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## American Pornographic: A Collection of Short Stories

Steven William Stringer

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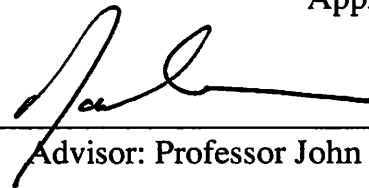
# AMERICAN PORNOGRAPHIC

Stories by Steve Stringer

A thesis submitted to the faculty of the University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

Oxford  
May 2011

Approved by



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Advisor: Professor John Brandon



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Reader: Professor Ann Fisher-Wirth



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Reader: Professor Tom Franklin

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*For my parents  
· and Jet*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## ABSTRACT

This collection represents my best writing culled from four years of undergraduate study. Encouragingly, I wrote the vast majority of the collection within the past year, which points to the fact that I am still improving and evolving as a writer. These stories fill various American landscapes, but I believe the emotional landscapes share a common thread. The characters strive not to find a purpose in their lives, but to reject the idea of life having a purpose at all. “Soldier On, Babies,” the oldest story in the collection and a major turning point in my writing, tells of a young nurse breaking from a surreal cycle of doctors chasing nurses to birth a baby daughter underneath an overpass. As she raises her daughter, the woman tries to steer her away from the same chase of doctors after nurses, lawyers after secretaries, politicians after aides, and professors after graduate students. She fails. My intent is that her failure and other characters’ failures throughout this collection do not communicate a sense of cynicism or a lack of empathy. These characters are ultimately able to find comfort in the uncertainties and the absurdities. In “Seaplanes,” two young men come together quite un-heroically to fight the melancholy of Alaskan winter. “Set Me Up With Your Niece” finds a man looking for love in a bowl of corn flakes. “Concerning the Last Great Wave of Pleasures” watches a young man sweep ubiquitous death under the rug in favor of ecstatic sexual fantasies. Finally, “Florida Pornographic” documents my attempt at something Southern Gothic and a boy’s attempt at first base. Throughout, I hope the writing feels urgent, but never for fear of failure.

## PREFACE

I'm dreaming of a world where men and women have stopped the war and where we will stroll as naked excellent couples under the eye of the sweet Lord again.

—Barry Hannah, *Ray*

Talk into my bullet hole. Tell me I'm fine.

—Denis Johnson, "Steady Hands at Seattle General"

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## **Soldier On, Babies**

The nurses are in the banquet hall by now. Together they navigate their way through tables and chairs in a wave of white gowns and red heels. Every few minutes, a chorus of giggles ripples through the wave. They are bronzed and rouged and glowing, and they glance over their shoulders with batting eyes.

The doctors follow en masse, toppling éclairs and petits fours as they stagger forward with stethoscopes draped around their sturdy necks. Dainty biscuits, baked meringues, macaroons, and puff pastries crumble and fall to the floor in their wake.

The nurses bait the doctors onward with swaying hips and tender sighs. Those little flirts. They could lead the doctors across the entire Dallas/Fort Worth metropolitan area if they wanted to. And they had! The doctors and the nurses forever wander through apartment complexes and strip malls like cats and mice.

This is the only way out:

Once a week, the nurses offer one of their own to the doctors. The chosen nurse slows, and a lucky doctor sweeps her off to the Southern Methodist chapel. The doctor lifts the veil just enough to kiss the nurse's glossed lips. They walk to their sedan in a shower of white rice and bubbles. Dragging tin cans behind them, they drive to their new house in Highland Park. They introduce themselves in the darkest bedroom, as is the custom. They make babies, then birth babies. The babies cry, and they say, "Soldier on.

babies.”

Lost your balance at the edge of the pool?

Soldier on, babies.

Broke your face against the sliding glass door?

Soldier on, babies.

Hit your soft spot on the linoleum?

Soldier on, babies. Soldier on.

All the babies soldier on, wet, broken-faced and dented. Meanwhile, a new nurse and a new doctor join the procession. Like clockwork the nurses and the doctors soldier on.

The nurses have found their way to a parking garage, and still they walk. Look at them fumbling for their car-keys in the dim fluorescence. They look distressed and search every corner of their handbags. They pout, lips out. They’ve lost their keys! The doctors trip over themselves in excitement. The nurses will need a ride home! The doctors have Saabs!

Why are they still walking? Why don’t they swoon, worried and desperate and alone?

This is a game they play for the doctors. The nurses stroll past the tolls and out of the parking garage smirking. On and on and on.

But wait! A nurse breaks free from the pack. Is this too a game? She ducks behind a dumpster.

As the rest carry on, the nurse lights out for the interstate. She looks back when she reaches the overpass. How could they not notice her escape? How could they be oblivious to the growing bulge under her smock? She has been using an emery board to file down the heels on her red pumps for months. She hoped to take the pressure off her bruised feet. Instead, she became the shortest head bobbing among the wave of nurses while her feet went on throbbing. For nine months the prospect of virgin birth loomed, and for nine months she never missed her cue. The morning sickness came but always passed, and when it was time to toss her hair, she sent tremors through the doctors like no nurse could.

Crouching in the armpit of the overpass, she births a baby girl. She swaddles the baby in a soft blanket unlike anything she's ever folded neatly at the foot of a hospital bed. A whole week she's been hiding the blanket against her chest under her smock in anticipation. It smells of her skin. She's almost certain the doctors and the nurses would frown upon all of this.

The exhausted nurse tucks the baby in a shadow. The baby sleeps and dreams of beached whales and sago palms and Oakland Athletics baseball caps. The treasures of the world.

"You are special," she tells the baby.

The nurse, flustered by the fatigue and confusion that follow childbirth, abandons the sleeping baby. She races off to find the nurses, no doctor to tell her she needs her rest.

The nurses go marching on. They've made their way to the local campus and approach the quad. Collegians in navy robes and tasseled hats sit in collapsible chairs, only half-listening to a commencement address.

"If your dog dies, he was a good dog and now he's soldiering on. If your boyfriend leaves you, there goes your everything but he too must soldier on. If your mother dies, we loved you mom and we'll miss you and we hope to see you again someday soldiering on. Feel heavy and pray nothing bad ever happens again, then soldier on, babies. Soldier on," says the speaker.

The wave of nurses comes rippling through the sea of navy robes like the tide. They pass through rows and rows of chairs without stepping on a single toe. The doctors follow as always. The clang of metal announces their departure as soon as they've arrived, collapsing collapsible chairs as they go. Go, go, go.

The nurse catches up with the procession in the butterfly house. The canopy above her casts a shadow that cools her fever. Monarchs nest in her hair and she rakes them out with her fingers like a beachcomber. She thinks of the overpass, where highways meet and her child sleeps.

The nurses glide through the botanical gardens, the only place their beauty is ever rivaled. Fragrant petunias, lilies, and tulips overwhelm the nurses' own perfume. The

doctors trample everything that was once beautiful and alive, but not before it's too late for the nurse to name her baby. Rose, Rose, Rose, Rose, Rose, she repeats.

The nurse comes back for the baby. The baby's dreams are as vivid as ever. She awakens from visions of Jesus and jean jackets to see her mother, the nurse. The nurse presses her child against her chest. They follow the interstate from Dallas to the gulf and make a home and a life together in Galveston. She nurses her infant in early morning, while she walks along the shoreline of the barrier island.

The nurse is a hospice worker and visits the homes of bedridden businessmen who are never around. They forever chase secretaries across East Texas, the secretaries a gentle breeze and the businessmen a blue-blazered herd dragging oxygen tanks and IVs behind them. The nurse busies herself tidying their dens and smoothing ripples in bed sheets. She tugs one corner, then another, then another. Whenever a ripple disappears another forms. This way her work is never done.

The baby nears her first birthday, and the nurse buys her an airplane that hangs from the doorframe on bungee cable. She sets the baby in the pilot's seat. The baby's bare little feet batter and bruise from bouncing on the linoleum all day, but she goes on smiling.

"I love you, Rose," says the nurse upon witnessing her daughter bouncing and beaming with baby feet.

Rose grows up chasing gulls on the gray gulf coast. When she's old enough, the nurse buys her a dog from the country and he chases gulls too. They watch the birds scatter skyward and eclipse the sun.

Rose pretends she's an astronaut hurtling through space. She looks down on Earth and sees city lights, tiny conflagrations burning in clusters. She transmits Morse code messages about the wonders of mankind to her dog, who flies an airplane high over Texas. He sees swimming pool after swimming pool, each a brighter blue than the last, but he never forgets the big picture. It's the ocean he's flying into. He splashes into the water and starts it churning. Rose crashes into the moon and keeps it moving along its orbit. Together they make the tides.

One day that dog dies, and Rose cries. The sea doesn't dry and the waves still wash up bits of scrap for the gulls to pick at. And it all seems so wrong to Rose.

"Why?" she asks the nurse.

The nurse shakes her head.

"Sometimes things are ugly," says the nurse as she digs a hole in the backyard. She wipes sweat from her eyes and streaks soil across her face. It smears her rouge to look like warpaint.

"Am I ugly?" says Rose.

"If only," says the nurse.

Rose has met a boy:

They're lying on a blanket over dunes and grass when their biceps touch. He reclines to rest his back and she pretends to do the same. But she really just wants their

biceps to touch. And when they do it's electric. She always remembers the blanket for that.

She carries that blanket out to the beach and washes it in the warm foamy pools that sit stagnant after high tide. She imagines it hasn't been washed since the night their biceps touched because she remembers the blanket for that.

And it has a smell. The same smell of her mother's skin that makes her think about her stomach. The smell of sand and salt. She remembers the blanket for that.

Sometimes she runs her fingers up and down the boy's stomach until he flinches and she remembers the blanket for that too.

The nurse takes Rose to Houston, where they visit mission control. As they tour the facilities, Rose peers through plexiglass to see astronauts in orange flight suits pedaling stationary bikes. The astronauts pedal and pedal with their chests wired to EKGs. The machines pulse soft light every time an astronaut's heart beats, and they always will. When the tired astronauts look to the sky, scientists swoop like owls, rushing to blot their perspiring foreheads. "Soldier on, babies," they say.

In Austin, politicians slog past bus stops and package stores in pursuit of their slender aides.

College Station swarms with professors in herringbone jackets wandering after graduate assistants in pencil skirts.

Somewhere in Dallas the nurses come trickling out of revolving doors.

Soldier on, babies.

Rose babysits the neighbors' five-year-old on Fridays after school. She takes the child to the beach, where they play all the same games Rose once played. They drag their feet, combing fresh grooves in the sand to spell out HELP. Every time a biplane or a hospital helicopter passes over, they flail their arms to signal their distress, laughing the whole time. With civilization in plain view, the would-be rescuers fly on.

And the biplanes have messages of their own. Like 501-USA-INFO or Schlitterbahn Galveston Open Now. Rose and the child invent jingles to accompany the banners that soar overhead. They shout them into the gulf like anthems. Once every lucky Friday a plane comes along skywriting. Rose convinces the child that if she tries hard enough she can blow the word-shaped clouds to Mexico, sending them messages of the exciting grand openings and Labor Day sales that await them in America.

Rose models nude for drawing classes at the university. She could sit to a sculptor for a statue of a goddess. She poses, surrounded by young men biting their lips in berets and striped shirts. As one, they shut an eye and size her up with their thumbs. Rose writes magic marker messages across her stomach to give the artists a hard time. The professors consider her a distraction and stop hiring her, but it's just as well. Those poor artists always paint her swathed in white sheets, fearing they'll be discovered for the treacherous flesh-tones glowing underneath.

Rose comes home on holiday with a tattoo, and the nurse celebrates her daughter's independence. How punk rock! How fun!

"They won't let me nude model anymore, so I thought I might as well," says Rose.



“Nude modeling!”

The nurse applauds. She considers showing up to work tomorrow in her underwear. She'd iron blue blazers in next to nothing, but the thought alone is enough.

Rose goes back to the beach and sunbathes on that blanket over sand and dunes. If the doctors happen to pass by, they might finally stop and stare. But for now it's just gulls and neighborhood boys, both longing to pick crumbs off her stomach.

This one time in college, Rose went to a party:

She was the youngest girl at that party in Little Rock. The nurse wasn't there, but some other people were. Most the men were either married or engaged, and the women were their wives or fiancées. Rose was having fun because they were okay people to talk to and maybe share a drink with.

The party was at this guy's house. His wife made hors d'oeuvres—flavorless and non-descript. The nurse wasn't there. The wife was in the kitchen talking to the friend that brought Rose. The guy was out on the patio with Rose and the other men. Or maybe it happened in the garage.

The guy was making jokes about Rose's age that made all the men laugh. They weren't very funny. Then he grabbed her. He pressed her body against his. The men laughed. Rose got scared, so she took her friend and left. They had two kids and one on the way.

Rose hopes they're in bed one night and the wife says to the guy, “Why am I married to you?”

“Because you love me,” he'll say.

He might try to touch her stomach or something, and she'll sit up with her back against the headboard.

"But you're just a guy," she'll say, "That's all you are."

There was a night when rose thought she might get pregnant too, and that was a weird bit of growing up to do.

There were nights when that boy from the blanket would try to cover every inch of her stomach with his hands because he said no guy had ever done that to her before, and no guy ever would.

Rose called the nurse from Little Rock at 3 a.m., crying.

"Well dear, I," said the nurse. These are the not the answers you find emblazoned under overpasses. "Soldier on," she says.

Rose decides on nursing school. She fishes the white gown and red heels out of her mother's closet and puts them on. She glosses her lips before surprising her mother in the kitchen.

"Rose, you were an astronaut," says the nurse.

The nurse treks to the beach with a blanket under her arm and her daughter at her side. They bury their feet in the cool sand. A biplane streaks by at dusk, making a final pass before carrying its message home.

What does a mother want for her daughter? East Texas. The moon. The gulf. The treasures of the world.

## Seaplanes

In Valdez, Alaska I have a one-bedroom apartment by the sea. From its windows I can see the harbor, where I spend winters breaking ice in the dark of morning. Summers I winterize ocean liners. I chip ice off the docks and into the water so the fishermen can slush to their boats and the pilots to their seaplanes. I take my lunches with Ernst, who pumps gas at the Esso station on one of the docks.

Me and Ernst come to work in layers, the bottommost of those layers being a fentanyl patch. Everyone does it. They say it raises your temperature. Really that's only if you're going off it, having withdrawals, you get fever. Me and Ernst have got snout freezing in our noses and blisters bleeding through our gloves. The only guys without blisters are the only guys without the patches, and those are the pilots.

I don't know where everyone else is getting it, but Ernst was Air Force Pararescue in the war. When they dropped in on someone in need of rescue they'd give them one of the fentanyl lollipops to suck on before they bailed out. If someone were in dire hurt they'd smack a patch as close to his heart as they could. The pararescuers all got into their own supply, and when Ernst was discharged he got his fingers on a few. Now every time his buddies come back they bring us some care packages.

Ernst was Air Force, but they didn't teach him to fly. They taught him to be dropped out of helicopters and get shot at. They just drop pararescuer on top of pararescuer until they run out or they get stacked high enough so one can see where the

bullets are coming from. Ernst got himself into just such a scenario, except the bullets were mortar rounds, and now he can't see at all. But these fucking pilots with their wives, they see everything.

Ernst came up from Alabama years back when he turned eighteen. His father worked the rigs on the gulf and kept a collection of Playboys in a Samsonite. One teenage Sunday Ernst dug out an issue from 1975. The first thing you notice about the girl on the cover is a scandalous iota of nipple peeking out from under her blouse. The second thing you notice is a miniscule bunny-shaped freckle over her left breast. Everything else—the headlines, the bylines, the bleached blonde hair—is noise.

Ernst was reading an article in this particular issue by a Georgian named Harry Crews. The article, wedged between photos from the latest Linda Lovelace movie and a wild nine-page pictorial on “The French Maid,” logged the journey of a Southerner in Valdez, an Alaskan town teeming with oil and its spoils. That article had drugs and booze and fish and fists and tattooed whores—the big orgiastic dream. Ernst knew oil, but his father was all wrath, so he decided to take oil elsewhere and hauled out at eighteen. Ernst's father wanted him to be an M.D. He said he wanted a doctor to fetch his paper in the morning.

What Ernst did not know is that the well had about run dry since 1975, the trans-Alaska pipeline now more of an IV drip. The drugs, the booze, the whores, all dried up. He joined the Air Force, etc.

I've lived here my whole life maybe, still can't figure out what these seaplanes do.

I come up to the Esso station this one day around noon like any other day, except Ernst has got a sling on his arm and little corners of fentanyl patch popping out from under his sleeves and his collar and such. He's got his lips around the crust of a sandwich but he's just kind of sucking on it. All those patches will make your mouth go bone-dry. He's got a plug-in thermos tucked up in his crotch. The light's glowing.

"Christ, what happened?" I say.

"Serves me fucking right," he says like he was waiting for me to come around so he could say it. Up close I can see Ernst's sling is mostly tote bag and part leopard-print guitar strap.

"You slip?"

"Goddamn shot me."

"Who?"

"I'm in bed, back against the wall. Bastard in the apartment behind me trying to off his girlfriend. Misses and puts one right through the wall. His girlfriend flips, looks through the tiny hole in the wall, sees me flipping, blood all on the sheets probably. And then he starts flipping too, shouting she's a cunt, I'm an asshole. You believe that?"

"No," I say.

"It's the truth. They fornicate like maniacs, so awhile back I pushed my bed against their wall."

He shivers and pinches his thighs against the thermos. We're huddled together so tight in the little heat and light we have. You can't even point a gun at your girlfriend without aiming at your neighbor.

"You call the cops?"

“Scared the shit out of him when he realized he shot a blind guy. Says he doesn’t want to shoot her anymore. She seemed happy with that.”

“Hospital?” I say.

“I’m the hospital.” He’s pushing a finger at his arm, and I swear to God the cloth of his jumpsuit sticks for a second in a little bullet-sized hole and comes back out with dark dots of blood soaked through. He’s rolling his tongue all around his mouth trying to salivate. His blind eyes just zipping.

“Let’s eat,” he says, “I’ve been waiting on you.”

I had a girl once. All I wanted to do was watch her try on hats naked, and I told her this.

“I want to lie naked in a bed with all my friends,” she said, “and they’re naked too.”

Her crotch might as well have been a plug-in thermos.

Ernst got plopped down on these marines during the war. As it was reported to me, one of them had his chest run through with an Ontario bayonet. Why we’re still using bayonets or how he managed to hold on to the thing with his attacker long gone is beyond me. But Ernst gets there and he can see that this bayonet is not coming out without doing some fatal damage, what with it being serrated and buried deep to boot.

Meanwhile, the marine is spilling his guts, calling out for morphine, confessing to every sin he can call up. He says he shoplifted gospel cassettes, says he filched from the collection plate, says sometimes he prayed to basketball players instead of God. He says

when he worked in the morgue he was coming off a morphine addiction. When no one was around, he'd peel back the fentanyl patches off the bodies, prick a hole in the patch with a pin, and lick the gel. He says he's sorry.

So Ernst pulls the blade out, tells the rest he had to, and rallies out. In the helicopter, Ernst tried to lock the bayonet on his own rifle, but it wouldn't fit right. He taped it around the muzzle, dirty.

The world is full of wretched and tragic people. Not all of us deserve rescuing.

"I've got it in my mind to commandeer one of these seaplanes," Ernst says, "I think I deserve to fly something."

"How're you gonna do that?" I say. I laugh, but I wish I hadn't.

"I've been in enough planes."

"I mean how're you gonna get a plane?"

"That's the easy part," he says. "I'm drugging one of these pilots."

I've never known anyone to be so nonchalant. Ernst could get shot, drug a pilot, and fly a plane half across the continent to kiss his mother on the cheek all in one day. He's a lovable tough. I'd hate to blame it on drugs.

"I'm not being your eyes," I say.

But Ernst was already set. He said he'd been smoking the gel out of the patches for awhile, just about figured it all out. You can smoke it on a cigarette and barely taste it. It's all over the internet, he said. I can't imagine how Ernst would read anything on the internet.

“All these pilots always see me smoking, ask me to bum a cigarette while I’m pumping their gas. No regard for my safety. I let them bum one of my cigarettes, get them to hang around long enough for it to kick in, and we borrow the plane.”

“I’m not doing that,” I say.

“I’ve reconnoitered the whole situation,” he says, “up to the point where what I need is eyes.”

That stunt with the bayonet got Ernst sent home for a bit. Like he was being put in timeout. They had him going to this bore of a shrink once a week. The shrink just put him on some pills, and when they got him on enough of them, they sent him right back. So he went back, lost his sight, and they flew him home for good.

I’m sitting with Ernst, eating lunch and smoking cigarettes and hoping to God he knows which ones he drugged. And here comes a seaplane. I see it coming, and I start waving it away.

“What are you doing?” Ernst says.

“Nothing.”

“I hear you flailing.”

“There’s a spider,” I say.

“There’s a plane,” he says, and then he’s jittering. His legs are bouncing up against his thermos so hard they’re almost squeaking.

“I’m not doing this,” I say.

“Let’s just see how far we get along with it,” he says.



The seaplane floats in, and Ernst is up tying knots and priming pumps all with one hand. Here's the one-armed sightless wonder. Who could tell this man he can't fly?

The pilot climbs out of the cockpit to stretch his legs on the dock. Everything about him looks for sale. He's got a mint jumpsuit that's starched and pressed. The breast is lined with what look like merit badges. Everyone knows this cocky bastard does not have to wear a jumpsuit. If Ernst could see this, he'd skip the cigarette and go straight to drowning him.

Of course the pilot sees us smoking our cigarettes and asks for one too because this is what you would call Ernst's moment. This is the day Ernst receives some grace.

"Surely," Ernst says, holding out a cigarette.

I'm a coward, so I play dumb. The pilot takes a long drag and looks at the cigarette. He's holding it between his thumb and pointer like it's a joint. God bless Ernst's blindness.

"What is it you do in this plane," Ernst asks.

"In the spring and summer months, the whale-watching boats pay me to fly up ahead of them and figure out where the whales are. I radio down and tell them over here, over there, you know?"

"What about during the winter?" I ask.

"I'm a painter," he says, "I do Alaskan landscapes. I can't keep a painting in the galleries in Sitka or Ketchikan for more than two days in the summer. Biggest reason I fly is it gives me the inspiration."

I'm drugging this man.

About halfway through the cigarette, the pilot starts lurching. I offer him a seat.

“I haven’t smoked a cigarette since college,” he says, “but it’s cold and I haven’t had any coffee.”

“Where’d you go to college?” Ernst is buying time. He’s about filled the tank.

“Caltech. That’s where I met my ex-wife. You two ever been married?” he says. We shake our heads, Ernst a little harder than me.

“Don’t do it,” he says. He’s dragging on the cigarette and we judge it’s best to just let him go at this point. I can see him swaying. Ernst can hear his voice detuning. We both know the feeling.

“The honeymoon must have been good at least,” Ernst says, “Where’d you go?”

“Tokyo. How’s that for romantic?” he says. “You ever think about the fats in Tokyo?”

“The fats?”

The pilot is shaking his head and watching the ash from his cigarette float into his lap.

“They have capsule hotels there. The fats can’t even fit in their hotels. They just walk around in the hallways all night until the maids shoo them out with their brooms.” he says, his head going back and forth the whole time.

He tells us about how he and his bride were trying to have sex in their capsule but how sex should not be had in perfectly symmetrical containers. He couldn’t get the angle on it. Nothing could please her. She made a joke about how she wished he had a vibrator, but it became less and less a joke, until anything phallic within range was a viable option. They thought of the pilot’s electric toothbrush, thought of it vibrating. He says he put it in a plastic baggie, and she gave it a whirl. He says it sounded like a robot.

He says when that didn't work she tossed it aside on his pillow, and it kind of stared at him like it understood.

“Jesus Christ,” he says, “She had a way of making me and my toothbrush feel so inadequate.”

The pilot is sucking his cigarette down to the filter. He's even sweating against all odds.

“But what it is I mean to say about the fats of Tokyo is that where do they go if they can't sleep in their own city's hotels?” he says. We're silent.

“They go down to the beach and sleep in the rain and dream about how heavy a single drop must feel to the small,” he says.

I'm floored. Ernst is floored. Ernst docks the gas pump. The pilot puts out his cigarette. We sit in silence for a good five minutes, then:

“What's your name, pilot?” Ernst asks.

“Haynes Walker,” he says, unsure.

“Wanna pump gas, Haynes?” Ernst asks.

“Yes.” Everything he says sounds beat now.

Ernst grabs the pump back up, walks it to the pilot and feels for his hands. He wraps the pilot's fingers around the pump and points it at the water.

“Do blind people cry when they cut onions?” he says.

“What happened with your wife?” I ask.

“She shaved her legs and she let me watch.”

Ernst has got his hand on my shoulder and I'm guiding him into the cockpit. I get him seated in there and I follow.

Me and him get in the plane, and we don't even fucking fly it. We just scoot it out the harbor, puttering up this baby little wake behind us. I'm flicking switches and twiddling knobs. Ernst is giving me some idea of what I should be doing to the best of his ability. Currents in the water send us drifting an inch or two, but they might as well be hundred-mile-per-hour tailwinds or jet streams or whatever. It's all the same to Ernst. Flight. We've got the pilot back there at the dock with his fist clenched to the gas nozzle. I wouldn't be surprised if he's just pumping gas straight into the water and watching it rainbow. The great pipeline ripping through the state and funneling down to an inch-wide nozzle. He's certainly not going to send anyone after us, so we just drift along the coastline in our pontoon.

"You ever seen a whale, Ernst?" I say.

"No," he says, "You?"

"No," I say.

Ernst says he wants to dip his toes in the water, says he wants to wash his hair in oil spills and play baby seals. I can't really come up with a reason why he shouldn't.

"Ladies and gentleman, this is your captain speaking," I say, "We're currently cruising at an altitude of 100,000 feet."

"That makes us dead," Ernst says.

"If you look out your right-side window, you'll see a school of humpback whales, and just past that is Hawaii."

"Fuck you," he says, peeling his socks off.

Out the left-side window is the Petro Star refinery. The chemicals in the air drift up from its stacks. They mingle with the sun to make twilight something rich, and it's tragic.

Ernst props his door open and lets his feet hang out. He's trying to salivate, then he's trying to cry. He just sits there frozen and dry like astronaut food.

## Set Me Up With Your Niece

Emily,

Thank you for watering while I was out. The sago palm is even greener than I'd remembered. And how lucky for you to catch the cactus in bloom! Please take this knife and slice cucumbers to cool your eyes. You'll find two tomatoes—salted and peppered—in the fridge. I bought red and white wine and rented three films. You could stay if you want.

Emily,

Just yesterday, a couple lesbians in parachute pants came down the walk, cameras over their shoulders. They did not know I saw them pushing their black-haired baby in a baby blue stroller. As they snapped photos of that baby girl, it occurred to me that I'm in love with the way your tits pout, baby

Emily,

Drinking in an airport bar, I'm reminded of a Norman Rockwell painting. Not any painting in particular. Would Norman Rockwell have been aware of airport bars? Were they of his era? Is he even dead? Can I take this cocktail to my gate or must I remain with it here at the bar?

Emily, how's Dallas? The home of NASA. The birthplace of astrophysics. We know now for a fact that there is water on the moon. And this is important because if we

one day run out of graves on earth we could bury our dead on the moon. Let's say you've died. Would we have the funeral on earth and cry into our handkerchiefs as you blast off into space? Would we watch your space-coffin leave the atmosphere until you were but the twinkle of a star? Or would we fly to the moon so that we could all watch as you're lowered into the moon-rock? Would we place flowers at your grave? Wouldn't flowers wither and die without oxygen? Can you imagine everyone dressed in black spacesuits out in all that black space on a gray planet? Can you imagine feeling so heavy and so weightless at the same time? Astrophysics! It was probably born somewhere in Europe. I don't know why I even brought it up.

I happen to like the sound of a crying baby in a quiet theatre.

Does it ever strike you how little we really know? I remember nothing of high school classrooms, but I could recite to you the measurements of every girl on the cross-country team. I flunked chemistry, but I could prepare for you a concoction of chemical compounds that matches the sweet scent of my lab partner's shampoo.

When I was young, I watered my neighbors' plants for a week while they were on vacation. The entire week I was tempted to explore their daughter's room, dig through her drawers or sample her perfume. I never once even touched the doorknob for fear of my fingerprints dirtying the shiny brass. But I did climb the arbor by their pool so that I might peer through her window, careful not to smudge the glass. I could write you an itemized list of the stuffed animals I saw. I could paint a landscape in the colors of her bedsheets.

There are nights when I think I could learn everything and remember it too. I could learn the slowest route from your mouth to your toes. I could draw every shadow

of your body on this very napkin. And if I squint my eyes, I could find your face in a ceiling tile or a cable-knit sweater.

Something tells me the flowers wouldn't wither. Something tells me they would take root and multiply and cover the whole gray moon in bright colors. Here I'd offer you a quote from Tennyson, but to be honest I don't know a single Tennyson quote or any quotes for that matter.

Some mornings you just want corn flakes.



### **Concerning the Last Great Wave of Pleasures**

When the salt mine closed, one of the foremen opened a mine of his own. He corralled the hungriest men on the day they announced the mine was mined up. He told us he knew where there was still salt and he would hire us to get at it. The most of us had families to account for, and he knew that. He scooped us up and the miners scooped up their families and we caravanned to eastern Montana. I caravanned alone. The mine burned down the night we left. Foul play was more than suspected.

The new mine was on a considerably smaller scale in the woods outside Ekalaka. Just the essentials to get started, the foreman said. We had the miners and the powdered man down in the hole and two trucks driving the haul from the mine to be dumped on a canvas tarp. When night came, those same two trucks took the salt to wherever it went next and returned in the morning. The canvas tarp was sprawled out in front of a double wide, where the foreman had set up his office. A chain-link fence wrapped around all that.

The foreman couldn't match the old wages, but we understood. We were lucky to be paid at all. I needed money because I needed a wife. And if I couldn't find a wife, I needed money to put sugar on my tongue. All that salt had me dried up.

The foreman was right though. There was salt to be had. The trucks were dumping it in great mounds. My job, as the smallest of the group, was to rake the salt flat across the canvas and comb out the rocks. This meant a lot of time between trucks and a

lot of time spent raking patterned grooves into the salt and staring at my designs and waiting for the trucks to wash them away with fresh salt so I could make my next masterpiece.

The foreman didn't seem to mind. He'd sunk a lot of money into his mine, and I think he came out with a newfound sympathy for the poor man and his diversions. He even developed a few diversions of his own—namely drink and painted women. When he ran out of both, he threw his favorite knife at a target on the side of his trailer, and he got pretty good at it. The knife's handle was detailed in gold that matched his wedding band. I can only imagine how either came into his possession.

I think I saw his wife come by one day, but I couldn't be sure. She was just as ruddy as the rest of them, and she too left with her cleavage full of small bills.

I watched animals wander in through the fence to lick the salt. They lapped it up with their broad tongues until, overcome by thirst, they sulked away. If they ever noticed me they would have fled, but I sat silent in the shadow of the foreman's mobile unit. And I never bothered to shoo them off. I never even bothered to mend the holes in the fence.

The fence was so full of holes there was one for every size animal. The coyotes had their hole and the wolves had theirs. The deer simply bounded the fence, and the young ones pushed through the coyote hole. The foxes and the rabbits burrowed under.

I saw animals wander in to die with a want for a last taste of salt. They licked until their legs buckled under them. I disposed of the bodies and raked the salt smooth where they'd lain. If there was blood, I minimized it. I covered their tracks and waited for the next truck.

I do not know the lineage of beasts, but this one came from kings. Travel enough highway in Montana and you'll see a plastic statue of a bison somewhere, whether it's at a welcome center or a Jiffy Lube. But plastic doesn't hulk like two tons of bison bull. His left horn was chipped and graying like a dead tooth. His right was sharp.

I stepped back against the wall of the trailer. He took one faulty step forward. His hot breaths came halting and off tempo. I could see them in the air between us. He buried his nose in my chest, and I inhaled and froze my diaphragm. My heart beat against the full weight of his massive bowing head. I left my palms flat against the fake wood siding of the double wide.

He bent at his front legs, then his back. He died there at my rain-boots.

God does not drop blessings at your feet. The bison wanted salt. And when he found it, I bet he cursed God for stinging his wounds.

I spit on the hinges before opening the screen door. I didn't want to let it screech. The mineshaft was deep but echoing, and the faintest sound could make its way to the very bottom.

I stepped into the foreman's office. A rickety cot was unfolded and unmade in the corner. Empty bottles lined the only windowsill. The blinds were clenched shut, only tiny shreds of sunlight piercing them and shining brown through the old bottles. Aside from the cot, a green wooden desk and its accompanying chair were the only pieces of furniture in the entire trailer. Overdue paperwork littered the floor around the desk. Around the bed, clothes, mostly women's.

I searched each drawer—three in total. I looked behind ceiling tiles. I rustled papers. It was either find the foreman's knife, or hack the beast to pieces with a pick-ax. I am a small man, but I could finesse the meat of a whale down to fish food. I would not go wielding an ax like a scythe on my bison. I finally found the knife, shining gold, sheathed under the thin mattress of the cot. I suppose he never wanted it too far. I tucked it in my belt and slipped out of the trailer.

I knelt before the bison. A few straggler rocks of salt dug into my knees. The bison's eyes were still open. A fly found me, then found him. I drove the knife into his shank. I drove the knife into the sirloin. I panted. Again I drove the knife into his shank.

I skinned. I carved cut after cut of meat from bone. The flies were swarming in great numbers. I tore strips of canvas and laid them in a row. With my blistering hands, I swept up as much salt as I could and dusted the meat with it. I wrapped the meat in the canvas strips. I let the sweat bead and drip from my forehead so it would be known that yes, I can work when the work is good.

There is no magic. I left the gate open. The bison walked through the gate. I set fire to the old mine the night we left town. And the foreman is not an altogether bad man. He does not deserve the punishment I've dealt him.

\* \* \*

Raw hunks of bison meat sat bleeding through canvas tarp before me, when I heard tires crunching gravel. A '94 F-250 came careening up to the perimeter of the compound, barely missing the fence. I considered ducking back under the trailer, but it was too late and I would not abandon my bounty. I tossed the knife in the bison's ribcage and wiped my hands clean on my jeans. That breasty woman with the busted teeth got out of the truck and slammed the door. I wished she wouldn't do that. Half the town could hear a slam like that, not to mention the men down in the mine.

"Where's Charlie?" she said. Her voice was cool but her pace was furious. She was cutting the distance between me and her car by half and half again, moving right along the outside of the fence.

"The foreman? He's mining," I said, "but I can give him a message when he comes back up."

"Was there a woman here?" she said. She spoke to me through the fence, and her mouth took up an entire diamond of chain-link. She must have been rounding forty. I told her I'd been in the mine, too. I was dirty enough for that to be true.

"You've got blood on your face," she said.

"It's mine," I said.

She hooked her fingers into the fence and pulled herself up on her toes, trying to crane past me to see the remains of my bison. Her breasts pressed against the chain-link, and when she finally backed away, it left an impression like char-marks on a steak. She couldn't help but be erotic in the worst way.

"You got a car?" she said.

"No ma'am."

She was talking over her shoulder as she made her way back to her truck. She hopped in and whipped it around the outskirts of the compound and through the gate right up to where I stood. She opened the rear door to the cab and started lifting and loading my canvas packages of meat. She motioned for me to do the same. Once we got all the meat stacked on the floorboards, Trish told me to grab the hind legs, while she grabbed the horns. As she bent over and strained against the weight of the bison, I could see evidence of pectorals flexing somewhere under her breasts. This woman was seasoned. If I had not carved the meat so efficiently, however, we would never have been able to lift him. But we did and we maneuvered him into the bed of the truck. His eyes were still open.

“Drive to the edge of the woods over there,” Trish said. “I’ll ride in the bed and push him out when we get there.”

She tossed me the keys and I did as told. I watched her in the rearview mirror as long as I could, wind tossing her hair, everything bouncing, her teeth threatening to bite clean through her lip. We ditched the bison, she took the driver’s seat, and we headed into town. I looked back to see the bison like a beached whale, bare ribs and all. It was colossal and I imagine it remains there to this day. I only wish I’d kept a rib, or at least a horn. Dresses and skirts flew from fenceposts like little flags, decorating the perimeter of the compound.

Trish’s truck was full of lipstick-covered tissues and barbecue sunflower seed shells. She could fit a handful in her mouth, and spit each shell out one at a time.

“I knew Charlie was with a woman,” Trish said. “I saw her at the grocery store. She had his fucking shirt on. I only ironed it yesterday.”

She shoveled more sunflower seeds into her mouth. The brown powder of barbecue seasoning stuck to her red lips. I wanted to taste them. The smell of bison meat was intoxicating.

“Whores and pricks buy groceries, Nelson. Real men hunt and kill what they eat,” she said. “How’d you trap that bison?”

She spit a shell into a cup-holder and a second into an AC vent. I had no choice but to lie to this woman.

“I baited him, and when he got close I knifed him in the throat,” I said.

“What’d you use for bait?” she said.

“Salt.”

We arrived at her home—the foreman’s home—around three in the afternoon. It was a four-walled periwinkle thing, not much more elegant than the double wide. I started unloading the packages of meat in the carport. Trish hopped in the truck bed with a hose and sprayed down the blood. It ran out of the bed and onto the driveway. Some of it made it as far as the gutter. A cat came sniffing around. We gathered the meat and carried it inside.

Their house was full of plastic furniture, their freezer full of frozen dinners. The bison meat, in its canvas packages, looked like the most natural thing to ever come in contact with the entire house.

“You can throw out that tilapia,” Trish said, as I crammed the meat into the freezer.

“I don’t think this all going to fit,” I said.

“Well then you’ll just have to cook some right now,” she said. She’d wandered into the next room. “You’re welcome to use anything in the kitchen.”

“I’ll make some for you too,” I said.

“I’m full, thank you,” she said, “But you need to eat. We’ll put some meat on your bones just yet.”

So I set about cooking. I found a skillet, knives, a cutting board, steak sauce, etc. I found everything but salt. I picked out a prime filet, a juicy cut with personality. It sizzled with the steak sauce in the skillet until ripe, and that was good enough for me. I carried it in the skillet into the living room to enjoy with my host.

Trish was in the living room ironing dollar bills. Then she took off her shirt and ironed it too. Then she called me to her. It happened so fast. I never once got to taste the bison.

But somewhere in the tussle, I set my arm to the iron. I did not shout. And had the burn not produced such a smell, Trish would never have known, and we would have gone on like that for days.

But she stopped. And her teeth, my God, her teeth.

“I need you to take my truck to my husband,” she said, “I was supposed to leave it there for him.” She pulled the knife with the gold detailing from her purse, and set it on the ironing board.

“There’s a freezer full of meat. Have at it whenever you want,” she said.

I took the keys to the truck and walked outside. The cold air met my burn.



The sun was setting as I pulled up to the compound in Trish's musty truck. The foreman was outside the fence looking in. Inside the fence was a herd of American bison. There is no magic. I left the gate open.

"Nelson, where the fuck have you been?" he said.

"I'm quitting," I said.

He rushed at me, and I would have been scared had I not known the whereabouts of his knife. I scaled the chain-link fence, and joined the herd of bison.

That foreman's going home to a freezer full of bison and a woman with a knife. I'm going home to an empty pantry and an empty bed. I'd take my chances with the knife.

Concerning the last great wave of pleasures, this is all I ask:

I'd like to captain a motorboat up a narrow river. And I'd like to have a golden tan. And I'd like to name my boat Trish. And I'd like to fly a flag. And I'd like to sing. And I'd like my song to stir the creatures deep below the water's surface to sing harmony. And I'd like the beached whales to sing from deep within their ribs. And I'd like to have a son.

## **Florida Pornographic**

I grew up in North Central Florida, where while building foundations they excavated boulders and left them there to decorate suburbanites' gardens. Those boulders were dimpled with the impressions of prehistoric seashells. Our house was in a particular bit of suburbia that was dropped on top of an old cattle farm. Sometimes I found cow bones in the dirt if my dog didn't find them first. My dog dug up a pelvis one Sunday morning. I left it on top of a boulder in the front yard to be washed white in the rain and dry in the hot summer sun. These are the fossils that sat proudly on the lawns of Gainesville, Florida.

My name is Charles Marshall. I spent junior high rooting around with my best friends, Alan Salgado, Anthony Liuzzo, and Joey Regalado. If there was a mafia in our college town, their names alone could declare them heirs to the godfather's throne. And they had a hold on me. At elementary school graduation I wore a get-up worthy of Miami Vice—beige suit, black shirt, white tie. By junior high I was wearing a gold chain around my neck, waiting for my arm hairs to go dark and my chest hair to come bushing in, but I stayed true blonde. I nearly converted to Catholicism, hung a heavy cross from that gold chain, and started using the Lord's name in vain. When I went to their houses on the weekends, their fathers kept a tab on the soft drinks we consumed and told us to keep off the carpet. I watched them kiss and dance at their cousins' weddings. I wanted to lust with the rest of them. My mother wouldn't allow it in the house.

My parents were atheist college professors from South Carolina, but they sent me to St. Joseph's Catholic School because it was where professors' kids went. And it was where Catholics went sour. They had us hailing Mary for looking at a girl wrong, and it was hard to look at them right. Their legs were growing out from under their skirts right before our eyes. As seventh grade was rounding the corner, they caught Anthony feeling up this Puerto Rican girl in the bathroom. He got hell for that.

My dog died in the night. I cried. As my father buried him in the late spring morning, I watched through the kitchen and chewed on my gold chain to loose the Pop-Tart crumbs from my molars. The humidity was hanging on my father's shoulders. I mumbled the Lord's Prayer, chain in my mouth.

"Are you sure you want to go today, honey?" my mother said. She was a sweet woman with dirt under her fingernails. One morning she caught me praying behind the bushes. She could stand a prayer here and there, and when I was too small, she picked loquats for me from our neighbor's tree.

"Yes ma'am," I said.

That day St. Joseph's had scheduled a field trip for the sixth graders. We were going on a trust-building retreat an hour outside town—our first overnight trip. It was the kind of hippie bullshit that grew on trees in Gainesville, and it was coed. If I missed it, I was missing the chance to catch up to where Anthony got in the bathroom. I wiped some tears with my sleeve and put my back to the window.

When my mother dropped me off at school they had us all congregate in the chapel. Anything beautiful in that chapel was offset by its baby blue linoleum floors. Father Kirkland stood jowling at the pulpit, his posture decidedly opposed to his usual faux-friendliness. Alan, Anthony, and Joey filed in one by one and slid down the pew to either side of me. Their sneakers squeaked as they scuffed the linoleum. Once the chapel was full, Father Kirkland stepped away from the pulpit. He was wearing his clergy shirt tucked in to madras cargo shorts. He ordered our forty-strong sixth grade class to the front of the chapel. There was no context to his orders, but the Sisters' eyes urged us forward and we did as told.

“On your stomachs!” he said. A Sister turned out the lights. Even as a sixth grader, this all reeked of incriminating behavior from a clergyman. “I said on your stomachs!”

There was a shuffling before we dropped to our knees. The boys all maneuvered so they might lie next to the right girls. I aimed for Vanessa, who would probably get chesty that summer, but I bumped into Father Kirkland in the darkness. He pushed my shoulders with his soft palms until I dropped to the floor at his feet. I could barely see Anthony fumbling for the hand of the Puerto Rican from where I lay.

Anthony was rounding first when something odd happened. Father Kirkland called us niggers.

“I’m your master now, niggers,” he said, “You’re all going to the New World.”

There was a hush. Enough songs had been banned from junior high dances for us to know that word was not favored in cafeterias or certainly in chapels. But the faculty had hatched a plan to simulate the passage of African slaves to the Americas. We were on

that chapter in History class, so we were slaves. It was all meant to put things in perspective, like how can you cop a feel in the stalls when you know what it's like to have a priest in cargo shorts call you a nigger?

Once the shock subsided, we were in hysterics. Alan had rolled over onto his back with his head propped on his hands. Father Kirkland pulled a whistle he must have borrowed from Gym out of one of his pockets. Alan lost it.

“Silence, nigger!”

“I'm from Puerto Rico,” Alan said.

Arielle was the only real black student we had. I remember her on her stomach, halfway slid under a pew. Father Kirkland and the Sisters avoided her eyes. She seemed thankful for that. One time I asked her what men she was attracted to, and I gave her three options. The options were the only three black actors I could think of.

“To the slave ships!” Father Kirkland said. He blew his whistle and the Sisters started ushering us through the doors to the bus.

“Don't forget your lunches,” shouted one Sister over the buzz of children.

I caught up to the guys in the aisle.

“Did you ask someone to sit with you?” Anthony said.

“What?” I said, “I thought we were sitting together.”

“Fuck off. I'm sitting with Jackie,” he said, “Alan's with Mary. Joey's with Cass.”

I looked at the others. They nodded. I've never since seen a group of boys so hopped up on girls. They all had their hands in their pockets, fingering their Altoids and Binaca and whatever else. It was puberty on the autobahn. Everything was happening so

fast I could practically see their cottony black mustaches hedging in. We were coming to the doors. I craned my neck for Vanessa.

“Haul ass, pussy. We’ve gotta get the back of the bus.” Anthony said. The three of them shoved their way out the doors to the front of the crowd. I was left craning in all directions now. Vanessa, the post-pubescent wonder, was alone gathering her things. God smiles on boys in chapels.

The rest is hazy, but the next thing I remember is me and Vanessa crammed into the single-person seat in the back row of the bus, Alan, Anthony, and Joey all shooting me their approval. The girls looked anxious.

Anthony had his hand up the back of Jackie’s shirt before the driver could shut the door. He didn’t know what to do with it once it was up there, but to us it was more than a triumph.

When it came time to go to college, I made sure to light out from Gainesville for anywhere else, which ended up being Boston. I met a girl in New York and we made it work. We had webcam dates every Friday night before we went out. One night she got the idea of setting her laptop on the toilet and pointing the little camera at the bathtub. I witnessed her shaving her legs in the tub. It was all very sexy if not a little clumsy. She was just getting ready to go soak in a jacuzzi with a couple of guys on a roof. One of them tried to kiss her that night. So I guess the whole scene was kind of bittersweet.

But it was just like her to let me watch it all. And she gave a breathtaking performance. She even nipped her ankle at one point. She brought it up to her mouth and started sucking blood. It was terrifying and I loved it.

But her slick little legs. They tore me apart.

So in the back of the bus I was praising every S-bend and pothole for sending Vanessa's soft hips clapping into mine. If we hit one hard enough, I'd get her torso.

But not everyone had the electric joys of the single-seat, so ten minutes into the trip Joey worked himself up enough to suggest truth or dare. We all knew it was coming, but nothing ever felt so urgent.

It was standard. The boys chose dare, and the girls dared us to do something like lick the bus-seat or shoot a truck driver the bird if they were feeling wild. The girls chose truth, and we did the best we could with that. But the truths born by sixth-grade mouths were no closer to the truth than I was to making a move on Vanessa. We learned: Cass drank coconut rum with her brother once, Mary caught the babysitter having something like sex, and Jackie stole her older sister's thongs.

But every few turns we'd catch a break, and a boy would get to dare a boy. In this manner, Joey got Alan to second base, Alan got Joey a hickey, and I scored Anthony a bus-ride with a blossoming Puerto Rican in his lap. These were debts to be paid off over time. There was still dew on the St. Augustine grass, and the boulders were shiny wet in the rising sun.

I was waiting on my piece of the action with my hands sweating and slipping against the vinyl-upholstered seat. Vanessa was shirking her truths and starting to fight the potholes. Lucky for her, when you've got a busload of twelve-year-olds pounding Capri-Suns on bumpy back-roads, the weak aren't going to make it. Scott Mansfield was

the weakest of the weak, and somewhere near the front of the bus he started a rumbling for a pit stop that spread like a virus.

The Sisters promised we were more than halfway there, and I believed them. For one thing, I could see tackle shops, Pentecostal churches, and aboveground swimming pools. You had to get out of Gainesville for these treasures. But the weak went on moaning, and it all became too much for Father Kirkland. He broke character, fearing parents' complaints, and we pulled into the nearest gas station off whatever unfortunate stretch of county road we'd been traveling.

The gas station had no fluorescent logos and the pumps were analog. I yearned for the patriotic glow of a Chevron station.

Jackie and Anthony detached to debus. Joey, Alan, Cass, and Mary slid from their seats. Vanessa exhaled. Anthony popped the emergency exit in the back to beat Scott Mansfield to the bathroom. The alarm buzzed and fizzled as we took the plunge out the back, leaving the girls to wait in line for the front.

We reached the c-store first. I could hear Scott Mansfield wheezing behind us. The building's façade was all stripped paint and advertisements for ice. Painted above the double doors were the words, "SAVE YOUR CONFEDERATE \$\$\$ BOYS, THE SOUTH WILL RISE AGAIN." We stopped.

"The fuck does that mean?" Joey said. We were on the colonies in History class, and the South meant Miami as far as we were concerned. So we stood, chewing on our chains in a row.



This was the kind of convenience store that had more knives than candy. The man behind the counter was leathery and cracking at the corners of his mouth. He eyed us with his lips pursed to spit. Over our heads and through the window nuns in casual dress were stepping daintily from a St. Joseph's Catholic School bus. Alan found magazines behind the blackout-bar before the Sisters could make it inside. Joey found the videos. Anthony elbowed into the bathroom to fill the condom dispenser with quarters. I idled by the counter with my head down and my chain on my bottom lip.

The store quickly filled with juveniles and Sisters. The Sisters were panicking. I wanted to buy them camouflage Dixie hats and Mexican blankets, but I was light on cash and the mood was all wrong. I rounded the corner of the counter alone, past fried chicken, potato logs, and cole slaw. I came to a massive jar of pickles, then a jar of pickled eggs, then pig ears.

Then I came to a smaller jar. The light shone piss-yellow through it. A single ball the size of a jawbreaker floated near the bottom. The ball was splotched brown in the cloudy liquid, so I tilted the jar for a better look. The ball rolled, and I saw it had a some kind of tail, and an iris, then a pupil. I jumped.

A ribbed condom whipped me in the face and out of shock. Anthony was standing behind me with his pockets brimming and snorting. I shut him up before he could make a scene and give me away, but the man behind the counter had already taken notice.

"You like that?" he said. He was mush-mouthed and hunching.

I didn't answer. I just let my chain drop to my neck and wiped lubricant from my cheek.

“That’s a real negro eye,” he said, “Been here forty years.”

I wanted to lay down a ten-dollar bill for absolutely nothing and bolt.

“Why do you have it?” Anthony said. I ribbed him.

“He got lynched. We kept a souvenir.” The man pronounced “lynched” like he had to drag it up from between his bottom lip and his crooked teeth.

“It’s a warning,” he said.

“Why do people keep warning us?” Anthony said. “We’re not black.”

“Then the warning ain’t for you.”

He backed away to let Scott Mansfield pay him for a tuna sandwich. The Sisters were doing their best to corral their flock. Anthony shoved a condom in my pocket as I made for the bus. Arielle was leaning on a trashcan outside. I did my best to trash the condom without her noticing it or me.

“You already brought lunch, Mansfield,” Anthony said as he struggled to remove himself from the eye.

The bus mellowed out for the remainder of the trip. Up front, Scott Mansfield charmed the Sisters with a mouthful of tuna sandwich. In the back, Jackie got back in Anthony’s lap despite the game being over, and Joey tried to rub his hickey in. He threatened to make Cass do it again if it didn’t stick. I sat with my arms across my stomach, so if I stretched my fingers they grazed Vanessa’s waist. Vanessa put her overnight bag between us.

We made our destination around ten that morning. We'd just passed the ninth house with both an aboveground pool and an oversized satellite dish, when I saw a sign that read Pathfinders Ministry. The bus tunneled through a corridor of live oaks and Spanish moss and into our campground, which was littered with picnic tables and worn tetherball sets buried in tires and cement. From an office atop a hill, a stream of post-grads in lime green t-shirts come trotting down to greet us.

Father Kirkland stood in the aisle. He spit a cough drop into a napkin and tucked it in a pocket of his shorts.

"Welcome to America," he said. Scott Mansfield applauded, while we hopped out the back.

The staff of Pathfinders looked like the hacky-sackers I'd see from my parents' office windows. I could date their most recent Hare Krishna stint by the length of their hair. It was like counting rings in a tree. The man and woman with the longest ponytails stepped forward.

The woman ponytail introduced herself as Martha. The man ponytail introduced himself as Longjump. They both smiled like they'd been huffing paint. After a speech about teamwork and stretching and poison oak, they sent us to our cabins—the boys on the hill and the girls at the bottom.

The cabin was rust and dust and plastic mattresses. Anthony, perched atop an upper bunk, surveyed his posse. Alan and Joey found upper bunks of their own. Scott Mansfield, who had the severe misfortune of being placed in our cabin, headed straight for the bathroom.

“Hey Mansfield, if I don’t get boob tonight, I’m heading straight for yours,” Anthony shouted at the bathroom door. We laughed. I am not above it all.

Joey was still messing with his hickey.

“Can you see it?” he asked us. He was rubbing at his neck with the pad of his palm. “I think I feel it.”

“It looks like Mansfield’s work to me,” Anthony said.

“You’ve never had one,” Joey said.

“That’s bullshit. Remember that Mexican girl at Epcot?” Anthony was bolt upright with his feet dangling from the bunk. “I had hickeys. You just didn’t see them. I had her bra off and everything.”

“That girl was not wearing a bra,” Alan said, “We were in fifth grade.”

“But she was fourteen.”

The remainder of the afternoon, we meandered from volleyball to tetherball to four square to a bench where we could watch the girls huddle in clusters, sucking the tips of their hair into wet points. By the time it was dusk we were all begging Anthony for a condom.

They kept us in the cafeteria after a dinner of Salisbury steak. Martha, Longjump, Father Kirkland and the Sisters stood before the buffet conspiring. I sat with my friends at a collapsible table, each of us leaning to one side or the other to account for the fragile condoms in our back pockets.

Longjump cleared his throat. "I hope you all have enjoyed slavery this afternoon." He winked at Father Kirkland and the Sisters. "But tonight, you'll find you're your freedom."

Longjump put his skinny arm around Martha. "Harriet Tubman here has invited you all on her underground railroad. No, it's not a train ride to Cincinnati! It's a treacherous passage north. Miss Tubman and her conductors will lead you from safe house to safe house, but be careful! Your masters won't be happy to find you've deserted them. If you're caught it's back to the fields!" The Sisters blushed.

"You'll all be divided into groups under the leadership of one of our conductors, but before we get started, Miss Tubman is going to teach you a song."

Martha was an aging white woman in a baggy t-shirt and overalls. Her ponytail was braided loosely and tucked behind a straw hat hanging from her neck. If she ever wore a bra someone got to it a long time ago.

"I want you all to listen, then join in as you get the hang of it," she said. She started singing before we had time to brace ourselves:

*Way down upon de Swanee Ribber, far, far way,  
Dere 's wha my heart is turning ebber, Dere 's wha de old folks stay.  
All up and down de whole creation, sadly I roam,  
Still longing for de old plantation, and for de old folks at home.*

She motioned wildly for us to join in as she came to the chorus:

*All de world am sad and dreary, eb-rywhere I roam:  
Oh, darkeys, how my heart grows weary, far from de old folks at home!*

The spirit never caught us, so she finished the second and third verses with the help of Longjump. I think they were both altos. The song came to a sustained finale and we were led outside into the night to be sorted into groups.

It was the most math we would do all year to make sure we were lined up in such a way that would ensure the right groupings. As soon as they started counting heads there was a mad scuffle. Somehow we managed it—Joey and Alan and Mary and Cass in a group, me and Anthony and Jackie and Vanessa in another. Scott Mansfield came up the odd man out and got thrown in with us. Longjump was our conductor and he couldn't have looked more gap-toothed and blissful. He zipped his ponytail up in a neon windbreaker and gestured us onward with a weak flashlight.

“Our first stop is a safe house in Georgia,” he said.

“First base by the time we hit Georgia,” Anthony whispered in my ear.

Scott Mansfield, bless his marshmallow heart, trailed an inch off of Longjump's heels, spouting off everything we'd learned in our slavery curriculum and giving us the buffer we needed. Anthony pinched Jackie's butt and she squealed.

“Quiet now! We don't want every bounty hunter in the state after us,” Longjump said. Anthony went for it again, and Jackie couldn't contain herself.

“Slavery is no laughing matter, young lady. Let's not forget that this is America's history. It'd do us well to know where we came from.”

“I came from Italy,” Anthony said. “Jackie is Puerto Rican. Vanessa, what are you? Colombian? It looks like this is Charles and Mansfield's fault.”

“My grandparents are from Poland,” Mansfield said, eager to defy Anthony.

“Then it's all on you, Charles,” Anthony said, “Why'd you do this to the poor slaves?” He was having a real good time of it all, pinching Jackie whenever he thought he'd said something particularly funny.

“It's no one's fault, boys,” Longjump said, “Ah, here's the safe house!”

The safe house was a card table with a Pathfinders staff member serving graham crackers by lamplight. He looked like the kind of UF student I'd see on the way to the football stadium, scalping his ticket. We stopped while Scott Mansfield ate his fill of refreshments. Anthony leaned up against a nearby tree with Jackie in his arms.

"My parents are from Maine." I'd been so distracted by Anthony's action under the tree, I hadn't noticed Vanessa beside me, close enough to touch. "But this is still pretty stupid," she said.

"Longjump?" Martha's voice lilted over static through a walkie-talkie at our conductor's hip. "Longjump?"

"Yes, Miss Tubman?" Longjump said.

"We've got a situation in Virginia with a snake. No one's bitten but the girls really had quite the scare. I think it's a copperhead."

"I'll be right there." Longjump cinched his ponytail. "Children, I'm going to leave you at this safe house in the very capable hands of another conductor. I'll be right back."

"Should we be worried about snakes?" Jackie shouted after Longjump. Anthony pinched at her thighs.

Our capable conductor chewed on graham crackers and tried to watch us for as long as he could bear, but he too had just found freedom. "You guys stay right here and holler if you need anything. I'll be right back," he said. He headed off for the staff cabin across the field.

Anthony and Jackie wasted no time in disappearing. Vanessa and I wandered down to their spot by the tree. Scott Mansfield didn't object to being left alone.

So me and Vanessa sat on the roots of an oak, pulling apart the clumps of Spanish moss that surrounded our feet. Then we went for it. We were silently pleading Jesus or each other for instructions. She kissed me like a number. I kissed her like a brick.

One Friday night Angela and I were on the webcam. She was egging me on about fetishes. I told her I didn't have one. She said her psychology professor said everyone had one. Or maybe it was that there are enough people in the world to account for any single fetish you could possibly dream up, she said. Either way, the odds were in favor of me having a fetish.

I told her about an article I read in the Globe. A scientist was training quail to copulate with a piece of terry cloth. Somehow he got the birds to sexualize the cloth, and one way or another the goal was the erasure of sexual fetishism. But he just ended up with all these terry cloth fetishist quail alone in the corners of their cages, grooming their feathers and waiting for the next test.

Angela found this story to be her proof. "So even birds have fetishes," she said, "You must have one."

"I don't know. Maybe bone structure," I said.

"Bone structure is not a fetish unless you want a girl to rub her bone structure all over you," she said.

Angela was lying in bed with her laptop propped up on her pillow. She'd do this thing where instead of looking at the little window on the screen where I would be, she'd look straight into the camera. It was unnerving.

"Fine, if you're the expert. What's yours?" I said.



“I guess if I had to choose one it’d be black guys,” she said.

“Is that a fetish?”

I spent two weeks glaring at every black man on the streets of Boston for lusting after my girlfriend. The first week I got myself worked up enough to spend the second week bumping their shoulders on the sidewalk.

The truth is I could sit alone in the corner of my room, back to the radiator with my feet in Angela’s nylons, pouring over visions of her slick shaven legs.

About the same time that Longjump came lumbering back to our safe house, Jackie came racing out of the woods with tears glinting in her eyes. Vanessa and I hopped up and out of each other’s hands. Longjump caught Jackie in his arms and soon after Sisters were showing up as well. They shook her, asked her what happened. The best we could make it out from our tree, Anthony had gone too far.

Fifteen minutes later Father Kirkland was leading Anthony from the woods with his fist clenched around his bicep. Anthony had his head down and his chain in his mouth. Anthony’s parents picked him up that night, and he didn’t go to St. Joseph’s Catholic School anymore. I rode the bus home in the single-seat alone. Vanessa sat across from me, and that was enough.

Five years out of college I was back in Gainesville for a weekend to announce my engagement to my parents. Angela had left New York for Boston and me, and I felt that warranted a proposal. Anthony found out we were in town, probably by way of my mother to Mrs. Salgado to Alan, and insisted on taking us out. We picked him up and

headed for this classic college bar—the kind of place where even the urinal cakes were sponsored. We used to sneak in there in high school, without Anthony of course. Anthony had beefed up, I'd slimmed down. I'd hung up my gold chain a long time ago and just about found and buried every embarrassing junior high photo album deep in my parents' closet. The last thing we had in common seemed to be a love for tequila shots followed by vodka shots followed by whatever shots. Anthony bought a round, I bought a round, Anthony bought a round. We swapped stories about St. Joseph's, pausing to fill Angela in on the main characters. She nodded along. I must have seen the bartender wiping down a hundred times.

“Remember Pathfinders?” Anthony said, who knows how many shots in.

“I do.” Neither of us filled Angela in. And it was left at that.

“Let's go swimming,” he said, “There's a fountain on campus the seniors swim in. I never had a chance.” He was already swiveling off his bar stool and making for the door. We were just drunk enough to follow him anywhere.

We staggered across the street from the bar, past coeds and post-modern sculptures into the heart of campus. We could tell we were getting closer with each article of clothing Anthony stripped off, and I knew we were almost there when he went for his shoes and socks. We rounded the corner and stopped at the lip of an inconsequential concrete fountain. It couldn't have stood more than four feet tall with the pool about the size of a bathtub. We passed at least three fountains twice the size on the way there. Anthony rolled up his jeans and stepped in. The water reached his shins.

“You coming?” he asked. Angela was begging me with her eyes not to make her get in.

“I think we’ll pass,” I said. I was fumbling in my pocket for a penny. Anthony was splashing around, stooping to stick his head under the trickle of the tiny fountain. He came up slicking back his wet black hair.

“Hey can I borrow one of those pennies? I wanna make a—son of a bitch!” he said. He hurdled the lip of the pool and ran at us with his head over his shoulder.

“What?” I was on my toes with no idea what was going on.

“Something bit me!” He was staring at his ankle, where two drops of blood were beading. I walked to the lip and used my phone as a flashlight. I raked the pool. Sure enough, a water moccasin was snaking around in the murky water. I slammed the phone shut.

“What is it?” he said.

“I think it’s a water moccasin.”

“Shit. Charles, you gotta suck this venom out.”

“I’m not sucking your blood,” I said, “We’ll call an ambulance.”

“I’m dying here! You gotta suck this out.” He extended his ankle to me.

“I’m calling the ambulance first.” I dialed 911. It rang six times before anyone picked up. The operator sounded stoned, but I was too drunk to judge. I relayed the situation.

“Water moccasin?” he said. “Oh my god, you gotta suck that out. I’m sending someone now.” It all felt like bullshit to me.

“I think you’re supposed to cut it and let it bleed out,” I said as I knelt down.

“I’ve already been bit! I don’t need to be cut too. Don’t make this weird,” he said. I took the plunge and started sucking his blood and spitting it out on the sidewalk. I swear it tasted like vodka. I’d had so many liquids.

“I think I’m gonna puke,” Angela said. I couldn’t help but resent that from where I was kneeling.

After I’d stained a significant part of the sidewalk red, I told Anthony that’d be enough until the ambulance came. Anthony said the bloodstain looked like a dick. I’m no shrink.

When the ambulance finally showed up, we’d all been watching the snake circle the pool for thirty minutes. He was cruising for ankles.

The EMT’s were no older than us. They wore their Shands Hospital hats flat-billed and their shirts untucked. When they pulled up they didn’t even get out, they just rolled down the windows and took in the scene, blipping their lights.

“Are you gonna do something?” Anthony said.

“One second,” said the one in the passenger seat. He was giggling and fooling with something in his lap.

Then, somehow in perfect unison, the driver flicked the siren and the other guy punched an iPod. They were blaring Whitesnake, laughing so hard they could barely breath. The driver took a drag from an oxygen tank he had wedged between his legs.

“You guys can get in now,” he said.

“Charles, why don’t I take your car and I can come get you two when you’re sorted out?” Angela said. I hated her for finding an excuse first, but I tossed her the keys anyway.

“I’ll call you,” I said.

Anthony and I let ourselves in the back of the ambulance and shut the door behind us. I crouched in a seat against the wall, while Anthony scooted up onto a stretcher. They had the stereo going in the back too.

“Should you do something about this?” Anthony asked. His ankle was swelling into something nasty, and I was feeling guilty for ever doubting him. “Fucking hurts.”

The medics queued up Poison on the stereo and went wild.

“Will you tell those vultures to cool it?” Anthony said.

“Sorry, man,” I said, “We’re practically at the hospital anyway. We probably could’ve walked.”

Anthony whipped a chain out from under his shirt and started chewing on it like gum. He closed his eyes and crossed his chest. He was whispering prayers to the tempo of the music blasting overhead.

“Anthony, you’re not dying,” I said.

“I know but it’s the closest I might come for a while,” he said, “You’ve got my blood on your lip, by the way.” He sat up and let the chain drop. He rummaged through drawers, filling his lap with ointment and bandages.

“I wasn’t a deviant, you know. That night at Pathfinders me and Jackie were in that cabin we did our best at fooling around, but we couldn’t really figure it out. It was like a McDonald’s playground. So eventually she got embarrassed, and I thanked God

for that because I'd been embarrassed for a long time. We ended up talking about her sister and her boyfriend and the kind of stuff she heard about them doing. Honestly, that was the most erotic thing we got ourselves into. But then she wanted to go, and I wanted her to stick around, so I tried to start things back up again. I was trying to do it all with my eyes, communicate and move her and stuff. When that didn't work I showed her something."

He'd found some aspirin and he was popping those back. I swear to god he was chewing on them and they were cracking like peppermints.

A couple years ago I'd heard through friends that Anthony had taken up racing motorcycles—nothing official. He'd found himself in a bad way after taking a long slide racing this guy up from Miami. He went comatose. That was probably exactly what he was after, but I couldn't help wondering who'd ridden in the ambulance with him then. I'd take Anthony in the coma—the amount of life in him now was scaring me to death.

"We were in sixth grade. We were all a little overdriven," I said, "It's okay."

"No no no. I wasn't a deviant. I lifted that dead eye from the c-store in the country. I'd had it in my pocket all day. It just sat there being less and less wet, and I didn't know what to do with it. I pulled it out and showed it to her. She didn't even know what it was. But when I told her about the hanging and all she freaked out. That's when she went running, crying. I would've explained myself but somehow the Sisters' story felt better. You guys wanted that story."

In those days, we could sexualize a helicopter. We could work anything up into an X-rated film. Today I turn to my fiancée having said I love her and she's plucking lint

from jersey sheets, and it's as much as I can do to find a new color in her cheeks.

Vanessa smelled like mangos and I wondered if she was one.

The worship was easy then. Hail Mary. Our Father. I worshipped every woman like a Madonna. The blood of Christ tasted like wine because it was wine, and I never once feared for drinking blood.

But here I have blood on my lips, and it all feels a little too real. So may it be amended that I also be allowed to worship what's near—Spanish moss, bones, retention ponds, boulders, water snakes? Somewhere in North Central Florida my fiancée is shaving her legs in a tub in my parents' house. These are the things I'm willing to bend at the knees for.