

Evangelical Rubric

Anyone who has the remotest connection to the world of teaching college English (a distant cousin working towards her masters degree at a state school down south perhaps, or maybe just that guy you ran into down at the mall who was going on and on about his job at the community college, the one who sat next to you in high school and, come to think of it, used to wipe boogers under his desk when he thought you weren't looking) has heard the wailing laments about the hiring process conducted at the annual MLA Conference. The MLA, or Modern Language Association, is the suspended body under whose auspices most things English are conquered or cured. And every years the conference moves to a new city, hauling its dread and its impotent hopes that perhaps this year might be the year something changes for the thousands of graduate students hawking themselves for a job; that this year everyone stops wearing black like they're extras in the café scene from some pretentious French movie vaguely about writers.

If the premise for the MLA were a movie, however, it would be more like the 1970s science fiction film *Logan's Run*. Where in a post-apocalyptic future the world is controlled by a ruthless (though well-meaning) central presence. And at some time in your early thirties that presence tells you that your time has run out. You and those other unlucky souls who've watched their twenties glisten and fade meet at the central area, don similar and bizarre uniforms, and by some miracle of future futureness, try to float upwards to the light at the top of the dome so you can get on with your future life. You fell excited, behind your anonymity and the exhilaration of actually moving upward. And you are cheered by the hundreds of smiling optimists in their late twenties chanting RE-NEW, RE-NEW (though your own optimism strains to ignore what you know your cheering fans are really thinking—that all too human intuition about odds—if you fail, there's a better chance I'll succeed when my own time comes). And just before your optimism completely flags beneath those

floating higher than you, you're quickly, painfully, and publicly dispatched by lasers into puffs of gray smoke. And everyone walks away from the arena thinking maybe next year someone they know will finally do it. It's why so many of us drag out our school—year upon year, degree upon degree, loan upon student loan.

So one summer day, the calendar opposite of my impending MLA experience, the phone rang. Usually I'm the kind of person who compulsively answers a ringing phone. I even tense up when I hear a phone ring on TV or during a movie. But I distinctly remember this day, I'd just put our one-year-old daughter down for a nap, my wife was up at campus at one of her classes, and I'd just poured the milk on a bowl of sugary cereal and sat down in front of a new episode of Spiderman. I didn't want the phone to ring.

I'd finished my comprehensive exams for my Ph.D. earlier that summer, and my new-found need for something easy-on-the-brain had turned me into a real fan of the cartoon. The real kicker here is that I had turned into such a fan I'd begun to plan my daughter's naps around Spiderman. I was settling in and didn't want to be disturbed, but old habits die hard and I picked up the phone.

"Is this Darren DeFrain?"

"It is," I said, fearing I would have to break the heart of another telemarketer. Like most graduate students, been there, done that.

"My name is Marilyn, and I'm the chair of the English Department at Waynesburg College in Pennsylvania. Your friend, Jonathan recommended I call you." Jonathan had graduated a couple of years ahead of me, and I only knew him from reputation and from speaking to him at a couple of parties. He'd had a poem taken in the *Best American*, and a collection accepted by a big press in Pennsylvania. These were the kinds of things that were supposed to land you on easy street.

And I guess I thought that's where Jonathan had landed. He'd marched right into the MLA the previous year and landed a job at a little four year school deep in the heart of coal country. I knew the term "coal country," but I knew it mostly from films

about country singer Loretta Lynn and gritty football glory stories. The kind of movies that make you wish you were dirt poor and that your drunken father crawled out of the dark earth each evening to tell you to forget your dreams, just so your successes could glow red hot. “Jonathan said you might be interested in a one-year position as our professor of creative writing. Do you think you can find time for an interview?” It was three o’clock and I was still in my underwear.

“Sure,” I said, choking back some Fruity Pebbles. “But I’ll have to talk it over with my wife.”

I knew she wouldn’t be home for some time so I called my friend Jeff, who was a year ahead of me and knew Jonathan much better than I did. I was excited and flattered that someone thought enough of me to offer me an unprompted interview, and I was already entertaining thoughts of bypassing the MLA.

“Did you get a call from that school too?” Jeff asked. They’d called him first. It didn’t occur to me that I might not be their only option, and here they had two lines in the same pond.

“Jonathan hates it there,” Jeff said. “And besides, we’ve been out there to visit him once last year. It’s god-awful. I might string them along for a trip out there, but I wouldn’t take that job if they put my nuts in a vice.”

My wife and I had been planning a trip out to see her father in Baltimore for some time, and when I pulled out my Rand-McNally, I saw that the college was just a few miles south of where we would be heading. When Melinda got home I told her about the call and asked what she thought. “I’m not moving down there,” she said.

“It’ll be good interview experience,” I told her. “Practice for the MLA.”

“Well, it’d better not cut into my time with my dad,” she said. “That’s all I’ve got to say.”

I called Marilyn and told her to go ahead with the interview. She was at her home in Vermont for the summer, and it was becoming increasingly obvious to me that Jonathan’s sudden departure had left the school up shit creek without a paddle. They had just two weeks to hire his replacement, or cancel the creative writing classes for the fall semester. She told me the position was

to teach creative writing and literature, and at Waynesburg College they taught only theme based classes. She asked how I might teach a class on War Literature, or Love, for example. And then the other shoe dropped.

“We’re a small Presbyterian school,” she said. “And so the president wants to make sure we include some discussion about the Bible in each of our curricula.”

“What do you mean,” I said. My grandmother is a Presbyterian, and so they don’t scare me very much. But I had never actually read the Bible. I always check the Gideon’s in hotel rooms since I’d heard that zealots will leave twenty-dollar bills as a reward for good Christians. I’d flipped through some illustrated copies at my dentist’s office one time, and I’d seen the movie, but that was some years ago. “Like, teach the Bible along with the other texts?”

“Not teaching it, really,” she sighed. “Just speak to its importance in, and relation to, the text itself.” She said this as if she had said it a hundred thousand times to as many different people. “Make it a part of your rubric. Do you think that would be a problem for you?”

“Rubric? “Is this something that gets checked on? I mean, does anyone sit in class and calculate how much Bible discussion goes into, say, an Allen Ginsburg poem?”

“Oh no,” she said. “The nice thing about the administration is that they have implicit trust in the faculty here to do the right thing. No one sits in your classroom.”

“Then I can do it,” I said. I didn’t know if I could actually read the Bible as I prepared my lesson plans, but I expected that the students would all be well-versed enough in the Bible so that I wouldn’t have to. One of the first things I’d learned as a teaching assistant was to utilize the strengths of your class. And nod your head as if you’re considering everything they say really carefully. And then if you don’t have any idea what they’re talking about, but you think you should, pat them on the back for their comment and then put the onus on the rest of the class. “That’s an interesting point, Rachel. But do you think you could explain it a little more so that the whole class might follow what it is you’re saying?”

“Good,” she said, clearly relieved that someone was even interested in the job. But I still wasn’t scared. I had another year of my teaching fellowship left, and no classes to take save my dissertation hours. If the job looked too impossible, I figured, no one could make me work there. “You should call the Dean, then. And,” she was about to impart one last warning which I wouldn’t recognize until it was too late. “Try to tell him you’re really interested in teaching at a Christian college. He’ll like that.” Her message was two-fold: appearances at the college take precedence over integrity, and pleasing the Dean is part of the job. I didn’t pick up on either and poured myself another bowl of Fruity Pebbles to celebrate.

The Dean’s name sounded vaguely like “Coleslaw,” and I was amused at myself for making this connection. When I finally spoke with him I thought he sounded as if he were trying to do a Ronald Reagan impersonation. I could even imagine the head wagging and smirking on the other end of the line. “We’re very selective here,” he said. “Jonathan will be a great loss for us. The students really admired him, and he pushed them. He really pushed them.” And then he began to unload a heap of bullshit. “We’ve got a lot of applicants for this position, and we’re going to have to be very selective. Our students come first here, you know.” Now I knew Jonathan had called Jeff about the opening, and I figured he must have recommended a couple of others, but even the piranhas at the MLA couldn’t move in on this wounded cow that fast.

I figured I had Coleslaw over the barrel, and his “interview” questions weren’t really very intimidating. He danced around asking me things about what church I go to, baited me to spice up my resume a little, and wanted to know how much I love my students. I’d expected something more like my oral exams: “Suppose you’re called upon to teach a class on the women in Shakespeare’s comedies. What supplementary texts would you choose and how do you defend these choices?” But nothing like that ever materialized. He did finally ask about my writing, which at the time dealt mostly with heavy drinkers lamenting their former loves and the sexual histories of their spouses. I recommended he visit a website Jeff had put together for me. I’d found a cut-away dia-

gram of a human head depicting how the senses were affected by fine wine and we'd replaced the senses with links to my vita, to a story, some poems and what not. It was a bit of a cliché, the "like a fine wine" comparison to the various flavors of my professional life, but it looked damn nice. Coleslaw said he'd take a look, and then he rang off with the admonition that he would forward my application to the President. While he was impressed with our initial contact, he couldn't guarantee anything.

But I'd forgotten to mention that we would be coming through Waynesburg on our trip to Baltimore. I called back later that afternoon and got his voice mail: "We'll be coming through Waynesburg next week and I'd be happy to meet with you in person," I said. And then I went to meet Jeff for a beer. When I got home Melinda was in a sour mood. "Someone named Dean Coleslaw left a message on the machine saying don't bother coming out. I don't like him. He sounds like a real pretentious asshole." Melinda seldom swears, so this one word put a bit of dread in me. I replayed the message.

Coleslaw, sounding more like Nancy Reagan this time, was saying: "I took a look at your website, and frankly I'm a little disturbed by what I saw there. I don't think you should bother coming out." I began paging through each link with my mind. I'd used some profanity in my story. The main character was a drunk and a lout, but surely Coleslaw could grasp the redemptive, baptismal qualities of the final scene.

I began a frenzied dialing. "What are you doing?" Melinda asked. "You don't really want this job, do you?"

"I just don't want any loose ends." I got through to Coleslaw and was stunned to hear that it wasn't the content of the story or the poems that bothered him, but the wine schematic. "We've had some trouble with drinking on this campus, and I just don't think you'd be a good fit here." I explained the metaphor, suddenly desperate not to lose this job. There was silence. To fill it up I blamed Jeff. His name appeared at the bottom of my web site and I could hear Coleslaw tapping the keys of his computer and sighing through his nose until he reached the bottom. Jeff took the heat well enough that Coleslaw agreed to see me when we came through on our way to Baltimore.

He recommended I read a book called *The Idea of a Christian College* by A. F. Holmes, and warmed enough by the end of our conversation to say that he was even going to see about getting us a hotel room. Melinda was quick to point out that somehow our relationship had changed, and that I was now beholden to him.

“You pussy.” She didn’t say this to me, but then she didn’t have to.

The drive to Pennsylvania went well. Our one-year-old daughter was already a seasoned traveler, and Melinda and I were both impressed with the rivers and mountains around Pittsburgh. Maybe impressed isn’t the right word. I was raised in the mountains of Utah, so these looked like pretty, green hills. As with most things, Melinda’s idea was more generous. And then we crested the hill down into Waynesburg.

It was a nightmare, and from the highway I could see a factory, the hotel Coleslaw had found for us, and the lights of the coal train chugging down a nearby mountain. We tooled through the town before heading to the hotel. Madchen, our daughter, was asleep, and though we were both exhausted from the long day in the car, we wanted to get a sense of the place. I had imagined the town to be small but charming, where the locals sat out in front of stores that looked like the new Cracker Barrel we’d passed near Pittsburgh. They’d be playing checkers and talking about this year’s football team. What we saw was like almost any other poor, small town in the U. S. There was a McDonald’s that needed a fresh coat of paint, a rusted out bridge, a bar advertising wet t-shirt contests and ladies night right next to the billboard against drunk driving, and local kids sitting on crumbling stoops clutching crinkled paper bags giving us the stink-eye as we drove past. “This place sucks,” Melinda said, and I wasn’t going to be the one to argue, though part of me already wanted to imagine us there. I wanted to imagine myself with a job.

The clerk at our hotel told me they pulled the continental breakfast at nine a.m. sharp, and that there was a problem with the phones. I suspected she was a Presbyterian, and I was already forming a template in my mind of what these Pennsylvanian Presbyterians were really like. I did this in spite of my chronic irritation as a Utahn, I know I am under constant suspicion of

being a Mormon by nearly everyone I meet. (In fact, the Taiwanese National Geographic had once taken a photo of my parents' home with the three of us out in front and included a caption that read: "A typical Mormon family and their home").

When I got to the room I tried to assuage my guilt through qualification: "I think these Presbyterians are a little hostile," I said out loud. The room itself was cold, damp, and smelled like someone had been doing it in the bed minutes before we arrived. Maybe out of spite. Melinda, whose back was bothering her, lay down on the bed with Madchen, who was now screaming with exhaustion. I went outside to fetch the luggage and ponder our circumstances in the quiet night.

The hotel was right next to a busy highway and the truckers yanked on their horns as they went by. I don't know why truckers do this, but it usually has something to do with women. There was a moon out, and between blasts from the horns on the highway, the locusts would scratch out their song; cautiously at first, and the building to a screech that seemed to reach into me like the heartbeat of the land. Or like a threat on a dark, foggy night. When I went back into the room Melinda had gotten Madchen to accept a fitful sleep. The room now smelled like someone had just done it and filled a diaper when they were through. "I think I've got a kidney infection," Melinda said. "You're not leaving me here tomorrow."

"Just for a little while. You can drop me off and then go find a park, or something." We'd both seen the town, and we both knew what a terrible lie that was.

In the morning Melinda's kidney infection wasn't any better and she groaned in pain and rolled around on the bed. She'd been vomiting and begging me to put her out of her misery. To help her out I went to the breakfast bar and loaded up on what was left. There were several overweight people, locals I thought (squirreling away another bit of Presbyterian composite), eating whole donuts in one bite and regarding any move I made toward the "breakfast" with suspicion and hostility. When I loaded several plates with donut remains, the pastries that looked like they've come from the bottom box at the loaves and fishes, and as much coffee as I could carry, one of the heavy brethren pointed at a sign

over the microwave: “ALL FOOD MUST BE EATEN HERE!” The breakfast cop had a mouth full of donut and so I said, “So I guess you’re taking that literally.” And I brazenly walked back to our room.

Melinda said she only wanted to eat the food I brought so she could have something to throw up, and the donuts put Madchen into a full hyperglycemic rage. So I shaved and showered and wiped the dust of the leather satchel my aunt gave me for graduating high school. It says: “GENUINE LEATHER” on the tag and “OXBLOOD,” which I assume is a special color of blood. The satchel makes me feel important and intimidating, as if it might actually contain some special blood. I made sure I had plenty of pens, five copies of my vita (which seemed excessive, but also, I thought, lent an air of my perpetual need to hand out vitas, like some famous movie actor forever handing our 8x10s), and a notebook. Melinda drove me to the campus, and when I got out I swear I could hear her crying for several minutes after she drove away.

I asked a student where I could find the Dean’s office.

“Coleslaw?” she said. “Follow me.” Presbyterians were perfunctory and efficient. I remembered my grandmother was a little like that as well, though I assumed most farmers were. She led me to an office adjacent to an immense, if unimaginative, stained glass window.

“Darren?” I recognized the Reagan inflection and was glad it was Ron again, and not Nancy. Coleslaw was a tall, lanky man in his early sixties whose loping stride and impressively virile eyebrows (which extended a good three inches beyond the confines of his squarish glasses) reminded me of the giant grasshoppers in the Disney movie about bugs. When we first had Madchen, Melinda and I had taken to watching Disney movies, as if we were in training. “Come in, come in,” he said, and retreated behind his desk. His office smelled dusty, but it was clean and orderly. I spied a half-dozen Bibles and many more books relating to music to the good book.

Coleslaw asked how I liked their little town. “It really grows on you,” he said, and I found myself staring back at his eyebrows. He quizzed me about the Holmes book, which I had checked

out of the Western Michigan library. It hadn't been in the main library, but in a remote shelf of the education library, and though it was a dozen or more years old, I noticed that it had never been checked out. The book had started out reasonably enough, talking at length (or at least as 'at length' as you can talk about anything in just over one hundred pages) about the need for Christian colleges not to shelter their students from the real world. Instead, it recommended hiring as diverse faculty as they would find at any other school, or as diverse as they might encounter in the real world. I thought this seemed like sound advice, until I got to the end of the book where it reiterated its points as a generally good way to conquer the world, as has been prophesied. I figured I would concentrate on the first, more noble sounding tokenism of the book, and see where that led me.

"We have quite a diverse faculty here, though we don't have too many people of color just now. But we're working on that."

"How many?" I said.

"How many what," Coleslaw said, and he took his glasses off and looked at them, unsure it seemed, if they were dirty or if the whole world might be.

"How many faculty of color? I'm just curious," I said, and I felt as if I were pushing into something I wasn't really ready to deal with.

"Well," he said, thinking. "None just at the moment, but we do have some fine students here who are very diverse." He went on to mention that they had a Jew on faculty and that everyone really liked him. He was a standup guy. But that he had actually converted to Presbyterianism. Not that you had to, to keep your job, but that he just seemed more comfortable that way.

Other than my gaffe about the faculty, our interview seemed to go well. He was smiling a lot and laughing at things, his own jokes mostly, but it was pleasant enough. And then he said, "I'd like you to meet a couple of other people here." And before I knew it he was hollering out to his secretary, a very sweet woman who took no notice at all of the terrible way he bossed her around: "Get me Skip and Jeff on the phone. And find Chuck. And see if the President is ready yet. And why don't we plan on letting the DeFrains stay over at the guest house. Round up that

key.” He had been keenly interested in Melinda and Madchen, asking question upon question about the two of them. My religion never came up.

When we were ready to go meet the rest of the faculty, Cole-slaw stood up and handed me an envelope with a key in it. “This is for the guest house, just out the window over my shoulder,” he said, never taking his eyes off of me. “It’s really quite beautiful, and I think your family will be very comfortable there. Mr. Smith was just there, but he left, and so I believe the Johnsons are the only ones staying there right now, and I don’t think you’ll disturb each other. They’re very elderly, you know.” He said this like I should know who the Johnsons were, so I nodded I did. “You can leave in the morning, and that will give you more time to look around.” Then he took me by the hands. I’m not used to being touched by older men, so I just stood there while he explained himself. “I always like to say a little prayer with new candidates.”

“Uh huh.”

“You know what Blake always says,” he continued.

“Uh huh,” I said, forgetting my mother’s advice to always answer in full words.

He parsed out a quote to me, earnestly hoping with each word that I might be able to finish it out. It was as though he were teaching me to speak. To this day I cannot remember that quote, though I’ve looked through several editions of Blake. I wonder if he didn’t mean some other Blake. Robert Blake, perhaps.

I asked if I could call Melinda—I wanted to break the news about another night in Waynesburg—but there was no answer at the hotel. I hoped she’d found that mysterious park I’d mentioned the night before. Then I began meeting vice presidents. Skip was the first, and he looked an awful lot like the British actor Bob Hoskins in his Iago guise. Coleslaw told me on the sly that Skip was an ordained minister, and that a lot of the vice presidents were. It seemed like what you needed to do to get ahead.

The next was Jeff, another minister, who talked and moved in that “I’m pretty sure I’m a tough guy” way Brian Dennehy always

does. He asked me a lot of questions about what good I thought it was to teach students creative writing, and what did I think of professors who kept students as puppy dogs. Each question was an attack, but it was pretty easy to see where he was going with all of it, and so I told him I don't believe in being a guru, but in being a source of information and craft. He slapped the table when he left with both hands and I could tell it didn't matter a lick what I said as long as it wasn't what he didn't want me to say. There were hourly updates about whether or not the President was ready to receive me. It began to feel more and more like one of those bait and switch operations they run at crooked car dealerships and health clubs, where the head-honcho manager has to sign off on the special deal and they keep him hidden like he's going to come down on angels' wings and personally change you destiny. If you can just make it that far.

Next thing I knew, I was being sent on a hike halfway across town to meet Chuck, one of the English faculty. Melinda had the car, Coleslaw was, regrettably, far too busy to shuttle me there himself, and so I was off on foot in a coat and tie and every drop of that night's fog hanging in the air.

I was out of breath and sweating when I found Chuck's door. He was a gregarious, barrel-chested guy with a mustache and a Rock Hudson chin, and he had a rugrat in tow. "My Grandson," he said, turning and letting me into the house. "This one's not quite potty-trained, so you'll have to excuse me." And he disappeared into the many rooms of the house. From the outside it had been a whitish, squarish, house on a whitish, squarish street, but inside it was pleasantly and tastefully Victorian. Just what the town and school aspired to, but to my mind seemed to come away quirky, at best.

Chuck was a reprieve. He spoke over me, but as a chronic mumblor and stammerer that is often more relief than anything. And best of all, he shot from the hip. "Do you know they all call the dean 'Coleslaw?'" he said. "It's unimaginative, but very popular." He explained the school and he explained the chair. He explained the department and he explained the job and he made no bones about the kinds of compromises the administration expected from the faculty.

“To be honest, Chuck. I’ve never seen such Presbyterians.”

“They’re not Presbyterians,” he said, and a wave of horror splashed up against me. I thought a conspiracy was afoot.

“They’re Evangelical Presbyterians.” I only had a rudimentary grasp of the term—Jerry Falwell, PTL stuff. “The Frozen Chosen, the kids call them. What are you anyway?”

“A lapsed Methodist, I suppose.” Chuck thought this was the funniest thing in the whole world. He’s a Catholic, I found out, and I think the word “lapsed” is just funnier to Catholics than it will ever be to me. “I was surprised no one asked me that.” “They can’t,” he said, coming down from his laugh and wiping his eyes with the backs of his hands. “Even at a private school, that’s enough to sue.” Just then the phone rang. It seemed the President was finally ready to see me. “I’d take you up myself,” Chuck said. “But I’ve got to wait for his mother.” He pointed to the kid playing on the Persian carpet in the adjacent room. I’d forgotten he was there. That was fine though, Chuck had lightened my load, and so I was back into the heat, working up a sweaty smell for my interview with the Enlightened One.

When I made it back to the main hall, Coleslaw was waiting for me. He was nervous and, I thought, sweating almost as much as I was. He gave me some last-second advice about what the President likes, as if I were meeting royalty, or a major religious leader. “He’ll like to know you’re serious about incorporating the Bible into your rubric.” Egad, I thought, I’ve got to look that word up. “He’s very against drinking, and only takes his vacations in dry counties...” Coleslaw had a few more random thoughts to throw at me before the double doors opened and I was ushered into the President’s office. The atmosphere left me time to think about who might be behind those doors. I think I conjured Ronald Reagan again, but I’m not sure why. Not Bonzo-era Reagan, but the dead serious, I’m-going-to-Bitburg-goddamnit, Reagan. So you can imagine my surprise when the doors opened and a ruddy-faced little man in a green jacket looked up from a desk that only made him seem even smaller. The Master’s was in the news a lot then because Tiger Woods had just become a media darling, and though I don’t follow golf, I had to choke back my congratulations on winning the coat. He moved slowly and deliberately, screwing the cap back onto his pen as if he had been sign-

ing impressive mission charters all morning. “The Dean speaks very highly of you, Professor.” I don’t think anyone had ever called me “professor” before, and I felt suddenly as if I should make a radio out of two coconuts to be worthy of the name. The dean acted like a schoolgirl, practically tugging on his lower lip with his finger and curtsying with every glance and comment from the President.

I was shown a chair to sit down in and the President came around in front of the desk and sat in front of me. Coleslaw, I think, hovered. I was asked the same questions everyone except Chuck had already asked me that day, and then it was my turn. To my great dismay I clutched my oxblood satchel tightly to my chest and began to ask questions about the drinking problems on campus like some southern belle. We were all playing out roles, and mine came to me as if I were channeling it. I like to think I was merely speaking in tongues.

The interview ended when the President’s ride arrived. I expected a stretch limousine, or k-car at least, but when I looked out the window I saw him board a chauffeured golf cart. It lurched forward across the quad and he waved like the queen at all the disinterested students who had obviously seen this display a thousand times before.

The dean and I stood at the front door for a moment and then suddenly he said, “Well, I’ve got word to do. Good luck.” I figured the channeling must not have gone over as well as I thought. Fortunately, Melinda drove up just then and I got into the car. “Let’s go to Morgantown,” I said. “And see if it is any better.”

I told Melinda that the President reminded me of Lucky the Leprechaun from the breakfast cereal, and I told her about my weird out-of-body experience. She’d had a pretty tough time with Madchen, and I expected that experience to carve out the rest of our day, but the moment we crossed the bridge of the Monongahela River, she fell hard for Morgantown. We drove past the Mountain People’s Co-op, the University tram whooshing up the mountainside, the vast arboretum, the fresh tarmac of the river walk just off Don Knotts Boulevard, the red brick downtown with its antiques and cafes and club after club adver-

tising live blues, alt country, and jazz. This was more our speed, and we both felt at home here. Morgantown's a small town, but with West Virginia University there, it seemed worlds different than Waynesburg. We hadn't just crossed state lines, but cultural boundaries—and we were glad to be back in our element.

We might have stayed a little longer than we should have, but the idea of returning to Waynesburg for one more night in God's grimy clutch seemed too much even for Madchen. As soon as we got back on the highway she started howling and didn't let up even when we reached the parking lot for the guest house. I was so tired I thought it was a wise move to try to take all of the luggage at once so I wouldn't have to go back out to the car. But anyone with a wife and child knows there's always some piece of necessary make-up, some pacifier or slobbery stuffed-bear that will call you back out anyway. Madchen slowed up on the crying long enough for me to work the key out of my pocket. Normally I would swear I'm not stupid enough to keep holding onto one hundred pounds of luggage while I retrieve a key, but that night I was. When I finally produced the key, it slid into the lock and would not budge. "Jesus Christ," I said.

"What?" Melinda said. It wasn't a question that wanted any answer other than "Nothing, I can take care of it."
"Fuck," I said. I swear, especially when I'm pissed off about something like a key not opening the door to my guest house at ten o'clock at night when I've been harangued all day by a bunch of Presbyterians. "This motherfucker." I was getting louder, thinking, I'm sure that I could somehow intimidate the Presbyterian doorknob into letting me in. "Let me try around back." My stupidity was in full bloom and I carried the luggage around to the back of the house. There were some lights on in what looked like a central living room, but I couldn't see anyone. I found the back door and slid the key in. "God damn it!" I said, and then I kicked the door, leaving a black smudge on the paint and white smudge on my shoe. It was a frustratingly muffled sound.

I hauled the luggage back up front and tried the key again, thinking the fresh air might have changed its mind. "Jesus fucking Christ," I said. "What kind of chicken shit bullshit is this?"

"Is anybody there?" Melinda asked. Madchen woke up again and started howling.

"Some old farts," I said. "Fuck it, I'm getting them out of

bed.” I pumped the doorbell and waited, expelling the last of my swear words at the key in my hand.

When the door finally opened it was a woman with incredibly coiffed hair. It looked as though it had been molded to her skull like G.I. Joe hair. “I’m the new English guy,” I said, trying to push past her. “We’re supposed to be staying here.”

“Are you sure you’re not supposed to be in the guest house?”

“This is the guest house,” I said.

“This,” she said. “Is the President’s house.” Her arm shot out like Dan Marino’s as he directed a pass across the street and into the window of the guest house. “That,” she said. “Is the guest house.”

Melinda, to her great credit, spared me the “Good One” look. She picked Madchen up under one arm, and unloaded one of the satchels from my arm (I think it was the oxblood), and calmly walked across the street. We were greatly relieved. The key worked, and the house was tastefully done, blessedly free of Bibles and President’s wives. I wondered if Chuck had his hand in the decorations. We climbed the stairs, chastened into whispers, and unlocked the door to our room, just hoping modest hopes that it smelled better than the hotel. And then Melinda sprang back. “This isn’t our room,” she said. I checked the envelope the dean had given me with the number on the door.

“Yes it is.”

“Someone’s in there,” she said and she took Madchen and stood behind me in the hallway. I set the luggage down, too tired by this point to keep being stupid, and walked into the room. There were empty soda cans, a few plates, and the bed was messed up. I had Goldilock’s Complex for a few seconds, but no one was physically there and it was late.

“They must have forgot to make up the room,” I said.

“Right,” Melinda said. She carried Madchen in and carefully lay her down on the bed. Then Melinda rolled onto the bed while I started bringing in the luggage. “You’re sleeping on this pillow,” she said. “It has man smell.” I could see a greasy ring on the pillow, but I was so tired by this point I just wanted to take a leak and fall onto my greasy pillow and fall deep into sleep.

I shut the door and went into the bathroom where the final sign was waiting to be shown to me. As my wife and daughter drifted off in the next room, I lifted the lid to find an inky turd

scar, about two centimeters wide and nine inches long crescenting the ceramic. Clearly it had come from the pious bowels of the room's lately departed Presbyterian occupant. I stared long and hard at it, wishing it would turn into a mouth that would say something simple to me like: "Figured it out yet, Dumbass? Go to Baltimore, it's only four more hours down the road." I wanted it to warn me that this was not the path I should be following, and that even the Bible, I'm pretty sure, has something to say about taking something you really didn't earn. That you get what you pay for, and that sitting around on your fat ass at three in the afternoon, eating sugar cereal and having a job fall into your fat lap isn't manna from heaven. It's the devil calling, brother. That maybe that circus at the MLA wasn't really just about shooting hopeful grads out of the air, but the best way to put the best people with the best jobs. There would be trickle down, the toilet surely would've said. Look around you, friend. This is a web from which few escape. Jonathan wasn't lucky to get this job, he was lucky to cut out. Go to the MLA. You'll find your niche there. I even hear that West Virginia University over in Morgantown is hiring.

But, of course, there are no such miracles, even at an evangelical Presbyterian campus in the dead heart of coal country. I flushed the john and I started teaching two weeks later.