

Meanwhile

Matthew Baker

Meanwhile

A dog sitting in the sand.

The shallows of the lake, meanwhile, scalloped with waves. Storm clouds clutching to the sky. The brothers Taylor and Corey Watterson in the lake, under the waves guttering about on its surface, diving toward the striped shells on the lake's bottom, their yellow (Taylor's) and green (Corey's) swimsuits fluttering at their legs, one of Taylor's toenails cracked in half, Corey's forehead and cheeks diseased with blackheads and whiteheads and other acne-type lesions, lumps of half-digested eggs digesting in their stomachs, their skin spotted with bumps from the cold of the water, their testicles huddled close to their groins, their fingers reaching for the shells, fat white bubbles meanwhile spilling from their lips as the air that they brought with them in their lungs is sent back to the surface, microscopic flatworms getting knocked this way and that by the bubbles, everything soundless, the synapses of Taylor's brain forming the words *Anna Linus*, the synapses of Corey's brain forming nothing at all, while above the water back on the beach someone is bent over their dog, Taylor and Corey's, and feeding it chocolate.

The flatworms having been looking for the legs of ducks, but instead having found the legs of these humans.

Paul Bott feeding chocolate, dog poison, 90% cocoa, to the Wattersons' dog, while beyond the beach grass from the birch trees Ben Isaac and Steve DeBoer watch Paul Bott

doing this, the synapses of Ben's brain forming the words *Yeah yeah yeah, fuck those bitches*, the synapses of Steve's brain forming the words *Dude hurry it up before they come back to the surface*. Ben's ear swollen and purple. The skin of Steve's stomach so sunburned that soon again he will be puking. Ben's ear, Steve's stomach, throbbing. Paul's brain pounding, the light from the sun (even sifted through the storm clouds) hurting his eyes, the membranes of his spinal cord and brain inflamed by a virus passed to his tongue from another. The synapses of Paul's brain unable to form thoughts relevant to what he is doing, instead bringing him words from elsewhere, forming *Mom's drinking again*, which hurts worse than the headache, while beyond the beach grass beyond the birch trees sits the Wattersons' cottage, its siding's paint pinkish and peeling, its porch still puddled with rain from the storm, in the kitchen of which cottage Mr. Edward Watterson is rewashing his hands, after having rewashed his hands, after having rewashed his hands, after having rewashed his hands, after having stepped through the kitchen to the sink using only the yellow tiles, bacteria in his mouth meanwhile chewing cavities into his teeth, the synapses of Edward's brain now, as he's rewashing his hands again, forming the words *Bacteria, sickness, disease*, again and again and again, meanwhile avoiding bringing him thoughts about Taylor and Corey's mother.

On the dock of a cottage down the road (this cottage's siding's paint yellowish, but still peeling) Ms. Pam Morse making a list of those in her town whom she hates, along with her reasons for hating them, on a sheet of cardboard, one of her wrinkled hands pressing it against the dock while her other hand pens it with black marker. The cardboard already reading, *Alice Olson, stuck-up and bossy. Marsha Bradbury, clingy and boring. Kim Bradbury, the Lower Peninsula's resident know-it-all. The Linus father, queer. The Vanderveens, loud. The fat pharmacist, nosy. The Bott children, ugly, the garbage collector, ugly*. A polyp growing in Pam's cervix, causing only a pale light pain, like a sort of pressure. Pam writing

another name.

On the floor of the bathroom of a cottage in the dunes, away from the lake, surrounded by pine trees instead of birch, Mr. Yi Kalleward, chemical burns on his arms, half-digested steelhead digesting in his stomach, meanwhile choking Ms. Hayley Isaac, his fingers wrapped around her throat, his other fingers clutching a fistful of her hair, his hipbones knocking against her butt, his penis, still wet with her spit, slipping in and out of her, as Hayley moans at him for more, her feet diseased with fungi, her skin there blistering and cracking like the skin of something decomposing, the synapses of her brain forming the words *Oh please don't stop*. Hightops squeaking in the gymnasium of the high school. The sound of basketballs being dribbled against a wooden floor. In the men's locker room's only stall, next to the men's locker room's three urinals, Danny Green's fingers wrapped around his penis, jerking it, the synapses of his brain forming the words *Ms. Isaac's tits*, someone on court meanwhile shouting wasn't Green supposed to come to the spring drills, someone else muttering let's hope he doesn't show, that kid is fucking annoying. On her bed in her bedroom in her house across the street from the high school, her dress at her hips, her underwear at her knees, Anna Linus rubbing her clitoris, the synapses in her brain forming thoughts that are not words, but something along the lines of *Danny Green and I together*. Back at the lake, on the porch of his cottage, Mr. Salvador Vargas, a cyst on his eyelid, half-digested pork sausage digesting in his stomach, giving Corey Watterson's ethics paper a D+. Back at the Linuses', in the kitchen beyond the bedroom where Anna Linus is making no noises, Ms. Linda Linus' nerve tissues growing tumors, the skin of her back spotted with fingernail-sized lumps, her face paralyzed from nose to chin, Mr. Paul Linus, her husband, bent over her where she's sitting, kissing her, him feeling her lips, her not feeling his. The synapses of Linda's brain forming thoughts that are not words, but something along the lines of *Feeling nothing can be suffering, feeling nothing can be pain*.

On the ninth floor of the hospital, Mr. Graham Parr, his tissues diseased, the joints of his toes ossified, these toes resembling, with their lumps, the toes of someone with cancer. Ms. (also Dr.) Donika Pepper ordering a biopsy for these lumps, a biopsy which will only goad their further growth, worsening Graham's condition, just as three hundred years ago the local doctor had ordered bloodletting for a man who had been stabbed and who had fainted from blood loss, this bloodletting only worsening the man's condition, although the man would, within days, recover from both his stabbing and his bloodletting, just as Graham would eventually recover from the biopsy of his ossified joints.

Along the lakeshore, behind her cottage's shed's woodpile, a pregnant woman squatting there, brown-sandaled, pink-dressed, eating handfuls of muddy dirt. The mucus of a sneeze still wet on her arm. Next door, cigar lit, boots untied, still wearing his postal service uniform, Mr. James Vanderveen, walking the fence between her cottage and his, tossing sticks into her yard.

Mr. Max Isaac peeing dark urine into the toilet of his family's cottage's bathroom, a virus in his liver, the synapses of his brain forming the words *Should be home by now*.

Ms. April Vanderveen, at the hardware shop, making a spare key, still wearing her dealer's uniform from the casino, the synapses of her brain forming the words *Better have cleaned that fucking yard*.

In the nursing home's cafeteria, the synapses of her brain forming the words *How many times must you ask these cretins?*, Ms. Wanda Miss, a goiter in her neck, her voice box ten times the size of a normal voice box, yet her voice still only a voice, asking for more water.

Awake, slumped on her daughter-in-law's yellow couch (across the road from Mr. Yi Kalleward's cottage), having been stirred from her nap by the sound of clattering pans, Ms. Marsha Bradbury unable to move her legs or her arms, unable to move even her eyelids, unable to move air in or out of her lungs, trapped in her own body, Marsha seeing only

the darkness of the backsides of her eyelids, the synapses of her brain forming the words *I'm awake, Kim, please help me, Kim*. In the kitchen, whisking whipping cream in a metal mixing bowl, her daughter-in-law infected with a common bacteria, her fingernails striped with green.

A woman in a wool peacoat squatting over the gas station's women's bathroom's toilet, squeezing piss from her bladder, through her urethra, past the kidney stone wedged there, the kidney stone like a lump of brown sugar, about the size of lump one might add to a pot, not cup, of tea, to do some sweetening. The synapses of her brain forming the words *Fuck off, bitch*, meanwhile shouting Jesus, hold on. Ms. Alice Olson rapping her knuckles against the women's bathroom's door, after having rapped her knuckles against the women's bathroom's door, after having rapped her knuckles against the women's bathroom's door, her bladder ballooning with apple-juice piss, her lips dark with lipstick, her purse at her shoulder, a pebble-sized kidney stone growing in her own kidneys, Alice still unable to feel it, the kidney stone, as she's rapping her knuckles against the women's bathroom's door, the synapses of her brain forming the words *Some people*.

The mechanic repairing the engine of Mr. Salvador Vargas' minivan, also growing a kidney stone in his kidneys. In his cottage, counting the spoons in his box of silver, Mr. Wes Merrick, his scalp shedding brittle strands of hair, growing a kidney stone in his kidneys. In his farm's barn, Mr. Nobuo Kondo, stove burns on his arms, slitting a sheep's throat, growing five kidney stones in his kidneys. Mending gray stockings with pink thread, Ms. Bethany Islet, looking at these stockings through freckling irises, the pale light blue of her eyes freckled with dark spots, growing a kidney stone in the kidney she has left. The synapses in their brains forming the words, respectively, *Lardass like that would need a minivan; Wes, you are a failure, a nobody, you have amounted to nothing; four more then supper; who will pay his bills?*

Mr. Edward Watterson, rewashing his hands, also growing a kidney stone in his kidneys.

From the birch trees, Ben Isaac and Steve DeBoer watching Paul Bott feeding the dog.

Down the road, in their cottage's garage, yellow-sweatered, gray-skirted, Jenny Bott asking her mother why she always has to be such a bitch. Jenny and Carrie Bott meanwhile watching their mother dragging Carrie Bott's toy box through the garage, toward the driveway (still puddled with rain from the storm), toward the garbage bins at the end of it and the garbage truck collecting them, the synapses of their mother's brain meanwhile forming the words *I am disgusting, I am getting so fat*. The garbage collector stepping back into her garbage truck to drive to the next cottage, her eye blinking, as per its blinking tic, her vagina sore, infected with fungal yeasts, leaking smegma-like curds, the synapses of her brain forming the words *Too late, asshole, should've put it out onto the curb last night like everybody else*.

In the windows of the brick apartment building across the street from the pharmacy, someone studding a ham with cloves. Someone hemming a sheet. Someone knuckling a lump of dough, someone scrubbing a floor with lye, someone pouring flax from cupped hands into a jar. Someone with a lump of half-digested bacon and waffles digesting in her stomach, the syrup on her plate hardening, sketching in it with a fork. Someone raising his hand to answer the television's question, a question he doesn't know the answer to, the boy, but thinks that he does, the synapses in the boy's brain forming the words *A rhombus*. Someone standing over a sink, nose leaking blood. Someone with a port-wine stain on his forehead having a seizure on a bed, the blood vessels under his birthmark, in his pia mater, overgrown and tumoral. Someone scraping with her fingernails at the yellowish scum around her kitchen faucet, her sponge flung to the floor, leaking vinegar onto the tiles. Someone pinking a dress. Someone peeling a lime. Someone uncrumpling a news-

paper. Someone whipsawing his curtains. Someone palming a lamp.

In the parking lot of the pharmacy, Mr. Rafael Franco, black-hoodied, black-tattooed, his lymph nodes swollen, the purplish lump of a fly bite on his arm, between parked cars choking Mr. Benjamin Cowen, Benjamin also black-hoodied, black-tattooed, neck stiff, head aching, the reddish rash of a tick bite on his shoulder, meanwhile kneeling Rafael's testicles (Rafael's penis, an in-the-way bystander, also getting kneed), Benjamin shouting spic, Rafael shouting redneck, the synapses of Rafael's brain meanwhile forming the words *Fucking kike*, Rafael's keys on the painted line, on the pavement, where he'd dropped them.

In the pharmacy, Kaitlyn Mukti, gray-sweatered, pink-skirted, head aching, burst blood vessels in her eyes, the synapses of her brain forming the words *Don't forget, psych exam tomorrow*, in line behind Ms. Anna Franco, sweatpantsed, t-shirted, black-tattooed, talking at the pharmacist, itching her anus through her sweatpants, the sticky eggs of pinworms tingling there where they'd been laid by the pinworms who'd been swallowed by Anna a month ago, who'd been living in her gastrointestinal tract ever since, who'd lived their entire lives in it, hatching from their eggs in her small intestine, molting there, fucking, the pregnant pinworms then relocating to her colon, and then, when birth-ready, relocating again, on to Anna's rectum, and beyond that her anus, where they'd laid their sticky eggs and then died, all of them, the mothers, there among the dust-sized dregs of Anna's shit. The pharmacist refilling Anna's prescription for antidepressants, pink-and-yellow pills, the side effects of these pills being dizziness, headaches, nausea, diarrhea, and insomnia, which pills are supposed to make her happy. The pharmacist's uniform streaked with dark wet stripes, sweat leaking from the folds of his fat. The curls of his beard brown. The pharmacist watching, as he's refilling her prescription, the fight out the window. The synapses of the pharmacist's brain forming the words *Get a job, you morons*. Sores on the pharmacist's lips, given to him by the woman he now lives with, a woman with those same

sores.

Having eaten a lump of undercooked ground beef, his intestines now inflamed, Mr. Paul Bott (Sr.) squatting over a toilet in one of his family's cottage's bathrooms, shitting watery diarrhea, as multicolored as a pack of sprinkles, the synapses of Paul's brain forming the words *The gutters leaking, the sink leaking, the roof needing a reroofing.*

Lamps off, fan off, awake, Ms. Karen Olson, naked, on her bed, the skin of her arms scaly, a number of her enzymes having mutated, leaving her skin cells unable to repair the damage caused by the light of the sun, Karen trapped in her cottage, alone as always, unable to leave (even with the storm clouds) until the sun sets.

Mr. Yi Kalleward, choking Ms. Hayley Isaac, his hipbones knocking against her butt, shouting at her to call him Max.

(The synapses of her brain forming the words *How did Jenny Bott make the team?*)
Melissa DeBoer saying Jenny Bott is such a bitch.

On the nursing home's patio, certain genes on one of her chromosomes inactivated, as they always have been inactivated, Ms. Sophie Gelsi, in a patio chair, flapping her hands, flapping them as she often does in the evening, and also the afternoon, and also the morning, whenever she is awake, and also smiling, as she does nearly always, always smiling, always happy, and not by choice.

On the floor of her father's office, certain genes on one of her own chromosomes inactivated, as they have always been inactivated, Rebecca Wit, on a pillow, doing her spelling homework with a green pen, Rebecca's stomach meanwhile sending her hunger pains, sending these pangs as it often does in the evening, and also the afternoon, and also the morning, whenever she is awake, even when she is eating, even after Rebecca has forked three or four platefuls of lasagna into her stomach, still the pangs, still coming.

At the wharf, on a dock otherwise abandoned, the cousins Dee and Bea Winslow (Dee's

hands scabbed with eczema, roundworms in Bea's appendix) tagging the anchored sailboats and yachts, Dee's fingers wrapped around her can of spray paint, jerking it, Bea meanwhile spray painting the hull of a sailboat, in pink, GIVE TO CHARITY, FUCK A RETARD.

In the cab of a white truck lurching into the hospital's driveway, his wife driving, Mr. Guoliang Kalleward, his cheeks flushed pink, shedding his skin, bits of it peeling, as if Guoliang were sunburned, instead of poisoned with mercury. Electrical burns on Guoliang's knees. In the backseat of the gray minivan ahead of them, Kelsey Fankhauser, chills racking her body, having been scratched, in the ankle, by a cat. Inside the hospital, on the fifth floor, Ms. (also Dr.) Naaz Mukti penning a prescription onto a prescription pad, just as she will later pen a prescription onto that same pad for Guoliang, a prescription for pills meant to treat his mercury poisoning, just as the local doctor in this town three hundred years ago (as the local doctors in all towns three hundred years ago) prescribed pills to treat constipation, blue pills, which pills were equal parts marshmallow, licorice, and mercury, and which, while treating the constipation, would also do some poisoning.

On the seventh floor of the hospital, a yet unnamed newborn's spinal cord bulging from her back, the cord coupled to a fluid-filled sac, the newborn screaming, the synapses of her brain forming thoughts that are not words, but something along the lines of *I am uncomfortable, please make me less so*. Down the hall, another newborn, Michael Holly, also screaming, Michael's abdomen swollen, a fetus in fetu in him there, Michael pregnant with a mass of tissues that was once his growing twin, but which now is merely a ball-sized tumor with two legs and nine toes.

On the fourth floor, lice in the pubic hair of Ms. Natalie Bultje, Natalie meanwhile wearing her janitor's uniform, the synapses of her brain forming the words *Should have socked that cunt in the face*.

On the second floor, someone coughing blood-colored mucus into his cupped hands; someone's scalp infected with fungi; someone's jaw cramping, her neck stiff, the tetanus already spreading; someone anemic, whitish hookworms in her small intestine; someone unable to speak, her brain's word-forming synapses ruined by a stroke; someone, as he stoops to grab a pencil from the floor, feeling the bones in his spine rubbing together, his spinal discs herniating, bulging out, through a tear in his spine; someone's eyes dry to the point of being painful, her mouth dry, her own immune cells having destroyed the glands that had produced her tears, her saliva, before; three of these patients; four of these doctors.

Ms. Rosalie Gelsi, gray-booted, green-raincoated, sitting on a dune with Mr. Christopher Linus, telling him that she doesn't love him, that she's sorry, that she's tried and she's tried, but that she can't feel any love for him at all. The synapses of Rosalie's brain forming the words *You don't make any money*. Christopher, as per his hair-plucking tic, ripping a pinch of hair from his eyebrows, one eyebrow, since having sat onto the dune with Rosalie, having been plucked from his face altogether, the other, which Christopher is plucking from now, still halfway there.

In the maple thicket behind his farm's barn, Mr. Jonah Winslow shouting at a tree as he chops it down.

His mother bending him under the bathtub's faucet, Mitch DeBoer washing onion juice, dead lice, from his scalp.

His mother in the garage with his sisters, his father in the other bathroom, Ty Bott, his backpack on the floor, his skin spotted with pockmarks, in an oatmeal bath.

From each of the cottages along the lakeshore, metal tubes carrying piss, shit, puke, mucus, skin, and scabs, through the floorboards, into the ground.

Farther along the lakeshore, behind the psychiatric home, the catatonics, in their resi-

dent's gowns, having been brought out after the storm, some of them standing in the green of the beach grass, among the ankle-sized pinecones blown there from the nearby pines, the other catatonics sitting on metal patio chairs, all of them staring out at the lake. Mr. (also RN) Steven Deboer (Sr.) sitting with them there, smelling the rain on the sand, the rain on the pine, breathing.

Across the lake, in another state altogether, their town separated from the other by a body of freshwater, a number of people, a family, gray- and pink-sweatered, sitting on the porch of their cottage, like catatonics, not speaking, not moving, watching the storm clouds blow in.

Mr. Edward Watterson rewashing his hands, after having rewashed his hands, after having rewashed his hands, after having stepped through the kitchen to the sink using only the yellow tiles, the synapses of Edward's brain now, as he's rewashing his hands, avoiding bringing him thoughts about Taylor and Corey's mother.

Paul Bott feeding chocolate, dog poison, 90% cocoa, to the Wattersons' dog.

The brothers Taylor and Corey Watterson in the lake, under the waves guttering about on its surface, diving toward the striped shells on the lake's bottom.

Catatonic, standing in the beach grass, Ms. Emma Watterson staring at the lake, behind her Mr. (also RN) Steven DeBoer (Sr.), behind him the psychiatric home with its peeling paint, the dark of Emma's hair streaked with gray, her lips chapped purple, her cheeks hollowed, her eyes a pale light blue, her gown fluttering, in the wind, at her legs, air moving in and out of her lungs, heart thumping blood in and out of itself, nothing half-digested in her stomach, no kidney stones growing in her kidneys, the synapses of her brain, Emma's, forming thoughts that are not words, but still something, there, something along the lines of *The shape we took, the shapes I took.*

About The Author

Matthew Baker is author of the story collection *Hybrid Creatures* and the children's novel *If You Find This*. He was born in Michigan.

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