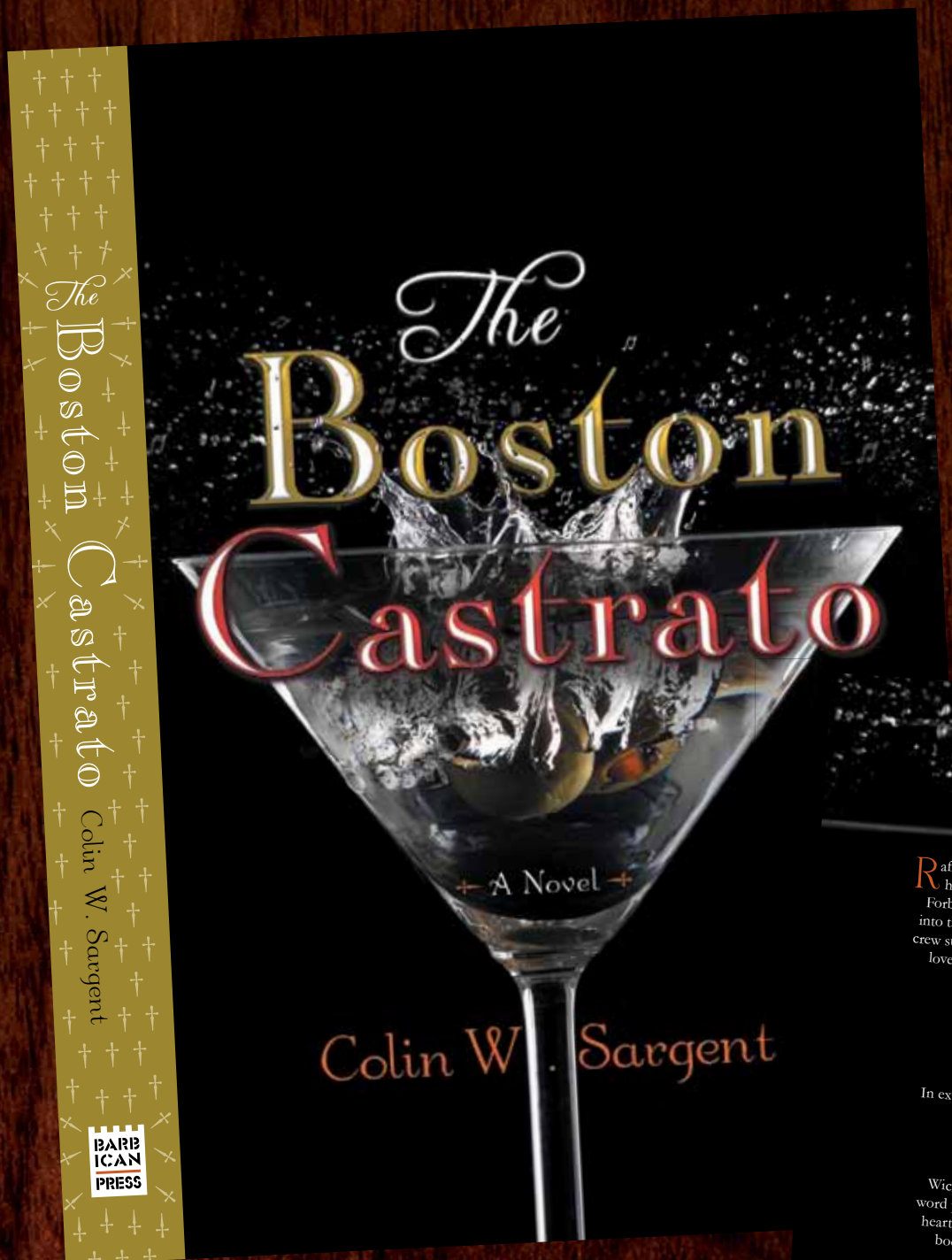
“A Pure Pleasure”

- Maine Sunday Telegram



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St. Anthony's

BY GREG BROWN

We'd been playing pretend for almost a year and he still wouldn't go back to his life. Meade wouldn't acknowledge he had another life at all, though he'd bring me into it in ways, mentioning how Cole seemed to like me, driving me by the horse farm where he and Cole and his wife had lived before the great domestic unraveling commenced and she moved out to Deer Isle. Testing, I suppose, fantasizing—feeling at the edges to see how I might be assimilated into his greater life.

It was Saturday before my shift at the hospital. Meade was cleaning out my apartment cabinets and making lists of domestic goods he thought I needed. I found his possessiveness comforting, though I admitted that to no one.

He said, "You need paper towels."

I said, "You have a wife who may or may not actually want a divorce."

He touched his ear with his thumb, just the quickest gesture. I prided myself on being able to recognize his myriad ticks. He could have been brushing away a fruit fly, for whatever I didn't have, I had fruit flies. We'd tossed out all the produce weeks ago, and the flies still rose from the dark when we opened any drawer in the kitchen. A friend said to fill a mason jar an inch full with vinegar then make a funnel from a sheet of paper and slide the funnel into the jar. This paper chute was supposed to steer the flies to an acidic death. We filled the jar and it sat on the counter for a week next to a piece of plain white paper. Neither of us seemed able to roll and insert the killing device.

Meade said, "You also need aluminum foil. Then we could save leftovers when we cook."

It happened like that a lot—something I needed subtly moved into something for both of us.

"And a son," I said. "You have a maybe wife and a son."

"New dishtowels, too," he said.

"Meade," I said. The room was too quiet. I wished fruit flies made noise, like the blood-sluggish horse flies Meade had pointed out when he drove me to his horse ranch out beyond Lincolnville because he wanted to show me where he'd come from and where he still was. "Where I'll probably always be," he said and ground a cigarette out in the gravel, going quiet under his moment of self-pity. "People see the ocean and think sailing and lobsters are all we've got. Truth is the midcoast has produced some damn fine race horses throughout history." The wind moved across the land and rapped gravel against the fenders. I tried to imagine racehorses charging around these rolling pastures overlooking the sea. I don't think Meade had anything in mind but to show me that road and that house and let me feel that wind and see those rocky pastures after months meshed together on my floor and in my bed. Cole would be getting out of school soon. He was the first one picked up in the mornings and the last one dropped off in the afternoons, and the bus ride home was exactly one hour long. That was one of about five facts Cole had shared with me the one time we'd met. Meade had called me at work and said, "Come to the Irving up the highway for lunch. I got a surprise." The surprise turned out to be an eleven year old boy, shaggy blond hair squirting out from below a Portland Sea Dogs cap, drinking a Cherry Coke through a straw, and looking very little like his father, the man who was oblivious to the cruelty of such a surprise and whose face and body I knew too well—the small brown eyes edged at their corners with crow's feet, the acne scars along his shoulders, the ankle he'd dislocated twice being tripped up on lobster boats and which popped when he stood after sitting for too long, the huge horse-halter calloused hands, the penis which he was self-conscious of and felt was small and was kind of small but didn't mat-

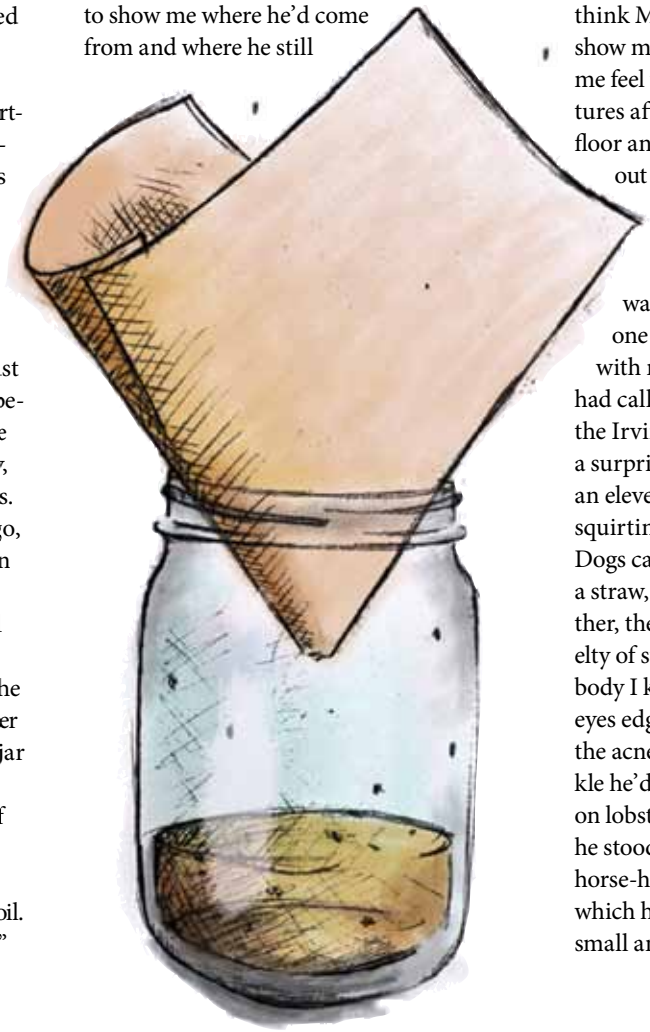

ILLUSTRATION BY SEAN KRUGER

ter because it was something in his voice that aroused me, how he would tell me exactly what to do or what he wanted to do to me and look me directly in the eyes while doing it or asking for it.

Cole told me the ride wasn't so bad in the afternoons. He enjoyed watching the other kids climb off the bus. He liked waiting to see if they'd run up to their houses or skulk back with their heads hang-dog low, dreading it all.

In January and February, Meade drove the half-mile down to the head of the farm road to meet the bus. "I walk it in December and March," Cole said. "December and March aren't really winter. Dad says they're like the preamble and the postscript." This winter I knew Meade was imagining me sitting beside him in the cab, waiting at the end of a dead gravel road for a boy who was not my own.

"Meade," I said now, "I have to go to work."

He closed the kitchen drawer and looked up at the window. We could see the brick side of St. Anthony's with its red and gold stained glass windows. The clock on the church's steeple face had been broken for two weeks now, and we spent a lot of afternoons speculating about when men would come with scaffolding to fix time. This was in between talking about when it would snow. Talking about that seemed easy still. Meade said it always snowed a little in November in Maine.

"I'm saying what if I don't want all this," I said.

He opened a cabinet and said, "It doesn't change its being there."

Then I walked out of the apartment, leaving Meade with the fruit flies and the view of St. Anthony's. I was going to walk until my feet felt as cold as Cole's must have stomping down that ranch road in December and March. And when I got home from work, I knew I'd find Meade lying on the thick brown rug in the living room with his feet up on the couch. Sometimes he was so much like a confused boy I couldn't look away from him. ■

Greg Brown's fiction has appeared in *Shenandoah Literary*, *Epoch Magazine*, and *Narrative Magazine*. A graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop, he lives in western Maine with his daughter and his partner and is working on a novel about family mythology, native land and river rights, and a territorial lobstering feud.