



**CAKETRAIN**  
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A Letter from the Editors

Dear Death—

*Fuck you.*

—Eds.



Melissa Ginsburg

**Anniversary Poem**

Warehouse, factory. Picnic table,  
planted maple. Swallows sunlight,  
the continent. Beyond, a bright morning  
a forest endangered. In a row,  
yellow, building. Distant, sunlight,  
hungry, swallows, caves. In the,  
even in, shadowy. I, mosses, you.

## F o r t u n e F i s h

Spring was the season of the fortune fish. They arrived in plastic grab bags dispensed by a decrepit clown at the entrance of the annual carnival. The clown's thick makeup always failed to disguise his stubbled cheeks and sagging neck. His bright costume smelled like smoke. His fingernails as he handed out the bags had a yellowish tint that I thought was part of the costume.

We were given a bag apiece containing a handful of stale popcorn wrapped in wax paper, ten tickets for the carnival games, a miniature kaleidoscope, a fluorescent orange kazoo, and, always at the bottom, a fortune fish sheathed in a sleeve of white plastic.

The fortune fish couldn't really predict the future. This was just false advertising on the part of Dr. Aloysius Manning, whose bearded, bespectacled profile was printed on the rectangular outer sleeve. The doctor's picture was bordered by exhortatory capitals printed in turn-of-the-century type: DR. ALOYSIUS MANNING'S PATENTED FORTUNE FISH. A MARVEL OF PISCATORY PROGNOSTICATION.

Rubbing the sleeve between your thumb and index finger caused the seam at one edge to open and expose the fish inside. Extracted and placed in the palm—per Dr. Manning's printed instructions—it was slightly longer than a child's pinkie finger. As soon as the tissue-thin fish touched bare skin, it began curling and rolling as if caught in the flow of an unseen current. The sleeve contained an illustrated key for interpreting the fish's movements. A consistent warping of the head and tail indicated WORRY. A fish that seemed to fold itself in half suggested CONFUSION. An

upward curl of the head was a sign of SOCIABILITY, but if it seemed to burrow itself down into the meat of the palm, RETICENCE was to blame. ANGER was a series of twists that rendered the fish as stiff as a drill bit. LOVE was an ecstatic coiling of the body into a tight cylinder with the head trailing flat like a useless anchor. MELANCHOLY caused the fish to coil in reverse, around its head, leaving only the tail exposed, a blunted arrow.

I had only myself to test the accuracy of Dr. Manning's invention. The carnival tickets were considered the real prize. They were eagerly taken out and spent on beanbag throws, pony rides, and shots from plastic pistols. The kaleidoscopes and kazoos were handy projectiles that shattered easily underfoot. The popcorn scattered across the playground and stuck to the hooves of resentful Shetlands as they traced the same tired circle around a creaking pole. The fortune fish were ignored and discarded, some never even making it out of the now flattened grab bags that littered the bushes at the edge of school. In the days following the carnival, you could spot them everywhere if you looked hard enough. They floated in rain puddles and in the basins of drinking fountains. They trailed unseen from the soles of shoes. They caught on the chain link fence that surrounded school property, their heads and tails wagging in the wind.

I hoarded them like currency and stored them in my nightstand drawer. The nightstand was an old piece of furniture from the time before I was born, when my parents lived in an apartment instead of a house. The lacquered panels resembling wood had warped with age and wear, and through the growing gaps, fortune fish sifted from the bottom of the drawer, down the back of the nightstand, and onto the carpet. Whenever my mother cleaned, they inevitably clogged the vacuum, tangling with hair and carpet fibers into a thick mess that she had to extract by hand from the bristles. She mumbled to herself as she kneeled over the vacuum's exposed underside.

After watching her struggle with crumpled shreds of fish, I would kneel next to her, but she would push me away and tell me to do my homework.

One spring, I watched my mother as she pried the vacuum open and absent-mindedly ran a finger along the matted bristles. She seemed to be staring up at a corner of the ceiling where a cobweb waved loose from the wall. I asked her if something was wrong. She answered by getting up and shutting herself in the bathroom until the noise of my father's return from work prompted her to start dinner.

After his return, my father and I would leaf through the dictionary on top of the desk in my parents' room. It was bigger than the family Bible and propped up on a special stand that could swivel in any direction. Whenever I found a new word in a magazine or a newspaper, my father would help me lift the heavy cover and turn the pages. My father would finger the cracked binding and shake his head. Someday, he said, you're going to wear this thing out.

By that spring, he had taught me all of the words in Dr. Manning's instructions that I didn't understand. More often than not, my father was distracted while I practiced pronouncing a word and using it correctly in a sentence. His eyes went from the dictionary to the empty hallway. The silence of the house was broken only by the sounds of chopping and frying from the kitchen.

On one of the first warm nights, we sat on the steps of the front porch. The sidewalk, the parked cars, the shrubbery bordering our neighbors' houses, even the air itself seemed steeped in an eerie blue. Under the green porch light, we watched together as I placed a fortune fish on my palm. The fish rolled and dipped, turned and twisted itself, curled one way, then the other. Nothing it did resembled any of the possible results described by Dr. Manning. On the outside, I felt nothing wrong. But on the inside,

apparently, I was a tangle of emotions, so incorrigibly bound and conflicted that I was beyond the doctor's diagnosis.

What do you think it means? I asked. Before my father could answer, my mother called us in to eat.

All through dinner, I could barely taste my food. I was more preoccupied with the effort of breathing. What little was said at the table was drowned out by what I took for the sound of my own blood rushing back and forth from somewhere inside, unattached from everything else but still working of its own unexplained volition. When my mother asked for the salt, my hand was shaking so badly that I spilled some onto her salad.

What's wrong with you? she asked. I shrugged. Shrugging is not a response, she said. Answer me with words.

Nothing, I said.

She stabbed at a lettuce leaf with her fork and continued to look at me. Did you wash your hands?

Yes.

He's still playing with trash. This she said to my father. Every day, he brings more of those fish home with him. He came in today with three of them stuck in an old wad of chewing gum.

If you scrape the gum off, they're still good, I said.

I didn't know that, my mother said. She turned to my father. Did you know that?

My father wiped at his mouth with a napkin. Did you wash your hands? my father asked.

Yes, I said.

See. Nothing to worry about.

Nothing for *you* to worry about, said my mother.

My father paused in his chewing. He looked at my mother coldly, one cheek swollen at an angle to the rest of his face. He took a sip of water, and worked at the food in his mouth until he had swallowed all of it. He took another sip of water.

Maybe, he said, it's a good night for a drive to the harbor.  
Enjoy yourselves, my mother said as she rose from the table.

I never liked the harbor. When my father said we were driving to the harbor, what he really meant was the airport. The two ran parallel to each other along the same highway exit. If you followed all the signs for the scenic route toward your left, you would eventually reach one of the parks that faced the harbor and the city skyline. But whenever we went, my father would always turn off of the exit even before the signs for the scenic route started. He would drive onto a side street instead, then onto another and another until we reached a stretch of chain link fence crowned with coils of barbed wire.

My father got out of the car and stood at the fence, his fingers woven tightly into the mesh of small, polygonal rungs. A cold breeze rippled his hair and the back of his shirt, but he didn't seem to notice. Shivering, I shut the passenger-side door and joined him.

We looked out onto the wide lanes that cut through the airfield beyond. Planes taxied back and forth in front of the distant terminal. To pass the time, I tried to guess what my father was staring at. I knew by now not to disrupt his reverie with questions. The only signs of human life were the ground crews that, from here, were only slightly bigger than the specks emitted by their conical flashlights. The terminal's exterior attempted to emulate the waves of the Pacific Ocean in concrete and glass, but at best it resembled the ragged blade of one of my father's power tools. Then there were the planes themselves. Their bodies and tails were painted with airline logos and the colors of foreign flags. A woman wearing a garland of hibiscus smiled from one passing plane. Another displayed the top of a mountain misted by clouds. One plane was painted over with the black and white body of a killer whale, the mascot for the local water park. The foremost windows were the whale's eyes and its mouth was skewed to one side in a toothy smirk. The plane was

cruising to a stop when I felt a familiar tremor begin behind me.

I covered my ears and fixed my eyes to the ground. The tremor increased until I could feel it in my ankles, legs, and chest. I forced myself to keep looking down, but after a few moments, I felt the urge to look up. I knew what to expect and how it would make me feel, but the urge became irresistible. Finally, hands still at my ears, I raised my head.

Above us, the sluggish body of a jumbo jet maneuvered the last stages of its descent. Even with my ears covered, the roar was overwhelming. The plane seemed close enough to touch. I dared myself to raise an arm into the heavy blue sky, but I could already feel my fingers being torn off by the suction of the immense engines. As the jet touched down, the ground seemed to shift under my feet and thin lines of light edged my vision. I looked over at my father. His hands had never left the fence. He watched the jet grow smaller and smaller until it disappeared into the narrow glare of the terminal lights.

On the ride back, my father turned on the radio, but I could barely make out what was on. The noise of my own body grew louder in my ears. I listened for every pulse of blood as the silence between heartbeats seemed to lengthen. Sinking lower into my seat, I forced air and words out of my tightening chest.

What? my father asked. He seemed to strain to make himself heard.

Why do you go to the airport? I asked.

He turned a knob on the radio. After a while, he said, you can't hear a damn thing.

My bed that night felt like a heavy sack of sickening warmth. Before long, I had exhausted every cool corner and begun tracing the angled shadows on the ceiling with restless eyes. I threw off the covers and listened to the sounds of the house. The noise from

the airfield had dissipated as soon as my father pulled into the driveway, but this only made it harder to ignore the silence that met our return.

Now, unable to sleep, I tried forcing my eyes shut. This only managed to strain my eyelids and give me the beginnings of a headache. But gradually, my eyes closed on their own for moments at a time. I must have finally drifted off because when I opened my eyes again, I was at school, sifting through the shrubs that bordered the playground. In the dirt visible beneath, I recognized familiar specks of red. They disappeared as soon as I reached for them, but the plants rustled pleasantly as I parted them with my fingers, and the dirt felt good and cold against my skin. While I couldn't see them, I could hear the crinkle of fortune fish in their plastic sleeves. And, from somewhere behind me, muted voices rose and fell, as if laughing and crying at the same time.

We went fishing that spring. We usually only went in the fall, when cooler water coaxed bigger fish to feed closer to shore. In the spring, you could expect perch or undersized bass or the occasional mackerel if you used the local pier. The day we went, my father hooked two sizeable perch during the first hour. The rest of the morning yielded nothing but seaweed clumps and a small stingray that I struggled to pull to shore. My father made me stand back as he stepped on the stingray's poison-bearing tail with the toe of his boot. He extracted the hook with a pair of pliers and kicked the fluttering ray back out to sea.

The sun was climbing higher over the beach. We could see motorboats cruising along the other side of the bay. By late morning, we would be crowded out by beach towels, portable coolers and sun-starved tourists. It would be too noisy to fish. My mother had made me dress for the morning cold in a flannel shirt and stiff new jeans. As my father baited our hooks, I felt my back

itch in the growing warmth. I reached behind to scratch.

My father looked up from the anchovy bucket. It's not as cold as your mother thought, he said.

I shook my head and continued to scratch.

He smiled as he watched a hooked anchovy struggle on the edge of his tackle box. She's only worried about you, he said. I said nothing as I watched him cast his line far into the deep blue bay.

When both our lines were out, we returned to the car to wait. My father sipped coffee from a large thermos. He always saved me a cup to go with the cereal my mother packed for me in a white Tupperware container. As I poured milk from the small carton tucked into a corner of the food cooler, my father turned to look at me.

She's right to worry, he said. Your mother and I both worry.

What about? I said.

We don't think a boy your age should spend so much time alone.

I shrugged.

Don't you think so? my father asked. Don't you ever wish there was someone else around to have fun with?

You're here, I said.

My father laughed. Grown-ups are no fun, he said. I mean other kids.

Other kids are stupid, I said.

How do you know?

They just are.

He shook his head. It's not healthy, he said. Something has to change. Don't you think something has to change? My father's expression was edged with a sudden concern that shocked me. I couldn't look at him until his silence made me realize that he was waiting for me to speak.

Maybe, I said. I guess.

It doesn't mean that things at school have to be any different, he said. What if, instead, the change happened for us?

Us? I asked. How?

Just then, the tip of one of the poles whipped sharply through the air. We ran to the edge of the beach. My father was stooping to reel in when I told him to wait.

What? he said. He looked at me with an annoyed expression.

I pointed at the tip that continued to quiver, but now not as sharply. The line he had cast only minutes earlier had grown slack and dipped in a leisurely curve toward the water. A second line was pulling at the pole from above. My father grabbed at the second line and unraveled it from around the tip. He followed the line down to a piece of driftwood that rolled back and forth in the tide. He handed the driftwood to me and told me to start winding the line around it.

I tried to see what was at the other end, but it was lost in the sun's growing glare. I began to wonder if the line itself was real. It was thin, transparent, and practically invisible as it arced into the sky.

I don't see anything, I said.

Keep going, said my father. He adjusted his fishing line and then turned to watch. I continued pulling the line in. Occasionally, I felt something tug at the thickening spool. It was several minutes before the air around the line solidified into a distant, diamond-shaped kite.

When my hands grew tired, my father took over. Soon, a tail materialized, then a pair of eyes, then the red and blue mosaic of its wings. I could hear the soft ripple of paper overhead. My father slowly pulled in the last of the line until the kite was hovering just above our heads, shading us both in a patch of purpled sand.

The following Monday, my father had to work late. There would be no dictionary study tonight. While my mother made dinner in the kitchen, I went alone to my parents' room and browsed at random through the musty pages. When this got boring, I continued work

on the movie I was making in the margins of the dictionary.

By studying the way that page numbers occasionally shifted in the upper corners while my father searched for words, I had discovered how flipping pages could simulate movement. I had begun testing my discovery with a small discreet circle drawn in the bottom margin of one of the middle pages (MILLEPORE to MILTONIA). On each successive page, I drew a new circle, slightly to the right of where the previous one had been. When the circle had reached the bottom right of the page, I began drawing along the right margin. Flipping the fifty or so pages of my work thus far caused the circle to shoot from left to right and then upwards around the bottom of the text. To emphasize the sense of movement, I had added curled wisps to the left of each circle like the ones I had seen in cartoons.

In the midst of my work that day, my pencil slipped out of my fingers and under my parents' bed. When I reached down to retrieve it, my hand felt the edge of a book among the shoehorns and forgotten socks.

The book was the size of a record album and its cover had been removed. The title page was printed in squat, rounded letters: RECOVERING EROS. A GUIDE TO PASSIONATE MARRIAGE.

The book claimed to be illustrated, but when I turned to the listed page numbers, I found nothing but ragged edges torn close to the spine. I flipped through the remaining pages. Some of the words I had never seen before. Many of the others were familiar, but they didn't make sense. From the kitchen came the sound of running water. I set the book on my father's desk and began turning the pages of the dictionary.

I was foraging in the plants at recess when something landed with a slap next to me. A woman smiled from the wrinkled pages of a magazine. She could have been a younger version of Mrs. Cooper,

my fifth-grade teacher. Her smile was the same as Mrs. Cooper's whenever she goaded us through grammar exercises. But this woman was naked and she held her legs apart to form a V. At the place where her legs met, the skin was as rosy as the lunchmeat my mother used for sandwiches.

I looked up from the magazine and saw a boy from my class standing in front of me. I knew his name only because Mrs. Cooper had made us memorize everybody's name at the beginning of the school year. At lunch, he liked to drink his milk through the bottom of the carton. When he was finished, he would return to the lunch line and place his apparently unopened container alongside the fresh milk.

He indicated the magazine with a quick nod. I know where you can see more, he said. When I didn't answer, he shoved me to the ground and pinned me there with his foot. What's wrong with you? he asked. Are you a fucking queer?

I thought I knew what queer meant. And that's how I felt as I stared at the spread-open woman. But I knew that I was supposed to say no.

No, I said.

He told me not to return to class after lunch. Instead, I was to meet him near the entrance of the school auditorium.

I spent lunch staring at my food. I took apart the sandwich my mother had wrapped in cellophane, removing the top slice of bread and the folded lettuce leaf. I dabbed at the ham with a finger. The salt of the meat and the sour smell of the mayonnaise entered my nostrils. When the bell rang, I threw everything away, uneaten, and headed to the lower courtyard.

A group of boys stood around the corner from the auditorium, hidden behind a high hedge. I could see their scuffed and dirty sneakers form a row along the base of the shrubs. One of them seemed to be the lookout. He peered out from the shelter of the

hedge and watched the entrance intently as the sixth-grade boys filed in through the double doors. I felt a hand clap sharply against the back of my head. It was the boy with the magazine. Hurry up, dipshit, he said. We're gonna be late.

We waited together through the tardy bell and then another five minutes just to be sure. The boy next to me checked his watch. They must have started by now, he said. The lights are probably out. We looked at each other and stepped out from behind the shrubs.

A sign was taped to one of the closed doors: DO NOT DISTURB. HEALTH INSTRUCTION IN PROGRESS. The doors opened onto a darkened room illuminated at the front by a movie screen. The audience of sixth-graders looked up at what appeared to be a cannon on wheels. The shaft was transparent and revealed a network of blood vessels. The film's narrator spoke soberly over the clacking reels: . . . basic components for the miracle of life, transmitting successful genetic traits to a new generation . . . The cannon moved aside to make room for a new image, a furred beetle that garnered scattered laughter and applause. From the darkness, an adult voice called for silence.

We waited at the back, I wasn't sure for what. I heard a gasp next to me as the diagrams faded into a flesh-and-blood man and woman who stood like guards before a multi-colored strand that twisted between them. The man and woman were both naked. Their faces were arranged with the same blank concentration that my mother and father gave to paying bills. My face went hot and even hotter when a flashlight shone directly at my cheek. A firm hand guided me out by the neck.

Mr. Halstrom, the vice-principal, fussed at the diagonal pattern of his tie and addressed my parents. I would like to tell you differently, he said. But it's still unclear how much your son knows and how he knows it. He has not been very cooperative.

My mother grabbed me by the ear and pulled. Tell the man what you saw, she commanded.

Ma'am, Mr. Halstrom said, we don't advocate corporal punishment of any kind.

Well maybe if you did, children wouldn't be exposed to the filth they get at this school. My mother released me and tucked the hair she had disturbed back behind my ear.

Mr. Halstrom cleared his throat. With all due respect, ma'am, the Health Instruction Curriculum has been approved by the entire school district. It has even won a national award for its thoroughness and sensitivity to young adult issues.

My son is not a young adult.

Yes, ma'am, we know and we share your dismay that curiosity led him to this. We would like to offer our sincerest apologies. But I'm not sure what we would be apologizing for. Your son willfully violated our strict protocol along with several other boys whom he has refused to identify.

When my mother looked at me, I moved quickly to cover my ears. But her hands remained fixed in her lap.

Looking at his record, Mr. Halstrom continued, I can tell that your son is a good boy. His reading scores are through the roof. He may qualify for the advanced track at the junior high. But certain aspects of his file bother us. Both his current and former teachers have noticed a reluctance to socialize and behavior patterns that appear consistent with an obsessive personality. Have you had your son evaluated by a professional?

I don't know if it's come to that, my father said. But we have noticed things. Right? He turned to my mother.

My mother flipped calmly through the contents of her purse, but as soon as she found her folded tissues, she began to sob into both hands. When she could speak again, she seemed to be addressing Mr. Halstrom, but she was looking at my father. I've

tried everything I can, she said. And it's still not good enough? The rising tone of her question gave way to more sobs.

Curiosity isn't a bad thing, my father said. He's a smart kid. Smart kids are naturally curious.

TUMESCENT. The word escaped my mouth so quickly that at first I thought I had only said it in my head.

Mr. Halstrom turned to me briefly before answering my father. I agree, he said. But I also agree with your wife that there is a proper time and place—

PRIAPIC, I said, picking at a clod of dirt at the side of my shoe.

The vice-principal looked at me again through lowered eyeglasses. As I was saying, a proper time and place for everything. We can't take complete responsibility for what happened, but you have my word that we will consider all that we can do on our end to prevent any similar incidents in the future.

CONCUPISCENCE. The consonants showered out in a spray of saliva.

My father ignored Mr. Halstrom. Where did you learn that word? he asked. I continued to study the plush beige carpet.

Mr. Halstrom took a small card from the brass holder on his desk. If you have any further questions or concerns, please feel free to call. And do let me know if you decide to pursue additional counseling. He handed the card to my mother. She dried her eyes, wiped her nose, and wadded the card together with the soggy tissues she returned to her purse.

I don't remember what I dreamed that night. But the noise in my dream, the laughing and crying together, continued even after I opened my eyes. It was coming through the wall behind me, from the direction of my parents' room.

The house was quiet as I made my way down the hall. At my parents' door, I heard nothing but the hum of the refrigerator behind

me. I grabbed the doorknob.

In the low light from the window, I saw sheets billow and then suddenly flatten out against the bed. They stretched so tautly over my mother and father that my parents looked like mummies. The only parts that weren't covered were their heads and bare shoulders.

I spoke to the darkness that obscured their eyes. I thought you were asleep, I said.

Turn around, said my mother.

Once they were dressed, my mother made me take a seat in the living room. She set one of the floor lamps right above my head and she and my father took turns pacing around me.

There are certain things you're too young to understand, my father said. You are a very smart boy, but this isn't about being book smart.

But I didn't see anything, I said.

That's right, my mother said. You *didn't* see anything. Her face was hidden by the light above me, so I watched her slippers trace half-circles on the floor.

My father's slippers stopped next to hers. Is that, he said, really the best—

My mother interrupted him. He didn't see anything. If he didn't see anything, there's nothing to talk about. Right? My father didn't answer. His feet disappeared into the shadows on the carpet.

There's nothing to talk about, my mother repeated. It's too soon. It's too goddam soon. Her throat caught around the curse. Her slippers left the room. I heard the bathroom door shut down the hall, followed by the rush of water from opened faucets.

The counselor showed me real pictures and asked me about them. Then he showed me ink blots and asked me to make them into real pictures. He seemed to scribble continuously onto a yellow legal pad. Before each new exercise, he made a point of asking my permission.

I'd like to try something, he would say. Would you mind?

During one session, he arranged a row of empty chairs in front of me. One was for my father, one was for my mother, one was for anything in particular that was bothering me. You can say whatever you want to them, the counselor said. I'm not here to judge. This is your chance to express sadness, annoyance, or anger about anything.

Where's the chair for you? I asked. At the next session, mine was the only other seat in the room.

We talked about the fortune fish. He asked to see one and I pulled one from my pocket. It was still in its white sleeve. I watched as he carefully withdrew the fish. In the meat of his palm, it looked tiny. Its movements were feeble and sluggish.

The counselor watched for a few moments and then turned his attention back to me. So why do you like these things so much?

You wouldn't understand, I said.

You're right, he said. I probably wouldn't. If I were your age, I'd prefer riding my bike or playing football with my friends. This, he said, indicating the fish with a slight jerk of his chin, this isn't a toy I imagine being much fun after a while.

They're not toys, I said. They tell me things.

You mean they speak to you? With actual voices? He watched me carefully and poised his pen over the legal pad.

They tell me things, I said, getting up. I took the fish back and returned to my seat.

My father came to pick me up after school. My mother usually drove and I asked where she was. She had to go to the doctor, he said.

Is she okay?

She's fine, my father said. Everything is going to be fine.

When we got home, my mother was waiting on the couch. Have you told him yet? she asked.

No, said my father. He took a seat next to her. I wanted to wait

until we were all home. He slid a hand over her belly and held it there. I watched from across the living room.

Things are going to be different from now on, he said. For all of us.

My mother took my father's hand in hers without looking at him. I guess it's what we all want, she said. Her eyes looked out one of the front windows. From where she was sitting, her view was obscured by the unkempt leaves of the bordering rose bushes.

My father winked at me. He jerked his head back slightly, a signal for me to join them. I stayed where I was. In the dwindling light from the street, I watched my parents' hands, fingers cupped around palms that were smooth and unyielding.

Claire Donato

**I have some things to tell you**

“Entwined” says the same thing as “enveloped,” only the word spirals a bit in its phonetics, follows the tongue down a staircase to a room that is empty. The room is white, its floor is dark, its splints are tiny pieces, a voice would echo. Its walls are sheets: take solace in the notion of a pair. I would be surprised if there is oxygen here. Have I told you you remind me of a sheet? Have I told you how I feel about your core? I want to look at you & see myself: I want to look at you & see a sheet. Sheets are mirrors, put a finger to the mirror, point out how the background casts a shadow of rain in the cranny. It is in this room you wear me

Bernard Quetchenbach

The Hermit's Family

If someday  
aunts, uncles—  
a hike, a picnic

Or a cousin—  
night, something  
unexpected maybe  
shameful

I would know  
them then  
I might.

Matt Bell

## A Certain Number of Bedrooms, a Certain Number of Baths

The boy carries the blueprint catalogs everywhere he goes, mostly keeping them in his backpack and occasionally looking inside to spy on their colorful covers. He feels comforted knowing they are nearby. After school, he locks himself in the empty house and sits at the kitchen table, where he fans the catalogs out in front of him as he eats his snack. He compares the artist's renditions on the left page with the floor plans on the right, then moves to the living room floor where he turns the thin catalog pages and ignores his cartoons. During *Transformers* or *G.I. Joe* he turns the volume all the way down so he can hear himself enunciating the names of the homes he hopes his father will build.

Ranches: Crestwood, Echo Hills, Nova.

Split Levels: Timber Ridge, Elk Ridge.

The Capes: Cod, Vincent, and Chelsey.

Two story houses, like the one they have now, in ascending order by size: Walden, Westgate, Somerset, Carbondale.

The boy has not been reading long and he wants to be sure that when the time comes that he can spell the house's name, that he can say it. He pronounces slowly, then more confidentially. He is dreaming of a new home, of one where he and his father will live together, where no one will have died in the garage. He wonders if they would be better off without a garage at all. Better is not the word he is thinking of. Safer is.

The catalogs are six months old now, from when the father had looked through them every night himself, explaining that he wanted

to build a new house, a house that did not have anyone's history attached to it. Only after his father's obsession with the catalogs had passed did the boy take them to his own room. He thought he'd get in trouble for claiming them but never did, not even later when he started sneaking them to school in his backpack. The boy is still years away from the time he steals his first porno magazine from beneath his father's mattress, but when he does he will remember the catalogs, remember the feel of their thin, crinkly pages and find himself a child again, too young to understand what he's looking at or why he wants it. The magazines will be too vivid of a reminder of this time in his life, when so much hope was invested in so little paper.

At dinner, the boy tells his father about the houses he likes best this week, about how he is having trouble deciding between the Crestwood and the Cape Cod. The father glances at the pages as the boy presents them. A month ago he smiled at the boy's enthusiasm, even joined in with comments of his own, but now he is less demonstrative with his opinions.

Dinner: A meal consisting of hot dogs and Kraft macaroni and cheese. The father is not frugal with his shopping like the mother was. He buys what he recognizes, assured by television that he is making a good choice.

The boy has been in so few other houses that actually picturing the interior of any other home means simply reconfiguring the rooms of their own house into his conception of the new one. The floor plans he likes best are the ones that he can most easily shoehorn his own into, using the homes of his grandmother and of the neighbor boy his mother had forced him to play with to fill in the rest of the bigger houses. The father does not say much but the boy has become used to this. He talks more and more now, more than he is comfortable with, not because he wants to but because he does not like the silence at the table. It is the silence that bothers him the most, that is the most vivid reminder

that they are alone even when they are with each other.

Suicide: Car running, windows closed, parked in the garage. No one would ever drive it again and two months after her death it would be sold at a loss. The boy was not supposed to find her. She did not know that school had become a half day, that everyone had been sent home early because of the impending snowfall. The note taped to the outside of the driver's window was addressed to his father, not to him. The boy could barely read then but decided to try anyway. He pulled the note off the window, leaving the scotch tape behind.

Mother: Hidden underneath. Pressed against the window with her mouth open, the steam from her breath slowly disappearing from the cloudy glass. The last time he saw her.

911: The boy had learned the number in school, but he had not been taught that it was not failsafe, that it did not save everyone. For months he thought about raising his hand and telling his teacher about her error, but they had moved on from health and safety and would not speak of it again for another year.

Extolling the virtues of the houses, the boy lists the numbers of bedrooms and bathrooms. He wonders what half a bathroom is but does not ask. He explains that all of the houses from American Homes have R-19 insulation, which he has been assured by the catalog is the very best kind. He shows his father the cross section of a wall and repeats from memory the phrase Oriented Strand Board. The boy pronounces many of the words wrong. He does not realize that learning words by sounding them out without ever having heard them spoken has left him with false pronunciations that as an adult he will be constantly corrected for. He will not speak the same language others speak.

Father: Quiet. Sluggish now. Often watches the news from his easy chair with his eyes closed. A tumbler filled with melting ice slowly turning brown dangles from his fingertips at all times. Has

apparently forgotten how to play catch or even how to get to the park.

Father (previous): Fun. Loud. Told jokes that mother disapproved of but the boy loved. Often rustled the boy's hair, which the boy pretended to hate but secretly didn't. Missing in action.

Father (future): Alcoholic. Out of work. Defined by the loss of his partner in a way he was never defined by her presence. Fading, fading, fading.

The boy reads the catalogs in the evening while his father naps in his recliner. His father rarely makes it to the bedroom anymore and sometimes the boy sleeps on the couch just to be near him. More often he goes to his own room so that he can leave the light on, reading his catalogs until he is too tired to keep his eyes open. He makes his choices for the home he thinks they need, his decisions changing daily or even hourly, like moods or Michigan weather. Sometimes he falls asleep with the light still on, and those nights are the ones he stays in his bed.

On other nights, the boy wakes up shaking, his bed or the couch soaked with sweat and sometimes, embarrassingly, urine. Then he walks into the living room where his father sleeps. Standing beside the recliner, the boy tries to will his father to wake up before starting to shake him. Neither tactic works. The father snores on, even when the boy begins to talk, begins to insist that his father talk back, that he take them away from this home which is no longer any such thing. When he exhausts himself he goes back to his room but not back to sleep.

Eventually his teacher notices the black rings below his eyes and keeps him inside at recess. She asks him if there's anything he wants to talk about, if maybe something is happening at home. He says no and means it. Nothing ever happens at home. The boy does not show her the catalogs. Curiosity is not caring. He hides the catalogs and what the catalogs mean from anyone who might ask.

The new house will end up being an apartment, a word the boy doesn't even know yet, and then later the new house will be his grandma's basement. The boy will lose the catalogs on one moving day or another but by then he won't need them, or at least not their physical presence. He will have memorized them completely. They will be part of who he is. As he grows, he will make friends and then lose friends, realizing a year or two later that he is unable to remember their names or faces but can still recount the number of bedrooms in their houses, how many bathrooms and a half they had. When he thinks of his old house, the one he had been born in and his mother had died in, he will picture it as a spread in one of his catalogs, imaginary fingers tracing the picture of the finished home, the hard blue lines of the floor plans.

Home: Where the heart is. Three bedrooms. One bath. Storm windows and a thirty-five year guarantee on the shingles.

Family: Two parents. One child. One dead with two survivors.

This is a home. This is a family. This is what happens in a home when a family breaks down a fault line, like when a foundation suddenly shifts because once it got wet when it should have stayed dry, because that wet spot was sealed beneath the floorboards, because it hid there for years and years before cracks began showing around doorways and windows, until one day whole chunks of plaster fall from ceilings and walls as something fundamental within finally gives way to ruin.

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One reviewer called **Rachel Dacus's** recent poetry collection, *Femme au chapeau* (David Robert Books, 2005) "thrilling, one-of-a-kind poetry." It follows her first book, *Earth Lessons* (Bellowsing Ark Press, 1998) and two poetry CDs, *A God You Can Dance* and *Singing in the Pandaleshwar Caves*. Her poems, essays, book reviews and stories have appeared in *Bellingham Review*, *Boulevard*, *Cranky*, *Image*, *The Pedestal*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Rattapallax*, *Swink*, and the anthologies *Ravishing DisUnities: Real Gbazals in English and Italy: A Love Story*. She serves as fundraising consultant to a wide range of nonprofit hospitals and charitable organizations and is a staff member for *The Alsop Review* ([alsopreview.com](http://alsopreview.com)).

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—*Boo.*  
—*Affirmative.*

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