The Midway Review publishes informed, accessible essays featuring literary, cultural, and political commentary and criticism. It is a forum for serious reflection and civil discourse across a variety of intellectual perspectives. We are currently accepting submissions to be considered for our Winter 2015 issue. For submission guidelines, please consult midwayreview.uchicago.edu.

Letters to the editor may be addressed to themidwayreview@uchicago.edu. We ask that letters be limited to 350 words.

The Midway Review is printed by In-Print Graphics of Oak Forest, IL. Publication is made possible by the Student Government Finance Committee and the College of the University of Chicago.
Events are noted. Words Capitalized, Passive Voices Employed, Certain Euphemisms Common, Conjunctions Rare.

When we are hungry, then, we want something to fill us up. That’s simple enough. But when we love someone, what is it that we want out of them?

“When the books are burned, when the offices go dark and cold, when I am too afraid to write, that is when I disappear.”

If they could fly with wax and feathers, I could do it with paper plates and duct tape.
Dear Reader,

The Midway Review accepts original essays of almost any sort, so long as they’re “good.” We thought it might be helpful to elaborate a little on what we mean, and why we put this particular group of essays together.

We picked these pieces because their insights come firsthand; whether personal or analytic, they are not beholden to existing theories or approaches to writing. They use other ideas as launching points and not accepted fact, and they trust their own observations about the world. Their most traditional move is to embrace what “essay” originally meant in English (and still does): “an attempt.”

One piece seeks to explain the differing tactics of satirical news, another the significance of a surprising metaphor. One records a friendship in Iraq, under threat of the Islamic State, and another chronicles childhood dreams of flight in Connecticut. It is admittedly a varied slate, but we hope you’ll find value in writing that is forthright, honest, and unafraid of its own curiosity.

—The Editors
Remarks on Fake News

Paul Dillon

“Humor can be dissected, as a frog can, but the thing dies in the process and the innards are discouraging to any but the pure scientific mind.”

—E.B. White, Remarks on Humor

In his book Jokes, the late University of Chicago professor Ted Cohen observed that one can be good at making jokes, telling jokes, and appreciating jokes, but it is common to be only one or two out of the three. It’s also pretty clear that some find enjoyment through generalization and analysis while others can enjoy things “without meddlesome reaching after fact and reason,” in the words of Keats, or without being “a fool, or one of those who believe in ‘theories,’ ” in the words of Cohen. One could also wish to have it both ways: in Jokes, Cohen just wants to “make a few conceptual claims, trying to understand something [with] no comprehensive theory.” Now, I love jokes, and in particular I love a certain kind—fake news. I grew up sneaking copies of The Onion from my brother’s room, and I would spend hours laughing like a hyena on his shag carpet. I also love to theorize about things that I like. The impulse to dissect White’s metaphorical frog is there, but I hate the thought of killing it.

There are two ways around this problem. First, there’s the possibility of satisfying our curiosity: to capture and dissect a very bad frog that no one would ever miss. Second, there’s the possibility that the best frogs stand up well to dissection, and can even live beyond it. Recall that these frogs are Humor—in this case fake news. I wish to

analyze this genre at incorrigible length. And by following these two paths—that is, by generally sticking to an analysis of either very good or very bad fake news—I hope to avoid committing the sin White and many other writers and comedians describe. I will be making heavy use of The Borowitz Report (a terrible frog that I will do my best to shove a scalpel in), The Onion, (the kind of frog, I will argue, that does not die when dissected), and several concepts from Ted Cohen’s Jokes.

By “jokes,” Cohen means your grandpa’s jokes, that is, short stories with a punchline. There are common craft elements of jokes—accents, the rule of three, logic gone haywire—and then there are “essential features.” One is that jokes are “conditional,” an argument bearing most of the weight of the book:

A conditional joke is one that can work only with certain audiences, and typically is meant only for those audiences. The audience must supply something in order either to get the joke or to be amused by it. That something is the condition on which the success of the joke depends. It is a vital feature of much joking that only a suitably qualified audience—one that can meet the condition—can receive the joke, and the audience often derives an additional satisfaction from knowing this about itself.

Cohen uses this concept to explain the insinuating rib-elbowing, know-what-I-mean, wink-wink, community-building quality of jokes. Audience, maker, and teller are joined in creating laughter through mutual recognition of the unspoken premise. It’s this communal quality that makes jokes addictive, joyous, and indeed funny. And it sure seems like these conditions are what makes most forms of verbal humor work. There is much more to Jokes, but I’m most grateful for the insight above. It provides a clear way to delve into how humor works: conditional analysis. Conditional analysis may in fact be just as unfunny as it sounds, since by explaining the conditions of humor you strip away humor’s essence—its unspoken conditions. Humor tends to die when dissected because what makes it function as humor is what goes unsaid.

But perhaps good jokes don’t die when explained. A friend recently suggested this to me, and it’s something I enjoy believing.
In Jokes, Cohen often compares jokes to art—in how each are made, received, and appreciated. The analogy is not perfect, but it is suggestive. Imagine you see a Jackson Pollock painting for the first time, and you authentically enjoy it. The lines just really get you, or something. Then you go and do some reading. You take a class on abstract expressionism. Would we say this ruins the painting in a way that explaining a joke is sometimes taken to be akin to ruining it? Yes and no, I think. It would be disingenuous to say that there isn’t a difference in the immediacy of enjoyment and the pleasure of analysis—but it seems similarly disingenuous to say that analysis of a work of art or a joke can’t coexist with enjoyment. We can do both, and I think that the best jokes can stand up to both.

With all that said, what does a conditional analysis of fake news in the mode of The Onion and its ilk reveal? First and foremost, the primary condition of this genre is a shared concept of newspapers—news media in general, but newspapers specifically, as we are primarily speaking of a written form. Much of the funny in fake news happens because of the audience’s understanding of what newspapers talk about, and, more importantly, how they talk about it. Events are noted. Words Capitalized, Passive Voice Employed. Certain Euphemisms Common, Conjunctions Rare. But, as Cohen points out with respect to jokes, sometimes “what is required is not knowledge, or belief, in the first instance, but an awareness of what might be called ‘commonplaces.’ ” The idea here is that one doesn’t have to believe what they are supposed to about the subject of the joke—that WASPs are stuck up, that marriage is unpleasant—to
Remarks on Fake News

understand it, even if one doesn’t find the joke funny. It may help to feel the same way about the subject as the teller of the joke, but it’s not necessary.

The principle applies in fake news as well. For example, The Onion revels in “area man” jokes:

Area Man Pretty Sure He Knows Which Athletes Are Gay
Area Man Breaks Out Dating Boxers
Area Man Could Eat
Hundreds of Horrified Onlookers Gather Around Wreckage Of Area Man

There are dozens and dozens of these articles, stretching back to the nineties. They’re often hilarious, and they are definitely successful. The Onion sells Area Man t-shirts, and I’ve seen them popping up on twitter and other humor sites as well. The condition of most Area Man jokes is twofold: first, a vague idea of what your average American less-than-a-mensch is like, and second, the idea that there is a kind of publication that actually covers his trials and travails—the local paper. But when was the last time you read a small-town paper, if ever? Regardless of whether or not you have, they are vanishing. And yet despite the increasing lack of grounding for their condition of existence, Area Man fake news jokes are successfully sticking around (at least for now) because the audience for them is aware of what local news is supposed to be like, long after that audience has had actual experience with local news.

In Jokes, Ted Cohen uses two New York jokes as examples. I heard one of them for the first time in middle school:

A family from Nebraska went to New York City for the first time on a week’s vacation. After being battered by New York and its citizens for the first few days, the entire family felt exhausted and humiliated, and they were nearly ready to cut their vacation short, but the father insisted on trying once more to have an agreeable vacation in New York. The family walked out of their hotel in the morning, and the father went up to a traffic policeman and inquired, “Officer, would you tell me the way to the
The condition necessary for this joke to work is the idea that New Yorkers are famously aggressive and unhelpful—a city of strivers often striving against one another. The other New York joke in Jokes uses as one of its main conditions the idea that taxis won’t go to Brooklyn. Cohen didn’t use them for this purpose, but for a young reader these are great examples of jokes whose conditions no longer exist. (Certainly the Brooklyn taxi joke would barely make sense to a kid from Jersey today if he didn’t have these things patiently explained to him.) As the city changes, both in fact and in popular conception, these jokes have less and less of a chance at success. A question, unanswerable in this essay but provocative and worth thinking about, arises here: as print media vanishes, what will happen to the satire built on it? What will your grandkids think of fake news when they aren’t familiar with traditional news? The Onion seems to have smelled this problem, launching Clickhole—a fake BuzzFeed satirizing the conventions of that sort of Internet media—in June.

The Borowitz Report began as an email newsletter in the early 2000s before become a small humor website and finally being bought by The New Yorker in 2012. A few headlines from any month—say, October—will give an accurate impression of The Borowitz Report:

New Texas Law Would Require Candidates for Governor to Show Proof of I.Q.
Man Infected with Ebola Misinformation Through Casual Contact with Cable News
G.O.P Leader: Five Million Forced Back to Work Under Obama
Cheney: “No Fair” That Obama Gets to Bomb Syria

One could go back much farther and find many blunter, flatter, and softer ones, and a variety of very upset people have done so. Google “Andy Borowitz not funny” and you’ll find particularly awful examples dating back to the early 2000s. Here is just one, from 2004: “Flip-Flopping May Have Injured Kerry’s Shoulder.” The point is that it’s not hard to make an empirical case that The Borowitz Report is full of bad jokes, and many a think-piece has been launched to such an
But I’d like to look into exactly how they are bad, using our thoughts about the conditions of fake news and borrowing a few more thoughts from Ted Cohen. I think this is worth doing for two reasons. First, here we have our opportunity to dissect without guilt—if the “thing dies in the process,” there will not be much to mourn. The second is that I think there is something particularly unsettling about The Borowitz Report, intentional or otherwise, and that it is shared by much bad humor. More than this, it’s a kind of gross humor I’m worried is aimed at me.

The Borowitz Report appeals to many: according to The New Yorker’s online editor, it drew around 6% of that website’s traffic in 2013. When humor appeals to many people, we deem it “broad”—or, using Cohen’s terminology, its conditions of success are broadly available. Look at the random headlines I cited from October. What do you think those conditions are? Are they conditions of knowledge, belief, knowledge of commonplaces, or feelings and preferences? Whatever they are, I know they ought to be available to me. I am Andy Borowitz’s target demographic. I am a good white liberal-progressive who reads The New Yorker, follows mainstream news and politics, and, for better or worse, on a gut level am more likely to blame the other side than the system itself. The only way I’m deviating from the ideal Borowitz Report reader is that I’m twenty, not fifty.

Cohen makes a distinction between “hermetic” and “affective” jokes (though one joke can have both qualities). Hermetic jokes have conditions of knowledge or belief that should be supplied by the audience;
affective jokes rely on feelings and preferences that should be supplied by the audience.

In most Borowitz Report articles, the condition of the joke is primarily affective. The audience for “New Texas Law Would Require Candidates for Governor to Show Proof of I.Q.” must supply hermetic conditions of varying strengths—among them knowledge of Texas’s voter ID laws and the belief that Rick Perry and George Bush are dumb. In fact, these are the definitive hermetic conditions of the joke—that’s really all there is to it. With a working knowledge of English anybody could put these two conditions together and end up with this headline. (It’s a common feature of The Borowitz Report that one can see the jokes being worked out like an algebra problem, as Cohen observed is more or less possible with all jokes, given the condition. This feature is not a problem in and of itself, but when something is formulaic it makes its poor qualities into odious ones.) The point is that while The Borowitz Report is clearly pleasing to many people, there’s just not too much going on in the realm of hermetic conditions. Given the popularity of the Report coupled with this lack of hermetic depth or subtlety, we have to posit a strong affective component: to really enjoy The Borowitz Report, you must dislike Texas governors and quite possibly Texas in a pretty uncomplicated way. In order to laugh at many or most of these articles, you have to feel that Republicans and conservatives are dumb, malicious people—and that you’re better than them.

There is a strong counterexample to this line of thought. The Onion is also pretty obviously a liberal publication with a predominantly liberal readership, but also funnier. The same conditions for jokes are available, and sometimes even used. The difference is that the affective condition tends not to be the obvious first step in good fake news, whereas it often is in bad fake news. The Onion is definitely not always good. But when it is good, it creates a meatier kind of joke.

First of all, The Onion is more formally committed to its craft. When you read a headline in a newspaper, how often do you look at the author’s name, let alone recognize it? The Borowitz Report always prefaced its articles with the author’s name, which undermines the audience’s preparedness to provide the condition of normal
newspapers. This is a failure in the craft of fake news making, not in its essence. It's the same phenomenon as in a joke that relies on accents and different pronunciations to be funny. While I always know The Onion is fake, its jokes are made funnier by its more faithful parroting of newspapers in this way. In the same way, I've never believed that a rabbi, a Jesuit, and a congressman walked into a bar—but if the teller is good I don’t mind so much.

But reliance on affective conditions is a more essential flaw in fake news than craft-flaws like the one just mentioned, which have more to do with the accuracy of its satire. Cohen says that conditions of jokes are “insinuating”—the grossness of The Borowitz Report lies in its insinuation that the affective condition is enough to make you laugh at a joke like “McConnell Campaign Rocked by Photo Showing Him with Science Book.” I want to be better than that, and laugh at better jokes that don’t rely on my being smug and comfortable. I may very well have a low opinion of Mitch McConnell. But attempts to build a joke off of my flawed and reprehensible sense of superiority seem lazy at best and slimy at worst. To build this intuition, you can reference any joke you think of as offensive, or felt guilty for laughing at. I’d bet you felt this way because it was trafficking in affective conditions that are gross, or worse, appealing to affective conditions you didn’t want to think you had.

As said above, Cohen argues that jokes perform community-building functions, and that this intimacy is one of their main pleasures. One of the main impulses to share (both really and electronically) a fake news article is when it gets at something you haven’t been able to say quite right. There is a pleasure there besides laughter, something like the intimacy Cohen described. Here are headlines run by The Onion after the presidential election in 2008 and The Borowitz Report after the 2012 presidential election, respectively:

Black Man Given Nation’s Worst Job
BREAKING: Man Who Told Half the Nation to Fuck Themselves Somehow Loses Election

Both venues are obviously happy Barack Obama is president. The audiences for both articles may, in fact, be largely the same, and may
be able to successfully participate in many of the same conditions.

But there is a gulf in how those conditions are used. In *The Borowitz Report*, one has to be aware of the hermetic condition of Mitt Romney’s 47% gaffe. Some humor probably comes from the paraphrasing of the comment as “Go Fuck Yourself.” But the condition more essential to the joke’s success is affective: an uncomplicated desire to gloat at a Bad, Lesser Man. Now, for all my big talk about how maybe it isn’t so bad to analyze humor, I hesitate to do too much to *The Onion*’s headline. But it wouldn’t be going too far to observe that this joke uses affective conditions that the liberal audience can participate in—both joy and sadness—against each other, and is thus both very serious and very, very funny. It is a better joke, it aspires to more, and it “plays close to the big hot fire which is Truth,” as E.B. White claimed humor could. On the other hand, fake news that relies almost purely on affective conditions without complication or challenge is almost as bad as an old one-line ethnic joke—and perhaps your grandkids will feel similarly embarrassed by the innards of that sort of frog.

This essay was motivated by thinking about Jokes this summer, as well as thinking about the fact that I don’t hear many, thinking about the kind of jokes I do hear, and remembering an elderly man I used to see once in a while smoking on the stoop of Harper.
Windless, warm, the sky without a cloud. Only the blue was veiled with a haze of light gold, as it is sometimes in early summer. The gardener had been up since dawn, mowing the lawns and sweeping them, until the grass and the dark flat rosettes where the daisy plants had been seemed to shine.

Breakfast was not yet over before the men came to put up the marquee.

“You see, with a thing like a marquee,” he said in his easy way, “you want to put it somewhere where it’ll give you a bang slap in the eye, if you follow me.”
The Food of Love

Angela Qian

Eating is touch carried to the bitter end.
—Samuel Butler

There is a fragment of Sappho’s poetry which describes, in a few short, elliptical lines, a scene in which a few apple pickers reach for an apple that dangles overhead, too high for them to grasp. The lines read:

As a sweet apple turns red on a high branch,
high on the highest branch and the applepickers forgot—
well, no, they didn’t forget—were not able to reach…

Anne Carson, discussing the fragment in Eros the Bittersweet, observes that the poem is essentially a poem about desire that operates on two levels. On the surface level of content, the apple pickers are suspended in a moment of longing; the fruit remains perpetually out of their reach. At the same time the poem is, like all of Sappho’s poems, incomplete: the sentence never reaches its conclusion and so it, too, is suspended. The reader hunts for an ending, an object, which will never be attained.

Probably everyone in the world is familiar with this sensation of longing and uncertainty, painful but nevertheless delightful. It is a feeling which most often manifests itself in the pangs of love. As a metaphor, therefore, Sappho’s fragment poignantly conveys the ache

of desire, of wanting something which lies just out of reach, outside of one's possession, and which may, perhaps, never be possessed.

But if the poem is a metaphor for desire, what should we make of the metaphor itself? The poem describes an apple. The apple is the object of one’s desire. We may say, perhaps, that the apple is a stand-in for the loved one. We, along with the apple-pickers, reach for it, straining. We desire it, can almost taste it; the fruit is red and ripe, sweet and tempting. And what would we do with the apple, once we had it? Well, the answer is obvious: we would eat it.

One winter not too long ago when the snow was piled all around the sidewalks, I sat in the basement of the library and wrote a short story. Without getting too maudlin, I will admit that I was, at the time, frustrated in love. With this in mind, I produced something like a love story, about a girl whose boyfriend is drifting further and further away from her. Unable to bear this, she grows desperate, distraught; she'll do anything to get him back. She begs, pleads, does everything she can think of. Finally, she murders him—and eats his flesh.

Why do we use the language of food to talk about love? We find the comparison in literature of all ages and cultures, not just with Sappho, but in Shakespeare, Chekhov, Kabir—whose poem “Chewing slowly” shows the seemingly endless appetite one has in the search for a loved one:

Chewing slowly,  
Only after I'd eaten  
My grandmother,  
Mother,  
Son-in-law,
Two brothers-in-law,
And father-in-law
(His big family included)
In that order,
And had for dessert
The town’s inhabitants,

Did I find, says Kabir,
The beloved that I’ve become
One with.²

And we find this comparison in Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, Anne Carson, the ideas behind the Eucharist, and contemporary poets galore. Darcie Dennigan, for instance, spins a fantastical surreal narrative in her poem “In the Bakery” about a woman who makes her bread by cutting up flowers. The language becomes violent, colorful, riotous, as the unhappy narrator’s frenzy mounts until the last scene, when her ex-lover makes his entrance, and she cuts open her veins and finds them to be filled with flour.³ In his endearingly-titled piece “The Amorous Cannibal,” Chris Wallace-Crabbe connects eating, love, and the written word in his description of how “someone slides out his heart / and offers it on a spoon, / garnished with adjectives.”⁴ The metaphor is so commonplace it is even used as a cliché, “Poetry is the food of love.”

Drawing a comparison between eating and love seems intuitive, natural. It is worth attempting to deconstruct why this is so. What does this say about love?

Robert Creeley once wrote a poem called “For Love”:

Yesterday I wanted to
speak of it, that sense above
the others to me
important because all

that I know derives
from what it teaches me.
Today, what is it that

is finally so helpless,

different, despairs of its own
statement, wants to
turn away, endlessly
to turn away.

[...]

That is love yesterday
or tomorrow, not

now. Can I eat
what you give me. I
have not earned it. Must
I think of everything

as earned. Now love also
becomes a reward so
remote from me I have
only made it with my mind.5

In Creeley’s poem, love is described twice: once as a sense “above the others,” the other as a helpless, even cowardly sensation that “despairs” and wants to “turn away.” Yet in both senses, love is distant—in the first case it is untouchable and unreachable for its glorified height, and in the second, it is withdrawn and distant.

Here, love and eating are equated: the satisfaction of love, like the satisfaction of hunger, is a reward of which the speaker feels undeserving. The poem’s speaker asks, hopelessly, it seems, “Can I eat / what you give me”—not even bothering to use a question mark. He has already decided he doesn’t deserve the nourishment. Because he is not loved, he cannot eat.

“For Love” is a neat example of the comparison between eating and love. Both love and its satisfaction are equated with an offering of food, of something to be eaten. The distance between the speaker and the loved one parallels the sense of lack the speaker feels, his hunger.

The desire for fulfillment in the form of something edible becomes, by the end of the poem, the same as the desire for fulfillment in love.

Creeley’s speaker not only feels distant from the reward of love, but also feels incapable of satisfying his hunger. In an oblique way, then, love is represented here as something desirable and given only to the deserving. Certainly we can relate to this: when we love someone, we want to be “good enough” for them, and strive to improve ourselves so that we will be loved in return.

When we are hungry, then, we want something to fill us up. That’s simple enough. But when we love someone, what is it that we want out of them?

Carson writes that the word *eros* denotes, in ancient Greek, notions such as “want” and “desire for that which is missing”; she says there is something “pure and indubitable about the notion that eros is lack.” Lacan, too, argues that desire is “an element necessarily lacking, unsatisfied, impossible, misconstrued.” It is a sensation of missing something that cannot be ignored—an innate instinct, unavoidable. It causes pangs, like those of hunger. We think its satisfaction will bring a gasp of relief, even a sense of fullness.

The metaphor, however, runs even deeper than that. When we eat something, we are physically taking it into our bodies. We make it a part of our bodies and beings in a way unlike anything else. In a sense, the act of consumption is an act in which all boundaries are broken, the most intimate act possible.

Similarly, when we love someone, our desire for the other person is so intense that we want to possess them entirely. As Carson writes

in “The Albertine Workout”: “The jealous lover cannot rest until he is able to touch all the points in space and time ever occupied by the beloved.” Desire stretched to its extreme is so desperate, grasping, and hungry that, like in Kabir’s poem, its appetite seeks almost everything, constantly wants more.

However, when we examine the equation of the appetites of hunger and those of love, we notice a crucial difference. Take, for instance, Anne Sexton’s “Loving the Killer”:

And tonight our skin, our bones,
that have survived our fathers,
will meet, delicate in the hold,
fastened together in an intricate lock.
Then one of us will shout,
“My need is more desperate!” and
I will eat you slowly with kisses
even though the killer in you
has gotten out.

Here there are several telling words: “need,” “desperate,” the physical meeting of bodies. It is after one lover shouts “My need is more desperate” that the poem’s speaker “eats” the other with one of the most symbolic gestures of romantic union there is: the kiss. Yet far from seeming sweet, the kiss is at once used for the consumption of the other. Like Kabir, Sexton makes romantic love a kind of destruction. Both lovers race to consume the other (“the killer in you / has gotten out”). Love is portrayed as a violent, physical need for connection and union with the loved one.

The extension of this insatiable appetite is, therefore, not a union, but annihilation. In Sexton’s poem, both lovers are killers—it is
merely a question of which one consumes the other first. When we are in love, we are never satisfied; we always want more from the other person. No matter how much time or attention we get from him or her, it is never enough. “If we look carefully at a lover in the midst of desire,” Carson writes, “union would be annihilating.”

So once again, the question is: When we compare eating and love, what are we saying about love?

In Chekhov’s play “Uncle Vanya,” Dr. Astroff, tormented by his love for the beautiful Yelena, makes a speech wholly surrendering himself to her. “[You] must have your victims!” he cries to her, “Here you have me—now, eat me.” This is a poignant example of the predatory nature of romantic desire. Dr. Astroff calls himself a “victim,” and certainly he may consider himself one of Yelena’s victims, but he is also, by extension, a victim of a bigger beast: love itself. And once Yelena “has” Astroff in her possession, he asks to be destroyed. The mere “having” is not enough.

But Yelena does not, of course, eat Astroff, and the two ultimately part from one another. The metaphor which compares possessing the loved one to physical consumption, then, suggests that the perfect union we may fantasize about does not in fact exist. When confronted with the prospect of “assimilating” the person we love, of taking them into ourselves so that there are no barriers or boundaries left, we quail—because the end result is destruction. Thus in serious relationships, in adapting one’s tastes, habits, activities, or personality, each lover may feel as though he or she is losing autonomy, his or her identity being slowly subsumed into that of the other. But if such a relationship involves a change of identity, how can the person we desire be the same at the end of it as is in the beginning? In this sense, the reach of desire is asymptotic: it strives for a point of perfect, close contact with the loved one, similar to the desire for satisfaction of hunger—but which it ultimately, though it gets close, never quite reaches.

In Margaret Atwood’s novel The Edible Woman, Marian, growing increasingly distraught and uncomfortable after her engagement, bakes a cake in the shape of a woman and presents it to her fiancé,
THE FOOD OF LOVE

Peter:

“You’ve been trying to destroy me, haven’t you,” she said.
“You’ve been trying to assimilate me. But I’ve made you a substi-
tute, something you’ll like much better. This is what you really
wanted all along, isn’t it?”

Peter, disturbed, runs away. His reaction in the face of Marian’s
offering shows a key and even paradoxical element of the nature of
desire, the paradox that the love as hunger metaphor reveals: that if
we were to fully possess what we love, it would be gone. As Carson
writes in Eros the Bittersweet: “A space must be maintained or desire
ends.”

10. Margaret
Atwood. The Ed-
ible Woman. New
York: Anchor,
1998.
Notes from the Abyss

This piece is a follow-up to the author’s Spring 2014 letter from Iraq, “The Four Who Watch.”

Matthew Schweitzer

One late night in July, Ahmed, a political scientist in Baghdad, anxiously waits for his friend in Mosul to answer a Skype call. When he finally does, the blurry face on the other end of a miraculous yet fading connection is grey, carved by two months of suffering. The mouth droops into a permanent grimace. The lips do not move when the tongue tries to speak. Younis, a professor of international relations at Mosul University and father of three young children, wears these features like a statue. His fixed expression resembles stone more than life. After a few perfunctory greetings, Younis reports in a quivering monotone that “there is a new joke here.” There is no humor in his eyes: “The Islamic State has banned perfume for women. They have asked merchants to destroy their stocks. Now the city’s women have a choice. Either to smell bad, or to be executed.”

Younis, like many Iraqis, has long used dark humor to compartmentalize the terrors in the streets outside his home. It doesn’t work anymore. In June, as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) stormed into Mosul, Younis’s house was hit by a mortar. His youngest daughter, eight years old, was blinded in a subsequent blast as the family fled toward the Kurdish border. After only three days, he was forced to return to his shattered home, now under ISIS rule. The fear, violence, and uncertainty of the last two months have taken their toll. “My young son has seen bodies without heads,” he says.

Over 260 miles away in Baghdad, Ahmed ends the call and shakes his head. “Younis is my dear friend and colleague,” he explains. “We
were classmates, we studied for our exams together.” Over the last month, these men have exchanged phone calls a few times every week. The purpose, he says, is simple: “to compare tragedies and congratulate each other for staying alive.”

Some of the most difficult narratives of Iraq’s dissolution unfold during such moments, where the monolithic forces reshaping the region have little immediate meaning in the face of the personal experiences of friends. For those living through their own nightmares, reality has contracted. Worlds constructed in times of violence are much smaller than those inhabited during peace. Few have the energy to think of those outside a close-knit social circle. Hope, already in short supply across Iraq, has seemingly disappeared.

Ahmed and Younis are my collaborators on a research project based at the University of Chicago, which studies the impact of war and violence on Iraq’s once-powerful intelligentsia since 1979 and their sufferings through the following three decades of conflict. I am their fellow researcher and mutual friend, and was able to sit in through a separate Skype video connection with Ahmed during these conversations, recording the dialogue and expressions of the participants from my home in Tangier, Morocco. Ahmed and I also discussed his own emotions at length after each call, and he sent many letters describing his impressions. These men, true intellectuals with the courage to endure intimate threats, had worked tirelessly for over a year to collect, archive, and in some cases smuggle testimonies from their cities to our research team in England and the United States. Now they had suddenly become research subjects themselves. As a friend, it was painful to collect these tapes. Yet as a scholar, I knew the importance of the task.

For Younis and Ahmed, late-night conversations, colored by urgency and danger, provide a lifeline for a friendship to endure through Iraq’s daily realities. Each is a window into two unique lives caught amidst general violence sweeping the country into an abyss.

10 JUNE 2014: INVASION, MOSUL
All the doors in the house seemed to be open. The house was alive with soft, quick steps and running voices. The green baize door that led to the kitchen regions swung open and shut with a muffled thud. But the air! If you stopped to notice, was the air always like this?

Younis watches soldiers stream past his home, shedding uniforms and weapons onto the dusty ground. “Maybe one day, when I am out of Iraq, I will tell you what happened here,” he yells into the phone from a road along the Nineveh-Erbil border near Iraqi Kurdistan. “But I am too afraid to say anything right now.”

Today Iraq began a quick slide into a civil war. A rough Sunni coalition, furious at former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki’s sectarian agenda, formed a dangerous marriage of convenience with Syrian-born ISIS to rout the Iraqi Army from the country’s second largest city of 1.8 million people. The loss of Mosul compounded an unresolved situation in extremist-controlled Fallujah and Ramadi.

That afternoon, Ahmed replies calmly, the government in Baghdad called its citizens to take up arms, “not in defense of the state, but in self-defense. All able-bodied men are being urged to fight in the North.”

“That’s correct,” Younis says. “There’s no law. Everybody has their own law in the form of a gun.”

There is little Ahmed can do from Baghdad, where reports of government defeats filter through the television every minute.
“Normal Iraqis must look to God to save their own lives now, even in the capital. Where do you think this leaves us?” he asks.

Younis stutters as he begins to answer. He starts the next sentence twice, seemingly unable to decide between the word for “I” and “we.” Eventually he takes another line of thought: “My house, my family, my everything, is gone. There are bodies on the roads. I am a refugee in my own home.”

He begins another sentence, but the line cuts out. Ahmed appears unsure what to do next. He sits for a moment by the window. Then with a flourish and quiet laugh, he says, “I think that’s my call to prayer.”

**30 JULY 2014: EID AL-FITR, BAGHDAD**

For some reason Skype is not working, so Ahmed calls his friend on one of his three mobile phones, each of which he carries in a different pocket. The Muslim holy month of Ramadan ends tonight, marking the start of Eid al-Fitr celebrations, and he wants to wish Younis a safe holiday. Iraqis often carry multiple devices, each one configured for a different carrier. Most people have two phones—one from Kurdish provider
Korek, and another from national carrier Asiacell—but Ahmed has a third, from Zain, a nationwide company, “because I never know when I need a backup.” Electricity cuts, infrastructure deficiencies, and corruption cause some networks to periodically fail. Political disputes across provincial boundaries often mean that carriers from different regions are incompatible with each other, especially between the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and federal Iraq. While generally reliable, “phone calls can feel like a game,” Ahmed often jokes. This time he uses the Asiacell phone, which he keeps in his right breast shirt pocket, next to the cigarettes. The call goes through on his second attempt, although the line is a bit scratchy. Tonight there must be millions trying to connect via phone, Skype, Viber, or Facebook.

“Please don’t ask what Eid is like here. Actually, I don’t want to talk about it,” Younis begins. “There is no holiday in Mosul. I think everyone is praying in the mosques. It really is funny, because I cannot tell you if they are praying because they believe in God, or because they are scared of the terrorists. We don’t really have much food to celebrate with, in any case.”

The situation in Baghdad is not much better, Ahmed explains. The streets are empty. “People are too afraid to leave their homes,” he says. The Islamic State recently announced plans to attack the capital before the end of Ramadan, and the city is bracing for a siege. Rumors of sleeper cells throughout the city, although unverifiable, have catalyzed panic for many. “It’s always quiet at night here,” Ahmed says, “but tonight feels different. Normally the city feels like it’s sleeping, but now it feels like it’s holding its breath. It’s especially silent.” The light outside Ahmed’s window, powered alternately by the grid and a rusting generator, flutters suddenly to remind residents the electricity has cut out.

In the days leading up to Eid, the capital has come to resemble a prison. Long lines stretch from ticket counters at Baghdad International Airport, and the waiting time for a flight out of the country is said to be around two weeks. Militants control territory to the north and west, and the roads have become treacherous between Iraqi Army, Shia militia, and Islamic State checkpoints. Trains have
not run since Saddam’s time. Ahmed has heard rumors that unknown gunmen across the city are conducting executions in the night. During what is supposed to be one of the happiest times of the year, Baghdadis are trying in vain to escape.

“You sound trapped,” Younis sighs.

Ahmed answers instantly: “You should know. We all are.”

There is not much more to say. The only sound in the room is a choked purring from the generator outside. The threat of an ISIS attack seems very real tonight. Ahmed wishes Younis an “Eid mubarak,” a happy holiday. For the first time in a while, his tone suggests that he is afraid not for Younis’s sake, but for his own. He lives on a sharp bend in the Tigris, from which he can see the Prime Minister’s palace in the city’s Green Zone. Looking across the water, he wonders out loud whether the city will survive the night. The men give odds and make their bets. “We shall see who is rich in the morning,” Ahmed says.

“Mosul has been a prison since June, and I suppose it was only a matter of time before Baghdad became one, too,” Younis replies.

10 AUGUST 2014: LAYERS OF UNCERTAINTY, BAGHDAD

Today Ahmed lost his home. A car bomb exploded just outside his front
door, “setting everything on fire.” He does not want to talk to anyone. He sighs, sitting quietly in a relative’s house nearby with his head in his hands. But when Younis calls just after midnight, he does not let the phone ring twice. The connection is awful, and the electricity cuts three times in the first twenty minutes.

Ahmed’s tragedy has played out against the backdrop of a generally uncertain day in the capital. As the sun set, chaotic reports began emerging that Iraqi Army units were deploying to strategic points around the city, sparking rumors that Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki had been targeted by a car bomb. Now, at 12:46 a.m., special forces loyal to Maliki are patrolling the city’s center, and the Prime Minister is very much alive. There are no facts tonight, only speculation. The ruling Shiite coalition is working to form a new government, and must name a Prime Minister. Maliki seems prepared to keep his position by any means necessary. Attention has turned to Baghdad, where the state seems perched at the precipice of an even greater crisis than the one which has already consumed the nation.

Younis had just heard of these developments when he called his friend, and is surprised by the show of force in the capital. “You don’t think Baghdad is under attack?” he asks breathlessly, fearing the long-rumored ISIS offensive against the city may have begun during the political instability. “This sounds more like a coup or a collapse,” he suggests. It is always dangerous for Younis to share news from Mosul, but the events in the capital have put him in an excited buzz. Uncertainty breeds conspiracy theories, and he is quick to offer a series of unfounded explanations for this tense Baghdad night.

“Listen to me. I swear to God, nothing appears abnormal in my neighborhood,” Ahmed snaps back, “I have no idea about what Maliki plans to do, but my own life is destroyed. Nobody cares about what happens to the Iraqi people. Let me tell you the story.” Younis tells him calmly to go ahead. Ahmed has become hysterical.

“I have become very sad, I do not care about anything anymore. Yesterday I took my youngest son to the barber because his hair was getting very long. After his haircut, he wanted to walk to the bookstore to buy pencils. He loves to paint. He is a very talented painter, even
though he’s so young. He is particularly fond of watercolors, and I know a very good shop nearby to the barber that sells European paints. ‘Come, dad, let’s walk. It is alright,’ my son says. He is too young to know much better, but I go with him because I like to see him happy.

“In the bookstore, another young boy—one of my son’s best schoolmates—runs up the street, shouting my name. I ask him to take a deep breath because I can’t understand any of his words. He finally says in a very distressed voice, ‘Doctor Ahmed, your wife, she is okay; your [other] son, he is okay.’ I still can’t understand, and I ask whatever does he mean. He says, ‘Your house, there was a bomb, your whole flat was destroyed.’

“I rush home with my son. We never had time to buy the paints, but he doesn’t complain even once. I can see, from a few streets away, a dark cloud of smoke over my home. My car is on fire, my home is blackened. The windows are shattered. I live on the first floor of an apartment tower. Someone had put a car bomb just next to my front door. Everything was burning. My books were destroyed.

“I see the terrible damage, and I put my hands over the eyes of my young son. ‘Do not worry, my boy,’ I say to him. It is too late. He is crying. I will not forget the wetness of his tears on my hands.”

Ahmed does not know if he had been targeted specifically, or if his home had fallen on some unmarked sectarian fault line that ruptured. He had received some vague threats a few months earlier regarding his political commentary, but nothing came of them. “I did not take these letters very seriously,” he says, “because there were no bullets in the envelopes or frightening phone calls at night” —the trademarks of serious assassination attempts professors have come to recognize. Since 2003, over five-hundred Iraqi academics have been killed by unknown factions. The universities are dangerous places to work or study, and the Interior Ministry admits that over nine-thousand fake university degrees have been purchased by prominent civil servants.

Younis is unsure how to comfort his friend. He faces an equally potent danger, as the Dean of International Relations at Mosul
MATTHEW SCHWEITZER

University. “It is very difficult to find any words to bring peace because I know there will be no peace, only words,” he confides in his friend. “We all face terrible hardship and threat from every side, and sometimes it is necessary to let the sadness and weariness take over.”

“I thought I had escaped the worst years, but I think they may be just beginning,” Ahmed cries, “and now I don’t know where I will live. Now all I want is to leave Iraq.”

The call must end here. Although he does not explain why, Younis fears someone “unfriendly” might be listening to their conversation.

12 AUGUST 2014: DISPATCHES, BAGHDAD AND MOSUL

Ahmed must travel to the University of Baghdad this afternoon to submit papers for the upcoming academic year. His journey takes him through eight checkpoints and could stretch over two hours. “It all depends on the bombs, shootings, and soldiers—a normal day,”
he jokes.

Younis waits for his colleague to finish. He is staring straight into the camera, something Ahmed just seems to notice with a confused expression. Younis has been mostly silent since Ahmed answered his call. After taking a deep breath, he begins to whisper. “The situation here is very bad,” he breathes, unsure of which words to use. “There are headless seven-year-olds in the streets. The lifeless bodies of women beaten for refusing to wear the niqab are also left for us as a warning.”

Ahmed sits with the remnants of an already-weak smile fading from his lips. The Skype connection is excellent, but neither man can linger very long.

18 AUGUST 2014: WAR COMES TO THE UNIVERSITY, MOSUL

Younis often repeats that, for a long time, his happiness and livelihood, along with those of his friends and neighbors, has been “shattered into a million little pieces that I am only beginning to pick up one by one.” The lightness with which he shares this thought today, though, hides a more painful reality. This morning three armed men burst into his office at Mosul University and forced him to resign his position as Professor and Dean of International Relations. “Now I must begin again,” he sighs. Ahmed sees a confusion in his colleague’s sadness. “It looks as if he wants to cry, but cannot find any more tears,” he notes quietly while covering the receiver tightly.

The ISIS leadership has clamped a firm muzzle on academics already struggling to continue their scholarship at Mosul University. The Ministry of Higher Education in Baghdad has withheld salaries for professors in occupied territory. “There is no way for me to survive,” Younis repeats four times, until he is whispering. Although intellectuals have borne the heaviest weight of their country’s last few violent decades, an academic voice has persisted. Yet even for those who felt a “moral conviction to serve the students,” as Ahmed puts it, the end seems closer than ever before.

Younis says simply, “I have tried very hard. It was not enough.”
He has never left Iraq for more than two weeks at a time. But now he begs God for a way to escape with his family.

“Where does this leave you, and in what way will I help you?” Ahmed asks. Younis’s answer is, for Ahmed, inconsequential. Intellectuals who have managed to survive thirty years of war are members of a rarified community. Within it, interpersonal relationships transcend mere friendship, or perhaps are the purest expressions of it. Professors know that their comrades must survive—the alternative is “too terrible to imagine easily,” Ahmed explains later. He knows that not only are academics faced with incredible danger against their lives, but also with their erasure from memory. “When the books are burned, when the offices go dark and cold, when I am too afraid to write, that is when I disappear. This is the reality we must fight as scholars whose purpose is to enlighten, to publish, and to teach.”

Although both men understand this reality, they must not discuss it. “I am here to force you to survive. I will try hard, because you have done the same for me,” Ahmed tells his friend in a tone that holds more confidence than he feels in his heart.

“I swear to God, I must endure on my own,” Younis replies. “My father’s name was once well-known on the streets here, but now his house is a bombed-out shell, his son is defeated. Did he work so hard for this result? I only wish my sons do not have to experience the shame I feel right now. What can you do to find my pride?”

“You are a good professor, and your mind is alive with powerful ideas,” Ahmed implores. “This is where your pride also resides. You must be a lion where it is hardest to stand against the shame, that is, inside your mind. Remember the words of our prophet: ‘Seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave. Those who leave home in search of knowledge walk in the path of God.’ ”

“I understand what you say.” Younis does not sound convinced. “But I hoped not to find my grave so soon on the path from [the cradle]. It is not that I’m afraid of what these terrorist thugs will do to me or my family—we have faced terrible danger before. It is that through all this danger, I have been anchored to my office, to my
home, and to my books. All three are gone. Does that make sense to you?”

“Yes,” Ahmed sighs. “It is too clear. What can we do?”

Neither man has a good answer, and both are quietly eager for this conversation to end.

23 AUGUST 2014: VACATION, BEIRUT, LEBANON

In a clean hotel room with twenty-four-hour electricity, Ahmed sits at his old Dell laptop writing an email to Younis. There is no time for a phone call. He lost his charging cable earlier that day, and the battery only lasts for an hour. He must type fast. “What a beautiful day I had by the ocean,” he notes. Although the demands of the conference he has traveled to attend are rigorous, “it is very important to find time to enjoy one's life,” he says.

The news reports coming over Iraqi satellite channels are depressing, and Ahmed prefers to ignore the realities of home for a few more hours. Tomorrow he must return to Baghdad for the start of the academic year. “I don’t know if it will be a full and prosperous one. I don’t think it will,” he writes, “but there is no doubt in my mind that I must return to my duties in the classroom.”

He sends his message, switching to another window to check his flight before the battery dies. “It is so unsatisfying to write a letter,” Ahmed complains, “because then I must wait. In Iraq, waiting is the most terrifying thing.”

He sits quietly reading his boarding pass for a moment. “But these days I am more afraid of the answers I will receive when the waiting is over.”
Into the Clear Blue

Hannah Nyhart

On July 2, 1982, Larry Walters flew to sixteen thousand feet in an aluminum lawn chair, hoisted by forty-five weather balloons. He took a BB gun to pierce balloons for a gentle descent, and a parachute, just in case. He also brought a packet of sandwiches, a camera, a six-pack, and a radio. That last one he used to call for help after the tethers connecting him to his Jeep broke, and he shot up so fast his glasses fell off, and so high he went numb. Larry was aloft for forty-five minutes, during which time he got reported by pilots from TWA and Delta, violated four sections of the Federal Aviation Act, and caused a three-hour blackout in the tip of Los Angeles County. He also dropped the BB gun. When he finally climbed down from his chair, which had caught in the power lines outside 432 East 45th Street, Long Beach, cops and press were waiting. He told The New York Times, “Since I was thirteen years old, I’ve dreamed of going up into the clear blue sky in a weather balloon. By the grace of God, I fulfilled my dream. But I wouldn’t do this again for anything.”

Larry Walters and I don’t have a lot in common. He was a Vietnam vet, a truck driver from Los Angeles; I’m a college kid from a Connecticut town nobody’s heard of. We were only alive at the same time for a six-month period over the summer of 1993. But when we were thirteen years old, we both wanted to fly.

I can’t remember a time I didn’t. As a kid at night I’d dream up a big field with crisp air at that perfect temperature that comes twice a year. I’d take off like a plane, arms out, legs churning until I’d launch.
In another dream, I fell off the banister of a multi-flight staircase to land lightly on the floor, and race back up. I spent that night falling and falling and laughing. My flying dreams were the first I remember that weren’t nightmares.

I was seven when my parents gave me a fat book of Greek myths for children, the wrath of the gods punctuated by full-page watercolor illustrations. Among the immortals—Prometheus and his cliff, Athena bursting from Zeus’s skull—there was Icarus. I could never keep track of why father and son were imprisoned on that island, and the warnings of the parable were lost on me. I didn’t care that Icarus had flown too close to the sun, that he’d ignored his father’s warning. I didn’t care that he fell, drowned, that his father wept over him. It was the flight itself that intrigued me. Men borne aloft by their own arms. If they could fly with wax and feathers, I could do it with paper plates and duct tape.

And so I tried. I made babysitters help me strap on the paper plates, even though the duct tape hurt like a thousand Band-Aids when we had to pull it off. I raced in loops around the downstairs, leaping on and off the window bench. When friends came over we spent afternoons making parachutes out of garbage bags. We jumped off my front porch over and over, swearing we’d felt a little more lift that time, running in to add more tape, more bags. When there were no friends around, my little sister became my dubious second. I remember telling her very sternly from my window-bench perch that I was in this for the long haul, and that she could only participate if she intended to see it through.

My belief was unflagging in a way I now find unbelievable. I thought that if I made the seams of the parachute a little tighter, if I flapped harder, it would work. I thought that the only reason nobody had flown like that before was that they hadn’t wanted it enough.

Larry wanted it enough. He’s the first result when you google “Lawnchair balloon flight,” but he wasn’t where I got the idea. That was Kent Couch, who flew a lawn chair in September 2006. He used 150 helium balloons. Like most of Walters’s emulators, Couch was middle-aged. A gas station owner, he’s made multiple successful
flights in the past eight years. Another copycat was not so lucky. Suspended by one-thousand party balloons, Father Adelir Antonio de Carli crashed off the coast of Brazil in 2008, off course with a GPS he didn’t know how to use.

By the time I read about Couch’s trip, I’d shed the paper plates. I knew human bones weighed more than birds’, no matter how hard you flapped. I knew plastic bag parachutes were best suited to little green army men. But here was a solo flight that had worked. My plan included precautions. I’d make a seatbelt; I wouldn’t drink and fly; I’d be tied to a strong tree in my front yard, with a friend to let the rope out bit by bit. Spring of my sophomore year, I stepped up my research and blanched at the financials. The weather balloons cost $80 each. I’d need forty. And that $3,200 didn’t even cover the helium. If it hadn’t been money, it would have been time. I was eyeing a newspaper editorship and staying up late writing instant-coffee-fueled papers to impress my aging English teachers. When exams loomed before one winter break, I spent two weeks sleeping on the downstairs couch so that I could wake up steps from the coffee machine and the Christmas tree. It felt like I didn’t have time to brush my teeth, much less build an airship. I tabled the flight plan. My best friend Julia, the would-be-rope-holder, was not surprised.

Senior year, I thought back to flying as I tried to come up with an entry for my boarding school’s annual speech contest. I got the reminder to submit in the middle of the school’s first snow day in seven years. It was a month or so before everyone would find out
where they’d gotten into college. There was something about the sudden childishness of all of us tromping through the snow. Snowball fights, and my young trials at flying, seemed so apart from—so much better than—all of our confused striving.

That day in late February, running around with stolen dining hall trays felt like play after months of only work. I wanted that back—the kind of childhood missions that stretch across summer break or snow days and feel more important than anything you’re told to do. So that’s what I wrote about. I sat down in my friend’s living room and wrote a tongue-in-cheek account of all the ways I’d tried to fly, and a lot that I hadn’t tried, but that sounded good: seeking magic carpets in furniture stores, and pixie dust in the spice cabinet. Larry Walters didn’t make an appearance, and neither did Kent Couch. I think I’d forgotten where the balloon idea came from. I wondered aloud why, as I was being urged in essays and interviews and meetings with my college counselor to declare a passion, I couldn’t find one as compelling as the quest for flight.

I thought the speech was funny and maybe even stirring, a self-deprecating call to step back from the grim race for achievement and try to figure out what we were all really doing here. Before I sent it in, I read it to my little sister, a junior. “You were a sophomore when you wanted to do that balloon thing?” She wrinkled her brow. “You shouldn’t say that—they’ll think you’re retarded.”

A few weeks later, I’d made it to the finals, an exhibition round in front of our thousand-person school. The other speakers were our student body president and two juniors, one of who would discuss the differences between the Chinese and American education systems, the other his spring break trip to Haiti, and how it had changed his outlook on life. My speech was called “Fly Me to the Moon.” I was glad I was first, because I didn’t want to follow Haiti with all of the things I had jumped off of as a child. My adviser had told me I gestured too much, so I gripped the podium. I made it through the first three quarters of the speech without incident. I changed sophomore year to eighth grade. The crowd laughed at a lot of the places I thought they should, but not all.
Then came the final paragraph. This was where I was really going to sell it, the serious, poignant, reflective part that told them why I had a right to be onstage alongside international education systems and Haiti. It was about not knowing what I wanted, but knowing how I wanted to want it: with passion. The line read, “I’m not sure what I want to do, or who I want to be.” I looked up from the text and tried to hold the audience with my gaze. “I’m not sure who I want to do—“

Nine hundred teenagers erupted into laughter. My face fell hot into my palm. They laughed through the end of the speech and as I walked back to my seat. Haiti leaned over and said ruefully, “That’s it—you won.”

I came in third, just ahead of Chinese Education. At least once a week for the month and a half before I graduated, boys I didn’t know would ask me, grinning, if they were on my “to do list.”

Larry shot himself in the heart on October 6, 1993, in the middle of Angeles National Forest. In the ten years after his flight, he’d broken up with his girlfriend, spent a little time as a motivational speaker, and hopped between security guard jobs. He was featured in a Timex ad, but he never made much money off it. On his Wikipedia page, a small grey box lists his birth and death dates and locations, forty-four years and fewer miles apart. Below that, it says “Known for: Flying a lawn chair with weather balloons.”

Here was a man who’d dreamed of flight since he was a kid. He’d come up with the balloon idea when he was thirteen, staring at weather balloons in an army-navy surplus store. He finally did it two decades later. The kneejerk wry shrug here is, “Where do you go from there?”

My speech was about not knowing where to go, but it had a neat ending no one heard. “If I don’t find what I’m looking for,” I wrote, “I’m sure I can dig up those paper plates.” On the cusp of college, the wink of the line was that of course I would find what I was looking for; I had time. A few years later, the line rings a little more hollow. I had always assumed college was a place you went to figure things out. Instead, I realized that I wasn’t even sure what the things to be
INTO THE CLEAR BLUE

figured out were.

Being lost at the end of college isn’t any less a cliché than being lost as you enter it, but it’s scarier. Last fall, the high school adviser who ran the speech competition died before I’d known he’d retired. I didn’t feel old enough to call him anything but “Mister.” Around the same time, adulthood stopped feeling like something I was waiting to grow into, and became instead something I’d entered carelessly, without realizing it.

I think there’s a fear, especially among twenty year olds who have been lucky: the fear of a small life. It’s there even as we realize that our parents’ lives are good ones, so good that they might actually be unattainable for us, not the baseline we’d always taken them to be.

My parents raised me in a town of seven thousand that I’ve always joked had more cows than people. It also had one of the best school systems in the state. They’ve never liked to talk about money, but when I was young enough to ask them if we were rich, they’d tell me we were very lucky. They’ve aged into that luck gracefully, in a way I think aligns with their ideals. A parish minister for more than twenty years, my mom once sparred on air with Bill O’Reilly over clerical opposition to prisoner torture. My father has spent thirty years fighting toward campaign finance reform. Forty years ago at Stanford, they were chaining themselves to doors in protest. A couple years back they went down to New York to spend a day at Occupy, and to try a new restaurant my dad had heard about in Greenwich Village. I don’t know if it’s just because they were my parents that I decided their lives were small, but some part of me always assumed that mine would be just as good, but different. Bigger.

Spring of last year, I sat across a table from a woman who had just rejected me for an internship. She said, “It just doesn’t seem like you’ve ever made anything for yourself.” That’s the exact quote. It’s the kind of total indictment of your life so far that’s hard to shake.

This is one of the big differences between Larry and I, one of only two that matter. With no head start or special skills, he made a flying machine for himself. To me, that broke Larry out of the small life.
I don’t have a working definition for what makes a life big, but in looking for a path toward one, I think I’ve come up with some pre-requisites. Chief among these is that the life be built for oneself, toward something that lives apart from external shoulds. Call it the brothers in a bicycle shop model: Orville and Wilbur constructing a plane among the strewn parts of old-fashioned fixed gears. Amid and out of the ordinary, by the same materials and methods, they built something unbelievable. And so there are two parts: the dream, and the lasting drive to pursue it.

In the spring of 2002, I came in second for John Lyman Elementary School’s Jonathan Howe Reading Award. As a high school senior in 2011, I was deferred and then denied from Columbia University. Those are the only two times I can remember having a dream I got close to. When I told Julia, the would-have-been-rope-holder, that I was writing about flying, she texted back, “I REMEMBER! You also had grand ideas for a pudding-in-ice cream creation that was going to make you millions.”

I’d forgotten that—shaking her awake in the middle of a sleepover: “I just had the most brilliant idea.” I had also planned a cooking blog for us, and a national political movement, (LYON—Liberal Youth for Our Nation) that never made it past a dozen chalk signatures on the walls of my basement. Getting that text, I had the sudden uncomfortable thought that my dreams of flight might be more a fiction than I’d realized, one more brilliant idea I’d woken Julia up for.

As a student at the University of Chicago, I spend a lot of time studying things that will never directly correlate to a paycheck. The rest of my days are spent at one of two jobs, as a barista in the Divinity School’s coffee shop, and as an editor for the South Side Weekly, an independent paper with a lot of energy and an ongoing identity crisis. The first pays, the second doesn’t. Both are located in basements and routinely feel more urgent than classes. I live with three of my favorite people, two of whom are the right size to share clothes with. The apartment only has one bathroom, but it’s good for parties, and when we have them it’s full by midnight. I have a big family whose love I have never doubted. This is all a messy way of saying that even
when it’s winter in Chicago, I feel lucky.

And yet. At least a couple of times a term I come home from a long-but-good day and steal a glass of milk from my roommate and stand in the kitchen thinking, “Is this all there is?” Because it is a good life, but it feels like a small one. And I wonder, if I’d picked it out and strived toward it, instead of falling into it the way it feels I have, would it feel bigger? Or would it only look big from afar, and shrink once I’d gotten there.

Unreached, a dream doesn’t fit into the panorama view of life-as-is. The dream stands in contrast to the Com-Ed bills, and foil-wrapped sandwiches, and snooze-button parts of daily life. And in that contrast is the steady assurance that this isn’t all there is.

That’s why forty-five balloons and a lawn-chair is as potent a dream as walking on the moon, or moving to the city, or the house you’re going to build your folks when you make it. And it’s also why they’re all equally vulnerable. This is the dirty secret of dreaming: what happens after. I’m not sure there’s a dream, however great, that isn’t emptied as it’s fulfilled. Once a dream is converted into an accomplishment, it becomes part of the daily panorama. And that question of whether there’s more is back. You get used to the view from the new house, or of the city block. And even a moon rock, tucked onto the shelf next to the cereal boxes and the bills, must blend in eventually.

Larry, having flown, would be more qualified to speak on this, the blending in. But the second
HANNAH NYHART

important difference between Larry and I is that he is dead, and I am alive.

Larry’s gravestone is at Forest Hill Memorial Park, twenty-two miles from his crash site. It reads:

LARRY WALTERS

APR 19, 1949 – OCT 6, 1993

LAWN CHAIR PILOT

“BELOVED”

His other nickname was “Lawnchair Larry.” In his bio, Google calls the Lawn Chair an airship. Larry called it “Inspiration 1.” While I get that “Airship Larry” isn’t as alliterative, “Lawnchair” seems like an unfair nickname for a guy who got himself to sixteen thousand feet. He had tethers, and a parachute, and thirty-five gallon jugs for ballast. But still, the chair is part of what matters. Larry couldn’t have flown a plane, his eyesight was too bad, but if he had, no one would have remembered. It was the sheer improbability of it, of him.

Maybe it’s the young and stupid part of me that thinks it’s the recklessness of Larry’s lawnchair that matters, that is “big.” In ten years, or fifty, maybe I will realize that the “Beloved” on Larry’s epitaph is more important than his nickname. But in a way, that is just as scary. I think that’s why I went back to this idea of flying as college loomed. Moving on from high school felt like the next step toward an inescapable resignation to a life as good as it was small, and that’s a resignation I’m not ready for.

On landing, Larry told the Los Angeles Times, “I had this dream for 20 years, and if I hadn’t done it, I would have ended up in the funny farm.” There is an urgency there that I, with all of my luck, can’t seem to muster. There is still some part of me ready to grab balloons and a chair and go charging off into the clear blue sky. But I don’t, and I think that I’m stayed by something more than the weight of adulthood and the wisdom I thought was supposed to come with it.
At twenty-one, I’m usually sure everything will be okay. I forget my bike helmet most days. I walk home alone in the dark. But I’m scared that I won’t find another dream, or that it will be the wrong one, or that once it’s done, I won’t be able to find another. I wonder if the fulfillment of a dream is always followed by a fall, not an Icarian plunge, but a slow descent back into a life that’s no bigger than the one you left.

Right after his flight, Larry gave Inspiration I to a neighbor kid, and multiple sources say he regretted it. The Smithsonian asked him for the chair, but I wonder if he wished for it back even before that. He hadn’t taken any pictures; he told reporters he was too startled by the view. Maybe, years later, he wanted proof.
T H I S
issue is composed
in Quadraat, a typeface
designed in 1992 by Fred Smeijers,
and printed on thrice-recycled, acid-
free paper.

Find us on Facebook.
Paul Dillon  hashes out a distinction in humor

Angela Qian  hunts for a meaning of hunger

Matthew Schweitzer  hears resilience amid horrors

Hannah Nyhart  hovers to new heights