

A Man and His Mirror

Brad Barkley

After scanning his senior yearbook photo from 1976, the man enlarged it, printed it out, then taped it to his bathroom mirror. Handsome him, all butterfly bow tie and disco sideburns. Using the left-behind cuticle scissors, he cut out the eyes and mouth, and standing *just so* could make his own eyes and mouth line up perfectly in the holes. He made his mouth say things it hadn't then. It said, "Lorraine, don't marry me." It said, "Coach Wood, shove that rope up your ass." It said, "This is my last donut." It said, "So long, Mom, cry all you want." Throughout that afternoon it said "Yes" eighty-three times, and "No" only twice. The next morning he was him again, not just his mouth. He said, "You are young now. Enjoy it." He thought the effect might work better with a cigarette, but the printer paper blocked his view of it, so he took the cigarette and used left-behind nail polish to glue it to his photo at the corner of the mouth hole. There. At the office he avoided regular mirrors, which seemed to him harsh and full of lies. At home he began to dislike thinking of himself as black and white and pixelated and grainy, and so with left-behind cosmetics he rouged and tinted himself, blowing the excess flesh-colored powder from the paper, careful not to knock loose his cigarette. Then he lined up his mouth and eyes; he held very still. He tried lighting the cigarette but it didn't work. He said, "You haven't aged a bit," but this was wrong, almost like winking at himself, and so he took it back. He said, "Take care of me when you're older," and felt such tenderness for himself then, such shameless pity, that he slapped the cigarette from his mouth. He said, "Those things will kill you."

At the Clown's Birthday Party

Brad Barkley

After cake and ice cream, the guests in their painted smiles and polka dot attire settle in to watch the man they've hired to entertain them. An actuary analyst! So much better, already, than last year's accountant or the year-before-that's linguistics scholar. In his narrow dark tie and shirt sleeves he opens his briefcase of tricks, produces an over-large ledger sheet and pencil, and, while the clowns watch open-mouthed, calculates a number of profitable, competitive insurance premium levels *while* determining the amount of cash reserves needed to assure payment of benefits and then—before they can even catch their breath—withdraws a dozen manila envelopes and reviews employee claims activity to see if premiums are adequate to cover losses. Hurrah! They laugh when he extracts a large seltzer bottle, lifts it high, and uses it to water down his scotch, because, he explains, Jill thinks he is drinking a little too much lately, though he can quit anytime he wants, and with a flourish he sets up a cardboard bar and sits at it and lights a cigarette and runs his hands through his hair, opens his wallet to a picture of Jill, who (surprise!) left him last week, the kids, still in their braces, and while his magic In-Box slowly fills itself and after he breaks five pencils with one hand, out come the skinny balloons which he deftly twists into a variety of shapes, including the 5-alpha reductase enzyme that is causing both his baldness and that little twinge in his prostate, and the Q-shaped ucler growing in his duodenum. He leaves one balloon uninflated, but won't talk about it. The clowns are not, he tells them, his fucking therapist, and he never liked them anyway. The clowns cheer and laugh; this is so much better than anything, despite the bite of pathos they feel as the man cries now, sobbing into his open palms, and the clowns all know, know in their *hearts*, that this funny sad man is really laughing on the inside.