The Book of Beginnings

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The Book of Beginnings
By Sharon Beck

BA, Kenyon College, 2003

A thesis submitted to the faculty of the graduate school of the University of Colorado at Boulder
in partial fulfillment for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

2013
This thesis entitled:
The Book of Beginnings
written by Sharon Beck
has been approved for the Department of English

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Jeffrey DeShell

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Martin Bickman

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Marcia Douglas

Date 4/19/13

The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we
Find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards
Of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.
Abstract

Beck, Sharon (MFA, Fiction, Creative Writing Program)

The Book of Beginnings

Thesis directed by Professor Jeffrey DeShell

This is a book of beginnings. It consists of twelve individual stories, each of which is re-begun multiple times, and a handful of beginnings that have no ties to anything that come before them or after. A number of the threads have beginnings told at different times from different perspectives; others begin again and again from the same perspective each time. A few of the threads overlap with one another; many remain distinct.

The thesis explores in the way in which stories, ideas, and concepts change as we go about writing pieces of fiction. Those ideas and concepts merge and depart so that what starts as an individual story or concept feeds in to another, or what is part of a larger story leads off into a life of its own.

The thesis also plays with the way a story begins. A story can begin anywhere, so what constitutes a beginning and how does a beginning influence the way we read or the way we write? How much is a story dependent upon a beginning? How does the beginning introduce us to a story and therefore color our perception of what the story will be? If the beginning changes, how does that affect the characters or the ideas? And, can a story be told through only beginnings? Do you in fact learn things about these characters? Do you come to know them and their desires?
Finally, the thesis explores yearning and what happens when yearning becomes pathological--what effect that pathology has on the mental states of those yearning and on others.
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The first thing I saw when I entered this world were the twin metal blades of a pair of forceps. It was appropriate, I suppose, being yanked out by a pair of tongs. I am in general a reluctant man.
The armored truck sat on Eric’s street for four days before he peeked inside. He was tempted to do so earlier, every time he walked past it and up his driveway, but worried it would look suspicious, going about ogling a Brinks truck given what Brinks trucks contained. And yet, it was impossible not to go about ogling a Brinks truck given what Brinks trucks contained. So he waited until evening on the fourth day, which he felt was somehow biblical, his being sure to separate daylight from night.

There was just enough moonlight for Eric to see inside, and, according to him, the interior was pristine. Almost never-driven pristine, with just a smudge on the dash and a thumbprint on the rearview mirror. He himself was careful not to leave traces, pulling his sleeves over his hands as he pressed against the door and wiping his breath from the window because you never knew what bodily elements carried DNA. As he stood with his nose nearly against the glass, he could see that the lock on the passenger door was in the up position, fully extended.

There was no question but to open the door. No one could have stood where Eric was standing, at 1:00 in the dead of morning, and not opened the truck.
Old Man Reilly cornered Cassie’s mother between the Octopus and the funhouse, trapping her between vertigo and distortion so he could open her eyes to the possibilities. Cassie was, he told her, a real honest-to-god prophet, a Moses or a Muhammad who should be doing her foretelling on national television, not in some dusty back-road carnival where ad revenue didn’t exist. Think of what she could do live, on TV. Think of the talk show circuit, the tell-all autobiography, the made-for-TV movie that would lead to the blockbuster cinema movie and thus the action figures and backpacks and lunchboxes.
There is a least common denominator of craziness that every psych-ward worker lumps the patients into. It’s too hard to keep track of varying degrees of mental illness and most orderlies think it doesn’t really matter unless it’s time for meds. Then, of course, you put the schizophrenics into one pile, the manic-depressives into another, the chronic depressives to the back of the room because they don’t mind waiting, in general.
The Pullyu had to pull the Pushmi on a wheelbarrow it attached between their respective stomachs, the Pullyu and the Pushmi being united there in a mixture of organs from which sprang two identical heads. The Pushmi had died, and the dragging of it across the barren ground, so that it left ruts the size of hooves and a head, had become untenable. Thus the wheelbarrow and the announcing of the Pullyu’s presence by a squeaky wheel well before it arrived wherever it arrived. The wheel is what attracted the Love Interest, the sound being close to its own mating call. The Pullyu thought, mistakenly, that the Love Interest was interested in it.
It seemed a simple task, the ringing of a doorbell. But Maggie stood on the porch staring at it with dread, as though it had the power to do something other than emit a high-pitched chime into the recesses of the house.

It was her cousin’s house, her cousin’s doorbell, and in that moment Maggie hated her cousin for owning a house with a doorbell, for requiring a bell in order to be summoned to the door and not having some other way of knowing that she, Maggie, a girl of only twelve, was standing at the door with her suitcase.
I impaled myself on a metal spike when I was ten, trying to hop a fence into a neighbor’s yard. It ran up through my chin, tearing through a series of muscle and tissue you wouldn’t know existed unless they were punctured by a metal spike. I would have preferred it had been left in place. It wouldn’t have mattered either way—ever since, my mouth has been filled with the taste of metal.
Victor was having a moment of lucidity. He’d “awoken,” in a way, to find himself in a pub two blocks from the hospital with a beer in his hand and three empties before him. He wondered if that nullified his fifteen years of sobriety or if falling off the wagon didn’t count in a fugue state.

The problem was that he never knew how he broke out of the institution, given that he’d always done so in a state of altered consciousness. It vexed him. The exit was locked from the inside, openable only by staff or on the other side by visitors, who were warned with bright red signs to watch for would-be escalists. Yet invariably, he broke out of the hospital once or twice a week. The hospital took precautions, strapping him to the bed and installing motion detectors around the door to his room. Victor wished he knew how he broke free, as this ability might be parlayed into bankable skills in the outside world, if he ever got out through legitimate means.
The first thing Eric ever stole was a Bible, one of the motel-room varieties you’re supposed to read for divine consolation when you’re cheating on your wife and/or having a go with a hooker. Eric and his family had gone on a trip to Worlds of Fun in Kansas City, Missouri, when he was eight—the kind of trip where you have a strict daily budget of $30 (USD 1989) and thus your only choice of lodging is the back of your 1983 Chevy Malibu or the type of motel that rents rooms by the hour.

Eric had noticed the phenomenon of the Bibles a few years earlier. This time, he gave serious consideration to their purpose. His only previous experience with a Bible was when a friend, upon learning that Eric’s family did not attend church, pulled one off a shelf in his living room and began reading from it under the fort they’d constructed out of the friend’s mother’s considerably large dresses.

When Eric asked his mother about the Bible, she told him that a religious organization supplied it. “One of those door-to-door sects,” she said, “whose entire purpose is to jam their views down your throat. Better you stay away from it.”

Eric has seen the door-to-door sects walking around in their suits and ties, even on the hottest days, when his father would be sure to have the air conditioning going full and a glass of ice water in his hand when he opened the door to turn them away. This of course only piqued
Eric’s interest, wondering what the book could contain to compel one to stew in one’s own sweat, which would have settled by day’s end in armpits and shoes and the creases of underwear.

So Eric stole it to read it, and when he wasn’t found out and punished, he figured that was the Bible’s purpose—to be stolen and read. When he found a hundred dollar bill pressed between its pages, he figured he’d received divine sanction of his life as a thief.
Old Man Reilly hated that he was called Old Man Reilly, not because of the “old man,” but because the O had been severed from his name. Re-severed, he supposed. His father had done it the first time somewhere on his journey from Ireland to America for the sake of assimilation. It was some time after the Second World War that Reilly retrieved his O from the seas and slapped it onto his caravan, effectively erasing his father and declaring linguistic allegiance to a never-seen grandfather in a never-spoken language. In reality, Reilly didn’t know the Gaelic Ó meant “grandson”; he thought it was a possessive prefix, a shortened “of” that would lend further credence to the fact that the rides, the tents, the games were definitively his. His carnival. His show.
Maggie stood in front of her cousin’s house staring at the doorbell. She was not a fan of doorbells or their slightly pinkish glow, pink being the color of cupcakes and fairies and other innocuous things when doorbells were not so innocent. They were in fact evil, given the rules attached to the ringing:

1. The doorbell must be rung twice, first with the left hand and then with the right
2. Whatever portion of the left-hand index finger touches the bell—the exact middle, the side, the tip, with the nail turning white from the pressure—must be closely studied and remembered, as must the duration of the pressing.
3. The doorbell must be pressed with the right-hand index finger in the exact same spot on said finger that the left finger used and for the exact same length of time
4. If any portion of Step 3 is performed incorrectly, the process must be repeated as many times as necessary until
   4a. The process is gotten right, or
   4b. The inhabitants of the house rip open the door with jowls quivering and shotguns pumped, questioning the possible purpose of all this demented ringing.
The pushmi-pullyu had existed for centuries as a combined unit, until the pushmi was killed by a hunter when it and the pullyu could not decide which way to run. They were still in a sense combined; the pullyu kept the pushmi attached, being used to its presence and unsure, in any case, how to sever the organs still binding them together.

The pullyu met the Love Interest a few weeks after the pushmi’s death, when it had gotten used enough to the dead weight to walk around without toppling over. The Love Interest, however, was attracted to the pushmi, not the pullyu, which the pullyu failed to understand. The pushmi would not respond to the Love Interest’s overtures, while the pullyu openly pined.
Victor had a blueprint spread out on his bed. He didn’t remember how he’d come across it or how, the previous evening, he’d found himself in a heating duct above the cafeteria. Heating ducts are, in general, narrow. Victor wasn’t so much crawling as shimmying on his stomach with his arms thrust over his head. Heating ducts are also flimsy, and the movement of his shimmying made enough noise that the night orderlies, typically sleeping except for periodic room checks to ensure that no one had offed themselves, scrambled into the cafeteria to stare at the ceiling. At that moment, the heating duct gave way.

Thus, the blueprint, for an alternative escape route. The problem was that the hospital’s windows did not open, nor did the doors except with a key. The blueprints didn’t tell him anything new about the hospital’s layout, except perhaps that the heating duct he’d been in dead ended into a compressor through which Victor couldn’t fit.
A chink in the wall connects my bedroom and hers. There is a crack that runs down from the ceiling, most of it superficial, but breaking all the way through a few feet from the floor. The opening is perfectly round, almost the shape of my eye, or my mouth when pursed. Every once in a while Laura, my neighbor, calls for her mother to plaster it over, complaining of a draft that seeps through the wall. This is our joke. The drafts are my whispers and she calls for her mother in mock complaint, when she thinks I’ve gone too far in my statements of love.
Very few families are like ours, but you can tell us by our eyes—bright green, where the chlorophyll gathers. We have, however, forgotten our origin. Our ties have begun to disintegrate. Breeding is important; the children must be pure. Too many have married outside our kind and produced children debased by their time in the flesh.
I found Jesus one morning in my pan, in an egg I’d left too long and burnt. That sort of spirally non-stick surface had made a robe and a beard and even a halo out of the yolk.

I didn’t really know what to do with it, but it felt a shame to throw it away. So first thing I did was I shellacked it and set it in a box on my counter. A clear box, so that I could see in and the Jesus egg could see out.

That night, I noticed Jesus had changed. He looked older and heavier, like he’d grown up during the day and turned into God. I wondered if I hadn’t shellacked him enough and he’d gone bad, but when I flicked on the light he turned back into Jesus. I turned it off again and he was God. Father. Son. Father. Son. I wished I had a dimmer because he might turn into the Holy Spirit somewhere in between.

I thought then about letting him go. I wondered if the problem wasn’t the light, but the box. A bird can’t fly if you keep it in the nest, and what is an egg if not a bird. It might not be a dove, but nothing says the Holy Spirit wasn’t a chicken instead.
The Model-T had been a spur-of-the-moment job, not for monetary gain or even the kleptomaniac’s adrenaline high, but for the sheer beauty of the car, its open-aired boxiness almost amplifying that beauty, and, of course, the theft itself elevating it to the point of ecstasy. Theft, Eric believed, brings one closer to the object than the act of purchase. There are tactical considerations before every job, logistics of weight, size, entry, exit. A true thief develops a relationship with the object, creates a bond that makes the theft not a theft but a natural reclamation of what now truly belongs to the thief.
The contortionist got stuck in a position. It was some sort of backward bend with hands entwined in his legs and head poking between the two. He claimed it was not at all uncomfortable, simply vexing and a bit embarrassing having his pants unzipped and penis pulled from his boxers by the strongman, whose hands were calloused from the barbells and not at all tender. The arc of urine was also hard to control, tending to fall on one leg or, worse, straight down the middle and onto his head. Armless Abby at least was gentle when she fed him, proffering bananas and sushi rolls with her feet, which the contortionist found not at all repulsive and in fact a bit arousing.
It’s funny how you find yourself in certain situations. I, for instance, found myself blindfolded and gagged, my wrists bound behind my back, victim of a case of mistaken identity. I have this sort of bland face and malleable skin, so that given the right manipulation, I look like any other bland, middle-aged white man. The fact that I was in France, being mistaken for a Frenchman, when I neither spoke nor understood French, seemed not to matter.
I have asked my mother to plaster over the chink in my wall numerous times. She says she does, but by evening, when I return to my bedroom, the chink has reappeared. I feel a draft through it at times, a puff of air as soft as a whispered breath. Sometimes I don’t mind the chink. It serves as a bridge between my world and another’s, and if I press my eye to it late in the evening, I can see my neighbor and his wife entwined on their bed in some sort of embrace. My own family eschews physical proximity. I wanted to insert myself into their embrace, even just once.
My family comes from the earth. We are not born from the soiled flesh of the womb but from the pure life of the soil. Every few hundred years a child is born with eyes lighter than the intense green that signifies our kind, and when that child reaches its fifth year, it grows buds from its fingers and toes. Those buds will blossom into flowers if the child is replanted. Our line, however, has disintegrated. No such child has been born for a millennium.

Remy and I thought we shared enough DNA to salvage what was left of our line.

Notes: Frequent dissociative episodes not marked by distinct alternative identities, though patient has no recollection of actions or events during such episodes. Prone to escaping during said episodes. Good at escaping.
Maggie’s cousin called Maggie’s affliction an “evenness complex” and introduced Maggie to what she called “exposure therapy.” This consisted of poking Maggie somewhere on the left side of her body a few dozen times a day and restraining her from poking herself on the right. Said practice drove Maggie batshit not only because the corresponding location on the right side of her body screamed to be poked but also because it was just, in reality, rude.
I was born with aphasia. A result, my mother was sure, of having sex while pregnant. It didn’t matter what the doctors said, she had no doubt that the thrusting had damaged my brain, causing the indentation she refused to attribute to the forceps that pulled me out. I give credit to those blades of metal, grasping unkindly at my temples and forcing me into a world I did not want to enter. I only spoke after I was eight years old, when the spike of a fence impaled my chin, and then, only if metal touched my tongue.
Once the Fat Lady was no longer ambulatory, the owner of the carnival, Old Man Reilly, ordered the side of her trailer hacked off and a garage door installed in its place. On show nights, the door was pulled upward by the carnival’s twin midgets, Hank and Tank, to display the Fat Lady sprawled on her bed, propped up by pillows, though sometimes at a tilt, being unable to adjust them herself should they slide askew.
The idea was fantastic: using a Brinks truck to transport illegal immigrants across the border. Perhaps drugs as well. A Brinks truck is, after all, armored. Impenetrable. Possibly even by x-ray. But that was the problem. Eric didn’t really know if Brinks trucks were un-x-rayable. Or what crossing the US/Mexican border entailed as far as cargo searching and documentation. Or if Brinks trucks have tracking devices and thus if one is stolen, if it would be tracked within minutes and followed by cop cars or even helicopters equipped with video cameras so that your slow- or high-speed chase goes viral and is watched by, of course, your mother. He did not know how one opens the back of a Brinks truck or whether Brinks trucks are airtight. Would you end up with dead illegal immigrants and therefore possible murder charges along with grand-theft auto, impersonating a guard, and human trafficking? And how, pray tell, is one supposed to do such research in such a short amount of time and without some FBI Internet surveillance operation realizing that one’s research entails how to steal a Brinks truck and transport illegal immigrants across the border, so that when a Brinks truck does eventually get stolen, whether taken to Mexico or not, you are a person of interest.
I noticed the chink in my wall a few days after Lucia and I moved in. The chink separates our bedroom from the bedroom of the girl next door. Lucia likes the term scopophilia, but I feel this a degradation of both myself and the girl. What I desire is not sexual. But Lucia raises my shirt and points to my pants, insisting it is.
My kind is not born from the womb but from the earth. Remy and I had been born that way, according to the books we’d found in my mother’s attic. It took us time to decipher them, the script being both worn away and in a language neither of us knew. The characters, we realized, were an encryption, and we learned to decipher it, after a time. Both my mother and Remy’s were dead by then; neither could confirm our discovery.

But I became pregnant the normal way, and Remy told me the baby wouldn’t turn out right. He said it was a sin she’d come from my womb and tried to paint the nursery back to white. I thought she was okay until we hung the mobile above her crib, the one that caught the light from the nursery window and cast rainbows all around the room. Her eyes didn’t follow the prisms, and Remy said her chlorophyll was lost.

But she had lighter eyes, much lighter than either of ours. Our books said that every few hundred years a child is born with lighter eyes, and when that child reaches its fifth year, it grows buds from its fingers and toes. Those buds will blossom into flowers if the child is planted in the ground.

I think that’s what gave Remy the idea. We replant our child, he told me, and whatever went wrong in the womb the soil would make right. He didn’t listen when I told him that she
wasn’t yet five and that the soil of our backyard had been too barren to grow a garden let alone a child.
My abductors thought I was a man named Mauriac and had therefore kidnapped me and taken me three hundred miles from Paris to Montbéliard. It was, shall we say, a surreal experience, though the surreality may have been due to the gash on my forehead, received when my kidnappers clubbed me with a wrench. I’d found it rather unnecessary, given that my attackers outnumbered me five to one and had the sort of physiques that induced compliance solely on sight. Also unnecessary was the gag. I knew no Franco-Provençal, and my French was little better. It consisted, in fact, of exactly two phrases, neither of which seemed appropriate to the current situation.

“Je m’appelle Seth,” I might have said, but I doubted these men cared about my name.

Or: “Où sont les toilettes,” but there was no bathroom here, and besides, I’d already pissed myself when they tackled me to the ground.
All of the showers on the ward had caddies affixed to the walls by rubber suction cups. These Victor removed and attached to his hands and feet with rubber bands. A spritzer bottle was also attached to each wrist, with which Victor could moisten the suction cups and maintain adhesive integrity. Only one window on the ward, however, had the capacity to open. This window was located in the main psychiatrist’s main office, said office being closed and locked whenever the main psychiatrist absented himself from the ward, about 23.5 hours per day. Victor had seen the psychiatrist once, for ten minutes, since his time on the ward. The visit consisted of Victor explaining the linguistic function of “like” as a hedging word, i.e., one could insert “like” before a relatively large word to prevent the listener from thinking that one is in any way pretentious. The psychiatrist, a tall, bearded man with incredibly long fingers, did not see the need for this word when a smaller word would suffice. Victor tried to explain that each word has a distinct meaning separate from synonymic terms, not to mention syllabic or alliterative qualities that change the way in which the word is received. Think of the word “pretension.” Is there not a sort of tension that exists between the one who is pretentious and the one who considers the other to be full of assholish egotism? The doctor hmmmmd and tapped his pen, pretentiously, against his teeth.
It began one day with her liver—with a pain in her side and a sudden inability to break down her evening glasses of wine. She threw them up one after the other, stopping only when the sixth glass left her throat raw and her mind despairingly sober.

She settled on water, not realizing until the next morning, in the absence of the normal pressure on her bladder, that her kidneys were the next to fail.

It was a strange sensation, having her organs break down inside her. She could feel the pieces rattling around as she moved, the softer parts sloshing like too much liquid in an overfilled stomach. Her boyfriend, aroused by the percussive accompaniment to his normally silent thrusts, pulled her down on top of him every time she walked past.
When I was little, my neighbor and I ran a string between our houses and talked through tin cans. If I remembered to pay attention, I could feel them vibrate. My own vocal chords vibrate, but no words emerge. I would hold the can up to my throat, speaking a language I’d devised of my own that consisted entirely of vowels. My neighbor would pretend he understood, for which I loved him dearly.
There is a chink in the wall separating her room from mine. It is our bedrooms that it separates, but this is not voyeurism. I am not a peeping tom. Rather, I appreciate her body as a form of art. This is no more invasive than observing a Botticelli or Monet, less so given the aperture through which my sight must pass. It renders her body diffuse, so that she exists one limb at a time. Only if she stands on the opposite side of the room do I ever see her whole.
Maggie had what she called an evenness complex, a need to balance her right and left sides so that neither (but mostly her right) felt in any way out of alignment. It began sometime in the fifth or sixth grade, when she discovered the presence of her own body. That the limbs are attached to the self is nothing new, but the positioning and movement become suddenly apparent, as does the fact that the positioning and movement are watched and evaluated by members of both sexes. She had therefore developed an unwritten and barely acknowledged set of rules, which were meant to assuage any insecurities about where in the social hierarchy she fell but which, paradoxically, ensured that she fell somewhere near the bottom.

Rule # 1

Anything that touches the left side of the body must also touch the right, in the same place, with the same pressure, and for the same duration.

Exceptions:

1. One-handed cartwheels will be performed with the left hand. Using the right results in an awkward, bent-kneed mess and disapproving glances from gymnastics coach.
2. Things that cause severe pain—stab wounds, paper cuts, third-degree burns—to the left side of the body need not be repeated on the right. Causing excessive harm to the favored side seems needlessly cruel.
The carnival found the escape artist as he was walking a cable from the hospital to the waste treatment facility next door. He would not tell how he had escaped the sealed windows of the psychiatric ward or why he had spray bottles dangling from his wrists. Old Man Reilly didn’t much care. He put the escape artist in straitjackets, pinched from a closet in the hospital’s basement. He tied the man in ropes and submerged him in water, buried him under sand, padlocked him to a fuse-lit block of TNT. Victor escaped them all. Or, he escaped only when he was not Victor. Only when he was Wherman the Magnificent and whatever constraints Victor had upon him as a slightly middle-aged, jobless plumber were lifted could he escape the bonds Old Man Reilly tied him to.
I went to France on a solo trip just after I turned thirty and was mistaken the day I arrived for a man named Mauriac. This happens often, given the blandness and elasticity of my face. I am often mistaken for other men.

I was driven in a Peugeot to a Peugeot factory in Montbéliard. This man, Mauriac, was some sort of race car driver and had absented himself with a rather expensive racing car that was, as far as I could gather with my limited French, a state-of-the art prototype whose mechanical workings were not street- or racetrack-legal. I was to divulge the whereabouts of said car or my various body parts would be severed or placed between the jaws of a wrench and twisted out of place. I named Vladivostok, a city on the furthest edge of Russia, as the location. How much time that would buy me, I didn’t know. Enough, I hoped, to convince them that I was not this Mauriac, to fashion my face through a series of stretches into a face so far removed from his they’d have no choice but to let me go.

It was disturbing, being always mistaken for somebody else, never having a face that is your own.
One half of the Pushmi-Pullyu had died at the hands of a man who did not understand the intricacies of its constitution. A Pushmi-Pullyu must never be ridden because it can never decide which way to go. A rider inevitably gets frustrated. He will try to direct the creature on his own, which only increases the animal’s confusion. Each side strains in its own direction, pulling at ligaments that were not meant to be pulled. Spurs set against pulled ligaments, in this case on the Pushmi side, causes internal rupture, which almost always leads to death.
Our apartment walls are thin, full of cracks and holes, one of which I discovered behind a picture the previous tenant had left. It was Magritte’s *Treachery of Images*, which was perhaps too heavy-handed for my current tastes. The chink opens into my neighbor’s bedroom, a girl of perhaps eighteen. I imagine that she and I communicate through it, that we are secretly in love but torn asunder by the wall.
Allison was not considered a candidate for transplant, given the fact that she continued to live after her organs failed. What no one understood was the association of organs to one’s mental state—the heart with love, the liver with pleasure (derived, most likely, from alcohol), the spleen with anger, the stomach with rage (distinct from anger in that the latter implies a slow suppuration while the former is a burst of fury the liver once so fondly enjoyed).
I was sitting in a motel room with six illegal immigrants and a duffel bag full of firearms when
Eric arranged himself in Cousin Jimmy’s parlor, trying to stand as naturally as possible, which, with the boxiness of his vest and the ill fit of his homemade holster, was difficult to say the least.

Jimmy stared for a moment. Eric hoped it was in awe, though he knew, somewhere deep down, that Jimmy was trying to formulate the best response to convey that he, Eric, was a moron.

“What the fuck have you got in there?” Jimmy finally asked.

“It’s a license plate,” Eric said, rapping his chest with his fist.

“A license plate. Why the fuck did you put a license plate underneath your fucking vest?”

“To make it bullet proof.” This seemed obvious to Eric.

“You have a Brinks truck parked beside your driveway containing nothing but a slip of paper on which is etched an address. You wish to steal the Brinks truck and take it to said address, where it will be filled with you know not what. And you arrive at my office wearing a fucking license plate beneath your fucking vest.”
The Man of a Thousand Faces had to be rescued from a small town in France where he was being held captive. He was procured by the escape artist, who felt it a degradation of his talent to not be placed in the man’s binding before exiting the Peugeot factory where the Man of a Thousand Faces was being held.
I was sitting in a motel room with six illegal immigrants and twenty porcelain Jesuses filled with cocaine when
My first job out of college was on a mental ward in Chicago. I did the intake and record upkeep, documenting patients’ disorders, meds, length of stay. As far as I knew, no one ever looked at the records. I set out the meds in their little paper cups in alphabetical order am and the pm. I’m not sure anyone bothered to check whether the right meds went with their corresponding patient.

There was one psychiatrist on the ward, who always walked by the patients without really acknowledging them. One of the chronic depressives asked him something one time about meds being lower, which you would think unwise when the primary thought was of committing suicide by repetitive slamming of the self into a radiator, his aim luckily not good enough to do serious damage.
Allison had heard that monkey to human organ transplants had been successful in certain, optimal conditions, but Allison didn’t know where to find a monkey or a doctor that would perform the operation. Her own organs were engaged in a slow process of dissolution, breaking up into pieces that rattled around inside her and left her emotionless and wishing, for a time, for a death that would not come.
Cousin Jimmy was not, in fact, anyone’s cousin. He was linked in some manner to every big player in Pima County, silent backer of most criminal operations in Tucson. He’d recently encounter a new operation, one involving Brinks trucks and one that was out of the norm for him. The boss was a shadow man whose identity no one could confirm. He’d contacted Jimmy directly, which gave Jimmy the runs for three days, out of fear that the shadow man was actually a cop looking to catch Jimmy in a sting. So the man sent Jimmy pictures of the police commissioner in a compromising position with a seemingly underage and definitely Down syndrome afflicted girl. Jimmy bit.
The birds are bullock’s orioles, Icterus bullockii. Orange birds, with black backs and tails and bright orange underbellies. They began flocking last night, heading back south to winter. Every year they pass by our house, their numbers in the hundreds or maybe the thousands. We’ve never really counted; not even the ones we sweep from the base of the house and put into the composting heap.
The tree girl died before Reilly could confirm her arboreal nature. She’d suffocated in the ground shortly after her parents had planted her, thinking she would sprout into a tree. Reilly thought about unearthing her, enclosing her in bark and branches and leaves and putting her on display. But some things were too extreme even for him.
The two-headed alpaca struggled for years with its dual nature, feeling torn between two selves and therefore at all times unsettled in terms of physical and mental position. And yet, after centuries combined, the front half had felt a grudging affinity for the back. The only thing the front half liked about the back half’s death was that the back half could no longer talk. It was a mute observer of the front half’s exploits and therefore could not judge the way in which the front half went about its pursuit of a Love Interest that was so clearly uninterested even a dead llama would have noticed.
I was sitting in a motel room wondering if the plural of “Jesus” would be Jesuses or Jesi when
According to Maggie’s father, her evenness complex, as he called it, was destroying his marriage. Maggie’s stepmother was tired of the double thumbprints on windows, double footprints on floors, double bruises on Maggie’s right and left arms that looked like the shape of hands pressed too hard in the region used for maximum purchase when grabbing and shaking a child. The calls from social services in response to such bruises did not help.
You’ve got three types of bipolar is what they teach us in job training. Bipolar I, Bipolar II, and Bipolar Not Otherwise Specified. The only patients we really saw were I’s in manic psychosis and II’s in mixed states. We had one of both at one time, and I thought they would bond, having the similarity and both being incredibly attractive, straight, and of the opposite sex. Relations were forbidden, but it seemed to me like they should hook up, clandestinely, maybe have a go in the prick of a psychiatrist’s office and leave a bra in a drawer for his wife to find. But the bipolars stayed far away, as if each served as a reminder of the other’s condition.
The girl without organs Reilly placed behind an x-ray machine and charged people a dollar to watch the pieces jiggle around as she breathed.
I was so lonely I had a threesome once with the neighbors next door. Their wall joins mine, separated by a chink about the size of an eye, or my neighbor’s penis should he decide to thrust it through. The girl said her name was Lucia; the man’s I still don’t know.
Once a year, the orioles flock south, past our house in Washington on their way to Mexico. We designed the house for maximum sunlight, with floor-to-ceiling windows that provided unobstructed views of the forest outside.

It took us a while to get used to the noise when the orioles flew past. Now, their migration is soothing, the sounds against the glass like rain in a thunderstorm, which we also listen to as it falls against the ceiling and walls.
Maggie just wanted the complex to disappear. She kept it secret, as if speaking of it would solidify its existence and make its eradication that much more difficult.

Her complex involved a need for balance. She’d split her body in two, dividing the right half from the left, and ensured that whatever object her body touched, it touched it evenly on both sides. The paradox of her condition was that wanting to make the condition disappear increased the need to maintain equilibrium. If she could just once, only once, achieve the perfect replication of a feeling from one side of her body onto the other her condition would, undoubtedly, vanish.
This all happened back in the eighties, when you’d still get the American flag and then the colored bar code when the TV signed off for the night. Some stations popped out to fuzz and I kept those on sometimes for the white noise to help me sleep. Fuzz is harder to come by now with those digital signals that freeze and turn people into hundreds of little square blocks and never, ever go off the air. Rabbit ears would let you sneak partway into a station you didn’t really get, like the porn shows on channel eighty-two that might show you a bit of a breast or a bare ass, depending on which way you jiggled the antenna.

It was one of those nights when I’d stayed up late enough for the station to turn to fuzz that the voice of god sounded out of the TV. It sounded as though God was gargling mouthwash at first, until I put foil on the antenna and moved it a bit to the left. I never really understood his messages. They were parable-like, and I never was good at figuring those out.

But they don’t have analog anymore, and the voice of God has disappeared.
I worked on a psych ward for about six months when I was twenty-three, a kind of between unemployment job, which were, at that time, the only jobs I could get. There was one psychiatrist on the ward, a tall man with a case of psoriasis that left flakes wherever he went, flakes that I had to sweep up into a wastebasket I’d reserved specifically for that purpose. One of the patients, a chronic-depressive named Steve, wanted to make a voodoo doll out of the pieces of skin.
Eric stood in the Sonoran Desert, sweating, trying not to gag from the stench. Apparently the back of a Brinks truck is not air conditioned or even properly vented, which fact started a pounding from the cargo hold, that, unknown to Eric or his accomplice, Tara, was filled with illegal immigrants. Eleven to be exact. Twelve if you counted the baby, which may or may not have been born before they crossed into the US. There was something Tara called a placenta laying on the floor of the truck. It looked to Eric like a T-bone steak.
“Ladies and gentleman, for your entertainment! What we have here is a real live Pushmi-Pullyu!

The Pushmi is under a sleeping spell, hence its slumped and unresponsive posture. Pay no attention to the coldness of the body and the lack of a pulse.”
If you want to know the truth, and I mean the honest-to-god truth, not some complete bullshit that you know is bullshit but nags you just somewhere in the back of your mind that maybe it isn’t bullshit after all—if you want to know the truth, I saw the divine up on a mountaintop in Tuscaloosa in a cloud shaped just like Jesus.
There is always a Not Otherwise Specified, because things escape the purview of the DSM. I’m an NOS; Victor, the escapist, is an NOS. He stopped me once from throwing myself against a radiator. Not because he cared if I died but because he wanted to see if what lay behind it might serve as an escape route. I’ve begged Victor to take me with him or at least bring me a souvenir. Perhaps a knife or a rope.

My only consolation, not even having a defined disorder on which to blame my condition, was the construction of a miniature town, fashioned out of Popsicle sticks, fingernail clippings, skin, and hair. The town was full of figurines, life-like replicas of certain people in my life. They sometimes perished, depending on how I felt about them at any given moment.
Cousin Jimmy was not at all convinced of Eric’s abilities as a thief. Eric had, after all, only recently botched the theft of a Westminster-winning King Charles spaniel by failing to account for the dog’s weight when tranquilizing it. But the shadow man, the unknown head of a new operation that ran between Arizona and Mexico, inexplicably wanted him. The payout for Jimmy’s end was too good to pass up.
She was young but parentless. This was the best recruit—malleable, unwise to the 70% take Reilly wrote into a ten-year contract. And he’d never seen anything like her. Not a bobble on the wire, hands somehow positioned exactly one meter from each end of the balance bar, feet perfectly centered, a total of forty-eight steps from one end to the other, left foot always first, right foot always last. He built her a doublewide with extra-large doorways and minimal furniture to lessen the chance of her running into tables and walls. A tightrope artist with symmetrical bruises was undesired.
Our house is made of glass. Windows, really—floor-to-ceiling panels that make the whole place a skylight. We wanted unlimited access to the scenery beyond. The glass provided at least the illusion of unmediated contact—we would often forget it was there.

The highlight of the structure is the moment out of the year when a species of bird called a Bullock’s oriole begins to flock and the house breathes to life. That moment occurs right before sunset, when the light catches them just right. They’re beautiful like that, with their wings up, white joints underneath spreading out like fans, and those bellies flaming just before they reach the glass.

Being unable to speak, or to speak only in stutters and starts,
No one really knows how Jesus started appearing to my father. Some days he said it was through the TV, some days in a cloud, some days on a fried egg he shellacked and placed in a box on his kitchen counter.
There are around 16 million ways to die; I know because I’ve counted. I keep the list in a series of three-ring binders in the back of my linen closet. Categorization was difficult at first until I settled on alphabetical arrangement by method. Thus drowning was one category with pool, ocean, toilet while vomiting, and so on listed underneath.
Cousin Jimmy considered himself to be in the insurance business. Every criminal operation runs the risk of damage, and Jimmy provided protection against certain forms of loss. His most recent request, for an operation in Guadalajara, Mexico, included safe border crossing, authenticity in the form of identification, potential bribes for Mexican and Arizona police, evidence tampering fees, mediation expenses should the primary operator, a rather inept man named Eric, piss off a Mexican street gang. The premiums were therefore astronomically high.
I first tried to kill myself in the summer of 1982, when the J. Geils Band’s “Freeze Frame” got stuck in my head for four months. I’m not sure I can adequately explain. It was not the entire song but the opening riff that played and replayed inside my mind. These were the days of electronic keyboards and synthesizers and high-pitched whines set to impossibly fast beats. All of this was crammed into my head at once. And what turned out to be worse, after I left the hospital, was the emptiness when the song finally departed.
Survival isn’t about adaptation, it’s about erasing the need to adapt.
The sword swallower was for the most part mute. It was only when he placed the sword against his tongue that words were able to escape his lips. He had developed an ability to speak around the sword, the vibrations of his vocal chords causing it to wobble. The words were garbled but this hardly mattered to Reilly. He’d added an extra sign indicating that the man spoke in tongues and installed an interpreter beside him, a man whose Southern accent had to be beaten out of him but who claimed a direct line to God.
Cassie had trouble being a fortune teller, sitting in the Mitt Camp at night, touching palms from one jump to the next. The problem wasn’t that Cassie couldn’t see their fates but that there existed varied and infinite futures. And each future was couched with an *if*. *If* you go to the grocery store next Friday at 4:00, you will meet your future husband; but if you go today, in 20 minutes, rushing to arrive through deadlocked traffic, you will slam into a rather large pileup, rendering yourself unable to meet your future husband, as you will be dead.
A neighborhood has patterns, and you can find them if you know how to look.

There are egresses in the mornings and influxes in the evenings. Lights come on or go off in particular windows at particular times. Even changes are consistent: extra groceries for parties; mailbox balloons, pink ones or blue ones, for new babies. A pet in a crate might mean a vacation. An absent car might mean a divorce.

Such things are important to watch. Major changes must be documented and accounted for, lest they have the capacity to begin a chain reaction that results in death. Take the visiting of nieces and nephews and grandchildren. Such beings play games in front and back yards that often involve balls whose trajectories may lead to impact with a window. Depending on the speed with which the ball flies and the ability of the window to slow the velocity, such a ball might be harmless or might result in a solid connection with the left or right temple, which, while not immediately fatal could lead to a subdural hematoma that if left untreated, often leads to death.
“Ladies and gentlemen, step right up!
Bibliography


