

“This vivid, strange, and beautiful book put me in mind of the Russian Daniil Kharms. Like his work, it made me look at the world more carefully and more affectionately, and feel more inclined to see the magic in it.”

—George Saunders, winner of the Man Booker Prize
for *Lincoln in the Bardo*

“*The Wagners* is an elegiac meditation on the egregore . . . an intense multi-dimensional anthropological assessment, by way of memetic engineering & sociological investigation, by way of black magick & in-the-clouds prose.”

—Mike Kleine, author of *Mastodon Farm*

“*The Wagners* is the most neat and elegant collection of outrageous surprises I’ve seen yet. Like the illustrations that appear throughout the book, each vignette is as bold and simple yet foreign as a letter from an extraterrestrial alphabet.”

—Sarah Galvin, author of *Ugly Time*

“Everything that happens in *The Wagners* wanders fearlessly through unending labyrinths of a tender surreality and its counter-realities.”

—Stacey Tran, author of *Soap for the Dogs*

“*The Wagners* will set itself inside you. Read it again and again, that is how things will go. “Once, he sat up in bed, shook with rage, and threatened to tell me something that I would not believe.” Oh I believe it and so will you!”

—CAConrad, author of *The Book of Frank*



The Wagners

A POEM

John Colasacco





One night after another the business of the city went on, and only one thing was out of order.

“Are you going to kill us?” he said.

“Oh love, I’m not going to kill anybody,” she said.

“But will the Wagners kill us?”

“The Wagners are dreaming.”

At that he went out. She and the baby sat at the table (the baby inside her.)

He was not going to kill—not the Wagners, not the baby, not anybody.

The baby was dreaming of one baby after another—no two alike, she thought.

It was the turn of the century, and the world made all kinds of noise, even as you slept.

Certain houses line up to be in a picture.

It's the approximate middle of summer, and a lunatic is passing the day with a series of coffees, one small mug at a time.

All we could afford was a white backdrop and a floor and a piece of advice.

Or something later taken for advice.

But that's much later.

Before that, winter comes: a letter read at dinner.

Each year the elementary school printed a directory of all the students' home phone numbers.

It was indeed important, seeing your name there set down, next to all the other kids' names you knew.

Because of some minor confusion, a few errors might appear in spelling or format.

The tall woman at the school who made these must have had her eyes closed—what was she thinking about?

Standing on one foot there at the warm copier, in love for the first time ever.

The dime falls from your cheek to the hardwood floor and spins an arc, making a silvery vibration as it comes to rest.

You tell a close friend, “The day my barber dies, I’ll never get another haircut . . .”

Meaning that for many years, you’ve managed to cut your own hair.

And the friend touches the side of his nose, understanding this.

With his next move he’s cut out your tongue with a white knife, and lit a cigarette for a stranger you didn’t know was there.

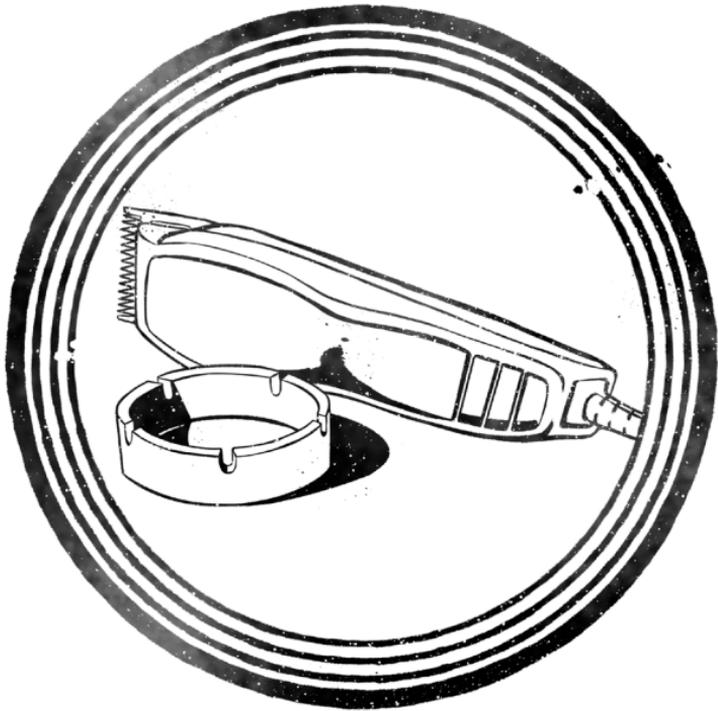
There are remnants of a stick inside the boy. They came off of the end of the stick yesterday, when the other boy took it out of him.

Now he has separated himself from the rest of the kindergarten class and entered the little one-person bathroom attached to the side of it. When the lock on the door catches, he thinks, “No one in the world knows what’s happening in here.”

The light in the bathroom is dim, dirty yellow. There is a small mirror and a small sink. The toilet bowl doesn’t have a tank; just a flush handle connected to crooked pipe that goes into the wall.

Still, there is always the feeling of wanting to stay here, in this bathroom.

It’s a bad place, but the end of the day is such a long way off, and after five minutes inside it feels as though the little bathroom is all there is.



On a dirt road, covered with orange pine needles, we can imagine the smells that one encounters on the foothills of a great foreign mountain range.

That dirt road leads to a medium-sized town, where the maroon-colored store signs have lasted for generations.

Still, one resident isn't quite satisfied.

In other places, of course, the exact opposite is true.

Fifty years pass in the room where two boys with milk teeth commit a sexual assault.

The windows are closed, but they let all the warm air out through small cracks each winter anyway, and no one can do anything about it.

One neighbor nods; the rain has filled up all his flower pots again.

After fifty years, why not bring them inside?

Or else just leave them—it shouldn't matter.

Everyone nods.

A tan car keeps turning around slowly in the cul-de-sac, and from the drafty windows, they see it, knowing that driver.

When she was very young, she had a yellow blanket that she took to bed with her every night. As she fell asleep she would hold the satin-trimmed edge of the blanket between her upper lip and her nose, running it back and forth gently there, having learned its creases and subtleties like a language.

Once she spilled a glass of water on the blanket and draped it over the radiator to dry. By the time she remembered to check on it, most of it had burned. The corner that was left was not much bigger than a napkin.

People are always asking her, “What happened to your blanket?” “Why don’t you ever use it anymore?”

But there’s no point answering them.

She’d rather wait for someone to dig through the chest of winter clothes in the spare room looking for something else and find it there.

Her boyfriend walks in wearing just his white socks,
looking somewhat fatter. He bends awkwardly to take the
socks off, trying to praise her purity with a long speech.

She covers her side and for a moment wishes that
she'd agreed to this months before or not at all.

She tries to remember the word for that.

The shades are drawn, but it's still sunny in the room.

In her nostrils there's an old aspirin or liquor smell;
the odors in this house always leave something slightly
transformed.

Everything that happens here carries the weight of a
solid object.

You leave feeling a cool disconnection between this
and that.