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Mary Cappello

Heir to Ambiguity

Why shouldn't we this morning in the pause between tea, toast, egg and a shared banana, play a word game. My mother begins her day with a heady application of herself to the "cryptogram." No morning bench press or slow padding of slippered feet beneath drooping eyes over a coffee pot for her. Word games are her morning constitutional, which may have to do with her being a poet or may just be a means to a peristaltic end. It reminds me of her deftness at all word worlds—crosswords, Scrabble, the early A's she earned in Latin; it strikes me as a kind of callisthenic, but more than that: an expertise. There's something beautiful about this timed quiet that should be accompanied by a line of saliva strung from an eraser or at least the absent-minded twirling of a lock of hair, the ecstatic time out of mind of sucking on a lolly with our eyes rolled back. We are engaging ourselves, and we are, in competition—myself, my mother and my lover—to beat each other and beat the clock. Our aim? To discover as many words of at least four letters lurking inside the word: "forthwith." Jean and my mother achieve a close tie, while I straggle, I stagger. Practice yields technique, but I conclude what's more important is the one word I have found within the word that neither of them has found. I feel then an immediate if thin glory, the presage of a blue ribbon into the chest of the owner of a fine calf, his boots ankle deep in manure, certified.

What's weird or scary—it depends on how you read it—is how, in the hours of my day thereafter, my indulgence of the word game changes my relation to the world, affecting the way I read. You might say it's the effect of my need to win, or a wary and existentially imbued obsessional trait, but I think it's more fodder for my unseemly susceptibility. I'm an easy convert, which may mean I am lacking in identity altogether and flit fragilely through life a dusty-winged butterfly, impressionable as paper. The sign clipped to the taxi seat reads, "passengers must exit curbside," but I see, "passengers must exist; curbs die." Following a frenzied round of purchases in a nearby consignment clothing store, I actually mistake the "L" that stands for "Lobby" on the elevator grid for "Large." Which is not my size. My size

is small. I wonder if these mild misapprehensions are the same kind of reworking of what's "there" as when I want to see what happens if the recipe reads "dredge in flower" instead of "dredge in flour." I write in an e-mail to a friend the sentence: "it appears that another one of my teach wants out" when I'd meant to say, "teeth." As a teacher, I translate, I must want to be extracted from the semester, or maybe a little teacher in me, like a mini-me, thimble-sized school marm wants to scurry out (I picture her exiting via my mouth), she exi(s)ts panting, then throws her four eyes to the wind, and rips off her ascot to expose a throbbing jugular.

To be heir to ambiguity could mean that I'm susceptible to mis-reading, or that a cock-eyed way of reading is my inheritance. Give me a language, a template, a way; expose me to a word-game, and I'm there: acted upon, inculcated, possessed, converted. Or...I've developed, through practice, an aptitude, a highly cultivated skill, a curse, a bliss.

What's the difference between reading askew and x-ray vision? Between reading between-the-lines and reading into? You can treat words like placeholders, or risk a relationship to words that acknowledges movement (neither change or progress) as the irrefutable ground of all things animate. What's the difference between being read to and being read? What will you choose, like a blanket with the right edging and twill, for me, to feed me? Like a superhero, can I deflect interpretation, attention, away from me? Is meaning in me, awaiting expression (parapractical), or something far far afield (metaleptical), for which I must quest: "I" only exists then for the search; object ousts subject. What's the difference between a reading a-tilt or awhirl, and a reading beyond, or around: the avoiding eye, the averting reader is she who cannot afford to see what is in front of her. What's the difference.

Parapraxis is not the same as metalepsis. Write these words onto a blackboard. Or not.

Beautiful words, these, in my mind, they form a daisy chain alongside the words prosthetic, gyroscope, salivation, et ux, and moot. This is what, whether I know what they mean or not, they produce and arrange for me; who knows what runic bands they pronounce for you. If I try for a more reasonable, less private lexical kinship for these terms, I come up with apoplexy, epilepsy, pleurisy, and dementia praecox. I find myself seated alongside round-faced round-monocled gentlemen in black and white; clad in wool vests, they are just visible behind the screen of a smol-

dering cigar, determining in a language mysterious and scientifically exact, a diagnosis. This is where the sound of these words—metalepsis, parapraxis—places me if I press them—hard—but they refer to anything but certified conditions, bounded by governing rules. They're techniques, creative interruptions, slippery processes of surprise.

Definitions of *metalepsis* are so maddeningly opaque that this word might yield more clarity if, instead of defining it, we searched for the other words lurking within it, or if we conjured the phrases a glance at its letters suggests. *Metalepsis*: Insistent tabletops mate. This is one way of reading, is it not? *Lame* atlases lisp, past aims, smelts lapse, ottomans sail, systems fail, eep. There are a number of tantalizing implications of the word, even if we fail entirely to understand its definitions, and they include: the degrees to which we can tolerate sense being interrupted (literally, "*metalepsis*" means to alter the sense); the paces a use of words requires us to travel (in *metalepsis*, the word and its referent are far afield, but if thought through with enough care, a relationship can be found); the fact that interpretation relies on proximity and distance, nearness and closeness (but to what we might ask)?

A frequently invoked example of *metalepsis* is Medea's cursing a mountain rather than Jason himself for her distress—the mountain, you see, is the true cause because it produced the tree that was used to make the mast of the boat that brought Jason to Medea that made their first meeting possible. Other definitions of *metalepsis* suggest a use of language that posits a farfetched effect as a feature of a cause. What I like about *metalepsis* is, again, one of its implications: that reading might entail removal and distance—casting off never to reel in—rather than assertion, presence, and nearness. *Metalepsis* relies on substitution (which would seem to imply a deposit, right in front of you), but to substitute is to re-place.

Metalepsis occurs when a way of reading in one locale finds its way into another locale. A shift of habitation is intended, and a substitution clarifies, amplifies, and fortifies an act as in "he has a lead foot," where lead stands in for heavy, and the whole stands in for a vast chain of signification implying a tendency to drive fast, to take out his aggression behind the wheel. "He has a hollow leg" is a wildly fanciful way of saying that he's a heavy drinker and it requires several fillings-in-of the blanks to arrive at the original referent. *Metalepsis* isn't usually a form of euphemism, but a way of saying without saying; of saying again; of lending a condition a

lasting resonance by depositing it in the realm of imaginative re-making, and myth.

There must be a degree of nonsense in every act of making sense, just as one is moved in the course of any day, of any sentence, to lend a situation or a word more clout than it deserves. To insist on meaning more than what is being said, not less.

Parapraxis, or a so-called slip of the tongue, entails substitutions, too, but unintended ones. What one can't otherwise say, what one is required to forget emerges in *parapraxis*. Or maybe what one wishes to draw attention to, in which case *parapraxis* is a mechanism of diversion, of throwing off course, of truth-telling, of demonstrating where desire, mentation, really is—the self tells the lips to say one thing and they say another.

Parapraxes are mis-sayings capable of a vast affective range from rage to humor. The beauty of a *parapraxis* is that it works by way of affinity (teeth, teach) and disruption or incoherence all at once. "It's anybody's guess what's going to happen in the race trial," I hear the newscaster say when he meant to say "rape trial." "Rape" and "race" are never far afield in the American unconscious—*parapraxis* admits, and exposes, and undoes; it rearranges, re-tells; it digs and finds words within words within worlds.

Would a radio announcer reading "Malcolm X" as "Malcolm the Tenth" (my jaw dropped to hear it) be an example of *parapraxis*; an unconscious conferral of hereditary honor; a nod in the direction of something vaguely Muslim; or simply a sign of unspeakable ignorance? Maybe *parapraxis* shows up those areas of life and of language about which we remain willfully stupid—it says, you know this but pretend not to. But *parapraxis* is also necessarily blind, it relies on a blind spot; it's maybe an effect of laziness and want but it also sees what isn't there, what's there but unannounced: it looks awry.

There's a "Guacamolan" bakery across from the new mill complex, I heard myself saying, and laughed, because I had meant to say "Guatemalan," and in slipping thus exposed just how much I don't know, how gaping is the gaff between the gentrified new apartment building (a worsted ware factory transformed into condominiums) and the neighborhood where the highest number of people living in poverty in Providence reside. Do "they" even make guacamole in Guatemala? Matching phonemes have the power to reduce a continent of differences to glop. Our grasp

of the world is as flimsy as mis-matched homonyms. Song sounds. Erasures. Bird chirps. Collapse...

Inscrutability jabbered like a magpie no a nightingale a hummingbird a mocking bird imitating us no a cuckoo a cardinal recognizable in its electric dashes no this bird, incomprehension, was so beautifully true to itself and certain that I could not stop listening to it even though it began to set me on edge even though I first received it as a gift of an unexpected new voice, one meant to distract me from my solitude. It seemed to sing a song that it had learned, whose lyrics we were meant to provide by our movement. Do you integrate the birdsong into your day, or keep at a distance the fact of flying things? Does the song, inscrutable, intersperse you, parse you, punctuate you to dot knees, mark thigh, bend at belly, crease elbow, to turn your head to one side? Later in the day, the bird out of earshot, you find yourself singing its song.

I sneezed at a public lecture, not a phlegmy sneeze nor a high-pitched, suppressed Little Miss Muffet swallowed her tuffet sneeze, but a minorly disheveling brouhaha into my hand. Brouhaha is my nine year old niece Justine's favorite word. In French. Today my niece had the idea to put a makeshift pot of gold into the garden in order to attract a Leprechaun. The stranger seated next to me, moved by my sneeze in ways I cannot discern, ever so lightly touched my arm with her fingertips. The waitress at a diner called "Classic Café" explains, one hand heavy with ceramic mugs, the other raised, pointing its fingers to her necklace, that she collects clowns, carousels, and crucifixes. The man who was a member of the Evangelical church went on a "killing rampage" and then killed himself. Afterwards, people told tales of how he grew and shared vegetables from his garden, and captured squirrels in safe traps so he could return them to life unharmed.

What is really inexplicable is what yokes together the diverse forms of unconscious invention that Freud writes about in the book where he treats of parapraxes (what I've called the parapractical). In *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, he ranges his interpretive eye and ear across mis-sayings, misreadings, misplacements, and accidents; across "blunders truly unfortunate," "casual mishaps," "semi-intentional annihilations," from the act of grasping the wrong thing (the thing other than what one thought one was after), to breaking things, and the awkwardness that reveals unconscious agility, to the slip of a pen to produce an unintentional word.

Perhaps the conceptual glue in this seemingly disparate text is the fact that modes of invention are judged, wrongly, as errors, and that accidents don't befall us devoid of our own desires, but in some sense are always waiting to happen if we let them. Accidents can also be happy.

As a child, I once intentionally took a few swigs of bubblebath because of my misapprehension of the bubblebath's name, but also because I was thirsty. The bubbles were my brothers', they were stored in a bottle shaped like a sailor whose head you screwed off to access the soap. The soap was called "Soakie" but I called it "Sody," a kiddy version of soda pop. The tube that was inserted into my mouth in the hospital emergency room probably was slender, no wider than a drinking straw, probably even thinner, but I perceived the tube to be as wide as a vacuum cleaner hose; in fact, looking out from inside the space of my four year old frame held in place by fat man hands, the room itself was nothing but that tube, magnified. It was quite a price to pay for misreading (well, I couldn't yet read), for mis-sounding, mis-hearing, mis-pronouncing, i.e., desiring. I remembered the tube as black, but probably it was colored more like an earthworm soaked in beer, amber (my father used the method to capture plant-eating snails); the black hose of my childhood was the one attached to the faucet in the basement that my mother used, lovingly, to wash my hair (but didn't every child fear being sucked down into the drain?). Following the stomach-pumping episode, I was confused about whether only I or only everyone else wore grotesquely over-sized clown shoes. No, I felt it rightly—I was certain I wore red Mary Janes, tight-fitting, and secure.

As a child, I was told I had a "soul," and so I pictured it: in my mind's eye, my soul was a white banner, like a scroll, that unfurled diagonally across my torso, from heart to hip. My sins appeared on my soul as marks etched on a reverse blackboard—black on white, and they were numerically displayed from left to right as so many sticks—that crude technique by which four sticks make a row, and the fifth crossed through the previous four makes a bundle. Obviously my unconscious hadn't placed a ban on invention.

As an adult, I keep an eye, an ear out for felicitous uses of language as in, "what could bring more joy than watching the plants start," or "I can't recall a more vivid winter." I like that my great aunt used to say, "It's in the freeze," rather than "it's in the freezer"; dropping the "r" suggested an intimacy with the freezer, thus

making that which is cold, warm. I like the sound, the idea that one's head could "swim" but don't relish the fact of it. If one's head swam, where would that put the rest of one? I was fascinated by the report, given my own recent cultivation of morning glories, that teenagers were ingesting their seeds for their hallucinatory qualities. Occasionally, I project a great deal of fantasy onto an image, for example the growling lion insignia for MGM studios makes me temporarily consider life as a lion tamer: as though it could serve as an answer to all of my problems, "That's the ticket!"

A woman at the funeral of my father-in-law approached me with the emphatic memory of the book on corn I had written and which she had read. She remembered the book in great detail—oh, it had everything to do with corn, a kind of compendium, and history, and lore of corn all rolled into one. I had never written a book on corn, I explained, though I did write a book that referenced a flower in its title, had she meant that? But no, the book she thought I had written was the corny one. When she really refused to believe that I hadn't written the book she'd read, I accepted the compliment (she appeared to have enjoyed the book), and asked her if she'd ever read other of my work, for example, a play called *Hamlet*. When I wept at this same funeral, my niece, a little scared as she observed me, fingered my velveteen scarf. A game of Scrabble can be too grandly a tedious challenge for a little girl, and so at a certain point in our play together in the afterhours of the ritual, I let my niece make up words and count them as legitimate so long as she offered a definition. "Quannex," she proposes. "Definition: a puppet." Funny, I reflect, my definition for the word would be "a drug for treating depression; or, a mood-altering drug." "Denhamen," she proposes. "Definition: a hay man in a den." I agree, this seems the correct definition, but I suggest it be pronounced with a Scandinavian accent.

Would it be possible to make a text, to compose a scenario of words to resemble a landscape by Egon Schiele? The one centered on a blue clock though how we know it is a clock is a question given that it has no hands and really is just a handless blue orb against green bands and buildings colored charcoal, colored limestone angled into mountains figured as part of the same plane. Or to mimic his painting of a tree dwarfed by fallen flowers in the foreground—are they this tree's or some other's? In the distance, water.

My niece tells tales of surprise; I, too, like an element of surprise. How,

while thinking of nothing, idly sitting on the floor of her still uncleaned room, and mindlessly patting her hands across the dust on the floor, she found, she says, "a diamond." A gemstone I suppose fallen from a doll's dress, a fleck of sand from the beach, a rhinestone displaced from a jewelry box, a sharp crumb of sugar candy.

How is it that some people carry a meal in their clothes for days after, and more than that, generational memory. Now the waitress in the diner following Easter Sunday smells, I'd swear, of bracciole and Easter lamb, of sauce and fat and sweets, and her voice, too, is raspy like the aunt's who dropped the "r" in freezer. Every time she comes to the table, she delivers and takes back a memory. If I were to attend my own father's funeral, I'd have to return to the Catholic church. And then you'd have to "gesticulate," my friend Karen surmises with a question. "Genuflect," I say, we laugh, that beguiling word, "genuflect." Teflon ingénue. Jet-setting urges. Tag team calculus. Nails in knees. Fluctuate underground. On bended knee.

If you're not careful, you could come to believe in a conspiracy of objects, or of meaning. As for example when the spell check wants to change the Italian word for whore, "puttanesca," to "pureness." Or when you find yourself wondering if the squirrels in their mad plundering of your garden are in search not of sustenance but of meaning. It only takes one striking object to change the landscape, entirely: introduce an azalea bush burning pink, solitary, on a lakeside lawn as seen through a train window and the sky reverts to slate, the lake funnels into nothing but its capacity to reflect or protect the bush, and the train slopes now like the plane that the bush, shocking, draws us down, pulling us up. Or from a park bench how all the scenes of children's erratic energy and adult hands clasped behind backs while walking, all the meditators and strollers, the daily grind power walkers en route, the elderly survivors are broken by a path that a woman without an ounce of flesh on her bones cuts. A little crippled seeming and effortful, the anorexic thus proves that it is possible to walk in a body entirely devoid of muscle. Would we call this a miracle or a feat? Where does she place you, your fears of disembodiment, your terrors of immobility?

Let us recall the interruption into an already vexing numerical sign system (learning to script the number two for example—do you opt for a loop or a solid base? And why did some people introduce a crossbar into the stem of the number

seven?): let us recall the interruption into an already vexing numerical sign system of “Roman numerals” so-called (why not, “Roman numbers”?): suddenly letters were offered as symbols for numbers (but only sometimes). In other contexts, an “X” could stand for felled bowling pins. X. Or pornographic movies. X. For a mathematical operation, a crucifixion, the mark of a signatory who hadn’t learned to write, a bullseye, a target, a forbidden zone, poison. X. A railroad crossing. X. Why could I never, no matter how often I saw the sign, make the transition from “ped ex-ing” to “pedestrian crossing”? A blank, a strikeover, xxxx, a kiss (before or after a hug), xoxoxo. A mistake. Malcolm X wanted to reject a slave patronymic. He wanted to be misread.

The day I began to draw a line across the horizon of the number seven was the same day that I came of age. Impossible to count back towards. Impossible, really, to mark as though on a calendar, but possible to recall the decision, as if suddenly to bring a first cigarette to your mouth, an intersecting line to your body, on your own, you shall mark the world this way, to have believed in the importance of proffering a sign, even a smoke signal, the day on which I changed the way I wrote my sevens was the same on which I introduced a line across the body of the zagging “z.” Numbers read, written, or charted often have nothing to do with calculation: take, for instance, the place of counting in the game of hide and seek, the different relation to fervor, longing, or loss of the counter (she who stands shouting, eyes shut, facing a tree) or the person made to listen to the counting (she who is given the power to hide but who is chased by numbers even before the hunt begins). She who counts faces the fact of losing the other in the space between each succeeding number and the time granted to make possible more distance, more ingeniousness in hiding, more undermining cunning. One minute you are housed, and the next minute, adrift upon a universe of groping: you’re thrown back on your own resources and new discoveries of dispositions you could not imagine your friends to own (their hiding places). So often in our neighborhood, hide and seek was a game that never yielded revelation, exposure, the reversal then of roles (you seek while I hide now). The hiders hid the whole day and everyone agreed to this without admitting it from the start: hide and seek was an excuse NOT to play. Not to play together. To lose each other to alone-time for a spell. A game that cast a spell. You feel the need to hiccough or to fall asleep, but you can’t have both or either.

I had never been stopped so firmly in the tracks of my own utterance as the day on which I produced a double parapraxis. Was it a sign of middle age, an early warning of Alzheimer’s disease, of spirit possession, or of profound disconnection, but if disconnection, where do we begin to identify the parts or the laws that govern their relationships after all? I had meant to say, driving south, that we should “mail the letters in Providence” (which was North), but the sentence that emerged was, “we should plant them upstairs.” Clearly there isn’t enough information here, even for the most intimate interlocutor, to understand the intended meaning of the sentence, even if she knew that I was currently fanatically preoccupied with starting plants indoors from seed. And where are intention’s final frontiers to be drawn? At the ‘true’ ground of the sentence’s most practical meaning— where the letters should be mailed—, or in the thorny underbrush (you can hear the frogs and crickets) of what we are trying to say and can never know, something quite apart from letters or plants but reliant upon them as messengers. Double parapraxes unlike single parapraxis seems to give way to utter incoherence, or perhaps it is just more volubly inventive. And does it matter if you heard yourself make the slip or not? If intention and words never met, what then. What then?

Either I am remaking the world or it is remaking me. I don’t claim to be able to tell the difference. If given the choice today, to act on the world or to act on yourself, which would you prefer? In which direction do you usually turn? Where parapraxis is concerned, I don’t know if the slip is unconscious or only a pretense of unconsciousness. Really, in misreading, mis-saying, mishearing, I’m actively trying by (unacknowledged) force of will to change the conditions of my existence.

It gets kind of hairy
as we grow older,
I guess we should all
be a little more bolder,
So up with the drink
down the hatch,
Hey, Buddy, got a match?

My great uncle, Joseph Bottino, had written this verse on a Christmas card some-

time in the 1960s, but I couldn't have told that the text would form a kind of center for me to one particular weekly meeting with my writing partner, Karen. Nor do I want to admit—but why not—how its weird sensibility (funny, askew) has in some sense formed my own style not just of writing but of being in the world.

That Wednesday Karen came to get me in the PT Cruiser, her husband Russell's car, rather than the VW Bug, her car. Thus there were bobbing-head figures from the Simpson's on the dashboard rather than a sticker of a yellow-billed duck sitting in a toilet, wearing a party hat, a sticker applied to the dash by Karen's eleven year old daughter, Caeli, the stickers a gift from me because, well, because Caeli collects stickers and I couldn't be held responsible for their content. There was no snow on this day as there had been on so many other days as we sloshed our way to the Classic Café, no restaurant workmen, thank god, creating a freezing draft while they installed a window but there was a hair, again, in my homefries and the sound of our laughter overloud as though we were always overstaying an invitation to this restaurant leaving the workers to wonder if we were employed or not and what we could have to talk to each other about for so long—sometimes several hours—and what we thought we were doing: this was an eating establishment not a hangout, an eatery not a place to incite fiery intellection and creative desire—the decision to meet once a week to discuss our writing (though to gossip or to bitch were never out of the question either). There was laughter on this occasion but no glasses overturned as on the morning in which, with a sweep of my arm, mid-story, I leveled an entire glass of water, its ice careening like glaciers over white napkins now sopping and the water speeding over the edges of our table like a falls. There was no harm done, but the waitress didn't laugh, would you? And what would Freud have said about the mishap? No snow, laughter, the usual hair, and the usual egg sandwich which I failed to notice as a usual occurrence. All these weeks of meeting, and I had never noticed that Karen had ordered the egg sandwich on numerous occasions until I considered ordering one myself. Do people tend to notice only what they themselves order in restaurants? It seemed to me a lapse, a blindness, not within my control. I do know that Karen likes her eggs benedict "runny," (she always smiles with her nose scrunched when she asks for the eggs to be "runny") whereas I have only once in my life ordered eggs benedict. We discussed Karen's writing for which I came to coin the phrases physic psychic and psychic physic for

the ways she had found to represent the physics of an inner life, not just the physical manifestation of a feeling, and in this move back and forth between her characters' body-in-mind and mind-in-body how she had conjured both a painting and a music. Meanwhile, Karen was helping me to release myself from a too ready move toward intellection in the writing—instead of enjoying my uncle's ditties, I was rushing toward an idea, a judgment: I'd called his writing "absurd," and Karen was put off by this word as much as by my need to transmute the x-mas greeting into an idea. An ide. A die. An aid. If a text doesn't follow a linear trajectory, my students have one way of describing it: "it jumps around," they say, rather than discerning the pattern that they aren't used to and therefore cannot recognize. And what of conversations forced to stay on course? And therefore never arriving. One must be allowed to careen. Getting into the car, en route, to the Classic, I don't know what compelled me blithely to use the word "orphan" and to think out loud about it given that Karen was adopted and had more of a right to decide if there was anything humorous to be found lurking in the word "orphan" or not than I. Really I wanted to talk about Karen's decision to take a new dog into her domicile and whether this was really a good decision because, well, the dog was ugly, barrel-chested, freckled, and a little lame, and the dog was out of control even though an unattractive creature. (I mean you'd think with its looks it would want to placate rather than drive the Other further away). It went for people's arms rather than for a dog biscuit, it was huge, the bounding sort, and it had a destructive tail—a long upward pointing white whip that would, I could picture it, send the numerous tchatzkahs in Karen's house careening, it would reduce meaning and substance to rubble. Besides which, Karen already had four cats, one recently deceased and replaced, and three teenage children. In a sense, Karen would be adopting this dog, whose name was uncannily just a tad too close to Caeli, (its name was "Kayla,") but that's an overdertermination I can only arrive at through writing. It wasn't nascent, it wasn't a part of that morning's conversation, its signifiers, its desires, its out-of-the-realm-of-intention's-aims. Karen was doing a favor for a friend who could no longer take care of the dog herself but who had loved it so, like a lover, like a child. She was taking the dog into her house, giving her own children another creature to love because Karen's home could accommodate more, always, whereas I saw the decision to take in the dog as a blunder, but the way I put it, (and Karen did love this

dog, but certainly neither like a lover nor a child), was that I would no longer be able to visit her at her house because, of course, I was afraid of dogs, and especially bounding ones with whip-like tails who couldn't tell the difference between the inanimate arm of a chair, a stuffed pillow's gnawable surface, and human flesh. "Bring on the chaos," I imagined Karen saying, whereas I was one for order, a fender-off of incomprehension, mayhem, and what Karen called "swirl." Any such easy opposition, we have learned, can easily be reversed: couldn't it be said that by neatening my surroundings, I was making room for chaos, and by accumulating, Karen was keeping it at bay? Hmmm. I can't remember what took us to "orphans" and we weren't even at the diner yet which was three minutes away, but I found myself wondering out loud if my nephew felt more or less abandoned by his mother than my niece because when she left them and my brother—simply left one day not to return until eight years hence—my nephew was not yet two, while my niece was four, and had therefore language, and a history, and a bond. "I know why mommies leave their little girls," my niece at four had said, not to me exactly, though I was sitting with her, but to the miniature furniture in the doll's house we were playing with, "because their little girl was bad, that's why." "No, that's not why," I replied. "They leave them because...because." We don't know the cause, we only know the effect. And so I asked Karen if her adopted father, a minister, had ever referred to her and her brother as "orphans," such a strange word this, the bereftitude of it, and connotation of war and devastation, of trash bins and the Great Depression, and abjection so severe you can't really take the word seriously. "No, he didn't," Karen looked at me, and wondered where I was headed with this, "though he did occasionally threaten, when he was mad, to send us back to a home." "So Brendan" (Karen's eldest child), "has quit his job at Target after two days," she reports. Because an elderly man fell and hit his head on the shelving and there was blood everywhere and Brendan just couldn't take it. We were inside the restaurant now, but when we greeted each other, purple marshmallow peeps were exchanged and gourmet coffee beans and a little blank book from a trip to Philadelphia, and a shoe polish cloth from a hotel in the city because I like to pretend a grandmotherly relation to Caeli; I'm a bestower of odd souvenirs. "Does Caeli ever polish her shoes I ask?", and a cavalcade of memories is unleashed following the tale of the job one takes before one knows who one is or could or wants to be. Brendan's present opens a floodgate

in me and before I know it I am narrating tales of the bank as though I were there again instantly with all its characters, and what kept me there in my late teens, and how I was able to stay and what it taught me because I could see that it wasn't the end of everything, my destiny. Narrative does this, makes a past otherwise remote pourable into a present body, flooding me; how this can help Brendan, I do not know. Maybe I could share the details with him of my first job as hospital cleaning lady where I encountered, just a teenager, the smell of illness and death and couldn't tell which was worse, where I got to experience being addressed as implicitly unschooled, unknowing—could the doctors believe I was a reader, that I was a poet, daily interpreting their wards, meeting their patients, cleaning remnants? "The dog will be ok with the cats," Karen explains, "they'll adjust," and she describes the new kitten she has picked up at the SPCA, and how she may name it after the beloved cat of her childhood who had two differently colored eyes, "Beatrice." That would make her a changeling, I say, I'm pretty sure changelings are creatures with two differently colored eyes because I knew a woman once who had one blue and one green eye and she said she was a changeling. But neither of us knows what a changeling is though I presume it is magical and has something to do with belonging to two sets of parents at once. When I look it up later, it turns out not to have the happy significance I had imagined at all—it's some kind of monster that is put in place of a couple's "real" baby, put there by dwarves.

I'm afraid my use of words today is exasperating, irritating, as though I am eager to produce ire, or rancor where I am not.

It gets kind of hairy
as we grow older,
I guess we should all
be a little more bolder,
So up with the drink,
down the hatch,
Hey, Buddy, got a match?

I drew the verse out of my purse to show Karen; following a recent family gather-

ing, I had scrawled it into a tiny, two-inch high notebook with the thought that I could work with Uncle Joe's writing, or at least contemplate its weird turns and unexpected pleasures. My brother, Anthony, had remembered the verse—verbatim (a brother who finds difficulty in letting life lead him at all to joy but who was able to laugh at the memory of the poem, indeed, who has the family's longest memory).

I think maybe I want to write about absurdity, I tell Karen, this absurd use of language I think I have been bequeathed. And I remind her of the collection of homespun epitaphs my father, facing the grave, has recently sent me that include: "On Second Thought"; "Absolutely"; "It's Vogue"; "Ho Hum"; "Ho, Ho, Ho, Ho, Ho"; "Hoe, Hoe, Hoe"; "Water the Flowers, Dim the Lights, and Tip Your Hat"; "A Contemplative Plenipotentiary"; "Post No Bills." The letter that accompanies the enclosure is headed by two hand-hewn stick figures braced by what appear to be quotation marks but that could also be "vibration" marks since they seem to be dancing. The hula.

This is zany stuff, I think, but when I look up the word "zany," I discover it can also be used as a noun. A zany is a stock figure in comedies who incites the audience's laughter by aping the principal characters. Another dictionary suggests that he "attempts feebly" to mimic the acts of a clown. Yet another dictionary supplies a remote etymological source: that the word derives from a shortened pronunciation of the name, "Giovanni." Too bad my father's name is Joe not John.

I want to call these texts "absurd," but Karen asks me not to jump the gun on that. If anything, she invites, they're "quixotic." In absurd I find drudge, bud, abs, sub, sud, and bard. I find dross, brood, burst, bus, bud, and baud. Where quixotic has quit, xit, tic, toc, ux, coit, and stoic. Where quixotic implies a dreamy or foolish impracticality (though I'm sure it can suggest much more than this if one has recently, like Karen, read Don Quixote), absurd, definitionally, mostly incites negation: to be meaningless, illogical, inchoherent. Hearing George Bush employ the word "absurd" in response to Amnesty International's charges that the US government is responsible for human rights abuses at Guantanamo Bay makes me want to boycott the word forever. Presented with loss of life—at least 100 people have died at the base to date—it's as though Bush, regally bibbed, turned back to his capon with the word, "poppycock." "Absurd" has the power here to dismiss a reality, just as one word had caused the brouhaha in the first place, and that word, "Gulag"—

Amnesty International in its report compared Guantanamo Bay to a Stalinist Gulag. Now, rather than address the reality of torture, abuse, arbitrary arrest and confinement at Guantanamo Bay, the administration is distracting the American public by disputing the word. Though it could also be argued that the word, by making what to some appears to be a farfetched comparison, has finally brought attention to the abuses that have been carried out in defiance of international law for at least three years. I wonder what the prisoners there think either of the words "absurd" or "Gulag," their lives depending upon them.

The use of the word "absurd" is often accompanied by a turning on one's heel and the continuation of what one was doing—reading the newspaper, smoking a pipe, eating one's supper—and I don't mean to speak back to Uncle Joe's verses or my father's lines that way. I meant, I think, a private fondness for the way the word figures in "theater of the absurd"—existentially. Or etymologically, as "off." Or, a refusal to, rightly, mean.

All of this might seem like so much hairsplitting, but the place our conversation arrived, mine and Karen's, on that particular day was with the sharing of a similar feeling each of us was having—neither to be blamed on deceased cats or the dead of winter—beyond earshot or eyeshot of a cause, but significant for being coincidental, our mutual feeling that something was pressing on some part of our respective brains that if only it could be removed, we would find relief. It didn't produce a mutual eep or giggle or froth of enthusiasm that, yes, we each needed a trip to the lobotomist as if to the hairdresser to "make us feel better," and I cannot conclude that "feeling better" was the aim. What's interesting at all is how astonishingly similar our feeling, and the feeling, I'd imagine, not a common or typically sharable one, was just then...though the presence I wished to be released from was located at the back and base of my head, whereas Karen's was on the top of her head.

Would the truth out if we were granted the license to err? Would the pen or fork feel less heavy if given the opportunity to mishap?

Uncle Joe reserved his most surprising and inventive lines for Aunt Anna (mispronouncer of freezer) who was a great aunt on my mother's side of the family, while Uncle Joe was a great uncle on my father's side of the family. Each year at Christmas time, it gave my aunt no greater pleasure than to anticipate Uncle Joe's

seasonal quip, like receiving a love letter from a once-a-year suitor. The fact that they weren't related but came to take up a thread of messaging like this intrigues me.

Returning to his verse as perhaps its only serious reader, I have to say that "hairy" is such a great word to apply to the otherwise onerous process of aging. "Hairy" is a light way of saying not exactly "complex," but cross-purposed, cross-hatched, motivationally mixed, haywire. How much more indicative than "harder." As though life were a comedy that becomes more screwball, more madcap as we age. And then there is the reversal he invents, the wily conundrum, since it gets "hairy" precisely as we lose our hair. I love the way my uncle breaks grammatical rules in order to achieve a rhyme, and the truly scary and funny silence we're made to enter just before the poem reaches out, with a wisp of utter banality, of meaningful meaninglessness, to a stranger named "Buddy."

If my brother had remembered this verse, I was revisited through the years by another of Uncle Joe's signatures: "Stop the world, I want to get off...but where the hell can I go?" The line is collapsed in my memory with a record album cover that my mother owned with just this "stop the world" motif. A man in oversized overalls, a kind of clown suit, appears on the cover, much larger in scale than the earth itself, trying to walk off its surface, to one side, but a hand—the hand of God?—pulls him back (thus further exaggerating the oversized nature of his pants in relation to his body), or perhaps it's just the force of gravity that keeps him there. Uncle Joe doubles the already metaleptic nature of the sentence he inherits, or is it metaphoric? According to the first trope, the world is something it is not—a bus, a train, a vehicle one can enter or exit—and this is funny because of how, from a distance, it expresses a desire to escape the inescapable, but Uncle Joe's elaboration treats the trope as though it were possible, believable. It enters the sentence from elsewhere, it breaks the diegetic space; enter the clown, apingly.

Other of Uncle Joe's antics were somewhat more disconcerting, as when he leaned down close to my ear to tell me something during my maternal grandmother's viewing, a strangely happy affair, a manically party-like event (she had been an especially lively woman, and the mourners seemed either to be mimicking her exuberance by way of feeling their loss of her, or were simply in denial). Tears did not come until the next day, at the edge of the grave. So the atmosphere was thick with people dressed to the nines and talking loudly in spite of the presence of my

grandmother's mute body, her palpable inability to participate, the thereness of it, as though her death were being feted. Into this atmosphere, enter my Uncle; sidelining, he asks, whispering into my ear: "Does the elephant walk in the forest?" Later, my brother Anthony tells me, Uncle Joe had asked him the same thing. It's not a riddle. And my uncle will not supply an answer. Was he trying to say that grandmother Rose, ever the life of the party, was now the proverbial elephant in the room? Was the inscrutable question a sign of my uncle's insanity or of his clarity, of his jouissance or his discontent, but why does one have to choose? Why not both and all. (Somehow I'm not sure I can say the same about my father's "Ho Ho Ho's").

"How are you, little goyle," my uncle always said to me by way of greeting, as though little girls were "goyles" without the "gar." His kisses were sloppy, Uncle Joe's were, and I didn't appreciate this, but so was his gait, uncontrolled, lax where it should be animate, limp where it should be lifted, leaning to one side, ambling, imbalanced and weak: his right hand curled inward like a claw or drooped like a fairy's alongside his barrel chest. Uncle Joe had been disabled at birth, my mother explained, the effect of the midwife's mistake, fateful but not fatal. She pressed, evidently, on the soft spot on his head, incurring paralysis on one side of his body, and who knows what else in the way of damage. This is what I remember about Uncle Joe, and that he owned the largest, maybe the only dictionary in my father's family. Perched on a large podium, it was the centerpiece of his small apartment, towering alongside a stack of girly magazines.

Uncle Joe promised my mother—lover of words and of learning, poet and decipherer of meaning—his beloved dictionary and its furniture (I also recall a collection of thesauruses housed in a cabinet fronted by glass doors), but in the aftermath of my parents' divorce, he cut the gift out of his will. If Uncle Joe was the only family member interested in consulting, nay, in reading a dictionary, my mother, though a non-blood relative, could pass more readily as kin. Childless, partner-less, Uncle Joe was consigned in those days and by an overprotective family to a kind of solitude, to a place outside of desire's norms (reminding me of the cynicism, too, with which my father treats dreams, rainbows, pots of gold and other stock characters that make up the lexicon of human longing—what another literary friend of mine might call "a paltry oasis"). Uncle Joe bequeathed me memories of strange and funny, taut and tattered verse, but/and my mother didn't really need his

dictionary. To receive it, though, would have acknowledged the fact that a door to inscrutability and a trust in strange interpreters to read had opened in the family.

Parapraxis and metalepsis meet at a threshold of distraction. Meaning is never where we are, they say, whether we're bequeathed a tendency to flail or to stride boldly and upright, firmly to fill the boxes of the crossword with an exact account, a word suited to its definition on the board. You can rearrange the jumble, and undo the scramble, but signs still only hail from a distance. Why not let language skitter and screech. Why not rummage, absentmindedly, around inside a word as into an old toy box of forgotten pleasures. Or let a word spread like spilled ink across a page, accidentally.

We go on this way in words, not knowing how they will take us from day to day. The cryptogram as morning constitutional is about solving a puzzle, cracking a code, finding a letter to equal another letter to yield a hidden proverb or worldly wise cliché. Beginning the day this way may make us less likely to slip in the course of it, and thus temporarily releases the pressure in our heads—the pain of all we have mistaken, the effects on us of the mistakes of other people. Oh, but to invent! To look up words in the dictionary in order to mistake them, differently to stake them so as not to know just how they'll stray or grow.