Failures of Imagination

ESSAY BY MATTHEW VOLLMER

1.

On a day in late November, my wife and I brought a baby home from the hospital to live with us in our apartment at the corner of Main and Perrin Streets in Lafayette, Indiana. That this baby was ours didn't change the fact that we didn't have any idea how to take care of him. We'd diapered realistic dolls and pretended to burp them in our birthing class but we hadn't put them to sleep, hadn't fed them, hadn't held them and thought, *oh my god this is a real person we made and now have to help keep alive until the day we die*. This latter part worried us most, especially because our baby was two days old and so far didn't seem to be particularly skilled at eating. We worried that because he hadn't latched onto his mother's breast within an hour following his birth—a crucial time period, according to my sister-in-law—he might reject her as a viable food source, and then we'd have to use a bottle, and then he wouldn't get that magical colostrum or the host of

other nourishments that, researchers claimed, would ensure a long and healthy existence. But what if, God forbid, we *had* to use a bottle, and our son refused *that*? Wouldn't he starve? Was that even a thing? Were some babies too stupid or confused to figure out the simple act of sucking? We didn't know. So we did the only thing we could: we worried.

In the meantime, my parents, who'd arrived with much fanfare to celebrate the birth of their first grandchild, commandeered our living room. They oohed. They ahhed. They argued about which relative our son looked like, made speculations concerning the particular family member whose eyes or mouth or nose or ears he'd inherited. My mother took dozens of photos on an oversized digital camera and scrolled through them, pointing out the good ones. At some point during the first few hours after we'd returned home, my father, while marveling at our sleeping infant, delivered the following sentence: "Can you *imagine* how anybody could throw one of these into a dumpster?"

I can't remember how, exactly, I replied to my father's query. Probably I made fun of him. My wife excused herself, folding closed the pantry-style doors to our bedroom so that she could quietly weep. I knew my father had simply been attempting to contextualize the absolute preciousness of a newborn child, which was maybe why he'd recalled the recent news report about two kids who'd recently abandoned their own newborn… in a dumpster. No sense in asking why, or wondering, if you were going to get rid of a baby—and not an unborn baby, not a fetus, not a not-yet-baby baby but an actual live and living infant—why you wouldn't do it in a more humane way, or why you wouldn't make provisions for its quick and painless expiration, though maybe that had been part of their problem, they hadn't known how best to *get rid of a baby,* which is, of course, an awful phrase to type, much less an actual thing to do, and maybe instead of setting it in a little basket and leaving it on some unsuspecting soul's doorstep, they'd decided—for one reason or another—that a dumpster was better. Yes, you put garbage in dumpsters but there was a reason homeless people commandeered them from time to time, as they offered protection from the elements, especially if they happened to be lidded with plastic roofs. Maybe the particular dumpster chosen by the young couple had been located behind a restaurant, and maybe the refuse, being mostly food, was spongy and soft, and maybe, these desperate parents had thought that the baby's cries would reverberate off its walls, the dumpster thereby creating a sort of echo chamber for Junior, which would prompt a soft-hearted person to say, "Hey, you hear that? That sounds like a *baby*." Yes, maybe these calls would fall on the ears of a baby lover, who would then engineer, with the loving-kindness of all angelic strangers, a rescue.

2.

"You just can't imagine," my father often says, when trying—and failing—to comprehend the

particulars of certain tragedies. What would it be like to survive an automobile accident, only to become a paraplegic? Or to be chained inside some sick fuck's sex dungeon for nigh on a decade? Or to flee through a jungle after very bad men have slaughtered your fellow villagers, holding up the bloody heads of your mother and father? My father doesn't know, can't imagine. The only ones who can are those who have experienced these things firsthand. And who's to say that even they can rightly comprehend what's happened to them?

My father could not imagine, therefore, what it was like for my aunt and uncle to have buried, quite recently, their own baby. Though my youngest cousin was not a *baby* baby, he was his parents' only son, one whose babyhood they would never forget, especially now that he'd died. At the morgue, my uncle had held the hand of his dead son and observed how cold it was, and how the son had always complained about how his hands were always so sweaty and gross, and so now his father took this opportunity to address him, saying, "Son, your hands won't be cold anymore." The dead son's sisters began cutting locks of hair from his head and sliding them into an envelope, and this was the moment when his mother—my aunt—approached me to say, in a voice no louder than a whisper, "They're gonna burn up my baby. Can you believe it?"

I couldn't. Two days before, my cousin had been a twenty-seven-year-old man. He'd shot hoops in the driveway with my uncle. My aunt had fixed him his favorite meal. They'd poured glasses of wine and watched the latest episode of *Girls*. Then my cousin had gone downstairs to his bedroom and injected himself with what he'd likely presumed to have been heroin, but had actually been a very powerful but much cheaper opiate that—according to the coroner—likely killed him within four seconds. Now, he was a body wearing a suit, lying in a cardboard coffin that resembled an oversized shoebox. The whole thing would be slid into an oven that operated at 1500 degrees. Post-incineration, a machine would pulverize charred bones to dust. His father would carry the box as he led the saddest parade I'd ever witnessed: a wife, a husband, and two daughters, walking through a field toward a tent, where a hundred mourners had gathered.

"You just can't imagine," my father said, after the funeral. I wanted to agree, but the problem was that, in fact, I couldn't *stop* imagining it. I too had a son of my own, a boy who looked not unlike the dozens of photos of my cousin that appeared on my aunt and uncle's refrigerator: a blond boy in ball caps, in a soccer uniform, upon a baseball diamond. A boy who had not known that he would die too soon. A young man who now didn't know he was dead.

3.

My son, who spends most of the day in school, carries a cellphone with which he texts his friends and plays games and scrolls through social media feeds. He goes to piano lessons and soccer

practice. At night, he sleeps in his own bed, and I with his mother, where he may—but not always—enter our dreams. If something happened to him, which is to say that if my son died—a phrase, like "get rid of a baby," is a one I would rather not type—he would suddenly be everywhere. In his absence, our house would burst open—relentlessly—with his past presences. Every room would become my son's room because that's where he'd appear. The guest bedroom downstairs, which he commandeered to watch TV and whose floor he left strewn with peel-tops of yogurt cups. The so-called playroom, where he and his friends held Nerf gun wars and used blankets and pillows to construct sloppy forts. My downstairs office, where I often stood on the arm of a couch office and yelled my son's name into the metal grate near the ceiling, this ventilation shaft as a kind of primitive telephone? Every time I looked in the backyard, I'd see him juggling a soccer ball. Every time I passed the piano, I'd see him playing proudly one of the songs he'd mastered for the lessons he claimed to loathe but I knew he enjoyed because I often spied on him when he was with his teacher and observed him cheerfully following her instructions. I'd see him every time I encountered a toaster waffle, one of which he'd eaten every morning for the last ten years. Every time I saw a tablet computer, I'd think about all the hours he'd wasted playing stupid games, and how we'd worried that the radiation or whatever might sterilize his family jewels, and how he'd bring me money from his little bank so I could enter a password and buy a certain amount of virtual coins so he could make in-game purchases, and how I'd wonder if these transactions were conditioning him in all the wrong ways to see money as both virtual and perpetually available. Every time I turned on the car radio I'd remember how we'd fight, once he was big enough to sit in the front seat, over what we'd listen to, me punching "1" or "2" or "3" because I always wanted to listen to NPR or ESPN or the college radio station and that he'd punch "5" because he'd always want to listen to K92, which, in the mornings, on our way to school—a mile drive I was always trying to convince him to bike, like the industrious neighbor boy next door—played a game called "Fact or Bullcrap," during which the announcers read various sentences—"writers once used bread crumbs to erase their mistakes" or "it is possible to smell scents in dreams" or "Abraham Lincoln's mother died when she drank the milk of a cow that grazed on poisonous snakeroot"—by a host and had to decide whether the statement was, indeed, "fact" or "bullcrap." Every time I visited our downstairs bar I'd remember how he used to drink from that sink's elongated faucet, or how he'd thoughtlessly fill dirty martini glasses to the brim and carry them, sloshingly, to the couch. Every time I picked up a washcloth, I'd hear my son calling my name, saying, "Dad, can you get me a cold rag?" which was something that he'd ask for in the summer, when the nights were hot and our ancient air conditioner couldn't sufficiently cool the top floor of our split level, and I'd go to the hall closet and select a washcloth—not a dishrag because the texture would be too rough—and soak it under the coldest possible water, ringing it out just enough so it wasn't dripping, folding it in half and creeping toward him in the darkness, because this was an important part of being given a cold rag, as he'd insist that I'd slap it suddenly across his forehead, which would make him shriek with delight, and afterward he'd thank me and say goodnight and I'd say goodnight and he'd say see you in the morney-bye and I'd said see you in the morney-bye, which was this alternate word for "morning" he'd made up and we'd been saying to each other for years,

and which, I realize now, I have no idea—not really—how to spell.

I'll admit that this morbid little exercise—trying to imagine what the world would be like if my own son died—is a way of pretending that the ultimate tragedy is something foreseeable and thus knowable and containable, something that I could prepare for, but I know—at least it seems like I should acknowledge—that it isn't. I often think about the parents of a boy who attended a soccer tournament in which my son's team also played, and how this particular boy and his parents were sitting quietly in their hotel room watching TV—maybe that show where rich people employ a man to design and build elaborate treehouses, or the one about the dudes who drag fallen redwoods from forests and transform them into intricately carved sculptures—while in the next room an ex-con was handling a gun, who knows why, perhaps he was cleaning it or simply appreciating the heft of it in his hand, and for whatever reason the gun went off, and the chamber fired a bullet into the air and through the wall and out the other side, where it entered the head of the boy, whose mother, after hearing the noise and hearing the ghastly burbling, called 911, told the dispatcher to please hurry, because there was so much blood, and that even with the surplus of hotel towels she was pressing against her only child's head, she could not hold it all in. She would have never imagined it would end like this: that her son, freshly showered, belly full, would die in the safest of places—a bed. And though you have now imagined it, surely it is reasonable to say that there are certain parts of this story that you or I can't imagine and that—even if this was our story to tell—we likely couldn't comprehend: the sight of the boy's slack face, the mother and father's panicked and futile attempts to revive him, the unfathomable depth of their grief. And so maybe it is better—or at least okay—if we say to ourselves, as my father more or less does, *there is little use in trying*. Better to say a prayer, think a good thought, lend a hand, savor our relative good fortune, and acknowledge that, in the end, there is no way to prepare for our own future tragedies, of which, whether we like it or not, are lying—even now—so very patiently in wait.

Matthew Vollmer is the author of Gateway to Paradise *and* Future Missionaries of America*—both story collections—as well as* Inscriptions for Headstones*—a collection of essays. He recently edited* A Book of Uncommon Prayer, *a collection of everyday invocations by over 60 authors, and with David Shields, he co-edited* Fakes: An Anthology of Pseudo-Interviews, Faux-Lectures, Quasi-Letters, "Found" Documents, and Other Fraudulent Artifacts*. He teaches at Virginia Tech.*

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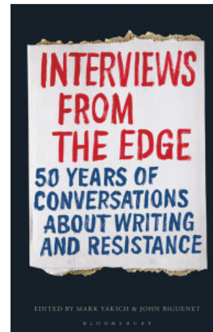

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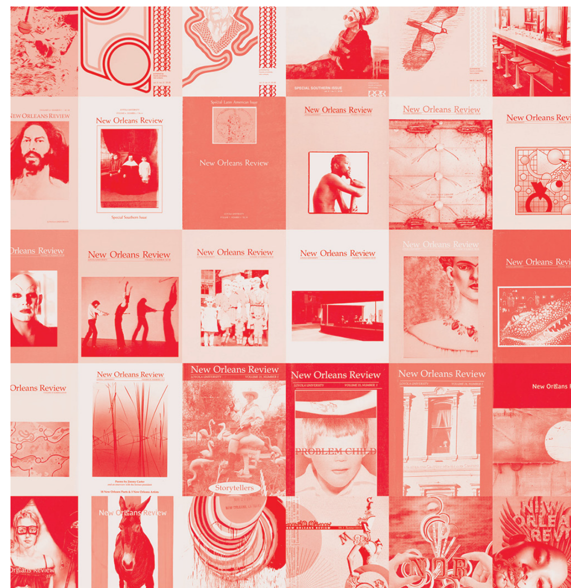

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