

SERIOUS FUN, or, BEATEN UNTIL WE SMELL LIKE ONIONS
Warren Wilson Residency July 2020

Their Sex Life

One failure on
Top of another

-- A. R. Ammons

DEFINITION(S) OF & HISTORICAL CONTEXT FOR WIT

originally, knowledge in the sense of mind, [in Old English *wit(t)*, *gewit(t)*, denotes the mind as the seat of consciousness, of Germanic origin; related to Dutch *weet* and German *Witz*], but later associated with the functioning of the mind in the sense of general mental acuity and versatility: originality, inspiration, evaluative powers, elocution, the ability to amuse, and the capacity for creating impromptu figures of speech and analogies. During the 19th century, the term "imagination" came to mean this capacity to see resemblances between disparate things, and "wit" came to mean that capacity used in a humorous way.

- from Myers and Wukasch, *Dictionary of Poetic Terms*

In 17th-century usage, wit much more exclusively denotes intellectual originality, ingenuity, and mental acuity--especially in the sense of using paradoxes, making clever verbal expressions, and coining concise or deft phrases. In several issues of *The Spectator*, Joseph Addison attempts to distinguish between "false" and "true wit," concluding that "true wit" must combine resemblance or recognition with an oppositional surprise. Examples of "false" wit include anagrams, puns, shaped verse,

among other clever word-play games.

Red

I fucking depended on you and
you left the fucking wheelbarrow
out and it's fucking raining
and now the white chickens
are fucking filthy

By the 19th century, wit became associated with a lack of gravity. Victorian critic Matthew Arnold, for example, condemned Chaucer and Pope for their "wittiness," their lack of "high seriousness" In the early 20th Century, T. S. Eliot swung the pendulum back again, and he rehabilitated the reputation of John Donne, Andrew Marvell, and similar poets in his critical writings because he saw them as figures able to combine wit and seriousness- an assessment most 20th- and early 21st-century critics would uphold.

- Adapted/paraphrased definition/history of wit by L. Kip Wheeler, Carson-Neuman University, 2018

INTERPRETATIONS OF WIT

from Bruce Michelson, *Literary Wit* (2000)

- Wit as "the language of unbound intellect, visceral insight, and meaningful – if at times unknowable – paradox."
- Wit as a compensatory gesture, a version of, or response to, a form of seriousness
- Not *purely* intellectual or playful, though, or solely about "word-craft" or "wordplay."
- Power of literary wit to "assault the conventions of literature itself" and "free the author from" the limits of original interpretations and contexts
- The essence of literary wit is the "Readiness for the unexpected and the inexplicable, the unknown and the unknowable"
-

from Joseph Epstein, "From Wit to Twitter:" (*Commentary*, 2015)

- Wit is a "speed game"
- witty ones can offend, and often don't care if they do
- the first test of wittiness is unpredictability

from Friedrich Schlegel, *Notebooks* (trans. Duncan Smith)

- A witticism is like a "non-transitive word" whose internal transformation says itself
- *Witz* (wit) and *Wissen* (knowledge) from the German appear at first to be only related semantically, but their "equality unsettles so much else." Their unity

confirms that "every flower showed itself to be larger without our discussing it."

from Gary Saul Morson, *Prosaics and Other Provocations: Empathy, Open Time, and the Novel* (2013)

- Witticisms typically involve *stories* – the wit faces a test, and the story tells how the character passed it. The witticism comes either at the beginning [and then the story backfills in order to catch up] or it comes at the end [as the "punch line"]
- Witticisms vindicate a superiority of mind especially in extremities of difficulty when where mental presence must overcome a disadvantage.
- The successful witticism expresses the triumph of mind and its adequacy to any social situation
- Emphasis on quickness and superiority of mind implies that "*l'esprit de l'escalier*," or "staircase wit" (Diderot) isn't really wit at all

Clare Booth Luce, meeting Dorothy Parker in a doorway, motioned her in and smirked, saying, "Age before beauty." Parker walked right in, saying, "Pearls before swine."

WIT AS POWER

from Doris Davis, "De Talkin' Game: The Creation of Psychic Space in Selected Short Fiction of Zora Neale Hurston" (2007)

- Unlike the voices of the victimized women in the work of such contemporaries as Jean Toomer and Richard Wright, Hurston's female characters evince a vitality of spirit that refuses to be muted...In defending their positions, they may, to use Hurston's vernacular, "beat you till [you] smell like onions." In particular, their linguistic abilities derive from their use of signifying, a rhetorical trope that, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. notes, subsumes such figurative language as metaphor, metonymy, irony, hyperbole, and litotes. In black rhetorical tropes, signifying may take the form, for example, of loud-talking, rapping, testifying, sounding, or playing the dozens...Gates points out that "insult is not at all *central* to the nature of signifying; rather, the two defining characteristics are its *metaphorical nature* and "*indirection*," with an actual meaning

behind an apparent one. It is a sophisticated ruse understandable only to those capable of discerning its encoded meaning." Hurston's most sophisticated work "explores secrecy and dissembling as fundamental to a tradition of double voice and masking." [emphasis mine]

- "Don't you know you can't git de best of no woman in de talkin' game? Her tongue is all de weapon a woman got." –Hurston, *Mules and Men*

- Hurston [creates] characters whose sharp tongues, deceptions, equivocations, and chicanery ensure their survival. The use of language supersedes physical appearance in conveying who they are.

*from "Story in Harlem Slang," (1942) by Zora Neale Hurston [can be found online at the Library of America *Story of the Week*]*

Context: Marvel (aka Jelly), originally from Alabama, visits New York and runs into his friend Sweet Back. The two men "boast and joke around for a bit" before encountering a young woman from Georgia.

Sweet Back says: "Where 'bouts in Georgy is you from? Delaware?"

"Delaware?" Jelly snorted. "My people! My people! Free schools and dumb jigs! Man, how you going to put Delaware in Georgy? You ought to know dat's in Maryland."

"Oh, don't try to make out youse no northerner, you! Youse from right down in 'Bam your ownself!" The girl turned on Jelly.

"Yeah, I'm *from* there and I aims to stay from there."

"One of them Russians*, eh?" the girl retorted. "Rushed up here to get away from a job of work."

That kind of talk was not leading towards the dinner table.

"But baby!" Jelly gasped. "Dat shape you got on you! I bet the Coca Cola Company is paying you good money for the patent!"

The girl smiled with pleasure at this, so Sweet Back jumped in.

"I know youse somebody swell to know. Youse real people. You grins like a regular fellow." He gave her his most killing look and let it simmer in. "These dickty jigs round here tries to smile. S'pose you and me go inside the café here and grab a hot?"

"You got any money?" the girl asked, and stiffened like a ramrod. "Nobody ain't pimping on me. You dig me?"

"Aw, now, baby!"

"I seen you two mullet-heads before. I was uptown when Joe Brown had you all in the go-long last night. Dat cop sure hates a pimp! All he needs to see is the pimps' salute, and he'll out with his night-stick and whip your head to the red. Beat your head just as flat as a dime!" She went off in a great blow of laughter.

"Oh, let's us don't talk about the law. Let's talk about us," Sweet Back persisted.

"You going inside with me to holler, 'let one come flopping! One come grunting! Snatch one from de rear!'"

"Naw indeed!" the girl laughed harshly. "You skillet is trying to promote a meal on me. But it'll never happen, brother. You barking up the wrong tree. I wouldn't give you air if you was stopped up in a jug. I'm not putting out a thing. I'm just like the cemetery – I'm not putting out, I'm taking in! Dig?"

"I'll tell you like the farmer told the potato – plant you now and dig you later."

The girl made a movement to switch on off. Sweet Back had not dirtied a plate since the day before. He made a weak but desperate gesture.

"Trying to snatch my pocketbook, eh?" she blazed. Instead of running, she grabbed hold of Sweet Back's draping coattail and made a slashing gesture. "How much split you want back here? If your feets don't hurry up and take you 'way from here, you'll *ride* away. I'll spread my lungs all over New England and call the law. Go ahead, Bedbug! Touch me! And I'll holler like a pretty white woman!"

The boys were ready to flee, but she turned suddenly and rocked on off with her ear-rings snapping and her heels popping.

"My people! My people!" Sweet Back sighed.

*Russian – ..."Rushed up here," hence a Russian.[Hurstons note]

WIT AS COVER

Batter my heart, three-person'd God, for you
As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;
That I may rise and stand, o'erthrow me, and bend
Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new.
I, like an usurp'd town to another due,
Labor to admit you, but oh, to no end;
Reason, your viceroy in me, me should defend,
But is captiv'd, and proves weak or untrue.
Yet dearly I love you, and would be lov'd fain,
But am betroth'd unto your enemy;
Divorce me, untie or break that knot again,
Take me to you, imprison me, for I,
Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.

-- John Donne

From WIT [play] by Margaret Edson - scene cut from the film adaptation:

VIVIAN: (*To the audience, defensively*): I was teaching him [the boy whose grandmother died] a lesson. (*She walks away from STUDENT 1, then turns to address the class.*)

So we have another instance of John Donne's agile wit at work: not so much resolving the issues of life and God as reveling in their complexity.

STUDENT 2: But why?

VIVIAN: Why what?

STUDENT 2: Why does Donne make everything so complicated? (*The other students laugh in agreement*). No, really, why?

VIVIAN: (*To the audience*) You know, someone asked me that every year. And it was always one of the smart ones. What could I say? (*To STUDENT 2*) What do you think?

STUDENT 2: I think it's like he's hiding. I think he's really confused, I don't know, maybe he's scared, so he hides behind all this complicated stuff, hides behind this . . . wit.

VIVIAN: Hides behind wit?

STUDENT 2: I mean, if it's really something he's sure of, he can say it more simply. He doesn't have to be such a brain, or such a performer. It doesn't have to be such a big deal. (*The other STUDENTS encourage him.*)

VIVIAN: Perhaps he is suspicious of simplicity.

STUDENT 2: Perhaps, but that's pretty stupid.

VIVIAN: (*To the audience*) That observation, despite its infelicitous phrasing, contained the seed of a perspicacious remark. Such an unlikely occurrence left me with two choices. I could draw it out, or I could allow the brain to rest after that heroic effort. If I pursued, there was the chance of great insight, or the risk of undergraduate banality. I could never predict. (*To STUDENT 2*) Go on.

STUDENT 2: Well, if he is trying to figure out God, and the meaning of life, and big stuff like that, why does he keep running away, you know?

VIVIAN: (*To the audience, moving closer to STUDENT 2*) So far so good, but they can think for themselves only so long before they begin to self-destruct.

STUDENT 2: Um, it's like, the more you hide, the less – no, wait – the more you are getting closer – although you don't know it – and the simple thing is there – you see what I mean?

VIVIAN: (*To the audience, looking at STUDENT 2, as suspense collapses*)
Lost it.

PART II: BREAKOUT GROUP DISCUSSIONS

Groups 1 & 2: "Word/Sound Play"

F: Zora Neale Hurston, from "Story in Harlem Slang" (story)

F: Lydia Davis, "A Mown Lawn" (story)

P: Kay Ryan, "Dogleg"

Groups 3 & 4: "High and Low"

F: Jenny Zhang, opening of *Sour Heart* (stories)

F: Philip Roth, from *Portnoy's Complaint* (novel)

P: John Donne, "The Flea"

Groups 5 & 6: "Wit as Sensibility"

F: Stephen McCauley, opening of *Alternatives to Sex* (novel)

P: Mary Ruefle, "A Morning Person"

F: Andrea Lawlor, opening of *Paul Takes the Form of a Mortal Girl* (novel)

Groups 7 & 8: "Itchy Outbreaks of Far-Fetched Wit"

P: Margaret Atwood, "You Fit Into Me"

F: Amy Hempel, "Sing to It"

P: Terrance Hayes, "Harryete Mullen Lecture on the American Dream"

F: Haruki Murakami, "100% Perfect Girl"

TEXTS FOR DISCUSSION GROUPS

Groups 1 & 2:

- See above for Hurston, "A Story in Harlem Slang"
- Lydia Davis, "A Mown Lawn" [Fiction]

She hated a *mown lawn*. Maybe that was because mow was the reverse of *wom*, the beginning of the name of what she was—a *woman*. A *mown lawn* had a sad sound to it, like a *long moan*. From her, a *mown lawn* made a *long moan*. *Lawn* had some of the letters of *man*, though the reverse of *man* would be *Nam*, a bad war. A *raw war*. *Lawn* also contained the letters of *law*. In fact, *lawn* was a contraction of *lawman*. Certainly a *lawman* could and did *mow a lawn*. *Law and order* could be seen as starting from *lawn order*, valued by so many Americans. *More lawn* could be made using a *lawn mower*. A *lawn mower* did make more *lawn*. *More lawn* was a contraction of *more lawmen*. Did *more lawn* in America make *more lawmen* in America? Did *more lawn* make *more Nam*? *More mown lawn* made *more long moan*, from her. Or a *lawn mourn*. So often, she said, Americans wanted *more mown lawn*. All of America might be one *long mown lawn*. A *lawn not mown* grows *long*, she said: better a *long lawn*. Better a *long lawn* and a *mole*. Let the *lawman* have the *mown lawn*, she said. Or the *moron*, the *lawn moron*.

- Kay Ryan, "Dogleg"

Birds' legs
do of course
all dogleg
giving them
that bounce.
But these are
not normal odds
around the house.
Only two of
the dog's legs
dogleg and
two of the cat's.
Fifty-fifty: that's
as bad as it
gets usually,
despite the
fear you feel
when life has
angled brutally.

Groups 3 & 4:

- the first few pages of *Sour Heart* (stories) by Jenny Zhang

"We Love You Crispina"

Back when my parents and I lived in Bushwick in a building sandwiched between a drug house and another drug house, the only difference being that the dealers in the one drug house were also the users and so more unpredictable, and in the other the dealers were never the users and so more shrewd--back in those days, we lived in a one-bedroom apartment so subpar that we woke up with flattened cockroaches in our bedsheets, sometimes three or four stuck on our elbows, and once I found fourteen of them pressed to my calves, and there was no beauty in shaking them off, though we strove for grace, swinging our arms in the air as if we were ballerinas. Back then, if one of us had to take a big dump, we would try to hold it in and run across the street to the bathroom in the Amoco station, which was often slippery from the neighborhood hoodlums who used it and sprayed their pee everywhere, and if more than one of us felt the stirrings of a major shit declaring its intention to see the world beyond our buttocks, then we were in trouble because it meant someone had to use our perpetually clogged toilet, which wasn't capable of handling anything more than mice pellets, and we would have to dip into our supply of old toothbrushes and chopsticks to mash our king-sized shits into smaller pieces since we were too poor and too irresponsible back then to afford even a toilet plunger and though my mom and dad had put it on their list of "things we need to buy immediately or else we've just lost all human dignity," somehow at the end of every month we'd be a hundred dollars short and couldn't pay the gas bill in full, or we'd owe twenty dollars to a friend here and ten to a friend there and so on, until it all got so messy that I felt there was no way to really account for our woes, though secretly I blamed myself for instigating all our downward spirals, like the time I asked my father if he would buy me an ice-cream cone with sprinkles, which made him realize I had been waiting all month to ask and he felt so sorry for me that he decided to buy me not only an ice cream with sprinkles but a real rhinestone anklet that sure as hell was not on the list of "things we need to buy immediately or else we've just lost all human dignity," and that was the sort of rhythm my family fell into--disastrous and depressing in our inability to get ahead--and that was why we were never able to afford a toilet plunger and why our butts were punished so severely in those years when it wasn't as simple as, Hey, I'm going to take a crap now, see you in thirty seconds, it was more like, I'm going to take a crap now, where's my coat and my shoes and also that shorter scarf that won't dangle its way into the toilet and where's the extra toilet paper in case the Indian guy forgot to stock the bathroom again (he always forgot), and later, when we finally moved, when we finally got the hell out of there, it still wasn't simple either, but at least we could take shits at our own convenience, and that was nothing to forget about or diminish.

Before Bushwick, we lived in East Flatbush (my parents and I called it E Flat because we

loved the sound of E Flat on the piano and we liked recasting our world in a more beautiful, melodious light) for a year and a half on a short little street with lots of stoops that needed fixing. We knew everyone on our street, not by name or by way of actually talking to them, but we knew their faces and we knew to nod and mouth, "hi, hi, hi," or sometimes just "hi, hi," or "hi!" but always something.

Our neighbors were island people from Martinique and Trinidad and Tobago. A couple of them confronted my father one evening to set the record straight that they weren't Dominicans. We're West Indians, they said. Tell your kids that. My father came home confused by the entire interaction, but later my mom and I figured they must have been referring to those asshole Korean kids who lived a little ways down from us and hung around outside their apartments wearing baseball caps with the bill unbent and pants that sagged around their knees, calling out whatever pitiful insults they could think of. Once, when I was walking home from the bus stop, they yelled, "Yo, it's the rape of Nanking! It's really the rape of Nanking!" as if yelling out the name of a terrible war crime had the ability to scare me when I was nine and had been loved my entire life by parents who vowed daily to spend their whole lives protecting me, and though in 1992 it was true that I was a small, unexceptional thing, one thing I never was was scared. Those Korean kids were goons who were going to end up dead or incarcerated or dead one day, and my parents and I loathed them and loathed being confused or associated with them just because to everyone else in our neighborhood, we were the same.

The Martinicans and the Trinidadians were the kind of people who acted like their homeland would always form a small, missing, and necessary bone in their bodies that caused them ghostly aches for as long as they were alive and away from home, and it bothered me how they clung to their pasts and acted like bygone times were better than what was happening in the here and now. They were always having cookouts in the summer and dressing in bright colors as if our streets were lined with coconut-bearing palm trees and not trash and cigarette butts and spilled food. Eventually though, I came to admire them greatly, especially the women because they had such enviable asses, which caused their belts to dip into a stretched-out V right at the spot where their cheeks met, and I used to follow that V with my eyes and so did the men, who apparently never got bored of seeing it either.

My mom had no such ass, but commanded attention anyway. The men on our block liked to stare at my mom whenever she walked past--fixed, long, concentrated gazes. Maybe it was because her hair was so straight and long and fell down her back like heavy curtains and she had skin so white that it reminded me of vanilla ice cream. That was why I drew little cones all over her arms, which she let me do because my mom let me do anything as long as it made me happy.

"What makes you happy makes Mommy happy," she would always say to me, sometimes in Chinese, which I wasn't so good at, but I tried for her and for my father, and when I couldn't, I would answer them in English, which I also wasn't so good at, but it was understood that while I could still improve in either language, my parents could not, they were on a road to nowhere, the wall was right up against them, so it was up to me to get really good, it was up to me to shine and that scared me because I wanted to stay behind with them, I didn't want to go any further than they could go.

[...story continues...]

- From Philip Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint* (novel)

Context: Portnoy is narrating this novel to his therapist. The book is one long associative rant about his family, his sexual obsessions, his self-consciousness about bodies in general, and religion, among other things...

Once a month my father took me with him down to the shvitz bath, there to endeavor to demolish—with the steam, and a rubdown, and a long deep sleep—the pyramid of aggravation he has built himself into during the previous weeks of work. Our street clothes we lock away in the dormitory on the top floor. On rows of iron cots running perpendicular to the lockers, the men who have already been through the ringer down below are flung out beneath white sheets like the fatalities of a violent catastrophe. If it were not for the abrupt thunderclap of a fart, or the snores sporadically shooting up around me like machine-gun fire, I would believe we were in a morgue, and for some strange reason undressing in front of the dead. I do not look at the bodies, but like a mouse hop frantically about on my toes, trying to clear my feet of my undershorts before anybody can peek inside, where, to my chagrin, to my bafflement, to my mortification, I always discover in the bottommost seam a pale and wispy brush-stroke of my shit. Oh, Doctor, I wipe and I wipe and I wipe, I spend as much time wiping as I do crapping, maybe even more. I use toilet paper like it grew on trees—so says my envious father—I wipe until that little orifice of mine is red as a raspberry; but still, much as I would like to please my mother by dropping into her laundry hamper at the end of each day jockey shorts such as might have encased the asshole of an angel, I deliver forth instead (deliberately, Herr Doctor?—or just inevitably?) the fetid little drawers of a boy.

But here in a Turkish bath, why am I dancing around? There are no women here. No women—and no goyim. Can it be? There is nothing to worry about!

Following the folds at the base of his white buttocks, I proceed out of the dormitory and down the metal stairs to that purgatory wherein the agonies that come of being an insurance agent, a family man, and a Jew will be steamed and beaten from my father's body. At the bottom landing we sidestep a pile of white sheets and a mound of sopping towels, my father pushes a shoulder against a heavy windowless door, and we enter a dark quiet region redolent of wintergreen. The sounds are of a tiny, unenthusiastic audience applauding the death scene in some tragedy: it is the two masseurs walloping and potching at the flesh of their victims, men half-clad in sheets and stretched out across marble slabs. They smack them and knead them and push them around, they slowly twist their limbs as though to remove them in a piece from their sockets—I am hypnotized, but continue to follow after my father as we pass alongside the pool, a small green cube of heart-stopping ice water, and come at last to the steam room.

[...]

It is as though all the Jewish men ducking beneath the cold dribble of shower off in the corner of the steam room, then lumbering back for more of the thick dense suffocating vapors,

it is as though they have ridden the time-machine back to an age when they existed as some herd of Jewish animals, whose only utterance is oy, oy . . . for this is the sound they make as they drag themselves from the shower into the heavy gush of fumes. They appear, at long last, my father and his fellow sufferers, to have returned to the habitat in which they can be natural. A place without goyim and women.

I stand at attention between his legs as he coats me from head to toe with a thick lather of soap—and eye with admiration the baggy substantiality of what overhangs the marble bench upon which he is seated. His scrotum is like the long wrinkled face of some old man with an egg tucked into each of his sagging jowls—while mine might hang from the wrist of some little girl's dolly like a teeny pink purse. And as for his shlong, to me, with that fingertip of a prick that my mother likes to refer to in public (once, okay, but that once will last a lifetime) as my little thing, his shlong brings to mind the fire hoses coiled along the corridors at school. Shlong: the word somehow catches exactly the brutishness, the meatishness, that I admire so, the sheer mindless, weighty, and unselfconscious dangle of that living piece of hose through which he passes streams of water as thick and strong as rope—while I deliver forth slender yellow threads that my euphemistic mother calls a sis. A sis, I think, is undoubtedly what my sister makes, little yellow threads that you can sew with . . . Do you want to make a nice sis? she asks me—when I want to make a torrent, I want to make a flood: I want like he does to shift the tides of the toilet bowl! Jack, my mother calls to him, would you close that door, please? Some example you're setting for you know who. But if only that had been so, Mother! If only you-know-who could have found some inspiration in what's-his-name's coarseness! If only I could have nourished myself upon the depths of his vulgarity, instead of that too becoming a source of shame. Shame and shame and shame and shame—every place I turn something else to be ashamed of.

- "The Flea" by John Donne

Mark but this flea, and mark in this,
How little that which thou deniest me is;
It sucked me first, and now sucks thee,
And in this flea our two bloods mingled be;
Thou know'st that this cannot be said
A sin, nor shame, nor loss of maidenhead,
Yet this enjoys before it woo,
And pampered swells with one blood made of two,
And this, alas, is more than we would do.

Oh stay, three lives in one flea spare,
Where we almost, nay more than married are.
This flea is you and I, and this
Our marriage bed, and marriage temple is;
Though parents grudge, and you, w'are met,
And cloistered in these living walls of jet.
Though use make you apt to kill me,
Let not to that, self-murder added be,

And sacrilege, three sins in killing three.

Cruel and sudden, hast thou since
Purpled thy nail, in blood of innocence?
Wherein could this flea guilty be,
Except in that drop which it sucked from thee?
Yet thou triumph'st, and say'st that thou
Find'st not thy self, nor me the weaker now;
'Tis true; then learn how false, fears be:
Just so much honor, when thou yield'st to me,
Will waste, as this flea's death took life from thee.

Groups 5 & 6:

- opening pages of *Alternatives to Sex* (novel) by Stephen McCauley (2006)

My decision to practice celibacy had nothing to do with prudery or penance, morality or manners, dysfunction, or fear of disease. It had very little to do with sex. It was all about real estate.

What had started out, one year earlier, as a bout of benign computer dating—euphemism for online chatting followed by brief encounters, less impersonal than old-fashioned anonymous sex because you exchanged fake names with the person—had turned into an almost daily ritual that had replaced previous pastimes such as reading, going to the movies, working, exercising, and eating. I'm exaggerating, of course, but by how much, I'd rather not say. For months, I'd known that my habits were slipping out of control, but I figured that as long as I acknowledged my behavior was a problem, it wasn't one.

And then, one rainy September morning—coincidentally, the same morning Samuel Thompson and Charlotte O'Malley wandered into my life—I woke up and decided that too much really was enough. I could feel trouble pressing down on me like the low dark sky outside my bedroom window. I lived in a house near the top of a steep, San Francisco-like hill, but rather than a view of the Pacific, I saw from my windows the colorful sprawl of Somerville, Massachusetts—jagged rooftops and the tight grid of streets—and in the near distance, the cozy, unimpressive skyline of Boston, minimized this morning by the clouds. The previous owners of my house had installed a picture window in the master bedroom, an architectural feature I frequently deride but secretly love. As I stood looking out through the streaks of rain, a plane dropped from the clouds in its approach to Logan Airport. The sight of it, popping suddenly into view like that, jolted me. For the past year, the sight of airplanes heading toward the buildings of the city had been alarming.

Do something about your life, I told myself, a directive that's usually, in my case, translated as: *Stop* doing something.

For some reason, a disproportionate number of the men I met online turned out to live in dank basement apartments with minimal, makeshift furnishings that didn't acknowledge the existence of aesthetics—sofas made out of rolled-up futons, mattresses

on the floor, television sets that took up half a room, collapsible bookshelves lined with DVD boxes. I hate DVDs. I'd switched from vinyl records to tapes, from tapes to CDs, from convection ovens to microwaves, from typewriters to computers, from landlines to cell phones, from revival movie houses to videocassette rentals, and as far as I was concerned, that was the end of it. I'd traveled as far along the technology highway as I could, and the sight of those skinny boxes gobbling up space in the video stores (and on collapsible bookcases) was enough to send me into a spiral of despair and dread.

It's always good to take a stand in life, even a completely meaningless one.

I don't mean to be a snob about anyone else's taste or to suggest that my own is worth bragging about. I don't really have taste; I have reactions to other people's. I have opinions. If I walked into my own apartment with anything resembling objectivity (fortunately, an impossibility) my reaction would undoubtedly be disapproval. Too beige. Too many midcentury lines and angles. Too self-consciously symmetrical. Way too clean and tidy. Who lives here? I'd wonder. What's at the center of this guy's life, aside from dusting? But imperfect as my own place was, the fact that I so often connected with men who chose to live unfurnished, subterranean lives had started to worry me. Maybe, if I kept to current habits, my future lay in that direction. Downward.

The night before, I'd spent an impersonal, passionate forty minutes with someone who claimed to be called Carlo. Most of the men I met claimed to have names that were either Latin-lover mellifluous or vigorously American West: Carlo, Marco, Hank, Jake. I usually called myself Everett. My name is William Collins. I wasn't cheating on anyone, wasn't breaking a vow of fidelity, wasn't sneaking a wedding ring into my pocket as I knocked on someone's basement door. But taking on an assumed name seemed to be part of the game, even part of the pleasure, and Everett, being a name that was neither mellifluous nor particularly cow-boyish, struck me as unlikely enough to sound real.

Carlo was not young, not old, not unattractive, not unintelligent, not unclean. Clearly not Latin, but never mind. For the forty-minute encounter, it's most important to figure out what a person *isn't* (not a mass murderer, whew); figuring out what he *is* requires more time, not to mention the belief that such information might be useful at a later date. Carlo and Everett barely had a present, never mind the pretense of a future. It all went predictably enough. He pranced around in a jockstrap, got down on all fours, pleaded, moaned, and complimented my height. If you can't be classically handsome, you're no longer young, and your idea of exercise is making plans to go to the gym, it helps to be awkwardly tall. He said "nice" at the appropriate moments and did a little panting thing at the end that turned me on, even if it was clearly one of his rehearsed bits. Afterward, there was that unsettling postcoital silence in which I realized I was with a stranger, noticed the dirty laundry in the corner, and saw that the TV on the bureau was tuned to FOX News. A flushed, scowling commentator was talking ominously about Iraq. I propped myself up on an elbow, ran my finger along Carlo's tan line, and to fill the conversational void, asked him if he'd been on vacation.

He rolled over onto his back and gave me an indignant look. "I'm not interested in sharing a lot of personal information," he said.

"Of course not," I said. "I'm sorry for asking. If it's any consolation, I'm not interested in hearing any. I was trying to be polite."

He pulled on a T-shirt and, satisfied by my lack of interest, said, "I was in Maine for two weeks."

“Ah,” I said, and realized that I truly wasn’t interested and had no follow-up comment or question.

As I was leaving his apartment, I noticed that he had bath towels—light blue with appliqué peonies and bleach stains—tacked over the eye-level basement windows for privacy. At midnight, it had been a detail that had struck me as amusingly tawdry, but now, in the gray light of morning, as I stared out at the rain, it screamed final straw.

The descending airplane disappeared from view behind the skyline of the city; when there was no ensuing rumble or billow of smoke, I got dressed and set up the ironing board in my kitchen. I’d bought a \$125 iron from a catalogue that specialized in expensive laundry-related products for obsessive-compulsives. It had arrived in the mail the day before, and I was excited about using it for the very first time. I was pouring verbena-scented water into the thing when it hit me that I should give my sex life a rest for a while. I couldn’t take any more dank basements and grim window treatments. You can choose who you go to bed with, but you can’t choose his décor.

Besides, I had a lot of *New Yorkers* to catch up on. My kitchen shelves needed to be rearranged. I had to start paying much closer attention to my job. I’d been meaning to sign up for a class in tap dancing. It was now or never on the question of spirituality and me. And so on, in that irrelevant vein.

Vanity compels me to say that I knew my resolution was about a lot more than the towels, but pinning it on those allowed me to try and change my behavior without diving into the mucky swamp of my psychology. Enough self-deception, in other words, to make it an unthreatening place to begin.

- “A Morning Person” by Mary Ruefle

What a beautiful day for a wedding!
It was raining when we buried my mum,
she loved lilacs and here they are,
the lilac lilacs like pendulous
large breasts dripping with dew,
I am enjoying them alone with my
mug of coffee, which I also enjoy
with the intensity of a remark
made in a surgical theatre.
Soon I will vacuum the day,
not a speck of it will remain,
I will suck it up like a bee
at the tit, making a hoopla.
But now it is quiet, hardly anyone
is dressed, not a doggie is walking.
I think flowers enjoy their solitude
in the early dawn before the buzz begins.
I think sprinklers annoy them.

I hear one coming on.
I hate my poems.

-opening pages of *Paul Takes the Form of a Mortal Girl* (novel, 2017) by Andrea Lawlor

Like a shark, Paul had to keep moving. He slept only when necessary. He had business with the world, codes to crack, so many questions. Tonight, for example, Paul needed to know what fucking was like for girls.

Snow piled up outside the house on North Gilbert Street, piled up on the porch, covering everyone's bicycles. The insolent fake spring of the last week was missing, presumed dead; little pink buds glittered in their ice caskets.

Paul paced the second-floor apartment in various states of unsatisfying undress. He supposed his roommate Christopher might, against all odds, have one nice article of clothing squirreled away. But there was Christopher, clad in a collarless linen shirt, meditating sanctimoniously on his bed. Silence equals death, thought Paul, as he repaired to his own room to dress.

Paul cast about for ways to look more bad. He did have those black vinyl pants (stolen from Trash & Vaudeville, back in New York) but he'd worn them out and about here five times already, enough to wear off the charge. He wanted to telegraph the word fetish far and wide, from Coralville to Cedar Rapids all the way to the Quad Cities; he'd spent the afternoon searching the Mennonite thrift shop for uniforms or glitter-stitched girls' shirts. He liked to elicit swears from the frat boys. He enjoyed his various reputations (freak, party boy, bisexual, New Yorker) and liked to keep them fresh, but his badness was incidental, really.

He'd seen a flyer at Gabe's Oasis announcing bands on Tuesday night. A local girl band was opening, then a dyke band from Seattle. But who would go with him to see a dyke punk band they didn't know on a Tuesday night in the middle of the Iowa winter? Christopher just laughed. Paul began calling around to his so-called friends.

"Um, no."

Paul required a partner for his mission, a girl who admired and offset him, who bolstered his girlishness. Even rock chicks went to bars in pairs. He tapped Jane's number into the kitchen phone.

"Come on," he said. "It'll be fun. They're from Seattle." He drew the word out exotically.

"I don't think so," said Jane, who was studying for her comps. "I have to read this book on the Gaze."

"This will be exactly like studying," said Paul.

"I'm actually busy, Paul," Jane said.

"Please," he said. "I need you."

"I can't," she said.

"Your loss," Paul said. He preferred to go alone.

He rooted around in his blue footlocker and found the vinyl pants.

"Christopher," he called out. "You really should come. Everyone's going."

Christopher called back something about a "working group."

He appeared in Paul's doorway. "Remember? The emergency meeting?"

"Just come after," Paul said.

"Perhaps you want to borrow this?" Christopher leaned into the room with a sparkly pink tank top dangling off his ostentatiously limp wrist. When he spoke his beard moved, mesmerizing Paul. "I wore it at Short Mountain to great effect."

"Ooh yeah," said Paul. "Gimme."

"Greedy." Christopher dropped the shirt at Paul's feet. "I want it back."

Paul bent to fetch. For a second, he wished he too had a beard, to offset the sequins. He loved that look. But he'd never grown a beard, wasn't even sure he could. Plus that wasn't the story he was telling tonight.

"Thank you," he said, with the cool dignity of an ambassador's daughter borrowing cab fare. He took the sparkly shirt into his room, and popped Horses into his tape player. He shut the door between his bedroom and the kitchen so Christopher wouldn't see him change.

First he needed good underwear. He decided to break out the unopened European-style briefs his old sociology professor had inappropriately brought him back from Spain last summer. They looked enough like girls' underwear and wouldn't disrupt the line. He dropped his swishy loose army pants and his shoplifted French-cut boxers, and stared at his penis until it shrank, tucked itself into the tight little crawl- space of his former balls. He stepped into the black briefs and admired his smooth front with his hands and eyes, then found the red lace bra he'd borrowed from that girl in New York. His skin shivered all over, belly and back and thighs. He stared down his skinny chest until it obediently softened, grew, filled out the bra. Not too big. It was like that TV show *Manimal* where the guy changed into a panther and other animals, a miracle of special effects, only that guy couldn't control himself. That guy was more like the Hulk. Not Paul. Paul stopped at a 36C. He was going for regular but hot.

He stroked his throat until the bump relented and then he checked his look in the full-length mirror. How could he look so pretty? His black engineer boots and snug Levi's jacket, big fur-lined Lenny Kravitz coat— every detail was good, was right. Who was he? He was Ginsberg and Streisand and Kim Gordon rolled into one. He was the girl he wanted to fuck. He clumsily applied silvery pale-pink lipstick. He raked black mascara through his lashes. He tugged his shaggy hair past his shoulders, then experimentally flipped this new long hair, but he didn't have the knack and he hurt his neck slightly but looked good. Now, he thought, as Patti Smith serenaded a girl called Gloria.

"Bye, Christopher," Paul called out, clattering down the stairs.

"You are a big nasty bulldagger," said Christopher from the kitchen table, without even turning around. "You are so butch."

Stupid queen, thought Paul. All who see me tonight will know I am a girl.

He left the house, alone in the blue night of snow and streetlights, air like paper cuts. Paul decided, as always, to go the pretty way. He cut over to Linn Street, which glittered blue and white, fairy snow in the trees. He walked with his hips deliberating: back and forth, back and forth, careful solid booted steps on the ice.

Paul passed by all his landmarks—Tuck's Place, Cozy House, the expensive sandwich shop, the QuikTrip, Seashore Hall—and then through the causeway by the chemistry building to the yellow lights of the empty downtown. A pack of frat boys spilled out of the Que and crossed the street, headed his way.

"Hey sweetheart, where are you going?" one of them called. "Do you need an escort?"

Paul tossed his head and kept walking, like he'd seen girls do. This was a first. Now they could actually admit they wanted to fuck him.

He turned the corner and stomped down quickly the rest of the lonely side street to Gabe's.

Inside the warm basement of the bar a row of pinball machines glowed orange light and glass. The jukebox blasted "Black Hole Sun" into the wood paneling. Paul liked to be early for things, to gain the home turf advantage—he liked to watch his ducks from a blind. He took a place against the bar and observed with amusement and pride every dyke who walked up the stairs to the room where they had shows. My sisters, he thought.

Groups 7 & 8

[you fit into me] –Margaret Atwood

you fit into me
like a hook into an eye

a fish hook
an open eye

- "Sing to It" (story) by Amy Hempel

At the end, he said, No metaphors! Nothing is like anything else. Except he said to me before he said that, Make your hands a hammock for me. So there was one.

He said, Not even the rain—he quoted the poet—

not even the rain has such small hands. So there was another.

At the end, I wanted to comfort him. But what I said was, Sing to it. The Arab proverb: When danger approaches, sing to it.

Except I said to him before I said that, No metaphors! No one is like anyone else. And he said, Please.

So—at the end, I made my hands a hammock for him.

My arms the trees.

- Harryete Mullen Lecture on the American Dream (poem) by Terrance Hayes

Mud is thicker than what is thicker than water. Pull your head up by your chin straps. Put the pedal to the metal. Peddle to the middle. Put the medal on the pedestal. I pledge Sister Sledgehammer & Father knows beds, but I am not my breather's keeper. I pledge to earn every holler & if found guilty, I pledge to repay my Bill of Rights to Society. From me to shining me. Money, money, money, monkey. We're number none. Our number's done. E pluribus unumskull. For war and several fears we go. Praise be to Guard. Slops & Slobbers. Maladies & Gentrifications. Don't kill us, we'll kill you. With lobotomy & Jesus for all.

- Haruki Murakami, "On Seeing the 100% Perfect Girl One April Morning" (story)

One beautiful April morning, on a narrow side street in Tokyo's fashionable Harujuku neighborhood, I walked past the 100% perfect girl.

Tell you the truth, she's not that good-looking. She doesn't stand out in any way. Her clothes are nothing special. The back of her hair is still bent out of shape from sleep. She isn't young, either - must be near thirty, not even close to a "girl," properly speaking. But still, I know from fifty yards away: She's the 100% perfect girl for me. The moment I see her, there's a rumbling in my chest, and my mouth is as dry as a desert.

Maybe you have your own particular favorite type of girl - one with slim ankles, say, or big eyes, or graceful fingers, or you're drawn for no good reason to girls who take their time with every meal. I have my own preferences, of course. Sometimes in a restaurant I'll catch myself staring at the girl at the next table to mine because I like the shape of her nose.

But no one can insist that his 100% perfect girl correspond to some preconceived type. Much as I like noses, I can't recall the shape of hers - or even if she had one. All I can remember for sure is that she was no great beauty. It's weird.

"Yesterday on the street I passed the 100% girl," I tell someone.

"Yeah?" he says. "Good-looking?"

"Not really."

"Your favorite type, then?"

"I don't know. I can't seem to remember anything about her - the shape of her eyes or the size of her breasts."

"Strange."

"Yeah. Strange."

"So anyhow," he says, already bored, "what did you do? Talk to her? Follow her?"

"Nah. Just passed her on the street."

She's walking east to west, and I west to east. It's a really nice April morning.

Wish I could talk to her. Half an hour would be plenty: just ask her about herself, tell her about myself, and - what I'd really like to do - explain to her the complexities of fate that have led to our passing each other on a side street in Harajuku on a beautiful April morning in 1981. This was something sure to be crammed full of warm secrets, like an antique clock build when peace filled the world.

After talking, we'd have lunch somewhere, maybe see a Woody Allen movie, stop by a hotel bar for cocktails. With any kind of luck, we might end up in bed.

Potentiality knocks on the door of my heart.

Now the distance between us has narrowed to fifteen yards.

How can I approach her? What should I say?

"Good morning, miss. Do you think you could spare half an hour for a little conversation?"

Ridiculous. I'd sound like an insurance salesman.

"Pardon me, but would you happen to know if there is an all-night cleaners in the neighborhood?"

No, this is just as ridiculous. I'm not carrying any laundry, for one thing. Who's going to buy a line like that?

Maybe the simple truth would do. "Good morning. You are the 100% perfect girl for me."

No, she wouldn't believe it. Or even if she did, she might not want to talk to me. Sorry, she could say, I might be the 100% perfect girl for you, but you're not the 100% boy for me. It could happen. And if I found myself in that situation, I'd probably go to pieces. I'd never recover from the shock. I'm thirty-two, and that's what growing older is all about.

We pass in front of a flower shop. A small, warm air mass touches my skin. The asphalt is damp, and I catch the scent of roses. I can't bring myself to speak to her. She wears a white sweater, and in her right hand she holds a crisp white envelope lacking only a stamp. So: She's written somebody a letter, maybe spent the whole night writing, to judge from the sleepy look in her eyes. The envelope could contain every secret she's ever had.

I take a few more strides and turn: She's lost in the crowd.

Now, of course, I know exactly what I should have said to her. It would have been a long speech, though, far too long for me to have delivered it properly. The ideas I come up with are never very practical.

Oh, well. It would have started "Once upon a time" and ended "A sad story, don't you think?"

Once upon a time, there lived a boy and a girl. The boy was eighteen and the girl sixteen. He was not unusually handsome, and she was not especially beautiful. They were just an ordinary lonely boy and an ordinary lonely girl, like all the others. But they believed with their whole hearts that somewhere in the world there lived the 100% perfect boy and the 100% perfect girl for them. Yes, they believed in a miracle. And that miracle actually happened.

One day the two came upon each other on the corner of a street.

"This is amazing," he said. "I've been looking for you all my life. You may not believe this, but you're the 100% perfect girl for me."

"And you," she said to him, "are the 100% perfect boy for me, exactly as I'd pictured you in every detail. It's like a dream."

They sat on a park bench, held hands, and told each other their stories hour after hour. They were not lonely anymore. They had found and been found by their 100% perfect other. What a wonderful thing it is to find and be found by your 100% perfect other. It's a miracle, a cosmic miracle.

As they sat and talked, however, a tiny, tiny sliver of doubt took root in their hearts: Was it really all right for one's dreams to come true so easily?

And so, when there came a momentary lull in their conversation, the boy said to

the girl, "Let's test ourselves - just once. If we really are each other's 100% perfect lovers, then sometime, somewhere, we will meet again without fail. And when that happens, and we know that we are the 100% perfect ones, we'll marry then and there. What do you think?"

"Yes," she said, "that is exactly what we should do."

And so they parted, she to the east, and he to the west.

The test they had agreed upon, however, was utterly unnecessary. They should never have undertaken it, because they really and truly were each other's 100% perfect lovers, and it was a miracle that they had ever met. But it was impossible for them to know this, young as they were. The cold, indifferent waves of fate proceeded to toss them unmercifully.

One winter, both the boy and the girl came down with the season's terrible influenza, and after drifting for weeks between life and death they lost all memory of their earlier years. When they awoke, their heads were as empty as the young D. H. Lawrence's piggy bank.

They were two bright, determined young people, however, and through their unremitting efforts they were able to acquire once again the knowledge and feeling that qualified them to return as full-fledged members of society. Heaven be praised, they became truly upstanding citizens who knew how to transfer from one subway line to another, who were fully capable of sending a special-delivery letter at the post office. Indeed, they even experienced love again, sometimes as much as 75% or even 85% love.

Time passed with shocking swiftness, and soon the boy was thirty-two, the girl thirty.

One beautiful April morning, in search of a cup of coffee to start the day, the boy was walking from west to east, while the girl, intending to send a special-delivery letter, was walking from east to west, but along the same narrow street in the Harajuku neighborhood of Tokyo. They passed each other in the very center of the street. The faintest gleam of their lost memories glimmered for the briefest moment in their hearts. Each felt a rumbling in their chest. And they knew:

She is the 100% perfect girl for me.

He is the 100% perfect boy for me.

But the glow of their memories was far too weak, and their thoughts no longer had the clarity of fourteen years earlier. Without a word, they passed each other, disappearing into the crowd. Forever.

A sad story, don't you think?

Yes, that's it, that is what I should have said to her.

"She had a pretty gift for quotation, which is a serviceable substitute for wit."

Somerset Maugham