



Lisa Carver

The Population of Dreams

John Forbes Nash, Jr. was a mathematical genius who suffered from schizophrenia for thirty years and then woke up and won the Nobel Peace Prize. He wrote that “rationality limits a person’s concept of his relationship to the cosmos,” and called the times he was cured, “interludes of enforced rationality.” A visiting professor yelled at him in the insane asylum: “How could you believe you are being recruited by aliens?” Nash said, “Because the ideas about supernatural beings came to me the same way that my mathematical ideas did. So I took them seriously.” Of course there is a connection between mathematicians and mystic religious fanatics, what with their complex alternate reality that might very well be true, just with different symbols. Nash’s biographer and/or psychiatrist (can’t remember which), Sylvia Nasar, called him an extreme example of how people whose intelligence greatly exceeds their emotional sophistication drown in creativity and research, satisfying the simultaneous needs for solitude and companionship.

The Only Child

The only child, surrounded by adults who are never his equals, feels like an alien on a mission to study humans—including the one whose body he’s inhabiting. The only child is always *realizing*. There are many ways of knowing. The only child does not have the natural way, the way that’s throughout his whole body and is consistent in various social situations. The only child seeks out difficult people to love, because being devastated works for him. Confidence to him is coagulation. He needs his confidence destroyed, he needs to get unarranged enough to see the different parts of himself—most of which are, under normal circumstances, eclipsed, possibly all lifetime long, by the higher functioning parts. Other people might think it’s a good idea to just let the higher functioning parts keep control, and live, but the only child would rather realize things. I don’t recommend becoming involved with him—he’s never satisfied. He’s only realizing. And trying to get away from you so he can dream about you. (I’m not talking bad about someone else—I’m an only child.)

A Guide to Bereavement by the American Cancer Society

You can imagine the platitudes and reassurances enshrined herein! I think I could write a better guide. “You’re going to hate the person. You’re going to be pissed off at them for dying, and for taking so long to die. You’re going to be pissed off at them for being in so much pain. They’re going to shrink and pieces of them will fall off till they’re very small and helpless, and every time you look at them you’re going to think about when they were strong and big and you were small and helpless, and how they shook you and humiliated you then, even though you hadn’t thought about that in years and years. You’re going to be pissed off at them for dying exactly like they lived. You’ll expect sudden realisticness, guidance, and generosity to pop up out of nowhere and flow sweetly from their lips, just because they’re dying. But nothing’s going to change, and you’re going to be pissed off at them for making you see that dying is not so miraculous and powerful. You’re going to feel absolutely guilty. You’re going to neglect your duties and feel like a robot-monster.”

I just found that written in my hand on the back of an envelope, dated 25 July, 1997. On 25 July, 1997, I was not at my most humourous and lovable.

Rich People Body

Rich people can do whatever they want. I knew this fashion designer who bleached her four-year-old daughter’s hair to trick people into believing the mother a natural blonde. She put *chemicals* on a child’s *head*—no one outside her insane income bracket would even consider such an act. Rich people’s relationship with the body is one of master and servant—the rich person tells the body what to do, hires an army of surgeons, masseuses, and experts to enforce the rules, and the body does it. In scaring workouts, the instructor shows a scary movie then sets you on an exercise bike and yells at you. \$250 per hour. What happens to my poor person body is never scheduled. When I run, I feel like pieces of meat. I feel slaughterable, edible. I feel sinews, I hear bones clicking. I escape the tyranny of the brain. I run faster and faster, a haze of movement takes over where my body had been. I escape everyone, everything. I’ve entered the after-life, my feet six inches above the floor of the earth and six seconds north-east of the tarry wave of time.

A Sweet Ugly Magnificent Floating Man

Allen Ginsberg was phenomenally ugly, and was made up of that ugly, New Jersey, enthusiastic voice, school-girlish crushes, and excessive, tumbling imagery... He was so filled with stuff to tell. He was naive, but that’s OK—he was covering a very wide area; you can’t be picayune when you’re stretching out over all of time and land.

It's Sweet To Realize You Don't Have to Have Something To Give It Away

I don't know what Layman P'ang means exactly, but that doesn't stop me from repeating it. "The stick doesn't hit a man who has nothing further to do!" I shouted that at Matt Jasper when I got tired of listening, and I think he reached enlightenment. Layman P'ang and Matt reached it. I'm just sitting here on the phone.

Humanism

I'm just gonna say all this, whether it makes sense or not, even if it bores people to death. Here goes: poems or lyrics run through our heads like people say prayers even though they don't believe in God. All we need is tunnels. All that stuff is there, I'll try any tunnel. But for it to work, you have to believe in the tunnel as the thing. Even though it's not. When I'm almost asleep, I'm halfway between the me I know and the me I don't who has a logic and a life and a landscape all her own. I try to catch clues to bring back to conscious me, but when I do I can't make sense of them. Or maybe they burnt up when they touched the atmosphere, and what I hold is char, not the thing I had as dreaming me. Monsters are real if you just understand them. Some things are too marvelous to be perceived in their true form. They became symbols, and to not believe in the symbols is to understand only partially. Inside me are all these separate parts that don't know each other, and cannot exist in each other's atmospheres. Dreams within dreams within dreams within dreams...I'm in a whirlpool. How does one get out?

She Came To Live With Us

She falls asleep before I do. I touch her body, some old, some new: the bird bones, cat muscles, snake jaw, wearing shadows like a black lace shawl. The metal plate in her pelvis makes her look a hundred-years-old at least. She'd never get past airport security so I tell her, don't even think of trying to leave.

The Only Relationship That Has No Way To End

I was kissing my son, and he threw his fist at the floor: "I throw your lovin' down!" I just stared at him, half hurt, half amused. Then he picked "something" up off the carpet and put it on my chest near my heart: "I put two lovin's back in."

On Having More Children

What I love most about having a kid is the dynamic of our different ages. Wolfgang is opening up into life and soon I'll be on the shady side of death. Down the road, it'll be neat to have one person in the house just

discovering hormones while the other is starting to break down. I always wanted more children. I have this ideal of having several different ages in the house, how we would all relate to each other as we simultaneously reach different points of life and our bodies and energies and interests. I see the conflicts and connections that would arise from that intersection as a much more real life than just me bouncing my ideas off the walls back into me, and arguing points with my intellectual friends that we all agree, basically, are worth arguing—which is totally different than trying to explain something to a ten-year-old, or understand how something unimportant to you could be so dire to him.

Last night I thought, for the first time, that maybe I won't have any more children, for exactly the same reasons I condemned my peers for not having any: I am selfish, value ideas above all else (maybe), and just don't feel like dealing with someone else's shit.

Three Things I Wrote While Drinking

- Love between a man and a woman is magical and hideous.
- Marriage and children are a temptation, a separation from the knowingness in darkness. Buddha, Jesus, Steven Tyler, all of them were rascalions abandoning their families. I, too, feel the call—to chaos, to fire, to water, to abandon all that I know and have.
- I believe in movement, three-dimensional senses.

A Letter From Wolfgang To His Godfather (dictated)

Five and the nine. I'm nuts. And there's six and five and a two. And there's five and there's three and there's five and there's four. And let's read the whole map! That's New York City right up there. No, that's New Hampshire! That's where you live. Do you know Grandpa's work? It's work where Grandpa lives. That's a nightmare I had last night. Those were mean dogs. And I had happy dogs in my good dreams. Mommy picked me up out of a bad dream. I love you Devon! I love you Devon! Hi Devon. I'm hiding a nightmare in the closet. I'm done with this letter.

Runaway

How could I think I could know more without my son? All I would be is uninterrupted. Interruptions are the clash of other people's dreams with one's own. It makes sparks, and sparks are the best stuff. To stay in dreams all the way through is to drown. I think?

We were taking a walk and Wolfgang pointed at a white feather on the wind. It glided up and over, then back again, and down until his dirty little boy hand almost had it—then up, up, up, until it disappeared into the whiteness of the sky. For the next few days, he called me "Feather

Mommy.” He’s always calling me things that go up into the sky and disappear: Firecracker, Smoke. I know he knows I am somehow unattainable, and I regret it. He calls himself Satellite Dish Wolf. He is attached to this world, but receives transmissions from heaven? All kinds of people are mothers, even people who weren’t meant to be. And they’re just as much mothers as those who were meant for it. We really are what we are. In my dreams I fly away, but I’m right here dreaming. I’m holding. I love you, and all your funny ways.

Going Out At Night

In my hand, on my knee, glowing deep blue and dentist-white on a seventeen-year-old’s lipstick red, my can of Budweiser is covered with tiny bumps of perspiration, like toad’s flesh. A few beads gather together and drop onto my thigh, which is smooth like aluminum and perspiring too. I have an air conditioner now, but I prefer the heat. I put the can down and think of what to do with my hands. One goes on the back of my neck, the thumb of the other is under my shirt, the fingers are half-down my shorts. One perfect second, yawning, stretching. My son is at grandpa’s tonight, all night long. I think I’m going out. Well, all right.

The sun is hovering at the periphery of the landscape, which is a friendly, small town, very many trees, and a few satellite dishes, solitary and brave, glowing white against the green. The bank clock dial glows and so do the clouds—luminescent with the day’s attempt to hold on to power even as it bends under the greater weight of the night. I cross the street to a police-horse, black and pretty; the cop says he’s purebred and friendly. I pet him gently, holding my breath because I don’t know if this would be considered public intoxication. I only had one beer, but I’m feeling wild. I’m scared the horse will bite me. I have a crush on the horse and the cop. I move on, exhaling madly.

I’m on my way to the river. The leaves are heavy, hitting my face as I pass them by. The sky is rising now to meet the night. A fat man with a backpack looks at my legs the same way the air touches cement. I slip down the wet grass hill on treadless sneakers. By the time I reach the bottom, it’s dark.

Like a cat’s eye, the river is black and reflecting light no one else can see. Earlier today I saw a decomposed squirrel. The fragile jaw bone with fierce front teeth had separated from the skull, pointing in the opposite direction. The river’s light is like those teeth—shiny, hard and useless. Couples move over the brick walkway holding hands over bony knees. Young and old jaws are moving—they’re saying something no one else can hear. Like the river, they move back and forth, unable to find rest in the body of the night. These bony, strolling couples, reverent, normal, are

not afraid of all the unlit things. Like me. The shadows are thin blankets overlapping, all different shades of dark. My lipstick glistens red like the sparkles on the crest of each wave. My body—soft, compliant—is lying on the craggy river rocks.

I travel back through a cold cement tunnel till I'm downtown again. Push through these dark doors where I know I'll find a TV and huddled couples and trios luminescent. One old man is talking to himself. I order a JD and coke and watch him frankly. The words he drops down on his pendulous gut from his drooping lip and hairy mouth, I know would be right if I listened. He is as much a part of the night as a star or the entire river or the blackness of the road.

Out of the corner comes someone I hadn't noticed. He's about fifty-years-old and resembles a fox terrier. He says, do you want another drink? I say, "I'm out of money." He says, "I didn't ask that." He buys me a drink. Straightaway I learn he was a P.O.W. for two-and-a-half years. I ask him what he thought about all that time. He said, "Home. Just home." He touches my leg with broken knuckles—two or three times the normal size—and knife wounds as he tells the story. He calls the Vietnamese gooks, looks up quickly to see if I'm offended. I'm not. How would I know what racist assumptions mean when you're in a foreign prison camp? He led the men out of the camp during a three-day monsoon. Dug under the barbed wire fence with their hands. It was twenty-two days before Americans found them. They ate a wild pig and a dog. Had to carry the animals ten miles away to cook them so the enemy wouldn't see the smoke and recapture them. Now he's a cook at Jake's and his girlfriend broke up with him Tuesday. She's thirty-two or twenty-four. Her husband is seventy-one, and she has another boyfriend too. Out of twenty-five men who escaped, nineteen survived. He'd moved out of his apartment to live with her. Now she's tossed him out and it's \$89 a night to stay at Day's Inn. He's thinking about moving to Maryland—everyone at the chamber of commerce smiles and is friendly there. I promise to come eat at Jake's tomorrow morning, and leave.

I get home and *The Last Temptation of Christ* is on. I yell things at my TV and feel deep.

I must've fallen asleep. The phone rings and it's Jerry, his sweet, crackly voice breaking my dream like a thumb poking through very old, worn fabric. I try to remember what I wanted to tell him. Something about how miracles are an abomination. Something about how I am of this world, and miracles mess up the flow of taking my turn to die eternally. (?) He says, "Metaphor, not miracles!" I say, "What the hell are you talking about?" He makes some comparison between the Bible and *Soap Opera Digest*. He says nobility is lost today. He has the gall to claim he is the

last noble man! I'm a sucker for gall. As I am for crooked teeth. He says he changed his mind about slowness. Now what was it he said originally on the subject? Neither of us remembers. Our story goes in and out like the tide. My night self's a sea-broken fence, breaking out of the sand and floating on top of deep waters till it reaches the horizon. I forget what we say that makes so much sense—maybe it never did. I go to sleep not like I'm losing awareness, but like I'm travelling to this sea that's always there. My everyday life is the one that seems lost now, seems like the dream. And every time I'm here again, over and over and over again, the stars come out like they never didn't shine for me to navigate by. Me the floating, broken fence glowing white in the sparkling, flowing night.

It's almost dawn. While I've been thinking, we've been talking about his hallucination that I'm a Mason, right and left brain, all the one-night-stands we've ever had, resistance and whims, endlessness, and how he wants to move north and be on call to snowplow this winter, because he wants to be interrupted by nature. "Thirty feet of snow!" he says as if he discovered it. I say goodnight and go outside. The seat under my clothes gathers into filaments clinging back to the night. Though the sky is still dark, the outline of every shape glows. I, too, glow. It's as if the earth and all the things on it have hidden the light from the night, and now it's beginning to peer out—from behind every bush, from under an abandoned red wagon and around every telephone pole, marking time.

In the night and in between the night and day are all sorts of lights that are not light. So too are there all these ways to know that are not knowing, that do not belong, that cannot find a home, haloed with an unreal, post-apocalypse aloneness. I can almost feel knowledge creeping across my limbs, like hairs rising when lightning is near. Except for maybe a few minutes, I haven't slept, but I don't feel lethargic at all. I feel like I could walk forever. Straight ahead is a wall of trees, magnificent in size, like a tidal wave. The wind is blowing every single leaf straight up—must be one-hundred-thousand of them. Their undersides are white. It's a wall of white, of wind-driven white. And it's not how I feel about him that lets me know how I feel about him—it's the way those leaves look to me now.

I hear falling in love makes you like a little kid, makes you feel four-years-old. When I was four, my father left my mother for another woman and her children and they moved across the country. My mother was in the hospital, they said she might not make it. I overheard the adults arguing about who I would live with. They lied to me. My cousins were watching my turtle; they forgot to feed him and he died. I had no brothers, no sisters, and no sense of direction. One day I went out my front door across the street to play at a friend's house. I walked out her back door, got lost, and ended up in another section of town. A policeman found me.

I'm surprised to find I've walked all the way to the river again, and the sun bursts up, fully formed, like a balloon that had been held underwater by a child. This is the sun of people who do their day right. In the last twenty-five, I've learned how to do my day right, and I laugh all the time. But just now I feel like I did when I was four. There's something magnificent in being lost and bewildered, something I've missed. It hurts my head as much as it would anyone, but at the same time it feels like peace. It's time to go back now, my son is coming home.

Cat Power

Reports came back that my name crossed Chan Marshall's lips about a thousand times that summer night in Boston. Apparently she felt that it was because of me people made fun of her androgynous look (because I was all glittery and high-heeled that night?), and I guess she's pissed that we went out with the same guy (but I was with him five years before her, so what's to be mad about?), and so she refused to sleep at the house she was supposed to because I was gonna be there too. It was late at night, I don't know where her band slept instead.

You'd think I'd be excited to be thrust into this silly non-cat fight with a celebrity, but it happens all the time and it's just boring. I am nice and I like to make friends. I thought she was perfect-looking. She looks like Thurston Moore or my son. Yeah, she looks exactly like a three-year-old boy. It's amazing. She also looks at ease in her unease. I'd heard she cries on-stage, moved by her own songs and frustrated by people talking. I was looking forward to it. Alas, it was just an annoying set. A song about a double confession. Actually, admitting to a double confession is a triple confession, and since two negatives cancel each other out, it ends up still being a confession. Those are the kind of games one tends to play when one's a WASP. Both complaining and confessing, done quickly, make for good songs. Dragged out, it's an insult to people who paid seven bucks to see you. She reminded me of Jandek, who I always thought I should appreciate, since everyone I respect respects him, but if it were the end of the world and there were no reason left to lie, I'd say I cannot stand that man. On CD, she's more like Joni Mitchell when she wanted to skate away, or maybe Neil Young at his most melodramatic, alcoholic, broken low. Her voice is like a summer breeze—barely there, meloncholy, drifting away, undeniable and then just gone. An undulation moves through it, something very old. She's bored, attentive, disillusioned, remembering. The language is stilted and unexpected. The music is gentle. Trailing off. In interviews, she's charming. Very interested in the world. I think quirky is the word. She's all over the place. She's young like a space alien visiting.

In *The Hills Beyond*, Thomas Wolfe tells the story of the Joyners. Bear

Joyner's twenty offspring split into two tribes: those who stayed in the hills and kept the same ways as everything around them deteriorated—the forest decimated, the soil eroded and scattered with trash, the people grown inbred and strange—and those who went to town, entered the world, and became prosperous, powerful, possessing senses of humour other people got. Those left behind had nothing to their name except for “something wild, world-lost, and lyrical: the sound of rockbright waters, bird calls, and something swift and fleeting in a wood; cloud shadows passing on a hill; the wind through the hill grasses, and the quality of light—something world-lost, far, and haunting...” All this is in Chan Marshall's song. And I guess that's why I hated her live show. I don't like what is ancient and wild to come blinking out of its hole. It's bound to crumble up here. I know she—the woman—has travelled a lot and goes out with the men of indie rock, and is lively, but the song somehow remained—though worn bare with age—pristine. I'm not ready for it to just poke its head out right there in The Middle East Cafe, amongst all those backpacked Bostonians and me and all my wiry-limbed gay friends in black, and silver-and-white dressed, boisterous straight friends. I'd rather never see it face to face—ever. And I wonder at all those who think they do want to. Do they just not mind making unsafe the last thing remaining safe-kept and unknown?

Secret Life

Whenever someone tells me they feel low about their place in life, and why, I think, “How could what you just described seem like a low place when there's so much wondrous stuff all around?” But then when I try to think of exactly what that wondrous stuff is, I can never come up with anything specific, because it's never what it seems. If a bird's song seems wonderful, it's because it's the messenger of some unknowable—what? I can't come up with the noun because I've never known it! But I see its messages and messengers everywhere. If I were to say this out loud to my suffering conversation partner, I would be sure to be annoying. If I'm thinking all this secret stuff all the time, other people must be too. What if they're thinking evil things about me with their secret thoughts? Surely they are. Nah—they're probably thinking about their drycleaning and love. Some things wondrous: the way the light always changes in the sky, bitten apples turning brown, dried leaves crumpling to dust, wind like razor blades, the smell of hot tar, and the memory almost there of pioneers forging always on, some falling down and behind, while others go on. I think it's wonderful to be a human being. Not many people think so. At least not the people I like.

More than one person has said to me (I think it was two) they'd like to

be solo astronauts because then there wouldn't be other people around to mess up the beauty they see, or their dreams (whichever way you look at it). My thought when they said that is, "God, I must be the most alone person on earth, because I already feel like a solo astronaut, and all I want is to come down, and I don't know how, and I don't think I ever will." What Royal Trux refer to as direct central-nervous-system to central-nervous-system communication—something they'd like to happen, but is impossible—is probably the same dream as someone knocking on my rocketship door and coming in. Lots of people talk about it in all different ways.

My friend David was just telling me he feels like a loser because he's thirty-years-old and he rides a bike (or would if he got the brakes fixed) and is between houses and the only shirt he has in the place he's at right now says STP (the oil company) and now everyone thinks he's a big Stone Temple Pilots fan. So I started complaining too—about how Wolfgang has a cold so he snorts and snuffles so loud it wakes me up all night, and how my friend and her fellow have been having some differences in styles of loving, which make her cry and call me when I finally do get to sleep. So by now, I told him, I'm a little delusional and I kind of don't like it, but it's actually extremely pleasureable, this careening in my stomach, and everything looking a little liquid around the edges. David said that's how he feels about his situation too. So he, too, was keeping his secret thoughts about wonderful stuff to himself, saying out loud only what he thinks will be comprehensible instead. What if people aren't knocking on each other's rocketship doors because they're all already open?

It's dangerous to think like that though, because that can lead to getting locked up in the looney bin! It snowballs. It's not healthy to be around a lot of people who encourage your eccentricities—I've seen people get really unlikable when that happens.

Fear

There is an American belief that poetry is OK if the guy's a drunk or he uses a lot of exclamation points or dirty words (Bukowski, Magakovsky, Whitman, Childish). "I am as lonely as the only eye/ of a man on his way to the blind!" This kind of person tries to possess life or a mood or the elements of the day or night—not by letting it inhabit us, or come to us from all directions and then spin off in all different directions again, like T.S. Eliot lets it. We're grabbing it. We're spearing everything we see with exclamation points. We want to make it ours. We'll do anything we've never done before. But we don't know how to do nothing. We don't know how to let it. The thing about ungentle poetry and ungentle living is that in the seizing, one can, oneself, remain unseized.

With T.S. Eliot, not a lot happened. In his best poem, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” he ended up not even doing anything with the woman, because he figured it would all turn out bad anyway. He didn’t even tell her what he thinks of life, because what if she said, “But that wasn’t what I was talking about!”? He hears mermaids calling to everyone, but they will not call to him, he thinks. They are calling to him though—they are! Of course they are—how else would he know they’re there? In the end he has “lingered in the chambers of the sea/ By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown/ Till human voices wake us, and we drown.” I thought he was strolling by cafes on the beach with the lady, and thinking about the lady, and thinking about the mermaids out there. But no, he was in here with the mermaids, and what he thought was the dream—other people’s dream, not his—was the real thing, and what he thought was real. . . I think that was real too. All the scenes and realities rolled by him and through him so gently, transforming without announcement. He let each one go without question, and it didn’t occur to him that he could say no to the new one coming. It was Prufrock’s nature to not expect too much—and all that can come came through him and he never knew.

I’ve impressed myself with my ability to make people cry. I thought it was good because they “felt something.” It never occurred to me that strong, unusual experience of any kind might not be other people’s idea of the best way to live, or might not actually *be* the best way to live. How was I so sure what “strong” was, anyway? Maudlin, out-of-control, terrified, humiliated, discombobulated—what made me so sure these are stronger than peace and gentleness? Was I right that they are the companion piece to intense joy? There is something calamitous about joy.

Gregory of Nyssa wrote, “Every concept grasped by the mind becomes an obstacle in the quest to those who search.” (And I have been so fierce!) So, to have a relationship with the unknowable, we must transcend all that we know, transcend what we’ve learned in relationships with any other human beings. Open up our hands and let it fly away. Open up our mind and not be so smart. Dante’s love of Beatrice mastered him because of the power of his own imagination. How much do we use other people as projection screens on which to play out our own dream? It’s so easy to love what is absent. I want to know what is present. I want to really know—what? God, the supernatural, nature, spirit, time. I also really want to know human beings. I don’t want to use one to get at the other. But that’s what I’ve been doing. Tunnelling straight through people’s hearts to the afterlife, and mistaking the sea and the rain for human social life. Have I thwarted all my own efforts by trying so hard? Am I very unnatural because I’m never not trying to divine what is natural, and that’s just not normal? Am I studying people so intently they end up

acting all weird around me? Do they resume their normal lives and interactions only when I leave the room? I challenge people's sense of self, I know (they tell me so)—but what about me? Always challenging, always challenging. I'm so used to challenging myself, I think it might be impossible for me to be truly unchallenged anymore. I use the Socratic method on myself all day long, and I think I might be entirely anaesthetized to it by now. How to calm down, how to calm down? How to let go? I want to be sweet. How to be sweet? How to be sweet when you have all fire inside you?

Just now a radio man said in my ear that Hildegard von Bingen—a nun/philosopher—said, “A fire will consume whatever it cannot transform.”

I don't trust the universe enough to give up my watch for even one night. Do I really think it will all fall down? My perception is the only thing holding the universe together? I had no idea until this very second of the immensity of my ego! I'm my own ghost of when I already live—did I ever live or am I only the future of my past forever? I move in memory. Shake, shake, shake off all these dreams of reality and super-reality. How to be clean? How to be easy? C'mon, c'mon, c'mon, you know you can.

Lev Baesh

That's what my rabbi—who has the heartiest laugh and the lovingest presence and the kindest, most knowing and energetic mind—changed his name to on a retreat last month. It just came to him, he said, and who was he to turn away what knocked on his door simply because it looks ridiculous? For *Lev Baesh* means “Heart On Fire.” So he's asking us to call him, an overweight gay man, thirty-six-years-old living in Dover, New Hampshire in 1998, “Heart On Fire.” I mean, how pretentious! But he doesn't care! It came to him, and he's not about to turn it away. “My heart *is* on fire!” he said. Right out loud he said that, in front of everyone. If he's not embarrassed, then I'm not either. Forget what I said before. I can't just put my own foot on top of my head and squash me all down. I'm not so gentle and sweet. My heart *is* on fire. And so is all that I see—trees, lonely girls curving over books on benches, the river moving slow, the cars carrying sweating lovers half-quarreling, the church with its simplistic love message in black plastic letters on a white board, new every day, the postal clerks who tease me every day, my son (who said today on our way to the post office, “There are reflections in my man-eye”), my long fingers, the dead bluebird on the sidewalk, the sky which parted for her flight only yesterday, and even the bank with its tellers in pseudo-classy silk and its air conditioning and little pieces of paper and its resigned depositors. Even the bank is on fire. Around the corner comes a rusted metal contraption on wheels, and then the hairy-shouldered man

pushing it. Then comes a child much too old for the stroller he's squeezed in, then the fat, hairy woman pushing it. That man knows his wife is no princess, but she is the queen of his life. Even if they can't stand each other (maybe they can, I don't know), even if they're unintelligent, there they are, facing each other, facing their child, naked among these wheeled devices, naked and haloed in the fire of aliveness and aloneness—and the coming breaking, just once, of both those things.

That last sentence might not have the best construction, because as I was typing it there came a continuous mewing from Violet, as if she were stuck, and similar noises from Wolfgang, who has been playing in the room next to my office. Fearing torture, I hurriedly typed the somewhat ambiguous “both those things” and rush out to find my son clapping and hovering over Violet who is hovering over and slapping a mouse, one of its hind legs sticking straight out behind it like a second tail. Violet looks up at me and cries with happiness. I tell Wolfgang to get back, then I pet Violet and call her a good girl. Wolfgang says, “Violet found a mouse to play with!”

“She's not playing, really—she's killing the mouse. That's what cats do—they kill small animals and eat them. It looks disgusting to people, but to her she's doing her work for the house, she's doing what she was born to do. That's why I called her a good girl.”

The mouse has taken the opportunity of my speechmaking to drag itself behind the open door into the corner. It takes Violet about half-a-second to find it. I wonder how long that half-a-second felt to that dying mouse? It must have really thought it was getting away, because now for the first time, as Violet very gently picks it up in her mouth, it squeaks. High, piercing squeaks, over and over and over. Wolfgang laughs. “That mouse is funny!”

“It's not funny to the mouse. Something a hundred times bigger than it is scaring and hurting it. C'mon, Wolf, let's go downstairs—this is private between Violet and the mouse. You can look at the mouse again when it's dead, but right now it's private.”

And time just stops, and I see the fire of all of us, as clear as if there were actual flames flying out of our eyes and mouths and hands and hearts. Violet, whose central nervous system was damaged when a car hit her six months ago, who can't even scratch an itch anymore because all the signals are haywire, who scrambles and falls most of the time when she tries to jump on anything, looking at me as if to say, “See, I'm still useful.” Wolfgang, seeing something dire for the first time and feeling the world open up. The mouse, fighting for its life, screaming and hoping even now that it's too late. And me, frozen, my heart racing, ransacking every store of knowledge I've accumulated over the last twenty-nine years

to decide at once how to handle this so that both members of my family (I include Violet) are taken care of properly (what should I tell Wolfgang at three to learn about death, pain, terror and innocent cruelty?). And what do I owe the mouse? Do I intervene? In the pause of all action, even my question is haloed in fire and then Wolf and I turn and head down the staircase.

This turned out to be one of the rare times when the mouse gets away. So now we have living in this hundred-year-old house one small, bloody mouse with a broken leg, one nerve-damaged cat with metal parts for a pelvis, one kid with long, thick scars all over his chest and side where they opened him up to patch up the holes in his heart, and one woman with holes in her thinking, blown through by ghosts of herself till she doesn't even know where she is in Time. And there's the plant my cousins gave me at my mother's funeral, and we haven't talked to each other since—that plant is doing very well. It's a very fine house.

My father comes over (this is the neverending story!) and Wolf and I tell him about the mouse. "Why should she eat mice when she has cat food?" he asks Wolfgang. Maybe he's trying to expand Wolf's thinking, but I know him—he's also trying to destroy my logic in front of my son. My father has holes in his heart too, but no one can fix them. He plays me like he played my mother and my stepmother. I'm not gonna lose, though, like they did. I won't wrangle. I won't fight for my son's respect or love. I demand the first and hope for the second, and nobody better get in my way. I won't get destroyed like I saw happen to the other women in my life, no way. (Some experts on *The Jenny Jones Show* said girls with fathers like mine just about always turn out, like me, promiscuous, bisexual and drug dabblers. They said it's because we fear intimacy, but I'm guessing it's also because we see destruction as normal, inevitable, and would at least like to be in charge of it. We want to take part in our own destruction and have fun, not just lie there and take it. My father is very good with Wolfgang—patient and scientific and adventuresome. As he was with me growing up when he wasn't poisoning my relationships with anyone else on earth or disappearing.)

My father asks me to type up a letter for him—he's decided to buy a Russian bride. I'm going to have another new stepmother! This intrigues me. I want to meet a Russian. Then he says that last night he "got with" this woman we both know, and informs me that she's into scratching till blood comes out, and "likes getting her face screwed into the bathtub drain." This is not the turn I was expecting my essay on the fire in my heart to take. He says he hears some women in Russia can't "get there" unless they're whipped. In my secret life I say, "Anyway. Whatever. Get out of my house." I'm listening very carefully to see if he says anything

that Wolfgang could understand or repeat. Apparently he's being just as careful, because he keeps one millimeter back from crossing the line. I am like a cat at a mousehole, waiting to pounce on one wrong word, and kill. I'm not young enough anymore for him to woo me like he used to. I've morphed into that thing he has waged chemical war on (I figure brain power is mostly chemical) all life long, Authority Of Any Kind. I turn my back on him and look at the TV. "You seem decidedly unimpressed," he comments. I say—and my outside life parallels my secret life for once—"Yeah. Whatever. S&M's OK, I guess."

He probably knows somehow that I've been into that stuff off and on, and is trying in his own deformed way to have a conversation with me. How is he supposed to know I'm looking now for some kind of purity that doesn't include talking about getting whipped till you come (though that's exactly where I've looked for purity before)? I never said that to him. I never tell him anything anymore. And just then I see him on fire too—in his seedy, dark, lonely world, reaching out for me with leprosy hands, thinking I'm still there with him, and I'm not. We're all trying, we're all on fire. My father is damaged, but he's kind of young and crazy and funny too. Mice eat cheese, cats eat mice, kids eventually get the power and loom up over their parents, lovers turn on each other. We're all killing and getting killed, and when we do what we were born to do, it feels like fire...and I, the ghost, wander in and out of all the murder, with the x-ray eyes God gave me at the expense of other gifts, tunnelling through the healthy body to the decay, and then to the young life gathering at the bottom of the pool of rot, getting ready to rise up. I smile at the sun that is burning out, I smile at me thinking I'm so smart and free. I smile at everyone looking so beautiful.

Love

Napoleon gave up his empire for Josephine not because she was so good in bed or so beautiful or intellectually stimulating, but because he was "used to her." She was older than he, and did not produce a male heir, and all the advisors told him to dump her, and that's when he said he couldn't because he was used to her. And look what happened! He lost everything and was banished to the island of Elba, and Josephine ended up with another lover and a lush garden in the French countryside. I was seventeen when I read that, and I didn't understand. Now my friends don't understand why I don't give up the situation I'm in that is clearly not good for me, and I don't understand why they stay in their situations.

He (I can't say my boyfriend because it always changes) said he can't stand it when I pay attention to him, and I got mad, but he's right. Romantic attention is like needles. I'm trying to poke holes through him

for me to slip through, to get to God. But it doesn't actually come out fancy-poetic like that in real life. The Eagles come on the radio and I leave it on, because I know it would annoy him. Even though he's not here, and even though I don't like the Eagles either. My attention is all coiled up and hissing. It has too much energy, it doesn't know where to go. It doesn't fit. It's scared and lovely and aggressive, and it wants so bad to be beautiful. He has needles for me too. In a friendly game of softball, he'll strike me out in a second when anyone else would've let me (the new kid, of dubious abilities) slip by. One time he spent four hours telling me why he couldn't love me. Then he called back because he forgot a few things. The time after that it took five hours. He said he can't stand the way I look at him—always waiting for something he can never give to me. I got even madder then, but he was right again. Still, that I imagine he could give it—not love, which is pretty easy to give, but passage to somewhere else to me, that's a compliment.

I fooled around with two ladies just twelve hours before he was due in town, and told him, and still he thinks I'm innocent. I mean, an innocent person. Not that he thinks what I did is fine. At least, I think he didn't think it was fine. He has all these theories about everything, I just have to guess. When I told him about my adventures, he said, "Are you going to let yourself be controlled by beauty?", put his cigarette out on the hotel wall, rolled over and said he wouldn't go for breakfast with me, and then got up. We had the most lovely breakfast and then he flirted with one of my best friends. That schizophrenic mathematician was right—rationality does limit a person's concept of his relationship to the cosmos. Something in him lets me see through him into a dream, where none of his actions mean what they mean, and the only important thing is that I stay here where I am travelling through him. "It's not what you say that makes me call you," he said, "it's the sound of the spaces in between." That's what you get used to, what's so hard to let go even in the face of all reasons to let go—how you see this person as being halfway between a friend and a rush of magic, a possibility, a wind, and their vision of you like that too. When he says I'm innocent, I know I am. And even with all the things he does, I see him not only as very innocent, but honourable too. His disconnected ways seem natural to me, they feel wide open. His instability, his carelessness, and self-destructiveness feel like coming home.

Five And The Nine, I'm Nuts!

"There are five things you have to say to a woman to get her into bed," my father said. One of them was "some form of 'You light up a room.'" My father's wrong. It's not all manipulation, with genes as the only puppeteer. People *do* light up rooms. Just as much as lightbulbs. I don't

understand exactly how electricity works, I just see it in action and believe in it. And I see my fellow and I get agitated. I think faster. Him too. He switches records every three-and-a-half minutes, tells jokes, lights a cigarette, changes his mind, starts telling me all this historical data about bridges and dynamite out of the blue. How is turning on a light switch so much more real than that, just because electricians know the numbers and diagrams behind it? I bet there are numbers and diagrams for feeling nervous and excited and light that someone somewhere must be writing down. I used to think love was like headlights skimming a child's room at night—all at an angle and unreal. But that's not so! It's real. He is honourable and innocent. My perceptions are not distorted when they're dreamy, they're illuminated. All at once I saw as clear as I see my hand, the inverse of all I'd been taught how to judge and use, what's real, and how to distrust all that is not recognizable. I'd been taught people will try to cut in front of you, so you better cut in front of them first. And any power you gave up would be used against you. So many guideposts for thinking, they were like trees in a copse so thick I couldn't see and I never knew there was anything beyond it (but I guessed, I guessed!). Now something had knocked me out of there, and I twirled around with emptiness and possibilities in all directions. All those facts were like discolored cellophane and I'd broken through. It's so wide open out here! "Oh thank you, thank you," I said out loud.

Something was wrong with Wolfgang, the doctors couldn't tell what. We were on our way to another doctor. This one would figure out that all he needed was to take an antacid once a day, but I didn't know that yet. At that moment, his symptoms were eerily similar to when my mother first had cancer, which finished her off in less than three months. I'd barely slept for three nights and was getting a little hysterical. I'd been thinking, "I can't lose you, Wolf. I know you, I'm used to having you around. I need to hear more of what you have to say. I can lose anything else, just don't let me lose you." And then I realized I will lose him, one way or another. I'll die first or he'll die first. At some point or other I'll lose everything. No matter how tight or completely I hang on, no matter how deserving I make myself—I'm going to lose. I could drive off the road into a tree right now, scared and exhausted as I am. This is the after-life. Right here. This drive, this day, this trouble, this doctor's visit, this rolling sky. This is heaven on earth. This is that thing all religions talk about that I tried so hard to understand and never could. I knew it all along! I've struggled with peace, it made me angry—I was sure it was wrong. I'd get irritated even at my beloved rabbi when he'd start talking about working towards the perfection of mankind. Because imperfections are what's interesting, conflict is what makes things happen, and I must

have no use for calm. But peace doesn't disturb the conflict! It's there, all along, flowing underneath. Under this agitation and sniping and confusion and pain and constant changes flows a very sweet peace. I started shaking all over and I was afraid I'd have a heart attack because I understood that man is perfected *now*. I didn't figure it out with a string of reason that could come unravelled. I hadn't built a web of logic that someone could yank a filament from, and make the whole thing collapse. Knowing came in waves over and over and over through my body and face, and in the sky, undulating forever. My skin was not a boundary between my insides and the sky. It felt like snake venom spreading through my veins, out my fingertips, looping around the globe and back again—not what I figured out, but what has always known itself, come to me at last. Welcome, welcome, I've been waiting! I've been waiting so hard. You could torture me now, you could use every Machiavellian trick on me in a row, and I could not forget that this is true. This is the first thing I've ever understood. I got out to get gas and candy, and there was a pregnant woman smoking. Is she perfect? Yes, yes, yes. She's doing wrong, but the mother's love is there. She's just dirtied on the top. It's the same pure goodness underneath—it just doesn't know itself. There is no slightly good goodness. It's all pure and perfect, waiting to be released. The perfection of mankind is realized when that goodness knows itself. If a shady-looking character approaches you in an alley, of course you should try to get away from him, but you're getting away from him for his own goodness as well as yours. Because for him, to hurt you, would be a sin on him, would not be what his soul wants. People get confused, that's where cruelty comes from. I started driving again and looked at all the trees and clouds and the other cars flying by to see if they looked on fire. No. This was more like water. And every song that came on the radio, no matter how insipid it had seemed to me before, now seemed full of wisdom. In a Stevie Wonder song, the cymbals were crashing, crashing—I wonder how I never noticed that before? They had gone wild! And that song "Do You Love Me Now That I Can Dance?"—that's how those two communicate, through action, movement. They pour life into dances. So much is said in how they arrange and unarrange their limbs. I was so happy that they found each other, and I'm sure that she does love him now that he can dance.

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