“Headlight.” The word so faint,  
its consonants: a lucent flicker  
in sonic darkness. I seal my lids.  
“Cut” she says. Or was it cup? “Cut,”  
I repeat back. I’m pressed against  
the glass cliff of fifty. In a sound booth  
not recording a rap song, or being interviewed  
by Terry Gross. I’m being tested  
to see how much sound flitters  
like sand through the colander  
of my ears. “Cupcake.” The next word  
so quiet, I clench. That feeling of knowing  
she’s said something, but unsure  
what it is. That place between silence  
and what you’re able to hear. Like being a child  
and watching your parents whisper  
on the other side of the room. Except  
you’re not a child. Your hair is vanishing  
like a glacier. Your left knee is officially  
a bum begging for change on the basketball court.  
The expanding clump of steel wool  
in your lungs making you gasp  
in cold rooms. The disassembling  
has begun. That point when the doctor  
stops saying he can make you better.  
You’re an old banged up car in Cuba. Your teeth  
keep breaking on pieces of candy. “Sunlight”  
she says, and you raise your hand, the new signal  
to let her know you hear. And your face tightens  
as you wonder if this is what it will feel like:  
total darkness and 99% silence, a cramped  
contained space, the faint sound
of someone talking nearby, but you can’t make out the words, and you wonder who’s standing up there, arranging flowers or drinking wine. Or maybe it’s just a jogger. Or the sound of your daughter’s voice, the one thing you want to take with you, the weight of her lying flat on your stomach at three, saying “sandwich,” your palm wedged into the crib for her head to lay on at two. “Hand pillow.” The adobe smell of her hair. How her cuddled into your chest is the closest you’ve ever felt to home.
I’m transcribing a second-grade creative writing exercise when I realize I have been misspelling penguin my whole life.

Bands are said to be selling out when a song appears in a commercial, but don’t the Pixies get a pass for “Gigantic”? Don’t they deserve a little icing off the cake they built? Crap—that’s a mixed metaphor,

and it doesn’t make sense. Sense is overrated says the dance therapist in my brain. Watch out for your bruised ribs says the mother in my solar plexus. I’ll only see the nurse, if you get me more Xanax says my mother in real life.

Twenty years ago, I met a French girl in a gigantic nightclub in Prague. Plopped on stage, chin propped on hands—if you drew a cartoon of a sad girl in a club, it would be her. Some guy had just dumped her.

A friend drove her to Prague on a cheer-you-up road trip. The fiction writer in my head says this would be a great place to add some tactile details, if you want to make this engaging for a general reader, but I don’t want to talk about how the club, Repre, was the size of a gymnasium in the basement of the Czech version of Carnegie Hall, with a lunette mosaic
in the lobby and a marble staircase. I don’t feel like talking
about how the bandana-wearing DJ was on a scaffold

and unleashed “Killing in the Name of,” and the Euros started moshing,
and their mosh pits were genetically more gentle

than American mosh pits. Anyway, the next night at dawn
Delphine, the French girl, said the Pixies were the only good thing

that had come from America, and we did that thing
where you make fun of each other’s country, overlooking the Vlatva,
gushing under Charles Bridge, with its gauntlet of holy statues,
the sky an orange dream over Prague Castle.

I was so stupid when it came to women. My pride
got wounded, and my hackles went up. And what the fuck

are hackles, and now it’s twenty years later—again it’s five a.m.,
and the sun is mutilating coke parties up and down the eastern seaboard,

and I’m middle-aged, and just learned penguin isn’t spelled with a q,
thinking of Delphine and crossing Charles Bridge at dawn,

the struck-match sun ricocheting off the silver on her fingers, the stone
saints and I all enamored with the mercury in her eyes.
You’re on a used car lot. The wind blows
through what’s left of your hair like high school boy breath

through a cheerleader’s skirt. Sale Discount Sale
wiggles in the wind. You have ten thousand dollars cash

in one pocket and a bottle of Viagara in the other.
“Want to hop in the saddle?” the saleswoman asks,
tapping the hood of a beige Chrysler. Her smile is a slice
of red velvet cake being snuck into a church. Her shawl says

with the lights out. Her black leather boots say
with the lights on. The road opens up like the mouth

of the first girl you ever kissed, in a grimy alley
behind a Philly arcade. She grabs the stereo knob,
cranks up the soundtrack of your life. Until this moment
you swore you were Bauhaus, but the speakers pour out Journey,

that watered-down bourbon of a rock band. You grip the wheel
and glide through a yellow light. A cop stands on the corner

juggling hand grenades like a robot’s genitalia. Ok, you say,
your eyelids dropping like coins from the palm of a beggar.
Jeffrey McDaniel lives in a small apartment in Philadelphia. His hair gathered back into a ponytail. His smile: a wobbly merry-go-round that he hopes you will get on.

He treads water in the same dive bar every Thursday night. He smiles at each girl who stumbles in and says: Would you like to ride the Tilt-a-Whirl? Notice how each one of his teeth is a different shade of yellow. Then he flutters into the bathroom and digs a rollercoaster out of his pocket. Jeffrey McDaniel inherited a lot of breadsticks when he was twelve from his dead grandfather. He has a fake shrine in his backyard. Sometimes his brothers call him and ask to borrow lawn furniture. In his pocket, the calls go straight to voicemail: Hi there,

you sexy little dumpling. Welcome to my earlobe. Please breathe hard into the mouthpiece. Jeffrey McDaniel runs his hands along the two f’s in his name like elephant tusks and shakes his head like a bucket

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full of soggy trademarks, then he stomps out of the bathroom and finds a pool of bourbon hovering near his stool. Girls he knew in college lounge in bathing suits. He yanks off his t-shirt, struts out onto the diving board, and cannonballs into his future, which smells just like his past.
The Bottom of My Hourglass

I’m so bored I can literally hear each grain of sand splat on the pile of time at the bottom of my hourglass.

My twelve-year-old daughter has just told me to go fuck myself and locked herself in a Porta Potty in a minor league baseball parking lot. I see my therapist’s smug face in the clouds. I want to kick this moveable lavatory,

but someone’s got to be the grown-up. “James?” I turn—a high school romance holds cotton candy, her eyes

the same blue whispers flashing glimmers from her head. No ring on her finger. No sin in her singular. Pleasantries exchanged. Smiles enunciated. The teeth that hickied me up in the back of Peter Maschal’s van on prom night

are still Easter Sunday white. I can feel the Jesus in the cave of my Calvin’s stir back to life. Forgive me Father,

_for I have singed my fingertips on the waist of a woman with microwave hips in the back of a Buick_, and then my daughter

steps out of the Porta Potty, and she’s in a white dress, garlands in her hair, violins drawing a moustache

on the face of eternity, and she grabs me by the elbow, and I walk her down the aisle strewn with petals and subway tokens.