



Fuckhead

David Rawson



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dead letter office

BABEL Working Group

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The **BABEL Working Group** is a collective and desiring-assemblage of scholar-gypsies with no leaders or followers, no top and no bottom, and only a middle. BABEL roams and stalks the ruins of the post-historical university as a multiplicity, a pack, looking for other roaming packs with which to cohabit and build temporary shelters for intellectual vagabonds. We also take in strays.

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§1: IN THE FALL OF 2012

In the Fall of 2012, my novel *Stairwall* was published by Wormwood Press. A small press. Mostly my friends bought copies. It is a slim, quiet novel about a man with cancer.

Some of my fellow writers have gone as far as to say to never write about cancer, to which I would respond, “God hasn’t tired of it.”

In the time since the work has been published, no one has criticized me for co-opting the experience of suffering from Hodgkins lymphoma. Perhaps if my protagonist were a black woman, there would have been such a critique. But what if instead of cancer, my hero had had Down’s syndrome? Perhaps John Berryman’s Mr. Bones is too far removed from Sean Penn’s Sam Dawson of *I am Sam*

or Dustin Hoffman's Raymond Babbitt of *Rain Man*.

I have always been of the mind that the novelist is allowed access to all experiences, as long as he ultimately has something to say. Plutarch and Samuel Johnson are typing somewhere in the desert of the next world, composing the ultimate collection of biographical criticism, explaining how David Lynch's entire filmography owes a debt to his club feet. But I and the friends who bought my novel agree the author is dead.



Perhaps I should have told my brother about the novel. He has since pointed out that if I had nothing to be ashamed of, I would have proudly told him about it. Instead, he found the book in a local bookstore. While his children were listening to a woman read a Berenstain Bears book, my brother perused the Employee Picks section, and recognized his last name on one of the spines.

My brother, whose cancer has been in remission for two years now, was outraged, later telling me in a series of texts that I had stolen his experience and that I will never know what it is like to have cancer, to fear that you

will die before your children graduate kindergarten. I conceded that I had borrowed from his experience, but that it was also my experience because I had been the one to drive him to the hospital at 3:00 am, the one who had brought him food during his chemo treatments, the one who had watched the kids, the one who was there when he rang the bell at the last treatment. But my protagonist, the adulterous Edward, was not my brother. My brother said I was acting out a vengeful fantasy, destroying his reputation and hiding behind the construct of the novel. I disagreed.

When he said I would never understand his experience, I reminded him I have lived with VATER Syndrome my entire life. His response: “When are you going to stop hiding behind that? You’re not disabled. You’re just a fuckhead.”



I have struggled my entire life with whether or not to identify myself as a person with disabilities. My closest friends do not know the extent of my conditions. The few times colleagues have seen me ill, they have shrugged it off as the flu or stress.

VATER Syndrome, also known as VACT-

ERL association, is named for the possible areas affected: vertebrae, anus, the cardiovascular system, the trachea, the kidneys (renal), and the limbs. The syndrome is like an umbrella, covering many different kinds of possible disabilities that may occur in relation to each other, although in fluctuating extremes. A quick Google image search illustrates this fluctuation: cleft lips, legs and arms bent back in impossible positions, legs fused entirely together like a mermaid, children with colostomy bags attached to bulging stomachs.

I was born with my spinal cord wrapped around my vertebrae, causing a benign tumor; a club foot, bent 90 degrees to the left; the last three toes of each foot fused together; most of my small intestine missing; and an imperforated anus. I had a colostomy bag until I was four.

In a Chicago hospital, a non-denominational pastor wheeled me through the halls of the hospital, pointing out the construction-paper snowflakes dangling from yarn paper-clipped to ceiling tiles. He told me each snowflake was different, but in fact all the snowflakes had been cut from a stack of paper folded together: all these snowflakes were identical. He said God wanted me to be different, that disability causes strength, and God only gives you what you are able to overcome. The pas-

tor wheeled me into a room where Santa Claus was sitting in a red velvet chair. Rows of empty metal folding chairs. Santa motioned for me to approach. I limped over to him and climbed up onto his lap, positioning my colostomy bag between my legs. This would be the last time I did not worry about leaving a stain where I sat. He placed his hand on my head and said, "Child, what do you want for Christmas?" And I said, "A buttole." Santa looked up at the pastor, searching, then down at my red colostomy bag. "That's quite a wish, son. You go to sleep, and I will personally see to it." Later that night, as they put the gas mask on me to send me into sleep, I told my mother I had seen Jesus. The son of God sat in a red velvet chair with snowflakes above his head, and all you had to do to enter His kingdom is to go to him with a pure heart and receive.

The doctor's name was Abraham. A strong, Biblical name. He believed in me. For years after, my mother would pet my head and tell me Abraham went ahead with the surgery, even after all the other doctors told him it was too risky, because I was a handsome boy. Now maybe my mother made this up. Maybe he did tell her I was handsome to lighten the situation. But I always felt guilty for being too handsome, as there might have been other children in

that ward, ones with cleft lips and fused limbs, who needed this surgery, too. At an early age I was aware of others who had it worse than me. I did not feel like I owned my experience.

The day of my surgery, or maybe days or years later, I dreamt of my mother on an escalator, descending and holding a cantaloupe, and I knew she was never coming back.

But this was not true. She was there when I awoke. She was always there.



I did not speak until I was four, right before the surgery. My mother was driving, and I was in the backseat. I said, "Where are we going today, Ellen?" Not a word before this, and then complete sentences. At least this is the way my mother tells it. If this is true, that I did not speak until I was four, then I am by definition autistic, although I have never been diagnosed as such. In my mother's telling, the doctors always say I will never walk or talk. I will be completely dependent. "Dumb as a box of rocks," she always says, so that I believe this was the doctors' diagnosis: "Dumb as a box of rocks." And then, right before the surgery, some electric light wormed through me, and I awoke. Or something. I was a mir-

acle child, a testament to God's work. I was to be my mother's Job.



The state of my VATER Syndrome now:

My right foot, the club one, is shorter than the left because the nurses bound my foot after surgery as if I were a Chinese woman in the Song Dynasty: my forever Lotus foot. A limp that appears randomly.

Diverticulitis.

A large gap in my small intestine.

Recurring back pain and the constant possibility my spinal cord will once again wrap itself around my vertebrae.

Chronic diarrhea. Yes, I have a perforated anus now, but I cannot eat fruits or vegetables without experiencing extreme abdominal pain resulting in shitting my pants. I have a hundred personal words for shit. The chafing of skin, the bloody stool, the leakage settling around my thighs. Never knowing exactly when it will be triggered. The fear of eating anything. Mapping out where the bathrooms are. Casually shoving my hand down my pants to check. Shoving toilet paper into my ass to at least catch some of it if I have an accident, constantly looking behind myself to check that the toilet paper

did not fall out of my pant leg. Checking the back of my pants for stains. Telling a date that of course I enjoy spontaneity, but I need to know where we are going and if there are any bathrooms.

When I do tell lovers, they stroke my hair and say, "I'm afraid to get too close to you" or, "Is it hereditary?" Or even the insufferable, "Is it contagious?" I used my condition as an excuse for years to not have children until I learned it was not hereditary. Still, for those who know of my condition, I am not disabled. I am a high-functioning person who occasionally shits his pants. I have been told by many girlfriends that I just need to take care of myself better, that I need to change my diet. They feed me salad, and I excuse myself to go to the restroom. One does not build up an immunity to salad.

There are others who blame my drinking. When I look up online whether or not someone with VATER syndrome should be drinking, the site administrator will say, "Why not? Let them enjoy it." Meaning, they will not live long. They will sit there, drooling, waiting for God. Let them sip.



As long as I can remember, my parents told me not to discuss my disabilities with anyone. If anyone at the small private school I attended asked why we drove to Chicago so often, I was to shrug and say, "We went to the zoo." After one of my check-ups, my mother dressed me in a Brookfield Zoo sweater and took pictures of me with a stuffed tiger.

My brother always stayed with our grandmother. He later told me he felt like we had gone on family vacations without him. I tried to explain that the trips were for check-ups and surgeries. And he understood it then, as an adult, but he still said, "I did not know that then. And I still resent you for it. From then. Little me still resents you." During one of these trips when my brother was at our grandmother's house, no older than nine, he was flipping through the channels when he stopped on the image of Tom Cruise, my brother's idol. The short hair, the sharp eyes and jaw, the dark and handsome type, always the shadow of a confident smile. My brother, already at nine, fancied himself a ladies' man, slicking his hair back and folding a deck of cards into the short sleeve of his white t-shirt, to look like a pack of cigarettes. My brother had watched *Top Gun* and *A Few Good Men* back-to-back countless times, but in this film Tom Cruise had found someone able to get

to him, to get under his skin. Tom Cruise was stammering, sweating. This was *Rain Man*.

Cruise plays Charlie Babbitt, a dealer of rare automobiles. When his father dies, Charlie learns his father bequeathed his money, not to Charlie, but to a brother Charlie did not know he had: Raymond, the autistic idiot-savant played by Dustin Hoffman. Feeling like he has been swindled out of his birthright, Charlie steals his brother from his mental ward to convince him to give him the money. Raymond, however, has many phobias and eccentricities that make it very difficult for him to operate in the outside world. Charlie has little patience and spends most of the film yelling at Raymond and attempting to change his behavior through brute force. Charlie learns to love his brother, but Raymond ultimately returns to his ward, unable to fully cope with the outside world. Charlie is partially vindicated in his didactic approach to dealing with Raymond's disabilities, for the doctor taking care of Raymond declares that his interactions with his brother have brought him "out of his shell." As if all an autistic person needs to get better is to be yelled at to act normal.

My brother took note.

ee

Every evangelist who came to our church laid his hands on my foot and proclaimed it grow. “The God who made your foot can not only heal this foot, but give you a new foot,” one said. “God has a warehouse full of body parts.” My parents taught me that I should pray daily to be healed, but until then, I would act like a normal child. If I shit my pants, I should blame a dog. I should wear cologne. I should walk away. If anyone should ask why I keep a change of clothes in my locker, I was to say, “I’m going to the park after school.” If someone asks to come, say you’re not sure which park. If anyone asks why you go to the bathroom so often, say you like to freshen up.



Reading through my medical records, I can see the doctor recommended digital stimulation for the new rectum for the first two years, as well as occasional enemas to encourage the expulsion of stool. My mother gave me an enema every day until I was fourteen. I did not question this until I was older.

My mother would fill me up with water. My stomach bulged. I leaked from my anus, not sure if this were my due to my condition or the remedy.

I took Loperamide for the diarrhea. I still do. I remember my mother crushing the pills into applesauce. I thought the pills were giving me stomachaches until I realized later it was the applesauce. I could not eat fruits and vegetables without extreme abdominal pain, yet my parents fed them to me anyway. I was to be their normal little boy with a normal diet. They would cure me with the invocation, *By his stripes you are healed.*

When I was five, or perhaps eight, they took me off of Social Security's Supplemental Security Income program (SSI). This is a government program that helps pay for the care of raising a disabled child. My parents said God told them not to take the money anymore. Caseworkers wanted to know what I was eating, how much exercise I was getting, how I was coping. They were intrusive. They might try to take me away. I was being protected. God had a plan.

Also, taking the SSI money was like claiming that I was indeed disabled, that I would never get better. It was a curse, like saying, "I am sick." My father believed we should never admit we are sick. When he had the flu and someone asked if he was ill, he would say, "No. By his stripes I am healed. I am healthy and strong."

“If you claim the sickness, you are sick. You’ll never get better,” my dad would say. “Every day, you thank God for healing you.”

I thanked God countless times for taking my stomachaches away, for making me normal.



When I was nine, while giving me an enema, my mother said, “So what are you going to do? Shit on your wedding night? No one will ever love you.” Maybe I was nine. Maybe she did not overtly say the last part, but only implied it. I can remember a hundred variations of that moment. And yes, mother, I have shit the beds of lovers, and I deleted their numbers before I even closed the door.

Very little, if any, research has been done on the effects of enemas on the psyche of the receiver. I still struggle with whether or not I am masculine enough. My girlfriends’ families have warned them I am gay. Even some who know I am straight can see how others are not sure. Some see me as a liberal intellectual who has been emasculated by the Humanities. Something in the tone of my voice, in my hand gestures, in the way I carry my

body, something is communicating weakness, and therefore emasculation.

Every day until I was fourteen, my mother gave me an enema, penetrating my anus with the phallus. Because I had disabilities, my mother had to perform an act that gave her control of the phallus, confusing the traditional gender roles, the roles of mother and child. She penetrated. I was penetrated. In my Otherness, I Othered my mother.

But my mother always seemed masculine. She had a deep voice, rough hands, and my brother and I were always serving her. She would bark an order, and we would do it. She was prone to anger, and whenever she got very angry, she would grind her teeth, grab the closest object to her, and wring her rough hands around it. So how much of my emasculation contributed to her mannishness? How much did the enemas contribute to my effeminate-ness? To my struggles with intimacy?



No research has been done on adults with VATER Syndrome because there are so very few who have survived.

I take vitamins for the fruit and vegetables I cannot eat. I feed myself on rice, grains, meat.

It is always trial and error. I reward myself with grapefruits, then spend four hours in the bathroom.



I have gone to therapy, where they assured me I'm quite sane. I excelled in school and was no idiot savant either, although the written word was always my specialty. I do sometimes stutter, and I often find myself lost, unable to make out my direction.

I got lost on the way back home from my eighteenth birthday party. I and a girl I liked shared a birthday party at a restaurant because our birthdays were so close together. She brought the guy she liked, and everyone at the table laughed at the server with the hook for a hand. On the way home, I drove to the top of a hill in Lake of Egypt, and found myself surrounded by water. I had no idea how I'd gotten there, no idea how to get back. But I closed my eyes and pictured my parents' house, where I wanted to be, and I drove directionless until I got there. At home, the phone rang. My aunt told me my grandfather was dying, and I felt perhaps I had done this. That somehow my being lost, my inability to just drive home, my walking in the door at that moment, had caused the

phone to ring and my wrongness to infect
someone else.

§2: MY PRIVATE SCHOOL DID NOT TEACH LITERATURE

My private high school did not teach literature unless it could be tied to Christian teachings, so I read on my own, bending the covers back or ripping them off so no one could see what I was reading. When they caught me with *Grapes of Wrath*, I was told to leave Socialist literature at home. One of my science fiction anthologies fell out of my pocket one time, and the principal asked the owner of the book to step forward. There was an ad for the Satanic Bible in the back. The owner of that book was obviously in trouble. And everyone knew it was me. But they couldn't prove it. I watched them slice it in half with a paper cutter. The blade got stuck halfway through, and the principal and vice-principal held their

hands over the blade until it cut through the bottom.

I read *The Sound and the Fury* and *Of Mice and Men* during gym class, since my parents had an understanding with the school that sometimes I could not participate. My mom had decided the gym teacher should know I shit my pants, so I abused what I called “the brown card.” I would squeamishly tell Coach that I needed to sit down for a while, and they would leave me alone in a classroom to read.

I loved those books and gravitated to Benjy Compton and Lennie Small, but I did not understand their behavior. What made them that way? Could they help it? Were they anything more than burdens? Was that life really worth living? I felt that maybe to understand them would be to understand my own condition, or to at least understand the motivations of the George Miltons of the world. That was much of my own motivation to pursue an English degree in college: the hope that I could understand human behavior, and then disabled human behavior, and then the interactions between the “abled” and “disabled.”

But that’s not what I found in college. Benjy and Lennie were seen as plot devices. They were tools for greater stories. They were foils of others. Yes, their narratives were interest-

ing, but only in service to others; otherwise, they were stagnant, empty vessels.

This amazed me. There was plenty of criticism on how our cultural understandings of other topics had changed. How *Mansfield Park* was a feminist novel. How *Frankenstein* was about homosexuality. How *Huckleberry Finn* is a subversive complication of race. But the characters with disabilities are taken at face value. The professors and my fellow students did not seem troubled by this. In my writing classes, poets would bicker about whether or not a white man could take on the persona of a black woman, and yet here was a legacy of writers taking on the voice of persons with disabilities, often for laughs or for pathos. There was no term for this, and I hesitated to compare this to blackface. But I wasn't sure why.

Ultimately, the students in my literature classes would say, "This is not a novel about disability. The disabled character is a tool to show us what is "disabled" about ourselves. The implication being that none of us in the room had a disability. When then could there be a novel that was really about disability, I wondered. But for then, with the canon we had, I was to understand disability as a tool. Faulkner himself wrote of Benjy, "You can't feel anything for Benjy because he doesn't feel anything." He remembers everything so that

he is more like a camera, a soulless cataloger, an accountant of details without context. It is no wonder my classmates did not change their mind about Benjy. Four years after writing the novel, not even Faulkner saw Benjy in a new light: “[without thought or comprehension; shapeless, neuter, like something eyeless and voiceless which might have lived; existed merely because of its ability to suffer, in the beginning of life; half fluid, groping; a pallid and helpless mass of the mindless agony under [the] sun, in time and yet not of it.”

I loved Faulkner. Still do. But the moment I read that, I thought he was a dick.

Was that not like saying Richard Wright’s *Black Boy* is really about all the white people?

The same people who agreed the author was dead also agreed Benjy was only a story-telling technique, and that the narrative is not ultimately about disability. But in doing so, we now have a legacy of characters whose disabilities we do not question. We do not wonder if Lennie Small acts believably because we assume he will act outside our norm. A character can then be as violent or dumb as the text calls for if he is labeled as disabled: “In accepting the portrayal of a fictional character such as Benjy as realistic, the critical literature perpetuates the dehumanizing notions of people with disabilities as primitive or bestial instincts

—unmitigated by thought.”

Reducing Benjy to a recorder of events “without the ability to choose, discriminate, or interpret, diminishes the tragedy of what he has lost and the relative emptiness of his existence.” How much worse then would a character be who understood his disability? Darth Vader can trace back to the source of his disabilities: they are the result of a cosmic punishment for entertaining *The Dark Side*. But Benjy has done nothing; he is unable to think in terms of complex moralities or even context, and perhaps that calls into question the morality of the promiscuous Caddy or the blackmailing Jason. If they live in a world where Benjy is punished for nothing, they must acknowledge an unfair God with unfair punishments. Or they might have to acknowledge Benjy is the manifestation of a collective familial sin. He is a dog, birthed by sin, who will rape his own mother unless he is castrated. He is the physical manifestation of the limitations of mothering, of the family’s ability to teach. Perhaps Benjy is the best teacher: it is hard to say how long Caroline has been “sick,” but surely Benjy’s birth has vindicated her hypochondria. She can tell herself that there is something wrong inside her, preventing her from being the mother she wants to be. She can contextualize Benjy’s disability to be about her-

self. He is, for her, proof of her sickness, but he also threatens to deflect from her. When he is not a reflection of herself, he is not needed. It is Jason who becomes her favorite son because he is “a true Bascomb”: she claims that his success in business is a result of her family genes. Although Benjy is the mere reflection of how Caroline wants others to see her, Jason is the reflection of how she wants to see herself. She both wants to be pitied, and to be proud.

When my mother told me to tell my classmates I had gone to the zoo instead of the hospital, it was to keep secret the narrative of the mother who gave birth to a broken child. I was not at risk of telling my story, but of revealing hers.

George Milton in *Of Mice and Men* uses Lennie Small as an allegory for himself, as an extension of his hardships. We are expected to pity George for being stuck with Lennie. We feel his grief and loss when he shoots Lennie after Lennie accidentally kills Curly’s wife, but we also feel his relief. But when the disabled Other stops being a metaphor or an extension of the protagonist, the protagonist is at risk of being Othered. In *Rain Man*, when Charlie Babbitt dresses his brother Raymond in an identical suit as him, who is mimicking who? Who is dressed as whom? Without context,

both are operating outside the norm and are possible Others.

In Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, the narrator watches a boy who is developmentally challenged do laundry. As she watches the boy, she wonders if others will see her as disabled: she has limped in the past, and her mother cut out the membrane of her tongue so that she could be skilled at learning other languages. She also felt unable to leave her bed for a period of time before her mother commanded her to go to school. As she realizes others might see her as she sees the boy, she irrationally worries her parents will arrange for her to marry him. His presence has endangered her normality, reminding her of the limitations of her mind and physical body: "I didn't limp anymore; my parents would only figure that this zombie and I were a match. I studied hard, got straight A's, but nobody seemed to see that I was smart and had nothing in common with this monster, this birth defect."

No one has claimed any similarities between her and this boy, and yet his very presence threatens her.

After watching *The King's Speech*, I was afraid I would develop a speech impediment. As if it were contagious.

I am drawn to Kingston's use of "zombie." I

have been afraid of zombies since I first saw *Night of the Living Dead* a week before one of my back surgeries, at a Bible study event where my parents' friends prayed for me and then sent me into a room to watch TV. Using "zombie" to describe the boy doing laundry implies that disability is infectious, that to question the humanity of another means possibly infecting one's own humanity.



While I was watching *Night of the Living Dead*, my brother was at a friend's house, re-watching *Rain Man* for the umpteenth time. Later, when I was recovering in ICU, my brother placed a piece of ice in my mouth and asked me if I remembered watching that movie.

"Of course," I said.

He smiled, shook his head, and read me the paper. Him, reading all night, even reading the classifieds. Me, listening. I think that was the happiest my brother has ever been at being my brother.

At the time, I did not realize how much my brother had internalized that movie, but now I notice my brother is happiest when he is speaking, and I am listening. Raymond is incapable of telling his own story; instead, he recites

stories in rote, asking who is on first and not even getting the joke. Just as Benjy becomes like a camera, so does Raymond Babbitt. The closest Raymond gets to telling his experience is through the pictures Raymond takes throughout the movie that are shown during the credits:

The shots of a woman's feet, cars lined up on the highway, the tread of a car tire, a box of cigars, an off-angle tree, tree-barren landscape, highway signs for Dynoflow, routes 152, 7, and 37, an old farm windmill, a cola pop bottle top, the side of a building and a street in a small town, a rail road stop sign, a gas station gas pump, letters from a sign over a gas station, a country bridge, a crooked driveway and a shot of the rear end of a car, suggest how alien the everyday world looks to Raymond.

Raymond's catalog of what has happened to him is very different from the film we experience. His is almost completely devoid of people. He has found the quiet moments that do not illuminate his own story. The images he chooses could be taken by anyone taking the path he and his brother took: he is not attempting to leave a narrative mark. He bastardizes speech, speaks in non-sequiturs, and

repeats himself. He is incapable of narrating the actions of the film. He has been given a tool of cataloguing—the camera—but he cannot discern what is relevant or valuable. This, interestingly, is a catalog of himself since through these images we realize his inability to tell his own story, or his disinterest in doing so.

Meanwhile, Charlie speaks in buzzwords, responding to the impulses within himself, rather than the needs of others. Raymond's presence cannot help but become a metaphor for Charlie; both are lost within the internality of the psychic body. Both are incapable of truly connecting or communicating with someone outside themselves. The key to this realization that both characters are struggling with communication and language is in the movie's title. As a child, Charlie was unable to say his brother's name correctly and instead calls him "Rain Man." But since Raymond is taken away while Charlie is still very young, Charlie has no visual reminder to make the connection between Raymond and Rain Man. Charlie has grown up believing Rain Man was his imaginary friend. So he has already made the psychic connection that Rain Man has no true agency, but is ultimately controlled by his mind. His will should ultimately be Rain Man's will. If he cannot control Rain Man, then his own mental state is in question.

Raymond is taken to Wallbrook Mental Institution as a child after their parents become worried he will harm Charlie. While Charlie is taking a bath, Raymond turns on the hot water, almost scalding him. Both have forgotten this moment until they are adults in a hotel room, accidentally re-enacting a moment from their childhood that forever changed them, but that they have not had words for. With both Raymond and Charlie in the bath, they have reentered the womb to be reborn together with an understanding that must fuse the verbal with the visual, as they place their heads together and say "Rain Man" aloud. They work as one mind, even physically placing their heads together, blurring the line between them.

When my brother would mention *Rain Man*, I would ask him if he remembered *What's Eating Gilbert Grape*. He would say yes, and then change the subject. That film came out in 1993, so *Rain Man* had already been out for five years, but I remember watching *Gilbert Grape* first. That film has its own bathroom scene in which Gilbert, played by Johnny Depp, forgets to take his brother Arnie, played by Leonardo DeCaprio, out of the bath. He runs to Arnie, who has been patiently waiting for hours, cold and shivering in the tub. In this scene, the disabled broth-

er's dumbness is not a threat of violence, but rather he is the victim of his brother's forgetfulness. The blame is on Gilbert for forgetting.

The characters with disabilities in these texts cannot thrive on their own. But their male companions, their spiritual doppelgangers, also cannot thrive while caring for them.

What *is* eating Gilbert Grape?

Even when Charlie convinces himself that he wants Raymond to stay with him, Raymond chooses to return to Wallbrook. Conveniently, Raymond returns to his rightful place after having made our real protagonist, Charlie, a better person. We are assured Raymond has made strides in his struggle with autism, which allows for a defense of Charlie's harsh behavior toward his brother, as if autism is cured through yelling at the person. But not even Charlie's presence is enough to completely heal Raymond.

As they part, Raymond and Charlie touch their heads together again, as they did in the bathtub. Raymond spells his brother's name, but then says "Rain Man," assuring us that he has gone back into the broken name his brother gave him. He is nothing outside of his brother; he is a tool returning to the shed.

But Charlie has been affected by Raymond's presence, just as George Milton is perma-

nently changed by his relationship with Lennie. Robert Cardullo postulates that George could still buy the farm with Candy's money if he wanted to, but since he does not, this proves that "being in one safe place with Lennie was more important to him than simply being in one safe place." He now feels he does not deserve a better life after spending time with Lennie, who did not deserve the life he had been given. Cardullo is quick to explain that,

[t]his is not simple pathos. It approximates tragedy because it suggests not simply that George loved Lennie too much, but that he was unnaturally attached to him, but also that only by developing an unnatural attachment to Lennie could he ever have put up with (and done so much for) someone like him in the first place.

The interaction demands a giving up of the self, a fusion of the spirit with the disabled, which will ultimately lead to an acknowledgment of the disability in us all.



The presence of the disabled Other calls into

question one's own ability. For it was Charlie who called Rain Man into being with his disabled speech, which he has since compensated for in being a loquacious hustler. The presence of the Other makes one's own self an Other, so that the person with disabilities must ultimately be removed from the narrative, because while the disabled Other can mimic narrative, he will ultimately destroy it (or at least strip it of meaning): Raymond Babbitt mumbling "Who's on first?" continually, Lennie Small waxing on about alfalfa and rabbits, Benjy shrieking and crying, Johnny Horne (*Twin Peaks*) in a Native American headdress screaming sporadically while his father talks important business to his associates.

The presence of this un- or slant communication questions all communication: how much different are George's aspirations from Lennie's? This is why the Other must be hushed. Even Cardullo himself, who argues that George's evolution is the heart of *Of Mice and Men*, believes that "Steinbeck sacrifices attention to George for attention to Lennie"—that Lennie is ultimately a distraction, or at best a tool for understanding George.

The disabled Other is more than a zombie, more than a camera. He is more akin to the alien in *The Thing*: a soulless mimic that cannot separate itself from its own illusion. Peter Sell-

ers in *Being There*, Abed Nadir in *Community*, Raymond Babbitt in *Rain Man*—all are mimics who use television and film as models for social behavior. But they do not necessarily grow or learn from mimicry. They just pass as “mostly normal” by performing certain tics.

In Season 4 of *Community*, a situation comedy set in a community college, even Abed’s attempts to grow as a person are tied to mimicry. In episode three, “Conventions of Space and Time,” he emulates Jeff Winger, his friend who is really good at manipulating people into action. Abed understands that most of what Jeff Winger says is manipulative and self-serving. But in attempting to understand and change his own behavior and to affect someone else’s behavior, he says he is going to “Winger” them for a minute. He is such a good mimic that he takes on Jeff’s persona to help him work through a situation and get what he wants.

In episode 9, “Introduction to Felt Surrogacy,” Abed and his friends are not talking because they shared their deepest secrets in the woods. They each remember telling their own secret and assume the others are judging them for it. However, they soon realize no one remembers anyone else’s secret because they unintentionally drugged themselves with wild berries that made them loose-lipped but for-

getful (sitcom logic). When Shirley accidentally reveals her secret a second time, the group decides to retell their secrets so Shirley will not feel alone—an act of bonding. Abed quickly stipulates that he was only emulating their behavior and that he had in fact not shared a secret. The implication here is that he did share a secret that night in the woods, but has found a loophole. He has the potential to bond with others, yet rejects it, relying on their understood assumptions of him—that he is a mimic.

I too played the mimic, taking on my brother's cancer to, maybe, understand my VATER syndrome. One possible narrative: I wanted to understand how my brother understood my disability, so I attempted to understand his.

And this is where things get messy. Sexual deviance and addiction have become labeled as diseases, placed alongside cancer. Physical restrictions and differing levels of mental disability, while not diseases, have become parceled in when the disease of addiction is contextualized as an un-ability, or a disability. Lennie and Abed Nadir have no specific diagnosis, although we can speculate that Lennie has brain damage and that Abed is autistic. The truth is, our understanding of what disability is, is so broad. My brother's narrative of his cancer: that something attacked his

body, and he was stronger than it. But the narrative of the cancer becomes part of my brother's story. I also do not want to be defined by VATER syndrome, but I cannot tell my story without discussing it. I can say I am who I am despite of it or in parallel with it, but it is part of me.



I believe my brother is angry, not because of what I communicate, but because I communicate at all. I occupy a state of both ability and disability who is attempting to communicate my own experience, not to be a tool in someone else's story, but to understand my own. And there's the rub. One possible narrative: I made my brother the tool. I co-opted the cancer. I turned him into Benjy.



After my brother watched *Rain Man*, after I returned from Chicago, he was no longer the protector, the person I went to at school when I had shit myself to help me clean up. Instead, he now amplified the differences between us. As we grew up, he delighted in my failed rela-

tionships, my failed jobs. He laughed at my messy car, my messy apartment. I am the failure who cannot get his life together. Any attempt to correct him is a fight. I must immediately be silenced.

He never told people I lost control of my bowels. At least he gave me that. But the murkier side of my disability became his prey. The few times he invited me out with his friends, they would comment on how much I was like him, that I was a mimic of a source. Every hand gesture, every joke: "You act so much like your brother." If we were going to meet somewhere else, my brother would have his friends follow me. He would laugh and tell them how I am awful with directions, that I constantly got lost on my way home, even driving on familiar roads. My brother would make a performance of explaining to me in front of his friends how to get to our destination.

I would get lost in my own thoughts. I wasn't concentrating enough.

One time, when my brother had me lead the caravan, they did not trust when I turned right. They turned left, heading the wrong way, having to circle back, so that when I arrived first, my brother asked me where they were, and I shrugged. The narrative: that I had led them astray. That I am a fuckhead.

§3: WHEN I FINALLY LEFT HOME FOR COLLEGE

When I finally left home for college, to escape the fuckhead within myself, I landed in an advanced literature studies course where our first assigned reading was Denis Johnson's *Jesus' Son*. There it was, waiting for me, in his story "Emergency." Here was a narrator who navigated a space of confusion and constant un-ability. This was not a drug narrative; the drugs were in response to the initial problem. This narrator was a fuckhead. He had no name *but* Fuckhead. He had no need for another.

He is unable to follow cause and effect. He accidentally hurts the ones he loves. He gets lost. He's naïve. He follows his impulses. Some critics are not even sure he is the same person from story to story. Is this a novel? Are these

related? The narrative has died. The narrative is reborn. He is a beautiful fuckhead. He is my brother.

No, not that brother.

Our family portrait: Darth Vader standing, Fuckhead and myself each on one knee. Fuckhead and I are smiling, and father too, underneath his mask.



It was not until much later, in a rereading of *Jesus' Son*, that I saw it. That Fuckhead was as much about disability as *Of Mice and Men*, but that we've had our terms wrong. The undiagnosed Lennie Small is a Fuckhead. Benjy is a Fuckhead. Raymond Babbitt, God love the savant, is a hopeless Fuckhead.

Although not apparent at first, "Emergency" is a retelling of *Of Mice and Men*. Fuckhead, the narrator, is Lennie Small reborn.



In Denis Johnson's "Emergency," the narrator is known only as Fuckhead. This is his name, his title, his diagnosis.

His confidante is Georgie, just like George

in *Of Mice and Men*. But this reincarnation of George, while having hints of Charlie Babbitt behavior, is no Charlie Babbitt and no George Milton. He is the George who has shot a Lenie before, the post-Raymond Charlie.

Both of the men are pill-popping hospital orderlies who struggle to remember what day it is. As George mops the operating room floor, he bends over “in the posture of a child soiling its diapers.” He obsesses over the sound of his shoes. He tells a man with a knife in his eye that he cannot hear him because, “Your face is dark. I can’t see what you’re saying.” Georgie, likened to a child shitting his pants, has lost the psychic connection between what is said and what meaning is intended. He is navigating a language disconnected from meaning. The narrative is crumbling, and he is a fuckhead too.

When the doctor calls for the orderly, and Georgie asks, “Do you mean me?” the doctor replies, “Is this a hospital? . . . Is this the emergency room? Is that a patient? Are you the orderly?” And yes, on one level the doctor is being snarky, sarcastic. But as he puts Georgie in his place, he psychically puts Georgie in his place as well. Georgie questions the narrative, threatens it, so that the doctor must question what he has taken for granted. But the doctor then reconstructs the narrative, placing Georgie back into

his proper place in that narrative through a series of questions.

So now Georgie is the fuckhead. The doctor says, about the man with a knife in his eye (a knife Georgie will later pull out without even thinking about it), “That person is not right, not at all, not one bit.” Not that both the narrator and Georgie are not right. Here, Georgie is alone. And the Nurse reassures him that she has her own life and series of problems and that she is only concerned with Georgie understanding her enough to perform his job: “As long as my instructions are audible to him it doesn’t concern me.” The nurse knows better than to engage Georgie’s attempt to deconstruct the narrative. She carries on by herself.

Up until this point, the narrator has presented himself as an observer of Georgie’s behavior. He has not told us much about himself, and we are led to assume he is different from Georgie. At this point, he is nameless. We do not yet know that he is Fuckhead.

It is in leaving the hospital, as the narrator and Georgie drive around in the pick-up truck, that the space between the two begins to fall in on itself. In the hospital parking lot, they lie down in the back of Georgie’s truck “with the daylight knocking against our eyelids and the fragrance of alfalfa thickening on

our tongues.” Here, Georgie does not ask the narrator to tell him about the alfalfa, for neither of them is truly capable of that narrative. In the naming of Georgie, who is first presented as a Lennie, we understand this man is not a George; he is like a child. There is no George to reconstruct the narrative.

As the pills he has taken from Georgie begin to affect him, the narrator sees “[a] champion of the drug LSD, a very famous guru of the love generation,” and he says that “[h]is eyeballs look like bought them in a joke shop. It doesn’t occur to me, as I pity this extraterrestrial, that in my life I’ve taken as much as he has.” After this, there is a temporal break. Perhaps he has reflected on the similarities between himself and the LSD guru in this space off the page. Perhaps he is not aware he is contemplating it throughout the rest of the story, but this rumination on what separates one from another becomes the subtext for the rest of the interaction between the narrator and Georgie.

While Georgie and the narrator drive aimlessly, both lost, Georgie hits a pregnant mother rabbit and uses a hunting knife to remove the babies, handing them to the narrator, assuring him they will save them together: “We’ll get some milk and sugar and all that, and we’ll raise them up ourselves. They’ll

get as big as gorillas.” This is a riff on George telling Lennie about the farm, and Lennie telling George he will pet and feed the rabbits. Georgie is navigating the space between George and Lennie—perhaps the “ie” in his name is the result of the amalgamation.

At first seeing the babies, the narrator says, “No way I’m eating those things”—one of the first hints that he is as much Lennie as Georgie: he has no model for this.

When the truck’s headlights stop working, Georgie and the narrator continue aimlessly on foot, the narrator calling, “Georgie, can you see?” and Georgie calling back, “See what? See what?” In a world where even the faces become dark, these two cannot save themselves in the dark of the woods.

On the other side of a military graveyard, the narrator does see, but again has no context. He is Benjy, recording:

On the farther side of the field, just beyond the curtains of snow, the sky was torn away and the angels were descending out of a brilliant blue summer, their huge faces streaked with light and full of pity. The sight of them cut through my heart and down the knuckles of my spine, and if there’d been anything in

my bowels I would have messed my pants
from fear.

In a world where both companions are equal parts Lennie and George, only the angels can save them through pity. He acknowledges the similarities between himself and Georgie, both always one step away from soiling themselves, but angels of mercy do not mind.

But Georgie becomes George enough to say, "It's the drive-in, man." The narrator tells us, "I wasn't sure what these words meant," but he watches with Georgie until the images end. They are two Charlie Babbitts watching the screen: "Famous movie stars rode bicycles beside a river, laughing out of their gigantic, lovely mouths." He is navigating a world where words and images do not quite connect, but he can admire the tools of communication, those lovely mouths.

Only when the screen goes black does Georgie say, "I'm starting to get my eyes back." Now that the film has ended, he must return to the world of emulation. And while Fuckhead does not come out and say he too had lost his eyes in the eyes of film, he does admit that "[a] general greyness was giving birth to its various shapes, it was true." Which shapes were close, and which were far

off? “I begged him to tell me,” he says, but Georgie again is no George.

It is then, returning to the truck, that our narrator gets his name, or rather, is reminded of his name. “We’re right outside town, Fuckhead,” George says, when Fuckhead says they must have driven three hundred miles. Whereas Fuckhead attempts to make Georgie a Lennie early in the story, Georgie is taking control of the narrative. They are Charlie and Raymond Babbitt in the tub, burning each other with hot water until one of them caves.

Georgie becomes concerned with getting milk for the rabbits, forgetting he is complicit in them going this long without nourishment.

But Fuckhead has accidentally squashed them. He has not tended the rabbits properly. This is not a case of loving too much or petting too hard. Rather, he spaced out. He is unable to care for himself, let alone anyone else. He is a fuckhead:

Georgie asked, “Does everything you touch turn to shit? Does this happen to you every time?”

“No wonder they call me Fuckhead.”

“It’s a name that’s going to stick.”

“I realize that.”

“‘Fuckhead’ is gonna ride you to your grave.”

“I just said so. I agree with you in advance,” I said.

Here Georgie is reinforcing the psychic space between himself and Fuckhead, as if one can only be a George if there is a Lennie, and to escape one’s Lennie-ness, one must make another a Lennie.

In the next paragraph, Fuckhead confuses the sequence of events, but tells us he is contemplating “how the slave might become a friend to his master.”

Here is George Milton, petting his mice.

Here is Jason Compson, in a moment of mute anger.

Here is Charlie Babbitt, wondering who is on first.



Fuckhead, too, wonders where he ends and Georgie begins, just as Raymond Babbitt wonders who exactly *is* on first. They have been playing this game the entire time, and only at the end do they both acknowledge it. They need each other to define a self, but the presence of the other Others the self. Fuck-

head remembers that, “Georgie had said something that had suddenly and completely explained the difference between us.” When Hardee the hitchhiker asks, “What do you do for a job?” Georgie tells him, “I save lives.” But Georgie saves a life through not understanding consequence, through having no model. But he has saved the life, he has pulled the knife out of the man’s eye, an action which the actual doctor hesitated over. He has managed to perform some good deed despite also being a Fuckhead. Without Fuckhead, Georgie’s story would be about a man who was incredibly lucky. With Fuckhead, he is a savior, assuring Hardee he will get him to Canada. Even though he will undoubtedly become lost, he is the one with the truck. He is the one with the hand on the knife. He is the Lennie who has learned to be his own George when he needs to be.

§4: BEFORE I WAS BORN

Before I was born, my parents raised chickens and rabbits. They still call their barn the “rabbit barn,” even though there haven’t been rabbits in there in decades.

When I was six, our cat Rocky was pregnant, and then one day she wasn’t. On Easter Sunday before church, I was walking through the woods past the rabbit barn, and I found two tiny little rabbits, both smaller than a thumb, in a rusted rabbit cage. One had been dead for at least a few days and had already begun withering away. The other was impossibly alive, breathing heavily, its little stomach expanding, then deflating to trace tiny ribs. It was mewling silently. Its mouth was moving, but nothing came out.

I told my mother, but she did not follow me out to the cage. She said, “Rocky’s her own wom-

an. She's too wild to be a mom."

I could not imagine a mother would leave her children to die. I became meaner toward Rocky. I would throw a rock near her to startle her, but never directly at her.



A year later Rocky gave birth again, to four kittens, and this time they were all healthy. But a month after they were born, Rocky led them out of the rabbit barn while it was raining, and then ran into the woods. They all mewed for her, but waited in the rain for her to come back. They did not run after her or go back to the barn. They trusted she would come back.

I ran out, picked them up, and carried them back into the barn. They struggled against my chest, ready to go back out there if that was what their mother wanted.



Weeks later, my mom called me into the kitchen. She was holding all four of the kittens. She passed them into my arms. She had a bottle of cough medicine and was pouring

some into a tablespoon. She asked them for one at a time and forced the medicine down their throats. They were sick, she said.

She told me to follow her out to the garden, where she began shoveling. After half an hour of digging, me still holding the kittens, my mother commanded me to put them in the hole and to make sure they did not get out. As I held them down, she began shoveling the dirt back into the hole. They mewed loudly for a mother that wasn't coming. My mom rested against her shovel and wiped her arm against her forehead. She gasped for air and said, "You finish. And don't tell your father."

I should have questioned. I should have protested. But I didn't. I shoveled all the dirt back and attempted to block out the sound of voices calling from underneath the earth.

I blocked out that memory for years, but as I began rereading the classic novels that deal with disability, I remembered and wondered what it meant. My mother had made me Lennie Small. I hadn't killed them by accident. My mother made me do it.



I have not spoken to my mother or father for

a year. They became very upset when my brother sent them links to my published stories. I attempted to explain to them that I was not stealing their experiences, but rather trying to understand my own. The last e-mail my father sent me simply said, "We will pray for you." I sent them four e-mails after that, now upset, ranting about how they raised me. About unnecessary enemas, about taking me off of SSI, about feeding me the wrong diet. They have not responded.

My brother had sent them links to my stories because of my novel *Stairwall*. "You've stolen my life," he said. "You made it like you. I am nothing like you. You will never know what it's like to have cancer." I sent him a series of texts explaining myself. He has not responded.

I do not call because if they answer, my father will be silent, and my mother and brother will scream everything they have held in until they are done, and then they will hang up.

We have never been good communicators.

So what do I do now that I have no family?

ee

In dating, I attract women who also do not

want a masculine man. Usually this is because of how their fathers treated them. They believe a less masculine man will not hurt them. Or perhaps they believe someone who lives with disabilities is more empathetic and understanding. Someone who lives in pain will not cause pain to others.

This is not true.



My first year away from home, a semester before I read *Jesus' Son*, I dated a girl who mothered me. She made me meals based on what I told her I could eat, she asked for a print copy of my medical history, and she wanted to have long discussions about how my physical disabilities has “branded my spirit.” She felt that we were kindred because she too had medical problems. She told me on our first date that she passed out sometimes and that the doctors did not know why. As we spent more and more time together, I noticed she would pass out when I needed space. When I told her I needed to be alone, she would start a fight to lure me into staying to work it out. Countless times, I would walk away from her in a crowded place only to hear gasps as she fell to

the floor. Ambulances would be called. I was her emergency contact.

When I confronted her, she cried and began hyperventilating. She could not believe that I could imagine that she was faking. I corrected her: "I don't think you're faking. I think you've wired yourself to faint when you don't get your way." This did not help.

I broke up with her, but we remained friends. One night as I was sitting on her couch watching TV, she straddled me so that I could not get up, and began hitting me in the stomach. She said if I hit back, she would call the police and tell them I had abused her. Her friend John sat there, across the room, not saying anything. I asked him to help. He said, "I don't want to get involved. You two work it out."

When I finally got her off of me and opened the door, she kicked me from behind, and I fell down the stairs. Bleeding, I got up, ran to my car, and attempted to drive away. She then ran down the stairs, jumped onto my hood to make me stop, and then opened the driver's door to attempt to pull me out.

Years later, I confronted her. She has no memory of this. I do not know how to contact John, but she says she called him, and he does not remember it either.

More recently, I dated a girl who had epilepsy. She could not go to a movie theatre. Most

concerts and even bowling alleys had too many flickering lights. Even kids' light-up shoes made her sick. She asked me to drive her home at night because streetlights messed with her eyes.

She was very understanding when I got sick. She didn't mind if we had to suddenly go home so I could change. She knew when to not ask certain questions about my disabilities. She made me chicken noodle soup and bought me vitamins.

But I didn't want to spend the rest of my life with someone who couldn't go to concerts or drive at night. Or maybe I just wanted to be the one who was special. It was an inconvenience, and I broke up with her.



I have made no attempt to create a community of the disabled. I haven't looked up people near me who have VATER syndrome. Knowing others have physical limitations does not comfort me. No disability is the same. Even VATER syndrome is different every time.

I want to be the strong one who has overcome the odds.

So does my brother.

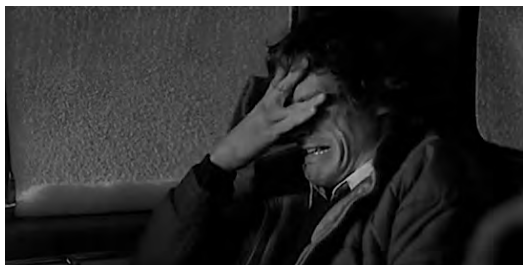
And that similarity just makes us angrier.

INTERLUDE

“fuck-head is gonna ride you to your grave”







CODA I: BILLY BIBBIT AND CHARLES
BABBITT

Billy Bibbit and Charlie Babbitt
Went to catch themselves a rabbit.
They intercepted Lennie Small,
Who struggled past to pet them all.
Habits are so rough to quit —
A neck is much more quick to slit.

CODA II: IT OCCURS TO ME NOW

It occurs to me now that Elwood P. Dowd of *Harvey* is the Fuckhead whom George becomes in Lennie's passing: the man haunted by the pooka, a rabbit no one can see.

CODA III: STEINBECK'S *OF MICE AND MEN*

Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* was originally to be titled *Something That Happened*. When titling the unfinished sequel, Steinbeck returned to the roots of the original title in naming it *More Things That Happened*. This lesser-read sequel is almost completely ignored by modern critics. The novel fragments, first published in 1982, never did find its audience. Allen Taft, in an introduction to the single, slim collection of literary criticism *More Things That Happened*, entitled "Shit Happens," postulates that the sequel did not succeed because its readers read it as a selling out of the values and sensibilities of *Of Mice and Men*. Being what seemed to be a science fiction or fantasy novel (the terms were just as murky then), readers did not accept that the

world of both could cohabit. Although Steinbeck did write what could be considered science fiction before, his short story “The Affair at 7, Rue de M—,” that story was tongue-in-cheek.

Here, Lennie awakens on a farm, mute and naked. Men with no faces (long ears, but no eyes, noses, or mouths—only a blank fleshy canvas) till the land, but nothing will grow. Mother, the rabbit-headed matriarch, kicks Lennie to the ground, placing a tight shock collar around his neck. Lennie is forced to walk on all fours across acres of farmland, every day, the faceless men following close behind.

Every day while Lennie struggles through hard dirt, Mother calls the men to her in song. They stumble over each other, hands outstretched, feeling for her.

The men with no faces stand around the porch and listen to Mother sing. They pet her soft body. She is such a beautiful singer, and no one here will ever match her voice.

After a month of this, Mother notices something is beginning to grow in the places Lennie is defecating. Voices call out from the hard-clayed soil. Little baby rabbits, ripe for picking.

“Why put Lennie through more pain?” Taft asks in his introduction. “Let that sleeping dog lie. Let him find peace.”

For Taft, Lennie is in Hell, punished in death as he is in life. For J. P. Lanks in “Tell Me Again About the Farmers with No Faces,” this is the beginning of a healing process for Lennie, that he must learn to transcend the animal man has made him. But I must disagree with Lanks, for the novel ends with Lennie nursing on the teat of Mother, along with the farmed baby rabbits. If anything, his animalism has here been enforced.

But I also must disagree with Taft that this is Hell.

Here is Curly’s wife as the rabbit who has found her audience.

Here is Crooks’ garden, thriving under Lennie.

Here is Lennie, unable to care for the rabbits himself, but able to bring them to life and offer them to Mother.

No, this is not “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge.” This is rather an acceptance that discussion of disability in literature outside of metaphor is impossible. So Steinbeck has amplified the metaphor, given everyone disability, even the earth.



It is curious business that *More Things That Happened* is also the name of Lynch's supplemental material for his film *Inland Empire*. I am not suggesting at all that Lynch is nodding to Steinbeck consciously here; the title is mundane and blandly functional. But with *Inland Empire* being connected to Lynch's web series *Rabbits*, the connection is worth being made.

Rabbits, reincarnations of the dead, waiting in purgatory for the phone call that will send them back to their human form. Alice's rabbit reversed with no clock and nowhere to go. Seen through a television set.

Raymond Babbitt is watching, but he can't quite make out what it is.

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W. dreams, like Phaedrus, of an army of thinker-friends, thinker-lovers. He dreams of a thought-army, a thought-pack, which would storm the philosophical Houses of Parliament. He dreams of Tartars from the philosophical steppes, of thought-barbarians, thought-outsiders. What distance would shine in their eyes!

~Lars Iyer

www.babelworkinggroup.org



Fuckhead

David Rawson

Georgie: Does everything you touch turn to shit? Does this happen to you every time?

Fuckhead: [weeping] No wonder everybody calls me "Fuck-Head."

Georgie: It's a name that's going to stick.

David Rawson's *Fuckhead* is a surreal exploration of the literature, film, nature and expectations of disability, and of 'fuckheads' in literature and film. Part lyric essay, part fictional memoir, Rawson's work tells the story of an unnamed narrator whose familial relationships are defined by his VATER syndrome. Abused by his mother and stripped of a voice by his brother's need to be Tom Cruise via *Rain Man*, he sets out into a universe of literary tropes.

Fuckhead is particularly interested in the relationship between Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* and Denis Johnson's reimagining of that work in the short story "Emergency" (in Johnson's *Jesus' Son*). But in accumulating characters with disabilities as widely diverse as Darth Vader, Benjy of Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, and the TV sitcom *Community*'s Abed Nadir, Rawson's narrator attempts to articulate the assumptions and clichés faced by persons with disabilities, all the while creating a new family with his unlikely gathering of "fuckheads."

David Rawson's fiction, poetry, and essays have been published in such journals as *Bound Off*, *Mixed Fruit*, *The Monarch Review*, *MonkeyBicycle*, *Prick of the Spindle*, and *Spork*.

dead letter office





Rawson, David

Fuckhead

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