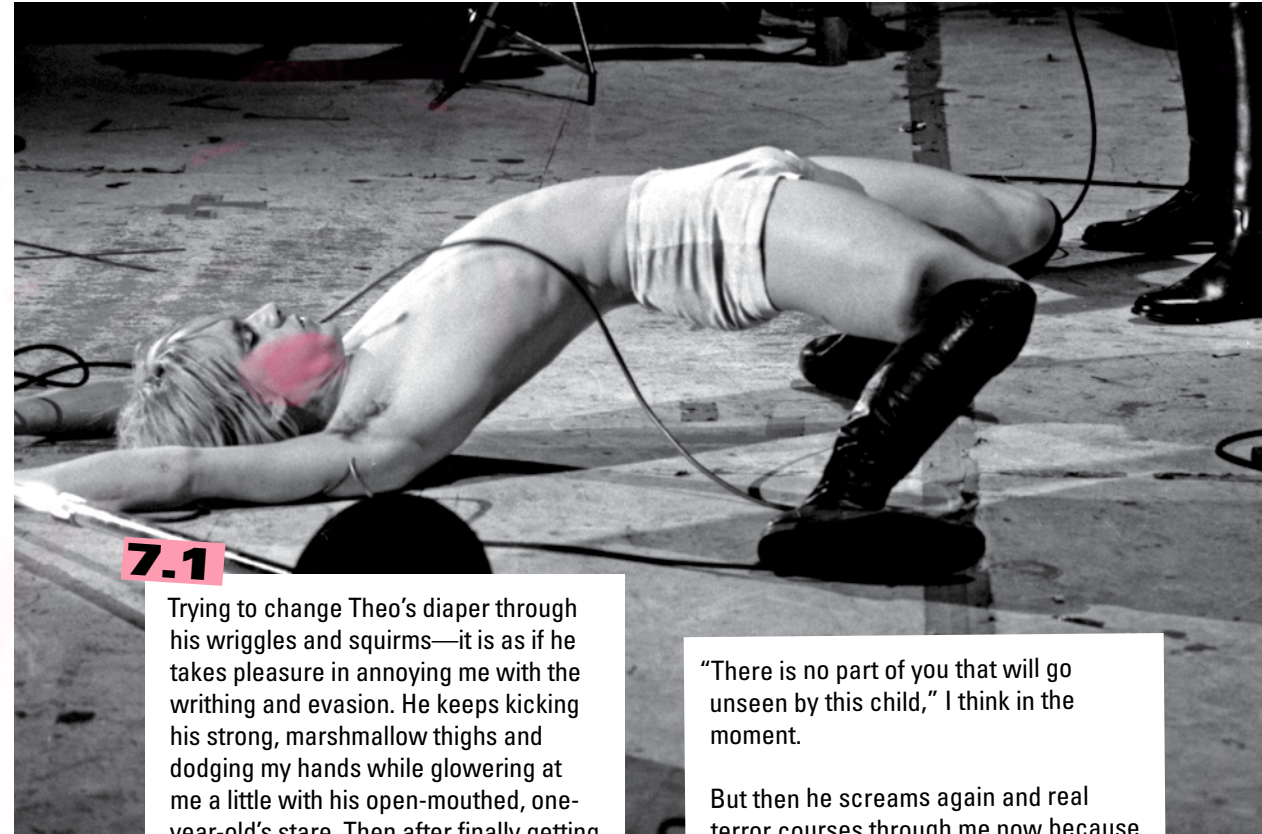


pinkboy





7.1

Trying to change Theo's diaper through his wriggles and squirms—it is as if he takes pleasure in annoying me with the writhing and evasion. He keeps kicking his strong, marshmallow thighs and dodging my hands while glowering at me a little with his open-mouthed, one-year-old's stare. Then after finally getting the diaper under him and one of those adhesive flaps latched, he does a half roll just as I am about to press down the second one, which tears it off making the diaper worthless. It is only when I bawl out a frustrated holler that I realize how helpless feeling and fury-filled I am. As I finish my belting, Theo looks me dead in the eyes and in a moment both terrifying and impressive screams back at me as long and loud as I had.

"There is no part of you that will go unseen by this child," I think in the moment.

But then he screams again and real terror courses through me now because a time or two before he had become so furious and screamed so forcefully that burgundy spots appeared all over his cheeks and forehead, tiny blood blister freckles of wrath at his dependence on us—these older roommates he is forced to tolerate at times—that endured on his skin for days. And the last thing I want to explain to Christine is why he got so upset by his expected caretaker.

7.2

I am sixteen and lying flat on my bed, staring up at the drop ceiling tiles above me. A year ago, I helped build this windowless bedroom in the basement under Dad's instruction and guidance. Last summer, after a miserably hot morning football practice, before the evening two-a-day session, I was to cut sheets from a roll of Pink Panther insulation and press them into the spaces between wall studs. Notwithstanding a cold shower, and in my ignorance of insulation, I did the job shirtless. Tiny shards of fiberglass coated my hands, arms, chest, and shoulders and during the evening practice, under sweat-soaked shoulder pads, the fine glass fibers rubbed raw my thorax and back, already ruddy with knots of acne and heat bumps, making an inflamed rosy patina that lasted for days. Still, I went to every practice that followed (stopping to heal didn't seem possible) and made it through the season, though I was filled with dread every moment on the field and traveling bus, and in the locker and weight rooms.

In the offseason, a bout of mono kept me cocooned in this black-box bedroom for weeks where the time alone transformed me back into a more familiar version of myself. Having the "kissing disease" also

kept me from weightlifting or running much and I was out of shape for taking back up the burden of being a small-town second-stringer.

Through the wall I can hear Dad rustling amongst the sounds of conservative talk radio and loud bouts of sawing in his basement wood shop behind me. Getting up the courage to leave my bed, I stand in the threshold of his shop to tell him I am quitting football—going against the lessons he and every male teacher and coach had ever taught me about conforming and perseverance through grit. Years later I describe this event to a shrink as my version of *coming out*.

No longer an athlete, I arrive on the first day of senior year signaling my independence by wearing star-painted

combat boots, cutoff hospital scrubs, a Hüsker Dü t-shirt with neon-lit plants and flowers on it under a faux fur vest, and black lipstick. In *Please Kill Me: The Uncensored Oral History of Punk*, photographer Robert Frank makes a very brief appearance at CBGB three doors down from his Bowery home and observes that "It looks like the way people dress here is very important." In the documentary *Salad Days* about the Washington, DC, hardcore scene in the late 80s and 90s, they explicitly define which clothes meant certain signs as semaphores of solidarity or antagonism. Artist Hal Fisher's now iconic photo-text series *Gay Semiotics* explicated signifiers of placement of earrings, keys, handkerchiefs, and other signs

on the body for male response in San Francisco's Castro and Haight-Asbury districts in the 70s.

Back at my mid-Missouri high school in the early 90s, any freedom felt, or signs I am delivering with my dress are checked when I see my schedule—PE first session—and the mortification that Coach Licklider, who had terrorized me on the football field for years, is the teacher.

Never getting enough aggression and hostility out of me in drills, he would sometimes demonstrate the violent forearm shots he expected of his defensive ends by personally thrusting them into my gut until I was doubled over. My passivity once apparently made him so angry that he headbutted me, smashing his bare forehead against the shield of my helmet and facemask, cherry streams of blood and sweat running down his cartoon red-with-anger, steam-from-the-ears face as he screamed, "Do it again, Jeep!" his nickname for me—I had no idea why.

When I get to the gym locker room, Coach Licklider is standing there with a clipboard, his lip fat with chew, fluorescent lights shining off his pink, alcoholic cheeks.

"Jeep," he sneers, "looks like you went and got fat and gay this summer."



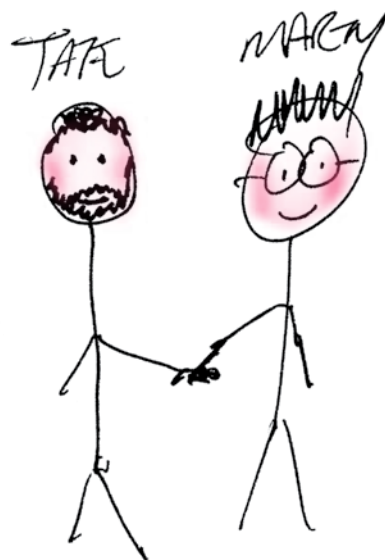


7.3

"Yer one of them pinkboys, ain't ya? Ain't ya, pinkboy?"

Marty is antagonizing me as any Oklahoma yokel might, to the delight of the five other college boys in the room, myself included. Andrew connects us—his musician and poet friends from Shawnee, another college friend and me from Missouri—and we've all carpooled together to his high school home of Decorah, Iowa for polka dancing at Nordic Fest. It's my first weekend spent with Marty and once he learns I want to be an artist, he goes into character, which I'm sure is based on his own experiences being ostracized for sitting in all-night diners writing poetry and publishing zines in conservative Shawnee. Any slight sign of difference in the small, midwestern and southern towns we came up in was immediately called out.

I'm so pleased to be part of this new group of friends that to keep in contact



after that weekend I create my first ever email address: pinkboy34@hotmail.com. Its regular use I believe is cause for my painting professor to put one of the inverted pink triangles, originally used by the Nazis to mark queer folks who have since reclaimed the symbol, on her office door to mark it a safe space for discussing sexuality and gender.

Writing a résumé upon graduation, it occurs to me that pinkboy34 may not be the moniker to best represent me on job applications, so I make a new, eponymous address.

A privilege provided by my dominance is that I could appropriate or turn away from queerness as I saw fit. It wasn't long before it dawned on me that subjugation can't as easily be shed by those in the then mostly underground queer community in Kansas City, much less in the surrounding farm country.

7.4

Every weekday morning, I slowly climb the daycare's two flights of stairs alongside Theo, who is still learning to ascend the risers. Virtually every morning he points out the laminated poster with a group of boys and the one he sees as sad. "He's crryying," Theo says in a singsong, partial whine that gets performed every morning. And most every day I must tell

the steps, I often think of all the "latest" findings that point to the need for children, particularly boys, to develop emotional literacy and agility, and more fluid recognition of the sympathetic nervous system's somatic signposting.



myself to keep quiet, since learning is iterative, and because to me the boy in the picture isn't crying, he is making a play-crying face, showing *amusive injury*. Such nuance is lost on Theo at this point, or maybe I'm wrong and he *would* understand this; or perhaps the boy in the picture is showing a sign of emotional pain that my two-year-old grasps and I cannot.

During this repeat daily performance, while pacing myself to Theo scaling

It appears bodies are faster at learning patterns in environmental contexts, but consciousness can be taught to pick up its pace. Also, one of the only ways for an adult human to develop new levels of empathetic awareness is to have a child, which puts the wholly entangled body and brain in these new situations and environments for learning empathy.

If only Theo's emotions could be captured in still images of his face for me to study and debate prior to physically and consciously reacting to them.

7.5

Late summer is finally here, and the wet blanket of heat plus humidity is lifted enough that I can arrive to work at 5pm wearing the navy and yellow polo with its name-badge affixed without the embarrassing moist spots darkening my chest and armpits. It is the week before Labor Day and the first start of school in my accessible memory that I'm not in preparation mode to buy new clothes, supplies, and books, anticipating new teachers and classes.

After graduating last May, I quit my job at Blockbuster Video, went to England and Germany for a month, then returned to my college town near Kansas City. The painting professor I was close with asked if I would direct my alma mater's tiny gallery for her while she was away on sabbatical. I agreed despite it paying almost nothing, and so I reluctantly went back to work a second job at the video store. Now students have returned from summer internships and junior leadership camps in the Florida Everglades and show up near closing time to rent videos and games. I recognize some of them and they me, cultivating a competitive, panicked sense that I should be reading and making more books. My only tangible critical outlet (and the solitary, ego-driven benefit of working at Blockbuster) is the five videos I put next to my handwritten name as my employee picks.

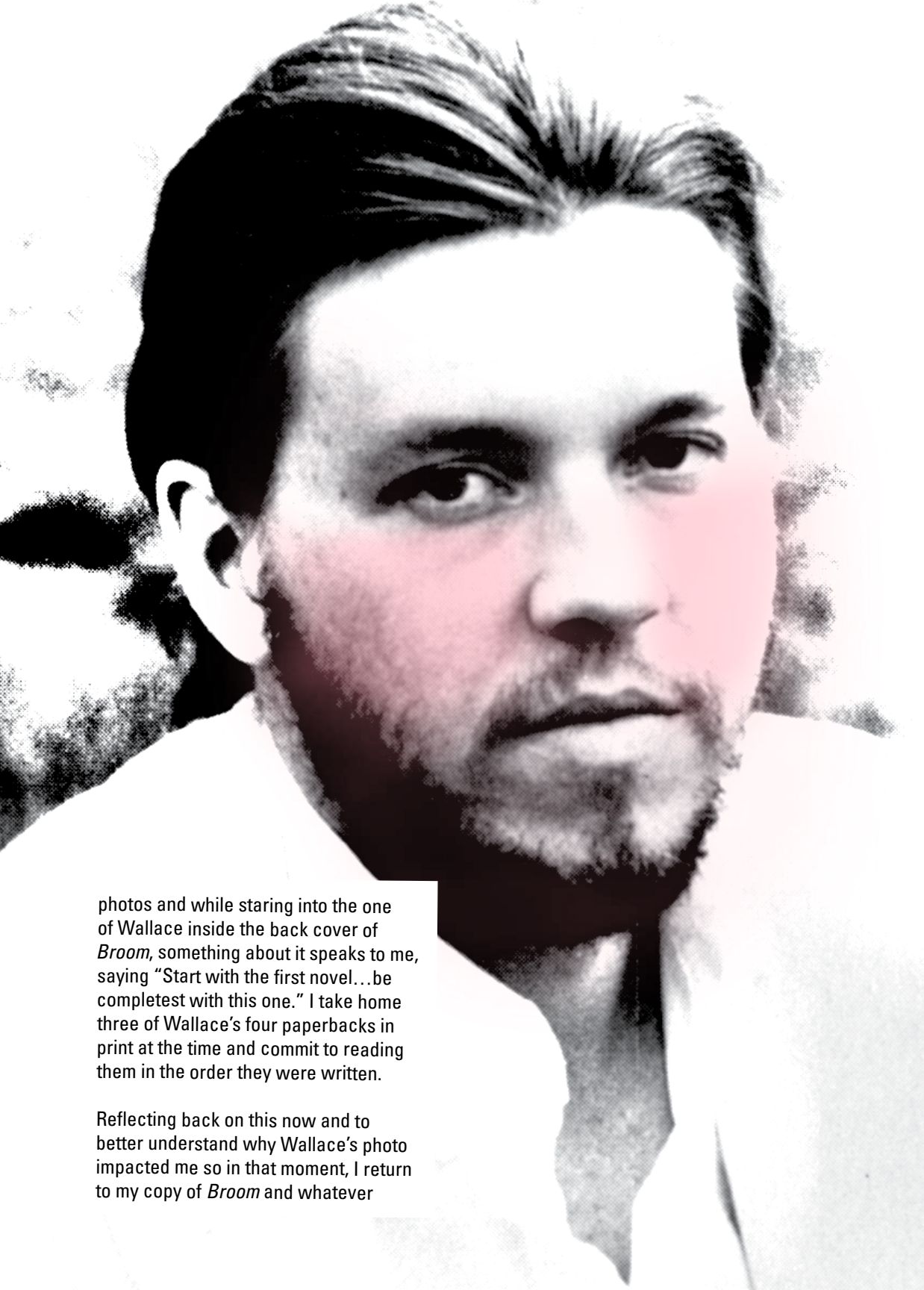
Obsessed with books-as-art and with understanding how to be an artist who also lives where I live, I create a personal fall syllabus and reading list. Andrew, a key member of my intimate creative community (that also includes his fellow bandmates, Marty the Shawnee poet, and my future first



wife, a violinist) has a newspaper column he writes called "Quest for the Midwest" that explores musicians and writers from the fly-over states. Willa Cather is highly recommended by Andrew's partner, Emily. David Nelson Duke, a religion professor mentor, is working on a biography of Harry Ward the Methodist minister, socialist activist, and father of artist Lynd Ward, who grew up in Oak Park, Illinois. He recommends all of Ward's wordless wood engraving novels, particularly *God's Man* in which the protagonist makes a Faustian bargain for a magical brush that grants him great status as an artist. Because I'm obsessed with images of Anselm Kiefer's large bookworks at the time, I learn about the work of Buzz Spector, also from Illinois, who wrote an essay on Kiefer in a collection of critical writing on books, *The Bookmaker's Desire*. I find Spector's artists' book *The Position of the Author* including appropriated author photos cropped in the shape of books. I buy it for the price of a cd from the early online bookstore of Visual Studies Workshop Press (my first time learning of the publisher that I eventually make my way to work for and that forms the base of my creative community for two decades).

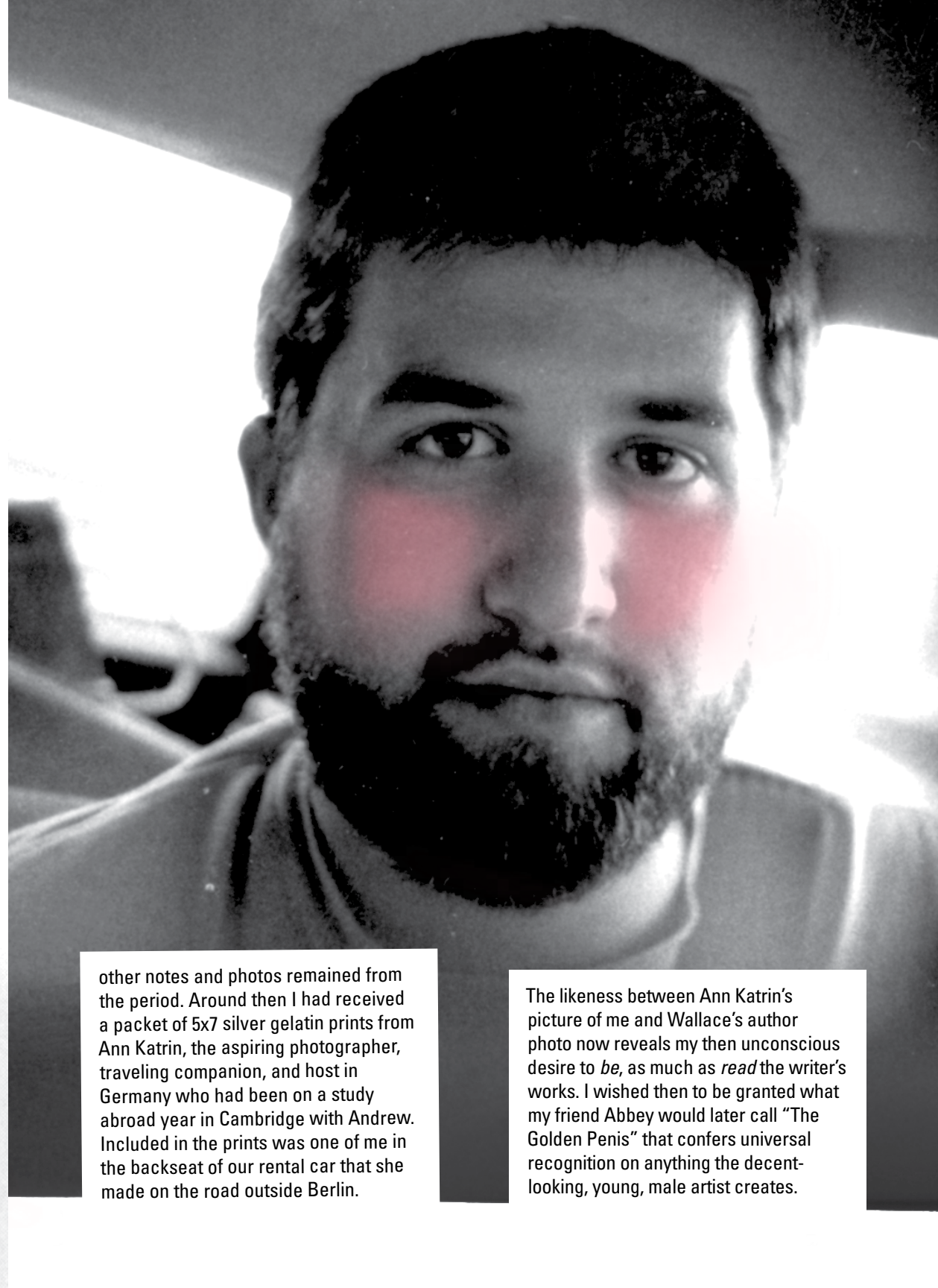
In response to my asking around for other books to go on the syllabus, Marty recommends *Infinite Jest* by David Foster Wallace—another Illinoisan and a frequently name-checked, "voice of a generation" type of writer—famed for its thousand-plus pages including hundreds of endnotes. When I get to Barnes and Noble to buy a copy, I find the tome next to a paperback of his first novel, *The Broom of the System*. Spector's artists' book has me paying more attention to author





photos and while staring into the one of Wallace inside the back cover of *Broom*, something about it speaks to me, saying "Start with the first novel...be completest with this one." I take home three of Wallace's four paperbacks in print at the time and commit to reading them in the order they were written.

Reflecting back on this now and to better understand why Wallace's photo impacted me so in that moment, I return to my copy of *Broom* and whatever



other notes and photos remained from the period. Around then I had received a packet of 5x7 silver gelatin prints from Ann Katrin, the aspiring photographer, traveling companion, and host in Germany who had been on a study abroad year in Cambridge with Andrew. Included in the prints was one of me in the backseat of our rental car that she made on the road outside Berlin.

The likeness between Ann Katrin's picture of me and Wallace's author photo now reveals my then unconscious desire to *be*, as much as *read* the writer's works. I wished then to be granted what my friend Abbey would later call "The Golden Penis" that confers universal recognition on anything the decent-looking, young, male artist creates.



What I'm reminded of now is the opening to a lecture Nathan Lyons, founder of Visual Studies Workshop, must have given a hundred times, which starts, "Most discussions concerning the history of photography establish the notion that Niepce, Daguerre, and Talbot are generally identified as the first photographers. However, it is to Narcissus that I wish to bestow this honor..."

My narcissism aside, *Broom* is likely where I had the capacity, as a naive near-adult, to begin with this writer. First, it opens in a dorm room, which I understood from recent experience. It's set in the provincial Midwest outside Cleveland, under the dominion of the more intellectual Northeast, which I also got. Like me, its protagonist, Lenore Beadsman, is highly romantic about the heredity of knowledge and there are surface things about her, such as her superhero-like uniform of always

wearing all white with Converse that were both recognizable and desirable.

"A story please," Lenore frequently requested of her older, publisher boyfriend, Rick Vigorous, forming many entangled stories within the novel's main storyline.

"You want a story?"

"Please."

The first of these from the manuscripts Rick receives and tells Lenore is marked in my copy of *Broom*—by a slight, felt-tipped "x" in the margin of page 22.

"Concerned a man who suffered from second-order vanity."

"What's that?" Lenore asks.

"Well," replies Rick, "a second-order vain person is first of all a vain person.

He's vain about his intelligence, and wants people to think he's smart. Or his appearance, and wants people to think he's attractive. Or, say, his sense of humor, and wants people to think he's amusing and witty. Or his talent, and wants people to think he's talented. Et cetera. You know what a vain person is." There I marked another minute "x."

I had dragged a long, skinny explanation point down the page alongside, "Now a second-order vain person is a vain person who's also vain about appearing to have an utter lack of vanity. Who's enormously afraid that other people will perceive him as vain. A second-order vain person will sit up late learning jokes in order to appear funny and charming but will deny that he sits up late learning jokes," after which I scribed "gulp," next to a quote acknowledging Lenore's silence, "...."

7.6 For my job at UMKC Gallery of Art I'm installing the rarely shown Klan Room tableau by artist William Christenberry, better known for his color photographs, made in Hale County Alabama, where he was born and raised. In preparation, I read several monographs on the artist and *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* by James Agee and Walker Evans, who immortalized a poor Hale County sharecropper family in 1936—the same year Christenberry was born to neighboring landowners. On a lunch break, over turkey club sandwiches and Lays potato chips in the university cafeteria, Christenberry tells me about his longstanding interest in Agee's cinematic writing, and the time he showed his Kodak Brownie pictures to Evans who told him he "knew just where to stand with that little camera."

I'm already familiar with most of what he intones and his southern manner

makes him seem like family. As I chew and listen, I feel like a boy on the fringes of conversations visiting Arkansas relatives—specifically a cousin of Mom’s who was similarly rangy and had the same barber shop haircut as Christenberry, and who wore the same short-sleeved, white, button-down shirt with pens in the breast pocket, high-water navy-blue slacks, black dress socks, and walking shoes. Except this cousin regularly referred to the *n-words* or *n-word-town* in casual conversation without anyone’s objection. I recall the feelings of shame about this family I was born to, their deference to the relative, and my own lack of agency or control over any of it. Yet in my adolescent petulance all I did was launch myself from the flower-print loveseat and retreat to my grandma’s sewing room, where I slept on visits. Mom soon came to check on me, dishonor in her pallid face and downcast eyes, while I sobbed through my anger-teemed incapacity to be free from the limits of this family and its acceptances.



KLAN DOLL PHOTOGRAPH BY WILLIAM CHRISTENBERRY (1982)

As I follow a half-step behind Christenberry while heading back to the gallery, he describes how his project was instigated in 1960 by a local newspaper listing for a Klan meeting to be held at the county courthouse. Curious about the typically secretive gatherings, he went and found the courthouse seemingly empty until reaching the third-floor landing where a lone, fully-robed sentinel stood motionless other than slowly shifting his eyes toward William, who withdrew back down the steps. This sidelong peer through the eyeholes of the conical Klan hood cut a frightening, graven image in the artist. Dreams about it recurred decades later. He made large drawings of sideways-glancing Klansmen. At The Fabric Workshop in Philadelphia, he sewed little Klan robes and hoods for twelve-inch G.I. Joe dolls, buying up dozens of the figurines. In Memphis where he taught (at Mom’s alma mater, Memphis State University), he hired a seamstress to make more of the authentic-looking, satin KKK costumes. He punished some of the dressed dolls by pouring wax on them, tightly binding them in cords, sticking them with needles, or ensnaring their hooded heads in nooses to role-play reverse lynching—all inescapably referencing, perhaps unintentionally, fetishist dominant/submissive BDSM tropes. Others he set up in more narrative dioramas of Klan meetings, several of which he attended over the years and calls “pure evil theater.”

Christenberry explains why he has seldom shown the Klan Room since several of the objects were mysteriously stolen from his Washington, DC attic studio in 1979. With no visible sign of a break-in, he and his family feared for their safety any time it was exhibited. But when asked by my gallery director

and with the patronage of a prolific Kansas City-based collector of his work, Christenberry was inclined to revisit the project in this scholarly setting.

Before lunch I had removed most of the track lighting fixtures as instructed. When we arrive back to the darkened gallery, I pull the large, framed Klansman drawings from wooden shipping crates with Christenberry hovering around me as I lean each against a long wall. He sets to ordering them while I go unpack the dolls.

In another room I open a wooden crate to reveal dozens of the identical G.I. Joe figurines, their poseable limbs intertwined, all the same peach-plastic hue, with fuzzy, dark-brown synthetic fibers affixed as beards and crowns of hair to their rubber heads. I also find plastic army jeeps and pickup trucks, along with several thin boxes of the miniature white, red, and purple satin Klan robes and hoods. At which point I sit cross-legged on the carpeted floor next to the open wooden crate, looking and feeling like a child alone in his room amused by the contents of his toy box.

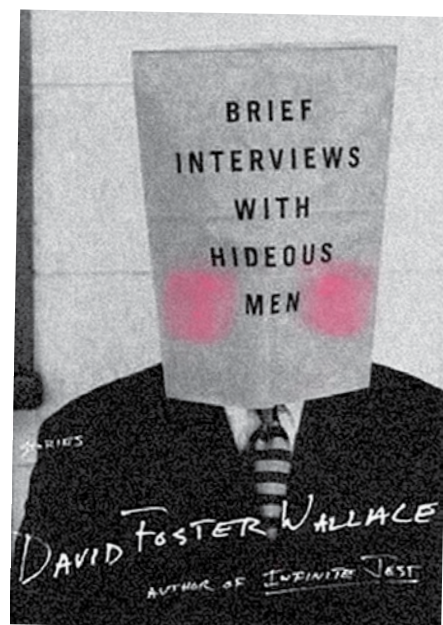
Another of these G.I. Joe dolls was in the tubs of my childhood belongings that my parents returned to me several years ago. I recall it was a Christmas gift from Mom’s mom, well-used in toy camouflage—no doubt purchased from a garage sale in suburban Chicago. I had many more of the 1980s action figures and they appear in the eighteen years of Mom’s diary entries she transcribed and gave me for my 35th birthday. She notes on 8-5-85, “Tate played G.I. Joe all day” and four days later, “Tate played G.I. Joe all day by himself again and thoroughly enjoyed it!” In other words, I am quite familiar



with my task in the gallery this day. In fact, I hardly think about what I am doing dressing these playthings in the iconic garb of white nationalist terrorists. Tableaus I made in my childhood bedroom were not unlike what Christenberry ultimately directs me to set up in the middle of the gallery: a panopticon-like scene of rituals and torture as viewed from a god-like vantage in control over the miniature objects of study. Looming much larger on the walls are the floor-to-ceiling grids I hang of the Klan-head drawings, each peering from its respective cell. Replacing the remaining white lightbulbs for blue and red ones makes the space a dream-like playhouse of horror and satiric mocking.

Christenberry comes and goes throughout the week with notes, sometimes touring a person or two through the in-progress room. He meets with student groups, including a gathering I arranged for him with the Black Student Association. Busy installing, I can't attend and don't know what is discussed. The gallery must be opened by noon on Friday and, as the only attendant, I need to fine-tune details and clean up that morning. As a summer exhibition, and prior to much press or reviews, undoubtedly no one will come through the gallery that afternoon. Hence, I am also obsessed with running out to Barnes and Noble and getting back beforehand since it is the release day of David Foster Wallace's story collection *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*. As my personal reward for the Klan Room's completion, I expect to sit and read by myself until closing time at six.

Indeed that is the case for a few hours. Alone in the silence of the gallery, I



wrestle with the wholly misogynistic, manipulative subjects documented by an unknown (female) interviewer in recurring episodes of the story collection's title work. And then a solitary Black woman, around my age of twenty-two, opens the glass gallery door beside my attendant's station. She looks sharply at the book, momentarily holds on my eyes above it before I avert them, and then takes one deliberate step after another into the funhouse of white gazes.

The very presence of a Black woman in the gallery reveals my obvious unpreparedness to discuss or defend the work exhibited with anyone other than the white, straight men who produced the show, including the artist, director, collector, other administrators, and me as installer. Acting upon the gallery as a "neutral" play space, I thought less about the culture of secreted racism and violence reified in the art objects and more about the freedom to create it. There is travesty and revulsion in the Klan dolls and drawings, but brought about by

plenty of parody, mockery, and classic distortion. Derisively chuckling out of discomfort at its perversity is its own form of acquiescence and unconscious confession of inadequate exploration of one's own injurious complicity.

Brief Interviews with Hideous Men sends corresponding signals of confession masked in dark humor and grotesquerie. Its men disclose, often boastfully, the lengths and depths of gaslighting, manipulations, and abuses they will perpetrate to nullify questions of sexual consent and avoid equity and intimacy. Unnamed and unexplored, its woman archivist only exists through her cataloging marks of numbers, dates, and locations in the heading of each interview collected. Her questions or comments, notated only by Qs, are omitted from the fictional transcripts. By unveiling the hideousness of men in the *inferred* presence of a woman, her reality and significance uncertain, the men's disclosures of irreconciled shaming and self-condemnation are equally felt as defiant shows of dominant aggression both by the fictional characters and their writer. The same way the Klan Room feels to me in the presence of a non-white, non-male audience member: like one big embarrassing metaphor of internalized shame.



7.7 Soon after I was offered the position as director of VSW, a friend told me about the blushing in private, that apparently it happened often and without my awareness. I didn't consciously know it was happening and so I don't know what I did—I didn't work myself up about it. Before it was brought to my attention, that is. Before it became the source of itself. Now I blush because I'm blushing. In the moment I'm aware of it happening, I can sense my nervous system in a stutter-stepping, back-and-forth freeze between fight and flight in a game of emotional hotbox occurring within an instant.

Intellectually I know it just shows that I care. I sympathize with them, not me. I broke some rule of the social order and the adrenaline and dilated capillaries in my cheeks are there to tell them I'm guilty of some transgression or other. My pinkness remedies their judgment.

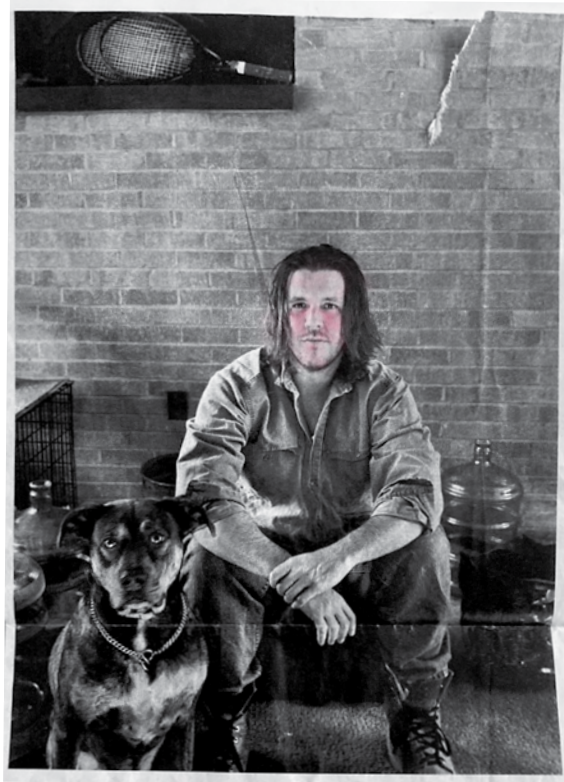
But now as *director* of these staff and students, I can't go around blushing all the time and showing sympathy with everyone. It causes friendships to accelerate. It's hard to fake, and signals I care about the relationship. If I blush and always sympathize with them to avoid confrontation, I pledge my allegiance to the order imposed by these other human beings and let them enter *me*. Then they're not going to sympathize with the order that I impose or be pliant enough that I can push my way into *them*.

It takes a decade of slow effort at raising my body awareness and denying the systemic, hierarchical thinking imposed by chain of command to have enough emotional courage to not denounce myself as somehow weak for wanting to be in harmony with the co-creators of my immediate community.

7.8

Near my desk at VSW are photobooth pictures of Christine and Theo, postcards and notes sent from my friend Kris and others, and for a time, a cheaply framed, wrinkled picture of David Foster Wallace sat on my office window ledge. My obsession with Wallace had mostly passed by then, so I don't know why I displayed it. Maybe because my college English professor had a framed photo of Faulkner hanging high over the threshold of his office, the evil drunkard keeping watch as we passed by in the hall or while we waited for the professor's office hours? A few years after we had graduated and married, my first wife told me with a provoking stare and through wine-stained teeth that she had been keeping a sexy (for her) written correspondence with the same English professor since graduation. She had several other one-sided flings with older male teachers, so this was not necessarily unusual, but that moment and this Faulkner photo, are my only lasting impressions of him aside from his red-inked critique to swap in "think" for every instance that I wrote "feel" in a freshman essay, as in you don't *feel* an idea or argument you *think* it to be true.

Also, John Keating, the teacher played by Robin Williams in *Dead Poets Society*, hung a framed photo of Walt Whitman in his classroom. In high school I was greatly enamored with and repeatedly watched on video the Peter Weir film with Williams playing the private boys' school poetry instructor who inspired a group of the young men in his charge to be artists. In one scene



the mousy, introverted Todd Anderson played by Ethan Hawke had not done a poem assignment because, as Keating asserts to the all-male class, he "thinks everything inside him is worthless and embarrassing." Todd is made to perform, after Whitman, a "barbaric yawp," his first efforts being bloodless with Keating imploring him to display more emotion and physically charging toward Anderson while barking at him: "Good God, yell it like a man!" Todd's threatened instincts finally making him belt it out, belligerently. Anderson is then made to also perform a poem on the spot, inspired by the Whitman photo, with Keating beseeching "Don't think about it, just answer." The camera circles Todd to illustrate the swirl of confusion and emotion as he faces his fears and, before the eyes

of his classmates and teacher, he spontaneously expresses a compelling lyric to the "sweaty toothed-madman," with Keating dramatically kneeling in prayer to the sublimity of it all—such feeling freed from constraint.

Inspired by Keating, Todd's roommate Neil takes up acting in a community theater production, and he's great at it, but Neil's father demands he quit. When Neil goes against his father's wishes and performs anyway, his father removes him from the prep school that inspired his independence and enrolls him in a military academy. Unable to escape his father's dominance, Neil kills himself with his father's gun.

Robin Williams died by suicidal hanging. David Foster Wallace also hung himself. The framed author photo on my desk was in actuality a folded-up magazine tear sheet acknowledging Wallace's work and death, sent to me by my friend Jenn in a kind of makeshift bereavement card following the news of Wallace's suicide.

The next summer, Jenn was making tintype portraits on the VSW lawn, and I posed with my dog, Wallace, named for the writer. I don't recall if I intended it as an homage to the picture Jenn had sent me or not, nevertheless the convergence is obvious.

Around the time I had the Wallace picture in my office, after a decade of bottling my emotions and thus pressurizing them for eruption upon their release over the sudden death of Wallace the dog, I was sinking into

PHOTO BY JENN LIBBY



a dark ocean of depression only to wash up in psychoanalysis where I went once a week for years. During the intake interview I recall the therapist asking me about suicidal ideation and my response was that Wallace the writer's suicide had provided a kind of permission slip or map to make my way out of the unfeeling depths, though I was clearly nowhere near as trapped in depression as he was, having hanged his way out, in his writing space/garage.

It's remarkable to me now that I didn't even have the capacity to see my own emotion as mine—it had to be modeled by or compared against a dominant superhuman, whether that be the heroes and gods of childhood like the feelingless Ironman or the Man of Steel, or one adept at an apparently unobtainable standard of thought, work ethic, or even possessing the ability to go lower than me into depression's unfeeling depths.



Currently, the largest share of suicides in the US are by middle-aged, unknown white men in rural areas—the epitome of unheroic—and sometimes I wonder whether their failure to be seen as heroes isn't partly a root of their self-annihilation, though no doubt a demographic propensity for owning guns and years of avoidance of feeling must be significant factors. Had I been a suicide statistic, it would have been similarly prosaic because during my own worst years, my preferred *way out* for avoidance of feeling was desk work, that least gallant of labors, including a

spate of critical writing about the body in relation to books and how physical things produce affect, when I ironically was incapable of parsing my own feelings. Crunched into unergonomic chairs, shoulders hunched over a foot-wide screen for most of each day, I would work until my tight hips and sacrum sent out searing hot signals that burned my skull with scorching headaches that laid me out flat on the floor for recuperation.

In fact, I had one such attack the morning following Wallace's suicide,



sprawled out like The Vitruvian Man on the ugly tan rug, lying in the dog's greasy funk while waiting for ibuprofen to kick in. I must have dozed off before rising with the post-concussive hangover feeling masked by temporary, gel-capped relief. It was in that brain fog that I recall reading an ex-girlfriend's text to express her condolences at his death (although *whose* death was unclear). After her return text came back with the reply that Wallace had died, I immediately altered my plan to work the entirety of that Sunday. When learning of Wallace's suicide, Israeli video artist Omer Fast revealed (in a lengthy footnote to an essay relating the writer

and Fast's work) that he immediately went looking online for press or an image of Wallace's dead body. A friend of mine once located the post-suicide real estate listing for the house in Claremont, California that Wallace shared with his wife, artist Karen Green, and I did morbidly scroll through the impassive images of spaces where they lived together, but never went seeking any further breach of the contract purposefully distancing writer from reader. Staying off the computer entirely, I spent the rest of that Sunday alone with Wallace the dog, re-immersing in passages of *Infinite Jest*, favorite essays, and stories.

Rereading “Good Ole Neon” that afternoon, a story in the darkest of his collections, aptly named *Oblivion*, I spent an hour immersed by riding shotgun in a nice car with a beyond self-conscious narrator and driver. Over the course of forty pages he explains the disordered depths of his thoughts, which, in the paradox of perception of time that can make it seem both continuous and motionless, are stretched out and lengthened to occur the exact moment he is driving at a high rate of speed into a bridge abutment off a two-lane road in Illinois farm country in order to kill himself. The act, we’re told, will end his decades of feeling fraudulent in every possible way or situation, no matter how honestly his thoughts and feelings are divulged to others. The riveting, break-necked spinning out of instances in the narrator’s life makes it impossible to logically refute why he, who on the outside seems so decent, thoughtful, and exceedingly high achieving, with solid life conditions and privileges circumstantially available to him, is now loaded with high doses of Benadryl and resigned to smash his body to death. He has chosen an abandoned rural road to cause the least amount of cleanup or performance possible, the only audience to this action and his thoughts upon racing to his death being me, or you, the reader. Until there is a pivot (and as they say, spoiler alert), where instead of being the moment of the narrator’s suicide “this whole seemingly endless back-and-forth between [the narrator and you] has come and gone in the very same instant” that

“David Wallace blinks in the midst of idly scanning class photos from his 1980 Aurora West H.S. yearbook and seeing [the

narrator’s] photo and trying, through the tiny little keyhole of himself, to imagine what all must have happened to lead up to [the narrator’s] death in the fiery single-car accident he’d read about in 1991, like what sorts of pain or problems might have driven the guy to get in his electric blue Corvette and try to drive with all that O.T.C. medication in his bloodstream—David Wallace happening to have a huge and totally unorganizable set of inner thoughts, feelings, memories and impressions of this little photo’s guy a year ahead of him in school with the seemingly almost neon aura around him all the time of scholastic and athletic excellence and popularity and success with the ladies, as well as of every last cutting remark or even tiny disgusted gesture or expression on this guy’s part whenever David Wallace struck out looking in Legion ball or said something dumb at a party, and how impressive and authentically at ease in the world the guy always seemed, like an actual living person instead of the dithering, pathetically self-conscious outline or ghost of a person David Wallace knew himself back then to be.”

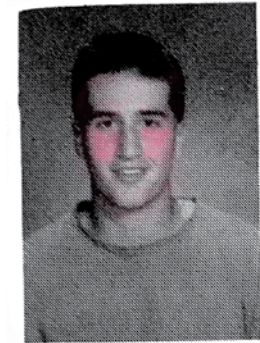
And with that, the whole encounter Wallace had structured for you to first experience as a breathless story becomes something more like an autofiction or lyric essay, with the writer hinging his instantaneous contemplation of a yearbook photo of this childhood acquaintance turned middle-aged-white-male-suicide-in-middle-America on an attempt to pathologize perhaps his own, perhaps his culture’s miserable condition years before this observational impression became statistically dominant in the States. And in that swing moment, reading “Good Ole Neon” the day after Wallace’s own suicide, as he, the writer or character David Wallace



is reflecting on the guy in the photo’s suicide, I pay more heed to an earlier passage where the narrator driving to his death had diagnosed the projection onto him in therapy sessions of his middle-aged white male shrink’s own insecurities about

“America’s culture having a uniquely brutal and alienating way of brainwashing its males from an early age into all kinds of damaging beliefs and superstitions about what being a so-called ‘real man’ was, such as competitiveness instead of concert, winning at all costs, dominating others through intelligence or will, being strong, not showing your true emotions, depending on others seeing you as a real man in order to reassure yourself of your manhood, seeing your own value solely in terms of accomplishments, being obsessed with your career or income, feeling as if you were constantly being judged or on display, etc.”

Now rereading the story yet again and thinking about all the glass screens and mirrors the writer put up to refract projections and involute these characters with himself or his own identity characteristics—it is as if they



are cracked and bent with diffidence to give glimpses that will never resolve to see him clearly or wholly reflected. It reminds me of the image his longtime editor, Michael Pietsch, used to describe the structure of *Infinite Jest*: a large pane of glass dropped from a very high building making it shard and shatter in a multitude of pieces. Also thinking about how before ending his life Wallace all but bow-tied the manuscript of his unfinished novel (later edited by Pietsch and published as *The Pale King*) for his spouse to easily find. His years of work on that novel Wallace described as trying to carry a large sheet of plywood while walking against a stiff wind. The thought of him or any person suffering such unwieldy burdens, isolated and estranged by being stuck on a sorrowful bipolar range of feeling fraudulent to feeling accomplished causes such a quick piercing pain of grief that I can only exclaim: “Fuck!”

7.9

A faculty colleague jokingly reminds me of the time in a critique, when a young student said something to the effect of “If I’m still making this self-portrait work twenty years from now, I’ll kill myself,” and my offhand quip is “Others have.”

7.10 Theo is two and woke with the soft outer flesh of his left ear enflamed bright pink. I get him fed and dressed and am starting to pack his lunch and my own backpack when I hear the shower cut off and the curtain rings slide open on the rod. Christine yells to me from the bathroom, "Are you taking him, or am I?"

"I drive right past there on my way to work," I holler back a touch derisively, feigning puzzlement.

"Not daycare—the doctor's open hours," she shouts through the door, now with more contempt.

"He's acting normally. He seems fine," I exclaim.

"Says the man whose dog had a triple ear infection because he thought the black gunk inside wasn't strange."



7.11 On the blue Ohio interstate sign is a logo marketing a Long John Silver's at the next exit. Easily ten years have passed since I have eaten the greasy fish and hushpuppies, nevertheless a powerful tractor beam of unnamable feelings pulls me into the drive-through. A couple of years later, when receiving excerpts of my mom's diaries in which I was mentioned, I read that my dad took me to Long John Silver's when I was two and my mom had gone alone to the hospital to give

sleep for the night. It's after 10pm two days before Christmas and I'm on the road to visit my family in Missouri. Both Wallace the dog and I are shivering as we pace the frozen grass for him to mark all his new roadside territory before I sneak him in through the back parking lot door, his leash wrapped around one forearm, his filth-encrusted dog bed burrito-rolled under the other. After getting in the room and settling the dog and making myself a place to



birth to my sister. Surely the affective influence from our separation that day has somehow bound my more inarticulate feelings to fried fish.

Leaving the oily cardboard boat in its bag in the front seat and Wallace the dog asleep in the back, I stop at a nearby Best Western to book a place to

eat, I eagerly dig in my backpack for the *Rolling Stone* magazine I bought for its reporting on Wallace the writer's final days. Wallace the dog quickly gets up to sit next to me on the floor and impatiently pedals his front paws against the carpet and grunts at me until I finally toss him something fried. This while I read of the writer's meal,

eaten out with his spouse and parents in the year before his death, that upset his digestive system enough that he tried going off Nardil, the drug that had been inhibiting monoamine breakdown in him for two decades. My own meal finished, I lay on the bed reading that neither the other neurotransmitters prescribed him nor going back on Nardil mollified his depression and how in the next few months he began wasting away both physically and spiritually. How his beleaguered spouse, and for a time his own mother and friends, were called in to caretake and lift his existence—until the night his spouse did leave the house for an art opening and upon returning home found him hanging in his writing space, their garage. How when she cut the belt leather holding his body aloft he forcefully thudded down, and how one of his dogs immediately went to lick his poor, dead face back to life while the other ran away frightened. All the while a somatic upsurge emits from me such that my own dog rises from his post-french-fry slumber to repeatedly nose-bump my hand and in begging for pets seeks to assuage the emotion erupting through contractions of forcefully discharged tears and sobs.

The sadness that the phenomenal depth of self-consciousness on the pages of Wallace's writing were ultimately made by a person pulled down to earth by gravity, ungodlike as any human, overwhelms me.

To coat the sadness, I rifle through my backpack again and pull out a bottle of NY State Finger Lakes wine with a personalized holiday label given to me by my college boss, Dean Short. Thankful that I remembered the travel corkscrew, I tear open a cellophane-bagged disposable motel cup, pour a burgundy brimful, flip through channels until finding whatever NBA game is on, and watch with soft fascination the game's beautiful flow and players setting picks and rolls, while draining the bottle or passing out asleep or both. Until I wake with a start and must scramble to the motel toilet, my naked knees on the cold, hard ceramic tile as my body purges the fast-food fish. White undigested planks of it floating in pink toilet water remains a stubborn memory as does repeatedly pushing away Wallace the dog from licking up spots of vomit splattered on the ceramic.

DOMINANCE DIARIES

PAMPHLET
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