

# QUARTERLY PRESS REVIEW

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## The Benefits of Being Cold

by James Hamblin

When you first put on the ice vest, you will feel cold. Not intolerably cold, but cold enough to make you think, *What am I doing with my life?* Or, at least, as numbness spreads across your shoulders and down your back, *There must be better ways to lose weight.* And there are. But as an adjunct to those better ways, the vest carries some unlikely promise.

The sturdy Han Solo-style garment is loaded with ice packs, and it's inspired by a theory gathering momentum among scientists: namely, that environmental thermodynamics can be harnessed in pursuit of weight loss. The basic idea is that because your body uses energy to maintain a normal body temperature, exposure to cold expends calories. The vest's inventor, Wayne B. Hayes, an associate professor at the University of California at Irvine, claims that wearing it for an hour burns up to 250 calories, though his data are very rough. A little more than a year ago, he began selling the vest, which he calls the Cold Shoulder, out of his Pasadena apartment. Name notwithstanding, people won't ignore you when you wear it.

Ken K. Liu, a principal at a hedge fund in Los Angeles, has been wearing the vest under his suit jacket on and off for about a year. He told me that some people's first reaction to the unwieldy getup is "What the hell are you doing?" As soon as Liu explains the concept, though, many of them say it

sounds like a good idea. Others still think it's "stupid" – as did my colleagues, when I wore one – but Liu has not been deterred. Each morning while his coffee is brewing, he takes his vest out of the freezer and dons it without shame. Liu was never "fat," by his estimation, but he says he did carry a few extra pounds that he had trouble dropping, despite exercise and attention to diet. The Cold Shoulder closed that gap.

Hayes's ice vest was inspired by the work of Ray Cronise, a former materials scientist at NASA who now devotes himself to researching the benefits of cold exposure. During the swimmer Michael Phelps's 2008 Olympic gold-medal streak, Cronise heard the widely circulated claim that Phelps was eating 12,000 calories a day. Having been fastidiously trying to lose weight, he was incredulous. Phelps's intake was more than five times what the average American eats daily, and many thousands of calories more than what most elite athletes in training need. Running a marathon burns only about 2,500 calories. Phelps would have to be aggressively swimming during every waking hour to keep from gaining weight. But then Cronise – who knows enough about heat transfer to have been employed keeping astronauts alive in the sub-zero depths of space – figured it out: Phelps must be burning extra calories simply by being immersed in cool water.

Fascinated, Cronise began a regimen of cold showers and shirtless walks in winter, and he lost 26.7 pounds in six weeks. He began measuring his metabolism during and after cold exposure, and found that his body was burning a tremendous amount of energy. Rather than storing energy as fat, his body was using it to sustain his core temperature. Cronise's preliminary experiments led him to put together what is now a pretty high-tech lab in his Huntsville,

Alabama, home, where he conducts miniature scientific studies, mostly on himself. All of this attracted publicity, naturally. Timothy Ferriss hyped Cronise's unorthodox weight-loss success in the 2010 best seller *The 4-Hour Body*. That same year, Cronise gave a popular TEDMED Talk. *Wired* ran a feature story describing his home laboratory, titled "The Shiver System." Through it all, Cronise endured not just the obvious physical discomfort of his endeavors, but the discomfort of personal and public criticism. Some detractors raised concerns about regularly exposing one's skin to cold (Cronise shared these worries); others accused him of diverting people away from solid principles of weight management and toward dubious shortcuts.

Cronise believes that his weight-loss story was misunderstood and may have distracted people from the important issue of nutrition. "You can't freeze yourself thin," he told me. "When I first started, I had kind of a naive approach that I was going to suck calories out of people." But his interest in altering metabolism through exposure to mild cold – which he defines as 55 to 65 degrees Fahrenheit – has only grown. Such temperatures are far enough below the socially accepted range that people plunked into a 50-something degree office would complain to no end. Unless, maybe, they believed it was good for them.

The notion that thermal environments influence human metabolism dates back to studies conducted in the late 18th century by the French chemist Antoine Lavoisier, but only in the past century has it really become relevant to daily life. Cronise believes that our thinking about the modern plagues of obesity and metabolic disease (like diabetes) has not addressed the fact that most people are rarely cold today. Many of us live almost constantly, year-round, in 70-something-degree environments. And when we are caught

somewhere colder than that, most of us quickly put on a sweater or turn up the thermostat.

In that sense, we don't really experience seasonal variations in temperature the way our ancestors did. Even people in tropical regions used to get cold on rainy nights, Cronise pointed out, in a quick rejoinder to my observation that not all parts of the world have four seasons. Most other species display clearly ingrained biological responses to the seasons; why would humans be any different? He casually mentioned some informal experiments he has done with squirrels in his backyard. It was October when we spoke, and he claimed that he couldn't get a single squirrel to eat a peanut. "They bury every one I give them," he said. In the spring, though, the squirrels ate his peanuts readily. "In their world, they don't eat for entertainment," he added. Few animals do.

Cronise's latest ideas are laid out in a 2014 article he co-authored with Andrew Bremer, who was then at Vanderbilt University (he is now at the National Institutes of Health), and the Harvard geneticist David Sinclair, who is well known for his recent work on resveratrol (the "anti-aging" antioxidant found in red wine) and sirtuins – enzymes that help control metabolism. Sirtuins are active during times of stress, including when a person is hungry, and are thought to be related to the known life-prolonging effects of very-low-calorie diets.

Cronise, Bremer, and Sinclair propose what they call the "Metabolic Winter" hypothesis: that obesity is only in small part due to lack of exercise, and mostly due to a combination of chronic overnutrition and chronic warmth. Seven million years of human evolution were dominated by two challenges: food scarcity and cold. "In the last 0.9 inches of our evolutionary mile," they write, pointing to the

fundamental lifestyle changes brought about by refrigeration and modern transportation, “we solved them both.” Other species don’t exhibit nearly as much obesity and chronic disease as we warm, overfed humans and our pets do. “Maybe our problem,” they continue, “is that winter never comes.”

Their article joins a growing body of research on the metabolic effects of cold exposure, some of which I’ve reported on previously. Earlier last year, in the journal *Cell Metabolism*, researchers from the National Institutes of Health likened these effects to those of exercise, arguing that a better understanding of endocrine responses to cold could be useful in preventing obesity. The lead researcher in that study, Francesco Celi, published more research in June, finding that when people cool their bedrooms from 75 degrees to 66 degrees, they gain brown fat, the metabolically active fat that burns calories to generate heat. (Having brown fat is considered a good thing; white fat, by contrast, stores calories.) Another 2014 study found that, even after controlling for diet, lifestyle, and other factors, people who live in warmer parts of Spain are more likely to be obese than people who live in the cooler parts.

Meanwhile, Wouter van Marken Lichtenbelt, a professor at Maastricht University, in the Netherlands, has headed up a spate of recent research on the weight-loss effects of “non-shivering thermogenesis,” the technical name for the calorie-burning, heat-generating metabolic phenomenon that occurs in the mild cold that Cronise champions. “Mild cold exposure increases body energy expenditure without shivering and without compromising our precious comfort,” Lichtenbelt and colleagues wrote in an April paper.

Cronise is currently testing whether, with a low-calorie diet and a cool environment, he can maintain a healthy

weight and low body-fat ratio without going to the gym. He does not turn on the heat in his Alabama home until the coldest days of winter, which at times means letting the indoor temperature dip into the 50s. And he has – most amazing, to me – trained himself to sleep without blankets. When he talks about the practice, he uses *blanket* as a verb, as in: People used to blanket because bedrooms had no heat. Now we heat bedrooms *and* we blanket.

Even on the hottest nights, I feel like I need the weight of a blanket, or at least a sheet, to sleep. But like eating sweets or turning up the heat, he sees sheeting and blanketing as acquired habits that can be changed. He was able to wean himself from blankets gradually, by learning to sleep with them first folded down partway, and then folded further, and then, eventually, all the way down to his feet. Cold really isn’t that miserable, he insists, once you’ve gone through withdrawal and adapted to it.

Cronise said that when people tell him they need a blanket to sleep, he asks them, “Do you walk around in a blanket all day?” (Given the choice, some of us would.) But Cronise is more affable and reasonable-sounding than his anti-blanket rhetoric might suggest. The mild cold exposure he advocates might be as simple as forgoing a jacket when you’re waffling over whether you need one, not layering cardigans over flannels despite the insistence of the fall catalogs, or turning off the space heater under your desk. And if you don’t want to annihilate the environment by running the air conditioner to get a taste of sweet, calorie-burning, metabolism-enhancing cold in the summer, there are devices like the ice vest, which really isn’t as terrible as it sounds.

“The first time you put it on, it’s a bit shocking, to be honest,” Wayne Hayes, the vest’s inventor, warned me. “You

feel like, *Holy shit, this is cold.*” But after wearing it a few times, he said, most people barely notice they have it on. That was my experience. (Hayes’s wife has become so used to the vest that she wears it under her clothes instead of over them.) Hayes recommends wearing the vest twice a day until the ice melts – which can take an hour or longer – though he has himself worn it as many as three or four times in a single day.

“If you buy more than one,” he said, drifting into salesman mode, and only half kidding, “you can cycle them throughout the day and wear them every waking hour.” ♦

## Beyond the Book

by *Mark Kingwell*

The issue of reading’s future is almost always framed, these days, as a question about technology. When will e-book sales render hard copies obsolete? Will print survive? Can I monetize my hashtags? Whither Kobo, Kindle, Kickstarter? Is there a living to be made when editors expect to get quality, on-time copy for zero cents a word? Are we approaching a literary Singularity, when every human being on earth will, in fact, have written the book they have in them?

You will forgive me if I set these standard, mostly boring, contemporary questions aside for the moment. The scope of technology’s effects lies on a timescale none of us can survey, creating only opportunities for self-serving predictions – either wildly optimistic or comprehensively gloomy, depending on your interests, age, and health plan. More important, these of-the-moment technology-driven concerns do not get us closer to the heart of reading, which is a matter of human consciousness.

I emphatically do not mean that technology is neutral. Although you can use Facebook or Twitter for social activism as well as for casual hookups, just as you can use a gun to topple a tyrant or exact personal revenge, all technologies have built-in tendencies, if not outright teleologies. You can use either a pillow or a gun to kill a person, but people with guns kill more people than do people with pillows. Marshall

McLuhan was correct: sometimes the medium really is the message.

McLuhan himself could be bold, sometimes wacky, on the subject of reading. “As a drastic extension of man,” he said in a 1969 interview with *Playboy*, “the printing press was directly responsible for the rise of such disparate phenomena as nationalism, the Reformation, the assembly line and its offspring, the Industrial Revolution, the whole concept of causality, Cartesian and Newtonian concepts of the universe, perspective in art, narrative chronology in literature, and a psychological mode of introspection or inner direction that greatly intensified the tendencies toward individualism and specialization.”

That is all good fun, though it does raise the awkward question of which features of the modern world weren't spawned by movable type. Hoopskirts? Monster-truck rallies? Martin Heidegger analyzes technology with both more wisdom and more prescience. The task is not to understand the function of this or that tool, he argues, but rather to examine the way technology comes to rule every aspect of existence. This enframing, as Heidegger calls it, which places everything within the ambit of possible use and disposal, is the real meaning of technology. You could not hope to find a clearer example of this than the current debate about the future of reading. As long as we continue to think about reading in the context of technology, we will fail to see the possible effects of our self-imprisonment.

Another standard misconception is that there is a single form of reading in question, and a single future for it. Current debates are overwhelmingly premised on the false idea that “reading” in its highest or best form means reading books, most often the realist novels of the middle-class condition that have dominated the modern age. But reading

has always offered us a host of experiences, from the mundane to the spiritual, including the dipping, skimming, and hyperlinking that now seem to worry people so. The specific concern for the future of the bound book should be seen for what it is: a form of special pleading whereby a particular (how I like to read) masquerades as a universal (reading!).

I want to suggest a possible starting point that takes seriously at least the last item in McLuhan's list of effects, the idea of a “psychological mode of introspection” that attends reading, an inwardness related to individualism. I will begin by asserting the following contradiction of late technocapitalism: we (a) are more networked than ever and yet (b) exhibit a growing deficit in that fellow-feeling usually labeled empathy. Researchers at the University of Michigan, in a 2010 study, found that American college students are 48 percent less empathetic than they were in 1979, with a sharper dip – 61 percent – having occurred in the past decade. According to the U.S. National Institutes of Health, the prevalence of narcissistic-personality disorder is nearly three times as high for people in their twenties as for the generation that is now sixty-five or older. These trends strongly correlate to increasing online connectedness.

Now, one could dispute the value of empathetic connection, as various psychologists have lately done. It has highly selective effects and can lead to an irrational allocation of resources. But surely it is overall a good thing for human societies to be based on some degree of reciprocal regard for one another. Hobbesian competition goes only so far to underwrite social norms and the behavior that meets them. We have learned to be better than that, and part of how we have done so is indeed tied to reading, as McLuhan suggests.

The rise of an educated reading public was linked inextricably to the emergence of democratic liberalism in the Western world. The development of the novel as a literary form is likewise conjoined with the idea of open public discourse and rational-critical debate. The philosopher Jürgen Habermas, examining the origins of the “rational public sphere,” dwells at some length on the significance of Samuel Richardson’s 1740 epistolary novel *Pamela*. One of the first massive literary sensations in Britain, *Pamela* relates the story of a beautiful young maidservant who is repeatedly importuned and then imprisoned by her nobleman employer, who is infatuated with her. She must fend off his attempts at seduction and rape.

Often read aloud in contemporary reading groups, the novel entranced and shocked its time; it spawned critiques, imitations, parodies, unauthorized sequels, and endless discussion in coffeehouses, drawing rooms, and literary journals. Richardson’s use of letters and journal entries as raw material introduces the element of consciousness that strikes Habermas and others as so influential. We are reading Pamela’s private thoughts, with the page of her writing a kind of free interior space even when her movements are constrained. But her master, known as Mr. B, is intercepting her letters as part of his campaign to break her will. We are, then, as it were, reading over his shoulder. Mr. B begins to admire Pamela’s naturally noble character as well as her good looks, while she succumbs to Stockholm syndrome *avant la lettre* and falls in love with him. They enter into what we are meant to understand is an equitable marriage – thus the novel’s alternative title, *Virtue Rewarded* – but even some eighteenth-century readers found this happy consummation of upper-class lust a bit too neat.

The novel brilliantly enacts the process noted by Marx in which a “sentimental veil” of human interest descends over the economic realities of class, marriage, property, and procreation. But it was the psychological interest that made the novel’s success possible in the first place. In a manner now so familiar that it is difficult to imagine how revolutionary it felt in 1740, readers were able to substitute the consciousness of a (fictitious) other person for their own. This doubling and suspension of consciousness is, paradoxically, essential to enriching one’s own sense of interiority or inwardness. Reading offers a heady way of identifying with another, mirroring and reinforcing the self. We might match it with Immanuel Kant’s stirring claim, made some four decades after *Pamela*’s publication, that the motto of the Enlightenment should be a generalized version of Horace’s imperative *sapere aude*: have the courage to think for yourself!

After Richardson’s example, the gold rush is on. Jane Austen’s subtle ironizing about female existence begets Henry James’s hypernuanced appreciation of aesthetic and cultural experience, then the high-water marks of Proust’s and Virginia Woolf’s representations of consciousness itself. (Kant, meanwhile, makes possible Hegel on *Geist*, John Stuart Mill on liberty, and Wittgenstein on language, to mention just the barest few.) What such reading does, then, is something like this: it objectively summons a subjectivity that belongs to each one of us. The interiority thereby revealed and reinforced is democratic in the sense that it is available to anyone with the requisite tools of literacy and access to books.

We might argue about the relative merits of fiction and non-fiction, as the fictional characters in Austen sometimes do, but it is clear that printed books and the democratized

culture of reading they enable are the most significant developments in human consciousness since, perhaps, the advent of writing itself. Dictators and medieval monks alike feared the transmission of knowledge via printed books, a technology of access to learning and pleasure that suddenly, and massively, escaped institutional control. The monks would adapt, more or less, which is why we still have universities. The dictators would survive, too, but widespread reading made their jobs a lot harder.

What, now, of the future, or futures, of reading? It has long been claimed by boosters of reading, especially reading in those subjects usually associated with the liberal arts, that there is a strong connection between the act of reading and greater levels of understanding between people. The inwardness of reading, they argue, especially if it involves the revelation of human character, expands empathetic scope. In the standard version of this pro-reading position, the next rhetorical move is obvious: If online connection is lowering empathy and reading raises it, then – books win! Turn off your computers, dammit, and get thee to a library!

Of course, the most obvious feature of most libraries these days is their rows upon rows of computer stations. But the real problem with this argument is that its premises are dubious, if not outright false. Unfortunately, there is no evidence that exposure to literature reliably expands your moral imagination. Nor do the liberal arts make you a better citizen – a common variant on the basic claim. Nothing is more depressing to those of us who believe in the value of robust critical thought and enhanced ethical imagination than to realize that some students can pass through years of forced ingestion of challenging texts without experiencing a glimmer of either goodness or truth.

There are failures on all sides here. The failures do not, by

themselves, diminish the value of liberal-arts education generally, but let us admit that such education does not guarantee good citizens, and also that there are many exemplary citizens who have not attended a single literature class or read a word of Plato. Reading *Sense and Sensibility* may give you a better appreciation of the joys and sorrows of love, but it need not. You don't have to be a sociopath to find that prolonged exposure to the minds of fictional others leaves you with just about the same level of regard for real people as before. The station chief in Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* is the one person in the novel who has read all the banned books. He is given to deft, apposite quotation, and points out gleefully how upsetting it is that books all say different things – an emotion familiar to my first-year philosophy students. Literary exposure has not softened the heart of this villain. On the contrary, reading is the foundation of his subtle psychic violence.

For some, the problem is that the modern novel is so closely associated with bourgeois life, a mode of consciousness that we ought to usher off the historical stage. The very same individualism that came with the spread of literacy has become a global blight, a vast expression of rapacious desires and – yes – narcissism. From this perspective, the current debates about the future of reading are merely the welcome death throes of individualism. The novel form is here transformed, by the likes of Tao Lin, Tom McCarthy, David Mitchell, and Haruki Murakami, into a philosophical battlefield, with the forces of modern middlebrow conformity opposed by those of postmodern “networks of transmission.” Well, maybe. My feeling, as a reader rather than a writer of fiction, is that this is one more inside-baseball debate from which we will all benefit, just as we have from T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, Thomas Pynchon,



and David Foster Wallace.

My own set of self-serving predictions about the future of reading begins with the belief that long-form reading will be with us as long as there is such a thing as individual human consciousness. That consciousness is a complicated burden. There is stimulation and pleasure in consciousness but also boredom, anxiety, frustration, loneliness, and grief. Books are my friends when nobody else can be; they offer a form of intimacy nothing else does. They do not make me a better person, but they give me respite from the incessant noise of existence. That market will never collapse. In the future, some people will be able to make a living as writers, others won't. But writing will remain among the cheapest forms of cultural production ever, especially relative to its effects.

We experience selfhood as a story, however haphazard, repetitive, and inconclusive. While the hypothetical narrative of self may be an illusion, it remains a necessary one. This peculiar experience of human consciousness will change. It is already changing. Individualism is neither woven into the fabric of the universe nor strictly necessary for human survival. In 2035, following a determined attempt to sideline it with that centuries-long glut of bourgeois novels, with their biofascist insistence on the importance of families and relationships and whatnot, critical philosophy may triumph as the most popular form of reading in history. But even if that happens, we will continue to argue about all this, just as Socrates and Phaedrus argued the relative merits of reading and speaking more than two millennia ago. ♦

## Slang for Sex

by Jonathan Green

What we now regard as the first glossaries of English slang – they were actually collections of criminal jargon – appeared in the 1500s. Looking back, some of the details may be blurred, but the themes that would characterize slang for the next half a millennium are already evident. There's sex (to *wap*), intoxication (*booze*), and money (*lour*); man (*cove*) and woman (*mort*); the penis (*jockum*) and the vagina (*cony*). There's buttocks (*prat*) and excrement (*turd*), thieves (*prigs*) and policemen (*harman-becks*). And there's stupid (*blockish*) and mad (*lightheaded*).

When I consider the 125,000 slang words and phrases I've collected over my career, from five continents, filling an ever-expanding database, one thing's clear: slang is repetitive. It is touted as speech's cutting edge, yet its preoccupations are unchanging. The jury may be out on whether slang is a language – it's got no grammar, which means it isn't; it's an undeniable form of communication (perhaps the liveliest), which means it is – but either way, it is an unrivaled repository of synonyms.

Slang's obsessions embody what Freud called the id and I call humanity at its most human. Where Standard English cheerfully makes do with single terms – *sexual intercourse*, *drunk*, *stupid* – slang offers respectively 1,750, 2,500, and 1,000 variations. The same goes for slang's other chart-toppers: we find myriad entries in such categories as drugs,

criminals, police officers, the genitals, money, and so on. Why? Why do we need so many variations on these themes? Why 1,200 penises, and 1,200 prostitutes? Why, for Christ's sake, 220 ways of saying *vomit*? Enough, surely, should be enough, even for the most obsessively foulmouthed.

Sorry. That isn't the way slang works. Slang is not about word count, but about in crowds and outsiders, and self-definition. *We are we because we know the words; you are you because you don't.* Whereas Standard English speaks for authority, slang gives voice to the margins. Its original in crowd was criminal. The cops, who didn't know the words, were excluded. Modern slang's great constituency is the young; parents and teachers have replaced cops as the outsiders. Which brings us to why slang words replace themselves so regularly. If one person has a secret, another will betray it. And when a piece of slang escapes into the wider world, it leaves a gap that must be filled. So while the slang of the 16th century has mainly vanished, its descendants march on. We lose *wap* and get *bumbaste*, lose that and get *trounce*, lose that and get *strum*. And on it goes, until we have 1,750 terms for sex.

You might expect this lineage to die off. In an era of surveillance and social media, of confessionalism and dwindling taboos, why bother generating secret new words for old preoccupations? And yet take a look at the latest batch of slang I've compiled. Multicultural London English, as academics call it, blends elements of American rap, British grime music, Jamaican patois, and London Cockney. A vocabulary that cuts across class and color to an unprecedented extent, it's definitely new. Or is it? Some examples: *gash* (women), *shotting* (drug-dealing), *wonga* (money), *merk* (murder), *lash* (intercourse). Here we go again. ♦



MURÁNYI PÉTER

Természetes  
Nyelvtanulás

ÍGY LEHETSZ NYELVZSENI

Márciusban  
megjelenik  
a könyv!

Gyakorlati fogások, cselek,  
tanácsok, játékok, lelkesítés,  
példák 430 oldalon keresztül.

A kép alatt egy kattintással  
beleolvashatsz, sőt,  
már most megrendelheted.

[Itt beleolvashatsz](#)

## Future Shopping

by *Alana Samuels*

Humans have been trying to figure out the easiest way to pay for things for a very long time. First, they traded goats and shells, then gold and coins, then they got fancy and upgraded to cardboard Diners Club cards – followed, eventually, by plastic ones. Now cash and plastic are fading in popularity, and possibly faster than you realize. Maybe you already pay for your morning coffee with just your mobile phone. Soon enough, thanks to advances in biometrics, you might pay with just your face. Well before the end of the century, wallets will likely be museum pieces.

Futurists sometimes joke that the prospect of a cashless society is much like that of a flying car: it's often promised, but it never materializes. And yet some banks in Sweden no longer dispense cash. Most airlines won't accept cash for in-flight purchases. A number of restaurants, including New York's Commerce, have begun refusing greenbacks, accepting only credit and debit cards. "It's less cumbersome, and no one has to worry about losing money," says Tony Zazula, Commerce's owner, who notes that the change has made accounting much simpler. "There was quite an uproar, but it seems like the future is here now." Here, drawn from interviews with futurists, economists, executives, and entrepreneurs, are other predictions about the future of money.

### **Phone It In**

The shift from credit cards to phone-based payment systems is, of course, well under way. Starbucks, for example, says that 13 million people actively use its mobile app, which allows customers to debit prepaid Starbucks accounts. And this summer, a consortium of 70 chains, including CVS and Walmart, will launch an app called CurrentC that aims to eventually let people in 110,000 locations pay (out of their checking accounts) via phone. Such apps will use customer data to offer shoppers targeted coupons, and could give merchants a newly detailed look at what consumers are buying, says Ben Jackson, an industry analyst with Mercator Advisory Group.

As mobile-payment technologies multiply, checking out stands to get speedier. Both CurrentC and the Starbucks app ask customers to scan a bar code on their phone. Apple Pay and Google Wallet likewise require a consumer to pull out her phone and hold it to a reader. Future mobile-payment systems could use Bluetooth Low Energy technology, which doesn't require a customer to be as close to a checkout counter. (Already, some Safeway and Macy's stores use iBeacon, Apple's indoor positioning system, to push deals to iPhones.) For that matter, Jeremy Epstein, a senior computer scientist at the research institute SRI International, thinks checkouts could pretty easily be dispensed with altogether. If Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) tags were attached to merchandise, a sensor at a store exit could register both a customer's phone and the RFID tags on whatever she was carrying, and voilà – as easy as shoplifting – those items would be hers. Merchants can be slow to adopt technologies that are costly to install. But many retailers have already begun upgrading their systems to accept mobile payments, and we may be surprised by how

quickly phone-based transactions proliferate. For one thing, allowing customers to pay by phone can save retailers costly credit-card transaction fees, Jackson says. For another, mobile payments tend to be more secure than credit-card transactions. In some new mobile-payment systems, when a phone is scanned, no bank-account data are passed through the cloud; if hackers broke in, they'd see only the unique strings of numbers that are generated for each purchase, which are useless for anything else. In the aftermath of recent data breaches, this security edge may be especially compelling to retailers. "I have a feeling that 20 years from now, everything now done by plastic will be done by a smartphone," says Robert Litan, an economist at the Brookings Institution.

#### **Scan Me Now**

Phones are only the beginning. RFID tags are already so small that they could fit in a watch, or even under your skin. (Such implants aren't science fiction: one techie, Amal Graafstra, has written about how he installed RFID tags in his hands and RFID readers on various doors in lieu of locks, so that he wouldn't have to bother with keys anymore.)

Eventually, biometrics might allow you to carry (or implant) nothing at all. A Swedish start-up called Quixter has outfitted stores at Lund University with a system that lets students pay by having the vein patterns in their hands scanned (vein patterns are less susceptible to fraud than fingerprints, since fingerprint dummies can deceive scanners). Iris scanners have potential, too – they're hard to trick, and eyes, unlike hands, don't change much with age, says Hector Hoyos, the founder of Hoyos Labs, which works on identity-authentication technologies. Hoyos thinks payments could one day be processed automatically –

imagine your eyes being scanned as you enter an amusement park, the price of admission being deducted from your bank account as you get in line for your first ride. Of course, changes like these raise big privacy questions: if we pay for everything by phone or biometrics, companies will be able to track our movements and personal data to an unprecedented degree. Scott Rankin, the chief operating officer of Merchant Customer Exchange, the consortium behind CurrentC, says users will be able to alter their privacy settings to ensure that information about what they buy isn't used or shared. But as Epstein, the computer scientist at SRI, points out, many people won't mind sharing data if they believe they're being compensated with good deals. "Most people are fundamentally lazy and will do whatever is easiest," he told me. "What's going to be easiest is not being anonymous."

#### **Gain Currency**

Not so long ago, it looked as if we might be on our way to a single global currency, or two or three. European countries eagerly abandoned their national currencies in favor of the euro; in 2009, Zimbabwe began using other countries' currencies in lieu of its own. Economically, these experiments haven't worked out well, as the eurozone's struggles suggest. And in fact, as digital technologies advance, shoppers are likely to use more currencies rather than fewer, says David Wolman, the author of *The End of Money*. From a merchant's perspective, accepting digital pesos or rubles is less of a hassle – and less costly – than accepting foreign bills and coins.

As mobile technologies let stores track shoppers' behavior more closely, customer-loyalty programs are likely to become more prominent, effectively creating new, private currencies, says Heather Schlegel, a futurist. Better data on

buying habits will likely lead to more-targeted, and therefore more-enticing, offers. Stores might well begin to accept one another's loyalty points: already, gamers can use Subway and Burger King gift cards to buy virtual goods for online games; down the road, you might be able to use, say, your Disney Dollars to pay for things at Walmart. Bitcoin, of course, is the most successful effort to create a decentralized "cryptocurrency" – a system of exchange that relies upon cryptography to validate and secure transactions, which are recorded in a public ledger. Whatever may come of it (so far, bitcoin's value has been volatile), Bettina Warburg, a strategist for the nonprofit Institute for the Future, in Palo Alto, believes that some sort of successful "crypto-economy," in which people can exchange goods without involving either banks or national currencies, is bound to develop. That could include more-widespread bartering of services, she says, perhaps with algorithms determining a deed's value.

### **But Don't Bank on Banks – Or the Fed**

Today, retail customers' most frequent interactions with banks involve cash and credit cards. As cash disappears and phones replace plastic, banks may struggle to remain relevant. Already, around the world, new services are enabling people to move money without any bank at all. In Korea, for example, people load value onto T-money cards, which started out as fare cards (the *T* is for "transportation") and can now be used in taxis and at vending machines. In Kenya and other parts of the developing world, people can walk into a convenience store, deposit cash into an account managed by a service called M-Pesa, then transfer the money to other users via text message.

Theoretically, the more popular alternative financial instruments and currencies like bitcoin become, the less control national governments will have – over law

enforcement, over taxation, over the very functioning of their economies. After all, if most Americans were to start using bitcoins or rewards points as everyday currencies, fewer dollars would circulate in the economy, and the Federal Reserve's ability to affect the supply of money and regulate interest rates would in turn be limited. This is, at present, an admittedly distant concern: if you add up all the bitcoins and rewards points and other "special-purpose moneys" in circulation, we're still a long way from the point where they could disrupt the Fed or erode the national economy. Even so, if alternative currencies continue to gain traction, you can bet that the federal government will be on the case, Litan says. "Once a nonbank creator of money got to be any significant size, there would be huge pressure to rope it into the regulatory framework and call it a bank," he told me. (China banned the use of virtual currencies to pay for real-world goods once the combined trading volume of such currencies reached several billion yuan a year.) And if the FDIC and the Fed don't crash the party, the IRS and other tax authorities very likely will. After all, currencies such as bitcoin and Linden dollars (from the virtual world Second Life) have become popular among those who wish to conduct deals out of sight, tax-free. A failed early effort to tax frequent-flier miles notwithstanding, most of the experts I spoke with believe the government will find a way to tax alternative currencies. Various travel-industry groups have recently expressed concern that the IRS may again be considering taxing miles, as well as loyalty points from hotels. Bitcoin could easily be next. Which means that in the future, tax dodgers might have to revert to an old type of money, if they can find it: cold, hard cash. ♦

## *Side by...*

### Second Lives

by *Daniel Alarcón*

MY PARENTS, WITH ADMIRABLE foresight, had their first child while they were on fellowships in the United States. My mother was in public health, and my father in a library-science program. Having an American baby was, my mother once said, like putting money in the bank. They lived near downtown Baltimore, by the hospital where my mother was studying, in a neighborhood of dilapidated row houses. Baltimore was abject, ugly, my mother said. Cold in winter, a sauna in summer, a violently segregated city, full of fearful whites and angry blacks. America, in those days, had all its dirty laundry available for inspection – the world’s most powerful nation making war with itself in the streets, in universities, in the South, in Vietnam, in the capital just down the road. And yet my parents set about trying to make babies: on spring nights, when they made the room smell of earth, summer nights, when the city felt like a swamp, autumn nights, falling asleep on top of the covers, winter nights, when the room boiled with sex. They were not newlyweds, strictly speaking, but Baltimore reenergized them, made of their pairing something indispensable, something chemical.

For their efforts, they were rewarded with a son, whom they named Francisco. The district they lived in was one of the poorest in the country at the time, and once the birth was registered my parents were entitled to free baby formu-

## *... by side*

### A másik élete

fordította *Tárnok Attila*

SZÜLEIM, CSODÁLATRA MÉLTÓ előrelátással, az Egyesült Államokban tanuló ösztöndíjasként adtak életet elsőszülött gyermeküknek. Anyám szakápolói, apám könyvtárosi kurzusokat hallgatott. Amerikában szülni, mondta egyszer anyám, olyan, mintha bankba tettük volna a pénzünket. Baltimore belvárosában éltek ekkor, egy roskadozó társasházban, közel a kórházhoz, ahol anyám gyakornokoskodott. Baltimore, mondta anyám, szánalmasan sivár hely volt. Télen hideg, nyáron egy szauna, félelmektől megosztott, tele rettegő fehérekkel és dühös feketékkel. Amerika, abban az időben, kitergette a szennyesét: a világ vezető hatalmaként hadban állt önmagával az utcákon, az egyetemeken, lenn Délen és Vietnámban csakúgy, mint nem messze Baltimore-tól, a fővárosban. Ám szüleim elhatározták, hogy a gyerekük amerikai lesz, ezen ügyködtek éjszakánként, tavasszal, mikor a szoba földszagot árasztott, nyári éjjeleken, míg a város mocsárként gőzölgött, ősszel, elalélva takarók nélkül és télen, ha a szobát a nemi vágyak hófoka fűtötte. Nem voltak már friss házások, de Baltimore új energiákat mozgósított, és a szeretkezés kihagyhatatlan testi szükségyszerűségnek tűnt.

Erőfeszítéseik gyümölcse egy fiúgyermek lett, akit Franciscónak kereszteltek. Az egész ország egyik legszegényebb kerületében laktak, így a gyerek megszületése után ingyenes bébiételre nyertek jogosultságot, amit hétfő reggelen-

la, delivered to their doorstep every Monday morning. They found this astonishing, and later learned that many of the foreign doctors at the hospital were receiving this benefit, too, even a few who didn't yet have children. It was a gigantic bribe, my father said, the government pleading with its poverty-stricken residents: Please, please don't riot! Baltimore was adorned with reminders of the last civil disturbance: a burned-out block of storefronts, a boarded-up and untended house whose roof had collapsed after a snowstorm. Every morning, the sidewalks were littered with shattered car windows, tiny bits of glass glinting like diamonds in the limpid sun. No one used money in the neighborhood stores, only coupons; and, in lieu of birds, the skies featured plastic bags held aloft on a breeze. But none of this mattered, because my parents were happy. They were in love and they had a beautiful boy, his photo affixed to a blue First World passport.

Their American moment didn't last long. They would have had another child – they would have had me – if their visas hadn't run out. By the time my mother was done nursing Francisco, a coup had taken place back home, and the military junta that came to power was not entirely friendly with the Johnson Administration. My parents were required to renew their papers every eighteen months, and that year, to their great surprise, they were denied. Appeals, they were told, could be filed only from the home country. The university hospital wrote a letter on my mother's behalf, but this well-meaning document vanished into some bureaucrat's file cabinet in suburban Virginia, and it soon became clear that there was nothing to be done. Rather than be deported – how undignified! – my parents left of their own accord.

And then their gaze turned, back to their families, their friends, the places they had known, and those they had for-

ként hoztak házhoz. Az ellátást bámulatosnak érezték, mégha később értesültek is róla, hogy a kórházban sok külföldi orvos ugyanígy kapja a juttatást, holott néhányuknak gyereke sincs. Az egész nem volt más, mint csillagászati összegre rúgó kenőpénz, amivel a kormány a szegényebb rétegek száját akarta befogni, mondta apám. Baltimore hemzsegett a legutóbbi polgári engedetlenség nyomaitól: kiégett kirakatok, bedeszkázott, lakatlan házak, hófűvás rongálta tetők. Reggelente a járdákon törött autóüveg csilant meg gyémántként az áttetsző napsütésben. A környék boltjaiban senki nem használt készpénzt, mindenki utalványokkal vásárolt, az égen pedig madarak helyett nejlonzacsók szálltak a szélben. De mindez lényegtelennek tetszett, nem csorbíthatta szüleim boldogságát. Szerették egymást, és gyönyörű fiuk született, a fényképét egy kék színű, elsővilágbeli útleveél őrzi.

Az amerikai pillanat azonban nem tartott sokáig. Ideális esetben még egy gyereket szerettek volna, engem szerettek volna, ha nem jár le a vízumuk. Mire anyám felhagyott Francisco szoptatásával, odahaza katonai puccsal egy junta vette át a hatalmat, és ők nem ápoltak barátságot Lyndon Johnson amerikai kormányával. Szüleim másfél évente érvényesítették a papírjaikat, de abban az évben, meglepetésükre, a hosszabbítást elutasították. Megtudták, hogy felbbezni csak az anyaországból lehet. Az egyetemi kórház igazolást írt anyámnak, de az iratnak nyoma veszett valahol egy Virginia állambeli hivatalnok külvárosi fiókjában, és hamar kiderült, nincs mit tenni. Ahelyett, hogy – méltatlanul – deportálás elé nézzenek, szüleim önszántukból hagyták el az Egyesült Államokat.

Tekintetük a rokonság, az egykori barátok, rég nem látott és elfelejtett helyszínek felé irányult. A főváros peremén vettek egy házat, itt nevelkedtem, egy külterületen,

gotten they knew. They bought a house in a suburb of the capital, where I was raised, an out-of-the-way place that has since been swallowed entirely by the city's growth. I guess they lost that old Baltimore feeling, because I wasn't born for another seven years, a crying, red-faced bit of flesh, a runt, undersized even then. No blue passport for me, but they consoled themselves by giving me an Anglo name, Nelson, which was the fashion at the time. Eventually, I got my Third World passport, the color of spilled red wine, but it was just for show. I still haven't had a chance to use it.

Francisco, of course, fled at the first opportunity. It was January, 1987, the situation was bleak, and leaving was the most logical thing to do. I was ten years old; the idea was that he'd get me a visa and I'd join him as soon as I finished school. We went as a family to see him off at the airport, took the obligatory photographs in front of the departures board, and waved as he passed through security. He promised to write. He promised to call. He disappeared into the terminal, and then we climbed the stairs to the greasy restaurant above the baggage claim, where we sat by the wall of windows, waiting for a plane that looked like it might be my brother's to take off. My father drank coffee, fogged his glasses with his breath and polished the lenses between the folds of his dress shirt. My mother drew a palm tree on a paper napkin, frowning. I fell asleep with my head on the table, and when I woke up the janitor was mopping the floor beside us, wondering, perhaps, if we ever intended to leave.

My brother went to live with the Villanuevas, old friends of my parents from their Baltimore days, who'd settled in Birmingham, Alabama. His first letter was three handwritten pages and began with a description of winter in the Southern United States. That year, the Alabama rains fell almost without pause until the middle of March, a soggy

amit mára teljesen bekebelezett a város. Gondolom, a baltimore-i energiák lelohadtak, mert csak hét évvel a bátyám után születtem, vörös képű, csenevész vakarcsként, és már akkor is méreten aluli voltam. Nekem nem jutott kék útlevel, de szüleim ezt a hiányt azzal igyekeztek orvosolni, hogy angol nevet adtak; a Nelson akkoriban divatosnak hatott. Végül útlevelet is kaptam, egy Harmadik világ-bélit, kiömlött vörösbor színére emlékeztetőt, de csupán a forma kedvéért: még soha nem volt alkalmam használni.

Francisco természetesen az első adandó alkalommal elhagyta az országot. Ez 1987 januárjában történt; az ország helyzete eléggé kilátástalannak tűnt, a távozás logikus döntésnek látszott. Tíz éves voltam ekkor, és úgy terveztük, Francisco szerez majd nekem vízumot, hogy utána mehessek, amint befejeztem az iskolát. Kikísértük a repülőtérre, és az ilyenkor kötelező fényképezkedés után integettünk neki, ahogy átsétált a biztonsági ellenőrzésen. Megígérte, hogy írni fog. Megígérte, hogy telefonál. Azzal eltűnt a folyosón. Mi, többiek, felmentünk az érkező csomagok futószalagja fölötti olajos étterembe, leültünk az ablak mellett, és vártuk, hogy megpillantsunk egy felszálló gépet, amelyen vélhetően a bátyám ül. Apám kávét ivott, rálehelte a szemüvegére, hogy az inge ujjával megtisztogassa a lencsét. Anyám pálmafákat rajzolt egy papírszalvétára, és komor képet vágott. Én fejemet az asztalra ejtve elaludtam; amikor felébredtem, a padlót körülöttünk felmosó takarító azon tűnődött, szándékunkban áll-e valaha távozni.

A bátyám a Villanueva-családnál lakott, szüleim egykori baltimore-i barátainál, akik azóta Alabamába, Birminghambe költöztek. Első levele három, kézzel írt oldal, a déli államok téli viszonyait ecseteli. Abban az évben Alabamában március közepéig szinte megállás nélkül esett az eső, és ez pusztán nyirkos előszele volt egy még csapadékosabb



prelude to an even wetter spring. For Francisco, unaccustomed to this weather, the thunderstorms were impressive. Occasionally, there'd be a downed power line, and sometimes the lights would go out as a result. It was in this familiar darkness, Francisco wrote, that he'd first felt homesick.

The second half of the letter dealt more specifically with the routines of family life at the Villanuevas. Where they lived wasn't a neighborhood so much as a collection of houses that happened to face the same street. Kids were permitted to play in the back yard or in the driveway, but never in the front yard. No one could explain why, but it simply wasn't done. People moved about only in cars; walking was frowned upon, socially acceptable for children, perhaps, if they happened to be accompanied by a dog. The Villanuevas did not have pets. Nor was there anywhere to walk to, really. A two-pump gas station sat about a mile away on Highway 31; its attractions included a pay phone and a magazine rack.

The Villanueva children, Marisa and Jack, ages fifteen and ten, respectively, made it clear from the outset that they spoke no Spanish. The language didn't interest them much, and their father, who insisted that my brother call him Julio and not Mr. Villanueva, considered this his greatest failing as a parent. It was his fault, he confessed to Francisco, for marrying an American woman. In general terms, though, things were good. Speaking English with the Villanueva kids, while challenging at first, helped my brother learn the language faster. At school, not a soul spoke Spanish, not even Señora Rickerts, the friendly, well-intentioned Spanish teacher. Francisco was not enrolled with Marisa, as had originally been planned. She went to an expensive private school, which would not permit Francisco to audit classes, so instead the Villanuevas sent him to Berry, the local pub-

tavasznak. Francisco számára, aki nem ilyen időjáráshoz szokott, a viharok látványosságként hatottak. Néhol kidőlt villanyoszlopok és áramszünet jelezte a pusztítást. Mint írta, ebben a lassan megszokottá vált áramkimaradásban érzett először honvágyat.

A levél második fele a Villanueva-család mindennapi életéről mesélt. A környéken, ahol laktak, nem alakult ki szoros közösség, a házak véletlenszerűen sorakoztak egymás mellett. A gyerekek csak a hátsó kertben vagy az autóbeállóban játszhattak, az előkert tiltott területnek számított, senki nem tudta, miért. Mindenki autón közlekedett, a gyalogosra rosszálló pillantásokat vetettek, a járdán, ahol volt, csak gyerekeket lehetett látni, és őket is kizárólag akkor, ha kutyát sétáltattak. A Villanueva-családnak nem volt háziállata, de amúgy sem lett volna hova sétálni. A 31-es úton, úgy egy mérföldnyire egy benzinkút árválkodott, fő attrakciója az érmés telefon és az újságosállvány volt.

A Villanueva gyerekek, a tizenöt éves Marisa és a tízéves Jack, rögtön a találkozáskor kikötötték, hogy nem hajlandóak spanyolul beszélni. Az anyanyelv nem érdekelte őket, ezt Mr. Villanueva, aki ragaszkodott hozzá, hogy a bátyám Juliónak szólítsa, mélységes szülői kudarcnak élte meg. A saját hibája, vallotta meg egyszer Franciscónak: amerikai nőt vett feleségül. Mindazonáltal, általánosságban minden rendben indult. Kezdetben ugyan nehézségekkel járt Francisco számára a gyerekekkel angolul beszélni, de így legalább gyorsabban tanulta a nyelvet. Az iskolában egy teremtettt lélek sem beszélt spanyolul, még Señora Rickerts, a jó szándékú spanyoltanár sem. Francisco végül nem Marisával járt iskolába, ahogy korábban gondoltuk, mert a lány egy drága magániskola diákja volt, ahol nem engedélyezték, hogy Francisco külsőként látogassa az órákat, hanem Berrybe került, a helyi állami gimnáziumba, a mucaiak

lic high school, with the hicks. This last word, Francisco explained, was the rough English equivalent of campesino or cholo, only it referred to rural white people. He'd learned it from Marisa, and had been advised by Mr. Villanueva never to use it if he wished to make friends. My father found this part of the letter very amusing. How remarkable, he said, that Villanueva's daughter spoke no Spanish but had somehow imported her father's classism to North America! How ironic, my father noted, that his own son should learn proletarian solidarity in the belly of the empire!

My parents read and reread the letter at the dinner table, alternately laughing and falling into worried silence. In the early months, I recall them wondering aloud if they'd made a mistake by sending him away like this. Whose idea had it been? And where was Birmingham, anyway? Was it a city or a town? What kind of school was this place called Berry?

They wrote back, urging Francisco to send photos. A month passed, and the next letter arrived with a single picture. We saw Francisco with an umbrella and a yellow raincoat, standing next to the mailbox in front of the Villanuevas' house, a dense knot of purple clouds above. The front yard sloped dramatically, and Francisco stood at an odd slant. He'd put on a little weight – you could see it in his cheeks – and his hair had grown out. His face was changing, my mother said. He was growing up.

By his third letter, the winter rains had become spring rains, which were the same, only warmer. Storms spread like inkblots across the sky. On sunny days after a rain, the woods behind the Villanuevas' subdivision looked as if they'd been dipped in light. Everyone said that it was an unusually wet year. Francisco didn't mind – he was fascinated by the weather. It was everything else that bored him. His great disappointment that spring was that he'd tried out

közé. Ez a kifejezés, magyarázta Francisco, a spanyol campesino vagy cholo szónak felel meg, kivéve, hogy fehérbőrű falusiakra utal. Ezt Marisától tudja, de Mr. Villanueva óva intette, hogy használja, hacsak nem akar ellenségeket szerezni magának. Apám a levélnek eme részét nagyon mulatságosnak találta. Elképesztő, mondta, hogy a Villanueva-lány nem beszél spanyolul, mégis elsajátította apja társadalmi előítéleteit. Hát nem ironikus, hogy Francisco a birodalom gyomrában kell találkozzon a proletár szolidaritással?!

Szüleim a vacsoraasztalnál többször is átolvasták a levelet, hol felnevetve, hol aggódó hallgatásba merülve. Az első hónapokban, emlékszem, hangosan morfondíroztak, nem követtek-e el hibát, hogy így szélnek eresztették a fiukat. Kinek az ötlete volt? És egyáltalán, hol van ez a Birmingham? Nagyváros vagy csak egy kis település? És vajon miféle iskola ez a Berry?

Arra kérték Franciscót, küldjön képeket. Egy hónappal később, a következő levéllel egy fotó is érkezett. Franciscót ábrázolta, esernyővel, sárga esőköpenyben, egy postaláda mellett ácsorgott a Villanueva-ház előtt, az égen sűrű csomókban lila felhő. Az előkert erős lejtése miatt Francisco furcsán előredőlve áll. Talán egy kicsit hízott is, az arcán látszott, és megnőtt a haja. Megváltozott az arca, mondta anyám. Felnőttes.

A harmadik levél szerint a téli eső tavasziba fordult, ami ugyanaz, csak egy kicsit enyhébb. A viharfelhők tintafoltként terjengnek az égen. Napsütéses időben, eső után a szomszédos erdőt fény ragyogja be. Szokatlanul csapadékos év ez, ebben mindenki megegyezett. Franciscót nem zavarta az időjárás, ellenkezőleg: elbűvölte. Amúgy minden más untatta. A legnagyobb csalódás számára azon a tavaszon az volt, hogy a Berry gimnázium futball-csapatánál,

for the Berry High soccer team, and spent three games on the bench, watching the action unfold without him. He'd quit in protest, and, to his surprise, no one had begged him to come back. They hadn't even noticed. Americans, he wrote, have no understanding of the game. The issue was not mentioned again.

By the fourth letter, the weather had turned; breezy, pleasant stretches were punctuated now and then by days of blasting heat. School would be over soon. He no longer complained about Berry or his classmates, whose dialect he could barely understand. Instead, he seemed to have settled in. Each week, Francisco went to the Spanish class and led conversation exercises with his American peers, and several of them had sought him out for further instruction. An exchange student from Mexico City had spent time at Berry the previous year, seducing Alabama girls and confounding deeply held stereotypes – he didn't wear a poncho, for instance, and was apparently sincere in his love of punk music. He'd also left behind a folkloric legacy of curse words: *panocha*, *no manches*, and *pinche guey*. Francisco wrote that he considered it his responsibility to teach these poor gringos to curse with dignity, and this was, as far as he could tell, the only linguistic knowledge they truly thirsted for. He introduced them to important words, words like *mierda*, *culo*, and *pendejo*, while offering the more advanced students a primer on the nearly infinite uses of *huevo* (*huevo*, *hasta las huevas*, *huevo*, *huevo*, *se hueveo la huevada*). My parents were proud: "Our son the educator," they said. Photos included with this letter were of nearby Lake Logan Martin, where the Villanuevas had a weekend house. Sun glinting off the water, bathing suits hanging on a line, barefoot games of Frisbee in the freshly mowed grass. In summer, Francisco might learn to water-ski.

próbajátékon, három meccsen is csak a kispadról figyelhet-e az eseményeket. Végül sértődötten otthagyta őket, de meglepetésére, senki nem könyörgött, hogy jöjjön vissza. Észre se vették, hogy nincs közöttük. Az amerikaiak egyáltalán nem értenek a focihoz, írta. A dologról nem esett több említés.

A negyedik levél idején ismét változott az idő: kellemes szeles napok váltakoznak elviselhetetlen hőséggel. Nemso-kára véget ér az iskolaév, és már nem panaszkodik Berryről vagy az osztálytársakról, akiknek a dialektusát alig érti. Úgy látszott, Francisco beilleszkedett. Hétről hétre beszélgetéseket vezetett a spanyolorán amerikai társaival, és többen kérték, hogy foglalkozzon velük az órán kívül is. Az előző évben egy mexikói cserediák csapta a szelet az alabamai lányoknak, és megingatott minden korábbi sztereotip előítéletet – nem viselt ponchót például, és úgy tűnt, tiszta szívből szereti a punk-zenét. Hagyott maga után néhány obszcén, falusi kifejezést, *panocha*, *no manches*, vagy *pinche guey*. Francisco kötelességének érezte, hogy megtanítsa ezeket a szerencsétlen gringókat méltó módon káromkodni, hiszen, mint írta, igazából ez az egyetlen nyelvi ismeret, ami érdekli őket. Fontos szavakat is tanított nekik, olyanokat, mint *mierda*, *culo*, vagy *pendejo*, és a haladónak elmagyarázta a *huevo* számtalan jelentésárnyalatát (*huevo*, *hasta las huevas*, *huevo*, *huevo*, *se hueveo la huevada*) is. A szüleim büszkék voltak rá: no, nézd csak, tanár lesz a fiúból, mondták. Ehhez a levélhez csatolt fotókon a család Logan Martin-tavi víkendházát láthattuk. Napfény csillan a vízen, fürdőruhák lógnak a szárítókötelen, és a gyerekek frisbee-t dobálnak mezítláb a frissen nyírt fűvön. Lehet, hogy a nyár folyamán megtanul vízisízni, írta Francisco.

Ez volt az első levél, amiben elmulasztotta megkérdezni,

This was the first letter in which he forgot to ask us how we were.

That year – the only year he consistently wrote to us – the photos were mostly of Francisco by himself. Occasionally, he'd pose with the Villanuevas: Julio, his wife, Heather, and their two dark-haired, olive-skinned children, who really looked as though they should speak some Spanish. Once, Francisco sent a photo of the Berry High gymnasium, which was notable only for its size. The entire high school, he wrote, would soon be razed and replaced by an even bigger complex farther out in the suburbs. Everyone was excited about this, but he wouldn't be around to see it. He didn't intend to stay in Alabama; on this point he was very clear.

We did eventually get a photo of the few American friends Francisco acquired in those first months, and perhaps this could have clued us in about his eagerness to move on. At home, Francisco had always been part of the popular crowd, the center of a fitful, manic group of friends who loved trouble and music and girls. At Berry, he was on the margins of it all, one of a bunch of skinny outcasts, happy to have found one another in the crowded, cliquish hallways of this immense public school. In these photos: a Korean named Jai, a red-haired boy called Anders, who wore a neck brace, and a frail black kid named Leon, carrying a stack of books and looking utterly lost.

It was just as well that Francisco didn't ask us how we were. My parents might not have been able to explain. Or they might not have wanted to. Nineteen eighty-seven was the year of the state-employee strike, which was particularly troubling for us, since my father worked at the National Library and my mother at the Ministry of Health. It started in May, around the time that Francisco was learning to water-ski. There was also dismaying talk of a new currency to re-

howy vagyunk.

Abban az első évben, amikor még viszonylag rendszeresen írt, a fényképek többnyire Franciscót ábrázolták, egyedül. Csak elvétve mutatkozott a Villanueva-család, Julio, a feleség, Heather vagy a két barna bőrű, feketehajú gyerek, akikről nehéz volt elképzelni, hogy nem beszélnek spanyolul. Egyszer a Berry gimnáziumról is kaptunk egy fényképet, de ennek csak a mérete volt érdekes. Az egész iskolát, írta, hamarosan lebontják és egy még nagyobb komplexumot építenek valahol messze a külvárosban. Mindenki izgatottan várja, de őt nem érdekli a dolog. Nem szándékozik Alabamában lekövetelni, ezt végérvényesen elhatározta.

Egyszer arról a néhány amerikai barátáról is láttunk fotót, akikre Francisco az első hónapokban szert tett, és talán már ekkor gondolhattuk volna, hogy odébb akar állni. Idehaza Francisco nagy népszerűségnek örvendett, közép-pontja volt egy szeszélyesen változó, bajkeverő baráti körnek; szerették a zenét és a lányokat. A Berryben perifériára került, egyike lett a többi nyurga, kiközösített diáknak, akik örültek, ha egymásra találtak az óriási állami iskola zsúfolt folyosóin, klikkekre szakadva. A barátokat ábrázoló képekről ismertük meg a koreai Jait, egy vörös hajú fiút, Anderst, aki nyakmerevítőt viselt és a Leon nevű, törékeny fekete srácot, hóna alatt könyvekkel, akiről úgy tűnt, nagyon el van veszve.

Jobb volt így, hogy Francisco nem érdeklődött a hoglétünk felől. A szüleim esetleg nem lettek volna képesek elmondani, vagy nem akarták volna elmondani az igazságot. 1987-ben az állami alkalmazottak sokat sztrájkoltak, ami bennünket érzékenyen érintett, hisz apám a Nemzeti Könyvtárban, anyám az Egészségügyi Minisztériumban dolgozott. Az egész májusban kezdődött, nagyjából amikor Francisco először próbálkozott a vízisível. Szó volt arról is,

place the one that was soon to be destroyed by rising inflation. Together these horrors would wipe out our already diminished savings. War pressed down on the country in all its fury. Adults spoke of politics as if referring to a long and debilitating illness that no medicine could cure. Presidential elections were on the horizon; no one knew who would win, but none of the options were good. My father was shedding weight and hair at a frightening pace, the stress carving him to pieces.

Our letters to the U.S. did not include photographs, a small concession to my father's vanity in those taxing months. Nor did they mention the fact that Francisco was attending the public school because the tuition at Marisa's school was simply out of the question for us. Or that my parents had already written a letter to Mr. Villanueva postponing the monthly payment for his room and board. Certainly, my parents didn't tell Francisco how much shame they felt at having to do this. I doubt they even told him that they were afraid they'd lose their jobs, and were speaking with a lawyer about getting citizenship for all of us and coming as a family to join him. These were the issues my parents talked about at home, in front of me (as if I weren't there) but not with my brother. Why worry the boy? The calls were too expensive to waste time on unpleasant things, and wasn't he busy enough, learning English and spending his afternoons jumping from the Villanuevas' pier into the cool, refreshing waters of Lake Logan Martin?

For most of my childhood, our neighbors across the street were a friendly couple named Alejandro and Luz. They were a little older than my parents, the rare neighborhood couple with no kids, possessing no concept of the kinds of things children might like. They visited from time to time, usually bringing some sort of gift for my brother

hogy a kormány új fizetőeszközt vezet be, mert a régi már teljesen elértéktelenedett. A kellemetlenségek, így együtt, lassan felőrölték egyébként is apadó megtakarításainkat. A belső forrongások dühvel sújtották az országot. A felnőttek úgy beszéltek a politikáról, mint valami hosszú, gyógyíthatatlan betegségről. Közeledett az elnökválasztás, senki nem tudta, ki fog nyerni, de egyik jelölt sem adott okot a bizakodásra. Apám fogyni kezdett és ijesztően hullott a haja; felemésztette a stressz.

Az Amerikába menő levelekhez nem csatoltunk fényképeket, engedve apám hiú követelésének: ne mutassuk magunkat rossz színben ezekben a nehéz hónapokban. Arról sem tett senki említést, hogy Francisco azért nem jár Marisa iskolájába, mert nem engedhetjük meg magunknak a tandíjat. Vagy hogy a szüleim egy külön levélben arra kérték Mr. Villanuevát, adjon haladékat a koszt és a szoba fizetésére. Hogyan is beszélhetek volna szüleim a szegénységről Franciscónak?! Szerintem még azt sem árulták el neki, hogy elveszthetik az állásukat, és hogy már konzultáltak egy ügyvéddel, miképpen kaphatnánk mindannyian állampolgárságot családegyesítés címen. Szüleim otthon, előttem, állandóan ennek lehetőségét latolgatták, mintha ott sem lennék, de egy szót sem közöltek Franciscóval. Minek aggasztanánk a fiút? A telefonhívás túl drága mulatság ahhoz, hogy kellemetlen dolgokról fecsegjünk, és amúgy is leköti Franciscót az angoltanulás, délután pedig felfrissülésre vágynak: a Villanueva-mólóról a hűvös Logan Martin-tó vizébe ugrál.

Gyerekkorom idején szemközti szomszédaink a barátságos Alejandro és Luz voltak. Kicsit idősebbek, mint a szüleim, és ritkaságszámba ment, hogy nem született gyerekük, így fogalmuk sem volt, mi szerezhethet örömet egy fiúnak. Néha, amikor meglátogattak, ajándékot hoztak nekem és a

and me – a jump rope, a pinwheel, that sort of thing.

Alejandro had big ears and a quirky grin. He wore dark suits and liked to talk politics until late in the evening. He was a good man, my father told me once, and decency was not something to be taken lightly, but when it came to world view – he said this quite sternly – “we simply do not agree with him.” Even now I’m not sure if this meant that Alejandro was a reactionary or a radical. Those were confusing times. Alejandro worked long hours, and months might pass between his visits, whereas Luz often came by to chat with my mother or to play with us. And when both my parents were working late Francisco and I sometimes spent a few hours at her house, deeply involved in card games whose rules the three of us invented as we went along, or listening to the dark, suspenseful stories Luz loved to tell. Ostensibly about her family, these tales of adventure and daring seemed to draw more from Hollywood Westerns, featuring spectacular kidnappings, gambling debts settled with knife fights, or long, dismal marches through unforgiving mountain terrain. Luz’s manner of speaking made it clear that she had no idea what she might say next. It wasn’t that she made things up, strictly speaking – only that facts were merely a point of departure for her.

Luz modified whatever game we played, never apologizing, and we rarely minded letting her win, whether at cards or dominoes or hide-and-seek; in fact, it didn’t feel like a concession at all. My brother, who usually kept a studied distance from me and all things preadolescent, regressed in her company, becoming, as if by magic, a gentler, more innocent version of himself.

Often Luz would let us watch an hour of cartoons while she rested on the couch with an arm draped over her face. We thought she was asleep, exhausted from so much win-

bátyámnak: ugrókötelet, pörgettyűt, ilyesmiket.

Alejandro-nak nagy fülei voltak, csalafintán vigyorgott, sötét öltönyöket hordott, és késő estig szeretett politizálni. Jó ember, mondta róla egyszer az apám, udvarias, meg kell hagyni, de a világnézetével – és ezt szigorúan hangsúlyozta – egyszerűen nem értünk egyet. A mai napig sem tudom, Alejandro vajon reakcionista volt-e vagy csupán radikális. Zavaros idők jártak. Sokat dolgozott, és gyakran hónapok teltek el a látogatások között. Luz gyakrabban ájtött, hogy csevegjen anyámmal vagy játsszon velünk. Amikor a szüleink későn jöttek haza, néha órákon át odaát voltunk Franciscóval: kártyacsatákat vívtunk, amiknek a szabályait a játék során hármásban fejlesztettük ki vagy Luz titokzatos, homályos történeteit hallgattuk. Ezek látszólag a saját családjáról szóltak, de a merész kalandok a hollywoodi western-filmek stílusában szövődtek és bővelkedtek a látványos emberrablási jelenetekben, késelésben végződő szerencsejátékokban és hosszú, reménytelen hegyi vándorlásokban. Luz modorában az egész úgy hangzott, mintha soha nem tudná, mi fog következni. Nem arról volt szó, hogy kitalált volna dolgokat, szigorú értelemben, inkább arról, hogy a tényeket csupán kiindulópontnak tekintette.

Mindig minden játékszabályt mentegetőzés nélkül felülírt, de mi nem nagyon bántuk, ha az asszony nyert. Akár kártyáztunk, akár dominóztunk, akár bújócskáztunk, a vereséget nem is éltük meg veszteséggént. Bátyám, aki általában magas lóról tekintett le az én gyerekes viselkedésemre, az asszony társaságában visszavedett gyerekké, és mintegy varázsütésre, korábbi ártatlan önmagát idézte.

Luz gyakran megengedte, hogy egy órán át rajzfilmeket bámuljunk, ezalatt a kanapén pihent és a karjával beárnyékolta az arcát. Azt hittük, alszik, elfárasztotta az állandó győzelem, de amint egy hírblokk jelent meg a képernyőn,

ning, but every time a news break came on Luz would sit up in a flash, cover our eyes, and make us press our hands over our ears. The news in those days was not for children, she always said, and I took her word for it. But afterward, when I had opened my eyes and was blinking hopefully at the television, waiting for the cartoons to come back on, Francisco would say, "Did you see that, little brother? That's why I'm leaving."

Soon after Francisco had gone, Alejandro moved out. It happened almost without anyone realizing it, though the dearth of concrete details was soon overwhelmed by the neighborhood's combined speculative power: Alejandro had run off with his secretary, with the maid, with the daughter of one of his business associates. The mistress, whoever she might be, was pregnant, or maybe she already had children of her own, whom Alejandro had agreed to take care of. It seemed likely that she was much younger than Luz, that he wanted, after all these years, to be a father. There were a few who thought that his sudden disappearance had more to do with politics, but my father rejected that theory out of hand.

A few weeks had passed when Alejandro came by late one night. He wanted to speak to my father, alone. They shut themselves in the kitchen with a bottle of pisco, and when they emerged, a few hours later, it was clear that Alejandro had been crying. His eyes were swollen and his arms hung limply by his sides. My mother and I were in the living room. I was supposedly doing homework, but really I was waiting to see what would happen. Nothing did. Alejandro gave us a sheepish nod, while my father stood next to him, pisco bottle in hand. They hadn't even uncorked it.

The following day, my mother clarified things a bit. Or tried to. "An affair," she said, "is when a man takes up with

hirtelen felegyenesedett, befogta a szemünket, és a fülünkre kellett tapasztani a kezünket. Manapság a hírek nem gyerekeknek valók, mondta mindig, és én hittem neki. De később, amikor már kinyithattuk a szemünk, és pislogva vártuk, hogy újrakezdődjön a rajzfilm, Francisco gyakran megjegyezte: Láttad ezt, öcsi? Ezért akarok lelépni.

Nem sokkal azután, hogy Francisco elment, Alejandro is elköltözött. Ez egészen váratlanul történt, és a konkrét tények hiányában hamarosan találgatások kaptak lábra a környéken: megszöktette a titkárnőjét, a bejárónőt vagy egy üzleti partnerének a lányát. A megszöktetett nő, akárki is legyen az illető, terhes lett, vagy már szült is, és a gyerekről Alejandro gondoskodni akar. Azt is beszéltek, hogy Alejandro sokkal fiatalabb, mint Luz, nem csoda, hogy ennyi terméketlen év után végre apa akar lenni. Néhányan úgy vélték, a férfi hirtelen eltűnése mögött politikai okok húzódnak, de apám azonnal elvetett minden ilyen spekulációt.

Egy este, hetekkel később, Alejandro egyszer csak megjelent, és apámmal kívánt beszélni, négy szemközt. Bezárkóztak a konyhába egy üveg piscoval, és csak órák múlva kerültek elő, duzzadt szemekkel, lógó orral: nyilvánvalónak tetszett, hogy Alejandro sírt. Anyámmal a nappaliban ültünk, a házi feladatokat kellett volna írnom, de valójában azt lestem, mi történik. Alejandro csupán bólintott felénk, birka módra, apám tétovázott, kezében a pisco üvege, kibontatlanul.

Másnap anyám egy kicsit megpróbálta tisztába tenni az ügyet. Flörtnek nevezzük, ha egy ember olyan nőhöz járogat, aki nem a felesége, mondta. Érted, Nelson?

Persze hogy értettem, legalábbis úgy hittem. És mi az, amikor egy nő járogat olyan férfihoz, aki nem a férje?

Az ugyanaz, bólintott anyám.

a woman who is not his wife. Do you understand that, Nelson?”

Sure I did, or at least I thought I did. “And what if a woman takes up with a man who is not her husband?”

My mother nodded. “That, too.”

I had other questions as well. “Takes up with”? Something about the way my mother said this phrase alerted me to the fact that it was a metaphor.

And she sighed, closing her eyes for a moment. She seemed to be thinking rather carefully about what she might say, and I waited, tensely, perhaps even holding my breath. My mother patted me on the head. It was complicated, she said finally, but there was one thing I should be aware of, one thing I should think about and learn now, even if I was too young to understand. Did I want to know? “It has to do with a woman’s pride,” she said, and waited for these puzzling words to take hold. They didn’t. It was all opaque, delightfully mysterious. Alejandro’s affair was different from others, she said. Yes, he had left Luz, and, yes, this was bad enough. Plenty bad. But a woman is proud, and at a certain age this pride is tinged with self-doubt. “We grow old,” my mother told me, “and we suspect we are no longer beautiful.” Alejandro’s new mistress was ten years older than Luz. This was what he’d confessed to my father the night before. A younger woman would have been understandable, expected even, but this – it wasn’t the sort of insult that Luz would easily recover from.

I knew it was serious by the way my mother’s eyes narrowed.

“If your father ever does something like this to me, you’d better call the police, because someone’s going to get hurt. Do you understand?”

Egyéb kérdésem is lett volna. Mi az, hogy járogat? Ahogy anyám hangsúlyozta a szót, úgy hangzott, mintha szimbolikus értelemben használná.

Anyám egy pillanatra behunyta a szemét és felsóhajtott. Úgy tetszett, mélyen elgondolkodott, mit válaszoljon, én feszülten vártam, talán még a lélegzetem is visszafojtottam. Megveregette a vállam. Nehezet kérdezel, mondta végül, de egyvalamivel tisztában kell lenned. Fel kell ismerned, még ha túl fiatal vagy is ahhoz, hogy megértsd. Akarod tudni, mi az? Egy nő méltóságát, mondta, és kivárt, hogy leüledjenek a fejemben a szavak. De nem fogtam fel, mi jelentősége ennek. Amit mond, olyan lényegtelen, ugyanakkor izgalmasan misztikus. Alejandro flörtje más, mint az összes többi. Igen, elhagyta Luzt, és ez már önmagában is elég rossz. Elég nagy baj. De egy nő mindig büszke, és egy életkorban ez a büszkeség kétségekkel párosul. Ahogy öregszünk, mondta anyám, felmerül bennünk a kétely, hogy vajon szépek vagyunk-e még. Alejandro új szeretője tíz évvel idősebb Luznál. Erről akart tegnap este apámmal beszélni. Ha egy fiatalabb nővel flörtöl, az érthető, sőt talán még várható is lett volna, de ezt a sértést nagyon nehezen fogja Luz megemésztetni.

Tudtam, hogy mindez komoly probléma, abból, ahogy anyám összehúzta szemöldökét.

Ha apád egyszer hasonlóra vetemedne, legjobb, ha rögtön hívod a rendőrséget, mert itthon vér fog folyni. Érted?

Hogyne, mondtam, erre elmosolyodott.

Rendben, akkor menj játszani, bocsátott el anyám.

Azután, hogy Francisco elment, a ‘menj játszani’ mindig konkrét dolgot takart: menj a szobádba, és rajzolj vagy írogass. Órákon át ‘játszottam’ így egymagamban. Általában erőszakmentes bosszúállásról fantáziáltam. A történeteim főszereplője – néha én magam – megkíméli a fiú életét, aki



I told her I did, and her face eased into a smile.

“O.K., then, go on,” my mother said. “Go play or something.”

In those days after Francisco left, “go play” came to mean something very specific: go sit in your room and draw and create stories. I could spend hours this way, and often did. My scripts were elaborate, mostly nonviolent revenge fantasies, in which I (or the character I played) would end up in the unlikely position of having to spare the life of a kid who had routinely bullied me. The bully’s gratitude was colored with shame, naturally, and my (character’s) mercy was devastating to the bully’s self-image. I returned to this theme time and again, never tiring of it, deriving great pleasure from the construction of these improbable reversals.

With my brother gone, the room we had shared seemed larger, more spacious and luxurious than before. I’d lived my entire life there, deferring without complaint to my brother’s wishes on all matters of decoration, layout, music, and lighting. He’d made it clear that I was a squatter in his room, an assertion I’d never thought to question. Just before he left, he’d warned me with bared teeth, frightening as only older brothers can be, not to touch a thing. In case he came back. If I were to change anything, Francisco said, he’d know.

“How?” I asked. “How will you know?”

He threw an arm around me then, flexing it tight around my neck with the kind of casual brutality he often directed at me. I felt my face turning red; I was helpless. At ten and eighteen, we were essentially two different species. I wouldn’t see him again until we were both adults, fully grown men capable of real violence. I suppose if I’d known this, I might have tried to appreciate the moment, but in-

korábban zsarnokoskodott velem, és a zsarnok mindig szégyenteli hálát érez iránta. A főszereplőm – vagy a magam – irgalmassága mélyen megingatja a zsarnok önbizalmát. Folyamatosan ehhez a témához tértem vissza, és soha nem untam rá az öröme, amit az események kiváltotta valószerűtlen szerepváltás okozott.

Bátyám távoztával a közös szobánk nagyobbak és kényelmesebbnek hatott. Korábban egész életemben zokszó nélkül alkalmazkodtam a bátyám minden elképzeléséhez, a zenét, a dekorációt vagy a világítást illetően. Úgy kezelte, mintha csak bérlő lennék a szobájában, és ezt a felállást soha nem jutott eszembe megkérdőjelezni. Mielőtt elment, fogait vicsorítva, ahogy minden idősebb testvér bánik a fiatalabbal, figyelmeztetett, hogy semmihez nem nyúlhatok. Ha mégis visszajönne. Ha bármit megváltoztatok, mondta Francisco, tudni fog róla.

Hogyan, kérdeztem. Honnan fogsz róla tudni?

Átkarolta a vállamat, szorosán tartva a nyakam, miként ezt mindennapos gyöngéd brutalitással gyakran tette. Elvörösödtem, gyámoltalannak éreztem magam. Én tíz, ő tizenhét, lényegében két külön faj. De soha nem találkoztam vele újra, csak amikor már mindketten felnőttek voltunk, és valódi erőszakra képesek. Gondolom, ha ezt tudtam volna akkor, többre becsültem volna a pillanatot, de ehelyett konokul levegő után kapkodtam, és valahogy kipréseltem magamból a kérdést még egyszer: Jó, de honnan fogod megtudni?

Francisco, különböző változatokban, gyakran szerepelt korai történeteimben.

Megjegyeztem, mit mondott anyám a női büszkeségről, és egyszer, amikor kettesben voltunk apámmal, nála is tapogatóztam az ügyben. Nem tudom, sikerült-e pontosan visszaadnom, de igyekeztem elismételni, amit anyám

stead I remained defiant, gasping for breath and managing to ask one more time, “Yeah, but how will you know?”

Francisco, or versions of him, appeared in many of my early works.

I took note of what my mother had said about a woman’s pride, and when I was alone with my father I decided to ask him about it. I wasn’t sure if I’d got the full nuance, but I relayed the conversation with my mother as well as I could, concluding with the last bit about the police.

“She said that?” he asked.

I nodded, and my father, instead of shedding any light on the situation, just laughed. It was a hearty, surprising laugh, with tears pressing from the corners of his eyes.

“What?” I asked. “What did I say?” But he wouldn’t answer me, and, finally, when he’d regained his composure, he gave me a big hug.

“Your mother is a dangerous woman,” he said, and I knew enough to understand that when he said “dangerous” he meant it as a compliment.

Meanwhile, Luz drew her curtains and rarely left the house. Alejandro never came back.

A few months later, we learned that Luz was planning to travel to the United States, to visit a cousin of hers in Florida. This was in June, when the strike was under way, and my parents were beginning to feel the stress most acutely. We’d seen little of Luz in the weeks since Alejandro’s visit, but she was often mentioned, always in the same pitying tone. Inevitably, the conversation veered back to my mother’s comment about the police, and my father would tease her about it, until they laughed together. I’d chuckle, too, so as not to be left out.

Luz’s trip couldn’t have been more perfectly timed. It was scheduled for July, three or four weeks before Francisco’s

mondott, sőt azzal zártam, hogy a rendőrséggel fenyegetőzött.

Ilyeneket mondott, kérdezte apám.

Bólintottam, de ő, helyett, hogy bármire rávilágított volna, csak nevetett. Mélyről fakadó, meglepő kacaj volt ez, a könnye is kicsordult.

Mi rosszat mondtam, kérdeztem, de ő nem válaszolt. Miután végül összeszedte magát, átölelt.

Anyád veszélyes asszony, mondta, de a hangjából megértettem, hogy ez valami bók akar lenni.

Ezidőtájt Luz behúzott függönyök mögött élt, és alig mozdult ki otthonról. Alejandro soha nem jött vissza.

Néhány hónappal később a tudomásunkra jutott, hogy Luz az Egyesült Államokba készül, az unokahúgát akarja meglátogatni Floridában. Mindez júniusban volt, a sztrájk még javában tartott, és a szüleim is intenzív feszültségben éltek. Luzt az Alejandro látogatása óta eltelt hetek során alig láttuk, de a neve gyakran elhangzott, mindig ugyanazon a szánakozó hangon. A beszélgetés néha anyám a rendőrséget említő fenyegetőzése felé terelődött, apám húzta is ezzel, de végül jókat nevettek rajta. Én is kuncogtam, hogy ki ne maradjak a jóból.

Luz útja jobbkor nem is jöhetett volna. Júliusra esett, három-négy héttel Francisco első külföldön töltött születésnapja előtt. Anyám valami jelképes ajándékot akart küldeni, csak hogy Francisco érezhesse, gondoltunk rá. Némi töprengés után egy sötétkék nyakkendőt vett neki, a Nemzeti Könyvtár hímezett emblémájával. Az ajándék apámnak is tetszett, azt mondta, segíti majd Franciscót, hogy jó állást kapjon. Ezt persze ironikusan értette, hisz tudtuk, hogy a bátyámat nem érdekli olyan munka, ahol nyakkendőt kell viselni. Mind a hárman aláírtuk a képeslapot, apám külön egy hosszú levelet is írt, majd az egészet becsomagoltuk és

birthday, the first he would be spending abroad. My mother wanted to send Francisco a gift, just a token, so that he'd know we were thinking of him. After some deliberation, she bought him a dark-blue necktie embroidered with the logo of the National Library. My father approved, said it would help him get a good job. It was a joke, really; we knew that Francisco wasn't interested in the sort of job where he might need a necktie. The three of us signed a card; separately, my father wrote a long letter, and the whole thing was wrapped and sealed and ready to go. Naturally, there was no talk of trusting our local postal service for this, or for anything, really. We would ask Luz to take it for us and drop it in an American mailbox. Perhaps, my mother said, Luz could even hand-deliver it, should her itinerary include a jaunt through Alabama, and, upon her return, report back – tell us how she'd found Francisco, what she thought of his prospects in the U.S.

One Sunday afternoon, my mother and I crossed the street and knocked on Luz's door. She seemed surprised to see us, a little embarrassed, but beckoned us into the house all the same. Immediately, we encountered a problem: there wasn't anywhere to sit. Sometime in the previous months, much of the furniture had been moved out, and the rooms, half empty now, seemed lonely and sad. Of the chairs that remained, no two faced each other. We strolled through to the living room, where a small television set rested awkwardly on a wooden chair. Luz was thinner than I remembered her, subdued; she seemed to have staggered recklessly toward old age, as if trying to make up in a matter of weeks the ten years that separated her from Alejandro's new lover. Her hair had faded to a stringy yellowing gray – she'd stopped dyeing it, my mother explained later – and her skin had taken on a similarly unhealthy pallor. Her eyes, even in

leragasztottuk. Természetesen, szó sem lehetett arról, hogy a hazai postára bizzuk a küldeményt, Luzzal akartuk feladatni Amerikán belül. Esetleg személyesen is átadhatja, mondta anyám, ha tesz egy kis kirándulást Alabamába, és majd ha visszajön, elmeséli, milyen színben látta Franciscót, milyen kilátásai vannak a fiúnak az Egyesült Államokban.

Egy vasárnap délután átsétáltunk Luzhoz, és bekopogtunk. Kissé meglepődött, talán kényelmetlenül is érezte magát előttünk, de azért behívott a házba. Amint beléptünk, szembesültünk a problémával, hogy nincs hova ülni. Az elmúlt hónapok során a bútorok nagy részét elszállították, a félig üres szobákból elhagyatottság és szomorúság áradt. A megmaradt székek egymástól távol, elszórtan helyezkedtek el a lakásban. Átmentünk a nappaliba, itt egy kisebb méretű tévé foglalt el egy széket. Luz soványabb volt, mint ahogy emlékeztem rá; megadóan, mégis nyughatatlanul szédelt az öregkor felé. Úgy tetszett, hetek leforgása alatt megduplázta azt a tíz évet, amennyivel Alejandro új szerelme idősebb nála. A haja drótszerű sárgás-szürkére fakult – ahogy anyám később magyarázatot adott rá: már nem festi –, és a bőre is hasonlóan sápadt, egészségtelen színt vett fel. A tekintete a halovány fényben üvegesen a semmibe fordult. Megkért, hogy tegyem a tévét a földre.

Hova, kérdeztem.

Ó, Nelson, jajdult fel. Mindegy hova. Ahova akarod.

A szék mellé tettem, mire Luz az ujjával intett, hogy üljek rá. Tétovázva anyámra néztem, ő bólintott. Így ültünk hármásban, nem túl meghittén.

Luz és anyám betartották a látogatáskor elfogadott forgatókönyvet: udvarias kérdések, fájdalomcsillapító csevegés, a szokásos frázisok és gesztusok, amelyek inkább a

the dim light, were glassy and unfocussed. Luz asked me to put the television on the floor.

“Where?” I asked.

“Oh, Nelson,” she said. “Anywhere.”

I placed it next to the chair, and Luz indicated that I should sit on it. I looked at my mother for reassurance. She nodded, and so the three of us sat, forming a not quite intimate circle.

Luz and my mother went through the protocols of a civilized visit: inoffensive questions, anodyne chitchat, the usual phrases and gestures intended to fill up space rather than convey meaning. It occurred to me as I listened that my mother and Luz were not close. They spoke without much fluency about a minor universe of events that affected neither of them: the vagaries of neighborhood life, people they both knew but didn't much care about. My mother seemed determined not to speak of our family, of my father, my brother, or even me. It was excessive decorum, as if the very mention of family might be insulting to our grieving hostess. The strain to keep the words coming was noticeable, and I wondered how long it would be necessary to maintain this charade before coming to the point of the visit, Francisco's gift. Ten minutes? Twenty? An entire hour?

Luz, as she spoke, as she listened, scanned the room as if looking for someone who was not there. The easy assumption would have been that the someone was Alejandro, but I understood instinctively that this wasn't the case. There were many people in the room with us, it seemed, a wide variety of people my mother and I could not see: principally, the players in Luz's life, those who'd known her at various stages of childhood, adolescence, and adulthood, at moments of joy, of whimsy, of expectation. Of anxiety and fear. It seemed to me that Luz was wondering, How did I get to

csendszüneteket hivatottak kitölteni, semmint jelentést hordozni. Ahogy hallgattam őket, felmerült bennem, hogy nincsenek jóban. Szűkebb környezetünk olyan eseményeiről társalogtak akadozva, amelyek egyiküket sem érintik: a szomszédok szeszélyeiről, emberekről, akiket mindketten ismertek, de akiket amúgy máskor teljes érdektelenséggel kezeltek volna. Anyám, úgy tűnt, elhatározta, hogy nem beszél családi ügyekről, apámról, a bátyámról, de még rólam sem. Mindez túlzott illendőségnek hatott, mintha a családtagok pusztá említése is növelhetné vendéglátónk szomorúságát. Éreztem, hogy nehézkes lesz így fenntartani ezt a társalgást, és azon tűnődtem, vajon meddig kell a színjátékot folytatni, mielőtt előhozakodhatunk látogatásunk valódi céljával, Francisco ajándékával. Tíz percig? Húszig? Egy órán át?

Luz beszélgetés közben folyamatosan forgolódott, mint ha keresne valakit, aki nincs ott. Könnyen gondolhattam volna, hogy ez a valaki Alejandro, de valahogy ösztönszerűen megértettem, hogy másról van szó. Úgy tűnt, sokan vagyunk a szobában, köztünk olyanok, akiket anyám és én nem láthatunk: gyakorlatilag Luz korábbi életének szereplői, gyerekkorától kezdve, kamasz korán át, felnőtt koráig, az öröm, a múló hóbort vagy a várakozás pillanataiban. Az izgalom és a félelem pillanataiban. Éreztem, Luz azon töpreng, miképpen került ide. Hogy történt minden? Mit keresnek ezek az emberek a házában és mit gondolhatnak róla? Csupán annyira volt képes, hogy ne tegye fel ezeket a kérdéseket. Összeszorította a fogát, és tovább erőltette a meddő társalgást anyámmal, abban a reményben, hogy mihamarabb visszatérhet a korábban megkezdett, befejezetlen és sokkal fontosabb párbeszédhez, amit a körülötte táncoló megfigyelőkkel folytatott. Legalábbis így képzeltem. Luz tekintete ide-oda vándorolt a körülöttünk levő

this place? How did this happen? Or perhaps, What are all these people doing in my house, and what must they think of me now? And it was all she could do not to ask these questions aloud. She was gritting her teeth, forcing her way through a conversation with my mother, an artificial exchange about nothing at all, hoping soon to return to her more important, unfinished dialogue with this other, floating gallery of observers. This was my theory, of course. Luz's eyes drifted to the near distance, to the seemingly empty space just behind us and around us. To the window, to the floor, to the ceiling.

At a certain point, my mother took Francisco's festively wrapped package from her purse. She passed it to Luz, who accepted it without saying much. I'd lost track of the words being exchanged, was focussing instead on the minute shifts in Luz's facial expressions: a sharpening of the creases at the edges of her mouth, or her eyes fluttering closed. My mother explained that the gift was for Francisco, that it was his birthday, that we hated to ask the favor but we hoped it wouldn't be a problem. Could she take it with her?

Luz sat, shoulders slouched, neck curling downward. The gift was in her lap, and by the tired look in her eyes you might have thought that it weighed a great deal.

I'm not sure how I knew, but I did: she was going to say no.

"What is it?" Luz said.

My mother smiled innocently; she didn't yet understand what was happening.

"A necktie."

Luz's eyes were wandering again, following a dust mote, or the disappearing image of an old friend. She was ashamed to be seen this way, and she was going to take it out on us.

látszólagos ürességben. Az ablakhoz, a padlóra, a mennyezetre.

Egyszer csak anyám elővette Francisco gondosan becsomagolt ajándékát, odanyújtotta Luznak, aki szó nélkül átvette. Nem emlékszem, mi hangzott el pontosan, mert a Luz arckifejezésén átsuhanó halvány változásra lettem figyelmes: a szája sarkában kirajzolódó ráncokra és hunyorító pillantására. Anyám megmagyarázta, hogy a csomag Francisco születésnap ajándéka, és hogy nagyon röstelljük, hogy szívességet kell kérnünk, és reméljük, nem gond, de lenne-e olyan szíves magával vinni.

Luz leeresztett vállakkal, előregörnyedve ült, az ajándék az ölében, fáradt tekintetéből arra lehetett volna következtetni, hogy nagyon súlyos csomag.

Nem tudom, honnan, de éreztem, hogy nemet fog mondani.

Mi van benne, kérdezte.

Anyám ártatlanul mosolygott, nem érezte még, mi fog következni.

Egy nyakkendő.

Luz tekintete megint a semmibe révedt, egy pormacskát vagy talán egy távozó régi barát képét látta. Szégyellte, hogy így látjuk, és rajtunk akarta kitölteni a haragját.

Jól vagytok, kérdezte.

Megvagyunk, mondta anyám. Francisco hiányzik, de jól vagyunk.

És a sztrájk?

A sztrájk említésére anyám elkomorult. Heti öt nap a demonstrálókkal vonultak, belefáradtak már az eseményekbe, és persze állandóan a küszöbön álló erőszaktól kellett tartani, a rendőrség vagy a radikálisabb csoportosulások részéről. Szüleim vacsorakor minden este erről beszéltek virágnyelven. Később, miután engem aludni küldtek,

“Are you well?” Luz asked.

“We are,” my mother said. “We miss Francisco, of course, but we’re well.”

“And the strike?”

At the mention of it, my mother’s expression darkened. She and my father were walking the picket line five days a week, exhausting in and of itself, and, of course, there was the constant threat of violence, from the police, from the more radical elements within their own syndicate. My parents talked about it every night, oblique references at the dinner table, and later, as I fell asleep, I heard the worried hum of voices drifting from their bedroom.

“We’re getting by,” my mother answered. “God willing, it’ll be over soon.”

Luz nodded, and reached over to the coffee table. She pulled open a drawer and took out a letter opener. We watched, not knowing exactly what she was after, but she spoke the whole time, carrying on a sort of conversation with herself, a monologue about the declining state of morals in the nation, about a new, aimless generation, and its startling lack of respect for the rules of society as they’d been handed down since the time when we were a colony of the Spanish Empire. A colony? The Empire? I looked toward my mother for help, but she was no less confused than me. There was sadness in Luz’s tone, a defeated breathiness, as if the words themselves were part of a whispered prayer or lament she would’ve preferred not to share with us. At the same time, her hands moved with an efficiency completely at odds with her speech: she held the package now, and, without pausing in her discourse, used the letter opener to cut the red bow my mother had tied. It fell unceremoniously to the dusty floor.

“Oh!” my mother said.

aggódó hangok szűrődtek felém a másik szobából.

Ha Isten is úgy akarja, felelte anyám, talán hamarosan véget ér.

Luz bölintott és az éjjeliszekrény felé indult. Kihúzott egy fiókot, és papírvágó kést vett elő. Nem tudtuk, mire készül, szótlánul néztük, ő megállás nélkül beszélt; a nemzet erkölcsi romlásáról, az ifjabb generációk céltalanságáról és a tisztelet hiányáról prédikált: nem tartják tiszteletben a társadalmi szabályokat, amiket a Spanyol Birodalom gyarmataként megörököltünk. Miféle gyarmat? Milyen birodalom? Értetlenül néztem anyámra, de láthatóan őt is összezavarta Luz monológja. Az asszony hangjából szomorúság csengett, a legyőzöttek zihálása, mintha maguk a szavak egy elsuttogott imádság vagy lamentáció részei lennének, aminek a titkát nem kívánja velünk megosztani. Ugyanakkor, szavainak erőtlenségével ellentétben, a keze nagyon is céltudatosan mozgott. Anélkül, hogy beszédében egy pillanat szünetet tartott volna, a papírvágó késsel elnyisszantotta a piros szalagot, amivel anyám az ajándékot átkötötte. A szalag ünnepnőntőn a poros padlóra hullott.

Anyám felnyögött.

Olyan volt, mintha Luz őt vágta volna ketté.

Aztán a kés hegyével lefejtette a ragasztószalagot, amivel anyám a csomagolópapírt rögzítette. A papír is a földön, Luz lábainál végezte. A cipője orrával odébb rugdalta, miközben a keze folyamatosan dolgozott.

Manapság nem bízhatunk meg senkiben, mondta. Minden megváltozott lánykorom óta. Akkoriban még ismertük a szomszédunkat, kisvárosban éltünk. Ha meglátogatott egy fiú, apám csak megkérdezte, kik a szülei, és ennyit elég is volt tudnia. Ha a fiú hátterét méltatlannak tartotta hozzám, a szolgálatot küldte ki, hogy beszéljen velem. Hogy ne engedje be a házba, ugye értik? Az ablakomból mindent lát-

It was as if Luz had cut her.

Then, with the edge of the opener, she peeled back the clear tape my mother had stuck to the wrapping. The paper slipped to the floor, landing at Luz's feet. She pushed it away with the edge of her shoe. Her hands kept moving.

"People these days can't be trusted. So much has changed from when I was a girl. We knew our neighbors – our town was small. When a boy came around, my father would ask who his parents were, and this was all he and my mother needed to know. If they didn't approve of his lineage, they'd send the servant out to have a talk with him. To shoo him away, you understand. I watched everything from my window. I was very pretty then."

"I'm sure you were," my mother said, her voice breaking, unable to hide the concern she felt for Francisco's gift. The box was open now, the white tissue paper was out, ripped in places, and the tie dangled from Luz's knee, its tip just grazing the floor. Luz opened the card we'd all signed, and spread my father's letter on her lap, squinting at the handwriting as if decoding a secret message.

"Is there something wrong?" my mother asked.

Luz didn't answer. Instead, she held the necktie up with one hand, and ran her thumb and forefinger carefully along the seam, lightly palpating the length of the fabric. She'd already checked the box and its lining. What was she looking for?

My mother watched in horror. "What are you doing? Is there a problem?"

"Where are your people from?" Luz asked.

"I'm sorry?"

"The north, the south, the center? The mountains, the jungle? How well do we know each other, really, Monica? Do I know what you do? What your family does? What

tam, csinos kis fruska voltam.

Hogyne, mondta anyám, de a hangja remegett. Nem titkolhatta el aggodalmát Francisco ajándékát illetően. A doboz már nyitva állt, a selyempapír néhol beszakadt, a zsinag Luz térdéről a padlót súrolva lógott. Luz a kártyát olvasta éppen, amit mind a hárman aláírtunk, apám levele kitergetve az ölében hevert. Aztán apám kézírását látva összevonta a szemöldökét, mintha titkos üzenetet igyekezne megfejteni.

Valami gond van, kérdezte anyám.

Az asszony nem válaszolt. Magasra tartotta a nyakkenőt, és az ujjait óvatosan végigfuttatta a szövet szegélyén, kitapogatva az anyagát. A doboz belsejét már ellenőrizte. Mit kereshetett?

Mit csinál? Valami baj van, kiáltott fel anyám rémulten.

Hová valósiak, kérdezte Luz.

Ezt hogy érti?

Északról, délről, a hegyekből, a dzsungelből? Honnan származik a családjuk? Monica, ismerjük mi egymást igazából? Azt se tudom, mit csinálnak. És a családja? És a szakszervezet, amelynek tagjai, amely a belvárosban a zavargásokat elindította? Azt gondolták, felszállok úgy a repülőre, hogy nem nézek bele a csomagba, amit rám akarnak bízni? És ha kábítószer van benne? Mondjuk, kokain?

Anyám megrendültségében mozdulatlanul ült.

Egy amerikai börtönben savanyodjak, mert az Önök elszegényedett családja a segítségem által próbál szerencsét?

Szélesre tárt szemmel meredt ránk.

Anyám hirtelen felállt, kikapta Luz kezéből a nyakkenőt és apám levelét. Odaugrottam, hogy felragadjam a dobozt, a csomagolópapírt és a szalagot, de anyám a karomnál fogva elrángatott. Az arca természetellenes vörös színben égett.

about that union you belong to, the one making trouble downtown? Did you expect me to get on a flight to America with a package I hadn't bothered to check? What if there were drugs inside? What if there was cocaine?"

My mother was stunned. Absolutely immobilized.

"Am I supposed to rot in an American prison because your impoverished family is willing to gamble with my life?"

Luz's eyes were open wide, and she held them that way, staring at us.

My mother stood abruptly, snatching the necktie and my father's letter from Luz's hands. I ducked to grab the box, the wrapping paper, and the bow, but my mother took me by the arm. Her face was a bright and unnatural shade of red.

"Leave it."

Luz reverted now, drawn back into that lonely place she'd been trapped in for months. "Did I say something wrong?" she asked, but the question wasn't addressed to us.

The empty rooms were a blur as we raced toward the street. On our way out, I managed to kick over a chair, and I knew by my mother's expression that she didn't mind at all.

The day passed and my mother was in a foul, toxic mood. The neighborhood, always so eager to gossip, was now gossiping about us. We'd tried to send contraband to America, people were saying. Drugs. Tried to take advantage of an unsuspecting elderly woman with a broken heart.

These were the kinds of humiliations we put up with for Francisco's sake. There were others. Francisco left Birmingham that October, and only later did we find out why: one afternoon Marisa skipped her S.A.T. prep class, and Mrs. Villanueva came home early to find them groping in the downstairs television room. For me, the most astonishing aspect of the story was undoubtedly the idea that the Vil-

Azokat hagyd!

Luz visszaesett korábbi morózus magányába, amitől hónapok óta szenvedett. Valami rosszat mondtam, kérdezte, de a kérdés nem felénk irányult.

Sietve hagytuk magunk mögött a homályba burkolózó üres szobákat. Mielőtt kiléptem az utcára véletlenül felrúgtam egy széket, de anyám, arckifejezése elárulta, nem neheztel rám.

Anyám egész nap szörnyen pocsék hangulatban volt. A környék, mindig pletykára éhesen, most minket vett a szájára. Azt beszéltek, hogy kábítószer próbáltunk az Egyesült Államokba csempészni. Ki akartuk használni egy megtört szívű idős asszony jóindulatát.

Francisco kedvéért ki kellett bírunk a megaláztatást. Aztán egyéb gondok is akadtak. Francisco októberben eltűnt Birminghamból, de csak később tudtuk meg, miért. Egy délután Marisa ellógott a vizsga-előkészítőről, és a korábban hazaérkező Mrs. Villanueva a tévésobában meglepte őket hancúrozás közben. Számomra a történet legmegfoghatatlanabb részlete az volt, hogy a Villanueva-házban külön tévésoba van. A hír további részletei, beleértve a csiklandós ágyjelenetet, szinte el sem jutottak a tudatomig. Mrs. Villanueva egy órát adott a bátyámnak, hogy összecsomagoljon. Mire a családfő hazaérkezett, Francisco már Jai nevű barátjánál húzta meg magát, örökre száműzve a Villanueva-ház rendezett amerikai életéből.

Még hónapokkal Francisco távozása után is pénzeket utaltunk át Villanueváéknak, hogy lerójuk a tartozást. Apám többször terjedelmes levélben kért bocsánatot régi barátjától fia viselkedése miatt, de soha nem kapott választ, és végül feladta a kísérletezést, hogy helyreüsse a dolgot. A barátságuk soha nem éledt újra, hogy is képzelhette az ellenkezőjét? A két férfi a hetvenes években talál-



lanuevas had a downstairs television room. The rest of the anecdote – even the titillating hint of sex – hardly registered next to this remarkable detail. Mrs. Villanueva gave my brother an hour to pack his things. By the time her husband got home, Francisco had already been dropped off at his friend Jai's house, forever banished from the Villanuevas' ordered American lives.

For months after he'd moved on, we continued to wire money to the Villanuevas to pay off our debt. My father sent several long letters to his old friend Julio, apologizing for his son's behavior, but these went unanswered, and, eventually, he gave up trying to make things right. The friendship was never repaired, of course, but, then, how could it be? The two men had met in the nineteen-seventies and had seen each other only twice in the intervening years. The mutual affection they felt was an almost entirely theoretical construct, based on memories of long-ago shared experiences – not unlike what I felt toward my brother by then, I suppose. Part fading recollections, part faith.

Francisco never got around to applying to college, as my parents had hoped he would. He moved briefly to Knoxville, where his friend Leon had enrolled at the University of Tennessee. But soon after that we got a letter from St. Louis (along with a photo of the Arch), and then one from Kansas City (with a picture taken in the parking lot of a rustic barbecue joint). Francisco's constant movement made it difficult for my parents to get their citizenship paperwork going, though at some point, I imagine, they must have told him what their plan was and how desperate our situation was becoming. Maybe he didn't understand. Or maybe it was inconvenient for him to think about. Maybe what he wanted most of all was to forget where he'd come from, to leave those troubles and stunted dreams behind and become

kozott, és csak kétszer látták egymást az azóta eltelt sok-sok év alatt. A kölcsönös, elvi szimpátia, amit ápoltak magukban, pusztán a nosztalgikus emlékekre, egykori közös élményekre támaszkodott. Később magam is hasonlóan kezdtem érezni a bátyám iránt. Halványuló emlékét lassanként szinte csak kötelező testvéri hűségéből idéztem fel.

Francisco soha nem jelentkezett főiskolára vagy egyetemre, ahogy azt a szüleim remélték. Egy rövid időre Knoxville-be költözött, ahol Leon barátja beiratkozott a Tennessee-állami egyetemre, de nem sokkal később már St Louisból jött tőle levél, fényképet is küldött a Nyugat kapuja boltívről, aztán Kansas Cityből, ahonnan egy rusztikus sütőde parkolójának a fotóját mellékelte. Francisco folyamatos költözködése miatt szüleim vízumkérelmének ügymintézése megrekedt, pedig úgy hiszem, volt egy pont, amikor elárulták neki a terveket, és hogy mennyire kilátástalanná kezd válni a helyzetünk itthon. Talán nem értette meg. Vagy esetleg kényelmetlen lehetett számára a család-egyesítés. Bizonyára a legszívesebben elfelejtette volna, honnan jött, maga mögött akarta hagyni a problémákat, a kényszeredett álmokat, és azzá akart válni, ami az útlevelében állt: amerikaivá.

Az emberek manapság rengeteget beszélnek a virtuális valóságról, egy másik életről, digitális megtestesülésről. A koncepciót természetesen alaposan ismerem. Jóllehet nem vagyok technikus és nem érdekel a számítógép, mindent tökéletesen értek. Ha nem is a mérnöki hátteret, de az érzelmi vonatkozásait ezeknek az úgynevezett haladó vívmányoknak valahogy ösztönszerűen értem. Hadd mondjam ki egyszerűen: kamaszkorom nem volt más, mint felkészülés az elképzelt életre történő végső átállásra. Amíg szüleim sorban álltak az amerikai nagykövetségen, amíg a vonatkozó rendeleteket és szabályokat tanulmányozták, hogy biz-

what his passport had always said he was: an American.

People talk a lot these days about virtual reality, second lives, digital avatars. It's a concept I'm fully conversant with, of course. Even with no technical expertise or much interest in computers, I understand it all perfectly; if not the engineering, then the emotional content behind these so-called advances seems absolutely intuitive to me. I'll say it plainly: I spent my adolescence preparing for and eventually giving myself over to an imagined life. While my parents waited in line at the American Embassy, learning all the relevant statutes and regulations to insure my passage, I placed myself beside my brother in each of his pictures. I followed him on his journey across America, trying always to forget where I really was.

He repaired bicycles in suburban Detroit; worked as a greeter at a Wal-Mart in Dubuque, Iowa; moved furniture in Galveston, Texas; mowed lawns at a golf course outside Santa Fe. At home, I read Kerouac and Faulkner, listened to Michael Jackson and the Beastie Boys, studied curious American customs like Halloween, Thanksgiving, and the Super Bowl. I formulated opinions on America's multiple national dilemmas, which seemed thrillingly, beautifully frivolous: gays in the military, a President in trouble for a blow job.

My brother turned twenty-one in Reno, Nevada, gambling away a meagre paycheck he'd earned busing tables at a chain Italian restaurant. It could be said that he was happy. This was 1990. He was going by Frank now, and had shed whatever Southern accent he might have picked up in those first few months as a putative member of the Villanueva household.

Six months passed, and we learned that he had abandoned water-skiing for snow skiing; he was working at a ski

tosíthassák utunkat a családegyesítés felé, én a bátyám által küldött fényképekre képzeltem magam. Vándorlásain Amerika szerte mindig mellette voltam, és igyekeztem elfelejteni, hol is vagyok a valóságban.

Detroit külvárosában kerékpárokat javított; Iowa állam Dubuque nevű városkájában információpultos volt egy Wal-Mart áruházban; Texasban, Galvestonban bútorszállító; Santa Fe határában füvet nyírt egy golfpályán. Én ott-hon Kerouacot és Faulkner-t olvastam, Michael Jackson és a Beastie Boys lemezeit hallgattam, furcsa amerikai szokásokat tanulmányoztam, tudtam, mi történik Halloweenkor, a Hálaadás Napja vagy a Superbowl alkalmával. Véleményt formáltam Amerika soknemzetiségű társadalmáról, belpolitikájáról: hogy melegeket sorozhatnak be katonának vagy hogy az ország elnöke bajba kerülhet egy szopás miatt, mindez csodálatos, frivol izgalmakat takart.

A bátyám Nevadában, Renóban töltötte be a huszonegyedik életévét. A fizetését, amit egy olasz étteremben kapott az asztalok leszedéséért, szerencsejátékra költötte. Elmondható, hogy boldog volt. 1990-t írtunk. Ekkoriban már Franknek hívták, és elhagyta azt a déli akcentust, amit a Villanueva-ház lakójaként vélhetőleg felszedett az első hónapokban.

Hat hónappal később megtudtuk, hogy a vízisít valódi sízés váltotta fel: a Sziklás-hegységben egy síközpontban vállalt munkát. Panorámafotókat is küldött, melyeken a hó szikrázva veri vissza a fényt. A jelenetek előttünk teljességgel idegen elemeket ábrázoltak. Egy egész oldalt szentelt a hó típusainak leírására, száraz hó, latyakos hó, műhó, porhó, és megtudtam, hogy az erős fényvisszaverődésben le lehet barnulni. Nem akartam elhinni, hogy amit ír igaz lehet, bár jobban meggondolva elég nyilvánvalónak hangzott, és már önmagában ez is elkésértett. Mi mindentről

resort in the Rockies, and sent photos, panoramic shots of the light mirroring brilliantly off the white snowpack. It was intriguing and absolutely foreign territory. He spent a page describing the snow – dry snow, wet snow, artificial snow, powder – and I learned that people can get sunburned in winter from all the reflected light. I never would have guessed this to be true, though in hindsight it seemed fairly obvious, and this alone was enough to depress me. What else was obvious to everyone but me? What other lessons, I wondered, was I being deprived of even now?

In school, my favorite subject was geography. Not just mine, it should be said. I doubt any generation of young people has ever looked at a world map with such a powerful mixture of longing and anxiety; we were like inmates being tempted with potential escape routes. Even our teacher must have felt it: when he took the map from the supply closet and tacked it to the blackboard, there was an audible sigh from the class. We were mesmerized by the possibilities; we assumed every country was more prosperous than ours, safer than ours, and at this scale they all seemed tantalizingly near. The atlas was passed around like pornography, and if you had the chance to sit alone with it for a few moments you counted yourself lucky. When confronted with a map of the United States, in my mind I placed dots across the continent, points to mark where my brother had lived and the various towns he'd passed through on his way to other places.

Of course, I wasn't the only one with family abroad; these were the days when everyone was trying to leave. Our older brothers applied for scholarships in fields they didn't even like, just for the chance to overstay their visas in cold and isolated northern cities. Our sisters were married off to tourists or were shipped to Europe to work as nannies. We

nem tudok még, ami mindenki más számára nyilvánvaló? Mi egyéb tanulságtól leszek még megfosztva, tűnődtem.

Az iskolában a kedvenc tantárgyam a földrajz volt. Tegyem hozzá, nemcsak az enyém. Nem hiszem, hogy élt valaha fiatal nemzedék, amely a mienknél sóvárgóbb izgalmossal tanulmányozta a világ térképét; olyanok voltunk, mint a fegyencek, akik a lehetséges szökési útvonalak kísértésében élnek. Ezt a tanárunk is tudta. Ha csak elővette a térképet a szekrényből és kifüggesztette a tábla elé, az osztály egy emberként hangosan felsóhajtott. A lehetőségek hipnotizáltak bennünket; abból indultunk ki, hogy minden ország virágzóbb, biztonságosabb a mienknél, és a térkép méretére kicsinyítve mind szívfájdítóan közel feküdt hozzánk. Szinte pornográf irodalomként adtuk körbe az atlaszt, és akinek megadatott, hogy néhány pillanatig egyedül nézegethesse, szerencsésnek érezte magát. Az Egyesült Államok térképén gondolatban apró pontokat helyeztem el, jelölve, merre járt a bátyám vagy mely városokon utazhatott keresztül vándorlásai során.

Természetesen nem csak az én családomból élt valaki külföldön. Ezidőtájt mindenki el akarta hagyni az országot, az idősebb tanulók olyan ösztöndíjakat pályáztak meg, amely szakterület nem is érdekelte őket, pusztán azért, hogy esetleg majd hosszabbítgassák a vízumukat egy hideg, tőlünk elzárt, távoli, északi városban. A lánytestvérek külföldi turistákhoz mentek feleségül vagy Európába hajóztak pesztonkának. Hirtelen sokakról kiderült, hogy a dédszüleik franciák, vagy hamis spanyol papírokat szereztek, vagy megvesztegették a közjegyzőt, hogy olyan szláv országokból származó születési bizonyítványt állítson ki, ahol az emberek aligha éltek magasabb életszínvonalon, mint mi. Mindenki a családfáját vizsgálgatta, nincs-e valaki rokona, akire támaszkodhat, valami idegen hangzású név az ősei közt.

were a nation busy inventing French great-grandparents, falsifying Spanish paperwork, bribing notaries for counterfeit birth certificates from Slavic countries that were hardly better off than we were. Genealogies were examined in great detail – was there an ancestor to exploit, anyone with an odd, foreign-sounding last name? A Nazi war criminal in your family's dark past? What luck! Pack your bags, kids – we're going to Germany! This was simply the spirit of the times. The Japanese kids headed back to Tokyo, the Jewish kids to Israel. A senile Portuguese shut-in who hadn't spoken a coherent sentence in fifteen years was dusted off and taken to petition the Embassy; suddenly all his grandchildren were moving to Lisbon.

The state-employee strike didn't last forever. It ended, as everything did in those days, with an uneasy and temporary resolution: across-the-board pay cuts but no immediate layoffs, a surfeit of mistrust and rancor on all sides. My father was there at the climactic march, when a bank in the old center was burned by government infiltrators and dozens of protesters were beaten and jailed. He was gassed and shot at with rubber bullets, and he, like tens of thousands of others, fled the violence like a madman, running at full speed through the chaotic streets of the capital, a wet rag tied across his nose and mouth. It was, he told me later, the moment he realized he wasn't young anymore.

The dreaded election came and went; the crisis deepened. The new President privatized everything, selling the state off piece by piece and dividing the profits among his friends. The truce that had been reached at the end of the strike was broken, and the next year thousands of workers, including my mother, were suddenly laid off. She was unemployed for months. Prices shot up, the currency crashed, the violence spread, and our world became very small and

Felbukkant egy náci háborús bűnös a sötét múltból? Micsoda szerencse! Gyerekek, csomagoljatok! Németországba költözünk. A kor lenyomata volt mindez. A japán gyerekek visszautaztak Tokióba, a zsidók Izraelbe. A szenilis, szobához kötött, betegeskedő portugál nagybácsit, aki évek óta nem ejtett ki egy összefüggő mondatot, leporolták és felöltöttették, hogy beadja a családegyesítési kérelmet a nagykövetségen; hamarosan az összes unoka Lisszabonba repült.

Az állami alkalmazottak sztrájkja nem tarthatott örökké. Úgy végződött, ahogy akkoriban minden: kínos-kényelmetlen, időleges megoldással; általános fizetésescsökkentéssel, de nem bocsátottak el senkit; émelygő bizalmatlansággal és gyűlölködéssel minden oldalon. Apám is jelen volt a demonstráción, amikor egy óvárosi bankot a kormánytól beszivárgott emberek felgyújtottak, és néhány tucatnyi lázadót megverték, majd börtönbe csuktak. Kapott a könnygázból és a gumilövedékekből, de több tízezer társához hasonlóan, hanyatt-homlok menekült az erőszakoskodás elől; egy vizes rongyot kötött az orra és a szája elé, úgy vágatott végig a főváros káoszba forduló utcáin. Ahogy később mesélte, ekkor döbbsent rá, hogy már nem fiatal.

Elérkezett a rettegetve várt választás, a válság csak tovább mélyült. Az új elnök mindent privatizált, egytől egyig felszámolta az állam vagyonát, és a barátaival osztozott a bevételen. A fegyverszünet, amely a sztrájk végeztével időlegesen beállt, megtört, és a következő évben több ezer alkalmazottnak, köztük anyámnak is, azonnal felmondtak. Hónapokig nem talált munkát. Az égbe szöktek az árak, az ország fizetőeszköze összeomlott, tovább terjedt az erőszak és a bennünket körülvevő világ nagyon beszűkültté, veszélyessé vált. A kenyérért sorba kellett állni és valószínűtlen köteggű pénzzel kellett fizetni a legaróbb árucikkért is. Az

very precarious. We waited in breadlines, carrying impossibly large stacks of banknotes, which had become a requirement for even the tiniest transaction. People spoke less; strangers distrusted one another. The streets, even during morning rush, had a perverse emptiness to them. We listened to the radio in the dark and emerged each morning fearful to discover what tragedy had befallen us in the night.

These emotions are quite beside the point now, like an artifact looted from an ancient grave, an oddly shaped tool whose utility no one can quite decipher. But back then, walking through the gray, shuddering city, I thought about my brother all the time. I was ten, I was eleven, unfree but hopeful; I was thirteen, I was fourteen, and my brother had escaped. Fifteen, sixteen: waiting for something to happen, reading obsessively about a place I would never see for myself, in a language I would never actually need. Twenty, twenty-one: small failures, each humiliation a revelation, further proof that my real life was elsewhere. Twenty-five, twenty-six: a dawning awareness that my condition as a citizen of the Third World was terminal.

And Francisco lived through none of this. As punishment, I set about trying to forget him: the sound of his laughter, his height relative to mine, the content of the conversations we'd had after the lights went out but before we fell asleep.

I never managed it, of course. ♦



emberek alig szóltak egymáshoz; akit nem ismertek, azzal még bizalmatlanabban viselkedtek. Az utcák, a reggeli csúcsidőben is, természetellenes ürességet mutattak. Éjszaka sötétben hallgattuk a rádiót, és minden reggel félelemben ébredtünk, féltünk megtudni, milyen tragédia történt az elmúlt éjjel.

Mindezek az érzelmek mára már olyan mellékesek, mint egy ősi sírról ellopott tárgy, amelynek egykori hasznát senki sem érti. De akkoriban, ahogy a szürke, borzongó várost jártam, állandóan csak a bátyámra gondoltam. Tízéves voltam, aztán tizenegy, a szabadságtól megfosztottan, de reményeket űzve. Tizenhárom, aztán tizennégy, és a bátyám megszökött. Tizenöt, tizenhat: vártam, hogy történjen valami. Egy idegen nyelven, azon a nyelven, amelyre soha életemben nem lesz szükségem, arról a helyről olvastam fáradhatatlanul, ahova soha nem fogok eljutni. Húszévesen, majd huszonegy évesen apró kudarcok értek. Minden megaláztatás újabb és újabb bizonyítéka annak, hogy a valós életem máshol játszódik. Huszonöt-huszonhat évesen ráébredtem, hogy állapotom – a Harmadik világ tagjaként – végleges.

És Francisco ebből semmit sem élt át. Elhatároztam, hogy büntetésül elfelejtem. Elfelejttem a nevetését, a testmagasságát hozzám képest, a beszélgetéseinket lámpaoltás után az ágyban, elalvás előtt, mindent elfelejték.

Persze, sosem sikerült. ♦