

4-2014

A Love Story, a Tragedy, or Both

Hannah Boes

College of William and Mary

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wm.edu/honorstheses>

Part of the [Nonfiction Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Boes, Hannah, "A Love Story, a Tragedy, or Both" (2014). *Undergraduate Honors Theses*. Paper 65.
<https://scholarworks.wm.edu/honorstheses/65>

This Honors Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses, Dissertations, & Master Projects at W&M ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Undergraduate Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of W&M ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@wm.edu.

A LOVE STORY, A TRAGEDY, OR BOTH

HANNAH HAWKS BOES

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my deepest appreciation for Professor Chelsey Johnson, who has accepted every one of my drafts, risks, and insecurities with grace and brilliance. Without her vital writing creeds, this endeavor would have plateaued months ago.

I also recognize the other members of my committee: Professor Kara Thompson, Professor Nancy Gray, and Professor Jennifer Stevens. They have been such trusting and indispensable advocates of my undergraduate ventures.

This project owes a great deal to Jordan Sutlive, who gave many gracious hours to my drafts and also allowed me to share in the development of his stellar writing.

To my parents, I extend many thanks, not only for the beauty, heartbreak, flaws, and love that give my stories substance, but also for their unconditional encouragement. There is no failure I could incur that would diminish their pride and no triumph for which they allow me to give them credit.

Finally, to my loyal friends and to my loving partner, Douglas: thank you for believing in my writing even though I never allowed you to read a word of it.

For Douglas

CONTENTS

THE SPORT OF KINGS	4
FACE THE MUSIC	24
CROSSED WIRES	36
TRAPPED	51
CHARM CITY GETS REAL	59
TALKING SHOP	78
THE HOUSE THAT HAWKS BUILT	86

THE SPORT OF KINGS

“What would it take to really hurt you?” Chuck slouches back in his chair and crosses his arms. He pulls a dark leather wallet out of the back pocket of his khaki pants.

“I don’t know. Twenty bucks would annoy me.” I look up from my folded hands. “Two hundred would hurt.”

“I want you to take twenty dollars,” Chuck says, shaking his head when I start to protest, “and spend it however you like. You can take yourself out to dinner or buy a shirt. Or you can go bet it right now on a good looking horse.”

“Why?”

“Why would you write about lost love unless you’ve felt that pain? You can’t write about this sport until you place a bet, until you’ve watched your horse come around that final turn and you’ve felt the adrenaline.”

I pocket the money and Chuck smiles. He’s always trying to teach me lessons.

The Pimlico racetrack has an off-white structure that backs up to an expanse of asphalt and rows of closed white stalls, making it look like a large warehouse from my drive on Northern Parkway. An unremarkable sign tells me I’m in the right place: *Pimlico Home of the Preakness*. On one side of the windowless and gray exterior wall, a gold-painted effigy, stretching about twelve feet wide, portrays three muscular horses and riders, soaring and suspended in flight. From above, I could have seen the grassy oval of the infield, whose green is interrupted by patches of carved pathways, and the surrounding outline of a seven-furlong turf. The second oldest racetrack in the nation.

I am early to meet Ted Mudge, Vice President of the Maryland Jockey Club, so I wander around the clubhouse where all the betting takes place. It is a large, linoleum-floored

room almost identical to my neighborhood DMV. At one end, there are counters with tellers and, in the center, uncomfortable chairs bolted to the ground and staring towards a grid of televisions. The screens broadcast stats and odds, other flat track races in the area, and some daytime shows. Pimlico's dirt racetrack is just beyond some glass doors, but almost everyone is inside today. It is a little windy, maybe sixty degrees or so, and people look tired. Everyone is hunched over their programs and reading over records, jockeys, owners, trainers, odds, and percentages. Some have brought their own chicken-scratched notes on paper, receipts, any surface where they can plan. It reminds me of what my restaurant boss used to say to me: "Betting at the track can be a full time job."

Behind the glass doors, the stands are completely empty save for one man who is busy marking up a program. I sit down inches away from the track on which the thoroughbreds will pound in less than forty minutes. I have never been this close to a professional sporting event and have yet to spend a cent. I could take a fistful of the all-weather dirt turf if I wanted, smell the flowers on the other side of the track that spell out "Pimlico," or touch the thoroughbred stretching his legs with the help of his bug boy, or assistant jockey.

The fifty-something bald man next to me looks out over the track with serene satisfaction. We get to talking. John is Baltimore-born and bred and has been coming to the Pimlico races for forty years. He grew up just across the street, where the neighborhood is now derelict and racially polarized. He got into racing because his father brought him, which echoes a refrain of his generation. There's no evidence that many people bring their children to the races now. I'm the only person under thirty in the entire clubhouse.

John explains how everyone has a betting ritual. Some people bet on the horse with a cool name, others by the owner, jockey, or horse's earnings. John pays attention to the horse's winning history. I remember that, as a rule, my old boss never bet on a gray horse.

"This was the best track in the eighties, unquestionably, all along the east coast, maybe in the country," John says through crowded front teeth and a serious overbite. "Everything was packed full, and now look." He gestures around to the empty stands that stretch around the concourse.

"It's a real shame. Pimlico is a cornerstone of Maryland. Or at least it should be."

The decline that John has borne witness to hardly captures just how far the track has fallen. In 1870, Pimlico opened its doors for the first time and commenced the track's decades-long rise to its distinguished position among racing locales. During the anti-gambling movement of 1910, only Maryland and Kentucky prevailed, and the course was famed even further. By the mid 1930s, Pimlico was a ubiquitously renowned destination among elite, high-class gamblers and horsemen. John never saw Pimlico in 1944, when Colonel Bradley, a wealthy gambler, used to ride his chauffeured limousine directly onto the infield every day of the season to place his bets.

Though racing had lost some of its blue-blooded exclusivity by his boyhood, John still remembers when Pimlico was open almost year round. Today, the track only hosts live racing four days a week for about three months out of the year.

Still, if Pimlico is open, John is there. "It's the high to bet and win," he says. "And I love the horses." I feel the twenty dollars in my pocket start to swell with its potential.

Ted Mudge texts me that he is on his way down, so John and I say our goodbyes. I tell him thank you and he tells me, in the kindest way, that he hopes my writing will help fix

things. Scattered folks are still all over the clubhouse room and this is when I realize there is no prevailing demographic among the loyal gamblers, save for age; it's the most diverse crowd I've ever been near in Baltimore.

When I meet Ted, I expect him to be preoccupied with selling Pimlico to me, but he wastes no time telling me he knows it's a dump and that the sport needs to be completely renovated. He tells me to imagine a three-legged stool that represents the tracks, the horsemen, and the breeders. "They started fighting and never stopped," he says. He switches metaphors and tells me the three populations are like dogs with a scrap of meat between them, enough to feed only one. When the money shrinks, as it has, each dog cares only about his own survival.

Like many other people in the industry, Ted traces much of this continued deterioration, which has been accelerating since the mid-1990s, to Maryland's failed attempts to introduce slot machines at the races in 2012. The colossal investment was poorly timed, poorly executed, or completely misguided depending on who you ask. Either way, it lost the Maryland Jockey Club a great deal of money. The purses, or the money awarded to winners at each race, declined dramatically. All the dogs started to starve. Breeders and jockeys were left with little motivation to keep their horses in Maryland.

When I confess to Ted Mudge that I want him to help me place my first bet, he smiles and eagerly changes gears. He pulls out his program and walks me through the first race. While he points to statistics and numbers and says, "these should give you a vision of exactly how this race will go," I hear white noise. I tell Ted that without him I couldn't even place a bad bet. He sighs.

“This is undeniably our biggest problem,” he says as he smacks the program with the back of his hand and turns his face to me; his thick glasses magnify his eyes. “For those of us who know and love this game, it’s great because you get to gamble but you’re not betting against the house—you’re betting against the people around you. But this means that if you don’t know anything about racing, you’re at a real disadvantage. You have to get *really* lucky to win. Ultimately, it’s not user friendly. This really hurts us.”

Ted tells me to imagine that I came into Pimlico by myself and sat down with all the older people to read forms and wait around. By a miracle, I’ve learned how to place a bet with the teller correctly.

“Then, the race starts. All around you, people are yelling and screaming and high fiving and you have a ticket in your hand and you’re thinking to yourself, ‘This isn’t fun, what the hell is going on here?’”

I tell Ted how unique it felt to be so close to the track while I was outside with John. He nods vigorously.

“The only other sport that comes close to that is NASCAR,” he says. “I don’t understand people getting excited about a bunch of machines driving around a track, but they have made absolute rock stars out of these hillbillies who drive those cars. Why can’t we make a rock star out of a jockey?”

Ted can tell I am not learning much from the program numbers, so he directs us to one of the televisions and explains the odds. From there, he narrows first race down to two possible winners. He walks to the glass windows at the far side of the clubhouse, where trainers are now leading the horses into stalls to get saddled.

“You want your horse to swish his tail a bit, bounce on his toes,” Ted says. “He needs to look *ready* but not *restless*.” Some people bet on this body language alone.

The jockeys come out next. They look like dolls, with their small stature and pencil-thin bodies. Ted mentions the importance of their body weight—the riders and their saddles must meet a strict requirement before and after a race—and the dangerous extremes to which almost all jockeys go to manipulate the scale and decrease their mass. The jockey diet is extremely restrictive, usually less than a thousand calories a day, and is often supplemented by further strategies like sauna-induced sweating and the abuse of diuretics. These practices are universal to the point of being standardized—most racetracks in the U.S. still have “heaving bowls” installed in jockey bathrooms for “flipping,” or vomiting, meals and water weight.

“I used to wrestle in high school,” Ted says with a knowing shake of the head. “The things we would do to our bodies.” He also shrugs; it’s a fact of the game, no more brutal than any other training exercise.

The horses shuffle around inside the stalls and stare ahead with black eyes, their veiny rumps swaying and inky coats reflecting off the lights overhead. As the trainers saddle up the colts, they whisper in their ears, analyze every corner of their muscled frames, and wipe off stray dirt from their coats. The jockeys stand like puppets on the side.

Pimlico racecourse remains an unrecognizable version of its former self all but one day of the year. The Preakness Stakes is the second leg of the Triple Crown, surpassed only by the Kentucky Derby in attendance and popularity. It is an elite 140 year-old Baltimore tradition, but I have only known it as a notorious annual all-day party. Every year, thousands

of people come to this race just to get drunk. Some take special pride in the fact that they will not see a single horse for the entire day. While ticketholders gamble, chat, smoke cigars, and sip specialty cocktails like the Black Eyed Susan in the stands, general admission infielders have different jobs: they chug, alternate between games of throw-the-full-beer-can and duck-the-full-beer-can, dance on port-a-potties, cheer at bikini contests, and shout over the noise of live concerts from Train and Pitbull.

For decades, the Maryland Jockey Club, which operates Pimlico and is the oldest sporting organization in North America, ran a loosely regulated show in the infield. In recent years, the internet has made it nearly impossible for the Club to feign ignorance of the Preakness party. In 2009, after pictures of men racing across portable toilets and dodging beer went viral, the Club announced that ticketholders were no longer permitted to bring alcohol into the infield. A boycott exploded. Instead of the 112,222 people who showed up in 2008 on race day, only 77,850 came the first year of the new policy.

Two years of economic flailing later, The Maryland Jockey Club got radical and invited a centaur named Kegasmus to the Preakness Stakes. At about six feet tall, Kegasmus was a half-horse mascot, half-human oaf. He had a long, cheap looking brown wig that fell to his pale shoulders and framed a face accessorized with reflective aviator sunglasses and a goatee. He had nipple piercings and a beer gut that looked like it was being suffocated by his felted lower half. In the months leading up to the 2011 Stakes, Kegasmus made television, radio, and bar appearances to promote bottomless beer cups and bikini contests.

The centaur sparked substantial outrage, mostly among elected officials concerned with Maryland's image. Maryland Delegate Pat McDonough told the *New York Times* he thought the Maryland Jockey Club had taken "a great sporting event and turned it into a

fraternity party.” Tom Chuckas, owner of the Club, defended the move. “I’ve got a business to run,” he told the *Times*, “and I have got to attract young people to our event, and we knew the elegance and grandeur of the sport was not the way to get them here.”

Ted Mudge has simply resigned the fate of the infield to tradition and he has grown tired of all the attempts to please the public. “Who cares who we bring into the infield if we keep losing money?” he wonders.

Kegasus marked the official resignation of the spectacle of class, splendor, and grandeur at the races, and perhaps it felt so harsh because these things are the only promises horse racing ever made to her followers; they represent the very foundation upon which Pimlico was built. In 1938, a *Time* article summarizing the annual Preakness Stakes referred to the “patrician atmosphere” of Pimlico, “where the spectators’ blood lines are almost as genteel as the horses’.” In 1945, a *Time* reporter in town for the Stakes remarked how Baltimore would “sweat and shake with its annual seven-day fever over a horse race.” It’s been decades, yes, but no one might have predicted that a refined, weeklong celebration could become a chance for Kegasus taglines like “a 10-hour party to celebrate a two-minute race. Now we’re talking.”

It’s too late now though, even for nostalgia, even for old newspaper clippings, and even for the way things were. Few, if any, living folks could remember Pimlico’s zenith if they tried. When I visited Pimlico, most folks stayed in front of a television for the entire afternoon; they never watched any of the races happening just steps away. The youngest generation of legal betters grew up with simulcast, slot machines at the tracks, and rap concerts at Preakness, so sheer love of the horse does not bring many young people to the

aces — and neither does the bet. Those who have hopes for Preakness, Pimlico, and the flat track make the mistake of wanting to restore something that has left not only the races but also our American ethos. Kegabus was an honest attempt to serve this population of race attendees on whom Maryland's dying industry feels desperately dependent. Year one of Kegabus, the Jockey Club lost money. Year two, they just barely broke even. In numbers alone, Kegabus worked. Attendance for the 137th running of the Preakness Stakes was 107,398, the sixth largest crowd to date.

A painful realization following the centaur's incarnation is that the Maryland Jockey Club probably did need Kegabus to get those people back to the race. The *most* painful realization is that those people will likely never become interested in horse racing. At about twelve hundred pounds, today's bred horses are some of the most powerful animals in existence and have a unique, deeply rooted connection to humanity. But the horse, it appears, isn't enough. And so, someone cut off his torso and replaced it with a more relatable image: the white, egomaniacal, hedonistic man who gets interviews at the *Washington Post* and claims that he has actually won every Preakness in history with his invisibility cloak.

I went to the Preakness once, and made it no further than the parking lot. It was a Saturday towards the end of my tenth grade. My best friend, Lata, and our older friend, Amelia, picked me up in Amelia's ancient Honda convertible from my school's campus around noon, where I had been serving Saturday detention for being out of uniform too many times. We drove due west from there, towards the Pimlico racetrack. Traffic got dense quickly and we got crammed between school buses full of infield partiers being shipped without their car keys into a future haze of inebriation. We sought out a parking spot in a nearby neighborhood and walked straight into the party; no one stopped the three sixteen-year-old

girls from meandering into the rowdy tailgate lot. For the first ten minutes we only wandered, unsure what we might do all day. Then a muscular guy on a lawn chair on top of an RV shouted to us.

“Hey girls! What are you all up to?”

We were hoping the buff, bronze man and his friends might have some free alcohol, so we went over to talk. It was 2007, the year of the highest recorded attendance in Preakness history, and only one Stakes away from the prohibition of infield alcohol.

The tan guy and his buddies invited us in. We drank rum punch and let them hoist us on top of their RV, where we tanned and watched the party unfold below us. We saw girls take their tops off and fight for the attention of any onlookers. At one point, a skinny white guy with dreads and a backpack briefly tried to sell us cocaine before fleeing from a cop on a bicycle. From my seat on the RV, I could also see the top of the infield. Beer cans were flying—there were dozens in the air at every second—and I could hear thousands of giddy screams. For a moment, I might have seen a horse on a big screen from the far side of the infield, but I’m not really sure.

The partnership between horse racing and drinking is not limited to a once yearly flat track race; it has extended to all facets of the sport for centuries. Patti Fenwick, a Maryland native who trained thoroughbreds for over 20 years, grew into adulthood, and alcoholism, in this crew. In her early adulthood, she spent her nights at the Manor Tavern in Baltimore County. “The workers, the wannabees, the jockeys, the trainers, we were all there every night. It was a pretty hard partying group of people,” she says. She suspects the culture among

professionals may have shifted since, but alcohol has always been in the blood of horsemen. It is, among many others, a well-known health risk for jockeys in the field.

The property Patti has lived on since she married into the Fenwick name houses the course for the annual Hunt Cup, a famous and prestigious four-mile, twenty-two fence steeplechase race that has been run across the same field in Worthington Valley since 1922. The horses are trained specifically for the timber race, which involves long distances and periodic jumps over high, wooden fences. The Hunt Cup course is considered to be the second most challenging of its kind in the world, trailing only the Grand National in Great Britain.

Most Marylanders know nothing about timber horse races. The steeplechase still has a reputation of being exclusive, elite, and only for the rich. By high school, I had heard about the Hunt Cup only in passing from my private school peers, who comprise a camp of wealthier teens and young adults for whom the Cup is a yearly social tradition. They never attend the race; the single purpose is to tailgate, party, and revel in something that feels distinctly Maryland and, for a day, their own. For some, it is attractive to upend the properness and sophistication of other attendees and of horse racing in general.

“I went to Hunt Cup for years and didn’t see the race. Never saw a single horse,” my grandfather says of his early years. “It was like a badge of courage to do that.”

The first time I ever paid attention to the Cup, I owed it to gossip. A girl in my ninth grade class was sent to the hospital with a blood alcohol content of .275 after drinking heavily at the 2006 race. For a while after the drama of Maddie’s alcohol poisoning, I would listen to people talk about driving to the event and I’d think of Hunt Cup only as a giant, yearly field party out in the county where my friends and acquaintances showcased the season’s newest

Lily Pulitzer sundresses and Vineyard Vine ties and drank Natural Light into half-consciousness.

“I still get a pit in my stomach whenever I think about that day,” Maddie told me one afternoon recently, almost seven years after her first and last horse race. She became That Girl From Hunt Cup within moments, and it has lasted for years. “People still talk about it and ask me about it,” she says. “But it was a lifetime ago for me.”

She has pieced together most of the day’s events. She remembers wandering between rows of grassed cars, looking for upperclassmen she recognized. “We had no intention of going and finding the horses,” she said.

When Maddie found friendly faces among a crowd of senior girls, there was immediately a full cup of beer in her hands. She has vague memories of pouring pink lemonade powder straight into a cup of clear liquor. After ninety minutes of drinking, Maddie couldn’t stand. When she asked for help, some friends got her into the back of an SUV lift gate. She tried to stand again, fell, and hit her face on a rock. She started bleeding and throwing up and this is when someone decided to get help. “At this point there was a huge crowd of several hundred people just watching me convulse and vomit,” Maddie explained.

Maddie goes to the University of Maryland now. Her boyfriend recently bought his general admission ticket to the Preakness Stakes, but she doesn’t think she’ll go. “I feel so removed from all that,” she told me, though it does make her feel like an outlier. “It just feels like the races will always have this association with going and getting wasted.”

For those who have made a life and living out of the horse, there are very different associations with races. “My main concern is that it is dangerous to have a bunch of rowdy, often teenaged, drunks around half-ton, overly fit animals with a strong flight instinct,”

Danielle Searson, a 22-year-old lifer in the equine world, says of drinking among non-equestrians. But still, she appreciates the temptation. Underage attendees at the races, particularly Hunt Cup, have a rare opportunity to both participate in and defy the blue blood, old money, and class that go hand-in-hand with the image of the steeplechase.

Patti Fenwick's niece, Lia, who rode a pony for the first time at one-year-old and now competes professionally, is especially disturbed by the party culture at the race.

"I can't stand it," she told me. "There is nothing I hate more than the 'general parking.' The fact that people get all dressed up and pay a lot of money to just go get drunk and say 'oh yeah I was at the races this weekend'...Everyone wants to go and have fun but there is a point where enough is enough. And when the EMTs and ambulances are more hung up with drunken children than jockeys, it is too much."

Lia's horse world is her church. She feels very personal pain at the sight of its violation. Unfortunately, part of Lia wants to preserve a racing world that has never existed. Even though the tailgaters of my generation have made legends of their own debauchery, the Hunt Cup has been a party for decades. In 1950, Joan Williams and Alden Calmer of the *Vassar Chronicle* attended the Hunt Cup race among the social elite to review the affair. "Baltimore society has achieved a weekend that more than competes, athletically, alcoholically and aristocratically" with New England's Derby Day, they concluded. The day itself was all "beering and betting," culminating in a race where "the danger and excitement unfortunately, was lost to the majority of spectators, who had, in turn, lost themselves in the stupefying excitement of an afternoon of Mint Juleps."

Lia is caught between acknowledging and challenging the status quo of racing. Though owning and riding horses is costly, Lia believes that viewing the race "doesn't have

to be like that...Everyone wants to turn the races into this ‘thing’ where you must get dressed up and done up and go out there and eat fancy food and drink fancy drinks. We have turned it into that.”

Maryland horse country is as beautiful as ever—the grass is still worshipped into lushness, ancient oaks still line hilly fields, and hand-hammered wood post fences still stretch for miles. In legacy, Maryland is still the center of horse country, though many local breeders and owners have long since moved to surrounding states to chase more money and better purses. Left behind is a prominent battle between the desire to preserve and surmount the definition of the steeplechase.

It is eight o’ clock in the evening and late June, which means the sun, still lingering above the tree line just ahead of me, has just turned the pastures golden. Hay season has been progressing somewhat sadly this year—the earth has stayed too wet for the farmers to do much—but round bales from the season’s first cut still scatter the fields.

I pull into the outskirts of Belmont Farm, where the Fenwick family has fixed equipment, boarded and exercised horses, and baled hay for decades. Patti is inside the house; I can see her squatting at the oven, her waist-length hair brushing the kitchen tiles. Some of the horses are grazing in the field just twenty feet from the front door. I hop the wooden fence and walk towards them. I stare at them for a while, keeping a distance of a few dozen yards.

I remember the two horse lessons I had and the nine dozen times my grandfather has tried to get me on one of his colts. I always prefer to be in a horse’s presence than to ride. Perhaps I have never been assertive enough to command authority over something so august

and puissant, but I feel a mixture of fear and unworthiness when I think about taking control of a horse.

Both colts have reddish coats, like wet rust, with trimmed, sooty manes. They are huge, thick with lumps of solid muscle, but their indifference towards me lessens my usual unease. When I start to rip some clover from the earth, the lighter horse sways over to me and takes the grass from my flat hand with huge, deep lips that tickle the surface of my palm. I stay on his periphery and stroke his firm cheek and jaw line. His brow is caked with dried mud from a playful day in the pasture. I am not afraid, but I am wary, like a little girl who thinks her mother might be in a bad mood. I feel he can sense these parts of me, the ones that know how powerful he is, that fear him and wonder if he will change his mind about allowing me close. I decide he must not know his own strength.

This horse could kill me before my brain even registered his movement. Yet this same animal wakes every day and stands still while his humans push metal into his mouth, strap heavy weights across his back, mount him, and make him run and jump into wild exhaustion. He is evolutionary, Darwinian prey: “Make me feel safe,” the horse says to us, “or I will run.” And sometimes, a person comes along who can force trust out of the horse’s natural flight instincts. When there is enough courage in both horse and human, there is a moment of fusion—the horse succumbs to symbiosis, and the rider to the flight inside himself. For those who have raced and do it for the horse, my grandfather tells me, “nothing is more transformative, dangerous, and exciting.”

Baltimore native Patrick Smithwick, son of the legendary steeplechase jockey, A.P. Smithwick, and a rider himself, wrote about this moment in his autobiography, *Racing My Father*. In one race at the Saratoga Spring track during an ill-fated ride with a strong gelding

named Rolling Rock, Smithwick remembers: “I couldn’t believe how good he felt, how fast he was going...I felt lithe, agile; I felt like I was a part of Rolling Rock.” Often, when he describes a race, Smithwick writes in ‘we’ terms—the horse and him, as one.

But how hard must it be for a prey animal like the horse to allow the relationship it has with us. Perhaps the species has a collective awareness of an ancient relationship honored today by only a few.

Ted Mudge doesn’t talk about winning when he talks about what makes horse racing beautiful and worthy, though he has been buying, racing, and betting since 1986 and has won at least one race each year since.

“It’s the horse,” he says. “As much as I love to bet, it’s always been the horse.”

Mudge traces his passion to what is now overlooked in racing. “Part of what we’re missing today is not letting people get close to the horses,” he says. “There is nothing in this world more beautiful than a racehorse. Nothing. And that’s the real hook into racing. If you asked anyone who goes to the races a lot, of course they all bet. But I don’t think they’ll ever tell you that’s the key attraction. It’s the horse.” The idea is nice, but complicated; Ted gets paid to bring people to the races for reasons that have nothing to do with horses: slots, retail, turning a winning better into a poster child, and so on.

“I was born to ride, there is no question,” Patti Fenwick says from the living room of her empty nest in the Worthington Valley. “Horses quiet me, they encourage me, and they have always been there for me. Sometimes, I’ll just feel I need to go outside and lay my cheek on one of my horses. It just couldn’t have been any other way. To get all these magnificent animals and do some incredible things with them...I feel like the luckiest girl in the world.”

Now that she's done training Thoroughbreds and galloping racehorses, Patti has earned a faithful student population. She teaches about thirty people across a wide range of ages. They ride for many reasons, some of them just for fun. Patti knows a few of them will ride for life. "There is this one young girl I teach who talks to me all the time. She's always telling me about getting into trouble in school because she's playing horse and cantering around the halls. The funny thing is, she's in high school. There's this amazing innocence in her because she's stuck in the horse world, which I can understand so much because it is where I was when I was her age. You end up growing up very slowly because you're still a little girl loving your horses."

On her family farm in Harford Country, Patti taught her niece, Lia McGuirk how to ride for a while. Lia just won her first major steeplechase race, *My Lady's Manor*, last spring.

"Horses are my life," Lia says. "Always have been, always will be. I love the challenge of horses; gaining their trust and getting them to do what I want is what I live for. I love seeing horses succeed and do everything I get them to."

When riders do fall in love, it's not always for the sport. Beau was a successful timber horse before he became a track reject and found his way to Danielle. When he died, Danielle says, "I couldn't understand how the sun could rise that next morning and how people could laugh and how my roommate could explain, so easily, when someone asked what was wrong, 'Her horse died,' and they could give me a pitiful look, and that was that."

Danielle wrote her old man a letter to memorialize him. "You'd think there would be something simple to say about what it felt like to be with you," she told him. "You were a horse. You didn't love me. I wasn't part of your herd. I was just your kid. But you, you were

some weird combination of a son and a brother and a father wrapped up in a hairy package that didn't speak English."

In 1902, an unknown author wrote a poem in the periodical, *Life*, entitled "To a Quiet but Useful Class." The author wonders why there is no guild for the race of horses, if there are so many for the men for whom they labor.

"Look back at our struggle for freedom—
Trace our present day's strength to its
source,
And you'll find that man's pathway to
Glory
Is strewn with the bones of the horse."

I decide to put my money on horse six. I still haven't learned much about making an informed bet, so I go with my gut, his fun name (Boogie Biz), and how he seemed to look right at me when I stared at him through the glass. Ted leads me to the booth to make a bet and takes me to the winner's circle to watch the live race. Boogie makes a beautiful, brief sprint towards the front of the pack, and I feel a rush of satisfaction and pride, but he loses by several paces in the end. The other contender Ted had suggested, horse two, takes first place. I feel a cringe of regret at the knowledge that I had been so close to picking the right horse, and I imagine how Chuck might have laughed when I came back to the café with the earnings from his twenty dollars. As the disappointment flashes, the rising potential of the remaining cash in my wallet flares for just a moment.

There is negligible fanfare in the winner's circle after the race. The horse is guided into the gates, veins popping and looking unfazed. The jockey steps on the scale with his saddle and then retreats up the steps without a glance back to his horse. On my way back to the parking lot, I cross through the clubhouse and find the loyal gamblers already lined up to

spend on the next race, which will take place in about twenty minutes. In seconds, everything is over and begun again. As I pull out of the parking lot and back into the surrounding city neighborhoods, I am unsure if I have witnessed a love story, a tragedy, or both.

FACE THE MUSIC

Part I

The rain begins to fall at the perfect pace when we pull out of the Royal Farms with our coffees and road snacks. The drizzle is modest; the wiper swipe comes every four seconds or so with a smooth repetition that sounds like car seat childhood naps.

Dad hands me the iPod as we merge back onto the northbound interstate, minutes past the Baltimore city limits. I get nervous when I choose for us because Dad has been listening to music for forty-six years and playing it professionally for thirty-three. I have convinced myself he would find my taste in contemporary music boring, a series of feeble, derivative attempts to repeat all the brilliance of his favorite artists. If I pick a classic, I have to be sure the song connotes nostalgia for him and not wearisome overplay. It should be something Dad can still enjoy, unlike the guitar riffs he teaches sixteen-year-old boys who don't practice but think chords will get them laid. So when I ask what he wants to listen to, and he says anything, I feel that it can't be true. I hit shuffle.

The iPod generates a folk playlist. The Carpenters first. Dad is feeling contemplative and I know this because he doesn't comment much on "Rainy Days and Mondays." The auditory memories of my favorite albums remain indistinguishable from my father's voice, which has always arrived from the periphery to tell me what a song meant to him, who produced it, why they kicked their usual guitarist off this track, and how it was received at the time. It is this way with them all: his voice complementing all the riffs, solos, and bass lines.

If he had spoken, Dad would have told me that the sweetness of Karen Carpenter's voice is radiant. He would admire her ethereal, yet commanding tone. He would be surprised at the delicacy and beauty of her vocals despite the melancholy of the song. I would have agreed, but I would not have said that I also found it easy to pretend things were lovely when

my grandparents asked me about college this weekend. I would think about how tragic it is that Karen could have suffered so obviously and not been noticed. Her anorexia killed her in the early eighties, my dad once told me. *But how could people not see, I thought. Why didn't they do anything?*

Baltimore stretches out across the passenger window as we scale the cityscape, which progresses erratically as we move north. Twilight casts a flattering glow on the business district despite the rain and the waving blue lines on the aquarium reflect across the harbor. But as we move across the city limits, Baltimore's metropolitan façade dissolves quickly. The only thing that sits between our most violent neighborhood and the tallest million-dollar condominium complex is a quick trash-infested swim through Chesapeake Bay waters. Dead zones are visible from the highway; entire square miles are covered with algae. Concrete backyards the size of sedans almost touch the edge of the slow lane. A billboard that advertises this week's lottery pool blocks my view of the yachts and dinner cruise ships docked below.

Dad is quiet through this song and the others, too. Then Carole King's unmistakable piano keys lead into "Home Again," an uncelebrated track from her first solo album. The first half-second is a perceptible but soft white noise, like rain outside a window, which comes from too many plays on the turntable before Dad converted it to digital. When the piano enters, the white noise softens, but continues to whisper. The chords are raw and woody and the first several bars feel like beautiful, heaving breaths. The keys quiet with restraint and a decrescendo strips the speakers almost bare to prepare for Carole's voice.

When you listen to Carole, you know she is not a natural pop star. There is something a little too human about her. Her voice floods with the reluctance to over-share. What she sings

is a series of simple letters to a dear friend.

Sometimes I wonder if I'm ever gonna make it home again, it's so far and out of sight.

When I listen to music, my attention is on the words. If I find some meaning in song lyrics, it carries the illusion of knowing a whole, hidden truth or uncovering a dear friend's deep secret. Sometimes, like analyzing tarot cards, I want it to be relatable and so I tailor it to my life. Dad always attends to key changes, production technique, or mixing to understand a piece of music. He hears every layer of a composition in a single listen. "Catch the harmony," he would tell me on the drive to school, or "listen to the bass go out of tune there for just a second" or "it's amazing how many times he dubbed the guitar." Dad hears every mistake and every technical tweak. What a burden, I always thought. He can never just listen.

Carole gives you no choice but to attend to her words. She exposes herself, a naked voice with only piano keys and a strumming acoustic. There is so much space in these speakers, so much room for our messy thoughts.

Carole King once told a reporter, "I didn't want to be an artist." Early in her music making, she paid the bills writing hits for other groups before she stumbled into a solo career, only barely a grown woman. The doubts, laments, and joys of her lyrics always avoid childish concerns; she seems at ease with the language of the adult for all its intensity and complication.

Dad has talked about picking up his grandfather's guitar for the first time when he was twelve. "When I started," he tells me, "I felt that I had to figure out how to play guitar every day for the rest of my life. I didn't think about getting paid. I just had to."

The road came hard to Carole. She wrote about how lonely and deracinating it was to

spend her life as a touring artist. “Traveling around sure gets me down and lonely,” she sings in “So Far Away”, another single from *Tapestry*. “I sure hope the road don’t come to own me, there’s so many dreams I’ve yet to find.” I hated this song when Dad was gone with the band.

I think Dad was most himself while he was on the road. He always wanted to be an artist. He believed in it, and not just the music. He believed in his bands enough to drive through the night while the other guys slept, to stay on motel floors for weeks, and be the guitarist, manager, booking agent, and roadie.

He believed in our family, too, and our home. Sometimes, late at night, he would answer my calls and help me with my math homework from a street corner in New Mexico or from the side of the road in Kansas. Even though we talked on the phone every day and he said goodnight to my stepmom every evening, he sent post cards from towns and landmarks that I would study in my atlases. Then Landis got kidney disease and the band stopped playing and my dad got bored and irritable and we all lost our way.

Dad’s band fell apart when I was halfway through high school. If I had been just a little older, I would have been able to predict his reaction. He thought he was a failure, which never crossed my mind because he was my hero. At first, Dad was only home more often. He subscribed to cooking magazines and made dinner for us every night. He built a fire pit in our backyard. He became an avid bicyclist. I should have noticed he was grasping for purpose before I moved to college.

I won’t be happy ‘til I see you alone again, ‘til I’m home again and feeling right.

Dad drums on the wheel after the first verse; he perfectly captures every beat of the percussion that follows the bridge. Carole reaches the top of her range and she cries out,

wailing for just a second, then hushes. We nod our heads in unison and the beat guides us through the instrumental. I look to the driver's side and see something I have seen only once before. My dad's bottom lip quivers under his long beard. He blinks hard and his eyes swell, the edges of his lids growing pink and damp.

I turn my head quickly. Let him pretend he is grieving in peace.

I often forget that Dad might miss home or that moving out was not the smooth, immediate break it had seemed when I came back to the spotless, empty house. I feel guilty for the access I have to the place my Dad has lost forever. I wish he knew how hollow it is without him. All I do is sleep there now.

And I want to tell him it's alright, we forgive you; I promise she'd take you back; you have no idea what it's like now; she won't do laundry without crying; she won't look at me; just come home.

Signs for New York surface on I-95. *Nobody else knows how to comfort me tonight.* It's the now familiar dread of returning to college—where I feel uprooted and exposed, suffocating in that dense, pastoral expanse—along with the realization that north is the only way to go. There is nothing left of home in Baltimore now.

Later, in my dorm room, I try to learn Carole's song on my cheap acoustic, but I struggle. I have trouble with the tablature I find online because I'm a lefty and because it's only written for piano. Dad would have flipped the tabs around and shown me how to play the chords without my pinky finger, which can barely hold down a string. When he used to teach

me, he always wrote chords on top of lyrics instead of using real musical notation because I learn best with words.

I am selfish with the sadness in this car. I want to breathe it into my lungs and hold it there where Dad cannot reach. It is much easier when I imagine a man who does not love her anymore, who is transitioning easily into a new life without us. Dad must do this same mental dance when he imagines that I am happy at school, self-absorbed and unaffected by the rupture of the family.

'Til I'm home again and feeling right. Three times Carole refrains the line, then the song ends with the same piano sighs of the opening bars.

In two minutes and thirty-three seconds, everything has shifted. The iPod is in my lap and the playlist has come to an end, so I scroll the remainder of Dad's music library. Melancholy is a seduction, and I am tempted by the desire to trap us in sadness. But perhaps I could return us to our illusions. Any song would liberate us from our own articulation, could make the listened feel spoken. I scroll. Any song could save us from hearing our honest voices, exposed against the highway hum below our car.

Part II

It was Memorial Day weekend in 1993 and my dad's band Q was on the books for the Sowebo Music Festival in Baltimore. He arrived with me, a stroller, the 1983 VW Rabbit, two amplifiers, and his sunburst and brown Ibanez to meet my mother (who, after prohibiting my stepmother from attending, would be watching me while my dad played). He saddled me up next to his parked car and we went off in search of my mother. Moments after the hand-off,

my father walked back to the car and discovered a perimeter littered with broken glass, a brick in the hatchback, and no music equipment.

A day later there were gigs on the books and no guitar so my father went to a mutual friend's house to look at an early 1970s Telecaster. As a rule, he never liked Telecasters, but he was desperate. It was in such dire need of re-fretting that he couldn't even test it out that day. My father took the risk anyway, borrowed some money, and sold a bass to buy the \$275 instrument.

Until a few years ago, I never saw my father at a gig without the yellow Telecaster. He played it every weekend with All Mighty Senators, Thursday through Sunday, until I was in tenth grade. He played it on The Pretenders tour, on the Busta Rhymes tour, at music festivals, in almost every state in the continental U.S.

When my father practices in his new apartment, it is on this guitar. He improvises the blues most, when his fingers squeak across the frets and bend the strings with a quivering hand. He used to play the Tele unplugged in the basement at two o'clock in the morning when he had insomnia, though he sleeps better now that he's playing gigs all the time again.

Once, when I was about nine, I joined my dad at a small festival. When he was leaving the stage with his equipment after his last set, a fellow artist approached him.

"Hey, man," he said. "I really hate to do this but we're about to go on and my ride left with my guitar. Is there any way I could use your equipment for just one set?"

My dad looked over at his soft case, the yellow Telecaster snugly inside, that was draped across his shoulder. He lowered the guitar down and started to pass it over.

“Alright,” he said. “But you should know that the only thing I care more about in this world is standing right next to me holding my hand. So please. Don’t do anything to this guitar.” This is still my favorite way I learned how much my Dad loved me.

My father plays many more guitars now. The yellow Tele makes appearances, especially on the rare occasion that All Mighty Senators plays, but Dad prefers other guitars for other groups.

Five years ago, I saw him on a stage with a different guitar for the first time and with my stepmother for the last. Two days earlier, my father had driven to Annandale-on-Hudson alone—five hours up, five hours back—to pick me up from college just hours after I said goodbye to my aunt Weezie on the phone.

The service was a series of tense transitions between the priest we found at the last minute and the words of our family members—the difference between “now she is wrapped in the embrace of our lord, Jesus Christ” and “we hope there’s Budweiser in heaven for you, Weez.”

Dad had been practicing all week. At the very end—after the family had spoken—he came up to the standing microphone with his black acoustic and stood in front of us with his eyes fixed on the back of the room. The opening chords to “After the Gold Rush” still captured the subtle and composed aching of the piano in the Neil Young original. I rarely hear my father sing in public but the quake in his voice did not escape me.

At the wake, he told me he had wanted to play “Heart of Gold” when my aunt Susie asked him to perform. Weezie loved Neil Young. “I wouldn’t have been able to get through it. It would have been too perfect. She really did have a heart of gold.”

Flying Mother Nature's silver seed to a new home in the sun.

It was the only way there was to tell her what he needed to say.

My father now rehearses or gigs with one of several regular groups almost every night of the week—more often than he ever did when I was growing up—and regularly stays up later than I ever did in college. It is strange to think of the restless man I knew several years ago who used to sit on the patio all night while his band and marriage were falling apart.

Before the silence overtook our house, I walked a certain way down the steps from my attic bedroom because there was almost always a record spinning on the turntable that sits against a wall that touches the stairs. Don't stomp; don't pound. Turn the corner in the hallway and step only with the balls of your feet. Practically tiptoe across the living room. Pretend you are a ballerina. Do not disturb Elton, Neil, George, Paul, John, Ringo, Joe, Ella, Jimi, Angus. Do this even now, even though no one plays records there anymore.

Dad and I listen to albums in the new apartment sometimes, later and louder than we ever did at the old house, especially towards the end.

"Fuck Jeff Beck," my dad says to his friend Drew as he unwraps *Led Zeppelin I. Truth* does not spend even a minute on our record player in the living room. My father takes another swig of his pineapple vodka drink. He switches the LP before any of us notice. Drew shakes his head and laughs at my father's predictable mulishness. "How could you possibly compare it?" my father says, closing his eyes and rocking his head to the percussive, cymbal-heavy "Good Times, Bad Times." It is decided, in my mind at least: Zeppelin wins.

By four in the morning, Jeremy, Jack, and Drew have left our living room. Dad and I are sitting on the couch in the dark and my head rests on his shoulder. We are talking about what might have been. We do this a lot now.

He was quiet for so long at the end of it all. When my dad started playing music again, the silence broke. It would be too simple to say he traded us for music or that he dove into it again to distract himself from who he left at the house on Overbook Road. It was the music that had originally crippled him when his band let him down and when he didn't make enough money for my stepmother. It was the music that would revive him, too, though even that is not so simple: he worries about the rent each month, he is tired and over-scheduled every time we talk, and, in weak moments during late talks on the couch, he still cries about my stepmother and apologizes to me for leaving.

"I know I could be somewhere different," he says, rubbing a hand up and down the top half of my arm. "Maybe the band could have tried harder to get signed. Maybe I might have stayed in Charlottesville and played with Dave Matthews and gotten huge with his band." The two men had been peers back in Charlottesville, the town where they both grew into their passion, and it has given my dad a strange isolation and closeness with notoriety.

"Maybe I could have been famous. Maybe that would have been awesome, to have my music recognized that way."

He speaks slowly, deliberately. I'm not sure if he's talking to himself or me.

"But then freak things happen. You know that bassist for Dave Matthews—Stefan—his daughter died of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. This guy is in one of the most famous groups in America and something like this happens. How are you supposed to reconcile that?" He pulls me, in my blanketed cocoon, closer.

“All I know is that I wouldn’t have traded that for anything.”

When my father solos with the yellow Telecaster, his eyes are always closed. He stands with his feet firmly together, rocking back and forth in a meditative rapture. I have heard these riffs for twenty-two years and still I can hardly explain what it is to know something so well that to hear it is to discern his every move without looking, to remember every time I’ve heard it, to feel that what is booming in my chest is coming from inside me because it belongs to me, to believe that these sounds are worth the silences.

CROSSED WIRES

DeAndre McCullough is my age when I first read *The Corner* in tenth grade. I am a fifteen-year-old without a boyfriend and he is a fifteen-year-old without a bed. The book is technically above my reading level, so I make a performance of taking it off our shelf in the study when I am sure my dad is in there with my stepmom. I surprise myself and get committed that night; I read in my attic bedroom for hours from the white, buzzing glow of the streetlight outside my window.

DeAndre is the reluctant protagonist of David Simon and Ed Burns' 1997 nonfiction book about the authors' year on one of Baltimore's most derelict, drug-soaked corners. DeAndre is a drug dealer and a poet. He wants to escape the ghetto. He is funny and smart and barely passing school. Outside the door to the bedroom DeAndre shares with his mother and brother, the rest of his family and friends wander around hallways doing drugs or preparing them for sale. Guns fire and the police kick down doors. His neighborhood is one of many still haunted by the ghosts of the 1968 race riots that left city blocks barren, condemned, and ignored for over forty years; there are almost 47,000 vacant homes and lots in Baltimore—sixteen percent of the city's residences. Certain people are worth more than others. The Drug War endures.

DeAndre's Baltimore is not as different from mine as it could be. My first home was an apartment that backed up against the expressway, in a white trash neighborhood still suffering from the downturn of Baltimore's industrial decline. When my parents moved in, the main road was only smoky bars that opened at 6 a.m., women who named their daughters Krystol, and John Waters, who filmed and day-drunk there. We were not the right kind of white people then. My dad had a massive dreadlock that hung halfway down his back and my

mom tried to decorate our porch with old Cabbage Patch Dolls that hung from strings and had song lyrics written across their bare butts in Sharpie.

Just before I was born, my dad was washing dishes downtown and Mom had just been fired from a waitressing gig. Dad cleaned the diner's kitchen overnight. His paycheck was about six diapers shy of a welfare check.

My unwed parents separated when I was six months old. Two years later, my mother became a heroin addict. My Dad found out when she called him to come pick me up across town; she was going through withdrawal.

But the system I share with DeAndre, the careful, brutal, cannibalistic system, would never let our stories be the same. DeAndre is a target—trapped, black, poor, and aware of his disadvantage only in time to realize his inability to articulate the injustice. His poems gesture at his position in the urban maelstrom:

If I had one wish it would surely be
That God would send angels to set me free
Free from the madness, of a city running wild
Free from the life of a ghetto child.

At the conclusion of *The Corner*, DeAndre faces his first adult, criminal arrest. His father, Gary, has died of an overdose, murdered by the corner itself, which treats its inhabitants like the debtors of a mob deal. DeAndre flirts with a serious addiction to cocaine and heroin, picking up the powdered trail his father left behind.

When I finish the book, DeAndre and I are farther apart than ever. My Mom is clean and I am in private school, where I have a friend whose parents offer her a bribe of \$10,000 to not drink alcohol until graduation. I spend most of my time thinking about the boyfriend I've landed and my SAT scores.

DeAndre was frustrated with the burden of the book's ending when *The Corner* was published in 1997. "That isn't the end of the story," David Simon recalls DeAndre saying, "you don't know that the story ends that way."

And Simon, too, conceded that escape appeared within reach. DeAndre's mother was sober and in the process of steering her children towards higher education. "If you give me another ending, Dre, I'll write it," Simon told him. "I'll write that fucking story so hard."

"Wait on it then. You gonna see."

For a long time after I finish *The Corner*, I have trouble letting go of these characters to whom I have an uncomfortable, paralyzing attachment. I don't know how to process the story of life that is less than fiction. I close the book, but these people are still selling, inhaling, exhaling, injecting and I am only seven miles away. I know so much about them, but our one-sided intimacy feels illicit. Their prospects are all a muddled, unpredictable entanglement of hope and desolation.

There is this long, ancient road in Maryland that starts at the Mason-Dixon line, by pristine squares of farmland and horse pasture, and ends in south Baltimore. York Road is the most direct route downtown so I usually hop on it just south of my house. The area is residential at first, with rows of 1950s Cape Cods built to house the white flight that followed educational desegregation in 1957. On the right, I pass the Giant where my Dad and I used to bike and then the Panera Bread where my friends and I got lunch when we could leave campus senior year. I pass small colonials with gardens and holiday decorations and the school parking lot where I learned to drive stick shift. I pass my favorite sushi place and the

historical theatre where I watched Barack Obama's first inauguration with four hundred other teary-eyed locals.

Soon, the storefronts are mostly pawnshops, fried lake trout joints, and liquor stores, fractured by gas stations and Baptist churches. I pass my favorite thrift store and then my old pre-school where my mom's car broke down once. Some guys came by and offered to help us fix the car, but instead they stole my mom's wallet. We had to hail down a ride home in a police car. I loved the plastic seats and the caged-in rear. I thought it was an adventure.

Just a little further south, the road does something I have never seen in any other city. The right side becomes overgrown with aged trees and vines, meticulously so, like the way a golf course forest grows. A thick, mossy wall rises above my car and almost blocks the view of the 1920s Baltimore City manses just beyond it. Most of the mortgage-payers are doctors or lawyers. The only white people they hire to do their really dirty work are their accountants. I know this because I babysit for them sometimes. On the opposite side of the street, there are tiny brick row homes with crippled porches and littered lawns; it's a black neighborhood where everyone gets their groceries from Rite Aid and their hair done at the Afro Hut. I lived here for a short while, before I could have memories of the place. This one road, separating two different worlds of people with the help of an ancient wall, clings to each side of the continuum and to a segregated Baltimore that is in the history but not our past.

Maryland, which hugs the Mason-Dixon line, was a slave state and continued to house a large population of southern sympathizers late into the nineteenth century. It is this legacy which keeps lifted diesel trucks flying their confederate flags on the eastern shore not thirty minutes from my house. However, Baltimore used to be considered, at least in part, a refuge. Just before the Civil War, the city had the largest population of free blacks in the country.

After the war, German and Irish immigrants flooded the port, Reconstruction prompted violent riots, and blacks fell into profounder destitution. The state overtook schools built for blacks, and so began the new legacy: whites were equipped for employment, citizenship, and health while the state used the education system to reinforce the marginalization of blacks. Emancipation was an unforgiving hard-won reality and segregation is still a way of life in the aptly dubbed “city of neighborhoods,” where colors don’t run.

Closer to downtown, each block on York Road—now Greenmount Avenue—is more dilapidated than the last. Litter is everywhere. The only businesses left are selling some form of alcohol or fried food. The rest of the economy is unofficial corner business. When I reach the center of the city, only a few of the formstone, marble-stooped houses per block appear inhabited. Condemned homes are shut with thin boards and painted over with hateful or half-assed graffiti. The occupied houses swell with bodies—people are always coming in and out and yelling down the street to other neighbors.

Barely shy of the tourist locales, the road stops at a cemetery. It feels like a strategic dead-end, an intentional blockade, that whispers to its inhabitants to stay in their place. Just beyond the cemetery are the Inner Harbor’s malls, street performers, paddleboats, and museums. The Harbor was the second leading port of entry for U.S. immigrants when Baltimore was a major manufacturing city, but since the 1970s has been mostly just an attraction and strategic effort to increase tourism. This happened just around the same time that advertisers got together and named Baltimore “Charm City” as part of a reputation refreshment campaign. It wasn’t long before Charm City caught on, too.

Just west of the harbor, in Fells Point, there are five brick row houses that Frederick Douglass built for poor urban blacks when he returned to Baltimore, the site of his escape from slavery. Even then the city had a way of luring its brutalized victims back to the waterfront. Today, Fells Point homes are, as a rule, prohibitively expensive. At night, the bars attract mostly Johns Hopkins business school WASPs, who binge drink and pee on the sidewalks. The old Douglass Place houses are gated away from the public; most of its residents have insulated themselves from city activity with high fences or barbed wire. In 2011, the Douglass Place neighborhood association halted the renovation of Beans and Bread, a day center that provides meals, intensive care, and housing placement for the homeless. Residents posted criminal records of the shelter's clients on Facebook, exposing their names and charges for things like prostitution and marijuana possession. "This is the kind of client going to Beans and Bread," one post of a scanned arrest record warned. The residents didn't have to say they were afraid of the city that lay outside the brick walls that hadn't been meant for them at all.

The American Dream is largely meaningless in Baltimore. DeAndre McCullough should have been able to make enough money to escape the corner, to enter the working class, to build something. His father, Gary, with his union jobs, Mercedes Benz, and financial investments, was written into the formula of this dream. By any account, liberal or conservative, the upward mobility Gary found before *The Corner* was a durable symbol of American institutional success. But then, suddenly, heroin.

For some reason, America has learned to despise the DeAndre McCulloughs of this world, not the corner he sits on every morning. Two St. Patrick's days ago, a white man was brutally beaten by a group of black men on the concrete outside a bar. There were enough

bystanders to take videos from their phones, which were later published on various news sites. The victim, a tourist from northern Virginia, stumbled back to his hotel room by dawn and woke up with no memory of the event. When he went to the police, he pieced his story together. His report claims the theft of his \$1,300 watch, Audi car key, and \$500 iPhone. It was in the news for weeks. Gregory Kane, a seasoned black reporter with a Baltimore journalism career of decades told readers of the *Washington Examiner*: “Baltimore is not a safe city for white tourists.”

“Thank God I don’t live in Baltimore anymore,” one commenter wrote in response to Kane. “Put a fence around it and forget it.”

“No place where blacks hang out is safe for a white,” said another.

The lines have been drawn, the safe routes mapped, and the ghetto mythicized into a jungle of chaos and depravity. The corner has become a genetic tomb, a family prison designed to madden its inhabitants with visions of the surface until they suffocate, having never taken a single breath. DeAndre’s corner, specifically the junction of Fayette Street and Monroe, is not unlike the others. There are always junkies, dealers, drugs, and crime, a complex ecosystem all its own. In David Simon’s book, DeAndre’s corner is the only thing his fifteen years earned him, his only possession. It is a malignancy, but like any other abusive relationship, it is startling to outsiders but remains a comfort to those inside its inexhaustible alienation. At one point in *The Corner*, several characters sit around and express real fear that the Ku Klux Klan would lynch them if they strayed too far from their block.

After *The Corner*’s adaptation into an HBO mini-series earned him three Emmys, David Simon created *The Wire* in 2002, which spent five seasons confronting the deranged

dysfunction between individuals and their institutions in Baltimore city. Simon's characters refused stereotype; the show permitted no clean justice or simple personalities. The dialogue was tight but raw, both foreign and poetic to the average viewer. In some ways, the show capitalized on other pervasive modern television dramas, where murder and the inner city comprise the primary stage for constructing honor, justice, and moral depravity in America. *The Wire* doesn't offer the same comforts, though, and pays less attention to the viewing desires of secluded urbanites, whose classed and racially limited lives have transformed the inner city into a rare, frightening scene.

In the frames, Baltimore remained unpolished. The corners were real, peppered by the same Coke cans, fast food wrappers, and cigarette butts left by the city's fiends and dealers not ten minutes before the cast and crew showed up for filming. David Simon chose Baltimore for *The Wire* because he hoped the artifice of television and story telling could be minimized by the city's realness. Simon has said he hoped this might make it impossible for people to ignore the reality of urban decay and, particularly, the perception of murder as banal in America's Others. "We put our town's shit in the street," Simon wrote in 2008. "And for that and that alone we ask apology for the premeditated trespass."

In an act of Hollywood defiance, many of the actors and actresses on the show were plucked off the streets to fictionalize dealers, junkies, cops, and educators, some of them with no professional training and plenty with their own corners to call home. Melvin Williams, a former drug kingpin, appeared on the show. Ed Burns, ex-cop and an executive producer, had arrested Williams in a high-profile raid not a decade earlier. Felicia "Snoop" Pearson played an assassin on the show. She had been born a crack baby to two jailed parents and was convicted of second-degree murder at the age of fourteen. The Maryland governor, Bob

Ehrlich, appeared for a short cameo as a state trooper. Once, Andre Royo, who played a police informant junkie named Bubbles, had a package of heroin pressed into his hands on the set by a junkie on the streets, who told him “you need a fix more than I do.” DeAndre McCullough played a side role for a few paychecks in his twenties, but the corner always found him and Simon could never keep him on the crew for long.

One night, almost a decade ago, I sat on my dad’s back porch for hours and watched them film in the mile-wide graveyard behind our apartment. They were preparing a funeral scene for a fallen drug dealer.

“It’s ironic,” my dad said one night while we were grilling out back and watching the production. “Baltimore hasn’t ever buried a single drug dealer or black man in that cemetery. There’s no chance it will.”

During high school, while *The Wire* was enjoying its critical acclaim, I overly relished some of my privileged viewing rights. I exercised frequent and audible self-congratulation when I could identify specific streets, corners, and regions where the show had been filmed. I eventually grew out of my over-assertion, though, and adopted curiosity instead. My Dad and I started to take bike trips, years after the first episode of *The Wire*, and recall scenes to each other while we cycled the areas they filmed on the west side. Once, on a Sunday morning, we headed to the farmer’s market under the Jones Falls Expressway. As we passed through the intersection of West Fayette and Monroe, I noticed that young dealers stood at all four corners. They were yelling at us. “Boys and girls!” they shouted. There was a steady flow of imperceptible cries. When they shouted, “White girl!” I turned to stare, but rode on. After the

market, over fish and chips at the Midtown pub, a police officer told us the dealer was just using a popular street name for the brand of heroin he was selling that morning.

On the rides I took with my dad, I felt closer to David Simon's Baltimore and a little despondent, though *The Wire* had trained me out of my tendency towards unconditional sympathy. Baltimore's streets are not a set for a Christian Children's Fund commercial. Baltimore's truth, like that of David Simon's show, is its layers of maladjusted disorder. It is a refusal to be good or evil.

But that's not the billboard for a tourist. So, the Baltimore police department found a clean, crude analysis of *The Wire*. At a public event on January 8, 2011, the Police Commissioner excoriated the show, calling it "a smear this city will take decades to overcome" and the "most unfair use of literary license that we've borne witness to."

"You know what Miami gets in their crime show?" The Commissioner said. "They get detectives that look like models, and they drive around in sports cars. What Baltimore gets is this reinforced notion that it's a city full of hopelessness, despair and dysfunction."

But it may be this loss, the stripping of glamorized fantasy, that says everything it needs to say. Maybe Baltimore is a city that's earned this kind of honesty. Maybe the high-budget fantasy missing from *The Wire* could represent every community that was reduced to economic and intellectual rubble when so few people made so much money and so many millions were cast into marginalization. Maybe the indulgent coziness withheld from viewers of *The Wire* invokes exactly what American society should make us feel every day: the discomfort of a culture that places so little value on its human beings.

A few days after the Police Commissioner made his statements about *The Wire*, David Simon released an obliterating response in the *Sun*. "*The Wire* owes no apologies," he said.

“At least not for its address of economic and political priorities and urban poverty, for its discussion of the drug war and the damage done from that misguided prohibition, or for its attention to the cover-your-ass institutional dynamic that leads, say, big-city police commissioners to perceive a fictional narrative, rather than actual, complex urban problems as a cause for righteous concern.” Simon went on to contest the commissioner’s claim that the television show had done damage to Baltimore city itself.

“It is not sixty hours of *The Wire* that will require decades for our city to overcome,” he wrote, but “a more lingering problem might be two decades of bad performance by a police agency more obsessed with statistics than substance, with appeasing political leadership rather than seriously addressing the roots of city violence, with shifting blame rather than taking responsibility.”

The Wire is not the truth of a city. It is only moments, fragments, and shards of lives that may be dismissed as fiction, considered a humanist exploration, or perhaps seen as an invitation to viewers to relate it to their own lives. Baltimore is a chaotic compilation of the daily inhales and exhales of its citizens, but never only that, and certainly not a television program.

Baltimore is all of my failed attempts to understand its violence and decay and addiction. Drug abuse, like everything else in Baltimore, is experienced quite differently depending on your paycheck and skin color. Because the neighborhoods stay so segregated, I only knew of white drug addicts. Six of them are dead, four of whom died in Baltimore while I was growing up there. One of them died just weeks ago. I would love to blame their deaths on the simplicity of a bullet to the head; I would love to close my eyes and imagine Omar

Little firing a well-aimed shotgun, ending lives and giving us the gift of an unblemished, obvious offender.

But none of these people died from television or physical violence. They all died from overdoses, outsiders to the corner since birth but trapped in its promiscuous seduction. No addict I have ever known was raised in poverty. No addict I have ever known was forced to the corner. But their dealers, maybe even friends of DeAndre, born to die on the corner, became the dearest interests of their lives. These white people didn't even need an American Dream. But always, heroin.

The people I knew who went to the corners to get their drugs, sometimes as early as seven in the morning, were always joined by a queue of fiends and junkies. One recovered addict I spoke to at a barbeque a couple years ago told me if he got to his corner too late, he would have to circle the city until a new shift of dealers arrived at his preferred spot. The lines are simply too long. And sometimes it is almost difficult to be white in Baltimore. Sometimes you don't get your drugs because new dealers think you're a cop. Sometimes you get profiled by law enforcement because you're a white person in a black neighborhood and they know the only reason you'd be caught dead on this street is for dope.

When I think back to the week I got my license, I remember the day I got lost in the neighborhood where I was born and watched two men trade money and baggies through car windows at a stoplight. When I watch the corners of *The Wire*, I am reminded of how distant my life is now from the passion and grossly misplaced willpower it takes to get a fix.

Though drugs and violence are never far in Baltimore, the rich have learned how to scale the perimeters of dangerous areas. Tourists are warned in advance; they usually return

home with an anecdote about taking a wrong turn and ending up in “the hood.” My out-of-town friends ride with me in my car, look nervously around, and talk about getting shot at, as if the nurses and janitors waiting for the 2:43AM number eight bus would waste bullets on some anonymous girls in a 1999 yellow Beetle. This is all possible because a bipolar Baltimore makes it so; ignorance is privilege and quite easy to come by if you live on a corner where Girl Scout cookies are dealt instead of drugs.

On August 1st, 2012, just a few months into his thirty-sixth year, DeAndre McCullough was found dead of heroin intoxication in a Baltimore home.

“Never thought I’d make it,” he had told David Simon in a text message on his thirty-fifth birthday in May. “How ‘bout that?”

On the day he turned thirty-five, DeAndre was struggling to outpace the speed of his own monster. A few years before, Simon had gotten him an apartment in New Orleans and offered him crew work on his new show *Treme*, where DeAndre stayed sober until payday. “There are corners here, too,” he told Simon before he asked for a ticket home to Baltimore. Then, in a miraculous sprint, he spent two years sober and started counseling troubled youth in Baltimore. Then, inexplicably, heroin.

A few weeks before his death, DeAndre robbed a Pratt Street pharmacy, leaving with no money and two armfuls of narcotics. He begged his shocked mother to allow him to get sober without the severe, barren conditions of pretrial detention. A few days following his detox and release, DeAndre still had not surrendered himself to the authorities.

Instead, he took more pills and died, a completely exhausted soul, devoured and expelled by his addiction too many times for another battle.

“I never saw a drug addict so unhappy to be high,” Simon reflected in a post on his website following DeAndre’s death. When DeAndre was chasing his habits, needs, and cravings, “he was miserable and angry and ashamed, with every better angel of his nature buried beneath an ash-heap of resentment and self-loathing. When he sobered, you knew it immediately; DeAndre emerged, playful and self-aware and once again open to the world and other people.”

I am tempted by a desire to reduce his death to symbolism. To the harrowing irony of how close DeAndre was to escaping the corner, to a hands-in-my-face head-on-the-table disappointment of him following in his father’s footsteps, to the inescapable ghetto, or the oppressive plight of addiction. But none of these things could explain DeAndre, who was the fifteen year-old pot smoking drug dealer, the seventeen year-old father, the twenty year-old addict, the thirty year-old counselor, or the man who died alone in a friend’s home.

He was a projection himself, a character also. David Simon created and froze him in time. When he died, it had been only six years since I met DeAndre, but twenty-one stood between that story and his real life. He was a young man I knew, who I never really knew. He was a human being, a rapid, violent neuronal impulse in Baltimore’s mind. He was not good or evil or victim or hero, but vulnerably, mesmerizingly, terrifyingly mortal in a world of unresponsive gods.

TRAPPED

Right before he left the apartment, my father laid the traps. There had been a dispute, but he ultimately chose cheese as bait because that was getting stale and the peanut butter in the fridge was my homemade recipe. As he assembled his defenses, my dad invited me to dinner with his girlfriend and their usual crew of down-to-drink forty somethings, but I declined. I had already worked a ten-hour shift at the cafe and my post-work pre-microwaved-dinner lethargy was peaking.

I was particularly tired on this night, sore in my calves and feet, and indulging in paralyzing self-pity that made me want to complain about my lackluster social life and be anti-social at the same time. I could only assume that my father invited me out of obligation. It was an echo from the days when he let me sit with him and his friends at barbeques and they pretended to laugh at my jokes. I thought I was an adult by age eight.

My father and his lady, Jill, were on their way to Hampden, a neighborhood where I lived as an infant. It looks much the same except for The Avenue, which is now a street full of storefront boutiques like Poppy & Stella and Ma Petite Shoes and restaurants with five-letter, one-word names.

The rest of Hampden is just as we left it. The houses are still plopped down on tiny squares of yellow, wiry grass and lined with cheap siding. There are more young people now, but it's still dominated by poor whites who wear sagging, ill-fitting pants below plaid boxers or cartoon-print pajama pants with midriff-exposing camisoles. Too-young parents still drag their too-old children down the street while they walk spiked-collar pit bulls.

My father locked the door from the inside. "I'll have my phone with me. See you later."

“There’s still some of my beef stew in the fridge,” Jill said. *Yeah, sitting in the Dutch oven I bought for Dad, not you.* “Great. See you two later,” I replied.

As they closed the door, I walked into the kitchen in search of a snack. I lingered in the freezer for longer than necessary, sighing into momentary relief from the hot, wet apartment air. I made a waffle sandwich with peanut butter and settled back into the living room futon. The wafflewich disappeared quickly and mindlessly and I tasted almost nothing. Netflix loaded and I noticed my father and Jill had been watching *South Park* again, causing the algorithm to wrongly suggest I might watch *Family Guy* tonight or perhaps I would be interested in *Futurama*? I scrolled extensively, apathetically, before settling on a re-run of *Law and Order*, the one where Ludacris guest stars as a child murderer.

Halfway through my SVU intro sequence sing-a-long, I heard a loud clap from the other room. *Oh my God, the traps.* I paused the show, feeling inconvenienced by the dead mouse. *Now I can’t go into the kitchen for the rest of the night. Not with a dead mouse in there. If I want dinner, I’m going to have to order food.*

Then I felt guilty. *That poor, sad mouse didn’t even have a chance. I should have warned his family that Dad was hoping to kill them. I should have posted an eviction notice or something, given them thirty days at least. That way, they could have packed their things and migrated to another place down the road, maybe a house with too many kids for the parents to care about mice.*

I was shaken, but not inconsolable. I settled back under the cozy down blanket and hit play. Then I heard a noise, like the sound of someone dropping a small book on our linoleum tiles over and over. I tiptoed to the kitchen doorway, stepping as if something might leap onto me. When I looked down, the trap was about a foot away from the trashcan, holding a mouse

in its claws. The animal was lodged there, its fur bunched together at the nape of its neck between the clamp, which pulled at the skin around its face.

His eyes were entirely black, which made them appear wide with fear and panic. His belly was cloud-white against his gray, cigarette ash body. His ears looked disproportionately large; they were translucent and veiny like a leaf. His limbs were frozen, except for when he struggled against the trap, attempting to free himself by flopping around on my kitchen floor.

I was terrified, but I didn't know why. I was scared that he might die, that he might not die, that he might escape and run at me out of rage. His breaths were fast and full. Each inhale and exhale stirred his entire body with such vigor that I thought he might explode. I pulled my flannel shirt over my hands and gnawed hard at the fabric. I looked at his huge glossy eyes and wondered if he was staring back.



We got Lauren and Leo on the same day when I was seven years old. I'm not sure if I was the one who decided we were getting pet rats, but I do remember choosing them myself, out of dozens of caged rodents. Lauren was gray with white-patched paws and Leo was white with a tan splotch above his pink nose. I picked the name Leo because it was my father's astrological sign and I got mad when my parents picked Lauren because I thought it was only a name for girls. I built them play towers and decorated their cage. My friends were scared to sleep in my room at night with the rats, which confused me; I could never see them as anything other than pets. Even today, I don't mind the hairbrush-sized rats that scuttle between dumpsters in Baltimore alleys.

Most days after school, I let Lauren and Leo out of their cage to run around my bedroom. I encouraged them to play in my Playmobile castle or ride in the Barbie Jeep but usually they just wanted to cuddle on top of my blankets or sleep under my bunk beds. They came out from under the bed if I coaxed them with treats, which they would grab greedily between two pink and hand-like front paws before retreating back. Years later, when we were moving, I found about fifty uneaten treats stored in a corner under my bed.

Lauren and Leo were indivisible partners. But when Leo got sick, we had to separate them because Lauren always tried to lick the medicine off Leo's leg. Leo's decline was rapid. When it came time to put him down, we took him off to the vet and said goodbye. We got home later that night after tears and consolatory ice creams. Lauren had died while we were gone, alone in his cage, alone without Leo. I wanted a proper burial, but the land outside our apartment wasn't ours, so we had them cremated. Their remains spent months in a wooden box I painted and bedazzled. Before we moved out, I spread their ashes outside my window.



A deep lump was lodged in my throat. I called my father.

“Dad, a trap caught the mouse but it's still alive. What am I supposed to do? He keeps struggling and trying to break free.” I stared in from the doorway. A crimson teardrop of blood was running down the mouse's back. I knew what my father would say.

“Shit. Kill the mouse. Drown it.”

“What? No! I can't do that. No way. Dad, no. No.”

“Okay, alright, just calm down. Then wait for me to come home. I'll take care of it when I get back. Okay?” There was noise in the background. Dad was at the bar.

“Dad, I can’t. He’s suffering. He keeps trying to escape and he’s scared.”

“I don’t know what to tell you, Hannah. Kill the mouse or leave it. I have to go.”

When I hung up the phone, the lump in my throat had grown. I tried to will myself into calm and breathe my tears away. I paced around and talked to myself. *Prove to Dad you’re not as dramatic and silly as you sound on the phone. It’s just a mouse.* I said that over and over, but always ended up thinking, *but it’s a mouse. A walking, squeaking, struggling thing. And it wants to be alive.*

When I got tired of listening to myself, I called my best friend, who told me to go for a walk and clear my head. “Maybe he’ll die by the time you get back,” she said, hopefully. Then I called my boyfriend, who was in Virginia. He dealt with my tears well, but then he tried to google ‘killing trapped mice’ so I lied and told him I needed to go.

I kept moving around the tiny apartment. Even in the bedroom I could hear the trap flop against the floor. Every noise brought to mind the sight of the panting mouse and his unfocused, shadowy eyes and fur, gray like Lauren’s. I knew the terribly selfish, evil thing would be to wait for my father to get home while the mouse writhed and suffered. He needed my help to die.

I took the walk. I ambled along the city street that runs next to our apartment. I stuck to lighted areas in a vague attempt to apply the learned caution of a young, solitary woman in a city at night. I walked to the Royal Farms and almost bought myself some American Spirits because that’s what my Mom smokes and because I wouldn’t know what else to buy. Three trips past the ice cream selection later and I had unsuccessfully freed the lump from my throat. The checkout staff started to leer. Perhaps they thought I was the kind of white girl who

would steal a pint of Chunky Monkey. I walked out empty-handed and headed home underneath the streetlights.

I wondered if this was what being an adult would be like forever. For the rest of my life, I might work a restaurant job and become a social recluse and eat peanut butter waffle sandwiches and have to kill things that don't pay rent. I might have a best friend, a boyfriend, and parents to call, but no one will ever get blood on their hands and kill a mouse for me.

The kitchen still echoed with the mouse's flops when I got back from my pointless walk. Every time he struggled, I winced and cringed. I walked down to the basement and got some gardening gloves and a small bucket from my landlord's pile of junk. In the kitchen, I filled the bucket with water and dumped every ice cube we had into it. When the water tingled and hurt to touch, I put the gloves on and walked over to the mouse. His limbs froze as I came close and his entire body pulsed with the rhythm of his breath, which was slower and strenuous now. The blood soaked his back. I picked him up, silently willing him not to struggle. I looked into his eyes for a fraction of a second, and I saw in him the face of my inseparable rats.

I wondered if my trapped mouse had a partner or a lover, if he had enjoyed his time in our home. I hoped we had prolonged his life, sheltered him from predators, and been lazy enough with our cleaning to leave good scraps for eating and stowing. I wanted to tell him he had been a good tenant. He was quiet during the day and respectful of our open containers; he never splurged on the fancy stuff or even bit through boxes. Sometimes he got careless and left tiny stool behind, but that didn't bother me nearly as much as the way my father slurped his coffee in the morning. I wondered what right I had to end the mouse's life. I plunged him into the icy water.

He struggled with newfound energy. He tried to swim out of his airless death chamber, but I held him below the surface. I sobbed.

“I’m so sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry, please, please, I’m so sorry.”

Finally, as if in slow motion, his body ceased. The trap felt lighter. His body seemed to shrink in the absence of being. I continued to weep, but I held him down until I was sure I had taken his life. I didn’t know what to do with the body, still limply attached to the floating trap. I thought about burying him, but our landlord would have taken me to court for messing up his grass. I took the bucket outside and set him down on the stoop. I sat with him on the steps for a long time, breathing the dense summer air.

When I went inside, I called my father. I started to cry again; it felt like a dark, evil confession coming from my fingertips. “I killed the mouse.” I apologized again, out loud, to no one. “I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay,” my father replied. “Don’t worry about the rest. I’ll take care of it.”

CHARM CITY GETS REAL

Against the odds, Patapsco Arena tries to be glamorous tonight. The building stands isolated on a sparse block in an infamously jilted south Baltimore neighborhood, its soggy and windowless off-white frame surrounded by crumbling tractor-trailer parking lots, empty body shops, and forlorn strip malls. But tonight, from a side door just around the building from the usual bingo games, there emanates an exceptional, glitter-filled commotion: the 4th annual “Know Your Status” Free Ball.

Tonight’s festivities are promoted by the Baltimore City Health Department and planned by leaders in the city’s ballroom scene, a community largely composed of black lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) individuals who attend competitive performance events—or drag balls—in tiaras, sportswear, homemade gowns, and street clothes where they cheer, talk trash, and walk in costume categories against competitors on a runway. The spoils of status, money, and trophies have been feeding national rivalries and contests in this community for over four decades.

The focus this evening is young black men who have sex with men (MSM), a large portion of the ball scene’s participants, with the hopes that the Health Department can earn the community’s trust and that the free testing and non-profit vendors will turn an established scene into a viable habitat for HIV prevention and intervention.

It’s been thirty-four years since the first report of HIV in our country—twenty-seven since Ronald Reagan publicly said the word “AIDS” for the first time—but the HIV epidemic is raging in Baltimore for some as if no one has noticed. This year, when the CDC released national data about HIV infection, Baltimore had the 3rd highest estimated AIDS diagnosis rate of any major metropolitan area in the country. 38 percent of Baltimore’s MSM are

infected, with unrecognized status rates estimated around 60 percent—both figures more than twice national averages.

Young, black MSM continue to carry the biggest burden of HIV. “They are the last ignored population,” Jordan White, who works as a community liaison for Johns Hopkins School of Medicine, says. As of 2010, young African Americans made up 55% of the new infections in MSM and accounted for more new infections than any other subgroup by race, ethnicity, age, and sex.

“Baltimore has a huge dearth of resources for these men,” Mr. White continues. “The fact that we can’t think of any single organization that specifically assists young black gay men, considering the needs we have, is especially telling.”

On paper, Baltimore—which boasts the top public health school in the nation, houses one of the best medical communities in the world, and receives the bulk of Maryland’s \$96 million dollars of federal funding for HIV—should have all the marks of a vigorous city with thriving and successful health programs. But last year, *AIDS and Behavior* published an analysis of HIV in young MSM in five U.S. cities—Baltimore, Miami, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and New York—all showing stable HIV rates except Baltimore, where prevalence increased, especially for black men.

But tonight, at the ball, no one is here to mourn.

The room inside the Patapsco Arena is thin, long, and ugly—unsuited for the glamour of thigh-high boots, deep red lipsticks, big hair, and bling that fill it. Next to the entrance, two chattering volunteers are restocking a bar with pink lemonade and water. The vendors, most

of them conspicuously white, sit behind wooden tables in the front of the room and wait for people to look at their pamphlets, condoms, and freebies. In the middle of the room, there is a wooden stage where the competition will take place. The trophies are lined up and a club bass is pumping, which clashes with rows of fluorescent lighting above us. Free HIV testing tables are arranged behind a black curtain in the back.

The modern ball scene, and all its rituals and practices, dates back to 1970s New York City. It was an artistic response to the plight of young black men—especially those who were gay, bisexual, or queer—in a post-civil rights movement America. As the subculture spread through major cities in the country, the balls continued to promise brief chances at freedom, fame, and admiration for its children. Drag became something more than cross-dressing: it became a way of recognizing the unanimous performance that was life for any queer black man.

The community is still organized into houses—nationally recognized names like Revlon, Mizrahi, and Ebony—with local chapters. For many, houses represent a place of validation. They offer ball children refuge in new kinship networks, ones that may contrast previous social isolation and rejection. “This is the new meaning of family,” Dorian Corey said in *Paris is Burning*, a 1990 documentary about the New York City ball scene.

Carlton Smith, president and founder of Baltimore Black Pride, was in the ball community in his early adulthood. Now in his sixties, he can reflect on what that time in his life offered him then and others now. “The ball brings visibility to the community. It creates a family—an extended family, a network—where young people feel free and are able to express who they are without being discriminated against. They are welcome. They see something close to that modern family that they wish to have and that they can embrace.”

The balls themselves developed just as much importance as the connections formed within the community. In *Paris is Burning*, a man on his way into a ball says of the events, “it’s like crossing into the looking glass, Wonderland. You go in there and you feel...you feel one-hundred percent right.”

As people trickle in to the arena at the Free Ball—in their jeans and t-shirts, platform heels and mini-skirts, suits, and dresses—there is an overwhelming giddiness. Attendees walk around in clumps, arm-in-arm, reuniting with old friends. Various houses have claimed their round tables and people gather around, grooming each other, fixing make-up, arranging hairstyles, and catching up. Every once in a while, someone stands up to practice their vogue—a style of dance attributed to the 1980s Harlem ballroom scene and characterized by symmetrical, rhythmic movements of the hands, wrists, and body.

One particularly glamorous woman with shimmering skin, golden and brown curls, and a wide smile sits at a table with her house, tapping away at a smart phone. When asked if tonight is her first ball, she shakes her head, laughing. She has been to almost twenty by now after entering the scene at 18. “The ball really gave me confidence,” she says.

A rotund man one table over, dressed in a red tracksuit and wearing chains around his neck and wrists, has traveled from Pennsylvania for the nostalgia. He was prominent in the ball scene in the late 1990s. “I found a real family there,” he says.

Kurt Ragin, who now works full-time at a Baltimore youth clinic, became an active member of the House of Revlon in his late teens. He left the scene when the competition and acclaim became too addicting. “But still, there’s no question,” he says, smiling and surveying

the room. “The ball gave me confidence, it gave me a voice, and it gave me street smart intelligence.”

About thirty minutes after the ball is scheduled to start, Keith Holt, a member of the ballroom scene and an activist who helps plan the ball, grabs the mic and welcomes the crowd of about 200. He advises everyone to text their friends and tell them to hurry up.

“Oh, and people, people, people. Let’s remember: tonight is not just a ball,” he says. “It is a conference. It’s about bringing people together and talking about the issues and getting support.” With that, Keith introduces the vendors and offers them the stage so that they can talk about the services they offer.

Immediately, the crowd is lost. As if on cue, almost everyone starts talking and laughing or becomes distracted by a phone or outfit assembly.

“...and we offer group counseling, free testing, and referral services...”

It sounds like an elementary school assembly where no one will even bother to whisper when the principal stands up to speak. The clapping between introductions is sparse, the personal conversations loud, and the chairs at the HIV testing counter empty.

A vast majority of the hundreds in attendance tonight have felt the effects of stigma and marginalization as a result of their race, sexuality, socioeconomic situation, or HIV status but the challenge is more complex than gathering resources to serve a community willing to spring to action on its own behalf. There is resistance on the ground and no one seems to know exactly why.

“We’re climbing a pretty steep hill,” one of the main organizers at the Baltimore City Health Department said a few days before the ball. “It comes down to the fact that the biggest thing working against us is these youths who don’t think anything could ever happen to them along with the stigma and everything else that goes with being an African American man, especially one who has sex with men.”

Dr. Goode-Cross, a counselor at Chase Brexton Health Services with research background in the life stressors of black gay men, also points out: “There was a morbid, healthy amount of fear and paranoia when AIDS was coming to be, which was a big factor. Now, I don’t know that there’s so much of a concern. That issue of grief and loss was so huge then. Now, these young men have some of those needs satiated. In some ways, what they have is good...good enough.”

African American MSM are not the only ones that may think themselves invincible, though they pay the direst consequences. According to several studies in the past decade, there appears to be a new, persistent conception of HIV/AIDS among young people as a historical relic, a non-threat, or a problem for the developing world.

On this topic, one young woman admitted as a white, heterosexual college student: “It’s hard to disassociate HIV with this image I have in my mind of 1990’s era New York City or a low-income country. As a student of public health, I can logically explain how HIV exists, but in my gut I always feel that the disease has semi-faded. It’s hard for someone from my demographic to really conceive...hard to think about HIV as something that my peers might be dealing with.”

Some argue that Baltimore's black MSM become infected and stay unaware of their status at such high rates because they are missing a sense of 'community ownership'. To some doctors and public health specialists, this means people within a demographic taking activism and norm shifting into their own hands. To its critics, this is a problematic way to view HIV prevention and intervention, one that improperly attempts to pare the disease down to good and bad choices.

It existed once before. At the beginning of the AIDS epidemic, while the government, the public, and a largely white feminist movement ignored them, members of the LGBT community were successfully rallying for themselves in organizations like ACT-UP.

Kurt Ragin has devoted himself to this example. "I was inspired by a real need for younger faces in my own demographic. We have grown so immune to actually hearing the voices of youth." Ragin certainly does not stand alone—he is one of many to turn his history in the ball scene into activism and outreach. But, for now, he represents a small collection of outliers. Community activism from the 1980s has been mythicized, not normalized.

The painful truth is that community ownership hardly seems like a fair fight here in Baltimore, where it would be asked of a fragmented, isolated group of men who are often silent about their sexuality and know HIV only as a small part of the cosmic number of institutionalized agents stacked against them.

Dr. Carl Latkin of the Bloomberg School of Public Health sees it as an endless string of rhetorical questions. They piled up, unanswered, and hung in the air of a phone conversation. "How does the MSM community really own this and how does HIV become an integral part of the community fiber?" he wondered. "How can we accept HIV? How do we

make this important, empower people, promote ownership of this? At the same time, do we really expect the community to, without resources and a sense of a future, to just deal with another issue? How do we do all this without just saying ‘it’s your problem, you fix it’?”

Sara McClean, who has worked in Baltimore as a community dietitian for a non-profit that provides health services to low-income people with HIV, has also spoken out about these embedded structural issues. In her work, she experienced the racial and economic divide between community organizations and the populations they aspire to help, as well as the steady supply of stigma and blame cast in the direction of many HIV-positive African American MSM.

“If you’ve had sex, even protected sex, *even once*, you still have risk. A tattoo, blood transfusion, surgery...all of these things introduce risk. Even though they are small, the point remains: when you engage in anything that can exchange fluids, you still have risks. So many of us have made choices that could have given us HIV. A huge reason I and so many other privileged people don’t have it boils down to luck, not choices.”

In a critical review of almost 200 studies, Dr. Gregorio Millet at the Center for Disease Control found that black MSM are actually less likely than non-black MSM to: engage in unprotected anal intercourse, have a high number of male partners in their lifetime, or have a high number of male partners within the past year. According to the data garnered, black MSM were more than twice as likely to use condoms and had a 50% higher chance of having been tested for HIV within the past twelve months.

Dr. Millet found that the factors contributing to the unbalanced prevalence of the disease in African American MSM are inseparable from social contributors. Among the 69 risk factors he studied, Dr. Millet found that HIV-positive black MSM were more likely to be

undiagnosed, lack health insurance, have limited access to drug therapy, see a health provider irregularly, and have drug regimen adherence problems. The unrecognized positive status rates among black MSM particularly work to raise a black male's risk at every sexual encounter. At the end of his study, which was presented at the 2012 International AIDS Conference, Dr. Millet and his colleagues conclude: "HIV epidemics in black MSM are inextricably linked to social and economic environments that should be considered and addressed to successfully stem disparities in HIV infection."

Dr. Goode Cross has anecdotally noticed these patterns in his clientele through group therapy he facilitates. "It's not like white men are any more protected from this disease," he said. "But, by and large, they aren't sleeping with Baltimore's black men. These guys have a small pool of sexual partners with a high percent of infected folks."

"We like to moralize about the way people make decisions to engage with these activities and other people," Sara McClean remarks. "But that is not science. That is social. And it makes it so damn difficult to fight this disease. People stigmatize and point fingers because it's easier to believe that someone else got what they deserved. We need to fight that kind of thinking vehemently."

Moralization and related stigma go past the shaming and social isolation of black MSM communities: they are woven into the decisions people make about sex, too. A 2006 literature review in the *Journal of Health Disparities* highlighted a body of research that strongly links stigmatization and a lack of social support—both especially common for black MSM—with risky sexual behavior. Stigmatization is also related to depression, low self-esteem, and poor coping skills, all predictors of risky sexual behavior. According to a 2006

study, HIV-positive MSM often report ostracism and stigmatizing attitudes from HIV-negative people within their community. Over 50% of young MSM of color experience violence or harassment because of their sexual behavior.

This is evident in the endurance and prominence of “realness” at the ball. Realness is usually a category in which judges evaluate contestants based on the believability of their having come by their gender performance naturally; to seem straight; to pass. The judges adopt the persona of our authoritarian society and have been known to reject people who do not adhere to gender norms in their dress and conduct.

Dorian Corey explains in *Paris is Burning* that realness is anything but genuine. It is “to be able to blend...to look as much as possible like you are straight” in a world where, outside the ball, passing may be your only authorization to survival and acceptance.

“Realness is more than a category,” reads a description for the Baltimore Free Ball’s categories. “It has been described as a way of life! Stigma and fear of isolation by peers have stopped so many from being tested and treated. Come take a stand against stigma and HIV by gracing the runway with a red ribbon.”

Dr. Goode-Cross argues this is another issue that makes being a black MSM in Baltimore especially difficult. “Race plays into everything,” he says. “And we see something different here, too, at the community-level. There is tolerance of homo-negativity within African American communities. We don’t talk often enough about how racism exists in the day-to-day elements that make it more likely that a black man will only be able to have relationships in a small subset of high-risk folks.”

Once the stone has been turned over, the effects of community and structural discrimination seem inexhaustible. Dr. Goode-Cross, who is relatively new to the city, also argues that Baltimore's black MSM experience severe, lasting effects of institutionalized racism, which produces what he calls the "ghettoized" presence of HIV in the African American MSM community.

Jordan White agrees and argues that the biggest takeaway from every conversation about HIV is that the health needs of these men will not be met until the structural issues are addressed. Black American MSM often lack access to healthcare, jobs, sexuality education, and social support experienced by whites or heterosexuals, who have rates of infection that are about one third those of black MSM, despite the fact that blacks account for only 12% of the U.S. population.

"All of these issues—employment, basic needs, housing—determine the decisions people make in their lives," Mr. White says. "People have this idea that it's okay for someone to live in these conditions. If we had these large numbers of white women who were dealing with HIV, it would be a completely different situation."

It also seems that the young, black MSM population pays the price twice for persistent inequalities. More poor blacks means less minority representation in influential places. "This is not a city with a particularly present black middle class, and this has huge effects," Dr. Goode-Cross says.

Indeed, according to U.S. Census data from 2008, in Baltimore City, half of all African American households bring home less than \$35,000, though only one-third of white homes fall under this level. And the incidence of poverty for African American city residents

is almost double that of white residents. Dr. Goode-Cross attributes this, along with other factors, to his inability to find many culturally competent therapists and clinicians of color to serve black MSM in Baltimore.

This issue has gotten national attention in the field of physician care. While 1 in 8 Americans are black, only 1 in 15 doctors are. It is well documented that racial concordance between doctors and patients is correlated with quality of care and patient trust and satisfaction.

This has particular consequences for the HIV-infected African American population. A 2011 in *AIDS and Behavior* summarized some findings of the past decade: most minorities do not see same-race providers, racial minorities have stronger relationships with same-race providers, better relationships with providers correlates to more drug therapy, better adherence, and better outcomes, and black providers have tended to introduce new HIV drugs to black patients quicker than white doctors do with their black patients.

In a 2005 survey of providers, study authors concluded that racial biases affect treatment decisions and adequate prescription care for minority patients who need it. When African American patients received care from a provider of the same race, the pre-treatment gap was 348 days. However, when African Americans received care from white providers, the gap increased to 459 days. The doctors concluded this gap could be accounted for by provider biases about African American patients' adherence to treatment.

When Dr. Lisa Cooper completed a study of Baltimore doctors' implicit associations about race in 2012, she found that doctors had a moderate implicit bias against blacks and associated whites more strongly with compliance even though they had no consciously negative attitudes toward minorities.

As Dr. Carl Latkin says: “It’s one thing to say that everyone should play by the rules. But the game is not the same for [African American MSM] and neither are the consequences.”

Through decades of HIV combat in Baltimore, tension and distrust have permeated racial boundaries. According to one senior public health advisor at the Baltimore City Health Department, competition for limited money and resources has created Darwinian antagonism between community organizations in Baltimore. “When everyone sits down to write grant proposals, no one collaborates,” he said. “There is no trust. It’s all a cult of personality with these leaders.”

The 2012-14 Maryland HIV Plan, published by the Prevention and Health Promotion Administration, also cited reports from community meetings that “the referral system that exists between providers, if it exists at all, is ineffective and outdated. Rather than combining resources...clients report little-to-no collaboration between providers.” Other people who contributed to the report discussed a “competitive” atmosphere between providers and community organizations, all stemming from inadequate resources and cuts to funding.

Other skirmishes arise from conflicting beliefs about what constitutes progress. Researchers and health professionals—those with the most funding and resources—are often at ideological odds with other organizations.

“The big guys are all about numbers and data,” Kurt Ragin says. “And, at the end of the day, I don’t think you should treat these youth as numbers. They are people. They have feeling and emotions. And youth have grown so used to being treated this way by organizations that claim to help. Now they are numb.”

Ultimately, one of the greatest crimes committed against Baltimore's most vulnerable HIV population might be the very way in which our city approaches helping them.

The ball is more than an hour behind schedule—though the crowd has noticeably swollen—when Phyllis Burnett, a silver-haired woman with a country accent, takes the stage. She makes a final plug for safe sex tonight by pointing out the truckload of condoms strewn about the room.

Glen Olthoff, who has been one of the Free Ball's main planners in the Health Department, stands comfortably in the middle of the crowd that surrounds the lifted stage. He is tall and lean with white hair and wears jeans, an event t-shirt, and black skater shoes. He shrugs when asked how he feels tonight is going, but not out of indifference. Mr. Olthoff is a humanist and also dismissive of the number crunching on which many health professionals rely.

“Most of this event is just about proving that we care and that we will keep showing up. And we have done that for four years now. And, yes, we're still not where we need to be. But if we can forget this ‘cultural competency’ stuff for a minute, look people in the eye and talk to them like humans, if they leave the ball feeling positive and good, that means something. It's just another reason I don't mind making this happen.”

Still, since the annual ball started four years ago, the numbers haven't gone down and the incidence of HIV infection in African American MSM still rises. At about \$7,000—a tiny portion of the city's \$1.4 million outreach budget—the cost of the ball makes it a relatively efficient method of testing, but people don't really come to the ball to get tested.

“Just because you’re young and black and gay doesn’t mean you’re in the ball scene,” said Dr. Karin Tobin, who researches black MSM social networks through the Bloomberg School of Public Health. “There are folks who wouldn’t be comfortable with formal structures or networks for a variety of reasons.”

Jordan White, too, says the “ball community is a piece of the story, a small niche that does not represent everyone in the larger population.”

These opinions people exhaust Mr. Olthoff. He sighs heavily when asked about his challengers. “Sure, this is a small group,” he says, gesturing to the people around him who are cheering and clapping or taking videos on cell phone of the ball community leaders walking the runway to represent their houses. “But it’s also not a rich one. These people need help. Not everything positive you do can be measured. People are always asking each other what the best thing is to do, what will get the most results. Say you test ten out of a hundred people and get ten results. How much is that worth? No one can give me a good answer.”

Kurt Ragin, who has attended the Free Ball every year and who used to be active in the scene, commends the effort and says he has noticed differences, some which escape measurement. “The Free Ball introduces people to the ballroom scene and introduces the ballroom scene to a cause that they can take part in. And, what’s more, the BCHD has gone to great lengths, even with mixed reviews from other organizations, to show that they believe in this community, not just what the funders say.”

At the same time, he recognizes the way in which his community is not perfect. When asked what he would tell a young person he knew who was trying to enter the scene, he said: “The ballroom should not be a substitution for an entire family because everyone always has

their own issues. When the beat has stopped, everyone has their own separate lives to live. I would give someone this advice: don't lose yourself to the hype."

A couple hours in, the audience still encases the stage to clap, laugh, and cheer with electric, contagious energy. The vendors and volunteers abandon their tables to watch from the peripheries. People take the stage and strut with tangible empowerment.

Dance dominates some categories, where participants freestyle on the stage with striking endurance, vie for the most eye-catching and outrageous moves, and antagonize their competitors with movement.

Other categories are "open to all" (OTA) and gender and sexuality plays no role—muscular men in thongs go up against full-figured women in body suits and platform heels. Many of the categories have attempted to incorporate safe sex and HIV testing. To compete in the "Sex Siren" category, for example, dress the color of your favorite condom package. For "Realness with a Twist," find a creative way to add a magnum condom to your outfit.

When the music stops each round, the audience whoops, laughs, and claps into the buoyant atmosphere of the arena, while the MC, sweating and painting across the stage, shouts over the vigorous crowd.

Over and over, as people are slowly narrowed down and eliminated within a category, the contestants dance, vogue, and blow kisses to the judges until a trophy is released from its display and sent to the house it belongs. In the fluorescent room, the ball feels like the center of everything.

It won't go perfectly. At one point, a fight will break out. A couple women will lunge at each other until their house brothers and sisters form a wall around them that leads out the back of the arena, security following close behind.

Nikia Revlon, a composed 29 year-old ball veteran in a revealing leather dress and velvet-red hair, will sigh and say: "I don't really know what's going on but at the end of the day, these girls always wanna fight. This is why I don't like to come out. There's just hatred and jealousy."

Nikia will back up for the camera that films her and spin around playfully, showing off, explaining how people get intimidated by someone who looks beautiful at the ball. "It's all supposed to be fun and love and it's about getting tested for HIV. You know, because there are a lot of girls here that have it." She will continue to strut for the camera for a few moments, smiling and laughing, as the brief, tense moment passes.

Into the morning hours, after the Ball is over, Nikia Revlon and another grand and curvy woman in a tight yellow dress leave the arena and chat at a video camera. There is a police officer waiting for them at the entrance, looking uncomfortable.

The women discuss the Realness category, a title Nikia walked for earlier in the night. The large woman argues that Nikia embodies the title beyond the ball scene because she bartends, works, and lives her life as a woman.

"Realness is dealing with society," she says as she launches into a short speech about what the ball means outside of the drag, competition, trophies, and moments of glory.

“The ballroom scene is an illusion for the night. When you go home, it is what it is. When I go home, I got a 14 year-old to worry about, I got to take care of an 11 year-old. I got his homework to worry about.

“There’s life outside of this,” she continues. “Deal with it.”

TALKING SHOP

From my seat at the receptionist's desk, I can tell my mother is lying about me again. The story is ancient: when I was three, I broke my head open and got seven stitches. It's true that I was running around the house naked with my eyes closed, resisting my father's attempts to take me away from my mother and her kiddie pool. The rest is fabricated. She didn't put the butterfly bandage on, my father did. And there was no city bus with the helpful strangers; we took uncle Strazz's car to the hospital. Then there's the punch line, when I sit up in the operating room after a traumatic stitching, wipe my tears, and say: "Thank you, doctors. What a good job you did with my head." Actually, I flailed and screamed.

"She was just the most polite child," my mother says from her station. All the women coo and laugh and waste no time before applying the story to their own children, anything to keep talking. I smile and swivel out of my chair to refill the coffee carafe and see if any hair needs sweeping.

Hair salons were my summer camp. I used to sit in the shampoo chairs, feet dangling, and try to sweep the floors or get head massages from the muscular Hispanic girls with callused hands who scrubbed scalps for a living. My mom moved to different shops several times in my childhood, always taking me—the eager salon mascot—with her. Then, when she grew tired of an unpredictable schedule and manic bosses, my mother started her own business. She opened in our new neighborhood, a historically poor white section of East Baltimore that is now being replaced by intellectual liberals, lesbians, and grow-your-own-food-ers.

The Chop Shop is not like the other salons where I spent my youth. It matches our neighborhood's temperament, which means no exposed brick, ambiguous landscape

photographs, fake bamboo, or New Age music. There is a corkboard where clients post flyers about local businesses. The walls are covered with local artists' work; some abstracts, plenty of nudes. Every week, the shop goes through a couple pounds of coffee that they buy from Zeke's, the local roastery owned by bearded hipsters whose wives get their hair done at the Shop. If her clients don't want coffee, they help themselves to mugs of boxed wine. I have served plenty of tired mothers a glass or three before noon.

“That's not true, Mom. You used to let me watch TV all the time. Especially at night during the *X-Files*.” I said this once in the Shop after school, when my mother's child psychologist client was talking about the dangers of cable and my mom wanted to look like a good parent.

“That's not true, Mom. You had Emily in your belly before you got married! Remember? You thought you would be fat for your wedding dress!” That was after she tried to tell an expectant mother this made-up, but romantic, story about conceiving my sister in Mexico on her wedding night.

Children embarrass their parents all the time, but bringing attention to my mother's falsified stories risked jeopardizing the world she created at her workstation. The hair salon is not a place for truth. It is a place for overly convenient similarities between strangers, a place for my mother to be a natural performer.

A lot of different folks come into the salon. My mother bleaches Nathan Sterner's hair every couple months; he is one of my favorite voices on Baltimore's local NPR broadcast. When he comes in, his eerily familiar voice echoes around the Shop. More than once, I have made him say “this is your NPR news station” in the chair. My mother's trendiest clients

seem to have the shortest hair; they look chic and have forearm tattoos and walk around in patent leather ballet flats. There are a few blueblood Baltimore ladies who have been with my mom for over a decade. They have the longest hair, the shortest roots, and always tell my mom to make them look like Katherine Heigl or Jennifer Aniston. They call the Shop “charming” and “cozy” and complain about the parallel parking outside.

I’m convinced eighty percent of my mother’s clientele are librarians. When the Book Ladies come in, they wear flowing linen tops with oversized buttons, unflattering skirts, and necklaces with big, fake jewels on them.

“Oh, girl, sure! I *loved* that book. Cover to cover in like two days,” my mother will say. I can’t remember when she last had time for a book.

Many of the clients are also overworked, single mothers. On Saturdays or Sundays, those women come in wearing loose jeans and oversized summer camp tees from a rogue laundry basket. They come to the salon once every six months or right before their Mother’s Day gift cards expire.

My mother wears platform heels to work most days. She takes them off briefly in the back room when she mixes color, grabs fresh towels, or has a cigarette on the porch and by lunchtime, she’s got replacement flats on. She always falls short of looking totally flawless. Half of her dresses are stained with bleach and there are hairs of every color on her clothes at all times. Her hair is the most erratically maintained thing about her. It changes colors on a whim and oscillates between being fried straight or wavy and voluminous. A stylist hardly has time for a cut, so when she gets frustrated with her hair, my mother will impatiently hack at her own bangs and ends after work.

Many of the clients are strangers to each other when they come into the salon. My mother takes great care in introducing the women. She designs the conversations and introduces topics they can all agree on (Monsanto kills! We totally thought Amy Poehler and Will Arnett would make it! We need more funding for public education!). She correctly assumes everyone in the room is liberal. Celebrity gossip is a great fallback. If they get to talking about their children, they may never leave.

In many ways, the women are alike, and they all know their role in the room. They know the topics to avoid and they know which stories to tell. They know how to apologize to my mother: “Lisa, I don’t know what happened. The at-home hair dye was recommended by *Real Simple* and it said light auburn on the box. I never expected it would turn out like this.” Most of them complain less than they’d like to and know that no one wants to know about disloyal partners, troubled children, or dying parents.

The women talk the same way they probably talked on their first day of college. They maximize speaking time so they can edge their way into monopolization and assert their knowledge. They pretend to be in a conversation when they are really waiting for a chance to tell the room that they are mothers, wives, soccer coaches, Lego Club leaders, or teachers. They go to the Shop to be selfish—to indulge in themselves in a haircut and a temporary ego boost amongst unknown contemporaries.

“Oh yes my oldest, you know, that cutie pie sitting up at the front desk, she’s been reading since she was three. I swear it. I remember when I bought her the first Harry Potter book and she devoured that thing in about two days.”

I started reading when I was five. My aunt bought me the first Harry Potter book on my eighth birthday. I felt too young to read it, so I made my parents do it before bed. It took us a month.

I have learned to stop being a snitch. I welcome clients, offer them coffee or wine, and think about this place, as much a sanctuary for my mother as it has been for her clients. Her own business is her dream, and she has built a fantasy life inside of it. In the shop world, I was once a precious, sharp, easy, delightful child. My mother was patient and forgiving and had time for things like knitting, yoga, and farmer's markets. Mostly, none of us were any of these things. Part of the magic is that my mom gets to be a new person every time a different client sits in her chair. I have wanted so very much to be the child my mother created, to live our fantasy life. I wanted to be the toddler whose mom took her for daily hikes around the city, because when my mom was working two jobs, we didn't have time for that kind of thing.

My own flirtation with fibbing owes itself to the hair salon, where the self is a construction, where you are taken at your word, where people want to judge you and you let them. I used to lie. It comes as easily to me as it does to my mother, always has. Once I convinced a preschool classmate that the "HB" on pencils stood for Hannah Boes and was a gesture of love from my grandfather, inventor of the number two pencil.

Later in life, I learned that all human connection is a series of performances, that we are all in the business of telling lies until they feel true, that there is no such thing as a factual story. Even later, there was the great relief that I could write truth without worrying too much about the facts. Though I suppose I've always known that.

One afternoon last fall, three women came into the salon. They all had appointments with my mother. One, who looked to be in her fifties, had dusty gray hair. The younger woman, probably in her early forties, was wearing a long floral dress and had brown bed-head curls. The youngest girl looked college-aged. She wore corduroy shorts that buttoned over her hips and leopard print converse sneakers. They went straight past the receptionist and waiting room without pausing to be helped—my mom’s closest clients do this. They found my mother as her usual, fabulous self. “Hey sexy mamas, how’s everyone today? What’s up, Susie Pants?” My mother hugged the youngest girl and called her Niko.

“It’s been one fucked up week,” Susie, the curly-haired woman, said. She stepped close to my mother and lowered her voice. “Peter was shot getting out of his car outside our house on Thursday night,” she said. “He was killed.”

Susie had sat in my mother’s chair many times before, talking about politics, music, school, work, and love. Her husband, Peter had an ex-wife with whom Susie was on great terms; apparently she was lovely. Sometimes Peter’s daughter, Niko, would also come for funky highlights or bright colored tips. Now the three women had materialized in my mother’s shop, together, numbed but raw with grief. The room was silent for a long time. All my mother could do was bring them into her strong, pillowing embrace. Then she went out to the front desk with some instructions: no one was allowed back to her room for the next two hours.

In their grief sanctuary, my mother started to heal the women the only way she knew how. She touched them. She worshipped their hair and painted every strand with her brush before tucking them away gently into foiled folds. She showed the women their faces in the

mirror so they could see their beauty and turned them away when it was too overwhelming. She let them do the talking.

The women shared stories about Peter; they grieved and cried and laughed. They talked about the blessing of knowing him and of the happy collision of their own lives because of him. Sometimes they were in a stupor of inaudible thoughts.

At least that's what Mom will tell me about that day. I wasn't there.

"I just felt lucky to be in the midst of their power, no matter how gut wrenching the grief was, you know?" My mother will sigh. "I am blessed to have been through the avalanche of those people's lives." She will stare off into the cityscape beyond our backyard and release cigarette smoke from her lips slowly so that it creeps up her face before dissolving into the air. The idea of it all is poetic and beautiful. I will keep quiet. She really does tell a good story.

THE HOUSE THAT HAWKS BUILT

“I know why you’re here,” my grandfather says to me. We are drinking strong double shots while steel cut oats bubble on the stovetop. It is the first morning that feels like fall and the farm fields stretch out beyond the kitchen window. The horses idle about a hundred yards away. My grandmother is fox hunting just beyond the lake. The dogs lounge on the floor beneath my feet, outnumbering us.

“You’re trying to find ancestors to name, people to look to.” He tilts his head down and looks at me from above his rimless glasses. This is the face he makes when he is waiting for me to admit something so I say, “I guess I might be.”

“Hannah, people have been naming their ancestors for thousands of years and looking to them for help. Do you want to know something? I pray to ours every day. When I need something to happen, I pray to our ancestors, the Hawkses. I name them, each one of them. Then I ask for help. It works every time.

“I pray to them everyday. And it still makes me so emotional.” He is suddenly teary; his deep voice quakes. He takes a white handkerchief from his shirt pocket, wipes the corners of his moistening eyes and collects himself. The succinctness of his affect astonishes me.

“It’s time for you to find your ancestors, to name them, to tap into the collectivity, to reach the God within all of us that comes from our blood.” He takes my hands and closes his eyes. “Let’s try.”

We pray.

“Hi, everyone,” he says, as though he is giving a toast to a room of old friends. “I want to introduce you to my granddaughter. I want you to pay attention to her and look out for her. Listen to her when she calls because she is yours. She is of you.”

He takes a breath and exhales, the sound something between a sigh and someone trying to cool down a hot drink. And then he starts to name them.

First, Major Wells Joseph Hawks, the mayor of Charles Town, Virginia. He was a chief commissary in General Stonewall Jackson's staff during the Civil War. The two were close, on and off the battlefield. According to Jackson's Corps' chief surgeon, at the end of Stonewall Jackson's slow and tortured decline, his last words were, "Tell Major Hawks—," a request forever unfinished.

Next, Major Hawks's son, Arthur, my great-great grandfather. He was a graduate of Virginia Military Institute during the Civil War but most revered for his career as a traveling lecturer, which earned him the title of "Sunshine Hawks, the Laughing Philosopher." A 1900 Chicago pamphlet summarizing his receptions says: "In the entertainments given by A.W. Hawks, tears follow laughter." Other attendees remarked on his "wit, which sparkles with the rarest of flavor" and called him "one of the best humorists in this country." He averaged over a thousand miles per week in travel. In 1925, he retired after giving his "Sunshine and Shadow" lecture over six thousand times.

In our family, though, Arthur's real legacy is the Ruxton House.

In 1901, Arthur and his wife, Rachel, were given a city-block of old farmland in Baltimore County for a wedding present. At the time, farm properties in the area now known as Ruxton Heights were being steadily replaced by suburban development and summer homes for the wealthy. Arthur and Rachel sold three corners of their new property to other families and planned the future Hawks house on the remaining half-acre. In 1903 they moved in, among the first people to colonize one of Baltimore's most historic suburbs.

In family legend, the Ruxton house was a bright, elegant place full of stimulating people and conversation. Under Mother Ray's care, the garden became prolific, suitable for the Hawkses' extravagant outdoor parties. Arthur, an editor for the evening news at the *Baltimore Herald*, often had his boyhood friend, iconoclast H.L. Mencken, over for drinks. In his autobiography, Mencken remembers Arthur and his brother, Wells Hawks, for helping him land his first journalism job in 1899. "It may be the example of the two Hawkses that led me to the *Baltimore Herald*," he wrote.

Mother Ray and Arthur also built a studio on the Labelle property, where Rachel, a member of the first graduating class of the Rhinehart School of Sculpture in Baltimore, made garden statuary and busts. Her most famous was a late 1920s bronze called "Boy of a Dragonfly," which showcases a nymph-ish child with curly locks who kneels on his calves, pushing his arms to the side as if in flight and smiling in ecstasy. Her son, Marshall, posed for the statue.

During the house's next life, Arthur returned to Ruxton to live with Marshall and my great-grandmother, Bam Mom. Arthur died seven years later, at 84 years old, in my grandfather's future bedroom, surrounded by memories of his adulthood and the bronzes of his late wife.

The Ruxton house was almost one hundred years old during my first freezing, happy memories of it. I only went to Bam Mom's once a year, for Christmas Eve. Our extended family, plus a few misfits, would crowd into the first floor of the house's ancient and crumbling structure. The younger women—my mom, her sisters, her aunts—would try to cook a ham in the turquoise steel oven, last replaced in the 1950s, and prepare various side dishes on two square feet of counter space. The basement and second floor were always

closed off and sheets of plastic blocked windows and rooms. It was not an immaculate grandmother home. It was always falling apart, and I loved it.

Bam Mom always spent most of the evening on her couch, smiling through thin eyes, squeezing and kissing her grandbabies and great grandbabies as they came through the door. She gave me stuffed animals, most of them twice my size, every year.

Bam Mom came late to the Ruxton house, relatively speaking, though she was the last to leave. She was born Ellen McCracken and married into the Hawks name in 1943 after she met my great grandfather, Marshall, at the prisoners of war camp where she was working in Mississippi. Shortly after they married, Marshall moved Bam Mom to the home where he was raised, where they would raise their three children, where he would die in 1974, where my mother would live temporarily in her teens. Bams never left, not until death took her on the kitchen floor.

The house sat on a sloping hill, surrounded by trees, small and large, and lush grass. It was one of the biggest homes on the block, but not exceptionally distinctive. Dark brown shingles and a wrap-around porch characterized the Ruxton house to its era; it was among several Victorian American cottages to crop up on the block at the turn of the twentieth century. There was a sturdy brick fence with a solid wooden gate that used to swing like it was trying to kick you off the property. The front door was tall with an arched top and long, wrought iron hinges that gave it a fortress quality.

I have memories in fourteen different homes, and I've lived in at least nineteen. My parents, separated before my first birthday and both married to and divorced from other people, spent most of my early years as indentured renters.

The summer before fifth grade, my father and stepmother finally bought their first home in a Baltimore suburb. My mother settled into a home in a northeastern neighborhood with my stepfather and their two children when I was thirteen. In both places, I made neighborhood friends, painted my bedroom with flowers or regrettable shades of pink, put up posters, and had sleepovers.

Then my high school graduation collided with the dissolution of my father and stepmother's marriage. That next year, I kept taking the train back from college on weekends, expecting my untouched room to remedy my homesickness. My stepmom would pick me up at the station and we would arrive to our little Cape Cod house, painted the color of a battleship. I would wait to feel at home while I took note of the little changes—the pictures of Dad taken off the mantle, a couple dozen of his records moved to the basement, his place at the table piled high with old newspapers and unread mail—and it would never happen, no matter how many times I expected it.

How comforting, to grow up in one place. You would watch your lifespan unfold as you aged in the house. You would know where the sun falls in each room at the different times of day. Your clothes would have the same nameless, inimitable smell for decades. Even after years of absence, you could come home and reach up to the correct cupboard for the coffee cups. Your grandfather and father would arrive from world wars and walk into the same living room where you took your first steps, where you watched the Kennedy assassination coverage, where your children spent the weekends of their youth, where your grandchildren would later waddle on holidays.

After Marshall died, Bam Mom settled into a routine entirely lacking in upkeep and cleaning and the second half of the Ruxton house's centennial existence underwent an active

suspension of maintenance. Every morning, Bams was on her way to the *Baltimore Sun* by 6:30, where she was a pet columnist and feature writer. She came home mid-afternoon to feed her animals, which may have included cats, dogs, squirrels, raccoons, and birds depending on the time of year. She drove to dinner and vodka at her favorite bar for *Jeopardy* and schmoozing, then returned home to watch *Wheel of Fortune* with her friend Bill Eliot on the phone. If she had time before bed at 8:30, she called her children and maybe a grandchild or two to hear the latest and complain about being lonely.

Over these years, the house was in a constant state of deferral. The kitchen stayed frozen in time, like a model room in a museum. The couches were piled high with blankets and comforters to cover holes and wear from animal claws. Rachel's old sculpture studio was first re-purposed as an anarchic storage room for unwanted and broken things then demolished in the 1980s. The seven bedrooms, one by one, became unusable. The entire structure of the house threatened to crumble under our weight every Christmas eve.

I grieved for the first time when Bam Mom died. It was the first family death, the first time that I realized I would never see someone again, that I'd taken someone for granted, that I'd assumed someone would live forever, that I assumed that of everyone, that people die.

I spent a lot of time crying and annoying my mother with my overdone, dramatized fourteen-year-old display. I had only known Bams in these ways: Christmas Eve, the white Ford Focus with the stuffed animals lined up against the back window, the restaurants and bars she would go to every night for years, and the stubborn Mississippi cadence that Baltimore couldn't beat out of her. She had these small, joyous eyes that squinted under the weight of years of smiling. She was plump and tall, a matriarchal giant.

I've never gotten a straight answer from family members about why the house deteriorated as it did. Bam Mom was not a universally idolized family member, though when she passed away, to me she was still a simple, jolly old lady who made a 'hoo-hoo' sound when she laughed, which was more frequently than she spoke.

At her funeral, my grandfather called Bam Mom 'complex' during his eulogy. He recollected the overwhelming chaos of their house while he was growing up. He called her powerful, vulnerable, intuitive, and naive. For a moment, I stopped grieving because I realized I hadn't really known Bam Mom at all.

My mom remembers the short time when she lived at the Ruxton house and Bam Mom would become erratically furious at slight affronts to her control. Once, when Bams came home from work to find my mom watching television in the living room with her boyfriend, she shouted and called my mother a whore until the young man silently escaped. For those who knew Bam Mom as children, many memories are at least partially grounded in the emotional and verbal abuse that accompanied her moods.

My grandfather and mother both admit that, though Bams loved fiercely, she was a volatile presence, and capable of explosive eruption. I'm not sure either of them knows they share these memories or the traits themselves; my grandfather doesn't speak to his daughter.

The annual Hawks Christmas Eve celebration, now hosted at my grandfather's, has gotten smaller in recent years, attended only by the people my grandfather includes in his shrinking family circle. Last year, as my younger siblings, two aunts, and cousins were feasting and voraciously opening gifts, my mother called me on my cell phone from her house. She was in bed, alone. She wanted to know where I was, when her children were

coming home from their holiday with her family. I was afraid of her and what we had done to her. For a moment, she was defeated, all of her Hawks anger subducted into sadness.

“You carry a lot of Hawks traits with you,” my grandfather says. “And not just on the outside. Our family hasn’t done very interesting things in a while. I think your time has come.”

Shortly after Bam Mom passed, my grandfather put the house on the market. In 2006, it was sold to a Baltimore artist who expressed his hopes to restore the house to its nineteenth century grandeur. However, it passed almost untouched to a new owner in 2008, who claimed he wanted to build a dream home on the property. The Ruxton House was demolished that summer. The event was traumatic for the residents on Labelle’s little dead-end block, who all seemed to know about Miss Hawks and her ancient family home. The demolition attracted the *Baltimore Sun* to write an article on the house and our family history.

Rachel and Arthur Hawks would probably still recognize the neighborhood they left behind in their death several decades ago. Ruxton has seen change and it hasn’t. In my lifetime it was where my private school friends lived, where I babysat, and where my dad helped me learn how to drive outside of the city. With a demographic that has passed from landed wealthy gentry, to summering white folk, to old money families, to Generation X professionals with private school youngsters, Ruxton has always been the exclusive, inaccessible tip of Baltimore.

The Light Rail system, for example, which connects various points of Baltimore County and its downtown, bestrides the entirety of Ruxton today. The tracks run through the outside of the neighborhood; I used to hear the Light Rail pass from inside Bam Mom’s

house. Decades ago, trains used to stop in Ruxton—it was the railroad that first enabled wealthy folks to move out to and develop the countryside of Ruxton. But when poor non-whites began to dominate the public transportation, Ruxton wasted no time in refusing access to the neighborhood via the Light Rail. If you drive along Bellona Avenue long enough, you're bound to see the help—all, conspicuously, people of color—walking along the neighborhood's perimeter, possibly on a long trek from the nearest public transit stop to their employers' mini mansions and bloated cottages.

Two and a half years after he bought the property, Jim Carroll had not moved into the new dream home that stood in place of the old Ruxton house. When he then flipped the property, news spread that Sheppard Pratt, a Baltimore mental health facility, was planning to use the space for a group home that would serve as a transitional living facility for people with depression, anxiety, substance abuse problems, and personality disorders.

Ruxton erupted.

An outbreak of phone trees, Facebook groups, flash newsletters, and community meetings spread through Ruxton and garnered sizable press. There was a lawsuit. Almost every homeowner on Labelle, and many throughout the neighborhood, staked one or more “No Retreat: Stop Sheppard Pratt” signs in their well groomed front lawns. Even Anonymous, the loose international network of hacker protestors, released a video about Sheppard Pratt's move. In the short clip, a suited man behind a Guy Fawkes mask accuses Sheppard Pratt of working to “exploit the neighborhoods of the 99%.” The video concludes: “We do not forgive. We do not forget. Expect us.” *The Baltimore Sun* ran several articles about the case and quoted enraged residents who despaired the road traffic the group home would bring,

wondered how they would keep tabs on this transient population, flippantly asked if the patients would have anxiety attacks on the sidewalk, and feared for their children's safety.

The Retreat stands today. It is a privately funded program that does not accept insurance; it costs a patient between eight hundred and two thousand dollars a day to seek treatment at Ruxton House. The home stands in a clearing now and resembles a well-conceived creation from *The Sims* computer game. Several old trees have been chopped down; red mulched landscaping and infant bushes hug the perimeter of the house, replacing the old gardens. The sandy gray siding, white curtains, slate roof, and oversized bay windows distinguish Ruxton House from some of the oldest places on the block, but it is much like any other development home too large for the family it shelters.

Ruxton residents have muted their fight, perhaps in part due to the anti-climactic banality of the Retreat's presence on Labelle Avenue, though unlikely from the force of their own hypocrisy. Because, of course, the most unstable folks who live in Ruxton House—the painkiller addicts, the hysterical middle-aged banker, the undiagnosed histrionic housewife—are exactly the kinds of people who pay the mortgages all along Ruxton's rows of suburban bliss.

Regardless, Labelle is quiet again, much quieter than when the Hawkses lived there. My mom always says Bam Mom would have wanted it this way, that she is waiting for one us to join her up in heaven, so she can clap and laugh when they tell her about the loonies who live at Miss Hawks's old place.

My grandfather holds my hands around the vast enclosure of his two palms. When he finishes, he has named five generations of our family, leaving out my mother, and a tight squeeze around my palm ends the prayer.

“And that’s how I do it.”

My grandfather releases me and gets up to stir the oatmeal.

As the moment fades, I try to hold on to it—my senses, the emotions that have passed between us, the ritual—and I try to believe. I want to feel connected but I also want to laugh at us, two people in a kitchen praying to the dead I don’t know.