

BOOTH

a journal

N O V E M B E R 0 9





CONTRIBUTORS: **Clyde Anderson** was born in Whinesburg, Indiana.

John Gallaher is author of three poetry collections: *Map of the Folded World* (Akron, 2009), *The Little Book of Guesses* (Four Way Books, 2007), which won the Levis Poetry Prize, and *Gentlemen in Turbans, Ladies in Cauls* (Spuyten Duyvil, 2001). A book written in collaboration with G.C. Waldrep, *Your Father on the Train of Ghosts*, is forthcoming from BOA. John lives in rural Missouri and edits *The Laurel Review*.

Erica Plouffe Lazure is the 2009-10 George Bennett writer in residence at Phillips Exeter academy and a graduate of the Bennington Writing Seminars. Her fiction has appeared in *McSweeney's Quarterly 29*, the *North Carolina Literary Review*, *Mad Hatters' Review*, *Smokelong Quarterly*, *Keyhole*, and elsewhere.

Jonathan Lethem is the author of eight novels, including the just released *Chronic City*, a book of essays, *The Disappointment Artist*, and the short-story collection, *Men and Cartoons*.



C O N T E N T S

Erica Plouffe Lazure
DISTANCE.....05

John Gallaher
THREE POEMS FOR BOOTH08

Mab Graves
FEATURED ARTIST.....14

Brian Buckbee, C.J. Hribal
WHINESBURG, INDIANA.....18

Jonathan Lethem
SIX BOOKS
THAT HAVE SAT ON MY SHELF UNREAD
AS CHARGED OBJECTS FOR MORE THAN A DECADE.....32

© 2009 *Booth, A Journal* and the contributors. All correspondence should be addressed to BOOTH, Department of English, Butler University, 4600 Sunset Avenue, Indianapolis, IN 46220, or sent to booth@butler.edu. More information at <http://booth.butler.edu>.

EDITOR: Robert Stapleton
ASSOCIATE EDITOR: Bryan Furuness
POETRY EDITOR: Alessandra Lynch
PROSE EDITOR: Mindy Dunn
ART EDITOR: Gautam Rao
READERS: Amanda Fagan, Jay Lesandrini, Dave Stocking
Traci Cumbay, Alex Mattingly, Steven Woods



Erica Plouffe Lazure

D i s t a n c e

The only way to kill the fleas, Mama said, is to pinch them between your fingers and drown them in soapy water.

“If it’s just plain tap, they swim to the rim and escape,” she said. “If there’s soap, it gets in their lungs and it’s all over.”

I love animals. I love animals so much I brought home a pair of cats last year from the shelter. Mama loves animals, too. She grew up hosing dairy cows and picking ticks off her daddy’s hunting hounds. That’s love, if you ask me. We never had any pets because my sister Juniper is allergic. But now, Junie’s at school three states away, and as long as I love my cats, which will be forever, they’ll live here with me and Mama.

The cats make me mad, sometimes. Junie told me we can all learn from the things that hurt us. And I learn so much from those cats. Their lessons are less complicated than the ones Junie teaches me. I’ve learned the armrest of our sofa is made of solid wood; that bleach should never, ever be used to clean up cat pee. The cats are far easier to love than the fleas. I am still trying to learn from the fleas. I am still trying to love them.

Certainly, the fleas love each other. Damned if you can’t hear the female fleas and the male fleas getting to know each other. There’s so much love in this house I ache from it. So every morning before I go to the animal shelter I sit and breathe in front of the Buddha statue Junie gave me last summer from her trip to India. It’s there the fleas greet me. Their bites make me look like I got the pox and I’m glad I’m done with high school because I don’t want to hear what everyone else has to say about it.

Junie’s been real nice to me ever since she went away to school. Last summer, she sat with me in front of Buddha and showed me how to close my eyes and breathe.

“It will make you calm,” she said. “Return to your breath; you’ll find tranquility.” I want to be calm like Junie. I want to be tranquil, too, and sometimes I think of her when I sit in front of Buddha. Sometimes I pretend she’s attached a secret camera to him, and so I wear lipstick before I sit down, so I look good, and I try not to slap myself when the fleas bite. I can see her: she should be doing homework, but no, she’s watching her big sister on a big screen TV in the lobby of her dorm with all her friends to see if I’m breathing right, to see if I deny love to an animal by hitting a flea. Mama and I dropped her off at college ourselves, and I’d never seen such a huge TV. It would embarrass me, personally, to watch someone I knew on TV like that. But in case any of Junie’s friends are boys, I sometimes pull a pillowcase over Buddha when I undress. I try to follow Mama’s orders and, these days, I give it up for no one. Not even on college TV.

Junie told me once at breakfast that I might as well go on and deep-fry the cats if I did not extend my love for animals to the pig who died for my bacon. Mama fries the bacon hard because I ask her to. There’s no need to pick through the pile for the good ones if they’re all crispy. To eat bacon, Junie said, is not to love all animals, because the pig died for you.

“Isn’t tasting good his job?” I’d said. But I knew even then, before I’d made my full commitment to loving all animals, that I was stalling. I ate the whole plate that day, on account it was Christmas, but I haven’t eaten bacon since, at least not when anyone’s around, which is hardly ever. Mama keeps a close watch on me. I still think appreciating the pig you eat is a kind of love, too. Like the same way we love Jesus because he died on the cross. But

I keep this thought to myself because I don’t think it’s one Junie would appreciate. And we don’t even go to church anymore. And I still have to figure out how to love all animals. That’s why I visit the shelter: these are animals I can love. They’re always friendly. Their tails wag. Not like the fleas, whose bodies are built like clamshells, or sesame seeds with legs. Some days, I sit in front of the Buddha, or in front of the bathroom mirror and I’ll feel the pinch. My right hand stops the left, mid-stroke, and I think, Stop the killing! You are not a battlefield!

But I am a battlefield. I am. Most days, I think about Junie watching me on TV and I let the fleas eat me up. She says it’s karma, some cosmic debt, like maybe in another life I was a dog, and I upturned a pullcart of oranges in Tunisia, and all those oranges came back as fleas. Other days, it’s all I can do to not pinch one between my finger and thumb, like Mama said, and drown it in one of the dishes of soapy water she’s set about the house. I tried it once, had that bugger in my fingers, but I couldn’t put it in the dish. How’s that for an animal lover?

I wrote this in a letter to Junie at college, and she called and told me everyone needed to think more like me.

“I love the extent of your love,” she said, “but don’t let it scare you.”

I’m not scared of anything. I just want to learn how to love all animals by finding a way to love the fleas. Sitting in front of Buddha helps. Sitting in this bathtub helps. Mama added a capful of bubbles for me so I’ll smell pretty after. And the fleas don’t drown, either. I can see them leaping from my hair for dry land. I asked Junie when she’ll come home next, and she said she’s not sure. She told me sometimes you need distance to be able to love something fully.



John Gallaher

meditation on subjects

*So it seems the body is this tent
you stand behind. You walk around a bit
and the body is just standing there.
You come back renegotiated
and the tent's moved to the front yard.
The neighbors will see. They're sure
to call someone. And you know
you're still talking about the body,
it's still your body. Call the street
"Cat's Game" and the city "Robot Hands." Call your friends
and they're talking
from behind tents about Cat's Game
and Robot Hands. How long has it been like this,
and does it mean you do or don't get to sleep with the pretty people,
when they've all become so ungainly, so
kind of charming and such odd things
to count on? So it seems*

*you're suddenly so perceptive
you maybe should try some profession soon,
or board game. Begin anywhere. Walk up the street to the left,
and it's a tent in motion. A list of fragments
you have to recite when you come across others.
Luckily, you don't have to know what the words mean
in order to say them. Like "there are a lot more afternoons
and sensible investing." And reasons for subjects,
when they contain their opposite,
as all things do, or are said to.
Can you contain your opposite then,
and coast all the way down?
Luckily, it's not a real question. And it's not
a real tent. And the weekend is almost always on its way
with its own hollow places
of easily painted landscape over crowds of people.*

the city experiment

There were other things we liked, of course,
 when it wasn't important to be careful, and the weather cooperated,
 with the knowledge that this moment
 is going to be repeatable, and more comfortable than better things, but still
 that light strain that maybe it really isn't all that repeatable after all,
 at least not with you, and even this has to end, and rather soon,
 but at that moment cocktails arrive
 so we can crest, and whatever we say fits
 or fits well enough. Yes to the cocktail, because we're polite, then yes again
 to sudden comments regarding next time.

We spent all night on the city experiment, but the whole thing
 barely moved, and now we're worried,
 though the formula looked good in the congratulatory lighting,
 and we had this feeling that we might be able to push through
 to the other side of what this is,
 and it'll turn out to be a movie set, and you'll be walking the carpet

to an award show. Yes,
 you immersed yourself in that role. Yes,
 so that you believed that you were indeed that person over there,
 and thank you, it sure was something, and you're going to miss it a bit
 now and then, but next season it'll be a museum
 or some people digging in a field.

That's the point where it always spills all over the table.

We're starting to get desperate. Wasn't it warm in the sun
 through this window in winter, the snow outside? I'm sure it's something small
 we've overlooked. What type of cocktail, perhaps. Perhaps survival
 is a state of mind, in your floating future, there in the experiment,
 on the ride into the city, past the tennis courts
 and trees, and an old harmonium someone put out by the curb,
 a trace of broken china, a fleeting study
 of a figure in a field, until you're writing notes on a napkin
 that blows into the lake, and you're hearing the flat echo,

fabulist trees in chrome landscape

*Your life is on the other side of a fence
 throwing things over the top at you.
 Every now and then
 it peeks over to see what you look like
 in your new hat. Your new shoes.
 I hate it when the city gets this way,
 when everything sparks
 unexpectedly. Too many reflections
 of hats. Too many catalogues.
 And clowns in the trees,
 so that you may almost glimpse them.
 One could think,
 perhaps, that they're trying to sell you a uniform,
 but subtly,
 as they're neither speaking
 nor holding uniforms.
 And all around you
 a series of lines indicating movement
 radiates.*





MadMabs

*illustrated
tales of work*





NOTE : THIS BIOGRAPHER HAD A PARTICULARLY DIFFICULT TIME GATHERING INFORMATION ON MS. GRAVES AS SHE MOSTLY ANSWERS QUESTIONS IN MEOWS, won't SIT STILL FOR MORE THAN 14 SECONDS, AND APPEARS TO HAVE NO LIVING FRIENDS OR RELATIONS.



Here is the info on Mab, as deciphered:

MAB GRAVES [exhibit A]
Was born in Indiana at least
7 or 700 years ago.

She paints like a chimney
And smokes like a fish.
She drinks coffee like it's illegal.

She lives in an old tavern
(or maybe teepee?) in Fountain Square.
She is or has a cat.
And a spider.

Mab never went to Art School.
It's not that she's too cool.
I just think maybe the meows
Would be a problem.



Editor's Note: *Whinesburg, Indiana* is a collection of monologues from the citizens of the fictional town of, well, *Whinesburg*. In the coming months, *Booth* will be running more of these monologues from Michael Martone, the developer of the series, as well as a few entries from some special guests. Stay tuned. Welcome to *Whinesburg*.

Brian Buckbee, C.J. Hribal

Whinesburg, Indiana

Hi, I am Clyde.

About a month ago, I was solicited to write a personal account of my life in Whinesburg, Indiana. It's been a tough life, what with the gigantism and all.

The person who solicited me goes by the name Bryan Furuness. I know, the name sounds made up. I wrote him back and asked him what I would get paid, and he wrote back and said "nothing."

Bryan works for a magazine called *Booth*. I don't know what that means. There's John Wilkes Booth, who shot the President, and there is the booth you sit in at a diner, and there is the telephone booth. *Booth* magazine?

I know, I know, it, too, sounds made up.

As far as I can tell, *Booth* is an "online" magazine. This means it doesn't exist in reality. It has no physical form. It also means that it could disappear in the snap of a fingers (Perhaps it is already gone?). What this

has to say about its editor, Bryan Furuness, I'll leave to your imagination.

But enough about Bryan Furuness. This piece is supposed to be about me, and my tragic life in Whinesburg, Indiana. It is a most curious thing, though. When Bryan contacted me about this assignment, he asked that I write a monologue about my life in the fictional town of Whinesburg. The fictional town of Whinesburg. Needless to say, that one word didn't slip by unnoticed. Fictional? Who is this invisible person—who works for a paperless magazine—to claim that I don't really exist? To claim that my entire town doesn't exist? Sheesh! You might as well say Springfield doesn't exist!

I've actually never been to Springfield. I have a weak constitution, which makes traveling an uneasy proposition. But I've seen Springfield on maps. Ms. Crystal brought them out during the unit on Indiana politics. If I were to leave Whinesburg, it would only take a couple hours by car to get to Springfield

(and even less by ferry). Ms. Crystal knew all about the history of Indiana. She knew the names of the five Vice Presidents who were Hoosiers, including Thomas A. Hendricks (and a lot of people forget him, seeing as he was only in office for a few months). Vice President Hendricks was from nearby Shelbyville (Just try and tell me that Shelbyville doesn't exist!). Hendricks was Grover Cleveland's Vice President, but then he died from swallowing a toothpick. Such was the respect for Thomas A. Hendricks that the position of Vice President was left empty until Levi Morton took office—four whole years later! This is all stuff I learned from Ms. Crystal, before I was diagnosed with Alien Hand Syndrome, and before I came down with Parrot Fever.

As you may have noticed, I suffer from a number of ailments. A few years ago my buddy Dale Rumsey suggested I go see Whinesburg's pre-eminent (and only) shrink.

Dale, in case you are wondering (ahem, Mr. Furuness), is more than just my imaginary

friend. Just now I went to check out the Booth Magazine website, and Dale's monologue about his life in Whinesburg is already there! You should check it out!

Dale is a good guy. We were in Ms. Crystal's history class together in junior high. Even then he was obsessed with aliens. Dale is a distant cousin of Leonard Nimoy, twice removed and that sort of thing, and I think he kind of got obsessed with Nimoy, as did I, especially that show *In Search Of...*, which was about finding things that supposedly don't exist. Dale himself has never been anally probed, but he has talked to a lot of Whinesburgians who have been, including Mrs. Camden, who miscarried her alien baby, and Dale has a collection of alien "scat," which is just a fancy word for "poop," which he wants to put in a museum.

Dale told me I should go visit Dr. Elyria, not because he could cure me, but because you could talk to him for almost a full hour without getting interrupted. Dale and I—and this is

going way back to junior high—we never had a lot of folks to talk to. And Dale can't talk to me anymore, on account of my hearing (tinnitus), so that's how he got to seeing Dr. E. Dr. E got his psych degree at Indiana Polytechnic Junior College over there in Terre Haute.

Dr. E has an interesting story. His roommate freshman year at IPJC was none other than Billy Joe Cuthbert. This was back when Billy Joe was displaying the same basketball prowess that would eventually take him to the NBA. As the story goes, Billy Joe was having an existential crisis, and the coach of the Polytechnic Fire-Breathing Chimera came to Dr. E—this was back when Dr. E was an econ major—and asked him to talk to Billy Joe. I guess Dr. E knew his stuff, because Billy got back on the hardwood and went on to have that successful career with the Utah Jazz, and Dr. E switched tracks and found his calling.

Speaking of tracks, I've totally gone off mine. It's probably on account of the brain cleft. Anyway, I did end up going to see Dr. E,

and I told him all about my problems, and he said that they didn't exist, and that they were all in my head. "What about the gigantism?" I said, holding up my size-19 left foot. "Oh, that's real," he admitted.

On the measure of my existence, I can't help but to think I exist. I remember Ms. Crystal teaching us the expression, "I think, therefore I am." Some famous guy said that. Ms. Crystal was my first crush. She was what the kids these days call a "cougar." Believe me, she existed. Not only did she exist in the classroom on the first floor at Whinesburg Junior High—the windowless room that doubled as a tornado shelter—but also in my imagination. In striped bikinis she existed, and in nylon stockings, and swinging by my house in her red Trans Am while my parents were out because she wanted to personally deliver the best student paper about alien probes that she'd ever read.

As it turned out, the best grade

Ms. Crystal ever gave me was for a book report I wrote on Leonard Nimoy's autobiography.

The book was called *I Am Not Spock*. Some people were upset when this book came out. (Dale, for instance.) They insisted that Leonard Nimoy was Spock. Because if Leonard Nimoy wasn't Spock, then who was? Me? Dale? If no one was Spock, then Spock didn't exist! Back then, that proposition was a hard one for some people around here to swallow (me especially, because of the Schatzki's ring I have in my esophagus). Thankfully, Leonard Nimoy followed his first failed autobiography with a second successful one. It was called *I Am Spock*. I didn't read that one, but I suppose he must have changed his mind.

The truth is, sometimes I wish I could say, "I Am Not Clyde." Sometimes, I'd like to be somebody else, somebody who didn't have a giant foot and an alien hand and a bad ear and a constricted esophagus. I'd like to be a Bigfoot detective or an astronaut or Ms. Crystal's

gynecologist. But what I am is a Whinesburgian, and that is all I will ever be.

As far as my own supposed unreality is concerned, Bryan Furuness tells me he's not to blame. He says there is another mastermind behind this project, an Indianan who goes by the name 'Michael Martone.' Bryan tells me that Whinesburg, Indiana, is the creation of this Martone guy. What an ego! To take credit for an entire town!

I did some looking around the web for this Martone character. Turns out he doesn't even live in Indiana! I've never left Whinesburg! So, I ask, who do you trust to be the real expert

on Whinesburg? Me, or a guy who lives in a place called 'Tuscaloosa' (I know, it sounds made up.)? I wonder how this Martone character would feel if I started making up stuff about him. Just because he was the first National Guard soldier into Iraq during Operation Desert Storm doesn't make him immune to my imagination. As Ms. Crystal taught us back in junior high, turnabout is fair play.

For now, I'll just say this: If this 'Michael Martone' fella ever does dare to show his face around these parts, we're going to have some words.



[Editor's note: Jackie and Julie Patch, 28, are Amanda Patch's twin daughters.]

Jackie Patch: My mother's way is not my way. You must find your own way. There are many ways. Those who claim to know the way, the One Way, are speaking only for themselves, and are trying to get a volume discount in God's supermarket of grace and life everlasting. I know this because Rev. Dave told me. It was he who opened my eyes, unstoppered my ears, clipped

my toenails and defibrillated my heart. I left the Church, but I never stopped believing in God, or something like God—a Prime Mover, a Great Spirit, a Shake-and-Baker, a Mix-Master, a Lotte Lenya. My mother raised me Catholic, then I became Episcopal, then Unitarian, then a pantheist, then a Hare Krishna (I didn’t like the robes or the haircuts), then born again, then Rastafarian, then nothing—a spiritual agnostic, I suppose—before settling on a non-denominational church run by a Rev. Dave and two lesbian former nuns who are raising their sons (Rev. Dave donated his Essence to both of them so they could each have children) in a deconsecrated church on Wentworth Avenue that they have turned into the First Family of Christ Living Center and Day Care. My spiritual journey took me about 20 years. I knew I was looking for something, and in this community I have found it. Caring for Stephen and Jacob and the other children entrusted to us is a calling from a Higher Power. This I believe. Grace fills you up from the bottom of your feet right up past your eyeballs until it pours out of your ears like wax after you’ve stoppered your ears up with warm water to let the wax soften. You feel purified and rare and not at all forsaken, which is what I felt when my mother first got involved in that prayer group. My mother wanted my sister and me (I pray for Julie’s soul, she is a lost sheep, a wayward soul, and two-thirds of the way towards being a Godless infidel) to hew to the religion in which we were baptized, but I couldn’t do that. Instead I found Rev. Dave and the First Family of Christ Living Center and Day Care. And Rev. Dave has found me. Rev. Dave took me when I was at my lowest and Lo! he raised me up on high. He cares for me, body and soul. “Christ washed the feet of his apostles, did you know that?” he asked me, and so he washed my feet, stroking the curves of my ankles, touching his tongue to my instep—“a holy place,” he told me—and observing that my toenails, while blessed with luscious half-moons (“the lips of God have touched you here,”



he said), needed trimming. “We are a vessel of the Lord’s making,” he told me, clip-clipping, “and nothing that is of us should go to waste,” which is why he saved the toenail clippings to sprinkle on his peanut butter and pickle sandwiches—trimmings as trimming. As he masticated he told me, “Ingesting that which is removed from the body’s temple is a symbolic manifestation of the circle of life. Did you know that the only living part of your toenail is called the matrix? It is underneath the nail fold, which overlaps the nail itself, and it is in the matrix where the keratin, which forms the nail you see, is created. The lunula—those moons you see—are the shadow of the matrix. You understand now, don’t you? Your feet, your lovely, holy feet, contain the Shadow of the Matrix. Keratin, related to Kristos, Greek for Messiah, the Christ, is a feast for one’s soul. Henceforth, whenever I trim your toenails, it shall be a feast day.” Rev. Dave is a believer in feast days. He is a believer in the body as a temple. He believes—as I believe, for he has told me—that entering the temple is a great and holy thing. This, too, is part of the circle of life. He removes the keratin from my toes, he ingests the keratin in his sandwiches, and this keratin, in turn, becomes part of his Essence, which he must give back to my temple. “There are many ways in which the body is a temple,” he says, “just as the Shadow of the Matrix manifest in your toes is but a Shadow of the Matrix that is in you, and I, Rev. Dave, must make deposits in the Shadow of the Matrix to keep holy your temple.” He showed me how this was done, and Lo! that night he speared my soul, raising me up high and lowering me, over and over, saying, “Rise up and lower yourself for His Humble Servant, the Rev. Dave, and I will make my deposit in your temple, and thus will the Matrix of Life be entwined, thee and me, and Oh, Jackie, Oh, it shall be good, yes, yes, yes, it shall be good.” And the Rev. Dave showed me that there are many ways into the temple, and in the morning left me broken and bleeding and in love with him, for all that he had done for me,

and he told me that my toenail trimmings had filled him with an excess of Essence, which he needed to give back to my Matrix, so the circle of life could be complete, and we feasted like that for many days and nights, until I felt queasy in the mornings, and the Shadow of my Matrix began to balloon and swell, and then Rev. Dave told me that there are, in fact, many temples, and he was worried we would not be able to sustain the circle of life with just my toenail clippings feeding his Essence, and so he introduced me to new temples that he had found, Karla and Alison and Susan and Melissa and Amy and Rachel and Monica and Samantha and Jessica and Debra and Ann, and he told us all that he was grateful he had found us, repositories of the Matrix which generated the toenails which fed his Essence which he could deposit back into us, his dozen disciples, his dozen temples, oh happy day when these many ways into the Matrix were made known to him and could receive his Essence, for he was certain that in this way the First Family of Christ Living Center and Day Care would grow and expand just as our temples would grow and expand until we pushed new beings out into the world, little miracles that were a combination of our matrixes and his Essence, and in this way we would be blessed with local, state and federal funds as a charter school and day care facility. The only problem, it seemed to me, was that as the Shadows of our Matrix began to balloon and swell, Rev. Dave would stop giving us his Essence, and instead concentrate his efforts only on those temples who had not yet commingled his Essence with their Matrix to the point where such a commingling was visible. It seemed to me he stopped worshipping our feet as well, and those of us with a swelling Matrix grew toenails long and yellow, and even though Rev. Dave assured us he was simply waiting for the blessed expelling of the miracle from each of us, whereupon he would again worship at our feet and clip our nails and give us his Essence, making us,

he said, the Matrix Reloaded, we began—I began, at least—to doubt the sincerity of his intentions. But Rev. Dave reassured us, “No, no.” He treasured us all equally, it was just that his Essence was required elsewhere, and he instructed us each to be the keepers of our temples, to trim our nails ourselves, and keep these Shavings of Keratin in jars labeled with our names, and when it was time for him to gift us again with his Essence he would have the necessary trimmings to begin again, anew, each of us clear, fresh vessels for his seed. But of course as we grew great with miracles we could no longer bend over to trim and collect our keratin ourselves. This was an ablution the two ex-nuns performed for us, and we for each other, our Matrixes (Matri?) swollen and hard as watermelon, and in the absence of Rev. Dave we explored the contours of our feet ourselves. We explored other things as well. We did this as a group, though we paired up for the explorations. Monica, who was the first (after me) to have successfully received the Rev. Dave’s Essence said, “You know what? Rev. Dave is right. There are many ways in which the body is a temple, and there are many ways into the temple,” and with her fingers she showed me some, and I trembled with understanding. And after many nights of exploration we agreed, as group, that when it was time for Rev. Dave to again grace us with his Essence perhaps we would not be the willing receptacles he thought we should be. Perhaps we would tell him to take a hike.



Julie Patch: My mother is effing nuts. I would like to put this more politely, to be sure: she is touched, she is suffering pre-dementia, she has her spells, she was never the sharpest tool in the shed, and over time she’s gotten duller, she is rationality-challenged, her marbles are not all where she first found them, she’s not quite right in the head, her

screws are not as tight as they could be, she’s gone around the bend a bit, she’s not on her rocker, the light in her attic has dimmed, there are bats in her belfry, etc. But the fact is she’s gone absolutely bonkers. She’s nutty as a fruitcake. She’s stark raving mad. She’s batty, loony, bananas, cuckoo, crazy, dotty, screwy, schizo, psycho, mad as a hatter. She has taken leave of her senses, cracked up, gone wacko. She’s unhinged, disturbed, psychotic, deranged, demented, certifiable, crazy, a lunatic, non compos mentis, mad as a March hare. In short, she is a total nut job. My sister Jackie, too. My sister Jackie in spades. Mind you, it is not my mother or my sister’s religious devotion that causes me to say this. I think spirituality is a very important part of one’s life. But this is not about spirituality. This is about carnal pleasure and displeasure masquerading as holiness. It’s sick, all of it. Rebuilding one’s hymen? Turning the clock back on one’s virginity? Coming up with some elaborate game about one’s Matrix and one’s Essence so you don’t have to admit you got knocked up by Rev. Dave? WTF, as they say in the text messages. I’d be ROFLing if it weren’t so sad, so pathetic. I mean, my life is no carpet of carnations—a five-year-old kid and a thirty-one-year-old ex-husband who’s going on seventeen as far as I can tell, and a dead-end job at the DMV followed by two nights a week cocktail waitressing at the Fort Wayne Holiday Inn out on Nine Mile Road by the airport, where the businessmen think the uniform (black tights and a black mini-skirt and a ruffled white blouse unbuttoned down to there) gives them carte blanche to stare down your shirt front and pinch your thighs as you walk by—but the bottom line is I suck it up and get on with it. I have defense mechanisms. I have a sense of self. Somebody’s hand grazes my behind and I tell them they try that again I’ll break every finger they own. It hurts my tips except for the ones who actually like the abuse because it means somebody’s paying attention. But I have my

pride. I'm not going to lay down for anybody, like my sister did, and I'm not going to celebrate a self-enforced sexlessness while I read about flagellations and stonings and dismemberments and other acts of violence that get transfigured into religious porn for those scared of their own desire. You have a body, people, own it! To be honest, though, not that I did a whole lot better at first. I mean, in college I drank a lot and went home with a lot of losers. I fell in love with one of them (*that would be you, Leo*), and compounded my error by marrying him. Turned out he wanted the same thing they all wanted, didn't much want me after he got it, only by then we were already mediocrely wed. Particulars aside, in other words, I wasn't much different from my sister Jackie, who clutches her hands over her belly and tells me Rev. Dave worships her temple or her Matrix or whatever word he's

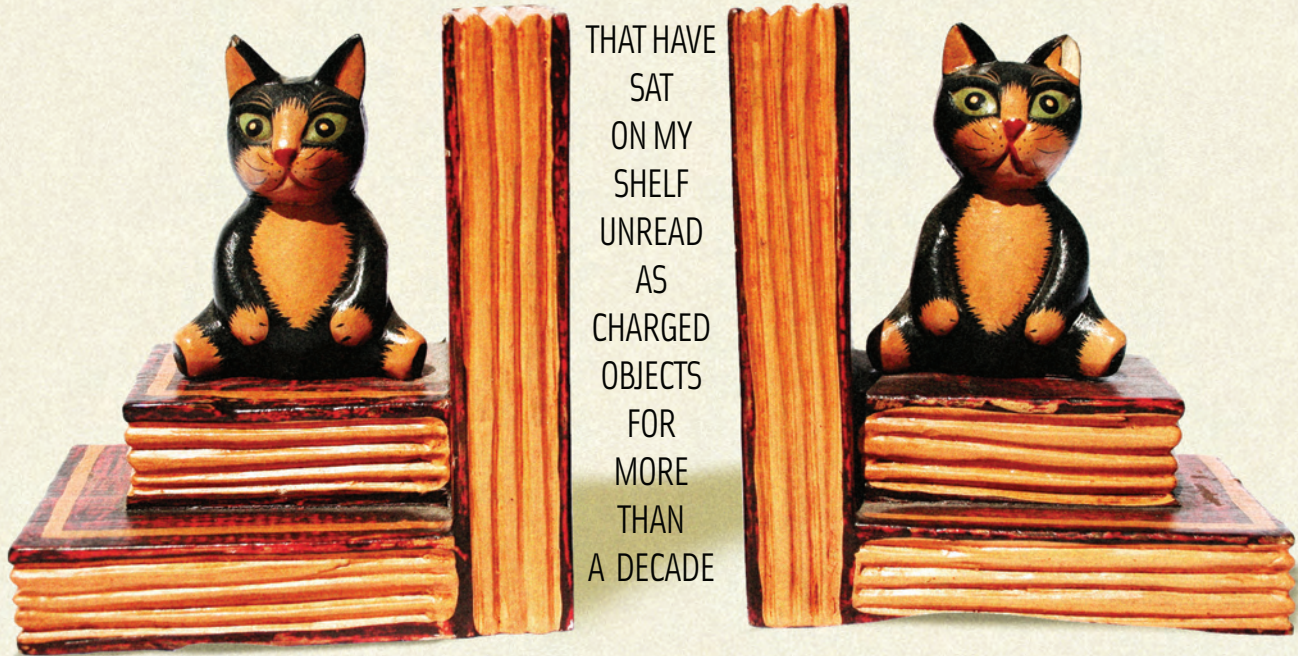
using these days to get inside her drawers. But Violet was a gift, however poor the source (*I'm talking about you, Leo*), and that's something. I just wish her father shared that belief, that children are a gift, and you must provide for them. Leo doesn't have a protective bone in his body—unless you're talking about his gift for self-preservation. For cutting and running. For skating on his responsibilities. He works first shift at the tool and die plant (when it's running)—he's a floor manager because he's got a degree—and he could help with the childcare sometimes, but no, that would cut into his drinking time after work. Mom's too wrapped up in her Lives of the Saints to take much of an interest in the life of her granddaughter, and Jackie says I could drop her off at the First Family of Christ Living Center and Day Care, but I'd be worried Rev. Dave would take an interest in my daughter's

ankles. Or her toe nails. So instead of having my family step up I'm hiring sitters the evenings I'm slinging drinks. And I'm still going home with the wrong sort of men. Sometimes you do get lonesome for the company. Once I even called Leo. "I knew you'd come around," he said, shucking his jeans while we were still having a glass of wine on the sofa, and that's when I threw him out for the second time in my life. I realized I wasn't that desperate. But there's something in me, something like a weakness, that makes me desperate anyway. Every few weeks or so I find myself doing the walk of shame at 2 a.m. from some two-bit apartment complex across the parking lot to my car and paying the sitter twice what I should because they had to stay

three hours later than I said I needed them. That or some guy is telling me as he's zipping himself, "I'll call you," and he never calls, and I know he's not going to call, but as he's gently pulling the door closed behind him with happiness and relief and I'm laying there all scummy-mouthed and broken-hoped but semi-in-love-with this guy who just used me, I'm still believing he might be the one, or I'm telling myself he's the last one like that before I meet the one, the really-for-real one, perhaps the very next night, I tell myself, I just have to open my legs and hope-- . Tell me, is that so different from my sewed-up mother or my knocked-up-by-her-minister-with-the-foot-fetish sister? I must be effing nuts.



Jonathan Lethem
SIX BOOKS



1. James Joyce, FINNEGAN’S WAKE

Unlike ULYSSES, I have not even bothered to fail reading this book. But it is making me smarter and more literary every day just by being there.

2. Milan Kundera, THE JOKE

His relatively unknown first novel. I like the title so much I don’t want to know if I’d dislike it as much as the more famous books of his that

I once ago did try reading. There ought to be a great novel called *The Joke*. Also, the author photo is marvelously creepy.

3. Thomas Mann, BUDDENBROOKS

I devoured a lot of “bildungsromans” in the time leading up to writing *The Fortress of Solitude*, but somehow always skirted this archetypal example. The only thing of Mann’s I’ve ever read, I think, is a terrific novella called *The Wardrobe*, but I find

his aura generally intimidating. The copy I have is my mother’s hardcover edition, with a photograph of Mann, taken by my great-grandmother in Germany, tipped into the endpapers. So I’ve been living with this book for forty-five years, actually. I’m sure I’ll give it to my son, read or unread.

4. Max Erlich, SPIN THE GLASS WEB

This is a peculiar object, a book published in 1951 with a unique gimmick: the last chapter is sealed in a yellow tissue-paper binding that keeps you from reading it without shredding the paper, and the jacket boasts: “Your Money Back If You Can Resist Breaking The Seal.” (The dust-flap explains the story this way: “Your name is Don Ewell. You have a good job, writing a top television show. You have a very comfortable Long Island home, a loving wife, and two children. You meet a young actress named Paula. And fat Henry Hinge, your expert research man, warns you, ‘That girl’s no good. She’d ruin any man she got her hands on...’” Well, I’ve found the book more spellbinding to contemplate than begin, so I’ve never learned whether I’d be able to resist, and destroy the yellow seal in frenzied pursuit of the mystery’s solution, which now that I think about it, must have been an ecstatic experience for somebody or another back in 1951. I wonder if they’re still honoring the promise of a refund?

5. John Cowper Powys, A GLASTONBURY ROMANCE

First sentence: “At the striking of noon on a certain fifth of March, there occurred within a causal radius of Brandon railway station and yet beyond the deepest pools of emptiness between the uttermost stellar systems one of those infinitesimal ripples in the creative silence of the First Cause which always occurs when an exceptional stir of heightened consciousness agitates any living organism in this astronomical universe.” I bet I’ve read that a hundred times, maybe more. Never typed it out before, though.

6. Charles Willeford, OFF THE WALL

My very favorite crime writer, down on his luck in the mid-seventies, knocked out this curiosity: a fictionalized account of the Son of Sam murders, for a fly-by-night publisher called Pegasus Rex Press. I collect Willeford’s books, and this is one of the most difficult items to find in all of his many years of marginal publishing. Somehow, though, it doesn’t need reading. Or maybe it does. Later.



