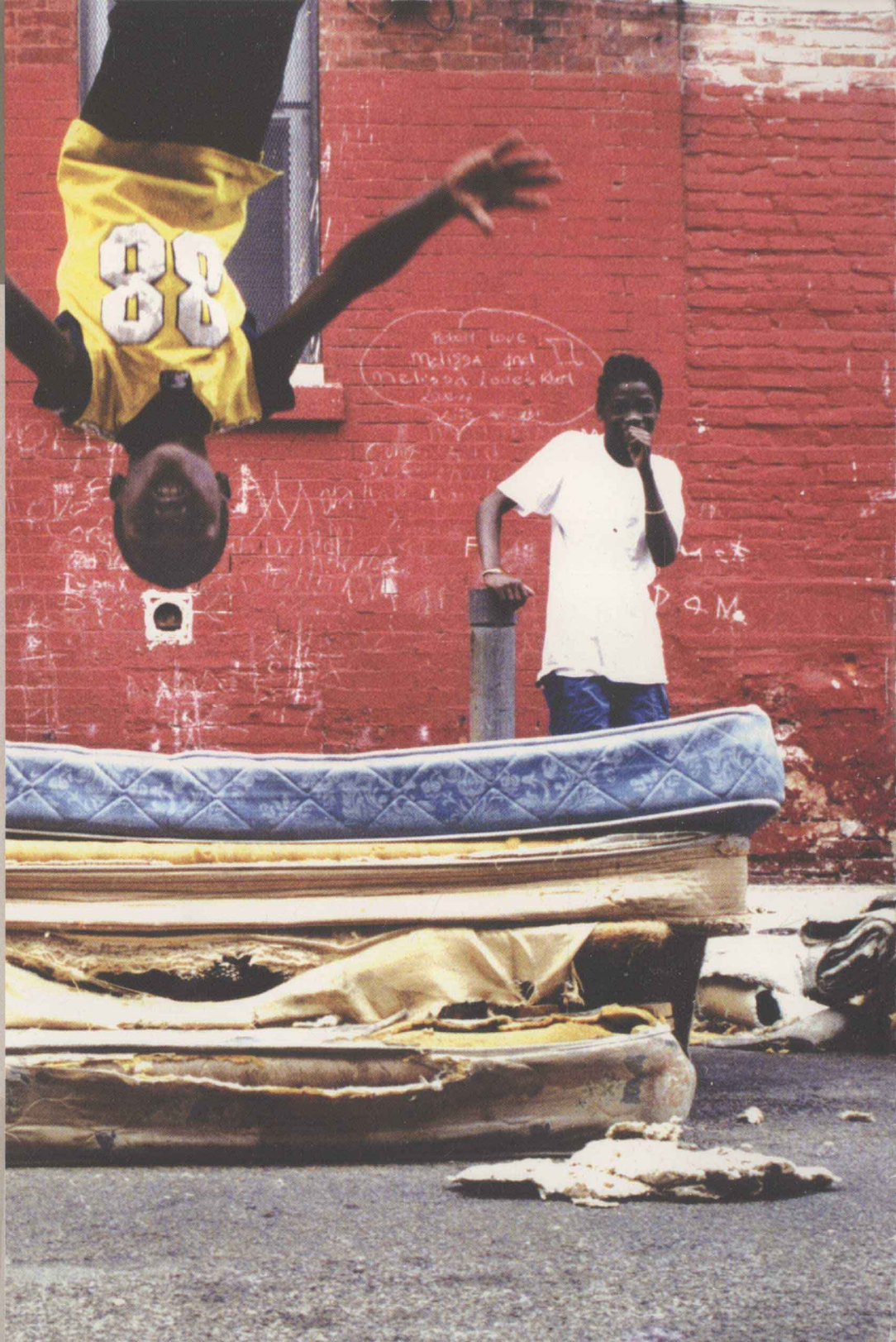

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A PUBLIC SPACE

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ISSUE: SUPERHEROES, HOLLYWOOD IN THE MCCARTHY ERA, TRANSLATING
NTO JAPANESE, NEW JERSEY PORN, HIKIKOMORI, THE COAL MINES OF WEST
VIRGINIA, CHEKHOV, SALINGER, STEPHON MARBURY, THAT WEIRD GUY WHO LIVES DOWN
THE STREET, BERTOLT BRECHT, DIGGING A HOLE TO CHINA, AND MORE.

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WELCOME

BRIGID HUGHES

Over the course of the past year, the recurring debate over the value of fiction seems to have intensified. Why do we read it? Why do we write it? Does it still matter?

In the nine months that it's taken for this magazine to go from an idea to the 224 pages you now hold in your hands, I've come across various responses to those questions—that fiction is how we learn about other lives, and so gain an understanding of the world; that fiction is a place where we can be honest about things because we don't have to be true. One that especially resonated was an article by the critic James Wood written in the aftermath of the tsunami in south Asia last year. "Literature can no more explain suffering than can science or religion, but it can describe it better than either." If that's true, then shouldn't fiction be as important to our culture as journalism? Can one truly inform us without the other?

This impulse to look to fiction to make sense of the facts came up again last year in a conversation with a journalist who wanted to write a piece on Fiction in the Age of Bush. What interested him weren't books that took on current events directly, but how those current events had affected the way writers—and their characters—saw the world.

Thinking about why we read fiction led, naturally, to thinking about how it's written. What kind of fiction did we want to publish? How can a literary magazine make a place for fiction in the larger world? The idea of fiction as exploration, as investigation is something we kept coming back to. Picking up on this, one of the early proposed titles for the magazine was *Fieldwork*. That old dictum inverted: writing that starts not with what the writer already knows, but with what he doesn't know. Writing that starts with a question, or a sense of curiosity.

Last year I came across an interview with Arthur Miller on the BBC about a job he had with the Library of Congress in the 1940s, which sent him to Wilmington, North Carolina, to record southern accents. What he ended

up recording were the protest songs of a group of women who had been on strike against a shirt factory for fourteen weeks. Now, who knows whether this experience had any real influence on his work, but I love the idea of a writer exploring something so absolutely foreign to him. (And to think that the U.S. government helped make such an experience possible.)

That BBC interview became the inspiration for our opening section, If You See Something, Say Something—to send writers out into the world and to invite the world back into the pages of the magazine as well. Something like a literary magazine's version of an op-ed page.

We also wanted, as editors, to get *ourselves* out into the world. So our Focus portfolios will look at the literature that readers in other places admire and enjoy—the first installment takes us to Japan—and in that way, to try to understand something new about another culture and, perhaps, to expand our tastes.

Eventually, we found the title for the magazine in a *BOMB* interview with the novelist Aleksandar Hemon. When asked if he trusted books, he replied, "No. But I love books more than ever. Because I learned that books don't represent 'truth.' Rather they open a space, a public space, in which that truth can be negotiated."

So that was the idea: a magazine as a public space. A literary forum for the stories behind the news, a fragment of an overheard conversation, a peek at the novel the person next to you on the subway is reading, the life you invent for the man in front of you at the supermarket checkout line. Ideas and stories about the things that confront us, amuse us, confound us, intrigue us.

This first issue is only a starting point. We hope the magazine will be an ongoing conversation between writers, editors, and readers. To that end, we'd love to have your input into what is very much a work in progress.

GOB DAMNED

IAN CHILLAG ON THE BUFFALO CREEK FLOOD

Chances are, if you lived in southern West Virginia in the middle of the twentieth century, my grandfather had his hands on you, either on your way in or your way out. Erwin Chillag delivered babies, and he was the coroner of Logan County.

I always think of Logan as *the West Virginia of West Virginia.* Whereas an Ohioan might ask you, "What do they do in West Virginia on Halloween," West Virginians ask you what they do in Logan on Halloween. (Pump Kin.) My parents grew up there. My mother says the reason there is so much teenage pregnancy in Logan is because there is but one movie playing: nothing to do but shag.

At the end of February 1972, the police came to Erwin's door. There were some bodies that needed to be called dead.

There's a byproduct of coal processing called *gob*, a mixture of mine dust, shale, and other useless stuff. One of the big companies in Logan County, Pittston Coal, dumped its gob into Buffalo Creek, making dam after dam and transforming the creek into a series of dirty little ponds.

Gob is not an ideal thing out of which to build a dam. It's unstable and it only gets worse when it's wet. Now and then, one of Pittston's gob dams ruptured, but the others stopped the water before it could do any harm. The state of West Virginia gave Pittston some cursory warnings. The dams were more-or-less illegal, but the law was seldom, if ever, enforced.

In 1967, the U.S. Department of the Interior warned the state of West Virginia that the Buffalo Creek dams were unsound. Residents of the holler below had complained of the danger to anyone who would listen.

Toward the end of February 1972, it rained for four days straight. Pittston officials began to worry that the dams wouldn't hold. But one higher-up in the company drove down to the holler and assured residents that there would be no flood. Some residents headed for higher ground anyway—a wife of fifty years

knowing to duck before her husband so much as raises his voice.

A *holler*, for the record, is Appalachia-speak for the hollow space between mountains. If you find yourself in a valley, surrounded by trailers, and you are being chased by a dog, you are probably in a holler. They are sticky, claustrophobic spaces: road, railroad, creek, houses, and mobile homes right on top of one another, snaking with the curve of the valley floor. As they get full, people build houses up the mountainsides.

Around eight o'clock in the morning on February 26th, there was a cascade of failures in the Buffalo Creek dams, and one-hundred-some million gallons of frothy, gobby bathwater broke forth into the holler below. People who survived talk about seeing a twenty-five-foot-high wall of black water, rushing up one side of the holler and down to the other. It picked up the railroad and wrapped its rails around the trees.

When the flood receded, they found bodies in trees, atop piles of ruined cars. One thousand homes were destroyed, or close. It was among the deadliest catastrophes ever to befall West Virginia, and Erwin counted the bodies. One hundred twenty-five died in all, in a matter of minutes.

When twelve men die in the Sago Mine accident in January, I call Erwin to ask if he's been thinking about Buffalo Creek. He turned eighty-five right after Christmas and no longer delivers babies or pronounces people dead. When he works, it's as an expert witness in medical malpractice cases. I hear he falls asleep in court.

Erwin can't remember much. I ask him how he got to the flood. He yells to my grandmother, "How did I get to Buffalo Creek?" For years he has stored his memories in her brain. As it turned out, the police took him on one of those railroad handcarts you have to pump up and down. He says, "The mines have never been as safe as they could have been. They sent me in those mines a lot after a lot of dead miners."

The police took Erwin to a gymnasium where the National Guard had been storing the bodies they found. One of Erwin's best friends, Nick Camicia, had moved away when he became president of Pittston Coal. He flew in, or over, to see what had happened, but they didn't speak. Jay Rockefeller, then the Secretarty of State, came in as well. He and Erwin talked about the flood, and Erwin shut Jay Rockefeller's hand in a car door.

Soon after the flood, Pittston put out a news release that called the flood an

"act of God"—something for which coal companies don't have to pay. They said the dam simply couldn't hold "all the water God poured into it." No criminal charges were ever brought against Pittston. There were class-action suits, the largest of which got a group of six hundred survivors a settlement that worked out to about thirteen thousand dollars, after legal costs. The state sued Pittston for damages and ended up settling for about a million dollars. In 1973, public outcry led to the passage of a law meant to regulate the dams, but enforcement of the laws has been chronically underfunded.

It is the Sago deaths that get me thinking about Buffalo Creek. But when I think about it, the years of unheeded warnings, the meaninglessly large numbers (what is one hundred million gallons, really, anyway?), and the unsatisfactory calculus by which things are reimbursed and fixed, seems more like New Orleans and Hurricane Katrina than anything.

It's funny: I've known this story forever, and I know Erwin was born in 1920. It occurs to me now, though, that when I imagine the flood, I picture some pre-industrial time, centuries ago. I think it's because Pittston felt they were operating in a time when it was still okay to blame God. I always see Buffalo Creek in black and white, and murky. But it was 1972. There were people hundreds of miles away, dancing to disco. There were skyscrapers and rocketships.

INSPIRED BY A TRUE STORY

RICK MOODY ON JAMES FREY AND J. T. LEROY

"Every journalist who is not too stupid or too full of himself to notice what is going on knows that what he does is morally indefensible." Janet Malcolm, when she wrote this memorable line, was describing the seduce-and-betray strategies of American journalists. But maybe there's an analogy with memoirists. Is it any less obvious in that case?

Along comes the James Frey book. Of it, I remember first hearing that it was the greatest recovery memoir of recent years, full of fisticuffs and bile. I consider myself informed on these themes, so I was naturally a bit curious about this Frey character, especially since he was getting such glare from the arc lamps. Soon he was selected by Oprah for her club. As with all such

announcements, it behooves the critical observer to remember that, yes, in dreams begin responsibilities. James Frey will be made to pay for all his successes, in due course, as Jonathan Franzen, an infamous Oprah selection, was made to pay, by such people as had a hard time imagining how difficult it was to be Jonathan Franzen that month. The literary community in this country would rather gorge on its young than make a case for itself with the ignorant at large. Just when I might have read the Frey, there was the news from The Smoking Gun enumerating some of the more dubious claims in his book.

The web is often used for the instantaneous attack, the literary equivalent of the improvised explosive device, and I suppose I understand why people approve of such assaults, but wouldn't a more cautious, sifting of the implications of Frey get us closer to that elusive quicksilver whose absence we are quick to condemn, though its presence is much harder to gauge: the truth?

The paper of record piled on Frey, not once, but many times. There is much for them to gain from it. First they assign their book-beat guy. Then the editorial page gets into it! And then the weekend section! And then the op-ed page! Then the letters column! Then the lead book critic! Is this to be believed? This is the paper that has, by almost any account, failed to apologize fully for allowing a reporter to swallow in the entire repast of Bush administration lies about the war in Iraq. This is the paper that is occasionally known for reporters who completely fabricate their stories. This is the paper that held onto the story about the warrantless wiretapping of the NSA for a solid year, before publishing it.

Omission is a kind of deceit, too, just as prevarication or outright manipulation of the facts is a kind of deceit. Noble deceit is still deceit. If indeed it *is* noble. The newspapers and cable news networks who have jumped on the Frey story, that is, are not beyond reproach. They are just as hasty as the self-satisfied pirhana at The Smoking Gun. And they're deluding themselves if they imagine that enumerating Frey's ethical lapses will cleanse them of their own.

I don't intend to minimize Frey's dissimulations. Though I know that recovery narratives often have a little bluster built in. This is obvious. Susan Cheever's recent biography of Bill Wilson indicates that the founder of Alcoholics Anonymous, for example—certainly one of the important thinkers of the twentieth century—was himself loose with the facts, in the matters, for example,

of mistresses, lovers, experiments with LSD, etc. The same is often true of his adherents. War stories about one's drug-related excesses are like fishing stories. When I say I drank wine with *shards of glass* in the bottom of it, I mean, I really did! Except that I didn't! Not exactly!

But one can't excuse inflating three hours in jail into *87 days in jail.* Such license is too much. When I wrote my own memoir, I worked my ass off to make sure that everything I included was true to the best of my knowledge. There was one brief passage where I induced a certain character to recur, though he had not in fact recurred, because it was poetically appropriate. Then I left this passage on the cutting room floor, because I felt guilty. This was not a job I really enjoyed, this truth-telling. I'm a fiction writer. What I like is the liberty of imagination. I like to let imagination go where it will. So when I decided to try to tell the truth, in *The Black Veil*, I had to keep myself on a very short leash. Having gone through such an ordeal, I *do* find it a little depressing to contemplate that other memoirists may not be willing to hold themselves to this standard. I could have slapped the words "a memoir" on one of my novels and had a much snappier life story!

It's possible that Frey believes he is telling the truth, or believed he was until appearing on *Larry King Live*. Because—and here I'm aware I tread on relativist territory—alcoholism is a mental illness, there can be lapses in such elementary areas as truth, bill-paying, hygiene, child-support, etc, even when the alcoholic is recovering. Just because an alcoholic can put together a couple of sober years and write a book doesn't mean that his pickled cerebellum is now squeaky clean. A sober alcoholic liar is often just a sober liar. Did Frederick Exley always tell the truth? Well, he told his memoirs from *inside* the disease, and I assume that they are full of interpretation, misapprehension, massaging of the facts, and that's why he hewed to the line that they were fiction. Yet no better book, in my view, has ever been written about what alcoholism is and feels like than *A Fan's Notes.*

Accordingly, I don't exactly blame Frey. The story as I understand it is that he did call the manuscript "a novel" at one point in its life. No doubt he was persuaded otherwise by persons with working knowledge of the book business. But why? "A novel" worked for Henry Miller. "A novel" worked for Bukowski. William S. Burroughs. Jack Kerouac. It worked for any number of European writers over the years.

If the fault is not with Frey, who then is responsible? Here's where the story collides with J. T. Leroy. I corresponded with J. T. Leroy briefly. As did many other writers. I heard about him from Joel Rose, provocateur and editor of *Between C and D* back in the East Village days. The conversation took place maybe ten years ago. There were some offhanded murmurings about a kid with the most horrible life story, writing these awesome stories. I failed to pay attention till later, when Leroy's first book came out. Then J. T. e-mailed me, to ask if I would read a story he'd written and if I would help him figure out what to do with it. I read the story, which I thought was full of compassion for old chicken-hawk pedophiles, and I felt like this, at least, was genuinely new.

But I didn't take a shine to the prose. Leroy's prose felt blunted in the extreme, as if written by a, well, by a high-school dropout. Having written a polite, encouraging, and noncommittal note, I let the matter drop. Of course, I encountered all the press about how J .T. was too shy to do his own readings, despite his appearances at these events. Wore a wig. Stammered horribly, etc. I marveled, because the Leroy phenomenon seemed such a clear example of how readers often lack the basic discernment required to differentiate between literature and prose that is merely vehicular. Every time J. T. in his wig appeared with some rock personality, I would get a little more disappointed about it.

As with James Frey who made good television fodder, the J. T. Leroy biographical narrative, in which a truck-stop transvestite hooker becomes a world-famous fiction writer, reassures those readers who are more interested in the life of the artist than in the work. These days, it's not even the *factual* life, but a freeze-dried, pasteurized, boiled down, lowfat, tastes-like-real-butter life that is suitable mainly for prime time. When I learned Leroy was a hoax, I didn't quite believe it only partly because it is rather strange to conduct a significant e-mail exchange with a person and then to find that he does not exist. But also because I didn't want to believe that the situation for literature had become quite so dire as it has.

I admire a good hoax. I liked, for example, the Ern Malley affair, in which a "modernist" poet was invented by a pair of conservative Australians. I like the story of Clifford Irving and his fabricated Howard Hughes memoirs. Hoaxes, though cruel and destructive, (c.f., Amie Barrodale and Paul Maliszewski's Pearl Files), can be rather creative. I like the way that a rigorous, astringent view of the world can often inform and lie adjacent to the most fraudulent

bullshit. And so I found the J. T. Leroy story amusing, except for one aspect thereof: as has been pointed out by others, there are a lot of young people out there who have been abused, who have been in very bad circumstances, young gay people, young transgendered people, young sex workers, who wanted to believe this Leroy story. They're liable to be ill-equipped to handle such a surfeit of fraudulence.

Still, I don't blame the ostensible adoptive mother of J. T. Leroy, and her odd, manipulative hoax. And so who or what is there to blame? Well, in the end, I blame the cultural environment. Because what we have here, with each of our twin protagonists, is a rapacious and dishonest way of marketing books. This marketing strategy is based exclusively on circulating the deracinated, sensationalized biography of the writer. It is based on making this biography the absolute bedrock for the text itself, the Cliffs Notes for the reading experience. And this strategy for marketing books in turn brings about a way of reading books, and this new way of reading books, wherein the book is just to be skimmed so that one can marvel completely at the indomitability of the author. Wherein the review is just as adequate as the book itself, particularly the most insipid in-briefs that favor summary and reduction over substantive analysis.

It is a little bit unfathomable to me that anyone could consistently read J. T. Leroy without addressing the fact that the work itself is not very good. (Although the hoax itself is marvelously creative, I do admit.) Likewise, I find it hard to believe—if it should turn out to be true that five percent of Frey's book is made up—that readers are so careless as to accept a nonfiction book whose every twentieth page is entirely false!

When I blame the culture entire for this mess, what I blame the culture for is its phobia at the sweet labor of reading. I do it myself occasionally (to my shame and regret): make do with the sketchiest acquaintance with a book, as though I knew what was inside its covers. This won't do. Reading requires a persistent, engaged, long-term relationship with a book. It requires passion and commitment and patience, that most unfashionable of contemporary virtues. Books that are slapdash and careless about these ideals of the reading experience, books that are made for the television market, or in order simply to be review-worthy, do not, in my view, have that much in common with the kinds of books that lie around for decades and contribute to history. But books that are anything less reek with the perfume of mendacity.

IN BOCA
ANTOINE WILSON EAVESDROPS

Hungry from travel, we hit the hotel restaurant. We were in Boca on business—one night, in and out. The Breeze Café was a plain white box decorated with a mish-mash of wicker chairs and faux-palm-frond ceiling fans. A television blared sports in the corner. The only other patrons sat behind me, in plain view of my friend. I dreamt of crab as I munched burger. The cole slaw was pink, and mysteriously sweet. I made a remark about it, but my friend wasn't listening. She was focused on the other table.

The players were a middle-aged woman, her ex-husband, and a pre-teen daughter, along with the woman's lawyer. They were in the process of haggling over details of a custody agreement and child-support payments. It all sounded quite complicated. Somehow, while we were listening, the daughter's skating lessons became a big bone of contention. The ex-husband couldn't get past how much they cost.

Their argument escalated; accusations flew; her lawyer called for "rationality." We lingered over our food. The waiter, a sweet young East Indian guy, smiled at me as if he could hardly contain his schadenfreude. Or perhaps he was trying to get us to leave—it was closing time.

Eventually, the daughter stormed out in tears. The woman accused her ex-husband of causing this to happen. This was too much for him, and he relented. He would pay for the skating lessons.

All was well in the world. We signed the check, said good night, and retired to our rooms. Seven numbers apart—121 and 128—they were somehow positioned on opposite sides of the hotel. Every detail in the place seemed like an afterthought, from the labyrinth of handicapped ramps to the armoire placed directly in front of my closet door. And it was loud. A train roared past every half hour. Partying frat boys stomped up and down the stairwell. Someone's children screamed at each other. A persistent car alarm went through its cycle, dozed a moment, and resumed. The ice machine hummed and crunched. I slid open my patio door and peered into the darkness, looking for the source of the car alarm. Was there a parking lot out there somewhere? I couldn't see anything. A lizard crawled across my foot into the room, never to be seen again.

Then I heard it. I couldn't tell if it was a child or a grown man, but he was crying and trying to talk at the same time. A woman yelled after him. They parked themselves outside my room. I lay on the lousy sofa, separated from them by only a thin glass window and curtain, and listened.

The male party, the weeping man-boy, turned out to be the ex-husband from the earlier child-support negotiations. The woman was his current girlfriend, Sheila. From the sound of it Sheila wore high heels. They lived in New York and had come to Boca specifically to meet with his ex-wife.

Their argument had started when he returned to the room, looking for some comfort from Sheila after "going through hell in there," meaning the negotiations in the Breeze Café. Instead of comfort, he found Sheila angry with him for leaving her alone so long and for keeping her out of the negotiations. He then initiated a monologue of persecution mania punctuated by torrents of self-justification:

He restated his agreement to pay for his daughter's skating lessons.

He promised to reform his earlier (non-paying) ways.

He complained that he had no support from anyone, especially Sheila, from whom he expected it, at the very least.

He verbally attacked Sheila for not supporting him.

He verbally attacked his ex-wife for trying to screw him over.

He verbally attacked his wife's lawyer, with extra profanity and volume.

He complained that whatever money went to his wife actually went to his wife's lawyer, and that his daughter would see none of it.

He wept and subjected himself to a barrage of insults.

When he'd grown tired of attacking himself, he changed strategy. "I'm doing my best," he moaned, "I'm doing my best." He repeated it over and over, as if trying to convince himself.

He pounded his fists on the wall.

He made a series of loud, clear declarations of love for his daughter.

He was quiet for a few moments. I thought he'd finished.

He moaned that he and Sheila should just break up.

Sheila, he said, wasn't supportive of him.

He was obviously not good enough for her.

He couldn't make her happy.

He only had enough room in his heart, maybe, for one woman—