

RELUCTANT MISANTROPIES

JARON TURNER

Accepted by the Graduate School, Indiana University,  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
the degree of Master of Arts in English

Reluctant Misanthropes

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MA Committee

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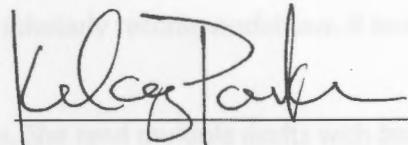
### Acknowledgements

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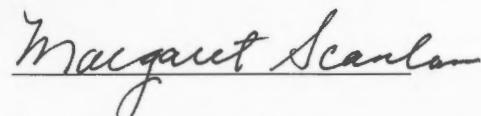


Kelcey Parker, Ph.D.

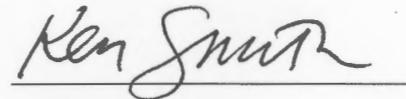
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Margaret Scanlan, Ph.D.



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Satire and Absurd Humor in Contemporary Fiction

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### The First

Indignant juvenile memories spring up in my mind as songs from my youth slither underneath the home office door. The notes coyly saunter up to their old, familiar slots in my memory and settle in as if nothing ever happened. I try to resist rhythmically nodding my head. It is useless. Greta must have decided to turn off "Belly Love - Mediations for a Happy and Healthy Pregnancy," which our chronically pregnant friend Melissa assured us is essential for the first pregnancy, in favor of something a little less prescriptive. But really, what is Greta thinking? Did she totally forget my complicated twenty-year love-and-hate with this band? I had explained my fallout with Andy Partridge and XTC to her a number of times.

When I was fifteen, 92.1 "The Beat" announced XTC's American tour plans. I was in my bedroom, happily working on my Halloween costume - I planned to dress in the most realistic bear costume anyone had ever seen - but the moment I heard the announcement about XTC I vowed not to go to the movies, buy albums, or chip in for any of the elusive rite-of-passage paraphernalia (beer & dirty magazines) that my friend Keith Brewster and I tried, unsuccessfully, to buy every single afternoon. I also resolved not to spend any more money on my Halloween costume and so instead of a bear costume, I went as a bear dressed in a human costume. I was determined to go to the concert. These were the kinds of sacrifices I imagined my grandfather would have been proud of. You know, for something that was really, *really* important.

"Mental note to self," I think. "Make our unborn kid understand sacrifice, but not in an unloving, ogreish way." Perhaps there is a chapter about "loving sacrifice" in the three

copies we have received of Fifteen Minute Parenting: How to Raise a Happy, Well-Adjusted, Independent and Grateful Child in Just Fifteen Minutes a Day.

Anyway, it took me over two months to save for the XTC concert. I bought my ticket and yet, it was not to be. XTC never made it to America. Something to do with Partridge's stage fright and pills. Even though I've taken some college courses in psychology and get the gist of mental illness, the fifteen year-old-boy inside this thirty-four-year-old man still definitely does not get it. Even when I reassure "him" of our revenge, which "we" totally got by never purchasing another XTC or Dukes of Stratosphere album again, (due, of course, to the dubbed tape, the burned CD, and the downloaded MP3) somehow the score has not been settled on an intrinsic level. But I try to push all this aside.

"Forget you, Andy Partridge," I think. "I'm going to be a father soon, and I have thank-you notes from the baby-shower to finish. I've lost enough time thinking about you. You can't hold me back – I have a system." Admittedly, it's a system many others before me have tried, but it is just one of the many strategies of preparedness I am trying to implement for our child's future. The strategy so far is thus: I look at the list of gifts we received last week, scrawl a personalized note, address the envelope, and then check off the names of the attendees from our master list. It's a pretty great system.

The master list was created by Greta and me five months ago; soon after we found out we were pregnant, we snuggled under the covers with champagne glasses filled with milk and created the guest list. But after Greta fell asleep that night, I lay awake, mind racing. There were so many plans we would need to make, and money we would have to save before we could have a baby. A brilliant idea came to me: a second list. This second, super-secret list is no ordinary list (which is why I've titled it "NO ORDINARY LIST"). The

people on this list are about to receive unique, homemade invitations designed to reflect their occupation or life situation. Rather than inviting them to something as mundane as a baby-shower, I'm asking them to share something....well, something keeping with their status. For instance, there's one shaped like a computer for Bill Gates and his Foundation inquiring whether or not they're able to provide remuneration benefits for the technological portion of our child's future. Technology ain't cheap, and with what Greta and I make topped by our student loans, well, this kid won't have a much in the way technology. Or toys. Or food. Hell. I start to sweat as I think about our finances. Quickly, I stuff Bill's invitation inside the envelope and I'm on to the next one. Oh good, the prospect of help from a financial mastermind. Charles Schwab gets a pop-up bull-and-bear inviting him to share his knowledge on upcoming "shifts" in the stock market. I seal his envelope and cross his name off the list with a flourish.

Greta calls out, startling me. "Jeremy, can you help me, please? I can't reach the lasagna pan from the top shelf without getting onto the stepstool."

"Yep," I call back, grabbing all the thank-you notes and shuffling the invitations from "NO ORDINARY LIST" to the bottom of the stack. Walking into the kitchen, I can't resist gently running my hand across her pregnant stomach. She grabs my hand, entwining our fingers, and continues her terrible whistling. Really, it's horrible, like a shrill, tone-deaf bird.

"Whatcha whistling?" I ask. "It sounds like Peter and the Wolf."

"What? No. Easter Theatre," she replies. She looks at me like I'm the one who is crazy. It sounds nothing like Easter Theatre. She's missed at least half the notes and is all over the scale. It's adorable. She catches my eye guiltily.

"Sorry. I just got so tired of the Baby Belly shit – oops, I mean crap. Got to get in the habit of refining my language," she says seriously. Her eyes cloud over slightly. I know she's thinking about the baby's ability to "hear" in the parents' intonations any negative or crass influences.

"I just hit shuffle on the iPod and it happened to be XTC. The baby started moving around so I played the whole album. I think the baby likes XTC."

"Greta, really it's fine." I stretch to retrieve the lasagna pan and as I do, my envelopes fall to the floor. "But what do you mean, the baby likes it?" Man, is this kid against me? Greta doesn't answer. Her attention is acutely focused on the papers I have dropped.

"What're these?" she asks. She bends down to collect them. Shit, I think, she's not going to like this.

She reads aloud. "Bill Gates? Charles Schwab?" Her eyebrows arch quizzically before taking the pan from my hand and handing back the envelopes.

"Nothing, it's nothing. Just some correspondence I've been meaning to keep up on."

"Correspondence with Bill Gates? Oh! Are you following up on your grant proposals? You've been denied for two. Maybe you should let Jeannie take a look before you send those." She must have noticed the hurt expression on my face because she quickly kisses my cheek. "Thanks for the pan," she says.

I am off the hook. I lean on the counter, trying to forget about her comment, and inhale the scent of lasagna. "It's fine. I'm glad you called for me. We agreed you would stay off step-stools. How was your day, anyway?"

"Oh, it was nice. I had lunch with Marie," she said. "We went out; I can't remember the name of the restaurant. But oh, I had a chicken sandwich with pesto. The pesto sauce was a little heavy on the lemon, actually. I wonder if I just taste things differently now. Anyway, did you know that Marie is planning to move back to Chicago? I was shocked to hear it." My thoughts wander slightly as she continues telling me about Marie. I picture Greta enjoying a chicken and pesto sandwich, crouched over a high bar table and seated on a stool that has no back. She sips of water and gasps at Marie's shocking news, hand at her chest, thumb resting in the small hollow on her neck. But as she straightens up on the stool, she loses balance and falls off of her stool. I cry out, "Oh, Greta!"

"What?" She whirls around from the simmering sauce. "Did you touch the oven?"

"You have to stay off stools!"

"I know. We agreed, and just now we re-agreed."

"No, I mean bar stools, too. The kind without the back. You could fall off of those too."

She laughs, catching her hand at her chest just like I'd pictured.

"I still have some sense of balance, Jeremy. I do not teeter and totter like an egg."

She reaches past me to grab a wooden spoon but catches her elbow on the silver canister holding the utensils.

"See? Your balance is completely off! You can't even get a spoon!" I pick up my envelopes and walk to the mailbox.

People tell us all the time we're so lucky. Or rather, they say she's great and I'm lucky. They're right. She is great; she's funny, and from the moment we met six years ago, we

understood each other almost completely. We were at an academic conference; I was presenting a paper on *Marlon Brando, Pocahontas and Me: An Exploration of Late 20<sup>th</sup> Century Afro-Anglo-Indigenous Relations in London and Seattle Through the Eyes of an Irish-Italian from Long Island*, and Greta was on the panel.

The Irish-Italian from Long Island was me. My feeling was this personal angle provided exemption from any scientific or published proof of my theory. My thesis advisor accused me of sabotaging my nascent academic career as well as ripping-off Neil Young lyrics. No matter; I argued back that in fact, I was passionately interested in showing how city development was responsible for the similar socio-economic trends in both Seattle and London. When I finally had him convinced, I didn't bother to mention that I really meant to "show" the panel. "Showing" gave me the freedom to create elaborate cardboard dioramas of both London and Seattle. This decidedly fresh perspective allowed me to create seascapes with ships and marine life. My advisor, by the way, was right. I was sick to death of academia and desperately wanted to get kicked out of my Ph.D. program but I didn't have the courage to quit.

I presented the argument at a conference. As I folded up my dioramas Greta approached me and tactfully commented, "I thought your argument was very interesting. I'm not sure I've heard anything city planners and socio-economic similarities in Seattle and London. Is this a topic you want to pursue?" Her tone was serious but I detected mirth in her smile. I liked her tall frame and candid manner. We started to chat.

After a few minutes of slightly awkward banter, she took one of the pirate ships and ran her long, slender finger along the edge of a sail. "You know, the pirates should be

depicted harpooning the whales— just to stir up a little commotion in the audience.” She looked at me and laughed.

I looked at her and resisted the urge to smile. “I’m not sure if this is a good time to tell you, but I’m Vice President of the local Greenpeace Chapter at my campus. Whales are an incredibly endangered species.”

She froze and her brown eyes widened. She blushed and murmured that she was just joking about her professed cruelty to endangered species. I couldn’t keep my pretense up any longer. I laughed.

“Oh, I’m just messing with you,” I said. “I hate Greenpeace. I hate whales, and baby seals. Mostly baby seals. I say club them, then skin them, then take the fur and go clubbing.” She stared at me with a look of horror but also something else. Affection? Disgust? I wasn’t very good at reading people. “Way to go, dumbass,” I thought. She was really pretty. And funny. And warm, with a long neck that I wanted to kiss. Perfect, really. I took a mental snapshot.

She regarded me with a raised eyebrow, still playing with the edge of the pirate ship and beginning to crinkle the edge of the meticulous cut and measured sail. I cringed slightly, thinking of the hours I spent on the sails. I reached out and took it from her but allowed my hand to rest on her fingers longer than necessary.

“I’m sorry about the Greenpeace joke,” I said. “But I’m completely serious about my dioramas. Don’t mess with them. They took hours to construct.”

She took the pirate ship back from me and smoothed the sail.

“Right, ok.” Her laugh started to bubble again. “Can I keep this one?”

A few days after mailing the newly minted invites I quickly walk home. Opening the front door, I hear Greta slamming drawers in the bedroom and muttering. At the sound of my arrival, she bursts out of the bedroom.

"You will not believe the day I had today!" she exclaims. I look at her; her face is flush with anger. I tense up.

"What happened? Is everything okay with the baby? You stopped at the hospital to look at the birthing suites, right?" I ask.

She nods. "Everything is fine with the baby, but everything is not fine with the hospital. As I was filling out the information register this volunteer punk kid tried to give me adoption papers!

"Adoption papers!" It's my turn to exclaim. "Why in the world!" Greta cuts me off. "Oh my god, if I ever see that pimply little proselytizer again I swear I'll...well, never mind. He came up to me as I was filling out my name and address. I realized someone was standing next to me and I looked up. There's this kid staring at me with a creepy expression and says, "It's not too late for your child. The father may not be a decent man, but there are plenty of homes that will be happy to have your child."

"Oh my god! That's horrible!" I take a deep breath. But wait – what? What did she just say?

"Wait, what does he mean – *the father may not be a decent man*. Was he one of the students I failed last semester? How did he know you were my wife? Why does he think I'll be a bad father?"

"Jeremy, no, this has nothing to do with you, well, not you personally. I forced him to explain himself and he just glanced at my hands and said, 'You're not married.' The little punk handed me the forms because I wasn't wearing my wedding band because of my stupid swollen fingers. Can you believe it? Seriously, what the fuck? Is this the 1950's?"

"Oh, Greta, I'm sorry." I embrace her. Secretly, however, I'm relieved that he is not one of my former students. After all, it's not like I do not try to take them aside and give them guidance. I look over her shoulder at the pile of mail on the kitchen counter. On top is my invitation to Charles Schwab. It has been returned. Written in the post master's hasty scrawl is, *Mr. Charles Schwab is not a real person.* I can't believe it.

"What? Charles Schwab's not real? Why bother using his name? That doesn't make sense," I say.

Thankfully, Greta does not pay any attention to my outburst. "Jeremy, I will not go back to that hospital. I complained to the nurses at the desk and they sympathized with me, but said they were just too busy to refuse good volunteer help. I get what they're saying but I really don't want to support that hospital. I don't think I want to deliver there, especially since Dr. Marx will probably be on vacation when I deliver. We don't know who will be working. I was already nervous about that, and now..."

"I know but—" I start to say.

"I know what you're going to say. There aren't very many hospitals around. I think the nearest is in Chapmay which is almost an hour away." She walks over to the window and rests her arms on the sill. I join her. Together we look out the window. She looks really upset. I guess she needs a few days to cool off before we talk about the hospital again.

The next day I leave work early to race to the bookstore. Minutes before, I had received an email from the *New Parents Alert*, a service offered by the bookstore; they phone, email, and even, for an extra \$25.00 per alert, send a bicycle messenger over to your work or place or residence whenever a new book or magazine about parenting comes out. This one sounded especially important; it is a ground-breaking new book called Choosing Your Child's Retirement Home and available only in limited quantities. When I arrive there's already sea of designer eyeglasses resting on the noses of anxious-looking young men waiting in line, some clutching the book tightly to their chest, others frantically flipping through it. I sprint past them to the parenting section and fight my way to the shelf where I pick up two copies. "Whew," I breathe heavily. "That was close." Since the line is so long I wander through the rest of parenting section for the fiftieth time.

We had not been "trying" or whatever it is that people say that provokes a very vivid and strenuous image of bedtime relations. We were a little surprised when we found out – but pleased. Definitely pleased. Honestly, maybe it's a vanity thing. It pleases me to think about a little tyke running around that resembles me in ingenuity and Greta in resourcefulness. Why else do people have kids? Necessity went out years ago. Family farm agriculture has given way to corporate farming, and very few lineage-based systems of government still exist. I think that perhaps I'm really onto a good theory when my eyes fall to a book tucked away in the Organic Parenting section. The cover features a faux Richard Simmons and is titled Not Dilating Early: Staying Healthy for Homebirth. I reach for it.

The introduction explains the impetus under which the book was written; he and his wife were investigating birthing suites at hospitals when they came across *Are You Sure That's Just Jaundice: What All Parents Should Know about Hospitals*, an investigative reporter's look into

nosocomial infection in hospitals. The author writes, "Within hours of admission, colonies of hospital strains of bacteria develop in the patient's skin, respiratory tract, and genitourinary tract. Hospital borne infections kill between 10,000 and 100,000 people in America every year." According to the report one in two babies will leave the hospital with an incurable disease, like Gradual Infant Death Syndrome that will languish with them for the rest of their lives. I flip to the author bio page. There's a picture of a perfectly normal, if a little hippy-dippy, couple. They reside in western Massachusetts and said they investigated over two hundred hospitals in four week period. A whistle escapes from my lips.

"Wow. Two hundred hospitals in four weeks. Lucky SOB's. They must have a trust fund."

I continue to skim the pages. There's a list of helpful hints about what not to use for aids to extrapolate the baby. The devices pictured with large "X's" through them are plungers, bungee cords, car jacks, WD 40, the "string and doorknob" approach (such as used for pulling teeth) and pitchforks. The pitchforks, the book notes, could damage or dent the skull. As the introduction concludes the author warns the reader that the following pages are not for everyone, just those who want to ensure that their babies have the healthiest future possible. I shut the book doggedly.

"What a cheap ploy, scaring new parents with nonsense about hospital borne infections. We have enough to worry about," I think as I pay for the three books at the cash register. This homebirth book is an impulsive buy, sure, but Greta will think this book is hilarious. Perhaps reading about homebirth will help her realize that the hospital is not so bad.

Greta meets me at the door when I arrive home. A rope is tied to her waist. Instantly the "string and doorknob" approach from the Homebirth book I had just purchased leaps to mind.

"It's to measure my belly progress each month," she explains. "We can mark each month with a piece of different colored tape. That way, we don't have to mark on the wall."

"Oh great! Then we can keep the rope as a memento." As I examine the rope, I laugh aloud, shake my head and gently tighten it around her expanding belly and attach a piece of blue tape.

"What's so funny?" she asks.

I remove the rope from around her middle and fling it around my neck. "It's just like the baby – it's a noose!"

She doesn't smile.

"Oh, c'mon Greta, I'm only joking," I say. Quickly I reach into my bag and pull out the book on homebirth. "Here, look at this! I got you a hilarious book. Maybe the hospital won't seem so bad!"

She takes the book from my hand and turns it over in her hands, still not smiling. A few minutes pass before she says anything. "So my reaction to the hospital is just a joke to you, something that I need to get over?" I don't like the way she's looking at me. It's a look without any clues about what the right answer is.

I stammer a reply. "What? Oh, no. Well, I don't think so, unless you do. Wait, I forget the question. What's the question?" My body starts to sweat a little.

"Jeremy, this hospital really freaks me out. I'm sure it doesn't make any sense to you – after all, *you're* not the one carrying our child, so you just think I'm overreacting but the

place where we decide to have our child is very important. The kind of environment he or she is ushered into will set the initial tone for his or her life!"

I know what I should say, and I know I should not argue, but I'm angry. "Greta, Jesus Christ, I can't help that I'm not the one carrying our child. I know that the hospital seems terrible but what are we supposed to do? We might not make it to another hospital in time. Besides, we'll be with a doctor, not the stupid volunteer." I try to bring my voice under control again. "I do think you're overreacting, sweetie. You're six months pregnant, and it's probably a little late for us to choose a new hospital."

"Well, I don't think I'm overreacting, Jeremy. I think this is really important," she says.

Dinner is pretty quiet. I do the dishes afterwards, sighing loudly every few minutes so that Greta will ask me what's wrong, but she's much better at ignoring me than I am at ignoring her. She settles onto the couch and flips through the book. I pass by the couch every so often and nonchalantly peer over her shoulder. I see chapters like *Pull Gently and Tear Here: Directions for an Umbilical Cord Surrender* and *Afterbirth: Do not refrigerate*. She sits enthralled, but I feel like it's within a world I can't access.

She finally breaks the awkward silence. "Jeremy, this book makes some startling good points. It turns out there are a lot of baby mix-ups, and not just the kind where parents go home from the hospital with the wrong baby. Mix-ups like circumcising the wrong baby or giving the baby the wrong vaccinations."

"I never thought about any of this stuff," I say. I chose my words carefully. "But I'm sure the hospitals are more careful than the book makes them out to be." Inside, however,

I'm extremely alarmed. What if someone double-vaccinates our child and gives him/her smallpox instead of preventing it?

Greta is silent for a few minutes before she giggles. "Hey Jeremy, if it's a boy, do we want him to be circumcised? Are you happy you're circumcised?"

Reflexively, I look down. "Totally. Otherwise other boys will make fun of me."

"Jeremy, I'm serious."

"So am I!"

Greta slowly nods. I can tell she isn't really listening, and before I can commence with a soliloquy on benefits of circumcision, her eyes widen to the size of saucer plates.

"Oh god!" she exclaims. "Listen to this, Jeremy. 'A person who starts life with a traumatic hospital birth is more likely to end it with a violent suicide. Studies demonstrate that there may be a link between how people are born and how they chose to die. *Do you want your child to commit suicide, or even to be subject to subconscious violent fits when he/she puts on a scarf or a turtleneck?*'"

She jumps off the couch and dashes off.

"Honey? Are you okay?" I call. "Did that make you gag or feel sick?" I am surprised; she's six and a half months, which is well past the sickness stages. I do not hear anything and get up to check on her, but the bathroom is unoccupied. "Greta?" I call out again.

"I'm in here, Jeremy," she answers. She's clicking away on the computer. I stand over her shoulder, relieved that our fight is over when my heart sinks. She's Googling homebirth. I watch as the screen loads with a surprising number of "trained birth specialists" around us and Greta furiously jots down names and phone numbers. She looks at me and

"What in the world makes you say that?" I am surprised at the brazen tone of her voice.

"It's just a sense I have about these things," Anne answers. There's a weird musicality in her voice was not previously there.

Greta snorts a little. "A sense."

"Do you know," said Anne, pouring tea that smells like mushrooms into three mugs. I didn't remember seeing a tea service for the last fifteen minutes. "Women who find out the sex of their baby have a 50% more likely chance of being the victim of a third-degree burn?"

I nod, panicking slightly because I did not know that, but Greta protests hotly. "That's ridiculous. What kind of statistic is that? And if it's true, why did you just tell us we were going to have a girl? Do you want me to suffer a third-degree burn? You don't even know me – us!" Greta stands up. I remain seated and pretend sip my tea. God, I just wanted to have a normal birth in a hospital with a doctor.

Anne also leaps to her feet. "I can see you won't subscribe to my kind of homebirth plan. You can show yourselves out."

"You're right we won't subscribe to your homebirth! You're nothing but a phony." We leave, Greta cursing Anne. I feel overjoyed. It looks like we're going to have a normal hospital birth after all. I start the engine and back out of the driveway.

"So the book she was reading when we arrived is The Homebirth Professionals' Bible. All the blogs talk about it. It's full of ways to scare and scam people into homebirth. I'll be damned if I'm going to be conned. This is my – I mean our – child, and we're going to do this birth thing right," Greta exclaims.

"Greta? Honey?" I ask timidly. "What blogs and books are you talking about?"

She does not hear my question before continuing. "And you know what else? I think the tea Anne served was the same tea that homebirth book warns against because it induces early labor!"

Greta continues to talk as I drive the car. Something dawns on me. All along, I've been operating under the premise that I'm as essential to this pregnancy as Greta. But I'm not. I'm on the periphery. I glance over at her, determination etched on her beautiful face, and am very concerned about having a homebirth. It just doesn't seem safe.

The next day is Sunday and another appointment, this time with a male homebirth nurse. We meet him in the driveway and he starts by saying that med-school wasn't for him; there were too many rules and tests. Greta and I glance at each other, not sure what he's talking about.

"You know, medicine, man, it is like not supposed to be an exact science..." he trails off.

"Not supposed to be an exact science?" Greta repeats incredulously.

"Yeah, you know. Medicine is supposed to be felt, you know, like intuitively. Like what you feel when you have chemistry with someone. It's not rigid, with rules and stuff. It's like a dance where neither partner knows the steps. They just feel their way through the steps as they go along." His eyes linger on Greta's swelling bosom and shapely middle.

I grab Greta's hand and lead her to the car, calling out no thanks as he protests our leaving. Greta is laughing and chatty on the way home from this appointment. I do not say much.

"Greta, can you drop me off at work?" I ask quietly.

"Honey, really? I thought we could have dinner together and talk about the questions we should ask at the next appointment. We have only one left." The disappointment in her voice is evident.

"Sorry, Greta. I'm really behind on mid-terms," I lie.

"But Jeanie said your grades were..." She does not finish her sentence. "Fine, Jeremy. I'll leave you at work."

"Greta, really, I'm sorry. I'm just so behind. Besides, we have two weeks until the next appointment," I reply. She doesn't say anything. I knew what she would say – that my midterm grades have already been filed – but I do not fill in the blanks. I realize that I really am behind. Let Greta figure out where and how to have the baby, and I will concentrate on what we do afterwards. I hadn't even cracked the book about our child's Retirement Home. Time was ticking fast.

Over the next two weeks I continue to research, and spend more and more time in my office. It's turning into a labyrinth, and I crossly refuse access to colleagues who drop by unannounced. Similar to the baby invitations, I have developed a strategy for examining all of the research that I'm ingesting. It involves a very large roll of parchment paper, twenty one feet long, and it is divided into three feet quadrants. Quadrants are color coded until the child reaches the age of seven, and each sectioned area lists the crème de la crème tips and techniques, behaviors to watch out for, and discipline methods according to top experts. The parchment gives me a lot of room to write and expand, and I can also post sticky notes of theories to check back on as research develops.

We're coming upon seven months. I check the mail religiously and still no replies from anyone on the "NO ORDINARY LIST." Bummer. I read constantly; in the morning,

at dinner, before bed. Greta does the same thing, but with her homebirth books, blogs, and websites. The day before we are scheduled to meet with the last homebirth nurse Greta tells me that I do not need to go with her to the appointment.

"Really, I'll be just fine on my own."

"What? To the appointment? No, of course I'll go. You need a protector from all the crackpots." I peer over the top of my book.

"Really, no. Actually, I'd prefer to go on my own," she says firmly.

I rest the book on my chest. My stomach is tittering strangely. It's like when I was a kid and no one picked me for their dodge ball team. "What's wrong, Greta? Don't you need me at all?" I say.

"Of course I need you, you silly man. But you're not onboard with having a homebirth and I'll be able to get a better sense of whether or not this is a good idea if you're not there. I'm not totally committed but I do want to earnestly investigate all the options."

I nod slowly. "Okay, Greta. Whatever you think is best" I say quietly. She leaves the true. The book continues to rest on my chest as I stare blankly at the wall.

"Like a dream" is the only way Greta explains the final meeting with the homebirth nurse.

"Oh, really? That's, umm, great," I reply. I want to be supportive but inside I'm groaning.

"Her name is Lauren. She's easy-going and I feel so comfortable around her. She's a little new-agey but certifiably sane and best of all, she had a homebirth. Her daughter is three

and so cute! Lauren's coming over in a few days to observe us in our environment." Greta's eyes and cheeks glow with excitement.

Lauren arrives at our door a couple of days later. Her daughter is in tow. Lauren and Greta greet each other like they are old friends. I eye all of them suspiciously, especially the daughter. She does not seem like a freakish home birth child; her head is not misshapen, and I do not see horns or lopsided ears under her brown curls. Still, I'm not convinced.

Lauren and Greta walk around this house, discussing how to transfer the downstairs bathroom into a birthing center. I stay in the living room and eventually Lauren's daughter totters into the living room and sits down in front of me on the floor.

"Sooo..." I want to say something but I'm a little lost. "What's your name?" I raise my voice an octave and stretch my mouth into a big happy grin. Too bad she's not a little older. I could ask her if she likes being a home-birth child and if she remembers anything.

She looks at me warily and doesn't say anything. I don't blame her. My smile is totally unnatural. My stomach growls. "I'm hungry," I say aloud. Her eyes brighten.

"Hey, are you hungry, too?" She nods. "Well, that's super!" I exclaim. We get up and I lead her into the kitchen. I get some cookies and hand one to her, but not before lifting up her top lips with my index finger to make sure she has teeth. She does. She is also fascinated by the cookie. I tuck a napkin into the collar of her shirt. She finishes her cookie and holds her hands out for another. "This isn't so bad," I think. "Parenting won't be so hard." I hand her another cookie and we munch, happily bonding over cookies. I hear Lauren call out,

"Sasha?"

I answer. "We're having a snack in the kitchen!" They walk in and Greta looks at me with a pleased expression. We exchange a smile. I then glance at Lauren and my smile fades. She looks horrified. "What is she eating?" she exclaims.

"A cookie," I reply timidly. "But they're the low-fat kind."

"A cookie?" Lauren repeats. She reaches over and takes the cookie gently from her daughter. "No, sweetie," she says. Sasha wails.

"Jeremy, it was really sweet of you to watch her. But we haven't introduced her to refined sugar yet," Lauren says. A look of concern crosses her face. "It's not your fault, but you'll learn when you're a parent that you have to ask the parents before you give any food to a child. What if she had allergies?" She bends down to comfort Sasha.

I feel like such an idiot. "You're right, Lauren. I'm so sorry. Listen, I'd be happy to watch her until the sugar-high wears off. No more cookies, I swear." I try to joke but nobody laughs. "Gosh, I remember reading something about this in a book, too. It just totally slipped my mind, and I am really so sorry."

"Well, Greta." Lauren turns towards my wife and Greta smiles, embarrassed on my behalf. "You're in great shape, both physically and emotionally, to have a homebirth, so just let me know what you two decide. We'll need to get started soon if you opt for a homebirth," she says.

Greta glances quickly at me, her hands resting on her swelling stomach. I can tell she's already made up her mind in favor of the homebirth. Now her brown eyes are pleading with me, asking me if I'm okay with this. I'm not okay with having a homebirth. It's weird and gooey. I'm not ready and okay with any of this. I can't even give a kid a cookie. I'm going to tell her exactly what I think. I close my eyes for just a moment and prepare to tell Greta and

Lauren exactly how I feel. I start to open my mouth. My body is trembling and quivering but I've got to be strong. I want to reason with Greta and tell her that hospitals are where people should have babies. It's much easier. Her decision not to have the baby at a hospital, where the drugs are plentiful and pain is managed, all because she's worried about nosocomial infections, mixed up vaccinations, and overall, making sure that our child has a happy experience coming into this world, is just plain regular nervousness. We'll get through it. My head is swimming when suddenly Greta gives me a lovely, hopeful smile. I'm taken aback by the hope in this little gesture. Against all my instincts, I nod my head yes. Greta sighs happily.

"Lauren, we'd like to have a homebirth if you'll be our provider." The two women hug happily. I glance at Lauren's daughter, whose cheeks and eyes are starting to twinkle with a sugar-induced craze. I quickly gather their coats.

Greta and I continue our pattern after Lauren's visit, each performing a prodigious amount of research. Exhausted, I leave work to come home and together we clean the house, set up the baby's room, and the homebirth center. We're the proud-owners of a homebirth tub that we have set up in the downstairs bathroom. (I wonder if we can rent it out to someone after we're finished with it?) I am not comfortable with any of this but Greta assures me that I only need to be as involved as I want to be, and that I do not need to be in the bathroom while she's giving birth. I think she knows how much this scares me. The time is getting close and I keep my cell phone on, and close to me at all times.

One night I wake up around 2:30am to Greta pulling my arm. I open my eyes. She's red-faced and breathing heavily. I try to pull her into bed but her grip on my arm is firm. "Jeremy, I think I'm in labor," she says through her teeth.

My mouth is dry. "Labor? You've still got a month left," I say hoarsely. Suddenly I am hot. Unnaturally hot.

Scrunching her face up she tersely replies, "Think my water just broke. I was on the couch and I woke up about an hour ago. I felt like I was having contractions but I told myself they were false contractions, and I tried to ignore them. But I felt a kick and suddenly I was wet. The contractions seem like they're happening really fast. Every fifteen or twenty minutes."

I sit up and give her a quick hug. "Okay, don't worry. I know what I'm supposed to do right now." I grab the phone and Lauren answers on the third ring. I quickly explain.

"This is a little early." The concern in her voice is apparent. "I'll pack up my supplies. Jeremy, don't worry, but if her water broke an hour after the contractions, and the contractions are only twenty minutes apart, then it'll be soon. I hope I get there in time. It might just be you and Greta for the birth," she says. My mind goes blank. I suddenly think they are playing a very nasty prank. Greta must have called Lauren and together they staged this whole thing.

I try to listen to Lauren. She is speaking very fast.

"Take the tarp off the birthing pool and run a little bit of warm water into it. Not hot, just slightly warm. Let Greta walk or sit or squat – whatever feels comfortable – but make sure she's on the ground level and close to the birthing room or the shower. Okay?" she hangs up abruptly.

Oh god. I need to stay calm. I hear Greta's slow pacing upstairs in our bedroom. I run up the stairs, two at a time.

"Oh good," she calls out before I enter the room. "What did Lauren say? Is she coming?" The fear on her face matches my own.

I lie. "Lauren said not to worry. First pregnancies are unpredictable. She's on her way. She wants you back on the ground floor, though. Near the birthing pool, so what do you say we head down?"

Greta nods. I put my arm firmly around her waist but she shakes her head. "Just support my left side, okay? Like you would an old granny."

"Sure. Okay." We make our way slowly down the stairs. Greta rests on almost every step, breathing deeply and closing her eyes. She is concentrating incredibly hard.

"Bad, huh?" I say as we near the last step. My hand trembles as I rest it on the wall. I don't think it's from supporting Greta.

She does not seem to hear me. I want to pick her up, carry her to the birthing pool, plunk her down and demand that she stay there until she has the baby. No walking around, no pacing. Just hang out in the birthing pool until it is all over. When we set our feet solidly on the ground-floor corridor I slowly exhale. Greta shifts her weight from me and starts to walk down the hall, but in the opposite way of bathroom where the birthing tub is set up.

"Where're you going, honey?" I call out. I need to keep my tone light. "Birthing palace is this way."

"I want to walk. I can't stay still, oh god..." she stops, her sentence caught in mid-contraction.

"Okay. I'll just start the water and then come and walk with you." I run down the hall and turn on the knobs, tearing off the tarp as I did so. The birthing pool is pristine, just like Greta has left it. She'd probably cleaned it earlier today. I thought about the chemicals and hope they have dissolved or lessened or whatever they do. Shaking, I test the water. Lukewarm. I close my eyes, still half-asleep and cannot register what is happening. "Involved as much as I want, huh?" I think to myself.

I hear a yelp and suddenly Greta appears at the door. I didn't know pregnant women could move that fast. "Jeremy, I think I should get in the tub."

"Of course, Greta. I'll help you in. Here, give me your hand."

She pulls off her nightgown to reveal her sweaty pregnant body. I feel a strange mix of arousal and awe. Even though we dress, shower and sleep together every night there is vulnerability to this moment of her nakedness different than when she steps from her morning shower. My hands reach underneath her sweaty armpits to help her into the tub. She exhales and inhales gently. I quickly switch on some music. We start to breathe and count together.

"One, two, three," I say. She doesn't hear me. The pain is evident on her face. I feel so helpless. I touch her hair, her face, but she squirms away from her. She's so low in the tub that the only things I can do are stroke her hair and grab her hand. I can't decide if I want to run away or if I want to be right next to her.

"Greta, you're doing great." The words sound so hollow. She squeezes my hand. "Lauren will be here soon." I jump, interrupted by Greta's blood-curdling scream. I think about the neighbors. I guess I should have warned them; after all, I do not want them to think I'm murdering Greta. She grips my hand even tighter.

"Oh, God, that was a bad one," she exclaims a few minutes later. I can't stand this.

Quickly I make a decision and stand up, retrieving my hand from her clutch.

She looks at me with incredible sadness. "You can leave if you need to. I said it was okay." She speaks in panting gasps, another contraction coming on.

I start to strip off my clothes.

"Jeremy, what the hell are you doing?" she asks.

"Greta, I want to help. I'm going to get in the tub with you so I can be right beside you. I feel so helpless over here." What am I saying? I can't get the tub. I had read and knew everything that is going to come out of her. Birth, afterbirth, shit, placenta, blood, tissue. Oh Jesus. I'd never feel clean again but I need to help, and I move to lower myself into the tub. Greta kicks my ankle and shin, water slapping against the sides of the tub and spilling over the sides. She shrieks.

"Oh my god, Jeremy, no! Get your clothes on! Eww, get out of my tub! There's no room for you in here. You stay outside of the tub! Lauren might have to fit in here. She's the deliver, not you!"

I wince at the pain in my leg. Greta's a hard kicker. "I've read books where the father can be the deliver. I want to be the deliver," I say. I sound a little whiney.

"Jeremy! God dammit, you didn't even want a homebirth! You didn't even want to be in here! If you wanted to help deliver you should have said something earlier. You need to go through special classes. Now is not the – ow!" she gasps and then loudly farts. Bubbles erupt underneath her.

I roar with laugh. I can't help it; farting is always, gods help me, hilarious. Greta laughs too but her giggles alternate with cringes and painful exhales. "Ow, ow, ow! It hurts so bad!"

I return to my place outside of the tub and we start to resume breathing exercises. The front door slams. "Oh shit!" I exclaim. I untangle my boxers from my clothes. It's in the nick of time, too; Lauren is suddenly in the bathroom. I squeeze Greta's hand again and I can see relief on her face.

"Lauren!" she exclaims. "We're happy to see you!"

Lauren immediately washes her hands and removes some instruments from our closet. "How are we doing, guys?" She speaks loudly over the running water, looking over her shoulder. She spies my clothes on the floor. "What's going on?" she laughs. "Jeremy, did you decide you wanted to get in with Greta?"

I ignore the question. "Lauren, the contractions are so close. It seems like every five minutes now." Lauren eases her arms into the tub and touches Greta. She nods at me. "It's going to be very soon," she says. "You might want to leave."

"No way," I say firmly. I kiss Greta's head again and she looks up at me. A momentary look of tranquility passes over her face. "I'm so excited, Jeremy. I can't believe we're about to be parents," she says.

Lauren begins to give us directions, asking Greta to tilt up and telling me to get some ice chips. I jump up to run to the kitchen but before I do, I return Greta's look of excitement.

"Don't forget to continue breathing, honey. I'll be right back." The look she returns to me is part sheer gratitude and annoyance for telling her to breathe. That's enough for me.

Blue Linen Dining

Next to the Blue Linen's elevated platform of Thonet bentwood armchairs, it sits roughly one meter high, and is a seat so cushioned that it is much longer. The chair holds much more than the place's historic weight. Therefore, the chairs of the dining room hold down much more than the weight of the restaurant's menu, which is still unopened. The chair is where the Blue Linen's history is held in each hand, hundreds of receipts crumpled from the back room, and the blue and white stains of Stevens' and wife as Diners have come and gone, the chairs unopened and regular diners here show no greater respect for their past than the waitstaff do. By gathering at the table with their backs to the front door of the guest chairs as they approach their destination, I am surprised at the new steps. Afterward, even if they have to leave in Stevens' car.

The main entrance is a bolt of Danish glass. Behind it is more bistro around and devils only a few purple idlers. It is early afternoon, talking sharply, the back doors and girls up two heavy glass-gilt bushes of favorite polgs and over the table, walking carefully down the R1 platform high. Her walk, from the arbor that wraps just the front door is framed by a laurel of the steps, herly meeting the weight of papers flapping in the wind, continuing the development of open concept environments, the green scaffolding, up and when construction starts work, carefully watching faded overhanging leaves behind and replacing them with bright pink ones. Looking down at the newly paved sidewalk as the walls, the blue, both plain or hot colors and others. "I'm not a

"I'm not a spring chicken," she thinks. She steps before all the guest seats in chairs, breathing heavily. She leans against her warped frame, bent from the back of her wrinkled

### Blue Line to Damen

Next to the Blue Line's elevated platform at Damen Street is an enormous rocking chair. It sits roughly ten stories high, and is a regular rocking chair except that it is much larger. The chair is also much taller than the grimy El platform next to it. The large, flat surface of the rocking chair's seat holds three small, yellow houses, only one of which is still occupied. The chair is reason that the Blue Line train route is always busy; each year, hundreds of tourists transfer from the Red Line Loop to the Blue Line at Merchant Street Station and ride to Damen Street to see the enormous chair. Longtime neighborhood regulars know better than to get off the Blue Line at Damen because of the bottleneck tourists cause by gathering at the door, necks craning and stretched to get a glimpse of the giant chair as they approach their destination. Locals opt to get off at the next stop, Milwaukee, even if their house is closer to Damen.

As train lurches to a halt at Damen Street, Darlene Hanson looks around and notices only a few people riding. It is early afternoon. Inhaling sharply, she bends down and picks up two heavy three-gallon buckets of furniture polish and exits the train, walking carefully down the El platform steps. Her arms tremble under the weight and she rests for a moment at the bottom of the stairs, barely noticing the sound of banners flapping in the wind, announcing the development of open-concept condominiums. She passes scaffolding equipment where construction crews work, carefully removing faded crumbling brown bricks and replacing them with bright peach-hues. Looking down at the newly paved sidewalks as she walks, Darlene feels pain in her knees and elbows.

"I'm no spring chicken," she thinks. She stops in front of the giant rocking chair, breathing heavily. She leans against its warped frame. Sweat from the back of her wrinkled

neck drips onto the frayed collar of her yellow raincoat. The stench of decaying wood permeates the air. The chair is rotting because of thirty year's exposure to humid summers and windy, icy Chicago winters. She reaches into her pocket and pulls out a key to unlock one of the harnesses affixed to the basin of the rocking chair. It dangles above worn and dying patches of grass. Darlene grabs one of the metal chains that affix the harness to the top of the chair's rounded, curvy armrest. Rusty residue remains on her hand. There are a total of three harnesses, as well one large bin on a separate pulley for groceries and heavier items. They all run on a mechanized chain pulley with a simple on/off lever. They are the only way to trek up and down from the rocking chair. The deep, bucket-style seats resemble infant swings found on blacktop playgrounds.

"I should just get an elevator installed," she thinks. She smiles wryly. "But just who would pay for that?" Before Darlene climbs into the harness, she takes a close look in front of her. Nicholas, the boy always hanging around doing a city housing assessment, said that the rusty playground equipment underneath the chair would be cleared out today. So far, it has not been removed.

"Wish they'd hurry up with it," she grumbles. "There are a lot of new kids in the neighborhood. What if they start playing here? I can't be expected to keep my eye on 'em all the time." With a sigh she begins to lift the bucket of furniture polish when suddenly a voice calls out to her.

"Mrs. Hanson! Wait! I'll get it for you!" She turns around to see a group of young people headed down the street, one of whom is running. She recognizes the young man with modern glasses and lots of different colors in his hair. It's Nicholas, the one who is assessing the houses on top of the rocking chair, as well as the chair itself.

"Those look so heavy. Here, let me help you," he says. Eagerly he takes the buckets from her hands and plops them into the basket before she had a chance to say no, not that her arms would have let her refuse the help anyway. She gives him a tight-lipped smile.

"Thank you. I do appreciate that," she says.

"No problem," he beams. "How are you today, Mrs. H? Feelin' fine? Do you want to use the lever to get to the top, or may I use the manual pulley? I could totally use the arm exercise." He looks at her and flashes a broad smile. She is slightly charmed by his youth and energy.

"If Matthew was alive he'd be like Nicholas," she thinks wistfully. Aloud she replies, "Oh, I'll use the lever, thank you very much."

Her hand winces as she remembers the first – and last – time she let Nicholas use the manual pulley to hoist her to the top of the chair. Due to his enthusiasm, Darlene had smacked repeatedly into the leg of the chair but she was too high up for him to hear her protests. She had tried to extend her legs; as if she were on a swing, to minimize her jostling to and fro, but this had done little to stabilize her movement. She screamed down to ask Nicholas to slow down but he mistook her leg extensions, waving, and faint cries for frivolity. He waved back, clearly enjoying her ride of terror, but suddenly and without warning, he stopped pulling. He must have thought she was safely at the top and let go of the pulley. She started a fast descent down before she could grab the pulley chords. The abrupt motion seared her palms, causing a deep, stinging pain.

"Are you sure?" He asks cheerfully, hands on the pulley rope. His friends, a man with dark hair and a young woman, approach behind him. Nicholas turns around and says hello. They wave to her, signs of recognition on their faces. Darlene smiles only slightly in

return. "They probably recognize me from all the damn newspaper pictures," she thinks. There have been many pictures from the past thirty years that have featured her dangling from the sides of the chair in a harness, polishing and buffing the legs, armrests and seat, her grimaced expression captioned by phrases like "Keepin' up the resale value."

"They're here to take some preservation photos." Nicholas explains to Darlene before she can protest their arrival. They look around, fascinated. Darlene is embarrassed by the dilapidated grounds surrounding the basin of the chair, and cringes as the young woman removes a video camera.

Darlene calls out, "Y'all should do your nosy filming at the top of the chair. It's nicer. I can manage well enough up there, cuttin' the grass and puttin' in flowers, and I polish the chair every week. But it's hard to keep up down here. Too much work for one old woman! The city should help me take care of it." She looks again at Nicholas and instantly regrets her words. His eyes sparkle.

"Exactly what I've been saying, Mrs. H! Why should you take care of this on your own, especially since the insides of the chair are rotting? This is a very valuable piece of property and we need to take care of it as a community. In what other great city in this great country does a gigantic, working rocking chair reside – and the history that surrounds this place! We owe it to future generations to take care of this great structure," he proclaims.

Darlene sighs. They've had this conversation a hundred times throughout the past few months. But before she responds she listens for a moment to Nicholas's friend, the man with dark hair and smooth white hands.

"The houses above reside entirely on the seat of this chair; Jaffe was such a genius to construct entirely from discarded billboards, and reinforce them with large sheets of scrap

metal," he said in an authoritative tone. Darlene rolls her eyes slightly. "Genius?" she thinks. "Genius would have put up a fence around the top of the chair."

They continue to stare and film, moving to the chair's undercarriage when the young man snickers. They are standing in the playground and looking up at the underside of the chair's enormous seat.

"It looks like a carnival massacre," the young woman giggles. Darlene notices Nicholas smiling in slight agreement, his eyes lingering over the young woman's svelte figure. Darlene supposes that it does look carnival massacre; the way the billboards are meshed together result in odd images and haphazard designs, like Jane Fonda's taut arm suddenly interrupted by Oprah's head, or Geraldine Ferraro's head inside Burt Reynolds shiny metal mouth. Models and celebrities, whose beautiful faces and bodies were once celebrated precisely for their symmetry and elegance, now, have body parts mangled together in odd contortions. Glancing at Nicholas, Darlene feels very angry and offended.

"Look." Darlene snaps, turning her attention back to Nicholas. He turns away from the woman quickly, surprised at Darlene's tone. "It's not that I don't get what you're saying. I know you want to save this chair. But the figged reason this was built was so people would have a new housing environment. What'd they call it —a new cityscape? Chicago wanted to give poor folks a chance to own a home. That's what me and my husband wanted. We just wanted a home, and this wasn't exactly my dream home when we first came here, some forty years ago, but it's been home for so long I don't know what I'd do if it wasn't. Besides, what happened to me and my family might happen to someone else if I don't stay." She glances up to the chair's fenceless perimeter before taking a deep breath to calm down.

Nicholas sighs deeply and kicks at the ground with his sneaker without meeting her gaze. "Mrs. Hanson, we've been over this before, many times. I am sorry about your loss. And the loss of your neighbors; I can't imagine what you must have gone through. I can't imagine how it must feel to lose a husband and son off of the edge of the chair, like pencils off desks, because there's no fence! I don't want you to feel like I'm trying to get you out of your house, but I also can't imagine why you'd want to stay." He looks at her scornful expression. A slight redness flushes his face before he continues. "But watching this beautiful structure wear down through all the wind and rain, not to mention termites, and exacerbated by the neighborhood's real estate, well, I'm afraid we'll lose it forever if we don't act fast." He, too, takes a deep breath. "Hey, what if we moved your house – just the house – somewhere different? Would you like that?" He looks at her hopefully, trying to lighten the mood. Darlene looks at him incredulously.

"I don't suppose I can explain it, not to you – you're just a boy. This house, this chair – even with its bad memories, they're still my memories. You couldn't pay people to move into the neighborhood back then. The only people who lived here were the ones like me and William. Poor folks who couldn't move anywhere else. It's not much but it's mine and it's all I've got. It's the only house I'm ever gonna own outright and I'm old. I don't want to move. As long as I'm alive and I own the deed to the house, then I'm staying. And it still bothers me that there's no fence. Why won't the city just put up the damn fence? Why don't you help me do that?"

"But aren't you lonely here, too? You never get to talk to anyone but me." He continues to ask her questions, hands no longer on the harness pulley but firmly at his sides.

"Of course that's not true." She sniffs slightly, throwing her head high into the hair. "I've got my church friends and my library work; you're just the pesky boy hanging around bothering me all the time," she says. It is a bit brusquer than she intends. A shocked look crosses his face. Well, it serves him right, she thinks.

"I see." He begins to walk away. "I'll try not to bother you, Mrs. Hanson. I'll be around for the next few days to finish my assessment, but I'll certainly try not to disturb you." He reaches across Darlene and flips the lever to "on." The chains squeak slightly as the gears spring to life and carry her towards the top. She wants to call down an apology but she's already too high up. He will not be able to hear her.

"Drat," she thinks. "Well, I'll bake him those peanut butter muffins he likes so much, and invite him over for one the next time he's up here." She looks around and sighs. She talked to him so long that the sunshine has disappeared beyond the clouds and heavy rain clouds are pillowing together. "I'll have to wait until tomorrow to polish," she thinks. She grabs the heavy buckets from the basket and drags them through a waist-high chain-fence gate that surrounds her yard. The fence is a recent addition, one that she installed last year when the first of the surveyors and contractors start to slink, square inch by square inch, onto her property. The first few times she saw tell-tale yellow chalk dust too close to her property, she went outdoors, walked across the seat of the chair to the other yards, and rapped on the ragged storm doors to politely ask whomever happened to be working to review their boundaries. Some would sheepishly apologize. Others were brazen and rude.

"Lady, are you nuts to still live here? This chair is falling apart. There's no way your house is up to code," one contractor said. He inhaled his cigarette and looked at her. He was fat, with ruddy, weathered skin and a dirty orange contractor shirt. Darlene didn't reply to

the man. Her stomach was nauseous. His statement reminded her of an article she read in the Tribune. They were interviewing one elderly man who said that the phrase "up to code" was like a death sentence to elderly people. Darlene knew that houses that were not up to code, and whose owners didn't have the money to get them up to code, were forced to move out.

She peeks out of her windows all afternoon, and the next day, looking for Nicholas but he does not appear. "I hope he's okay. Maybe I should call him...I have his card, and he said to call anytime. Well, tomorrow, if he doesn't come by, I'll call," she reasons. "I can eat my humble pie," she smiles to herself. She has missed his chatter. It was nice to have a young person around.

She awakens that night to the sound of breaking glass and sits up in bed, alarmed. "Sounds like it was in the living room." She reaches for the baseball bat. She can't find it; she leans over a bit, frantically reaching underneath the bed when she realizes her bed is sliding gently across the room. She relaxes.

"Damn students always want to rock my chair." She tries to aim her feet into her drifting slippers, feet rocking to and fro. "Hoodlums! Can't they let an old woman sleep? Humph! And on a Sunday, too. They should be ashamed," she mutters aloud. She gets out of bed.

"Why do they always rock my chair on Saturday nights? I've got church in the morning." She wanders into the living room, realizing that the swaying will take a week to stop. "Maybe I *should* move. There's probably no place in the world where an old woman gets woken up from being rocked." Darlene scans the floor to see what shattered. Her heart

sinks; the frame that held the first and last family picture she took with William and their son, Matt. She lifts the photograph from the shards of glass carefully before sweeping them into a dustbin. Slowly she paces for a little bit before settling into her regular sized rocking chair.

"Oh, shoo," she says. A lump is rising in her throat. She flips on the television, pressing the "Up" arrow frantically before something familiar catches her eye. She gasps at a rerun of the evening news.

The television is flooded with pictures of her chair and the houses on top of the chair. "Where'd they all come from?" she wonders angrily. She only has pictures of the chair that she clipped from newspapers, and a few snapshots. This is a collection of color pictures, some from above the chair and some up close. One early picture is especially beautiful; the day's last few strands of sunlight had escaped to illuminate the chair's velvety hue. Tears prick at the corners of her eyes but she laughs out loud.

"God, how young and stupid we were! Buying a house on top of a chair...I told him he was crazy! But we just wanted a house so bad." She remembers the day when William had burst into their apartment, his eyes filled with a look she'd never seen as he thrust papers into her hands. They'd only been married a year and she was newly pregnant. He'd kissed her, gently pulling her onto his lap and announced "Baby! We're gonna buy a house!" His deep voice was filled with pride.

She had been speechless. Always, they had lived in apartments; she figured that they probably always would live in an apartment, crowded on all sides by neighbors and their noise. She got up from his lap and stood looking out at the rows of apartment buildings that stretched across the city.

A house! Her heart had bounced high, trying to climb out of her throat. A house, maybe a yard. Their child would grow up in a place where there was no landlord demanding rent from them. Her head was swimming.

Skeptically she had asked, "William, how can we afford a house?"

"Some experiment by the city. We've got to act fast," he said. She returned to his lap, grabbed his face and kissed him hard.

"Then you better act fast," she said. They grinned foolishly at each other.

More pictures flashed on the television in front of her. They were recent and showed the Mission-style back slats were covered with widespread rot. They looked like a thousand termites had chewed them. She clenches her hands, realizing that since she cannot reach up there to polish, she didn't realize it was so bad. As suddenly as they started, the pictures stop flashing and a familiar voice came across the airwaves.

"Where do I know that voice from?" She moves closer to the screen. Nicholas! Her heart jumps with a little bit of pride at seeing him on television, even if it is 4:00 am. But it is a different Nicholas than she had encountered this afternoon; a camp of cold steeliness has settled around his eyes and he is speaking with new confidence. She increases the volume.

"...it's just not safe up there for Ms. Hanson any longer. The damage and decay is severe, and we can only imagine the decay underneath the floor-boards of the house, and all the pressure it's placing on the seat of the chair. Water has obviously been trapped underneath the house because of the lack of proper foundation, and I am amazed the houses have not crashed through the seat of the rocking chair. The rotting is so bad that the chair actually smells. This chair deserves better...Jaffe's memory deserves better. This is an amazing piece of unique art for the city and the city deserves to have it preserved for years to

come. I want Mrs. Hanson to be happy and to have her home, but we've got to consider restoration procedures and the long-term life of the chair. Besides, it's clearly not sustainable – no one has been permitted to move in for twenty five years because of the tragedies of the past.”

The camera panned back to the reporter. It is the lovely young woman who was here earlier this afternoon. Darlene’s blood boils. “So that’s why he’s doing this,” she thinks. “Stupid boy.”

“But given even these tragedies, which Mrs. Hanson certainly knows all too well about; this is a piece of private property, and not a piece of historical property. I suppose you’re saying that the chair must be considered seriously. It was, after all, originally a public service announcement to symbolize Chicago’s commitment to reusable products and to public housing. This was pictured as a new kind of community space, a cityscape that was elevated off the grimy streets where children could play safely, sheltered from the drive-by shootings and drug crimes that plagued the neighborhood.”

Darlene rolls her eyes at the vixen. “Yeah, a new cityscape all right, but without a damn fence.” She listens for Nicholas’s reply. Nicholas is a good kid, she thinks.

“Correct.” Nicholas takes a deep breath. “But that is why, on behalf of the neighborhood association, today I filed a complaint calling for the city to recognize the chair as a piece of eminent domain property, and not private property.”

The camera returned to the young woman. “The Damen Street rocking chair will be a story we’ll follow closely as it evolves. Nicholas Breton, thank you very much.” The camera cut away and Darlene hears the beginning report about the Chicago Cubs’ losing season.

The remote slips from her hand as the words race through her head. Eminent domain? What does that mean? She owns her house. What did he file this afternoon, and why?

She owns her house. The thought races back and forth across her mind. She rises and walks quickly into her bedroom to take out an old wooden box. Carefully she sifts through the papers. William's death certificate and nestled deep inside the folds of his, she knows, is Matthew's. She can feel the weight of it without looking. A single picture of their wedding day; a picture of her parents, also long dead, and some of Matt's first toys. Finally she finds the deed to the house that is made out in her name. The life insurance company put the house in her name after the accident, assuring her that she owned the house on top of the chair. It was hers and no one could take it away from her unless she sold it to them.

She breathes a little easier later that morning as she dresses for church. "Well, I'm not gonna sell it. It's my house." She hurriedly drinks a cup of coffee and then leaves her house. She harnesses herself in and begins her descent down to the street. As she approaches the ground she is shocked. Below are hundreds of people gathered; a few old people, but mostly young people with unnaturally white teeth who are holding signs as reporter's wave microphones.

"We won't let the man displace you, Doris!" one man with tortoise shell glasses yells into a camera.

"Doris?" Darlene says aloud. "Who's Doris and why are they gathered at the bottom of my chair?" She climbs out of the pulley. No one notices Darlene.

The camera swirls to another man. "Preserve historical art!" Darlene freezes. The chanter is Nicholas. Others cheered behind him. He notices the swinging pulley before

anyone else. He meets Darlene's eye. She extracts herself from the straps of the harness and holds her gaze.

"Why are you doing this?" She yells over the commotion and charges at him. He, too, makes his way toward her, a determined expression on his face. The crowd on the other side notices her and chants "Save Doris!" even louder, moving swiftly between Darlene and Nicholas. They push her to the center of the protest group. People cheer and a put their arms sympathetically around her shoulders. She brushes them off.

"Who are you people? I don't want any of this!" she shouts. "I just want to live here in peace! Nicholas, why did you do this to me?"

No one says anything; it's like a bad dream. She's screaming and no one listens. People next to her inch away, looking at her like she is crazy. Exhausted after her long sleepless night, she looks around and for a moment she thinks that she sees Matt and William. Impossible, she tells herself. There are too many memories whizzing by her, outside of her mind, outside of her control. A loud squeak from a bullhorn breaks through the crowd. "Testing, One Two," Nicholas's voice echoes through the bullhorn.

"Thank you for coming out today. I want to try and clearly explain our position, which, thanks to the "Save Doris!" signs, seems to be a little confused. First of all, her name is Darlene Hanson." A few people in the crowd laugh; the people who hold the "Save Doris" signs turn bright red. Nicholas continues.

"She's a wonderful woman, and we're not trying to displace an elderly lady from her home for sport or profit." A feeling of hope swells inside her. He's not trying to displace her! She looks at him on the platform and feels a rush of gratitude.

"Shush, all you," she says to the people around her. She wants to hear.

Nicholas's voice is shaking. There's slight decrease in the noise from the crowd before he continues.

"But we'll do what we have to do in order to preserve and restore this beautiful and iconic symbol but we can't do that until the houses up there have been demolished. We've already started the dismantling of the other two homes up there. The third, as you know, is occupied."

Darlene's skin tingles in shock and she slumps towards the ground. "Whatever he has to do, he'll do," she repeats. Tears gather her eyes. "I've been such a fool to think he was only assessing."

His voice breaks through her thoughts. "... and what we've found is disturbing. The floorboards are completely eroded; what if the decay continues and the playground we're working so hard to assemble underneath is destroyed because the houses from above cave in?" Momentum builds in the air. People on both sides of the debate are listening attentively and their "Save Doris" signs recline next to them.

Darlene stifles a sob before it escapes her lips. The victims he's talking about are *hers*, she thinks, her tiny son, her husband. The lights are flashing and popping, even though the sun is shining brightly. Just like the flash of lights from the ambulance as it roared down Damen Street.

She had been indoors, cooking dinner while William took Matt outside. Matt was just learning to walk, tittering and tottering all over the house. She had placed locks on the doors, the windows, everywhere; she was terrified that somehow he would get out and fall off the chair. But as long as he was with her or William, he was safe. William took him outside for fresh air while she cooked dinner. A half-hour passed and dinner was almost ready. She went

outside to find them. She opened the screen door and instantly heard ambulance sirens. She knew what they were for. She sped from the house, down the pulley and onto the ground. She saw their crumpled bodies only for a split-second before the medics quickly drew sheets over them but before they did, she saw William's arm was curled and perfectly tucked underneath Matt's body, like Superman.

Without warning, she is confronted with microphones and reporters. "Darlene, how do you feel? Do you think that the chair should be preserved? Are you going to go to the city clerk and fight the filing of eminent domain?" The questions are fired at her fast.

"I feel – Well, I'm going to – What?" She stands confused, people surrounding her. "Why, um, yes. I'm going to the city clerk and tell him not to give the –um, the domain." She stumbles over the foreign words while trying to remember "city clerk." The city clerk will help her keep her house. They continue to huddle around her. "Darlene, do you feel about the announcement is somewhat of a relief for you? You won't be reminded of the deaths of your family any longer?" Darlene gasps at this question and her face crumples. Nicholas is suddenly in the middle of the reporter circle.

Nicholas clears his throat. "I'd be happy to answer any more questions if anyone is interested," he says. He looks straight at Darlene, an unreadable expression on his face. The reporters whirl around. Darlene looks at him for another moment. He catches her eye again, momentarily, and jerks his head sharply to the left where the pulley is located. She slips away undetected. Inside her house the box of mementos still lies open on the floor but she steps over them and falls into bed, exhausted. She wakes up much later that day, terrified and sweating. In her dreams, William and Matt were alive but insisted that she bury them

anyway, underneath a large egg-shaped headstone. She refused and they took the shovel from her,

She jumps at the sound of the factory whistles blowing a few miles away. It's 4:50 am. She has been lost in sleep and nightmares for an entire day. She gets out of bed immediately to make sure she is the first person at the city clerk's office. She drinks a large glass of water, the coolness refreshing her dry mouth as she tries to forget yesterday's events.

"I'll beg them to not to grant domain. I need to remember the deed, too, to prove I own the place." She waits for the Blue Line in the damp morning air, the smell of bagels and pastries wafting up from the Ukrainian Village. They smell delicious and her stomach growls hungrily in appreciation. She paces a little bit on the platform, heading in the general direction of her chair. She sees decay and wood rot along the top and quickly turns away from it. When the train arrives she falls into a seat on the train, watching the neighborhood whiz by.

When she arrives the heavy iron gates at city hall are closed.

"Foolish old woman." She looks at the cold marble columns and heavy, gilded door handles. "It's 6:00 am. 'Course they aren't open."

She starts to walk west down Randolph Street, over the Chicago River, realizing that is has been years since she's walked in this part of town. She passes people in the various stages of waking and preparation for their day; friendly early morning joggers pass her, nodding politely. A few young people scurry home from a late night out, their hair mussed, eyes bleary and shirts wrinkled, smelling of alcohol. The daybreak transforms; young and prosperous people who look like Nicholas surround her. Darlene tries to meet their eyes, desperate for companionship, but they all avoid her. They walk straight ahead, ears

preoccupied with cell phones or iPods, and hands gripping cups of coffee. She wants to scream at them, "Why did you betray me?"

The brisk, unfriendly wind ushers her along. The sun streams over the buildings and through the glass windows, revealing the grime and dirt. She looks up to see tall apartment buildings quietly encompassing her on all sides. Quickly, she turns southeast and heads toward the lake, crossing underneath Lake Shore in the South Street Tunnel. There's sand underneath her shoes. She kicks them off her shoes and walks towards the water, shivering as she tentatively dips a toe into the cold water. She breathes in quickly and deeply as she watches the sun dance over the bright blue lake. The sounds from the noise of the city ring in her ears, her back firmly to the tall apartment buildings on the city blocks behind her.

## Satire and Absurd Humor in Contemporary Fiction

In his 1957 essay, *Laughter to be Taken Seriously*, British satirist Kingsley Amis reflected on the work of celebrated English satirists. Amis stated that his generation's work differed greatly from the work of predecessors like Evelyn Waugh and Aldous Huxley because "their world is not our world" (Dooley 26). In his statement, Amis highlighted one of satire's key features. Satire is not only a genre with "an aim, a preconceived purpose to instill a given set of emotions or opinions into its reader," it is also a genre that elucidates an era's political and social timbre (Worcester 14). Traditionally, satire identifies, defines, and comments derisively on the follies of political and social figureheads in order to elicit reactions from the people affected by the follies. Satire is also a genre with a long and illustrious history. Lisa Colletta, in Dark Humor and Social Satire in the Modern British Novel, argues that satire as a genre has changed dramatically in the past two centuries. Likewise, Amis comments on satire's shift in his essay, and both critics agree that democracy in Great Britain and America meant that church and state no longer wielded the same power they once did. The shift in social and political control also meant that satirists could no longer appeal to the public if they, the satirists, focused only on social and political outrage. Realizing who one's audience is, and what they are interested in, is an integral part of any fiction writing, but especially satire (3-9).

As Amis noted, satirists must construct fiction that reflects "their" world. The current fiction writer's world is rife with political and social commentary, so if one wants to write about contemporary events, then one must do so in a fresh and engaging manner. In 2004, an article from the United Kingdom's *The Guardian* referred to the next, now current, tide of writers: "the next real literary 'rebels' might well emerge as some weird bunch of anti-

rebels ... who treat of plain old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence, humor and conviction. Who eschew self-consciousness and hip fatigue" (27). The literary rebels that the *Guardian* referred to are some of today's best-known American fiction writers: Judith Budnitz, Gary Shteyngart, and Aimee Bender. These authors use literary elements like parody and humor to infuse new energy into millennium old subjects like politics and social injustice. Above all, however, what connects these authors is their use of absurd humor. A rise of absurd humor in fiction is typically a response to feelings of frustration and desperation with regard to one's political and social climate (Cornwell 16). "Absurd" is laden with semantic and philosophical debates, but a review of Neil Cornwell's Absurd in Literature provides a working definition: "the absurd has been defined as a breaking down of norms," and it studies human behavior under circumstances that are highly unusual (24-29). When political and social situations are unstable and uncontrollable, absurd humor offers entrance to fictional worlds that are even more unusual. Absurd humor is not a relief or an escape from polemic times; rather, it juxtaposes the absurd to our current, real world.<sup>1</sup>

*The Guardian* characterizes the work of these authors by not only what they are doing, but also by what they are *not* doing. I will spend a moment discussing what these authors are not doing because it defines my motivation for writing fiction that is satirical and absurd. *The Guardian* noted "the literary rebels" were participating in an active pull from a self-conscious tone. This tone featured heavily in 1980's and 1990's fiction. It is difficult to translate "hip

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<sup>1</sup> Absurdism and Theatre of the Absurd have dense histories. For the purposes of this essay, I will refer to absurd humor as a study of human behavior that is highly unusual.

fatigue" into literary elements, but Patricia Waugh's book Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction describes qualities such as "an extreme self-consciousness about language, literary form and the act of writing fictions; a pervasive insecurity about the relationship of fiction to reality; and a parodic, playful, excessive or deceptively naïve style of writing" as metafiction qualities (4). These characteristics were prominent in best-sellers of the past fifteen years like Dave Eggers's 1997 A Heartbreaking Work of a Staggering Genius; Nick Hornby's 1995 High Fidelity; or Helen Fielding's The Diary of Bridget Jones. While these authors are not metafiction giants like Thomas Pynchon and Don DeLillo, their work does exhibit metafiction qualities, namely a sassy first-person narrator that describes the author's inner angst as he or she is writing about their character's inner angst. For example, the introduction to A Heartbreaking Work of a Staggering Genius begins with "Rules and Suggestions for Enjoying this Book." One of the rules states "you might want to skip much of the middle, namely pages 239-351, which concern the lives of people in their early twenties, and those lives are very difficult to make interesting, even when they seemed interesting to those living them at the time" (1). Egger's suggestion that people skip this part of his book is self-referential because the novel is about him when he was in his mid-to-late twenties, which is also the time in his life when he wrote this novel. Egger's self-consciousness style where he sees *himself* as a character/commentator in his work rather than just as the author exemplifies characteristics of metafiction. Understanding the literary techniques *The Guardian* referred to as hip fatigue and self-conscious tone of voice has helped me to define what "it" is that current writers are moving away from. They are participating in a literary exodus away from the self-conscious tone of voice. Whether or not the recent burgeoning of fiction featuring self-conscious tone of voice has a correlation to

Budnitz, Bender, and Shteyngart's motivation for writing absurd humor and social satire is difficult to say. It is clear, however, that these authors do use satire and absurd humor in their fiction.

While I cannot comment on the motivation that drives other authors to create satire and absurd humor, I can comment on my own motivation. I am highly motivated by considering the self-conscious tone of voice and not including it. As my title "Reluctant Misanthropes" suggests, my characters struggle not to be just cynical curmudgeons. Let me make clear that I do not think the self-conscious tone of voice is bad or produces mediocre fiction; rather, my opinion is the self-conscious tone of voice typically does not ignite conversations about social issues. Rather, this tone opens doors to discuss personal issues, and I found that I tired of reading many best sellers in the 1990's because of their concentrated personal narrative feel. They provided opportunities to explore the individual self, and I wanted to read and write contemporary fiction with more social relevance than just heartbreak and a thirty-something coming-of-age narrative. In my short stories "Blue Line to Damen" and "The First" I focus on social issues relevant to America today, like gentrification and the displacement of elderly people, and the hoopla of preparation and anxiety new parents undergo. In this essay, I will explore Bender, Budnitz, and Shteyngart's use of political or social satire and their expression of absurd humor in the context of exploring similar elements in my own fiction.

Satire and absurd humor are certainly within my work, but not always in quite the same way as I expected. "The First" opens with an absurd scene. The protagonist and narrator, Jeremy Hardy, is busy writing baby shower invitations to wealthy American philanthropists. Jeremy desperately wants his child to have the best possible future in

America, and he so turns to Bill Gates and Charles Schwab for loans, grants, or information about the stock market. He is not sure what the best future for his child is, but he is sure that it involves access to vast monetary resources. Jeremy's action, writing to Bill Gates, is absurd, but the context is satirical because it is a commentary on the pressure new parents undergo. Parents are expected to have considered before they have their first child how they will pay for the child's college education. "The First" is about the vast amount of information available and recommended for all parents, but especially first time parents. It is also about the preparation that goes into absorbing and sifting through the information. Jeremy discusses how excited he and his wife Greta are to have their first child but that they are also nervous. Part of the reason they are so nervous is because all of the information they are reading. They realize all of the things they have not prepared, such as saving for their child's retirement home. The information available to new parents is a fun premise with absurd and satirical promise. Browsing the new parents section at the book store is an awe-inspiring experience. There are how-to books on every imaginable topic. The premise of most of these books is that parents can raise a certain kind of child by following the book's rules. In and of itself, this is not an absurd notion, but row after row of parenting books is both overwhelming and curious. Satire comes from considering all of these books in connection to one another. When are parents supposed to stop reading parenting books and be parents? Most notably, if you're a new parent, how are you supposed to know which book is the best, and what if you miss the seminal book on a particular topic?

Throughout their reading and investigation, however, Greta and Jeremy emerge as independent thinkers. The crux of the narrative is Greta's realization that she does not want to have the baby in the hospital. She had a bad personal experience at the hospital, and after

reading a book Jeremy bought as a joke, she decides that a hospital birth is not the only option she has. She elects for a homebirth. This decision causes a rift between her and Jeremy. Jeremy does not understand why she wants a homebirth but he decides, however, that where to have the baby is “ultimately” Greta’s decision because she is the one who is giving birth. Jeremy sulks and feels left out of the birthing process decisions. He concludes that it is Greta’s decision where to have the birth and he will focus on discovering what books recommend the best parenting methods. I intended to continue to satirize Greta’s decision to have a homebirth as well as Jeremy’s preparatory measures but it became clear to me that ending the story works best if Jeremy realizes parenting cannot split down the middle where one person can take the half that suits them. It’s a partnership, and the way to best depict their partnership is if the story resolves with both of them in the home bathroom for the birth.

“The First” examines a popular topic but in an atypical frame. Plenty of fiction already exists that portrays caricatures of men afraid of children and marriage; last summer’s popular film “Knocked Up” is a recent example of this stereotype. “The First” is narrated from the perspective of a man who is fearful of becoming a new parent, but not because it means relinquishing his time to hang out with his buddies. One author I frequently turned to for assistance narrating and creating a male narrator was Aimee Bender, and in particular her story “Motherfucker,” from her short-story collection Willful Creatures. “Motherfucker” is not a gratuitous depiction of sexual fetish and lust. It is an insightful discussion into a socially relevant topic popularized by glib media sources like *People* magazine: the notion that men are unable to maintain committed relationships with women. Whereas a reader might expect the title character to exhibit negative traits normally associated with this derogatory

term, the protagonist simply states, “I fuck mothers” (72). He describes himself literally and this representation is likely to draw wry smiles from her readers. Bender’s work exemplifies social commentary expressed by non-stereotypical characters. Jeremy is afraid of the world that society, for lack of a more definitive term, has created for new parents, but he is not like many male protagonists who are afraid to be parents. Like Bender, I focused on a social topic that is generically referenced as “a norm,” and offered a non-norm view.

Judy Budnitz’s stories also rely on absurd plots, as well as exceptional imagery. Her ability to artfully transition between situation and substance is a characteristic I try to emulate in my own fiction. For instance, the opening line in “Dog Days,” from Budnitz’s first short story collection Flying Leap, is: “The man in the dog suit whines outside the door” (3). This line is playful but urgent; Budnitz does not try to convince readers that a man in a dog suit is anything other than real. There’s no mention of a dream sequence or a man that looked like a man in a dog costume. He *is* a man in a dog costume. Budnitz is true to the definition of absurd humor because a man in dog suit is a very unusual study of a man in a remarkable situation. One challenge with absurd plots, especially ones that are as improbable as Budnitz’s, is how to maintain absurd tension. Readers are likely to have at least initial doubts about such fantastic and absurd events. The following conversation is an example of how Budnitz addresses a reader’s doubts.

“No collar,” says my mother. “He must be a stray.”

“Mother,” I say. “He’s a man in a dog suit.” (2)

This conversation reiterates to the reader that a man in the dog suit is not the norm; he is an exception. It is important for the reader to know this is an exception because otherwise they

will grasp for clues about what “world” they are in. We quickly discover that the man is in a dog suit because economic depression has rendered near apocalyptic ruin and the man is insane. Budnitz’s transition from absurd situation into concern for this five-person family focuses the reader’s attention. Her pacing is even more appreciated when compared to another contemporary writer, Stacy Richter. Richter’s story “Caveman in the Hedges” also starts out on a strong absurd note, “There are cavemen in the hedges again” (1). I like Richter’s playful tone as well as the lingering suggestion that cavemen are epidemic problems that continually plague the characters. The story, however, doesn’t transition quickly enough between quirky detail and the story’s substance. Richter spends too much time describing the Neanderthal return to her neighborhood, and by the time the protagonist returns to the narrative, I’ve forgotten who he is and why he is telling the story. Budnitz demonstrates that maintaining traditional story elements, like pacing, is crucial with absurd situations.

Similar to Budnitz, I wanted to immediately introduce my absurd element in “Blue Line to Damen:” “Next to the Blue Line’s elevated platform at Damen Street is an enormous rocking chair.” But I did want remain focused on this element for long because I wanted to move beyond my absurdism to launch quickly into a story about gentrification. Gentrification occurs in rundown neighborhoods where property investors or neighborhood associations renovate properties. Renovations typically cause property values to increase. The original members of the neighborhood, typically poor and/or elderly people, cannot afford to live in the renovated neighborhoods. The main characters, Darlene Hanson and Nicholas Breton, represent the arguments for and against gentrification. This is a relevant social issue, especially in major cities like Chicago, which is the setting for Blue Line to Damen. Darlene is an elderly woman who will be displaced from her home if gentrification

occurs. Nicholas is a young man who is concerned about preserving a unique piece of city architecture, the same piece which Darlene's house happens to occupy. In the story, a giant chair is a rare instance of avant-garde architecture by a famous (fictional) artist. It is quickly eroding because of the lack of care its structural elements, namely the seat, have received over the past thirty years. Descriptions like "the stench of the wood permeates the air" and "the rotting, warped back slats" indicate the chair's disrepair. Nicholas is concerned about the disrepair and wants to preserve the chair for future generations to witness. In order to do this, however, the city must declare the chair is a historical object. If the chair is declared a historical object, then Darlene will be displaced "from the only home she's ever had." Both characters are deeply concerned about the chair's future but neither is motivated by money. The arguments for/against gentrification are polemic, but removing extraneous considerations like money highlight, in my opinion, equally weighted arguments.

The story's social premise leaves ample room for satire. Satire is reflected in the voices and actions of the periphery characters. Characters like the protestors at the impromptu rally on page are particularly ridiculed. For instance, one protestor who turns up to support Darlene refers to her as Doris. No matter which side of the debate they fall on, if they are uninformed about the issue, they are ridiculed. To a less obvious extent, Nicholas's friends who come to the chair to take preservation photos are also mocked. Darlene overhears the man describe the avant-garde creator of the chair as a "genius." She reflects that a genius would have put a fence around the perimeter of a ten-story structure. This revelation also pokes at one of the story's nestled ideas: why in the world did a city allow houses to be built on top of something so high without a fence or a wall? It's absurd, but is it so absurd that a city wouldn't do something like it this a weird PR campaign? Instead of

just building safe, affordable housing for citizens, the city decided to build something flashy that was extremely ill conceived. The presentation of this new affordable housing is absurd, but it also points to a very touching human desire: the longing that many people, not just Americans, have for a home. A home represents stability, and although Darlene has a home, it is not physically stable. This is represented most obviously by Nicholas's determination to preserve the chair, thus pushing her from her home, but also symbolically by the midnight prank that a group of teenagers play on her. They rock the chair, which is an active and fun image, but the act of rocking the chair is intended to signify that her house is on unsteady grounds. The story's ending also indicates that the house is on unstable grounds. Darlene experiences a wide range of emotions in the story because it is a realistic depiction of gentrification. There will be absurd, satirical, humorous, and sad moments.

Contemporary celebrated American author Gary Shteyngart's 2003 novel Absurdistan has earned him comparison to Kingsley and Martin Amis, Evelyn Waugh, Saul Bellow, Joseph Heller and Vladimir Nabokov. It is his characterization of modern society that earned him a place next to such esteemed writers. Shteyngart exercises no mercy in satirizing both American and Russian citizens. He writes about Russia, "our intelligent, depressive citizenry has been replaced by a new race of mutants dressed in studied imitation of the West, young women in tight Lycra, their scooped up little breasts point at once to New York and Shanghai, and men in fake black Calvin Klein jeans hanging limply around their caved in asses" (4). In developing the scene in Blue Line to Damen where Darlene finds a crowd of protestors in front of her chair, I considered the way Shteyngart characterized both the West and the Russians in this scene. Misha described everyone as a fool, and that was the image I really wanted to portray as Darlene took her pulley down to

the sidewalk in front of her chair. As I mentioned above, I wanted everyone, even the people who support Darlene, to look like fools. I achieved this through the periphery character's dialogue. They chant the wrong name ("Doris") and say idiotic things to the press. The point is that no one except Darlene can understand the full magnitude of the situation and yet, hundreds of people turned out to voice their uninformed opinion. This scene stands firmly as a strong moment of satire because I'm clearly criticizing any uninformed protestors, no matter which on side of the debate they fall. Shteyngart's fiction helps me understand a particular problem with writing satire. Satire is ultimately a hard-nosed genre that does not allow for nuanced perspectives. My stories will never reflect traditional satire until I derisively take a side.

I mentioned at the start of this essay that satire and absurd humor are not always present in the quite the same way as I expected. Satire and absurd humor play a major role in my fiction, and I'm also attracted to fiction writers who use satire and humor, but my fiction is also about exploring human relationships and emotions. While satire and absurd humor figure largely into the works of modern authors, no literary genre or element is ever an island onto itself. It's interesting to consider why what current authors are doing might be a response to the writers who preceded them, but I can only draw comparisons to their work and my own. I'm not sure if absurd elements and satire in contemporary fiction are the result of a departure from metafiction. I know they factor heavily into my fiction. I have also realized through the course of writing this essay that literary elements will never nestle comfortably inside each other like matryoshka dolls. At the start of my exploration into the fictional techniques, elements, and influences of my short stories, I sincerely hoped that I would be able to tease out one genre, hopefully satire, and contain my conversation to how

other elements like humor prettily popped out but quickly retired, put their feet up contentedly, and let satire take the foreground. I wanted an essay that was neat and tidy, but in-depth exploration did not yield that. An honest exploration of my work has revealed an amalgamation of many genres and techniques. I suppose that like most writers at any given period of time, I'm a product of previous and current influences, and as I write, I consider what's been done and how I can make a subject fresh and engaging. As a writer, I find Amis's words, "their world is not our world," very comforting. Those words provide allowances for change as well as room to seek new ground.

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# JARON ALENA TURNER

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## EDUCATION

**Master of Arts Candidate, English, August 2008**  
Indiana University  
**Master of Library Science, December 2006**  
Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis  
**Bachelor of Arts, English, minor Spanish, May 2003**  
Indiana University

## PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATIONS

**Member**  
American Library Association

## RESEARCH INTERESTS

Information fluency curricula and standards;  
Global e-journal programs;  
Access to information barriers in developing countries

## TEACHING INTERESTS

Library curricula for developing countries

## WORK EXPERIENCE

### **Assistant Librarian**

Cornell University, Albert R. Mann Library  
February 2008-present

### **Project Assistant, VIVO and WorldAgInfo**

Cornell University, Albert R. Mann Library  
August 2007-January 2008

### **Graduate Intern, Library Administration**

University of Notre Dame, Hesburgh Library  
August 2006-December 2006

### **Collection Maintenance Coordinator**

University of Notre Dame, Kresge Law Library  
December 2004-July 2006

### **Library Assistant, Access Services**

University of Notre Dame, Kresge Law Library  
July 2004-December 2004

### **Intern**

The Onion  
January 2004-April 2004

### **Tutor**

Indiana University Writing Center  
September 2000-2003

## ACTIVITIES

### **Outreach Coordinator and Developer**

Global Access to Literature

### **Volunteer**

Red Cross

### **Assistant Editor**

2003 Indiana Undergraduate Research Journal

