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# Selections from SHADOWS OF CLOUDS ON THE MOUNTAINS

Mike Smith

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**This dissertation is approved, and is acceptable in quality and form for publication:**

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**Selections from**  
***Shadows of Clouds on the Mountains***

**by**

**Michael Smith**  
**(a.k.a. Mike Smith of Albuquerque)**

DISSERTATION  
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Fine Arts,  
Creative Writing

The University of New Mexico  
Albuquerque, New Mexico

**July 2014**

SELECTIONS FROM  
*SHADOWS OF CLOUDS ON THE MOUNTAINS*

by

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July 2014

**ABSTRACT**

The following essays are all chapters from a larger work, *Shadows of Clouds on the Mountains*, a sort of life-spanning nonfiction *Ulysses*, a literary mixtape in which every chapter takes a different form, and every chapter's form is dictated by its content. These essays, or chapters, will appear, basically as is, in my book, *Shadows of Clouds on the Mountains*.

These are stories of family, memory, suicide, mental illness, the sibling bond, marriage, children, divorce, and adulthood. These are stories of a life devoted to art and exploration.

**Selected Essays from**  
***Shadows of Clouds on the Mountains***

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## Origins

First, the static, gray, and white, and endlessly in motion, dynamic, and flat, so much going on with maybe no work from anyone. It's just the tops of trees in early winter, the ends of branches thrashing in a windstorm. A cloud of gnats. The gray of the water of a restless lake, and it's a cloudy day, and there's rain on the water, and the drops explode the water's surface, and that's it.

My mom stands at the stove of our old house—2852 East Golf Avenue, Tempe, Arizona. It's April, 1979, and my dad says, "Let's see, Hon', turn sideways," and my mom, in a bright-red button-up shirt, turns away from a pot on the stove, laughing, smiling even before she turns, pregnant, pregnant with me. Somehow, I am a part of this, unseen, upside-down and folded-up, afloat in electrolytes and protein and another being, four months from nothing, five from a name, able to blink and pump blood, translucent, and veined, shrouded in a dim-glowing darkness.

One month old, and I'm me. October, 1979, and I am a crying baby, crying just a little. Grandma Bang, my mom's mom, is visiting, and says, "Michael! Oh, don't cry, sweetheart," and kisses me. My mom washes my hair in the kitchen sink, pouring water onto me from a cup.

13.8 billion years before this, at the advent of Time and Space, and everything, literally everything, all the matter, and energy, that somehow exists finds itself compressed into a point. Everything so hot and dense. Everything shaking from what it contains. Shaking from what it is.

Static at the ends and beginnings of all these tapes. Sunlight shattering over ocean waves, skittering down like spiders of light. A landfill in an earthquake. Water boiling, sure to boil over.

It's late 1980, and I'm one, and in the backyard, waving a little American flag and saying, "Whoa oh, whoa oh, whoa oh," which is what a flag says. I run toward a gray-and-white cat, Whiskers. My brother Rob, with one arm in a sling, picks up the cat and chases me. "He's going to kiss you!" he says. I find a stick and hit a red wagon with it, repeatedly, for several minutes.

September 24, 1981, and there's a party for my second birthday. There's a lamp beside me made of cattails. The table is covered in presents—there's a plastic TV with a carrying handle, a stuffed tiger, books, another plastic box with a handle. There are people in the dark on every side. There's a round cake with two candles on it, and I'm leaning over it, excited and smiling, and I'm taking a break to hug Fred, the dog, who I love. Loud, louder than any words, is the music, one of the Brandenburg Concertos, dubbed over everything, holding all of us in.

A question that could be asked of any scene, or of any story, is, "What led up to that?" And an answer that could always be given is, "Everything." Here, everything is in one place. Literally *everything* in one place. A place so densely packed, so hot, so abuzz with potential, eventually it can only explode, can only move outward, and it does. The Big Bang, although initially it doesn't bang at all, or sound like anything, as sound can't and doesn't yet exist. Here: it begins.

More static. And then more static. In a moment, some things will emerge.

My older brother David, ten-years-old, jumps on our backyard trampoline, in 1983, playing “It’s a Small World After All” on a trumpet, badly. I’m jumping too, four-years-old. My sister Julie, a teenager with feathered bangs, watches from a concrete-block wall, laughing with her friends.

Now four years old, with evidence of billions of years more all around. The Grand Canyon. Sunset. 1983. At my feet, a mile-deep rock chasm. A sky even deeper and older pushing down into it. My oldest sister, LeeAnne, seventeen, alive and laughing, stands at a guardrail. Near her are three Indian women, in sarongs, red bindi dots on their foreheads, their hair in buns. They are visiting LeeAnne, from Bombay, India, where she stayed with them as an exchange student. They disregard the camera, looking silently over the hazy levels of the Canyon. The wind blows, the Sun burns a notch into the canyon’s opposite rim, and I am jumping around, excited, begging to go down, my voice muted by the vastness. LeeAnne, my mom, and my brother David walk away from the edge. LeeAnne waves. The tape ends, rewinds itself, and begins to play again.

The Big Bang, because this is about origins. The Big Bang, because our origins are knowable, unknowable, and will be revised. The Big Bang, because there’s just one story, the story of everything. Every story, yours and mine, is an infinitesimal part of that, and not one part is extra.

13.8 billion years ago, it happened, and it's still happening. The Universe expanded, suddenly, and the Universe is expanding still. We're in it. Turn on an old TV, and the static hushes and churns and roils its way into our homes, and part of that static is the Big Bang itself, its cosmic background radiation, the evidence and erasure of what we were, of what we remain.

Then, the desert, in 1983, and my brother Matt is about to jump from a plane. My mom holds my younger brother, Jeffy, a baby in a blanket. I walk behind my mom, hesitantly, away from a small plane. I smile and watch. Matt puts on a helmet and a parachute pack. He climbs into the plane, and it taxis away and takes off and flies toward a range of bare stone mountains. Minutes pass in an instant, the plane turns black and shrinks, and a parachute blooms in the distant sky.

My brother, Jeffy, blond and two-years-old, sits covered in kittens, in 1984, on the green AstroTurf of the back porch. Beside him sits a cardboard box, the kittens' bed. My mom's voice says, "Put 'em in," and Jeffy does. Lovingly, one by one, he picks up the kittens, by a tail, or a back leg, and hurls them into the box. One tries to crawl away, but is snatched up and affectionately flung toward the others, mewling. My mom tries not to laugh, but laughs.

It happened so long ago, yet here is the proof. It's all around us. It's everywhere. Here are the patterns of heat and radiation still left over from the initial phenomenon. Here are the galaxies, laid out precisely along those patterns' cooler lines. Here are the stars, and the galaxies again, still moving outward and apart. Here is the temperature of the remaining radiation, exactly as predicted. Here is the chemical makeup of the Universe, just what we thought we would find.

Before all that, another tape. It's 1977, and the family appears complete, on a quiet gray road, in Arizona. Heat corkscrews up into the air from the bleached-gray pavement. The family's large tan van sits nearby, and there are my parents, though not yet my parents. The sky is coarse and grainy, blue and white and gray and fizzing. The film behind them hisses and hushes, roars. The sky moves over everything; just keeps happening; holds everyone in, in a pale blue nebula.

My five extant siblings are there—but they are not my siblings—they are just one another's—I'm not there. My mom, and my older brother Matt, an athletic teenager, have just finished running a race on this paved desert highway, and they have paper numbers pinned to their shirts. The whole family is there, and my mom's brother is there, and everyone is smiling, talking, congratulating. They are a genuinely happy family, and none of this has anything to do with me.

I don't exist yet, though my atoms may be everywhere—in the air between people, in the water beneath the desert, in the few clouds in the sky, in the food in a cooler in the van—soon to be part of my parents, and then, a part of me. Elements that were formed by the Big Bang, clumped together, pulled into a molecular cloud, collapsed into a ghostly column of dust and gas, fitted together into atoms, into atoms that would later be you, me, everyone, Earth—they're there.

I am not waiting to come together, but I will come together. I am not waiting to have an origin, or to go out from it, but I will have an origin, and I will go out. Everything is not leading up to me, but it will lead up to me, among other things. I will come from an unknowable cloud. I will never know the cloud. I will come from a churning field. And then, the picture will resolve.

## Some Thoughts on LeeAnne

I.

In this world, there is a god—or, at least, a kind of a god—and I am him—and I am watching a younger version of myself, twenty-two-years-old and alone, on a road heading north through the woods of New Brunswick, Canada. The road has four lanes and is paved, or has two lanes and is paved, and there are few cars on it, and I am walking alongside it, facing traffic. I have been walking all year. The road is gray and porous and paling and dark and stretches away into the distance, and it's as much a thousand other roads as it is the one it is. The trees on every side are red and orange and wilding, because I know the time of year, and they are as much the trees of every northeastern forest I have ever seen as they are the ones they are. My face is bearded and tan, because it is bearded and tan on a photo ID I just saw while cleaning out my garage, and it is a blank that needs no filling in. There is a fifty-pound pack on my back, and my brain is either filled with thoughts—of the terrorist attacks that happened just a month ago, of the girlfriend waiting for me in Boston, or of something else entirely—or it is avoiding thought, perhaps looking for change on the side of the road, a trick to help pass the time. The world bulges at its center, but if I look toward its edges, they are tattered, and then indistinct, and then black.

A yellow taxi is speeding toward me, and it is pulling over quickly to the side of the road, and my younger brother is jumping out, and the driver is stepping out behind his door, or he is remaining inside, and my brother is running toward me, and he is saying something like, “Mike, Mike, something bad has happened. LeeAnne’s dead.” And I am feeling like I just got hit by a downward blast of hot and cold air, and like something else, and I am saying back something like, “How did she die?” And Jeff is certainly saying, “She killed herself.”

Then Jeff is asking me if I want to ride up to a town with him—a town I know now is St. Quentin, in New Brunswick, because I just now looked at a map. He and the other hikers have already reached it; I have fallen behind. And I am saying something like, “No, because then I’d have to get back here somehow, later, to make up the miles,” because we are hiking from Key West to Cape Gaspé, from Florida up to Quebec, and we are not missing a step, and because I want to be alone; I need to think about this.

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I know that today, when I tell people about doing this, about just walking on, that that part can sound unbelievable, but after walking across fourteen states and a province, walking two or three more hours is almost nothing; time has slowed down, my relationships with time and distance have altered, and the thought of later having to find a ride back to where I’d left off seems more inconvenient than just doing the miles. We are walking to beat the winter now, and it is already October, and none of this seems all that real anyway.

For the next hours, I am walking, and the hours are reduced to moments, although they do remain hours, and they are long, and there is a blackening darkness in me, a new and sudden, upward-plunging darkness, a thing that even now threatens to lunge upward into tears. The

trees and the road are here, generic and typical, standing in where trees and a road are needed, and they are like thoughts to my reality, mostly false, and the reality is every occurring possible way that LeeAnne might have done it, might have killed herself. Jeff didn't tell me how, and for some reason now mostly lost to me, it didn't seem right to ask him. Now I wish I had, I wish it explicitly, because I see LeeAnne, my sister, put a gun to her head and pull the trigger. That could have been how. I see her hang herself with a rope and with a belt. That could have been how. I see her cut her wrists wide open and bleed herself empty, in a bathtub. That could have been how. I see her drive her car off a cliff, or into the column of an overpass. I see an imaginary version of my dad's sister do that too, though that's before I'm even born.

I see myself walking along the road in Canada, and I see that I am trudging, and I feel a quick flash of just how heavy the pack feels, just how hard the pavement, just how long the miles. Heavier. Harder. Longer than usual. I see myself cinematically, impossibly, from above, and I see myself naturally, weirdly, from the point of view of my unseen face, arms holding my shoulder straps, and my legs beneath me. I see LeeAnne park her car in a garage and sit with the door closed. That could have been how. She could have done it that way. I don't know. I don't know anything about this, except she killed herself, and she's dead. I see her walk into a river, but that's from *The Hours*, a movie I've watched since, so I don't see that, though I do see it now. I see her step in front of a train, and I see her overdose on pills, but I don't see either of those by the road.

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I make it to the town, to St. Quentin, and maybe I find a payphone to call the hike voicemail, and there is probably a teary message from my dad or from my mom, and this makes

me tear up right now, hearing this, even if this never really happens, and maybe there is a voicemail from another hiker telling me where to meet—or I know where to go already, and there is no call, because Jeff told me all this back by the road.

The hotel is painted the color of stucco and seems like a heap of boards with an old sign on it, and it seems fairly nice for what it is, and everything is in French and English because that's the law. There is a communal eating and lounging area, and I think this is where I rejoin Jeff and the other four hikers. John sits near a travel guitar that might be webbed to his backpack or that he might be quietly fingerpicking; he is shaggy and blond and saying something uncharacteristically tender. Dakota says something sympathetic about his father having killed himself, there's no way he doesn't; he will later make a film about that. Kim, the only woman in our group, almost certainly hugs me and asks me how I'm feeling; her mother died of cancer when she was a little girl, and I can see this in her eyes and manner now. Ray hugs me because he has always been a man more-than-okay with hugging, and because we are lifelong friends. He is all beard. Jeff is there somewhere, and I know that Jeff has also lost a sister, and seeing him is like seeing a ghost in the room, like glimpsing an almost-accurate portrait of exactly how I'm feeling. I love these people so much. I can scarcely feel this more strongly, but I don't know if I feel it in the hotel, or if I feel it only now while writing, as we are almost all fairly sick of one another by this point in the hike, and we won't even hug or shake hands when we reach the cliffs and the lighthouse and the ocean at the end.

We sit around some small round tables, glass or white plastic, indoors in the high-ceilinged lounge, and it seems like someone is smoking, and one or two of the hikers might be at this point in the hike, but that might just be how it feels. Smoky. Maybe there are ashtrays. Or

maybe I am seeing this room all wrong. The ceilings might actually be really low, and there might be ugly, stained-glass chandeliers. This is all wrong. I'm not getting this right. I can never be sure of any of this. This is a world of my own creation, and uncertain.

But the mood feels as weird as any I have ever experienced—solemn and convivial, dark and too light, quiet and too quiet, forced and casual—and it doesn't always come through when I see this happening; sometimes there is no mood; sometimes there is just an image and some somber chatter. There may be French fries covered in cheese and gravy on the table, in paper trays or in plastic baskets lined with paper, and I know for certain there are glasses of 7-Up.

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It seems to be there—and perhaps also on a wide, nearby step, on a stairway leading to nowhere—that I find out from Jeff how my older sister, my oldest sibling, really died. Her suicide is shocking to us both, but it isn't something that's never occurred to me. I don't know for sure that I see this while sitting on that step or in that room, but I see it now. Some months before LeeAnne's death, I visit a friend when we hike through Boston, and she loans me a book, a history of suicide. I read it across Maine and into New Brunswick, over meals and in a tent by the light of a headlamp, and I see my sister on its every page, in every description of depressed men and women, in the sentiments of their suicide notes, in their losing struggles between a desire to live and a desire to die. It is a horrible, dawning realization, reading this book, realizing for the first time that my sister is severely depressed, and that depression leads to suicide. In New Brunswick one night, we camp in some rubbery-leafed woods behind a neon-signed bar in a French-Canadian town, and I venture out alone during a late-night downpour and get soaked through my raingear to find a payphone to call her from.

She doesn't answer. I leave a message. In the daylight somewhere, sometime later, I think I call her again, but I do not call her enough, and I do not call enough others. I am busy, walking to fight world poverty and social injustice.

Later, I will learn about others in my family also being aware of LeeAnne's state of mind and its possible consequences—conversations between LeeAnne and my mom, my mom telling her that if she can only be happy outside the Church, *then be outside of it, that's okay, we love you*; of LeeAnne telling my mom on the phone, again and again, "I just don't know, Mom, I just don't know, I just don't know, I just don't know, I just don't know"; of serious conversations between LeeAnne and my other siblings and between LeeAnne and her husband—but this is all unknown to me before she dies. Before her death, there is a mostly unstated and ultimately lethal refusal in my family to accept LeeAnne's bipolar diagnosis as real, or to consider antidepressants and mood stabilizers as anything more than a frowned-upon aspect of "Western Medicine." That she's often sad and darkly minded is known, but it's actually joked about—*she's like Eeyore, ha ha*. No one seems to really understand that how severely depressed she is.

So, there are signs, but when such things actually happen, as possible as they may have seemed, they come from nowhere. At the hotel Jeff probably tells me that a few days earlier LeeAnne had tried to kill herself by standing in front of a train, but had jumped off the tracks at the last minute. She told her husband about that, who told our parents, and they flew out to see her, before being assured that she was all right now, she would be fine, she wasn't going to do anything drastic. Our parents left, and she seemed to improve, as if the incident with the train was just a cry for help. Her mood visibly improved, her energy returned, and she may have said something about recommitting herself to life or maybe I'm just making that up. This is all

foundational knowledge to me now, but in the hotel in Canada I don't know any of it until Jeff tells me. The day of her suicide, she seemed to be doing well enough that her husband thought she would be fine to leave alone at home while he went to work—she was only going to rest. After the hike, my dad offers to show me the police photos, from the official file from the scene of my sister's death, and I refuse to see them. I will always refuse. I see it all already. Phil, her husband, leaves for work in the morning, hugging LeeAnne goodbye outside their home in Danville, Kentucky. Phil is going off to teach Shakespeare at Centre College. LeeAnne, taking a break from teaching, and from other work, is staying home. She is in her mid-thirties, has sandy blonde hair, and a lightly freckled face that is a composite of her obituary photo, her face in certain family portraits, and some of the ways she looks when we are together. To me, she always looks radiant, always looks ready to tell me something interesting.

After Phil is gone, or before he leaves, she puts a leash on their dog, a beagle, and at some point she fills her pockets or a leather bag with sleeping pills, Ibuprofen, and a two-liter bottle of 7-Up. She cuts across a cemetery and into a grove of trees perhaps a mile from their house, prepares a place on the ground, maybe laying out a blanket, unhooks her dog's leash, swallows the sleeping pills, and swallows the Ibuprofen, using the 7-Up to wash them down. Before long, she goes into convulsions, bruising herself badly on the ground, vomiting, and dying. Her dog comes home by himself, whining, and Phil calls the police, and the police search for her, and they find her, dead, in the grove, with a letter in her pocket.

It is addressed to Phil, her husband, and I have it here, with some other things.

I love you so much and am so sorry that in my selfishness and pain I will cause you grief. I wish there were a way that I could see this differently, but my anxiety about myself runs so deeply that it feels insurmountable; I feel incapable of making those changes to get back to my old self. It feels

so hard and I feel so weak. I just want to lie down and rest, to escape to a place of non-being. ...Please let everyone know that their love has been felt by me and that this anxiety has just become unbearable—even though their love has been a comfort. Please pass on my love to everyone especially to my mom—and dad... And to Julie and Rob and David and Matt and all their families. And to Mike and Jeff. Tell them not to stop hiking...keep on for me. I'm proud of them. ...Just tell everyone that I haven't been able to rise about the depression of these last few years; I've just felt stuck and disappointed in myself. ...Tell my mom I love her deeply and that I'm so sorry to be leaving this way. There's nothing anyone could have done.<sup>1</sup>

## II.

Jeff and I leave the other hikers, to go to the funeral. They remain in New Brunswick, to wait for us, taking a river trip to pass the time. Jeff and I fly to Utah, where LeeAnne is being buried for some reason, some Mormon reason, even though she has had had little to do with the Mormon Church for years. Her husband, my brother-in-law, Phil, has family there. That might be why. The viewing and the funeral service are in a Mormon chapel somewhere in Provo, Utah, a sprawling strip-mall town surrounded by mountains, and I can't see any of the building clearly, only the interior, and of that only the middle. I don't cry at all; I haven't cried at all about it yet; I've just felt awful; but then I see my parents crying, in particular my dad, and I've never seen my dad cry, but he is crying now, weeping, and his sobs are coming out of him violently, almost like coughs and more like howls. LeeAnne was my parents' first child, and I have children now, sleeping as I write this, and I can scarcely imagine that pain, though I have, I have imagined it. I

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see my dad rocking back and forth on a long wooden pew; and I can see a version of my mom with tears coursing down her cheeks; and I can't see anything else, I don't know who is next to me, I don't know who all is here, and I can't stop crying myself. I am going to miss her. I can't believe this happened. I can't believe this happened. I can't believe this. All five of my other siblings are here, I'm sure, but they are mostly unseen. My older brother Rob gets up to talk, stands at the podium up front, and talks about how he and his little daughters went with LeeAnne to El Morro once, a historic rock outcropping in northwestern New Mexico, and LeeAnne was so moved at how Rob's little daughter kept picking up sand and rocks excitedly from the ground and saying, "This! This!" as if our little niece just couldn't believe how unbelievably wonderful everything was and how great it was to be alive. Rob talks about how shortly before she died, he talked with LeeAnne about trying to just hold on until she felt better, and how he half-facetiously, half-seriously sang that song "Tomorrow" from the musical *Annie* to her voicemail after that. He sings the whole song to everyone now—"To-morrow...to-morrow...there's always...to-morrow...it's only...a day a-way"—his voice cracking horribly and tears streaking down his face, and the whole room just loses it, and I see it now like some dementedly sad Pentecostal revival, with everyone howling and bawling and burying their faces in their hands, like something tribal, like just too much, like I can't go on, even now.

LeeAnne's husband, my brother-in-law, has his brother read a eulogy he wrote but doesn't think he can read himself, and everyone cries even more. Friends speak, and family speaks, and a familiar picture emerges of LeeAnne as someone who always moved in pursuit of life even as she felt stalked by death—a picture of a compassionate woman who read everything she could, who traveled the world, who loved nature and literature and place and poetry and music and

friendship and art and truth, of someone who lived her life, and lived it well, despite all the challenges of her brain chemistry.

My oldest brother, Matt, talks about going to see *Gallipoli*, an independent movie, with her once, and tells how she had to cry for almost an hour in the parking lot about it afterward, before she felt okay enough to drive. LeeAnne felt everything deeply, and in the end, too deeply.

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The funeral could end here, and it would be all right; it would perform its function. Even with my sister in her dress in her coffin at the front of the room beneath the pulpit, even with all that flickering in view, it would be okay, or mostly okay.

But now someone who barely knew my sister at all gets up to talk, an old man who had met her only once more than a decade before. He is speaking now because he is the highest-ranking Mormon “Elder” present, a person in a high position of leadership in the Mormon Church, and he gives a twenty-minute sermon that feels like an hour and that grows and pulses and metastasizes for years until it threatens to consume every worthwhile moment of the funeral’s catharsis and communion. LeeAnne will always be connected with her funeral, because she has had a funeral, and that funeral will forever be altered by the Elder’s sermonizing.

The Elder talks about the glorious afterlife allegedly awaiting LeeAnne—even though LeeAnne was an unbelieving suicide, whose soul, according to Mormon theology, should be condemned to eternal separation from her family and loved ones. Most of LeeAnne’s friends are not Mormon, her husband is no longer Mormon, and both Jeff and I are drifting away from our childhood beliefs rapidly at the time of the funeral. I want to leap up and yell at him to leave,

this fuzzy, gray, scintillating presence behind the podium. Some people do leave. Others just glare at him, and I do too. My dad speaks after this man, but I cannot see or hear a word of it, because I am angry.

Here, I am beginning to see that not even my grief will live on intact; it will be suffused with and corroded by anger, though that anger will fade as well, and my visions of her will fade and fragment and distort, and the only likely afterlife she will actually inhabit—the scenes we have shared together—will remain always an uncertain place where the details will forever change and disappear and return different.

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And now we are burying her body, at a cemetery overlooking Provo, and there is a big, dark hole in the ground with an earth mover nearby, and the dirt at the bottom is in blackness, and there is some sort of contraption over the hole, made of cloth on rollers, on which the closed coffin rests, and the coffin is lowered by it into the hole, and there is a metallic gazebo around it, set up just for this occasion because it isn't there after the headstone is in place and sod is planted over the hole, and it is really raining hard, which seems clichéd for a funeral, but it is raining, and a pair of workers are leaning against the earth movers, and some hymns are being sung, or a prayer is being said, and people take turns throwing shovelfuls of dirt, and the kids take turns throwing flowers, and it becomes a game, and soon children are throwing all the flowers, and there are a lot of flowers, and it seems irreverent and annoying, but also like the sort of thing that would have amused LeeAnne, and we say as much, and the kids keep on going, until soon all the flowers are gone.

I see Phil, standing alone, still reeling from it all, looking like a remnant of himself, bespectacled and tousle-haired, waxy and cried-out. I pat him on the back, or give him a hug from the side, something wildly inadequate. Later, he will reference this time in a poem.

...First the flowers were thrown,  
then the earth. I remember the rich incremental  
dark by shovelful smothering their flaming colors  
like cloudbanks slowly blotting out stars.  
And as the earth fell, my heart finally failed  
and I cast my eye around wildly, wanting to take  
each thing in, not knowing what part would be lost  
that I might struggle into this life again.<sup>2</sup>

After all the flowers have been thrown, the people begin to move out of the rain, if it's still raining, hurrying slowly to their cars, leaving my sister there in her coffin. The mourners stumble away, and the men leaning on the earth movers begin looking at each other, and straightening themselves.

### III.

And yet, LeeAnne is still alive, in her way, in the world I watch over, in the imperfect afterlife I have managed to grant her in my mind. She is here right now.

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Her form is shifting a little, and her face is sometimes indistinct, but this is definitely her, the LeeAnne I remember, literally. I am visiting her and Phil in Kentucky, and I am getting ready for the hike, and she and her friends are all impressed at what we're undertaking. We go to see *Unbreakable*, and I fall asleep before the twist ending, and I still don't know what happens, though I could find out. We tour a Shaker village, and LeeAnne and the museum people are impressed when I identify an unknown object in a case as a weight for a plumb line. We play tapes and CDs and records for each other. I play her Soltero's *Times Are Evil and You Are Beautiful* and she plays me songs from Matthew Sweet and Greg Brown and the Silos and Morphine. She says something that lives on as, "You can only copy 'Let's Take Some Drugs and Drive Around' if you promise not to listen to it while taking drugs and driving around." Or maybe that's another time.

We use LeeAnne and Phil's keys to get into a big classroom at their school with a movie screen, and we bring pillows and blankets and some of their other friends, and we drink beer and wine and watch *Magnolia* and I fall asleep before the ending, but it's okay, I've seen it before. I'll see it again.

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LeeAnne is alive in these scenes—in these shards cascading among shards—in my oldest daughter's middle name—in the art and themes she spends her life obsessing over, and which I now obsess over for both of us. I listen to the music of Talking Heads and hear LeeAnne say her favorite line of theirs is, "I'm just an animal, looking for a woman," laughing when she says it. I watch the films she loves, read the books she loves, listen to the music she loves, because I love it too, most of it, and I almost invoke her, almost summon her still, whenever I discover

something I know she would like. Neko Case—there is no way she wouldn't love Neko Case, what with her love of Lucinda Williams and Gillian Welch and Patti Smith—but the only way I can play it for her is to conjure up a fictional version of her, which feels pathetic and a little crazy. Or the Felice Brothers—she would adore them. She loves all those punk-edged anti-folk acts. And with her fascination with the meaning of place, a fascination she passed on to me, I would love to send her a copy of Dirck Van Sickle's *Montana Gothic*, in my mind the best exploration of that subject, fiction or nonfiction. That one's old. She might have read it anyway.

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Such wishes just make me feel stretched and helpless, though. Better are the scenes, flawed and fragmentary as they are, of really being with her, scenes shifting and clashing and glitching, inexpertly jumping from moment to moment to moment. In one, we are walking in the desert between Albuquerque and Santa Fe, on an isolated piece of property our parents once bought with the hope of all of us one day moving there to live together. Cholla cactus tilt and bristle everywhere, like life-sized mutant stick men; prickly pears stab at our feet; a few tall Ponderosa pines stand together, likely smelling of butterscotch; and there are details I can only see because of what LeeAnne wrote about them herself, in a college paper.

A plane drones overhead every now and then, and sometimes a dog will bark, but mostly you hear only the wind as it rustles through cedar trees and patches of dried cholla cactus. Overhead the sky is clear and blue and wide. A large rock-faced mountain covered in scrub hovers over the flat plains that lie beneath it. You can see for what seems like a hundred miles—miles and miles of flat, dry, brown land. ...Wild doves fly up out of the dry brush and snakes rustle through patches of overgrown gourds—often leaving their dried skins behind them. ...Nobody lives on this land now, though an old chicken coop, a dog pen, and strands of barbed wire fence offer up evidence of previous owners.<sup>3</sup>

There is a deep hole here that some of the neighbors say is bottomless, that they say trash has been thrown into for decades and that's never even begun to look full. The hole is a few feet across; a low wire fence encircles it, or it doesn't, and the bottom of the hole is dark. We walk to where we know it is. We approach it cautiously. We peer in.

LeeAnne walks around here and there, studying the ground, occasionally picking up a rock or a pinecone or a piece of purpling desert glass. She keeps a shelf at her home in Kentucky for the things she finds; she is always looking for such things. Nothing much happens out here, nothing at all, really, there is no story, but LeeAnne is alive, and we walk all over.

## **Start Breaking My Heart**

*In March of 2001, electronic musician Dan Snaith released his debut album under the name Manitoba, writing and producing all of its songs, and calling his ten-song collection Start Breaking My Heart. Re-released in 2006 under the artist name Caribou, the album stands as a masterpiece of mostly restrained, faintly melancholy, often playful electronic dance music—a densely layered landmark in the IDM (or Intelligent Dance Music) subgenre. More than any other, this album has served as a soundtrack to my life, as a symbol of my ongoing friendship with my younger brother, and as something that embodies a time of our lives that was never all-that-great but that now is gone forever—a time when all we had to do was drive a dirt road late at night, listening to this still-new CD again and again, marveling together at the way it fit the world so well. Track by track, song by song, moment by moment, it was a thing of wonder to us both, a thing of hidden joys and comforts, and it is still. Around the time of the tenth anniversary of the album’s initial release on the Leaf Label, I began to write the following, as liner notes.*

### **01. “Dundas, Ontario”**

*Start Breaking My Heart* begins in a quiet way—with “Dundas, Ontario”—with an electronic murmur, and then four notes—four slow, synthetic notes—four notes repeating and repeating and repeating. Behind these notes flits something notably less predictable—something insect-like, many-legged, and vaguely threatening—a clockwork moth, clicking and clattering, battering at the glass of the song with a quietly increasing intensity. Then: a window opens, and

then: we hear the beat. Sparks of sharp percussion electrify the world, people start to wake up, and we can dance, or we can tap our feet, and nothing feels harder than to just stand still.

Dundas, Ontario is Canadian musician Dan Snaith's hometown, a lakeside community of just under 25,000 people. "Dundas, Ontario" is this album's first track, and it feels appropriate that Snaith would want to begin there, in the town he grew up in; with a return to, and a launching from, someplace formative and fundamental.

Several months after this album's release, I returned home as well. In the final third of 2001, terrorists used airplanes to attack the U.S., my oldest sister LeeAnne killed herself with an overdose of sleeping pills, my mom's health worsened dramatically, and my younger brother Jeff and I moved back to Cedar Crest, New Mexico, home to about a thousand, a desert mountain bedroom-community for the nearby city of Albuquerque. For nearly a year, Jeff and I had been walking across the country with four others, from Florida to Quebec, to raise money and awareness for Oxfam America, a charity fighting world hunger and social injustice. Why we came back to New Mexico to stay, I am not sure. Jeff tells me now it was because he had nowhere else to go, but I know we were both worried about our mom, who was suffering from diabetes and kidney failure; I know we wanted to be there for our parents, who were mourning for their daughter, our sister; and I know we were both physically and existentially worn out after walking more than 3,500 miles with an often-contentious group.

Besides, things were going to change, and soon. Twenty-two years old, I thought I would probably begin another adventure, or marry my girlfriend. Jeff, nineteen, thought he would go on a two-year proselytizing mission for what was then his Church—the Mormon Church. And

we both wanted a chance to just hang out, to just *be*, before nothing would ever be the same again.

Jeff rode an Amtrak train home, riding with a group of Amish men on their way to Albuquerque to sell furniture. I stayed a while longer in Boston, our hike's home base, and then flew home via Michigan, where my girlfriend at the time lived. Her brother, a musician and electronic music fanatic, burned me this album in his basement office, refusing to tell me anything about it, wordlessly confident I would appreciate it.

Later, the first time I heard it, those first notes of "Dundas, Ontario" and the songs that followed, I was driving alone on Interstate 40 west through the canyon from my parents' house down to the city—sloping boulder fields on either side of the road, past piñon trees and dirt, past concrete and cracked-stucco houses—and it didn't stun me. It was so subtle, so apparently simple. But I liked it. I passed it on to Jeff, who gave it closer attention, proclaimed it a masterpiece, and insisted I listen to it again and again and again, as many times as it took until I got it. And I did get it.

## **02. "People Eating Fruit"**

For most of 2001, Jeff and I, and the other hikers, had had a clear goal for every single day: *walk. Walk north. Walk fast, because it's going to get cold.* And then, we had reached the sea, the gray granite Cliffs of Forillon, the northern end of the Appalachians, and suddenly, we had nothing else to work toward. After almost a year of goal-oriented living, we suddenly had nothing to do at all. Jeff and I were back, in the house we had grown up in—a middle-class, single-story house at the top of a dirt road—and we were now directionless, unmotivated,

adrift. We wanted to relax, we wanted this time to be good, but nothing had any purpose, nothing felt right, every moment hid sadness.

How this time felt is how “People Eating Fruit,” the album’s second song, still feels. Both remind me of *The Time Machine*, H.G. Wells’ early sci-fi novel, the story of a gentle race of humanoids living in crumbling buildings on the surface of a far-future Earth, living peacefully, eating only fruit, all the while knowing that, when night falls, carnivorous predators will emerge from dark wells to hunt and devour them. Formerly the title track of Manitoba’s four-song debut EP (released in October of 2000), “People Eating Fruit” sprawls as a realm of peace and idleness—a realm in which a chorus of childlike, inhuman voices sings, and then disappears, and then reappears distorted and slowed down, reappears to harmonize unnaturally with the chorus it was before—a realm in which scattered wells plunge to blackness all around, every one a quiet reminder that everything is not okay, that things are waiting to emerge.

I wrote a screenplay about a UFO cult, and talked on the phone with my girlfriend, breaking up and getting back together over and over again, usually about religion, which I had had enough of and she had not. Jeff, a talented musician, channeled most of his anxiety into pounding out brooding classical originals on our mom’s grand piano. We watched movies—*Brokedown Palace*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, others. We tried to reconnect with our parents, hiking mountain trails with our dad, talking over *Colombo* with our mom. I tried to make plans—another hike, a kayak trip, a return to college—but nothing stuck.

All of us were still reeling from my sister’s unexpected suicide, my parents especially. My dad—in his sixties, usually gregarious, the owner of a regional playground sales company—saw my sister in everything. A bluebird flew across his path one day, while he was out hiking, and he felt

sure it was her, back from the dead to lighten his heart; soon, ceramic bluebirds began appearing all throughout our house. He saw a movie starring the actress Kate Beckinsale, was struck by how much he thought she looked like our sister, and bought everything she had ever even made a cameo in. He spent hundreds of dollars on a custom-made sign that named a hiking trail after my sister, and we all hiked into the foothills of the Sandia Mountains, east of Albuquerque, west of our home, and installed it as a family. The sign was unofficial, though, and someone removed it within a few days.

My mom—a homemaker, also in her sixties—just didn't deal with it. Her health was already failing—from advanced diabetes, which she had let go untreated for years; from the kidneys that had given up and forced her into daily dialysis; from restless legs syndrome; and from a nearly constant itching—and all of that, with the addition of my sister's sudden death and my mom's belief in an afterlife, combined to rob her of almost all will to live. "I just want to be with LeeAnne again," she would say. And, "This is not living!" Even on our best days, our mom was always steadily dying in the background, and even on our best days, our dad no longer smiled. The bleary aftermath of my sister's suicide, the broken despair of my parents, and the day-by-day dying of my mom were not the main story in this time as I experienced it, but they were the setting; they were the tone; they were the almost-visible haze hanging hard between every moving figure and everything else.

And then, there was my brother. Jeff, barely nineteen years old, three years younger than me—blond, of average height, with a solid frame, deeply serious but with a grin always ready, his green eyes a mixture of fun and darkness. Jeff, whom I think felt and feels things as intensely as our sister did. Jeff, to whom I have almost always been closer than I have ever been to anyone,

in part because we were a bit like the only children in a family all our own. Our parents had had five children and their family had appeared complete, but when their youngest, my older brother David, was seven years old, they had me, and when I was three years old, they had Jeff, and so Jeff and I grew up slightly apart from the rest. By the time I was ten, everyone else had left home, and as my parents often moved, Jeff and I were each other's only stable friendship. In early 2002, Jeff was planning to go on a two-year religious mission for the Church in which our genuinely loving parents had raised and indoctrinated us, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints—the Mormons—a relatively new American religion with a central mythology about Jesus visiting the Americas; a prophet who claims direct contact with God; and a holy book, *The Book of Mormon*, that reads like bad Bible fan-fiction. I had had doubts about the Church my entire life, and had viscerally rejected it some time before, though some of its tentacles still wound their way through the folds of my brain. Jeff was still very much in it, even preparing to help it grow.

At nights, Jeff and I would head out driving, usually driving north from our parents' house on the two-lane Highway 14 and then turning left, west, onto La Madera Road—a winding, ruins-lined dirt road that angled and wound its way from the piney northwest slopes of the Sandias down into junipers and piñons and a grassy valley and out into the wildest desert. The miles of La Madera Road unspool as a microcosm of the Southwestern past—past Native American ruins and petroglyphs, abandoned Spanish-Mexican villages, early twentieth-century mining towns, a crumbling railway, and a desert so wide and varied, all stone and cliff and dirt and nearing mountains, so seemingly infinite it makes everything human feel slight. Even human problems. Along La Madera Road, civilization had failed, and that felt okay, even hopeful; there, the

fleeting became the timeless; there, the desert took back the world. We drove La Madera almost every night, for hours, and we would play this album, with every curve of the road matching every rise and fall within the music.

The songs would play; “People Eating Fruit” would play—the music a liquid calm, burbling and frothing along a curving streambed, sloshing up occasionally against digital banks, our white, camper-shelled truck sloshing and curving along a parallel course. The song would end, the album would continue, the album would end, and we would listen to it again; we would keep on driving, the album would play, or we would listen to something else.

On one such drive, I remember taking out Manitoba and putting on the unearthly zithering of Washington Phillips. I remember the two of us listening to Phillips’ 1930s gospel-blues song, “I Am Born to Preach the Gospel,” and Jeff exclaiming, “This is just how I feel!”—the rabbitbrush desert careening and revolving around us as we drove—and my heart sinking, knowing he was about to go deeper into something most people never really returned from—two years of intense indoctrination—into something two of our older brothers never really came back from—into something I worried our friendship might not survive.

### **03. “Mammals vs. Reptiles”**

Most mornings in early 2002, I would sleep in—in the same bedroom I had grown up in, although a room now completely remodeled and repainted and re-carpeted, a foreign place, not mine—eat breakfast, watch TV, work on my script, or drive down to Albuquerque to meet with friends or tape fliers on light poles. The days were tedious and mostly pleasant, filled with the desire to do something and with a total lack of good ideas as to what. So I just kept on

putting up fliers, just kept on doing whatever. The fliers were for a fictional cat-grooming service I had founded in my brother's name; every one featured photoshopped images of cats waving American flags, an offer of a free initial grooming, and a fake quote from *Cat Fancy* magazine. I just liked the idea of people calling up Jeff to ask him to groom their cats. It made me laugh, so I taped up hundreds.

And, I kept on driving, late at night, with Jeff—usually the same road, La Madera, with its roofless tunnel of dust-coated junipers, with its headlighted sandstone, its walls and rises, its brittle tufts of roadside sage—and with this album. Alternately melancholy and warm, creepy and relaxed, surprising and repetitive—this album is all of that, and “Mammals vs. Reptiles” is all of that in a single song.

Immediately frantic, immediately repetitious—a record needle has become stuck at the end of a 45, and is playing the same four notes over and over and over again in close succession—dadumdadum, dadumdadum, dadumdadum, dadumdadum—but instead of being annoyed, the residents of this musical house are grabbing drums and cymbals and jamming along, accompanying the stuck needle, competing with one another and with the world. And then come the horns. *The horns!* Things are happening here, things are intensifying, but there is always this manic sameness. We know this song will build, will smear out wide as the horns join in, will lean and sprawl and almost collapse, but despite all that, there will be those notes, those same four notes, those four notes again, those four notes again, those four notes again, those four notes again. Its strained repetition fit our minds just perfectly at the time, and driving at night with the album as our world's soundtrack, it fit everything.

Some nights, apparently reveling in the absurdity of our existence, Jeff and I, before heading out, or after coming back, would spend hours on the Internet, on martial artist and actor Chuck Norris's official website, trolling the chat room. It was stupid, and pointless—*and why didn't we just get jobs?*—yet now I remember it fondly. Jeff had discovered that in Chuck Norris's chat room, we could each create as many online identities for ourselves as we wanted to. So we did, each of us strolling into the online world of diehard Chuck Norris fans as a crowd of twenty, all of us interested in one thing and one thing only.

“So, uh, any like, uh, young teenage boys in here, who are, like, uh, pretty muscular?”

The six to ten legitimate Chuck Norris fans using the site would suddenly find themselves in a growing crowd of friendly pedophiles who for some reason just showed up out of nowhere. At first there would be outrage, then threats to report us to the site administrator, and then a mass exodus, with everyone typically leaving in quick succession, leaving Jeff and I laughing maniacally to each other, trading the keyboard of our parents' computer back and forth, talking and typing to no one else.

“When we look back on this time,” I remember Jeff saying to me on one such evening, “We'll say, ‘That just has to have been the most worthless part of our entire lives.’”

#### **04. “Brandon”**

Most days, things just happened, and time just kept dragging on, but sometimes everything would come together—sometimes wonderfully, sometimes not. For Jeff, everything just got worse. He was growing out of adolescence, and many of his teenage eccentricities were beginning to manifest themselves as real problems—as anxiety, mainly, but also as mania,

depression, paranoia, and as increasingly intense panic attacks and suicidal thoughts. Later, perhaps a year later, he would begin seeing a therapist and taking medication for his anxiety and depression, but during this time he just hoped he wouldn't need it, if only he lived right and kept praying. Occasionally, our mom would drag Jeff to a naturopath friend of hers who would place different herbs in his hands and then tell him things she had somehow deduced from how much effort it took for her to push down on his arms—but it would be wrong to say he received any real treatment for his problems during this time.

During the days, when he wasn't playing the piano, or reading Church literature in preparation for his mission, Jeff and one of his friends, a beautiful girl his same age, would plan increasingly elaborate and ridiculous schemes for getting kicked out of various Wal-Marts, down in Albuquerque. They would execute their plans and film them, and then bring the videos home to play on our parents' TV. These videos typically featured Jeff as his performance art alter ego, Timmy the Bold, an autistic, wheelchair-bound man who asked literally everyone if they were feeling sassy and would like a seat on his lap. Jeff's friend would usually play his caretaker. "Two knees, no waiting," Timmy the Bold would say, patting his lap, pawing at the shoppers' rapidly retreating figures, and speaking in a croak. This went on for some time—this was Jeff's life at the time as much as our late-night drives were—until Jeff and his friend began dating and her on-again-off-again ex-boyfriend—who was also Jeff's best friend from high school—came home from college mid-semester. Jeff spent much of almost every day with them, but the dynamic among them felt toxic and made of resentment. They bickered almost as much as they spoke. Jeff scowled more than he didn't.

In a way, it was the opposite of “Brandon,” the album’s fourth song, my favorite on the disc. The song begins in a slow hurry, the drums whipping a sequence of peaceful, quiet keyboard notes to step it up and move faster—keep going—*we’ve got to reach the bass*. And eventually, the notes do reach the bass, so wobbly and strange and uncertain; the frantic drums are left behind, and the music continues on, changing, growing, quieting, slowing, stopping, inching forward—and then, in what I always called “The Greatest Moment in Modern Music,” the drums return, but with superpowers, with an added dimension, and when they unite with the music once again, the song just *becomes*. A new and fatter and even wobblier bassline wanders back in, and even now, listening to this more than ten years after I first heard it, I get chills. A hurriedly strummed guitar joins the other instruments, the other sounds drop away one by one, only the strumming of the guitar remains, and then nothing does, nothing at all.

Brandon is another Canadian city, the second-largest in the province of Manitoba. For a song that becomes so big, it’s fitting that it departs so wildly from Snaith’s hometown, heading west to a place with more than double the population—heading west via two freeways and another country. Albuquerque was our Brandon, I suppose. It was west of us, anyway, and larger, and for Jeff, at least, things did intensify there.

Of course, I was just on the edge of that story, typically holed up in my room, writing or reading or killing time. Sometimes I would wander out to get a drink from the fridge, and Jeff and his two friends would stomp in and out of the kitchen; my mom would drag her home-dialysis tubes over to the wall-phone to yell at yet another strange call about a free cat-grooming service, and then she would yell a question about it at Jeff.

## 05. "Children Play Well Together"

The percussion of the album's fifth song, "Children Play Well Together," sounds like the scuffling feet of someone drugged and uncertain. It sounds completely unlike any existing idea of percussion. It sounds like someone lost and wandering through an auditory hallucination, drunkenly stumbling from evening into dusk. Slow notes of a touch-tone phone float past. Fingerpicked guitar notes drift by, repeating. Everything plays in a minor key. Everything sounds ominous. It's a song many online short films have used to make mundane events seem terrifying. It's the playfully titled "Children Play Well Together," but at this time we were not all even functioning well together, and the song only fit our world because of its tone.

Jeff's girlfriend broke up with him to go out with her ex again, and in a single day he lost her as his girlfriend and friend, lost the friend who had been his best friend throughout high school, and he almost lost his mind. One day shortly after that, he spent almost the entire day in the bathroom, and when I would knock on the door, I could tell he had been crying, though he said he was fine. I think it was that night, when we went driving, when Jeff skipped ahead to "Children Play Well Together," saying he loved it because "It's just so creepy! It's just the way everything feels to me, all the time," and I had to agree.

We drove down La Madera Road, and I can clearly remember hauling through the Dusty Corridor, an early-on juniper-lined stretch of the road; Jeff wrote a song about that stretch on his guitar around that time. I remember passing what we call First Ruin, the first partial adobe walls seen when heading west, and passing the cholla cactus field in which I would one day get married. Jeff leaned over the wheel and, suddenly, he broke down sobbing, just weeping in harsh, choking bursts. It was all roar and crash and guttural sound, and he was shaking so hard I

wished he wasn't driving, and he was panicking and crying out. I remember him sobbing, "It's my face, my stupid face!" It was so irrational, but his pain felt so real that I could feel it too just by sharing the vehicle. Eventually, he managed to explain that when his girlfriend had broken up with him, he thought she had implied that his *appearance* had something to do with it, particularly his acne, which could sometimes get noticeable.

"I just want to—I just can't stop thinking about just, just ending it," he said. "Like LeeAnne did!" "Oh, man, don't talk like that!" I said.

I reminded him about how, three years before, living in Alaska, I had spent months of a seemingly eternal winter just sitting in the window of my cabin, smoking way too much pot, reading depressing books, hiding from the cold, and just hating my continuing existence.

"And I was the same age you are now. Maybe it hits everyone in our family then!"

I suggested that, since depression affects a person's brain, that means a depressed person can't even *think* correctly about his situation, because the tool he needs to do that with is the one most affected by the problem.

"Just wait, man," I said, meaning every word. "You can't be thinking clearly about this.

Seriously, you're probably better-looking than anyone else in our family. I've actually been envious of your appearance before. Don't you remember in high school, when people constantly told you how much you looked like Leonardo DiCaprio? And that was when *Titanic* came out! Not *What's Eating Gilbert Grape?*, when he played a retarded guy."

Jeff laughed. He started talking a little more positively, coming to more reasonable conclusions, stating positive, even cocky, things on his own. "I guess I have made out, just since we've been

home, with the two most attractive girls I know,” he said. “And I am the same age you were, when you were so depressed. That does make a lot of sense.”

“Man, Jeff, I just want you to feel *better*,” I said. “When I see you suffering like this, it makes *me* suffer. When I see you feeling so bad, it makes me feel bad. You’re not just my brother, you know. You’re my closest friend. ...I love you, man. I want you to be happy.”

#### **06. “Lemon Yoghourt”**

Several miles north along the highway from the start of La Madera Road runs another dirt road, this one without signs or a real name. Jeff discovered the entrance of it by himself, while out driving around one day, and we headed out to it later that night. We put the album on to play in the truck’s CD player, we drove west, we passed a windmill, we passed a cattle pond, we passed a fence. We passed another windmill, another cattle pond, another fence. Another, another, another. We drove, and we drove, and the road channeled us into involuntary left turns, involuntary right turns, sudden angles—more windmills, more cattle ponds, more fences. The car stereo played the album’s every song, and most appropriately it played this song, “Lemon Yoghourt,” the album’s most aggressively repetitious track, a song likely named as a tribute to electronica duo Lemon Jelly, a song that can’t be played at a party without someone checking the stereo to see if it’s skipping. The song starts quietly enough, with a tiny loop of notes reminiscent of the gently annoying song a car door plays when the keys are left in. A sound like a forgotten turn signal joins in for a strange automotive harmony, then keyboard notes, xylophone notes, unidentifiable percussion, and then everything sticks, sticks, sticks, sticks, sticks, and if you’re at all like me, you might have once thought this song breaks the tone

of an otherwise perfectly smooth-in-the-best-sense-of-that-word album, but eventually came around to realizing it's integral, a culmination, that it lets the listener know to remain on guard, that this is *not* easy listening.

There is repetition, repetition, and more repetition, but there is also a build. Everything is the same, but it's all happening faster and louder and more urgently now. Everything is becoming everything else. It's all going somewhere or, I mean, it was. The landscape was just so flat, much flatter than that around La Madera Road, we were farther from the mountains; there were no landmarks at all useful for navigation other than windmills and cattle ponds and fences, and there were dozens, maybe hundreds of those, and soon we were completely lost, with no idea at all how to get back out. We decided we would name this area The Maze, and even if it did go all the way west to near Interstate 25, to the freeway on the other side of the mountains and the desert north of the mountains, we would probably not be driving it much again.

And then, we drove for three hours more, completely lost. I pulled out my tattered New Mexico map book, but it was no help at all, showing only a straight line and "57A," where the actual roads were less linear and more fractal, more like an endless circuit of right angles and windmills and cattle ponds and wire fencing. The fuel light went on, and we turned off everything we could, the heater, the music, hoping to conserve gas. Neither of us had a cell phone, and we knew that if we did run out of gas out there, we would have a long, tired walk ahead of us, across the desert, down toward the distant lights of the city below.

As we drove, we talked, primarily about how to get out of The Maze; we pointed to coyotes and rabbits caught in the yellow cast of the headlights; and we talked about life and how stranded

we felt. Jeff talked about his mission—but only when I mentioned it. I noticed his reluctance, and it gave me hope, made me speak more boldly about it than I had before. I reminded him of the time our older brother came home from his mission to Germany.

“I mean, don’t you remember, man, when David came back, and he gathered all of us together to stand in the living room for that half-hour-long prayer of...gratitude...or whatever, and he just kept on going on and on, and you and I opened our eyes and looked at each other like, ‘*Is this how he is now?*’—and basically, it was! He was *never* the same after that! You *know* that! Aren’t you *at all* worried that’s going to happen to you?”

“Oh come on, I’m not David,” Jeff said. “David listens to...I’m a totally different person! David never walked across the country with you. Or pretended to be a robot for a year!”

“Right. Right. I know. I know that. And still, I love David. But you’re going to be out there for two full years, man, not allowed to listen to non-Church music, not allowed to read non-Church books, not allowed to go to movies, not allowed to be alone with anyone except your mission companion—some glassy-eyed chump from Utah or Idaho, probably—and every day you’re going to go out and say the same things over and over and over again, all day—‘The Church is true, the Church is true, the Church is true’—so many times you’ll believe it more than anyone!”

“The Church is true!” Jeff exclaimed. “I believe it already! It is! You...fool! You just...you don’t have to worry! *I’m me!*”

An edge was coming into his voice, and he was done talking, done, and he swung the wheel and brought the truck out onto a paved road, and there was Santo Domingo Pueblo, a Native American village north of Albuquerque, and there was an over-lit, garishly bright gas station,

open late, and it was as if Jeff had conjured the place up magically, out of frustration, just to shut me up, just to banish The Maze and the subjects it invoked.

### **07. “James’ Second Haircut”**

We never went back. Aside from memorizing that network of roads for use in some future, unforeseen police chase, we could see no reason to. It was mostly featureless and unexciting, the roads newly graded and unhistoric. Besides, we had a road that meant far more to us anyway, La Madera, the woods road, a road that hadn’t even begun to give up all its secrets. About halfway along La Madera Road when heading west, a broad, flood-carved arroyo suddenly pulls up beside it, just to the right, to the north, and on the other side of that arroyo sit the ruins of Hagan, an early 1900s coal-mining town, the town I would one day name my son after. Hagan was laid out in two halves—a primarily residential group of houses, and a mercantile, on one side of a smaller arroyo; and on the other side, the old mining office, the mine entrances, and the power plant, where the town had used its own coal to electrify itself. One wintry evening, in early 2002, Jeff and I and another friend of ours—a friend I would later date and marry and have children with—decided to drive in our friend’s car to Hagan, through the Dusty Corridor, through the half-abandoned adobe town of La Madera, past First Ruin, past the long sunburnt tilt of Suicide Cliffs, playing Manitoba for our friend.

We may have played her this song then, “James’ Second Haircut.” It fits the memory. A peaceful murmur of amorphous sound—the feeling not of a song, but of the time before a song, of musicians tuning up their instruments, testing drum kits and keyboards, then segueing effortlessly, casually, into an easy jam, something so friendly even as it builds and reveals a

manic edge. There's a build, and a build, and a beat, and a beat, and we begin to suspect this friendly song may be deeply troubled.

We decided to camp out in Hagan's commercial half, building a campfire inside the widest of the power plant's two chimneys, and sleeping in sleeping bags inside the building's cement shell, near an old stone staircase leading down to a lower level filled with mud. We sang along to a 1980s cassette of "Campfire Songs," climbed up through the narrowest chimney for a starry view from the roof, and listened to the howling of the coyotes.

The night got cold, and colder, and sometime around three in the morning, Jeff began thrashing around, gasping, frantically packing up his things, and throwing them all into his sleeping bag. I woke up as he was throwing the bag over his shoulder, and our friend woke up, and Jeff muttered that "I've got...I've got to get out of here, I'm freezing to death! I can't get warm, I can't get warm!"

"Oh come on, Jeff," I said. "You're not going to freeze to death! You had that bag in Canada! Just...go back to sleep already! It'll be light in three hours!"

"I can't breathe, it's so cold! I can't breathe! You want me to freeze to death out here?" he yelled, and it was obvious and annoying that he was out of his mind and panicking and that nothing was going to calm him down but all of us packing and leaving.

So, we packed, and we tried to leave, but as soon as we got to the car, we discovered our friend had parked too close to the arroyo, and her car was now hopelessly stuck in the sand. We spent most of the next two hours digging it out, putting rocks under its wheels for traction, all of us moving quickly just to stay warm, our soundtrack now just rock against rock, the chuffing away of sand, the occasional rev of the engine. The darkness drained slowly from the air; knots of

light began tumbling over the frost-covered ground; the sun rolled burning into view, and the whole sky spilled off of it, flooding pink and orange and purple and red, and for a moment I wasn't annoyed and resentful and uncomfortable and cold, I was just in awe of one of the most astounding sunrises I had ever seen anywhere, and I just felt grateful, and even Jeff just looked shyly embarrassed to have woken everyone—not terrified, not crazed, not thinking he was going to die if he didn't do something, something else, anything else, almost anything else, right away.

#### **08. "Schedules & Fares"**

Eventually, our weird interim, our mostly wasted months, came to a close. Jeff decided to move, to attend a summer semester at Brigham Young University-Idaho, a Mormon-owned college in Idaho Falls, Idaho, before he would leave on his mission in the fall. In April, I decided to redeem some ancient savings bonds, buy a used travel trailer and a year's worth of canned food, and move into the desert to be a hermit and write. I have always loved the desert, and loved solitude; for me, both are necessities. My parents owned some isolated ranchland, in northeastern Arizona, and they said I could park my trailer there, beside a windmill and a cattle pond.

Before I left, my friends surprised me with a cowboy-themed goodbye party, with plastic guns and cowboy hats. And before we left, Jeff and I drove La Madera Road one last time for that little era, and I wondered if it would be the last time we would ever really drive it together, as people who mostly understood each other. I wondered if he would come back like our other brothers, with his mind as much the Church's as his own. I didn't know. I wondered if when he

returned he would think significantly less of me for not sharing in the same “truths”—or if I would find him insufferable.

But we drove, and the album played, and it wasn't many songs away from its end. The album really is one of the most peaceful, welcoming, ensconcing, perfectly listenable musical works I know—and yet it is never just peaceful; it's never just welcoming. Underneath it all, there is always something uneasy, melancholy, and worried. Maybe I'm just projecting my own temperament, my own generally-content-but-quietly-dark state of mind onto this album, onto this song, but I don't think so.

Track eight, “Schedules & Fares,” in particular, is so relaxed, and so relaxing, I would put it on a mix for an anxious friend in need of something calming. It traipses along contentedly, happily, dreamlike, but as it progresses it moves more quickly, more determinedly, too quickly to be entirely comfortable, grows increasingly percussive, and I'm left to wonder about its title, to wonder if this song is more about the underlying anxieties surrounding plans, or schedules, or fares, than it is about the plans themselves.

I moved out into the Arizona desert in early May of 2002, forty miles from the nearest town, and several miles from the nearest neighbor. Jeff left for college, where he met and began dating a girl, a recent convert to Mormonism, from Michigan's Upper Peninsula. In late June, after I had been living in my desert trailer for almost two months, they surprised me by showing up at the end of my long dirt driveway, during the middle of a nearby wildfire that had turned the sun into a dark red disc and the sky into a sifting murk of ash. The girl seemed nice enough, though her taste in music was questionable—lots of trendy boy bands—and I couldn't see her being anything more for Jeff than just a college girlfriend.

That evening, we sat in lawn chairs around my fire pit, coughing and talking, while Jeff's girlfriend rummaged in the car, and Jeff, obviously smitten, asked, "So, what do you think?" And I said, "She seems great. She's cool. She seems really cool. She's cool. She's nice. She's great. She seems just really great."

### **09. "Paul's Birthday"**

The next day, I threw a few things into a couple of pillowcases, and Jeff drove us all back to my parents' house, for a break from the constant, headache-inducing smoke, and for a special gathering. Sometime before, my mom had checked the mailbox at the bottom of the road and found an envelope, addressed to Jeff, whose return address was that of the Mormon Church's headquarters in Salt Lake City, Utah. This was Jeff's "mission call"—the allegedly revealed-by-God-through-his-servant-the-Prophet letter which would tell him where he had been called to go for two years to preach the so-called Gospel—that Native Americans are the descendants of seafaring Jews, that Jesus somehow appeared in the Americas, that a nineteenth-century treasure hunter found a record of that appearance, and that there is a living prophet today who can tell you what the supernatural force that controls all of existence wants for your life.

As far removed as I am from that Church today, and as removed from it as I was then, I can't deny that this was an incredibly significant moment for my brother—the moment kids sing about for years in Sunday School, singing, "I hope they call me, on a mission, when I have grown a foot or two." This was the first major rite of passage for all young Mormon males—the experience, along with "temple marriage," which every active Mormon male abstains from sex and drugs and drinking and even coffee to be worthy for—the experience Mormon high-school

and college students take classes to prepare for—the experience that, without which, most Mormon young women won't even look at a guy—in short, a major thing in that culture, with an almost crippling amount of psychological weight attached to it.

Jeff had been waiting for months for this letter, for this call, but my mom had asked him to wait to open it until some other visiting family members and I could be there for the big event, for the great reveal. Jeff agreed. He realized the enormity of this. Probably more than anyone, he felt the pressure of it, the intensity, and he wanted it to be special.

Because things were coming to a close. Like “Paul’s Birthday,” the album’s ninth track and its only real single (released in February of 2001), with its sampled harp-strums, its mournful horns, and its spidery drums, everything felt and sounded like the end—at least until its sudden escalation, its doubling of speed, its instrumentation like traces of light, like strange phenomena barely glimpsed. At first the song’s percussion sounds soft and lazy, as if the drum heads were loosely stretched rubber sheets, but as the song progresses, those sheets tighten, and everything becomes sharper, harder, more insistent. Inescapable.

Late that afternoon, we all gathered in my parents’ living room; Jeff sat on the largest couch in the center of the room, and everyone sat around eager to hear. At that moment, in our minds, his future home could have been anywhere. He could be sent to Russia, or Japan, or to Utah, where everyone was either already a member or totally hated Mormons. (Utah is infamous in Mormon culture as the worst possible mission.) My mom handed Jeff a letter opener, Jeff trembled with anxiety, and he opened the envelope.

Inside was a little poem. Something like, “What you seek, you’ve been seeking hard, now go and look, by the faucet in the yard.” In an instant, it became obvious that someone had

removed the actual mission call and replaced it with a little clue starting a treasure hunt. Jeff looked as if he was unable to process what was happening. As if his brain could not make sense of it, and I heard his voice crack as he croaked out a forlorn “Wha...aaaat?”

The room erupted in outraged comments, including some from me that I later regretted, and my mom, immediately recognizing that this was not actually a funny idea at all, that this was actually a huge mistake, rushed to explain.

“Oh, I, I’m sure, if you just go...out...into the yard...you’ll find it right away. It’s like a...fun little...treasure hunt. To find out the...”

With an air of angry resignation and hopeless anxiety, Jeff pulled himself up from the couch to stomp out into the yard to look for the next clue, but then collapsed into his chair again, defeated, shaking, tears forcing their way out. Now he was just angry, and he couldn’t stop shaking, and he demanded of our mom, “Why did you do this? This was important to me, and you’ve turned it into some kind of...*game!*” I sat there, not at all wanting him to go on a mission, wanting him to say to hell with this stupid Church, but still, feeling terrible for him.

Finally, humiliated and despairing, my mom ran outside and got the actual mission call from the leach field, and came in with it clutched limply in her hand. Jeff sat up straight, to read it, and everyone regrouped, and we all tried to act as if we hadn’t just seen a devastating, absolute failure of a practical joke played on someone right when he was expecting the most momentous, long-awaited announcement of his life. Jeff, sniffing, read the call. ““Jeffrey Farrell Smith...you have been called to serve in the Brasilia, Brazil mission...” and everyone cheered for him, or acted impressed or excited, but Jeff’s enthusiasm for it all was gone.

Photographs of this occasion might look happy and exciting; the tears in Jeff's eyes might look like tears of spiritual conviction; and the look on my mom's face might look as if she's sad to think of not seeing her son for the next two years, worried for the trials he'll have to face; but this was a hellish time, and everyone present felt terrible, then and afterward. No one who was there would deny it, and no one who was there felt happy.

### **10. "Happy Ending"**

Summer of 2002 was coming to an end, and Jeff was set to leave for a Missionary Training Center, in São Paulo, Brazil, to learn how to be a Mormon missionary. His short semester of college concluded, and he returned to my parents' house to prepare to leave. He drove by himself to my trailer in Arizona and picked me up again, and brought me back to Cedar Crest to visit with him and my parents for a few days. Halfway through our time at home together, he got a phone call from his girlfriend in Michigan. Whatever she said on the other end of the line made him go quiet; after about a minute of the conversation, he locked himself in his room; and when he emerged sometime later, his face sagged pale and he almost staggered.

Early that evening, he suggested a drive.

We drove north to La Madera Road, with me at the wheel this time, and discovered, to our horror, that half of what we had always called "The Greatest Dirt Road of All Time" was now paved. All of what we had once called the Dusty Corridor was now completely paved, apparently by some suburban developer intent on turning that half of the road into the center of a housing development. Today, Jeff can't even remember how the song he wrote about it used to go. And neither can I.

We drove on. We passed First Ruin on our right, and what local ranchers call Ship Rock, a white sandstone spire that looks nothing like a ship, on our left.

"I have something to tell you," Jeff said. "Something major."

He fell silent. The music seemed to turn itself down.

"Kristen called. And...she missed her period."

"Are you...*serious*? Oh crap. *Oh crap*. Did you—did you two—is that possible?"

Jeff couldn't even talk. Every word almost choked him.

"I...well...*maybe*...I think...kind of...*no...no...no!*"

"Well, what? I mean, did you have sex? You can tell me, man. I won't think less of you or anything. Seriously. You know what I think of all the Mormon rules."

His voice warped by emotion, Jeff was just about yelping every word out now. He couldn't stop shaking as he spoke.

"This...I don't understand this!" he said. "This can't...be! I...so, I visited her, in Michigan, and we...we fooled around in her parents' house, a little, but...*I swear* we didn't do *anything* that could have done this!"

"What do you mean—like...you used protection? Or you just—"

"No! Like, we didn't even...get undressed! We just messed around, with our clothes on! I swear, I swear to you, Mike, I am *not lying*, I'm not...but something must have...I guess...I don't know...soaked through our clothes and, somehow..."

This sounded absolutely *impossible* to me, and I just assumed he must of course have been lying, unwilling to admit what had really happened, that they—fresh out of BYU-Idaho and with Jeff preparing for his Mormon mission—had had sex. I couldn't help but think that this sexless

sex story sounded way more embarrassing, and involved disclosing way more details, than simply admitting to doing it, and I wondered how sticking to this story could be worth it.

Jeff showed me a fax she had sent him from what appeared to be a doctor's office, stating that her pregnancy test was positive, but I had a hundred questions for him. "Could someone else be the father?" "Would she purposefully get herself pregnant just to keep you home?" "Could she just be lying?" And it would later, much later, turn out that I was completely justified in my doubts. Later, much later, she would confess to having lied about the pregnancy, and would confess to having forged the faxed information, to having lied about everything to keep Jeff from leaving, but at this time, neither of us had any real idea of this. It even turned out that Jeff *had* told me the truth—that was why he had stuck to that ridiculous story—*it was actually true*—they never really had had sex. Fully-clothed, dry-humping Mormon sex, sure, if you want to call *that* sex, but nothing that could have actually gotten her pregnant.

Now, looking back, I wish I had just said to Jeff exactly what I was thinking—I wish I had translated how I felt into words and then spoken them. *Jeff, the only way this girl could be pregnant is if you're lying about how far you two went. If she's pregnant, and you're the father, that's the only way. If you really didn't have actual sex with her, then you need to run from this girl, because she is not pregnant, or at least not with your child, and she is dangerous.* At the time, I don't think I said any of this. I may have urged him once or twice to tell me the truth, but I didn't push him. I should have. Maybe making him uncomfortable for an hour then would have saved him some of the years of grief that followed.

I knew Jeff was no innocent bystander, naïve though he was—but still I felt myself choke up.

Jeff and I were friends, but he was also my brother, my only younger sibling, and I felt as if, as

his older brother, I was supposed to make sure these sorts of things didn't happen to him. And if they did happen, I ought to be able to do or at least say *something*.

"How do you know, man, how do you know?" I asked. "...This all just sounds so wrong and sneaky and, like she lured you into this, like it's so *manipulative*, somehow, and—" and Jeff just shook his head, and put a hand to his forehead, suddenly used-up, suddenly exhausted—and I couldn't help it, I found myself tearing up and starting to cry and my voice turning uncertain, and then Jeff was comforting *me*—"It's...it's all right, man, it's all right. I'll be all right," he said. "Whatever happens happens, right?"—and there was the album playing behind us, and it should have been coming to an end right then, the last song. The song with its title ringing so ironic: "Happy Ending." The album, the symbol of our brotherly bond, of our friendship, the idol we worshipped at more than any other. The album with its title so huge and clear in my mind: *Start Breaking My Heart*.

At least when our own lives go to shit, we can take some degree of control, because they're our own, but what about when the lives are those of the people we love? All we can do is watch and lamely say we wish it wasn't happening. At least that's all I could do.

Back at home, in the following days, Jeff called the local church's bishop, told him of the apparent pregnancy, and the bishop cancelled Jeff's mission automatically. Our parents talked with the girlfriend's parents, and Jeff and his girlfriend made plans to "do the right thing" and marry. The time of very little happening had come to an end, and now began the years of far too much. Years would pass before Jeff's life became stable again. In those years, he would eventually learn that his wife had not been pregnant—but she would be, for real, at least until she miscarried, by the time he found out. His marriage would decline and fall; he would lose

himself in addictions to alcohol and prescription drugs; he would attempt rehab more than once, would acquire new addictions, and his mental health would fluctuate wildly. Behind him lay his innocence and his childhood, and it was only in that direction.

That last song of *Start Breaking My Heart*, “Happy Ending”—its title most likely a jokey reference to a massage with a sexual finish, its introductory measure of notes borrowed from the earlier song, “Lemon Yoghourt”—takes us out on a melancholy note, but on a cruelly hopeful one too. The song is so surprising, so easygoing, so unnatural and unfamiliar in its alternately halting and accelerating percussion, its simulated snare-beats snaking around a rise of keyboard notes, and everything leading up to a fadeout that fades back into this: a sample of a child singing, “Get yourself together,” the only words on this otherwise instrumental album, and then a light cascade of piano notes; the child singing, “Get yourself together,” and then the piano; “Get yourself together,” and then the piano; “Get yourself together,” and then piano.

### The True Book of Deserts

I left town to become a hermit, going down from the mountains to the desert. I got married, and moved with my wife to southern New Mexico, where she was going to school. She got pregnant, she graduated, and we moved back together to live in a small house behind my parents' place, to help take care of my mom, who was dying of kidney failure. My parents lived in Cedar Crest, New Mexico, where I'd grown up, a high-desert town on some high-desert mountains. This was the spring of 2005, in a time between times; I was twenty-five, writing a local history book, and in the last months of my life between being childless and being a parent.

In those months, I biked more than I drove, pedaling everywhere. One day I was pedaling north up the winding Highway 14, from my office to the little backhouse, when I noticed a van parked in a dirt lot with some books for sale. I stopped, of course, laid down my bike in the dirt, and found a few kids books for the daughter I would soon have, including an edge-worn, taped-up copy of a 1958 educational book called *The True Book of Deserts*. Written by Elsa Posell, with illustrations by Carol Rogers, it had "10¢" and "Discard" scrawled across the cartoon saguaros and prickly pears of its hard, sand-colored cover, and was divided into four sections: "Deserts," "Animals in the Desert," "Plants in the Desert," "People in the Desert." It looked pleasantly kitschy, I liked the title a lot, and it reminded me of years before, when I'd moved out into the desert to write and be alone, and of a decision I'd made out there that I was still feeling the consequences of and still unsure about. I crawled a hand into my pocket, sifted out some coins, and then pedaled away uphill, the books swinging in a disposable plastic bag from a handlebar, my legs pushing slowly to regain the speed I had had before.

\*

## I. Deserts

West far away from the Sandias, south from Chinle and Ganado, east and south of a painted desert and a petrified forest, is the place I came to call Nowhere, Arizona—or the High Lonesome Middle of Nowhere. The nearest neighbor, and the nearest phone, I'd been told, lay eight miles away, though as time went by I came to think there were people hidden everywhere, in every pot-shard-strewn valley, behind every sun-rusted hill, on the other side of every wind-slanted wire fence. Unknown dogs would occasionally run up to me, sniff at my trailer, and then run off. Some days, I'd hear gunshots, on-and-off, all day. At night, I'd sometimes hear a generator. About fourteen miles away or so was Witch Wells, a lonely bar. From Witch Wells, about thirty miles or so in any of three directions was a town. Sanders, Arizona, one way. Zuni, New Mexico, another. St. Johns, Arizona, another. This was in east-central Arizona, in Apache County, ninth-largest county in the U.S. Most of Apache County was Navajo or Apache reservation, and most of it was undeveloped desert. More than three-quarters of its residents were Native Americans, but in parts of it, the descendants of Mormon pioneers ranched, and logged, and grazed cattle. There were a lot of Mormons around.

Some of the surrounding desert looked like classic badlands—stony bluffs, white, red, brown sedimentary rock, the sea floor of a prehistoric ocean whose water had been replaced with sky.

Elsewhere, there were only hills, low and chitinous, all coarse sand and coarse rock, harsh to look at in their blinding auras of reflected light and heat. There were monstrous steel towers, carrying loudly buzzing power lines. There was a crumbling, sunbleached highway. The radiant white light of an electric, spinning Earth. The sky too vivid and blue to look at directly. Or the sky too tired to even bother holding any color.

“Rain is often shut out by high mountains,” says *The True Book of Deserts*, with a picture of the ocean, and a half-verdant/half-stony mountain, and a desert on the mountain’s other side.

“Winds blow in from the sea. They bring clouds heavy with moisture. The winds rise to cross the mountains. The clouds cool. Rain falls. There is no rain left for the far side of the mountains. The dry land becomes a desert.” And then, on the next page, there’s a picture of a hawk, and the words, “Deserts are not always flat sand. Mountains and rocks are found in some deserts.”

Where I slept, the power lines were a file of distant shades, the highway didn’t exist, and the world wasn’t round, it was corrugated. The land rolled motionlessly, like congealed waves, vein-blue mountains angled up in the distance, and a gradual tilt of a hill rose up behind my trailer. I could follow a cow trail up that tilt and over it to where the outhouse was, and here and there, there were fences, maintained by the Long H ranch, which had easement rights to the cattle pond and its water and the windmill. The desert sprawled out in every way, all openness and silence, wind and sand and sky, sunlight, and stars, and the occasional cloud. The old, gray windmill would turn so fast it would sound like a car, and I would walk down and drink its water right as it rose up, cold and clear as it poured out into light. Sometimes I would climb the

narrow pyramidal tower of the windmill, up the welded lattice-work, for a view, and the view was of what might as well have been a prehistoric world, and the distant silhouettes of cows were maybe dinosaurs, and the distant blur of a car was neon lava, maybe, rushing slowly toward me.

Nights I slept in a 14' Go-Lite travel trailer, a flimsy, 1970 tow-behind thing that nearly fell apart on the way there from Cedar Crest. Inside was a bed, two other beds that could fold out if I had guests, a kitchen area, a table with a sitting booth, a small closet, posters on the walls, cupboards full of food, and drawers full of books, my secret shelves. The trailer had a low doorway, and at 6'3½" tall, I hit my head on it every other time I went out, stumbling out into the sunshine in a lightning-traced fog, clutching my head in my hands and swearing wildly. With a nail, I scratched a line above the door, every time I hit my head, until the nail got lost or wore out.

The trailer sat almost in the shade of the tall, gray 1954 windmill—"AERMOTOR," it said on its fin—and when the wind blew, the wind wheel's steel blades turned, moved a long, steel shaft that thrust in and out of a concrete pad, pumped up water up from deep underground, out of a pipe and into an above-ground cattle pond. The cattle pond was round, about three feet tall, about ten feet across, and steel. On the other side of the trailer I had built three makeshift walls out of desert logs on one of which I hung a solar-heated shower. There was no one to see me out there, so I never worried about modesty. A bench swing with a shade awning sat in front of my trailer. A four-foot-wide, hatbox-shaped fire-pit I'd dug sat beside a lawnchair and a pile of

firewood—the third point on a triangle, if one point was the windmill and another was the trailer.

Surrounding everything was the roll of the land, the undulating plain, the desert hills. Said the desert, *It's fine you're here, though you're not needed here. You don't have to believe in this, or in anything, it will exist either way—being made and unmade and made again, in the harsh light of the real, in the fine silver mesh of the dark. What you believe matters only to you.*

This piece of the desert was owned by my middle-class parents, a seventy-five-acre investment property they never had any plans to live on. They let me park my trailer there while I lived on cashed-in savings bonds and canned food and wrote. Wind often blew for whole days without ceasing, churning the water in the cattle pond into foaming waves that sloshed over the sides. Or the sun shone down hard on everything, baking it in place, cauterizing the ground, sealing it off. I had bought the trailer from a classified ad, just wanting to get away from everything, wanting to write, wanting to be alone, wanting to be in the desert, twenty-two years old and mostly unsure of what I should do with my life. I knew I wanted to write, but that was about it. Before coming there, I had spent aimless months back at home with my younger brother, driving around and listening to music, preparing to watch him leave on a two-year proselytizing mission for the Mormon Church, the Church that we'd been raised in and I had drifted away from—watching my brother and friend about to surrender his identity—and watching our mom beginning to die. Before that, our beloved older sister had taken too many pills and killed herself. And before that, my brother and I had spent almost a year walking across the country,

for charity, and I had yet to recover from any of these times and events, at all, even a little. Still, the desert felt good, and the solitude was welcome. I was never bored, and I was usually content. I read. I wrote. I worked.

I made a point of not keeping track of time. Of forgetting dates and days of the week and how long it had been. Kaella, my pretty, troubled girlfriend, came out every month or so, and she had been out a lot. I had to go into town every few weeks, and I had been to town several times. The seasons advanced, from the last of winter, to spring, to summer, but this was the desert, and the changes were subtle—tinges of green, stronger winds, hotter days, smoke from approaching wildfires, wildfires that would eventually combine and burn down much of the surrounding area.

Before coming out to the trailer, Kaella and I, friends since high school, had found ourselves back where we had grown up, at the same time—her while taking a break from college, for her mental health, me while recovering from the walk across the country, and my sister's suicide. I had a girlfriend, and Kaella had a boyfriend, but we both soon found ourselves single around the same time, our friendship escalated into a physical one, and then into a relationship. We took camping and climbing trips together, and she stayed in a room of my parents' house for a time on a suicide watch, after I had hidden all the knives and medicine from her. She and I had grown close. One day we would marry, have children, grow apart, grow further apart, and get divorced, but at the time, it was just nice, all hormones and glances and happy motion.

I dug the pit for the outhouse with a digging bar and a shovel, digging it about fifteen feet deep and four feet across, softening the petrified Arizona dirt with buckets of water from the cattle pond, painstakingly chipping out a bucketful of dirt and mud, climbing up a rope, and then pulling up the bucket, tied to the rope, to empty it. Once, I threw my shovel out of the hole, the back of it caught the bucket-rope, and pulled it up with it, and I was left in the bottom of the hole, alone, in the sun. Eventually, I found a root and used it to carve steps in the hard dirt wall and climb out.

Most days I would sit in the trailer and write, in notebooks, or on a laptop I charged with a borrowed generator I'd brought. When it was overcast, and the sand wasn't too hot, I'd spend whole days barefoot. I wrote a novella about an atheist who couldn't die because every time he arrived in the afterlife, he refused to believe he was there. I wrote draft after draft of my screenplay about a UFO-worshipping cult. I tried editing and expanding the journals I'd written while living in the desert in a canoe three years before, but I lacked perspective. I wrote about life as a desert, seemingly barren, but actually rich, but still, it's pretty dry, and it can kill you. I thought about writing something like Mary Austin's wonderful book *The Land of Little Rain*, in which she plotlessly describes the natural world near Death Valley, but I could never keep my descriptions that simple. I had too much from my past that I still had to deal with, and too much yet to deal with, that kept looming in the future. An often-credulous agnostic, still recovering from a Mormon childhood, I found that a lot of what I wrote about had something to do with questions of belief—was there a god or not? What happens when you die? Could the Church be true? Should I accept what the natural world seemed to say to me—or what the people I knew

said? I felt no void that needed filling, and I enjoyed the beautiful simplicity of unbelief, but I did want to know what was true. I worked on improving the property, clearing it of scrap metal, and keeping my place clean. I scrubbed my laundry on a washboard in an aluminum tub and hung it on a clothesline to dry, and every morning I exercised—the only time in my life I've ever done so with any discipline. Pull-ups on the windmill, push-ups on two gas cans. Sit-ups. Whatever.

### **I. Animals in the Desert**

Most days, I wouldn't see anyone. I had a cat with me, though, so I never really felt lonely. Years before, living in a canoe on a desert lake, I had often spent weeks at a time in complete solitude, once as long as a month. I remembered feeling unbearably lonely, talking to myself insanely, dreaming ecstatic dreams about simple things like having a conversation or watching TV with a friend. But solitude with an animal was completely different, a softer sort of loneliness. It was fine. Red-tailed hawks would sometimes curve above the trailer, gliding in ever-tightening, slanted circles, eying the cat, and I would hurry to take it indoors.

This was not my first experience with solitude. It felt familiar, comfortable, appropriate for the things I was thinking about and reckoning with. Missing my sister. Worrying about my brother. Worrying about my mom. Worrying about belief. My rejection of Mormonism and religion had

been decisive, but it had only been visceral, intuitive, felt. Those beliefs had all just *felt* like nonsense to me, more so the older I got it, and I had met it with a simple *No. No. No.* Intellectually, however, I had never really grappled with it—I didn't really know how—and so, when I was left alone with my thoughts, I would feel the unnatural mass of those beliefs blink awake, open half of a thousand cataract-silvered eyes, stick its vampiric proboscis into my brain, and grow slowly stronger off my still-indoctrinated uncertainty. I felt liberated by the simplicity of atheism, or liberated by the openness of agnosticism, but terrified that it was all wrong, that I was making an enormous, soul-condemning mistake. When Kaella would come out for a visit, she spoke as if she shared my doubts, but I don't know that she ever did—she just wanted to do things that Mormon rules prohibited, like drinking alcohol, smoking pot, and having sex—but I don't think she ever intensely questioned the religion's truth. I think it was a relief to her to just believe.

Somehow, the ranchers were allowed to keep their cattle all over the property, these massive animals shitting everywhere, groaning and croaking constantly, scratching their insect-bites on every available surface, licking molasses out of a dirty steel box. The sounds they made were like the voices of the damned, loud and constant and inexplicable, less like "Moo" and more like a crowd of lunatics shouting gibberish through megaphones. Sometimes the bulls would get aggressive, and paw at the ground near me, but usually they kept to themselves, perhaps just walking around, bellowing, and showing off their disgusting erections. I remember watching their family dynamics—the happy calves, bound to end up as hamburger, leaping and playing

and running in the sagebrush, or wandering away and getting disoriented and mooing for their mothers, who always found them and were affectionate with them.

“Some desert animals sleep under rocks all day to keep out of the hot sun,” says *The True Book of Deserts*, above a black-and-white cutaway picture of animals in their burrows underground—a pocket mouse, a badger, a kangaroo rat, a bull snake, a kit fox. “Some animals burrow under the ground during the heat of the day. ...Desert animals have tough skin over their lips. They have strong teeth with which to eat the spiny, prickly plants of the desert.”

Sometimes, a pack of coyotes, shades of brown, ragged, and so cautious as to seem well-mannered, would come drink from the cattle pond during the day, or from a puddle of water after a rainstorm. Or, a single coyote would sidle into camp after dark, sniffing around the clicking, crumbling embers of the fire, snapping up a dropped piece of food or a rodent who'd gotten there first. More than anything, I would hear them yipping and howling all night long, sometimes as if wild with hunger, sometimes as if mourning a loved one. Their howls are among the few animal sounds that never get annoying to me, that always give me chills. To me, they are the voice of the desert. Full of longing, mischief, heartbreak, glee, a need.

Crows would watch from the tops of fences, sparrows would flit from branch to branch, and hummingbirds would whir between flowers, occasionally even flying into and then back out of the trailer. Swallows, their wings and tails lovely curves, would swoop arcs, drawing lines in the air from insect to insect, as if connecting dots and summoning a picture.

At night, an owl, almost two feet tall, would perch hooting on a bar about halfway up the windmill, watching for movement in every direction, before suddenly swooping off, its great wings scooping up the night air and pulling it toward it—its prey, whatever it was, suddenly unthinking. In the morning, I would find owl pellets beneath the windmill, coughed-up balls of fur and tiny bones, often being pulled apart by groups of pebbly little beetles that would freeze up when I touched them. On another perch, a road sign visible from a barstool in Witch Wells, a little burrowing owl kept watch every night, and whoever was in the bar could observe its patrol, and its inevitable drop, away, into darkness.

At night, clouds of white moths would batter my face, flying into my mouth and eyes as I sat by the fire. By morning, a layer of them would cover the cattle pond. At first, I'd try to fish some out, but their wings were always ruined by the water, and they died on the ground every time. During the day, it was the flies, which were worse, inescapable. Sticky, glue-coated fly strips, hanging in every corner of the trailer, would get so covered in them that within hours they were useless, as the flies stuck in them remained alive, buzzing and struggling obnoxiously for hours. I realized they were living creatures, doing the only things they knew how to do, but still, I found them intolerable, and I wanted them all to die. More than once I tried to take pictures of them mating—I wanted to turn one into a postcard with the caption, "Arizona is for Lovers Too"—but I could never get a good close-up that wasn't blurry.

Mice would come and sit by my fire at night and hope I dropped food. Kangaroo rats would bound past, hopping like their namesakes, their long, curving tails held aloft for balance. When I dug the hole for my outhouse, kangaroo rats would fall into it almost every night, even though I covered it. Sometimes I could lower a bucket and they would climb in and I'd pull them out and let them go. Just as often, they died from the fall, or drowned in water at the bottom.

An array of lizards would flit across every rock, like gleams of light or spidery shadows within the stones themselves. The days would grow hot, and I would see the lizards breathing in and out rhythmically, or doing what looked like push-ups, alerting rival lizards that they were strong and able. I would witness them catching bugs, smashing them twice in their mouths before swallowing them down, always a small thrill to see. My cat would chase them like a kitten, and jackrabbits would lunge at her, and she would bolt, wide-eyed and terrified, galloping into the open trailer door and leaping up onto the bed. Jackrabbits were everywhere, as were smaller rabbits, and wherever they were, coyotes and hawks were as well. Catching a ride back from St. Johns, at night, it was as if the road was lined with catapults launching rabbits in front of the car. They were almost impossible not to run over. There were literally hundreds of them.

Tawny mule deer would occasionally come by, smallish and sure-footed and studying the ground as if looking for lost keys, white-eared, black-nosed—or bounding past, as if happy to be alive, or afraid. Once, an antlered elk the size of a horse walked past, stopped and stared at me as if it had figured me out completely, and then wandered on, never looking back.

Said the elk, said the animals, *This works the way it's always worked, this tangle of lives. It doesn't need anything or anyone always correcting it, always keeping it on course. Patterns came to be, and patterns continue. Once, it was everything, hurtling out from a single point. Now, it's just all of us, you included, thrown in every direction, cast alone out toward the world.*

### **I.Plants in the Desert**

In the spring, as if color-corrected, the desert greened, although just barely. Barrel cactuses opened small vermillion flowers to the bees. Prickly pears and stiff tendrils of cholla bloomed as well, yellow and red and pink, among spines. Tiny yellow and white flowers sprang up among sagebrush and piñon and stunted junipers. The arrival and departure of the flowers, the arrival and departure of rain, the greening and ungreening of the desert—these were reminders of the shape of the planet, of the desert's place on its shell, of the motion of our planet around an invisible line. Everything was easy, automatic. Even missing my dead sister, and hating death. Even worrying about my brother, and resenting the Church. It all hurt, but it all fit, and it required nothing from me. The Earth turned, things grew on it, life began and evolved, life became more complex, and eventually I was hanging up my laundry on a clothesline tied to the windmill and a tree, flowers on every side. I didn't know that that no one, least of all myself, would ever let the world be that easy ever again. I didn't know that losing faith would be so ragged. That I would think it lost, and then reclaim it, ravenously, and why? That it would bring me to marry Kaella, to marry within that faith, that it would own me and own my children and gnaw jealously on my brain before I would ever begin to get my thoughts back. I never thought

I would revert, and later, only much later, two children later, be able to think clearly enough to take it back.

“In the spring, the desert is a pretty place,” says *The True Book of Deserts*, above colorful flowers. “Bushes are in bloom. The cactus plant is the most common plant of the American desert. Most cactus plants have no leaves. Some have tiny leaves for a short time only.”

An eccentric neighbor told me that decades before, in the 1920s, ranchers had cut down every tree that they thought didn't help their cattle, and that's why there was so much old dry firewood around. I think it was mostly junipers that got cut down during that event. I always had firewood, and I spent most of my evenings sitting by a fire, burning wood I had gathered in the area.

Often, I would go exploring, walking for an hour or so in whatever direction and seeing what I could find, walking on an old ranch road being reclaimed by nature, walking fencelines, walking wherever. I never found any people, doing that, though I think I may have once gotten within hearing distance of a house. I remember getting the strong feeling that I was being watched, perhaps through a rifle sight, the hair rising on my arms, and then turning around, fast, feeling I'd walked far enough.

Once, I found a large tree, a tree I remember as a Ponderosa pine, blown apart and charred black by lightning, its remains a burnt, pointed stump, and a blackened halo of wood. A Navajo

belief I had once heard that said that such sites were spiritually significant for some reason, and that you shouldn't burn wood that had been hit by lightning. Doing so was supposed to bring bad luck.

Junipers seemed to be the most common tree. If there was any shade around besides the covered bench swing in front of my trailer, it was inadequate, and from a juniper, the tree's shadow only a light-eaten scrap of darkness, the juniper's branches spiky and upturned, like harsh fronds, its bark in tattered gray strips, its limbs so twisted, knotted, hard. I'd heard that junipers tended to grow in overgrazed areas, and that makes sense. The area around my trailer was practically wooded with them.

I came to think that before the windmill was installed in 1954, another windmill was there. A neighbor of mine told me as much, and all around the base of the windmill were pieces of old wood covered in flakes of pale blue paint. My neighbor said this wood was almost certainly from the old windmill, probably from sometime between 1890 and 1920—though how would he know? All around the pond, shockingly green grass grew wild in tufts, the brightest color out there besides flowers and hummingbirds. One tuft of neon-green grass not far from the cattle pond actually had a small, oily spring hidden in its midst, and it made me wonder if maybe before there was any windmill here, there was a spring, a spring with a stream that only flowed after a big rain. Maybe the old-time ranchers knew to build a windmill here because there was already some water trickling up from the ground. Or maybe that spring was something artificial, like overflow from the windmill.

To the south, I could see an almost endless rise of desert, much of which would soon burn down in the largest wildfire in Arizona history. I could see the wooded slopes of Mount Baldy, the highest point in Apache County, and the other White Mountains on either side of it. On Mount Baldy's slopes, there were bears and wolves and hidden lakes and, if they were anything like those of other desert mountains I knew, alcoholic men living in pickup trucks, and maybe a hippie in a teepee. But from where I was, the mountains seemed low and unimpressive, barely more than hills. In 1873, Captain George C. Wheeler stood on Mount Baldy's summit and looked in every direction, including toward where my trailer and windmill would one day be; he wrote that the view was "the most magnificent and effective of any of among the large number that have come under my observation." He wrote of "valley lands far surpassing any I have before seen," "a perfect landscape," and "true virgin solitude."

Somehow the rawness of the land favored nothing as much as it favored light. Everything seemed to radiate, or reflect, or pulse with it. The light was always busy, speeding into rocks and dirt, ricocheting off of it, hitting the top of the sky, and then heading back, shuddering, palpitant, stuttering along the oval leaves of prickly pears, or coating every juniper like a layer of settling dust. Above the clouds, sometimes, a rainbow, or a half-rainbow, light traveling through drops of water and becoming ineffable. Above the veering, westbound Sun, sometimes, clouds, as if the Sun was just the end of a tailpipe, expelling them. Above the horizon, every morning, the sunrise, hemorrhaging blood across the sky. Above the horizon, every evening, the sunset, dragging bloody gauze away.

The two big wildfires that began in June and continued into July made the sunsets even wilder and the air hazy and thick and gray and visible. The Sun became an apocalyptic red disc, flat against a flat sky, a burning hole in yellowed paper. Ash snowed down regularly, covering the trailer and the ground and the surface of the cattle pond. I found myself coughing all the time, coughing up black phlegm, short of breath, my eyes red and burning. One of the fires began near the remote Chediski Peak, when a woman's car ran out of gas and, after wandering for two days in search of cell-phone reception, searching for anyone, she spotted a news helicopter and then lit a signal fire hoping to catch its attention, a signal fire that quickly went wild. The other fire began near the Rodeo Fairgrounds of the Fort Apache Indian Reservation, when a firefighter from the nowhere-town of Cibecue intentionally set it, in the hopes of getting some work on a quick-response crew. Soon, the fires merged into the Rodeo-Chediski fire, the biggest fire Arizona had ever seen, and I began making preparations to go away for a while.

One day, I found a beautiful circle, several inches across, smoothly, if spikily, engraved in the sand. It seemed alien, too perfect to be natural, and I knelt down to examine it, and found a sagebrush seedling, pale green and dry, clinging to the ground by only one thin root, blown around in circles in the wind. The wind had had looped it around, looped it around, like the arm of an architect's compass, tracing the circle at an equal distance around it. I think I jumped up and down and yelled, I was so excited.

Said the sagebrush, said the plants, *It's simple. Everything is automatic, a continuance. Watch the wind make its course around the world, jostling branches. Watch the roots of everything stretch to water. Extra help is unnecessary. And if it did come, supernaturally, anyone who claimed to know exactly how would have to be wrong. How could they know?*

### **I. People in the Desert**

Toward the mountains, toward the south, I could see some sort of power plant in the far distance, its lights blinking at night. I hated that thing. Sometimes, at night, strange lights would flash brightly on either side of me and I would hear a sound like enormous horses stamping and snorting, and I still have no idea what that was. Army helicopters would fly overhead. The sound of a train would catch a breeze, and I'd hear it from four-and-a-half miles away. Kids would ride up on ATVs. And occasionally, I would see ranchers, from the Long H ranch. Real cowboys riding ATVs or horses along the fenceline. They were never personable and I didn't become friends with any of them. To them, I was just another new person on longtime ranchland that had been tragically subdivided and sold off to city folk. One was particularly annoyed by me. If I had a lawnchair set up in the cattle pond on a hot day, he'd always say something about it. Later, after I left the area, he and another cowboy would feud and build a fence right through the middle of the cattle pond, which was ridiculous and unlovely and made me not ever want to come back.

Sometimes, a neighbor would show up, always for some reason like he was looking for something, like a dog, and then would stand and talk. One, named Donald Jones, would show up in a battered yellow truck, and always brought his kids, two half-Navajo boys who played that every stick was a gun and every rock was a grenade. When he drove up, he always drove about forty feet past the end of my driveway, crushing and parking on all the desert plants. He wore a gun on his hip at all times, a six-shooter, and sleeveless shirts that never quite covered his stomach. He would say we were living in the End of Days and he was preparing for Armageddon. He would say he'd dug a concrete shelter and stocked it with food and guns. He would speak, in one breath, of the power of Christlike love, and in another, about one time when he really kicked a bully's ass. He would talk about an intact Anasazi pot he found on my property before I came there, which he sold in Phoenix for \$4,000, a rusty Civil War-era gun he found there and sold for \$600, and would say the sands are always shifting and turning up something new. He told me about Anasazi ruins nearby containing what he swore was an ancient petroglyph showing Jesus with UFOs and dinosaurs. He would tell me that twenty years before, a serial killer had lived about ten miles away, and the killer's property was dotted with at least twenty graves, the graves of hitchhikers he'd picked up on the highway and then tortured and killed. He would tell me about a family of hippies that lived off the land only two ridges south of my place. He would tell me about how his wife ran off with someone and got their kids and house, because her mom dated the Judge and his wife's lover was a drug dealer involved in some sort of mafia. Watching his kids play war games, he remarked, "The trouble with kids nowadays is that their parents don't teach 'em the right way to use guns at an early age." He was always complaining about kids nowadays. "Kids nowadays, always breaking into

people's houses," that was his most common complaint. Once, he pulled two copper dowsing rods from the bed of his truck and walked around and told me where he thought the water was under my property. He said the water was 600 feet down, because he could stamp his foot six times before his dowsing rods crossed back over each other. He would yell Bible verses at me, and I liked him a lot.

More than anything, Donald would talk about the End of Days, and the End Times, and the Apocalypse, which he was sure was on its way. "These big fires," he would say, "they're a sign." "All these problems," he would say. "They're a sign." Now, I think of him only as a character. I think of his words as evidence of his beliefs. But back then, his words resonated with me. My childhood indoctrination was still with me, latent but present, and when he would talk about *the truth* and *being prepared* and *being sure to be on the right side when the time comes*, those words would shiver through me and leave me affected and uncertain. They made me think about reading scriptures again, and praying.

Witch Wells, fourteen miles away, had been momentarily famous in the '70s as a place where the American Indian Movement (AIM) took the entire bar hostage because the owner was a white man serving an indigenous population alcohol. Every wall in the place was dotted with bullet-holes—157 in the ceiling alone. On the edge of the Zuni reservation and a formerly dry New Mexico county, the place was wild. One bartender, I was told, used to shoot out the lights every night. Fights involving guns were common there, many people had died in it, and it was

basically lawless. It was usually calm when I was there, though. "Ain't shot no one since '90," a bartender told me.

Hear now how Witch Wells came by its name: a man who'd walked with dowsing rods, walked until they started to twitch, drilled for and then hit water, and then built his business right there. He'd witched a well. I'd walk or hitchhike there every couple of weeks, or if someone was visiting, we'd drive there to get a drink and talk with people.

Pottery shards dotted the newly graded roads, evidence of the people who had been there hundreds of years before, and I would collect them, knowing they'd only get run over and pulverized if I left them in the road. The shards were beautiful, their clay always painted on both sides.

Said the shards, said the people who made the shards, *You were raised with beliefs. But other people were raised with other beliefs. Here's proof. What are the chances the beliefs you were raised with weren't just shaped by the same sorts of cultural and societal influences that shaped everyone else's? What are the chances that you just happened to be raised with the true ones?*

"Where there is irrigation, the desert produces fine crops of cotton, grain, fruit and many other things," says *The True Book of Deserts*, accompanying a picture of a crane, a bulldozer, a surveyor, and a scowling foreman. "About one fourth of the land of the earth is desert land. This desert land is wasted land."

Every few weeks, Kaella would come out to visit me. It's strange to write this now, because we've since married, had children, and divorced, but it was a relationship that meant something to me at the time, even though my memory of her now is such a pale one, barely there, flickering as if seen on an old color television. Even when I see her now, she's a pale presence to me. The years have taken dimensions from her, drained her of reality—to me she never seems wholly there—a hologram, a shadow, a ghost. I'm sorry, Kaella, if you read this. I know you're not really. I'm sorry I feel like this. Thank you for our children, and for the years you spent on me, and for the life you gave.

Back then, we loved each other, though I wonder now if that was pale too, even then. We would walk through the desert, picnic together among the bones of dead cows and horses, fool around in the cattle pond and the trailer. She'd be there, she'd leave, I'd miss her, I'd think, *I should propose to her*. My feelings weren't clear, even to myself, but I knew I loved her, whatever that meant. I wrote a long handwritten letter, to a favorite female friend I'd always secretly liked when I lived in Boston before my walk across the country, hinting at feelings for her. *If she responds positively*, I thought, *that will be a sign not to propose to Kaella*. But she never responded at all. I prayed to an old idea of God I had to give me a strong feeling, to let me know if what I was about to do was right or wrong, but I never felt anything that wasn't obviously my own feelings. One day, I proposed to Kaella, in the cattle pond. She was sitting in a lawn chair half in the water. Everything around us was on fire, the air was ash, the sun was a cancerous eye, the windmill was still, and I felt suddenly overcome with emotion. I knelt down

in the water, told her I loved her, and asked her to marry me. Her voice caught in a sob, she hugged me, and kissed me, and said yes. I didn't have an overwhelming feeling that it was the right thing to do, but I didn't feel overwhelmingly that it was wrong, either. It seemed okay, though I remember thinking, even then, that marrying a Mormon girl was going to create problems over time. Today, I'm struck by how much of a spectator I've sometimes been in my own life. How I've just stood by, watching myself do things, major things, thinking about them almost indifferently, a half-interested passenger in my own body. I remember thinking, *I am probably going to regret this*. And I remember thinking, *Oh well*.

It wasn't the thought of marriage, or of Kaella, even, that filled me with worry. It was the thought of Kaella's Mormonism. What if she grew more Mormon, and I grew even less so? It seemed very likely to me this would happen. I knew those beliefs were more important to her than they were to me. Yes, she might get sexual or drunk, but she still deeply believed that stuff, I could tell. I might have worried that some of it was true, but it still felt like oil to my water. I remember thinking, *How do I know this is right? How do I know she's the one? How do I know I'm not just horny? Oh god, I am. That's it. No. Yes. No. That's totally it. Completely. No.*

That had to be it. Like almost any 22-year old male, I wanted sex, and only one woman ever came to visit me, offering anything like it. And now I had let that cloud my mind. I had ignored the lessons of the desert, and I was about to make an enormous mistake, joining myself to her forever and making my escape from Mormonism unlikely. I felt no void that needed feeling, this

impending marriage didn't feel grand enough or Shakespearean enough to me, and my journals became nothing but pages and pages, days and days, rant after rant, of doubts.

I hitchhiked into St. Johns, where my P.O. box was, where payphones were. I walked a few miles, and then a middle-aged couple—he, an asphalt salesman, her, the publisher of a screw catalogue—gave me a ride all the way in a truck. When I arrived, I discovered it was a regional holiday, Pioneer Day, and a parade was going on. Everyone was out along the sidewalks, waving flags and eating popcorn. People were riding horses down the center of the town's main street, driving cars bearing election signs, or showcasing comically underwhelming floats. One was just a flatbed truck with folding chairs on its bed, two sullen teenage girls sitting them holding a sign saying "GO TO CHURCH." One was an old couple driving a king-sized bed somehow, looping endlessly around in circles. People in the floats threw candy, kids dove for it, and many people mistook me for part of the parade, since I had a beard and hiking backpack and looked like something different, clapping and cheering for me whenever I crossed the street. I checked my mail, called my mom, my brother Jeff, a few friends, and tried to call Kaella, to call off our engagement, but only got an answering machine. I talked with a girl at the video store, who I always enjoyed talking with when I was in town. I ran into a few people I'd gone to college with years before, in Thatcher, Arizona, but no one I'd ever been close to, and I ran into Henry Cohen, the middle-aged man who ran the town's single-screen movie theater, a friendly Mormon man who would sometimes put his hand over the projector during any scenes containing nudity. We had talked a few times before, and he invited me to come see a movie. Don't worry about money, he said, and when I got there, he even gave me popcorn and a root

beer. The movie was *The Other Side of Heaven*, a Mormon-made film about two missionaries preaching to and converting locals on a tropical island. If I were to watch that movie again today, and I'm not eager to, I would probably think, *What the hell is Anne Hathaway doing in this movie about how great Mormons are? Or, This depiction of Mormons is so general they could be almost any Christian group.* But watching it that time, it spoke to everything I'd spent my life hearing: the Church was true—spirituality was power—everything I'd grown up with was right and good—and if I only embraced it all, I could serve my future-wife and family with all the Blessings of the Priesthood. In Mormonism, every worthy adult male can claim the authority of the Priesthood, the same power the prophet Melchizedek had in the Old Testament. If my wife or children ever got sick, I could put my hands on their heads, and say a blessing, and if I had enough faith, they could be healed.

These days, when I read books about cults, I feel jolt after jolt of recognition and understanding on every page. I know I grew up in a common Southwestern religion, with millions of members, with whole counties and regions in which nearly everyone was a member, with many members who are good people and believe it deeply—not in, say, Heaven's Gate, or Aum Shinrikyo—but still, I feel like a cult survivor. The way those beliefs got into my brain, stayed there, and then pulled me back—I can think of no other explanation besides cult-like indoctrination. My mind was not my own, and they liked it that way.

I left the little theater with all my doubts about Kaella and Mormonism gone. I just didn't care about doubts anymore. I felt inspired. I felt great. I felt full of faith. We'd get married! I'd get

back into the Church! And everything was wonderful. Hooray! As if good will was hanging in the air like humidity, a woman with only two teeth said I looked hot and gave me a bottle of water, and I walked the highway out of town, happy, content, and filled with a nameless satisfaction, completely wrongheaded and on the edge of making a terrible, life-altering decision, thanks to a goddamn movie that even then I recognized had some serious narrative flaws. Henry, the movie-theater owner, soon pulled over to the side of the highway in a battered convertible. I told him what I'd been thinking about, and how the movie had affected me, and he encouraged me to listen to my heart and get married and then later get married again later (or "sealed") in a Mormon temple. He said he could see the Holy Spirit working on me, and I was doing the right things. He said he was proud of me. His words filled me with determination, and in hindsight, I have to say, I am a giant unthinking moron. Ugh. Holy shit. He was headed to work at his other job at the Power Plant, the one I could see blinking from my trailer, and he dropped me off at the turn-off up to it.

I walked a while further, beneath the coarse hum of power lines, got a ride with a semi-truck driver who yelled over the truck's engine that the fires could have been put out way sooner, and all the locals knew it, if the government just would let anyone get some bulldozers and make some big old dirt walls and tear up the precious environment. He dropped me off at Witch Wells, I checked inside to see if anyone was going my way, and no one was, so I set off up the dirt road to the trailer. A guy named Larry gave me a ride, an incense-maker who loved to read. He said he loved the book *Stranger in a Strange Land*, because it was Charles Manson's favorite. I had to read it, he said. "Yeah, man, *Stranger in a Strange Land*—the only thing

Manson had on him when got arrested was that. Nothing else. You gotta read it!" I still haven't read it. He said he would have driven me all the way, except he had guests, and he gave me an open invitation to visit him anytime.

A truck with its cab and bed full of Zuni men drove past me as I walked the dirt road alone. Their tires churned up shadowy dust, and a man in the truck-bed yelled, "Watch out! Zuni gods are gonna get ya!" driving off into the darkling evening, laughing, whistling the *X-files* theme.

That night, I collapsed in my trailer, exhausted, but the next day I wrote in my notebook-journal, "I think I'll give Kaella a gift: getting married in the temple in a year. She'd love that, and it probably *is* the right thing to do." No, you idiot! Where the hell is time travel when you need it? Later, I gave her a card with a promise that I would try out the Church again—for her—that we would get married in the temple. I barely remember her reaction—it was happy—but I do remember the effects. They were lasting.

I went out to the desert to find myself, and I found myself wrong. My sister threw away her life with Ibuprofen and sleeping pills. My brother was throwing his away with plans for a Mormon mission, and then, when his girlfriend faked an inexplicable pregnancy and his mission was cancelled, with a doomed marriage to a manipulative psychopath. And then, here I was, a free-thinker suddenly unable to continue thinking freely about anything, promising to immerse myself in the oppressive religion I'd grown up in, once again. The Nineteenth Century version of Scientology! Jews cursed to have dark skin and become Native Americans! An obviously phony

holy book written by a treasure-hunting farmboy! And a bullshit, pioneer-worshipping culture with a legacy of polygamy and violence and bigotry. I was in love. I was in love, I had favored Kaella's happiness over my own, and now, eventually, neither of us would be happy. The blatant falseness of it all, and the way it all owned my mind, oh god, to this day, it makes my blood fucking fizz. I really can't think about it too much. I can't fucking handle it.

*Said the desert, said the animals, said the plants, said some people, We are all having our own experiences. Even a rock is busy being. Every deer that runs past the windmill has a worldview. Every scrap of lichen knows what it's like to be alive in a way you never will. Every person you pass is the hero of his or her own story. No one way of being can say that it, and only it, is right.*

*But, said some other people, One way is right. Look into your heart, as if it's a never-checked mailbox that people have been leaving messages in all your life. The messages have been piling up. Read them all. Think about them. Actually, don't think about them too much. Pray about them. Ask God to help you make a choice. And I'm sure you'll choose wisely. You will.*

\*

Pedaling away from the roadside book sale, from the dirt lot, pines and junipers and little businesses lining the road, I could see the gleaming spokes of my bike's front tire turning forward around their hub—turning away from some things and toward others. Toward my

pregnant wife, and family prayers, and church on Sunday. Away from the old quiet of the desert, from a truer-feeling life, and from a world for its own sake.

And this was what happened: this was how it worked: my heart pumped blood to my brain and wherever else it was needed, and my brain sent commands to my legs, telling them to move, telling them to push down, against the pedals. Push down hard and see what happens.

The motion of the pedals turned a loop of chain, and the chain, attached to a gear fixed beside the rear wheel, turned, and turned the back tire, and both of the bicycle's wheels rolled along over the pavement, and I rolled astride them. The front wheel turned, and the spokes blurred, and the blur was the blur of curved, galvanized steel blades, and the wind was blowing lightly, though intensifying, and the blades of the wind wheel were riveted to steel wheel clips and then to a curved rim. The wind wheel turned, sounding like a train on a wooden bridge, looking like a machine in bloom. The roll of the wind wheel becomes the up-and-down of the shaft, and the shaft moved gears beneath the ground, moved a rod up and down in a pipe, in a deep well, filling a cylinder at the bottom with water, and bringing that water up to the air, bringing hidden things up to light, bringing what had been deep underground up once more into the world.

*Come away*, said the sound of the windmill, said the sound of the bike. *Come away*. But, of course, by then, I couldn't.

### Place Names of 501 Filomeno

This project of documenting the place names of 501 Filomeno St. NE—a suburban home in Albuquerque, New Mexico—was first undertaken as an examination of the places most important to one struggling family, my family, in 2010. Collectively, these entries portray a specific time and place, and to preserve that portrait, I have chosen not to add to them it all that has happened since. I have, however, changed a minimal number of names and location-related details, for reasons of security. I need to thank my beloved children and my now-ex-wife for their years of assistance with this research, as well as Robert Julyan, author of *The Place Names of New Mexico*, for inspiring the format.

ALBUQUERQUE: Although thousands of Native Americans lived in the Rio Grande Valley of central New Mexico before the Spanish first arrived in 1540, the name—meaning “white oaks” and then spelled *Alburquerque*—was first applied to a small adobe villa in the area in 1706, in honor of the duke of Alburquerque, Spain. In 1880, the railroad arrived, and with it an influx of English-speaking residents who simplified the spelling. During the tuberculosis pandemic of the 1920s and ’30s, the city boomed as it gained a reputation as a health retreat. It boomed again, after World War II, thanks to defense work. And from the 1950s through the ’70s, a decades-long housing frenzy brought the city east, right to the rubble foothills of the Sandia Mountains, and created the Neighborhood in which 501 Filomeno St. now exists. Here, my wife and three children and I now live, not far west of the little towns in which my wife and I grew up.

ART LOG: A barkless log covered in grooves made by insects, the Art Log sits beside a sunless mud hole on the edge of the Back Yard. Anodyne, age five, and Hagan, age three, play here,

placing paper over the grooves and rubbing it with peeled crayons. The kids produce huge amounts of lovely, creative, inspiring art—and no one has any idea, at all, what to do with it.

ASH TREE: Actually the larger of two ash trees in the Back Yard, this is the property's tallest tree, unfolding its rough gray branches high above the house. Swings hang from it, birds nest in it, and the sun casts ornate, bobbing shadows of the tree's leaves onto the cracked stucco of the back of the house, tiling the wall in shifting diamonds of light and dark. Sometimes, I'll lean a ladder against the tree's trunk, so that Anodyne and I can reach its limbs, and we'll climb together toward a view of the volcanoes west of town.

ATTIC: Entered through a wooden panel in the ceiling of the Garage, the Attic is an unfinished space of exposed rafters, fiberglass insulation, wires, boxed-up decorations, and broken chairs. Whenever something needs to be stored or retrieved, all three children—Anodyne, Hagan, and little one-year-old Sonora—like to follow me up here and play with flashlights and chalk on the narrow central walkway. Anodyne, long-haired and long-legged, especially loves the Attic, as she's big enough to walk from beam to beam over exposed insulation, bravely exploring the entire space. She walks to the slatted windows overlooking the sides of the house, to the many rafters she's written her name on, past the nativities and Jesus pictures I've hidden away beyond everything else, past the boxful of letters from an old fiancé of Kaella's, past two decades of Kaella's running trophies, past crate after crate of my old photos and journals and letters.

**BACK PORCH:** The Back Porch sits in back of the house. (There is no Front Porch, just a concrete pad in front of the house with chairs and kids' bikes on it.) The Porch Swing can usually be found here, along with a number of folding chairs and a spider-filled wooden box meant to hold firewood. A set of wind chimes hangs from the Porch's awning, chimes that Kaella, my wife, made from little bells and the glass of a car window she smashed in during a manic episode. Diagnosed with bipolar disorder as a teenager, Kaella, now twenty-nine, my age, has had a challenging life filled with light-limbed highs, frantic shopping sprees, all-obscuring depressions, and attempted suicide. At twenty, she disappeared, to California, while a search party combed the mountains here for her body. Her mental illness has caused some difficulties in our marriage—but not the worst ones.

**BERNALILLO COUNTY:** The county that contains the house, and the whole of Albuquerque, was named for the Bernals, some of the area's first Spanish colonists—a mother, a father, and their children. The mother and father arrived here with colonist Don Juan de Oñate in 1598.

**BOTTOM BUNK:** This, the lower half of the Bunk Bed, is where Hagan sleeps. It's also where he listens to me read chapter books to him and Anodyne at night—the Famous Five books, the Oz books, E. B. White—as I sit in the doorway for the light. When Anodyne is angry with him, it's also where Hagan listens to her whispering horrible, naïvely sadistic things to him as he falls asleep. "You're a horrid brute," she'll say. "I only love Sonora, not you." "The kids in preschool just *pretend* to like you." In early 2010, the Bottom Bunk was also briefly, and to the great disgust of everyone but Hagan, the site of the Booger Wall.

**CARTOON COUCH:** This little tan couch in the Living Room, a loveseat, was named by my brother and me when we were kids and would sit on it and watch Saturday-morning cartoons. When my mom died, my dad gave it to my wife and me. We were sitting on it a year and a half ago, when Kaella—her long brown hair in a ponytail, her tall frame held rigidly—told me she had finally had enough, she was miserable, my unbelief was irreconcilable with her Mormonism, we were fighting too much in front of the kids, and she could see no other option besides divorce. Two days later, in the Bathroom, she showed me a pregnancy test, and eight months later, Sonora, our baby daughter, was born. We are still married.

**CLIMBING TREE:** A silver-barked Siberian elm beside the northeast corner of the house in the Front Yard, the Climbing Tree is just sturdy enough for Anodyne to climb up to about the height of the Roof. It's a place only she can get to; she calls it My Tree. Recently, she climbed to its top and tacked a piece of paper there with her name on it and a picture she had drawn of the ocean.

**CLOTHESLINES:** Held aloft by two T-shaped metal poles at the north edge of the Back Yard, the Clotheslines are used by Kaella to dry hand-dyed silk sheets, which she then sells online or to area parents. A swing hangs from one end. Kaella is industrious and entrepreneurial, and I know it frustrates her that I'm not.

COMFORT CORNER: In the northwest corner of the Playroom, behind the Reclining Chair, is a space filled with pillows and blankets for the kids. This space is meant especially for Anodyne, who feels everything intensely and who sometimes gets overwhelmed to the point of tears. Anodyne's name, inspired by a favorite Uncle Tupelo album, means, in Greek, *without pain*, a cure for pain, and given Kaella's depression, we thought the name was a hopeful one. Of course, no one can cure every pain.

CRIB: Sonora starts her nights in a plastic fold-out crib in Our Bedroom, though we often try to get her to fall asleep in the Kids' Room. We could use the privacy. Sometimes, I'll wake up late at night, and Sonora will be standing up, holding the Crib's railing, laughing, delighted to see me awake. "Hi!" she'll say. Unlike the dark-haired rest of the family, Sonora has sunny blonde hair, as well as enormous blue eyes. In the womb, she absorbed a twin and, perhaps as a result, she seems to have twice the usual amounts of obstinacy and spirit. Her eyes flash as if she's too full of light. Sonora was named after the Sonoran Desert—and after sonorousness—music.

DADDO'S OFFICE: Across the Hallway from the Bathroom, this small bedroom has been converted into a bookshelf-lined computer room—Daddo's Office, to use the kids' terminology; My Office, to use mine; the Computer Room, to use Kaella's. (My kids call me Daddo because I used to call Anodyne "kiddo," and she responded in kind.) As a writer and first-year graduate student, this is where I do my writing and schoolwork; it's also where Kaella posts the dolls and crafts she sells online, where Kaella e-mails, and where I avoid my e-mail. Wherever there aren't bookcases or filing cabinets filled with historical research materials, there are framed

photos of my life before the long, slow crush of suburbia: canoeing, hitchhiking, long-distance hiking, living as a hermit. On the wall beside the door is a large map of New Mexico's counties, with thumbtacks marking every place whose history I've written a newspaper column about. When every county has at least two, I'll compile those columns into a book.

DOÑA ELENA: The house's address is 501 Filomeno St. NE, but it sits on the southeast corner of Filomeno and Doña Elena. Doña Elena is divided into several sections in a perforated line across this part of the city. The section our house is on is about a quarter-mile long, and lined with single-story houses much like ours, most containing families. The street was named for Elena Gallegos, a powerful female landowner of the early 1700s.

ELIZABETH'S GRAVE: Elizabeth was Anodyne's first pet mouse, named for an adventurous little mouse in a story I used to tell her. MoCat once knocked the Mouse Cage over and chewed off one of Elizabeth's legs, and after that the mouse was never quite the same. Elizabeth died several months later, with Anodyne, awakened for the event in the middle of the night, holding her in her hands. We buried Elizabeth in a shoe box beneath the Rosebush in the southeast corner of the Front Yard. We marked the grave with a piece of mountain granite, and until she got another mouse, Anodyne would often stand there and cry real tears, almost enjoying her grieving. Hagan just asks to dig the mouse up. Last week, a second grave was added, after Elizabeth II escaped into the workings of a drawer.

**FAIRY CAVE:** Just south of the house—just beyond the Climbing Tree—are two ragged forsythia bushes, their boughs an almost perfect arc over a shady, child-sized area. Inside is a straw mat weighted down by rocks, with ribbons and yarn figurines are tied to twigs overhead. In the children’s private cosmology, particularly in Anodyne’s, this is the center of the fairy world, where almost all the fairies and angels and gnomes live. The idea for the Fairy Cave came to me when I noticed a rectangle of worn cardboard and several empty Red Bull cans, and realized there was a lot of space in these bushes—enough apparently for even a creepy adult to hide. I pruned the space with clippers to make it wider. Kaella and the kids decorated it.

**FAIRY HOUSE:** This lies behind the little metal door on the back of the Fireplace, accessible from the Back Porch. According to Anodyne, often a namer of things, “usually spark fairies and fire fairies live here.” When we first moved in, this space was stuffed full of half-burnt *Bible* pages—perhaps a remnant of another family’s different, but imaginable, disputes about religion.

**FAVORITES SHELF:** Located at the end of the Hallway, between the doors to the bedrooms, this metal-mesh display-case holds four rows of books with their covers facing out. This is where Anodyne and Hagan put the books they want to keep track of—library books, illustrated fairy tales, whatever chapter books I’m reading to them, whatever makes Hagan laugh. Hagan has a huge, clear, ready laugh he has to use his whole body for. When he laughs, he has to stop doing anything else, to give in to it entirely, involuntarily, gasping to breathe.

FILOMENO: Also referred to as the Street, Filomeno, like Doña Elena, is broken into several sections and lined with houses. The section on which we live runs from Doña Elena, where our house is, north to a larger, five-lane road. It's a moderately busy suburban street, named for one of the people who initially owned and divided the Neighborhood.

FIREPLACE: In the winter, we have fires here, in the center of the west wall of the Living Room. In the spring, we fill it with yellow-flowering forsythia branches. Old bottles of thick clear and blue glass, all found on hikes in the desert, line the mantel.

FRONT YARD: We spend hours in the Front Yard, just east of the mostly red-brick front of the house, sometimes with the windows to My Office open and music emanating from inside: "Baby Let's Play House," "Love Will Tear Us Apart," "Barbarism Begins at Home," "Feel the Pain," "When U Love Somebody," and other, less-thematically-relevant songs. In the Front Yard, the kids play on the Swing Set. I put them in pillowcases and swing them around. Sonora runs urgently from place to place, her right arm windmilling hilariously as she goes.

GARAGE: Home of all the things we should just get rid of but don't. The walls are lined with boxes, and the boxes are full of nothing important. Bikes and extra lamps crowd the middle. The Water Heater stands in a corner, the wood frame around it still charred from previous tenants. (That couple made the news when the man tied his lover to the Water Heater and tried to burn the house down with her trapped inside.) The Washer and Dryer are out here in a side-nook, and this is where the cats, Lewis and MoCat, eat and sleep. Lewis, an all-black barn-

cat, used to be my mom's and was named for the explorer. (Coyotes ate Clark.) MoCat, extra-furry, was Moe when we got him from a pet store and the kids affectionately altered his name. We have been slowly remodeling the Garage into a new office for me, instilling a sense of urgency in the documentation of the house's current place names.

GARDEN: No matter how old he grows, some of my favorite memories of Hagan, so little and handsome with his eyes alight and his hair in his eyes, so happy and determined, will probably always be of him at two and three years old, with a handled wicker basket, moving purposefully around the plants of the Garden, picking cherry tomatoes and green beans and eggplants, and talking incessantly. The Garden sits near the southwest corner of the Back Yard, and Hagan loves it, as he loves gathering, and sometimes throwing, eggs from the chickens, as he loves anything that grows and is alive. He once told me that the Garden is like a farm, but "on our farm, the only animals we have are two cats, and three chickens, and two mice."

HAMMOCK: In the Back Yard, between the smaller ash tree and a pole at the northeast corner of the Chicken Coop, sags the Hammock. While washing dishes in the Kitchen last month, I looked up to see Sonora playing happily in the Hammock, diving down into its fabric canyon, and then emerging gleefully at the other end, like a dolphin or a seal, cackling with pure joy at Anodyne, who was standing smiling nearby.

HORSE SWING: A tire artfully cut and arranged into the shape of a horse, hanging from the Ash Tree in the Back Yard. The kids don't enjoy riding it, because it lurches back and forth when it

swings, and because it's almost always wet from water pooling in its saddle. It's a very poorly designed swing, but Kaella insists we keep it, as it was a gift from my dad.

JUMPING LOG: Another large log in the Back Yard, this one sits on the edge of the lawn, near the Playhouse. Outside, the kids are allowed to jump off anything that's not as tall as they are, and often they jump off this. Anodyne has a minor sensory coping problem, inherited from either Kaella, who often can't handle music playing or people talking, or from me, who can't stand sticky food, or cats bumping against my ankles. According to Anodyne's therapist, jumping should help lessen her symptoms.

KITCHEN: Separated from the Living Room only by a white, table-high piece of wall, the Kitchen could be the setting for one of the First World's more depressing documentaries, comprised only of footage of me cleaning it. I didn't mind cleaning the Kitchen when Kaella and I first got married, because I could listen to music or audiobooks at the same time, but it's become my role, my fate, meal after meal, day after day, through arguments of varying intensity over money or child-rearing, God or Mormonism, through tedious planning and discussion.

Fragments of broken dishes, a railroad spike, a telegraph key—all from the trash piles of the ghost town of Hagan, New Mexico, my son's namesake—hang mounted and framed on the wall by the window. By the stove hangs a bundle of dried flowers and a framed copy of our wedding announcement, a fake obituary. "Kaella Darger, 22, of Edgewood, NM, and Mike Smith, 22, of Cedar Crest, NM," it says, "had their lives of free will and individual choice come to a sudden end on the morning of August 3, 2002, in a tragic wedding. . . . After a secret two-month

engagement, their solitary lives came to a dramatic conclusion in an isolated cactus field in Sandoval County, NM. There will be no services held.”

LITTLE KITCHEN: In the southeast corner of the Living Room, within sight of the Kitchen, is a play kitchen for the kids—a little wooden oven beside a bookcase, one lower shelf of which is stocked with wooden fruit and a metal tea set. Here, the kids do what we do in the Kitchen. Cooking. Cleaning. Fighting. Or, Hagan will take everything he can find and shove it in the oven and walk away. Or, Sonora will throw everything on the floor to make noise. Good for them.

LIVING ROOM: Here, in the largest room in the house, between the Kitchen and the Hallway, the children play, laundry gets folded, the kids get read to, and Kaella knits or sews. It was here, when we first moved in, that two representatives of the Mormon Church tracked me down, after months of my avoiding all things Mormon. It was here I told them that, despite having been raised in their religion, I no longer believed in it, at all, and wanted nothing to do with it. At the core of the very serious differences that Kaella and I have is that meeting, and that decision, and I can see no easy way to remedy it other than to let time pass and yield nothing on this issue when it comes to raising our kids. I can't see how I could *just kind of* raise my kids in what I now consider a cult, and every marriage counselor we have had hits this issue like a wall. We have been through three, and are about to start with a fourth. Also in this room, more than three years ago, on June 13, 2007, Hagan was born, in an inflatable pool. After Anodyne's birth in a hospital, Kaella became an ardent home-birth advocate, a licensed doula (sort of like an assistant midwife), and she now teaches childbirth classes at a women's hospital. When

Hagan was born here, no one, not even the midwife, managed to catch him, and he fell into the pool. We pulled him out of the bloody water, into the candle-lit room, and to me it all felt like a Satanic ritual.

MAILBOX: A rounded gray box on a tilting metal pole, the Mailbox is a portal through which books enter the house. Also, bills. Sometimes the kids will run out and get the mail for us. Or they'll fill the Mailbox with grass and sticks and I'll pretend to be frustrated that that's all we got. "Erggh! Sticks again! Bills and sticks!"

MOM AND DADDY'S ROOM: It's in this room—one of the two bedrooms at the end of the Hallway—that one of the central rituals of the marriage takes place—when I lie beside Kaella and read to her as she falls asleep. *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, biographies, popular science, parenting books, popular history, whatever. It's an intimate ritual, but it can also be a distancing one. As in, *Let's not talk. Let's just read*. Sonora was conceived and born in this room, and it's where her Crib is now. This is also where I once confessed to Kaella how close I came to having an affair, with a college freshman who worked the sound booth for a TV station where I had made a history documentary. Nothing had happened, but the young woman and I had e-mailed covertly, met for coffee twice, and talked about it. I'd been lonely, Kaella and I barely ever touched, the usual excuses. I had hoped that by confessing to Kaella, she would see I wanted to be more truthful and open with her—but it's only made her mistrust me. She says, "I know it's going to happen again."

NATURE TABLE: In the northeast corner of the Living Room, between the Big Couch and the partial wall separating the Living Room from the Kitchen, stands a small three-shelf bookcase, on top of which is a seasonal display, the Nature Table. Every season, the table is changed to feature a different colored silk covering, and a different landscape is arranged on it by Kaella, with dyed silk rivers, felt and wool animals, real rocks and leaves and flowers. This is one of the wonderful things Kaella does for the kids, who marvel at its every change, changes they believe were brought about magically by fairies and house brownies. I wish I could focus on these good things. I wish I could stop feeling only the differences. Kaella and I were both raised by Mormon parents, we both drifted away from the Church, and when we got married, neither of us was all that into it. At the time, I was a nervous agnostic, slightly concerned that what my parents had taught me was actually maybe true. Kaella just thought she was a sinner. After we got married, as a now-regretted gift to Kaella, I promised to return to the Church, to see if I could believe, because I knew that was important to her. We were even “sealed”—married for the life beyond this one, in a Mormon temple—a year after we were married in the desert. After much study and disillusionment, I have since left the Church entirely, and have even had my name removed from its membership lists. Kaella rarely attends church anymore, but belief is still the major subject at the heart of our disagreements.

NEIGHBORHOOD: There is no official name, but our house is a part of it—as are the other houses along Filomeno and Doña Elena and the surrounding streets. The Neighborhood is a small part of Albuquerque’s Northeast Heights, an area that, before the housing booms of the middle twentieth century, was just another part of El Llano—the East Mesa—the desert east of

downtown. The people here are generally friendly, if not particularly social. Occasional sounds of many high-pitched dogs suggest a puppy mill or an animal hoarder may be one block over. Rumors persist of a human-trafficking operation based out of a nearby house. I'm convinced people often film porn in a house on Doña Elena. Strange metal boxes occasionally float overhead beneath gas-filled balloons from the nearby Sandia National Laboratories. The bank-owned house next to us on Filomeno sits boarded-up and abandoned, and is used by transients as a place to shoot heroin. Gang colors are not uncommon, nor are SWAT teams, and people's cars and homes sometimes get broken into. It's a neighborhood in Albuquerque, and it's not the best neighborhood.

NEW MEXICO: Hoping to convert the natives and discover mineral riches, the Chamuscado-Rodriguez expedition of 1581 claimed this mountain-strewn desert land for the king of Spain, and recorded its name as San Felipe de Nuevo Méjico—a *new* Mexico. Colonists began settling here in 1598. Spain yielded the region to Mexico, Mexico yielded it to the United States, a territory became a state, towns became cities, Albuquerque became the largest city, and eventually our house was built toward that city's eastern edge. It's a house in a neighborhood, in a city, in a county, in a state, in a country, in a time, on a planet, in a story that begins with the founding of a city and leaves off, at last, with us.

OTHER COUCH: Also known as the Big Couch, this couch sits in the Living Room and fills me with shame, as its sides have been completely shredded by MoCat. Kaella and I have ended intimate dates here, kissing and undressing, and we've yelled and argued on it—about me buying books

and maps when we have no money, about her taking the kids to church, about nothing worth recalling now. Kaella believes that raising our kids in a Church with an established moral structure is good for them, will keep them from doing drugs and getting pregnant, and gives existence meaning. She's more than once said to me, "If nothing matters, if there's no punishment or reward, and nothing after this, then what's the point of anything? What's to stop someone who wants to kill himself from just doing it?"

PLAYROOM: We really could not have picked a worse room to be the first place people see when they walk into the house. *A playroom? Three small children's impossible-to-keep-clean playroom?* The walls are lined with large bookcases, but the bottom two shelves of all of them are filled with baskets and boxes of toys. This room adds to my isolation, as it's a major reason why I almost never invite people to come over. It embarrasses me.

ROOF: To my kids, this is an almost mythical realm that Daddo once threw a stick over, and that Hagan once got to walk on. To Kaella and me, it's another reminder of how shabby life in suburbia can be—shingles missing after every storm, edges frayed, unsightly wires or water lines showing—everything so often cheap, worn-out, breaking, broken. Sometimes I look around at all of it and I think about how every piece of the surrounding landscape has some memory, or some deeper feeling, attached to it, and that none of it at all deserves it.

ROSEBUSH: Growing over Elizabeth's Grave at the northeast corner of the Front Yard is the Rosebush, cited twice by the City for obscuring traffic. It seems as if every time I glance at it

while the kids are swinging, Lewis, the cat, has chosen just that moment to squat and defecate beneath it. He must wait until we come out, so he can have an audience. He's a freak.

**SIDE OF THE HOUSE:** On the sunny south side of the house lies a weedy, rock-strewn slope between the Fairy Cave and a wall of the Back Yard. Currently it's a wasted space, home only to unruly honeysuckle bushes. Once, I saw a bird, its wing broken by one of the cats, drag itself into one, to die.

**SIDEWALKS:** The Sidewalks run parallel to both Filomeno and Doña Elena, and to the edges of our often-shaggy Front Lawn, meeting at a ninety-degree angle between the Stop Sign and Elizabeth's Grave. The kids ride their tricycles and scooters up and down these, and will lie down and have me trace them, an activity we all enjoy, as something always goes wrong with the chalk and they end up with antlers or wheels or extra legs. Lately, Anodyne has been practicing writing on the Sidewalks, spelling out "CAT" and "RAT," writing her name over and over, copying the word "STOP" from the Stop Sign.

**SILVER CAR:** This is the car I generally drive, or whichever parent isn't with most of the kids drives. When it's home, it's parked beneath the hoopless basketball backboard, on the north half of the Driveway. The car is a 2002 Ford Escape, silver, and when its CD player is working, I have no complaints about it. When I drive out into the desert, as I love to do, this is the car I take, because I don't feel like I'm dying the entire time I'm behind its wheel, like I do in the Van. When Kaella discovered she was pregnant with Sonora, I was devastated. It contributed to

more than a year of depression, as I did not want to have another child with her, with our relationship as uncertain and doomed-feeling as it was and still is. I told almost no one that she was pregnant, and I basically stopped answering my phone or checking my e-mail. The day Sonora was born, however—October 11, 2009—I took a drive to pick up some food for everyone at the house. I had just re-bought Bob Dylan’s *Blonde on Blonde* on CD, and I parked in a Hobby Lobby parking lot to eat a breakfast burrito and to think. I listened to the song “One of Us Must Know (Sooner or Later),” and whether it was that rolling piano line, or the words—“Sooner or later, one of us must know, you just did what you were supposed to do . . . that I really did try to get close to you”—or having just seen and held and named Sonora, my beautiful daughter, for the first time, I felt better about everything. The moment didn’t fix everything. Maybe it didn’t fix anything. But afterward I felt different.

SWING SET: The Swing Set was assembled in the dark on July 7, 2008, the night before Anodyne’s third birthday, during a particularly fierce argument between me and Kaella. We all spend hours here, though not usually at the same time. Kaella and I do many things apart. The Swing Set includes a slide, a variety of swings, and a teeter-totter a neighbor kid once broke his arm on. Beneath the Swing Set is the partial stump of a large tree that a neighbor told me was destroyed by lightning. The Swing Set helps keep the kids quiet if anyone is sleeping inside the house, though it does sometimes feel uncomfortably to me like a place for the public display of our family. *Look how happy we are! Look how fun our kids are! Look at this family as it falls apart.*

TIRE SWING: This is not really a tire, just a circular piece of molded plastic made to look like a tire, hanging from the Ash Tree. Anodyne and Hagan like this swing because they can push themselves on it, if they hang through it face-down, pushing with their feet, scuffing a grooved dirt path in the lawn. I can barely write about them doing this without feeling a swell of love for them, even though that's a simple enough thing, and pretty common probably. I love these kids. I even love my wife, though the love doesn't come as naturally with her anymore. I love how determined she is to raise happy children, the bookcase of parenting books she's read, how she commits herself so wholly to the career she's pursued and the things she makes; I love discussing books with her, going out to dinner with her, and having adventures with her. Before we had kids, we hitchhiked to Carlsbad Caverns on a whim, and once spent a few months traveling around Central America. I love them all, in different ways, but I don't know what to do about anything, or how to make anyone happy. I'm determined to give my kids some sort of stable home, with a father who is always around—and if Kaella and I ever do divorce, it will not be at my insistence, though I know I will have helped to bring it about. I know I can be an eccentric person, who's never casually into anything, who's always intense, who's sometimes emotionally detached and analytical, and who, perhaps because of a fundamentalist upbringing, still sees sharp divisions between right and wrong, good and bad, smart and stupid. I want so desperately to keep this family together, but I am so unhappy, so often, and so is Kaella. She can't fathom my obstinate lack of belief, while I can't comprehend anyone having a microbiology degree and not accepting humans as a part of evolution, or having good eyesight and yet wearing those weird-looking glove shoes with each toe individually encased in rubber. We are mysteries to each other.

TOP BUNK: Anodyne sleeps on the Top Bunk of the Bunk Bed in the Kids' Room, above Hagan. Half-covered in dolls, her bed is a sanctuary for Anodyne, who needs places to get away, who gets overwhelmed, as Kaella does, as I suppose everyone does to varying degrees. After we remodel the Garage, what's now My Office will become Anodyne's Room. Soon, many things in this house will change.

VAN: The Van is a blue-green Chrysler Town and Country minivan and the last thing Kaella and I bought when we were still somewhat cool. With three kids, we needed it. With three kids, people have to compromise. Every day almost, we load up the family, back out of the Driveway, and head off down the Street, sometimes peacefully, sometimes contentiously, often after pleading with the kids to just get in and get buckled, *please*, please. At times, I can barely handle all the love and sadness this family holds. At times, I can't begin to fathom that everyone else alive is dealing with their own struggles and conflicts, just as we are. In the Van, we drive away, passing a house, another house, another house, almost every house the home of other people—often another family—like ourselves. The same sorts of joys and griefs and disappointments we experience are experienced with variations by everyone else on our Street, and on every street, and in every city, and in every town, and everywhere, and that thought, to me, makes the world's gravity feel doubled. We are a family, and we have a home. We have a home, and in it, and in ourselves, we store our troubles. Before we were here, there were other families here. And now other families live beside us.

### Notes from a Slowly Dying Suburbanite

Sometimes, I stop and look at my children — Anodyne, my oldest daughter, so smart and creative and beautiful and independent; Hagan, my son, so quick to laugh, so handsome, and with such light in his eyes; and Sonora, my little baby girl, who somehow has the ability to collect all of a person's love and radiate it back to him or her tenfold — and I think, *It really would be wrong to take all the money, and the better car, and abandon them.*

\*

To me, one of the strangest things about human beings is how, when they're alone in a car, they just swear and swear and swear.

\*

I think one of the most important skills a parent can cultivate is the ability to comfort an upset child with a simple phrase or metaphor. For instance, yesterday at a party, my six-year-old daughter popped a balloon, and was crying, and I was able to explain that *all* balloons pop — that's just what they do — just as all humans die, every one of us, even me and Mom, even you. One by one, all the people you love will die, and then you will also. Everything you are and know will cease to be, just like that. Just like that balloon.

\*

It's so interesting to me how much I can tell about other people just by them telling me they're "happily married" — like that they haven't been married very long — or that they're lying.

Yes, it is just fascinating how much this tells me, about other people.

\*

On a family drive up to Santa Fe, my wife shared a quote with me from educator Maria Montessori.

"Society must recognize the importance of the child as builder of humanity' *ANODYNE! STOP IT! STOP RIGHT NOW, THAT IS RUDE!* 'and come to have an appreciation of the psychic roots determining' *HAGAN, STOP IT NOW! NOW! NOW! OR WE ARE GOING HOME!* 'whether the mature adult will seek positive' *DO I DO THAT TO YOU? STOP!* 'or negative goals.'"

\*

My children have just discovered babytalk. And with it, the limits of my love.

\*

I'm looking for a good book for my children that will help to teach them that when they are really feeling emotional about something, feeling vulnerable or bothered or in need, feeling like just breaking down and crying, that it's okay, it's really okay, it's okay to just not cry, and to be quiet about it.

\*

We are replacing the blinds in my six-year-old daughter's bedroom, so right now a blanket hangs to cover the window. Anodyne didn't want to keep it up because she says it makes the room too dark, casts creepy shadows, and scares her. I explained to her that waking up to strange men staring in through an uncovered window would be way *more* scary, and I'm guessing by her quietness that that helped to comfort her.

\*

The kids were screaming in the backyard, and one was crying. I ran to the back screen door, throwing it open and accidentally hitting my three-year-old son in the face with it and knocking him off the back steps.

"Hagan, what's wrong, why are you crying?"

"You hit me in the face...with the door!"

"I know, I know, I'm sorry. But why were you crying *before*?"

\*

Some people might say that the amount of effort a parent is willing to put into correctly installing his or her children's car seats is a good indicator of how much a parent doesn't want his or her children to die.

But those people probably have way simpler car seats than we do.

\*

Sometimes, when I'm driving along with all three kids, and they're every one of them screaming for whatever reason, I like to roll down the windows and try to trick my mind into believing I'm an ambulance driver.

*That's odd*, the people I drive past probably think. *Ambulance sirens are usually like, way, way, way more relaxing to me.*

\*

I think that, from now on, the only traveling I will ever do that will have anything at all to do with children will be traveling back in time to prevent their conceptions.

\*

It's tempting for parents to always offer little short-term incentives to get their kids to act, like, "Come on, get in the car, and I'll give you a piece of gum," but the danger there is that you're ultimately teaching the kids to do things only for immediate rewards. Not good.

So, maybe instead — whenever possible — try to offer lasting, long-term incentives, like, "Come on, get in the car, so I won't stop loving you forever."

\*

Today was shaping up to be another tedious and ultimately futile slog full of housework and home maintenance, but in an instant, everything changed. I was walking out to the car to look for shoes for my kids, when something stuck to my foot in the wet grass. A piece of paper! "INSTANT WINNER," it read. "Free Any One 1.25-1.5 oz. Packet of McCormick Taco Seasoning"!

\*

All I was trying to do was explain the smoke detector, and suddenly all the kids were weeping.

\*

Several times a day, I see surly-looking fellows in my neighborhood wearing red or blue bandannas, I'm assuming as gang colors for the Bloods and Crips. As someone with young children, I suppose the big question I have is, "Which gang should I join to best protect them?"

\*

Because their new pet rat has gray fur, gray paws, and even a mostly stone-gray tail, the kids had no trouble at all finding it a name: Brownie.

\*

My daughter, Anodyne, age six, got a little card in the mail today, saying, "Dear Anodyne — Thank you for the star baby doll. I named her Anodyne. Love, Sophie."

And I said, "That's so cool, Anodyne, none of my friends have ever named a doll after *me*" — but then I stopped, and it hit me that I don't really know that for sure.

\*

I imagine that when married parents get divorced, it's fairly important for them to sit down with their children sometime, and explain to them, in a calm and loving way, that what happened wasn't entirely the children's fault.

\*

Today I realized that life is just about killing time until you die, so there's really no reason to ever get upset about anything, as it all accomplishes that goal.

Then I realized I had achieved Zen.

Then I was deeply disappointed with Zen.

Then I was okay with it.

### **“Happily Married”**

I sat with friends at a table, in a hookah lounge, in Albuquerque—night outside, us inside—in a large L-shaped room crowded with college students and dense with fruity smoke. This was January 19, 2012, a Thursday. Couches lined the walls, and tables ringed with chairs mushroomed from the floor. The décor was earth-toned. The décor was forgettable. Everything felt brown, and hazy.

Almost everyone in the hookah lounge looked younger than thirty. Almost everyone there, I bet, liked to read. I saw eyeglasses and band shirts. I saw local comedians, some good, some bad, some who'd just performed, some who were about to. Some glanced at pieces of paper with notes scrawled on them. Others stared at nothing, intently, likely going over sets in their minds.

Everyone was talking and laughing, smoking flavored tobacco from the tubes of Middle Eastern smoking devices. The place was trendy as hell, and I still don't understand the trend, though the crowd did seem mellow and smart. They laughed at people's better jokes.

A guy with an acoustic guitar finished singing a terrible song about having sex with his sister, people clapped half-heartedly, and then the night's emcee—Rusty Rutherford, a semi-ironic, white-gangsta-type with an enviable wit and a heart of gold—stood at the front of the room. He cracked a few funny jokes of his own, and then introduced me. People clapped, the people who knew me cheered and got rowdy, and then I walked to the front of the room, suppressing a grin.

And here's what I looked like then: I wore sneakers, blue jeans, a coarse long-sleeved orange undershirt, and a Los Pollos Hermanos t-shirt over that. I was thirty-two. I was skinny and tall, clean-shaven with moussed-up short brown hair and hard-rimmed rectangular glasses. I took the microphone, and I stared into the harsh stage-lights pointed up at me, barely able to see anyone.

“Hey, everyone,” I said into the hot cloud of light, as my pupils began to contract—as the cloudy harshness began resolving into people's expectant faces.

These words were to let the audience know I was friendly—inclusive—and, uh, had to start the set somehow. I'll be your guide, I was saying implicitly—a friendly Virgil taking you by the hand for a five-minute trip into an existential hell. And—again—I have to start the set somehow.

This was only my third time ever performing stand-up comedy before an audience, and my first time performing at event that wasn't just an informal open mic. It was something I'd decided to try after people had responded positively to readings I had given of some funny things I had written for a self-published zine—and I still felt a little unsure of myself, although excited.

“So, isn’t it strange,” I said, “that it's perfectly okay to have a conversation at an amusement park...in which you talk, and then go silent...”

“...and then scream for a while, and then go silent...”

“...and then scream...and then talk again—”

“—but, when you try to have that *exact same* sort of conversation in the dark hallway of a random neighbor’s unlocked home,”

“then...the police have to get involved?”

This one got a nice, perhaps slightly nervous, laugh—probably from the sort of people who laugh at Emo Phillips. This was kind of like an Emo Phillips joke. I remember at least half the room responded, and I smiled involuntarily, while trying to force myself to appear unmoved. I noticed a woman sitting nearby relax her shoulders, get comfortable, and glance at a friend.

I wanted to start with less-personal jokes, and then move into the personal. I wanted to start with weird jokes just meant to make people laugh and maybe disorient them. As Jeff Tweedy, of the band Wilco, once said, a state of confusion is an effective place to put people, because then they’re less sure of everything and more willing to accept whatever might come their way next.

I let the laughter subside, and continued.

“Also strange, to me:” I said, “why is it that *the media* always portrays people who own, like, forty...or more...cats, as crazy, and *filthy*, and unstable?”

“I’d say *it’s about time* we see at least one news story about a well-adjusted, successful, career-minded woman, living in her immaculately clean home, with her...between forty...and 150 formerly stray cats.”

“I’d like to see that. You know?”

This also got big laughs throughout, though maybe it was too easy. Cat ladies? That’s a go-to comedy staple. Still: it’s a staple for a reason.

“Speaking of unstable women, I’m married—”

This line was really just a segue—from the set’s general jokes to its more personal ones—but this was the third time out of many that I’d performed this set, and as always it got a good laugh. The response to it always surprised me. I wish I could say it was all mine, but actually I performed the set over the phone for my older brother Rob, who’s a very funny author, and he

suggested that line as a less abrupt transition right there than what I'd had before, which was basically nothing. Though he suggested *crazy women*, which I thought was too mean.

Glancing across the room, at a table against a far wall, I could see three close friends of mine sitting around a table beside an empty chair. These were graduate students, all of them, from the University of New Mexico, where all four of us study Creative Writing.

There was Nora, in her twenties, a poet who writes beautiful poems about alcoholism and bodily fluids and is from Milwaukee and looks like an American Apparel model with huge plastic glasses and who might be funnier than anyone who performed that night, myself included.

There was Ty, a brilliant historian and memoirist and one of my closest male friends. Like me, he's in his thirties and has kids, and like me, it showed on his face. He wore a peaked cap and wire-rimmed glasses, sported a neatly groomed beard, and looked weary.

And then there was Suzanne—one of the strongest, most original, most intuitive writers I'd ever known. Suzanne, with her wide shoulders, aggressive posture, and beautiful figure. With the hugest, darkest brown eyes. With the shoulder-length hair of a brunette goddess. In her late-twenties, and with a face like one of Andy Warhol's It Girls. Somehow, she changed the architecture of every room, becoming the center of every one. When she was in a room, my eyes went right to her. Even when she wasn't there, my eyes searched for her still, painting every room with her absence.

I liked that she was there that night, but, my whole set was about my marriage, and I had a wife at home with the kids, so however I felt about Suzanne, I kept it to myself. Even if the feelings were almost certainly mutual.

"I'm married," I said. "And I have kids—"

"And note that I did not say '*happily* married.'"

"Because *love*, as many of you may know, is...an evolutionary *trick*, to get you to reproduce—and once you do, once you pass on your genes, then: it fades!"

"And *then* all that's left is the yelling. And...the blame!"

I said all this as chirpily as possible. Trying not to seem as world-weary and sad as these insights could make me feel. At that point in my life, that sentiment was close to a personal philosophy for me. It was something I'd said before in conversation, and that people always responded to with bigger laughs than I expected, laughs of recognition and disbelief, so I included it in my set. And it did get a response. A couple of people even clapped.

"...It is interesting, to me, though, how much I can tell about *other people*, just by *them* telling me that *they're* 'happily married'—"

“—that they are *newlyweds*—“

“—that they are *lying*,”

“to me, and to themselves—“

“—or that they’re, at the very least, leaving a lot out.”

That last line never works, and it didn’t work that night either. People laughed at all three of the lines before it, but not at that last one. I included it because that’s genuinely what I think—but it’s weak. I talked with Ty about it afterward, and he agreed it’s the least funny part of the entire set. The next lines though, I really like, though people didn’t always catch them.

“Yes, it is just fascinating, how much this tells me,”

“about...other people....”

I just like this for what it says about my own state of mind. That I was seriously unhappy. That I was projecting. That I might be lying to myself just to cope with life. Someone who tells you that happiness is impossible, of course, is telling you way more about himself than about happiness.

What still pains me about this set, and what makes me sad, is that I genuinely thought all of this. A lot of it, I still think, almost two years later. I mean, yes, there was a degree of self-awareness there—I’ve read too much and been sad too long for there not to be—and there are some parts in the set still coming up in which some of the things I’ve thought in my darkest moments are made to seem as if I think them all the time. And I did take all these thoughts and put them into a comedic monologue, so there is a degree of calculation there.

But then again, all the personal, marriage-related things I talked about here really happened, or I really thought. That’s always been my goal in comedy—to be as funny as possible and as true as possible. My goal, which I hope is possible, is for my comedy to be completely funny, and completely true. That’s my holy grail, which I’m still pursuing.

I’m not proud that I’ve held such dark convictions, but there it is. As I performed this set, something about articulating these sentiments really hit me. For years, I had only *felt* this stuff—had only felt the sadness, the anxiety, the frustration, the feelings of being constantly misunderstood and dismissed by my spouse—but now, putting those feelings into words, and standing up in front of a crowd to share them—it made me feel genuinely insane. Why would I willingly stay in a relationship like the one I was describing? Fear, sure. Uncertainty. Hope. Concern over how people would think about me, ending a marriage with children. Uncertainty over whether I could ever be happy with or without being married. Hope that maybe, just maybe, the kids would get older, and my wife and I would start getting some more sleep, and

we'd just feel better about everything, and our differences—our major, irreconcilable differences—would fade away.

"I've been married for almost ten years, and *no* two people stay exactly the same for that long," I continued.

"So how is that going to work out, after you've both become *totally different* people than the ones who actually chose each other?"

"Ten years will change you. Marriage will change you."

This was a long, joke-free set-up, but it was setting up an even longer multi-part joke. I think it also served to establish a tone of openness and sincerity, and I think it's a legitimate enough simple insight that it keeps people's attentions. Even if it does totally leave out the possibility of a couple growing together instead of apart, a possibility that I honestly hope does exist. Up to this point in this set, I'd been pretty general. But here, I got specific.

"It changes everything, even little things."

"Little things, like...how you close the door when you leave the house in the morning."

"Like, when you're first married, and you're leaving the house to go to work or school, you think, 'Someone might get into our house and murder my wife—I'd better lock the door.'"

People laugh a little at this. I don't expect them to, but they do. I think it's just the idea of me being so paranoid and then being articulate about my paranoia. Sometimes it can be funny just to take something that's typically only felt and then put it into words.

"But then, a few years go by, and you're leaving the house, and you think,"

"Someone might get into our house and murder my wife—*that would be great!*"

"...I'll leave the door unlocked...just in case they...get ...discouraged easily."

This got good laughs throughout its latter portions. Though it also made people look at me a little worriedly. That's fine. It is a little psychotic. This is one of those jokes I referenced earlier in which I take fleeting sentiments and make them sound as if they're more than just fleeting.

"...And then, some more time goes by, and things mellow out a bit, and you start locking the door again when you leave, because you think,"

"She's been so unhappy lately, and if she's going to try to kill herself, I don't want anyone walking in...and...interrupting."

And here the room just lost it. People laughed and made sounds of outrage and disbelief, which can be a pleasure in itself—riling up a whole room.

My eyes went to Suzanne again, finding her angled in her chair, her face like a photograph, her whole presence made pale by tobacco smoke. Her eyes glinted with mirth, and she stared at me thoughtfully, regarding me, twisting her hair around the index finger of her right hand as she shook her head in happy disapproval.

“...I joke about suicide, I joke, but it really *is* a serious topic.”

“It is.”

“It is a permanent, tragic solution to temporary problems.”

“It leaves nothing but grief in its wake.”

“And you should never, *ever* do it, unless...”

“...of course...”

“...you’re depressed.”

This got the biggest laugh of the whole set. People with darker comedic inclinations rolled in their seats at this one. Others didn’t. I saw Mike Long, pale and thin, a comedian whose sets are as dark as anyone’s in town—who jokes about serious health problems, suicidal ideation, and his own impending death—slap his leg and laugh out loud, even though he’d heard this set once before. I saw Sarah Kennedy, a butch pixie whose ambition and wit have made her perhaps the most successful comedian in town, crack a smile. I saw Hannah Taylor, an attractive young comedian and sorority girl who’s sometimes babysat my kids, just look at me worriedly.

I let the laughter subside just a little, just so I could be heard, and then continued.

“Or if, say, you feel you’ve just become a burden, on everyone.”

“I mean, you don’t want to just keep hanging around, just *burdening* everyone.”

“That wouldn’t be cool.”

“Why would you do that, to people you love?”

“How selfish are you?”

“Don’t be such a dick!”

The laughter built and rippled throughout all these jokes, as they were all essentially parts of the same one. That last line was another one from my brother Rob. He's semi-religious, and doesn't really swear much, but I like that he knew that something semi-profane would be funny there, and that the blue language would add an element of surprise. The whole bit is a weird, dark one, similar in form to one that Louis C.K. has about rape. Mine was a sentiment I might have actually thought and felt at moments—that if you're truly broken and doomed to misery, there's no point in sticking around—but it's also totally not one that I could endorse wholeheartedly, soberly, as suicide has affected my life so strongly, and so negatively. My dad's sister killed herself, setting up a pattern for the family. My sister LeeAnne killed herself, and there will always be a hole in my heart because of it. My mom basically killed herself, by refusing to continue dialysis or consider a kidney transplant. Friends have killed themselves, and I have spent much of my adult life depressed and fending off suicidal images and thoughts, and the subject is not one I take lightly. But I guess I'll joke about almost anything.

Camus once wrote that the central choice of a person's life is the choice between life and death. Shakespeare too. To be or not to be, that is the goddamned, motherfucking question. It is. So far, I'd chosen life just because I could. Just because I knew I'd get death too, eventually, so I might as well get life while I can. Sometimes, though, it felt like a pretty shitty dichotomy—the choice between nonexistence and misery, and nothing else. But what if there's a third choice, I began to wonder. What if I said to hell with what people think of me? What if I said to hell with a secure future? What if I took a leap? To be—or not to be—or, to be in a very different way—maybe even to be happy? Maybe there's a different question. Maybe there's a better option.

I resumed, with a story that my wife later denied ever happened, but that totally *did*. It was the sort of bizarre, telling little incident that stays with me, that I tend not to forget. It circles back to the sentiment that the personal bulk of this set began with—that things change over time in a marriage. *This whole stand-up set is about my marriage*, I told myself. *I am married*.

"Things change for women, too, of course, obviously," I continued.

"Once, a couple of years ago, one evening in the kitchen, in one of those vulnerable, say-anything moments that couples sometimes have, my wife said to me,"

"Sometimes, I enjoy...just"

"fantasizing..."

"about you..."

"dying...in a car wreck..."

"..and it makes me feel good."

*Dying* got a laugh. *In a car wreck* took the laugh further, and the end got a final splash of uneasy merriment. It's not the biggest joke in the set, but it allows me to show that these sorts of dark, fleeting thoughts aren't limited to only the men in unhappy relationships, and it lets me circle back to those opening thoughts, which I think is important. I want to be funny, yeah, but I also want to be more than that. I love comedians who are funny but who also have something real to say.

Maybe I could fend off the thoughts of suicide and unhappy resignation. Maybe I didn't have to condemn myself to a life of misery with someone I could no longer relate to and who didn't even like me anymore—someone who ridiculed me to my face in front of mutual friends, who only snapped at me to be quiet and tell her later when I tried to share an idea with her, who hated me for no longer sharing her religious beliefs. Maybe I could stop modeling resignation and misery and a terrible marriage for my children. Maybe I could still be a good dad, without being married to my children's mother. Maybe I could be with Suzanne! As my friend Tim Howard once told me, there's nothing worse for a person than being bound to someone who fundamentally doesn't understand him. It's crippling. Suzanne understood me though—she was one of my best friends. She seemed to love hearing what I had to say. She laughed at my jokes. She shared things with me. She'd text me almost every time she'd drink, eager to tell me that she and another friend were talking about how cool I am and wished I was there. She liked me, for me. *I could be happy with her*, I thought.

I could hear Suzanne, above my set, and above my thoughts. I could hear her full laugh cut through the sonic miasma of everyone else's, and I couldn't help it, I loved her. *I'm married*, I reminded myself again. Not happily married, no, not any, not at all, and I felt miserable in it, but still. The kids. Commitment. The faint hope that it might improve. However I might have felt about Suzanne, I needed to keep it to myself. Even if the feelings were almost certainly mutual. And: anyway: this wasn't about her. This was about my wife.

"And I said, 'Oh, Wife, thank you for...confiding in me,'" I went on. "That's...so...personal."

"Wow. Wow. ...Wow."

*"And then we conceived our youngest child."*

That was this set's closing joke. A minor one. And I'm not sure if the night of that conversation actually was the same night my wife and I conceived our third child. But I do remember it that way. Just as I'm not sure if the night of this stand-up set was the night Suzanne and I ended up in a booth of a Village Inn together, where we talked obliquely about the possibility of the two of us having an affair, where I said I still had major reservations about doing anything like that, where I talked about wanting to set a good example for my son, where she mentioned that modeling a relationship of total misery was hardly setting a good example, where I silently agreed, where a drunk man at a table next to us yelled that we should just do it, no one had to know, where our knees rubbed against each other once under the table and neither of us objected, where I loved her more than ever and then said nothing, where I said I just couldn't

have an affair, but I could end my marriage, and I would, I had to, I would write my wife a letter agreeing to a divorce, like she'd so often wanted, I would write her a letter, a final letter, I'd write it right away. I'm not sure if that was the same night. But I do remember it that way.

At the end of a set, maybe at the end of anything, there's never anything really great to say. The best you can do is step off while people are still laughing and mention your name, so maybe they'll remember you. So maybe they'll remember that they enjoyed your presence in a positive way. That night at the hookah lounge, that's what I did.

"...Hey everyone, I'm Mike Smith" I said. "Thank you so much for laughing."

"Good night."