

Hearing Test

“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 flutters
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.

“Gigantic”

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.

Midlife Chrysler

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 Viagra 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.

Bio from a Parallel World

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

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 hickeyed 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.