

Harpur Palate: a Literary Journal

Volume 11 | Issue 2

Article 7

January 2012

The Misfortune That Summer

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Recommended Citation

Baker, Matthew (2012) "The Misfortune That Summer," *Harpur Palate: a Literary Journal*: Vol. 11: Iss. 2, Article 7.

Available at: <https://orb.binghamton.edu/harpurpalate/vol11/iss2/7>

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THE MISFORTUNE THAT SUMMER

**MATTHEW
BAKER**

I.

The hotel's pools are guests-only, yet the boy Gaspard Petit, who is not a guest, is here.

Easy enough, very simple, this sneaking-in-of-self! Almost daily the boy Gaspard comes padding across the hotel's cobblestone drive, comes into the hotel's revolving door. The door senses Gaspard's presence, spins—of its own accord!—until Gaspard's chamber empties into the hotel proper. *All the while clutching his inflatable duck* the boy Gaspard then steals across the lobby's marble floors, avoiding the glances of the porters parking their luggageless luggage carts, of the mustached concierge. Then, as if merely an unsupervised child-of-guests: down the spiral staircase! Out the glass doors at the hotel's rear! Down the cobblestone pathway, and through the metal gate looming between sugar palms above the hotel's pools! Gaspard wears pink-and-yellow swimming trunks, the lining of which is far too tight even for legs as skinny as Gaspard's. A size too small, like all else kept bunched in the boy Gaspard's dresser; outgrown by Gaspard years ago, yet still these trunks of pink-and-yellow must be worn.

How good in these preteen years to spend the afternoon swimming with other children! How good to spend it anywhere other than Gaspard's apartment, which is often parentless until

long after Gaspard has eaten his supper of microwaved oatmeal and grape jam knifed from a jar; parentless until long after the security lights in the parking lot below have come snapping on yellow (except that light nearest Gaspard's apartment, whose burnt-out bulb still has not been replaced); parentless sometimes until sunrise has sent the security lights snapping off again. How good—the best!—to find children-of-guests willing to play with the boy Gaspard, children-of-guests whose parents will gift him with sunscreen, with sandwiches, like one of their own. How good in these preteen years to sample other families, to wait for one that will keep him.

II.

Deck chairs shadowed by striped umbrellas.

A family claiming these chairs: a brother with blackish hair and blackish eyes, a tattoo of a rook needled into the skin of his hand, white swimming trunks knotted at his hips; a sister with blackish hair and lopsided shoulders, wearing a one-piece spotted with Mickey Mouse silhouettes; a sister with reddish hair and yellow braces bolted to her teeth, wearing a brown bikini. Teen, preteen, preteen, accompanied by towel-toting parents. The boy Gaspard stands to his ankles in the shallows, staring at the sisters, trying to gauge which of Gaspard's games they would be most likely to play: Squid Hunters? Castaway Wedding? We Are Mutant Humans with Feet Webbing and Fins? Yet then Gaspard notices *the tattooed brother staring back at him*.

Gaspard's heart begins beating fast enough for two Gaspards. The tattooed brother appears angry with him for staring at his sisters! The brother kicks his flip-flops under a deck chair, still staring at Gaspard.

Gaspard pretends to look at a pool attendant carrying an armful of wet towels, then a pregnant woman floating past on an inner tube. Gaspard does this so it will appear that the boy Gaspard has not been staring at just the sisters, but was taking turns staring at everyone.

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Yet when Gaspard looks back at the tattooed brother, the brother stares at him still!

Gaspard bends to whisper in the ear of the duck Michel. Gaspard wears the inner tube of the inflatable duck now around his hips, this duck stolen months ago from the daughter of Japanese guests.

—It seems the fiend means us harm if we are to approach his sisters, says Michel.

The duck Michel wears black sunglasses and also is pink.

—I hate this brother, whispers Gaspard.

—We cannot risk a quarrel, says Michel. Away with us.

—But I wish to swim with those sisters.

The duck Michel stares at the boy Gaspard.

—And to eat the sandwiches brought by their parents, and to become their youngest son.

—I said away with us! shouts the duck Michel.

The boy Gaspard goes splashing into deeper water.

III.

Very desirable, the proximity of this five-star hotel to the boy Gaspard's apartment! For a boy with legs as long as Gaspard's, a mere half-hour march. And unlike all other hotels in this metropolis of Orlando, the other hotels where Gaspard has attempted to swim? Here, no plastic keycard needed for the opening-of-gate. No lifeguard patrolling the gurgling spas, the canals between the hotel's pools, the water slide flinging children into the shallows. The pool attendants too taken with the selling of their platters of frozen watermelon, frozen blackberries, rum-laced iced orange juices—too taken to bother with patrolling for non-guests such as this boy Gaspard!

These pools more home to Gaspard than the apartment where he and the duck Michel share a twin-sized bed. These pools more home to him even than the duplex in Marne-la-Vallée where Gaspard once lived when he was merely Michel-sized. Here, at the hotel, Gaspard's home is an island: three pools

shadowed by sugar palms, creek-sized canals connecting one to the other to the other to the one. Circled by these pools and canals, a concrete island of deck chairs and striped umbrellas and complimentary yellow towels. It is here Michel has raised this Gaspard, on the sandwich crusts and watermelon rinds of the mannerly and snot-nosed children-of-guests.

—Gaspard, says Michel.

From this Gaspard, nothing.

—Why do you sulk, Gaspard?

—You know very well I sulk over the sisters.

A stone bridge arching over the canal: guests with bright beach balls climbing the bridge's stairs, crossing from the concrete island back toward the hotel, only their above-the-waist parts visible over the bridge's stone sides. Foamy water spits from metal holes in the bridge's sides, fountain-like, into the canal below.

—There are many here who would adopt us into their playing. Many even today.

—But I have not chosen those others, says Gaspard.

—Why then these sisters?

—Because they are the most beautiful sisters who have ever existed. Because they have not even a glance of meanness between them, not even a mutter.

The flow of the canal bringing Gaspard and Michel drifting through the drape of foamy water into the bridge's underside. An echoing. Through another drape, back into the sun.

—You cannot always do the choosing.

—Have you already forgotten my father? says Gaspard. My mother? Only three days they are gone, and already you have forgotten their carelessness and stupor? Not I. I have had my fill of being chosen. My parents chose me, and nothing good has come of it.

—You have been getting careless. Caught climbing onto the roof of the bathhouse. Then yelled at for attempting to become the triplet of those twins. Then the macaroon incident—

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—I have forgotten those others. I want only to be in the family of these sisters.

—If we are not careful, they will exile us from this place, and then where will we—

—I must make amends with their brother, says Gaspard, ignoring the duck Michel. Or destroy and supplant him.

The canal now emptying Gaspard and Michel into the pool with the water slide.

—Shall we tumble pell-mell down those tubes of yellow? says Gaspard.

—Nothing, says Michel, would please me more.

IV.

Yet even now waiting for them, at slide's end, an oddity: grandchildrenless grandparents, applauding each of the children cannonballing out of the tubes. A bald grandfather, a spectacled grandmother, holding hands in the shallows. Then taking their hands apart again for clapping.

Gaspard knows they are grandchildrenless because of this: these grandparents cheer all of the children alike, are privy to none of their names.

—Very good! shouts the grandfather when a boy in green swim trunks topples sideways out of the slide's end. Best splash yet!

—Well! shouts the grandmother when a girl in a striped one-piece faceplants into the shallows. Very brave!

These grandparents appear lonely for grandchildren—might perhaps even choose one from those here at the pools, perhaps even—yes!—this boy Gaspard.

Gaspard vows he shall give them proof of his worth.

Gaspard patters off along the poolside, leaving shadowy footprints behind him that shrink with the heat. Together the boy Gaspard and his duck Michel climb the concrete stairs leading toward the slide's top, even as children go shrieking through the winding tubes toward the bottom. A pool attendant mans the

top, monitoring the line of children waiting to go down.

—You can't wear that flotation device going down the slide, says the pool attendant.

Gaspard pretends not to hear him.

—I said you can't wear that, kid. No flotation devices on the slide.

—He's not a device. He's a duck.

—Sure, okay, I see that. But still.

Gaspard squints at the pool attendant. He does not trust this freckly teen, with his acne and his slouching and his Mickey Mouse wristwatch.

—They always let me take him before.

—Rules are rules, kid. I can hold him if you want while you go down the slide.

Gaspard and his duck Michel climb back down the concrete stairs. The grandchildrenless grandparents applaud the boy in green swim trunks, who again has come toppling out of the slide's end. *Gaspard entrusts Michel to a bush near the stairs* and then angles Michel's head so that Michel will be able to see Gaspard's splash.

—Speak to no one, Michel, says Gaspard.

He patters up the stairs, the soles of his feet already dry, leaving footprints no longer.

—Ready? says the pool attendant.

Gaspard mutters a curse against the pool attendant and sits at the slide's top. Foamy water spurts from holes in the slide's sides. Gaspard's insides gurgle for sandwich. He feels happy to have grandchildrenless grandparents waiting for him, grandparents who will clap for his daring.

Gaspard then launches himself off into the tubes! The knobs of his elbows banging against the slide, the knuckles of his spine rattling across it, Gaspard careens this way and that, seeing above the sun in the sky wearing half a mask of a cloud, then the hotel's nine hundred windows reproducing the sky in rows of endless panels, then suddenly again the sky itself!

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Arms wheeling, Gaspard slides sideways from the slide and faceplants into the shallows.

V.

Upon surfacing, a general fête.

—Very good! the grandfather shouts. Best splash yet!

—What speed! the grandmother shouts.

—Thank you, sir, says Gaspard, bowing to each of them.

Thank you, madam.

Gaspard looks to see if Michel has noticed, but the duck Michel is pretending not to look.

Gaspard gathers Michel from his perch atop the bush.

—If we could not go together, Michel says, then you should not have gone at all.

VI. A Making Of Vows

Yet before Gaspard can bring Michel down to the grandparents and engage them in a tête-à-tête regarding their perhaps keeping this boy-of-breathhtaking-splashes and his duck-of-decorum-and-politesse, out from the canal nearest the slide *come bobbing the tattooed brother and his preteen sisters on white duckless inner tubes*. Gaspard sees he has been a fool: he has fallen for the wiles of these grandchildrenless grandparents—forgotten meanwhile of the sisters.

—I must go down the slide.

—Without me once more? Please, Gaspard. Please do not leave me alone once again!

—But I must.

The duck Michel stares at Gaspard.

—You are worse than your father, says Michel.

Then to the boy Gaspard the duck Michel will say nothing more.

Gaspard feels his cheeks tingling, as if suddenly sunburned. The shame of it! Yet with Michel, Gaspard cannot seek to make amends, because even now the sisters Gaspard loves are bobbing

by the slide's end, just beyond the grandchildrenless grandparents, in prime position for the viewing of Gaspard's splashing.

And as Gaspard scurries up the stairs, he vows that never again will he leave the duck Michel alone after this, and, as he reties his pink-and-yellow swimming trunks at the slide's top, he vows that he will not be like his father, who is always working for what he tells Gaspard will be *a better life for us* (Gaspard's pit-eyed mother repeating to Gaspard, as always, whatever his father has said, whatever his father has chosen for them to say, *a better life for us*, and then saying nothing more), two or three shifts a day at the Magic Kingdom—his father wearing suspenders and a striped shirt and selling tickets in the afternoon, then dancing in a bird costume in the evening's firework-splattered parades, then with Gaspard's mother spending nights in the streets of Fantasyland, of Tomorrowland, sweeping up the crumpled litter of the lifeless families who had come to pretend that they had some magic left to them still—working so just as they had in Marne-la-Vallée when Gaspard was young, at Paris' Disneyland, and as Gaspard peeks over the railing at the sisters on their inner tubes below, as he's given the nod from the freckly pool attendant, as he sits down in the spurting foam at the slide's top, Gaspard vows that even if for his own family nothing is ever any different or gets any better or only gets worse, he will change himself for the duck Michel and become a better boy.

Gaspard then launches himself into the tubes, his heart beating against his ribs in a wild frenzy over his daring!

At slide's end, a tipping backwards, Gaspard's derrière sticking out of the water, his legs flailing like a bird's feeling for something on which to alight, his head meanwhile underneath.

Upon surfacing, a fête as before.

—Very good! the grandfather shouts. Better even than your first!

Again a tingling-of-cheeks for the boy Gaspard: yet on this occasion caused not by shame, but by pride!

Yet beyond the grandchildrenless grandparents, on his

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duckless inner tube, the tattooed brother laughs and laughs and laughs. And the sister of lopsided shoulders and the Mickey Mouse one-piece and the sister of reddish hair and yellows braces clapped onto her teeth stare at Gaspard *as if they would never consider playing with such a boy in all of the days of their living*. Then Gaspard sees the grandparents as the brother sees them: as silly old lardbottoms who would love even the most worthless of boys.

Before the sisters Gaspard loves bob off into the next canal, Gaspard feels he must make his faithfulness to them quite plain—his faithfulness to them and them alone.

—Perhaps you should go down the slide, Gaspard says to the grandparents, *a gleam of gold cunning in the brown of his eyes*.

—Oh, I don't think we'd fit, the grandmother says.

—No, Gaspard says, and then shouts, No you certainly wouldn't! and laughs and laughs and laughs, just as had the tattooed brother. Then with this Gaspard slaps a chop of poolwater into the grandmother's eyes!

—Hey, you, shouts the grandchildrenless grandfather, but Gaspard has already clawed himself out of the pool and wriggled into the inner tube of the duck Michel and gone flying down the poolside again leaving the shadowy footprints that shrink with the heat!

VII. Hidden Behind The Bathhouse With Its Roof Of White Thatch

—Michel the duck, née Komatsu, for your bravery when twice left alone on the bush, I bestow upon you a dozen fresh lungfuls of air. This as always through the plastic tube in your underside.

—To me this is acceptable, says Michel.

Then, hunched among the pipes and the wisping steam vents, from Gaspard this bestowing.

This duck Michel loved the chlorine-and-liquor taste of the poolwater; loved nesting among the shoes at the bottom of Gaspard's closet, where Gaspard's mother could not find him and toss him out onto balcony to dry; loved the clicking noises of the apartment's ceiling fan, which reminded him of beaks against beaks; loved the bobbing sensation when Gaspard would get to bobbing, the flying sensation when Gaspard would run along the poolside with Michel at his hips; loved Gaspard's hips, which were just the right size for a duck of his sort, and the freckles on Gaspard's shoulders, which reminded Michel of the spots on spotted eggs.

IX.

Gaspard stands wearing the tattooed brother's flip-flops, left here among the family's deck chairs. The parents sit beyond one of the pools at the hotel's outdoor café, feeding each other macaroons and hors d'oeuvres. The brother and his sisters bob somewhere along the canals on their duckless inner tubes—undoubtedly talking of things other than the boy Gaspard.

Gaspard wiggles his toes in the brother's flip-flops, allowing each toe to express its pleasure at being fitted as such in the dernier cri.

Then away with Gaspard! Still wearing the brother's flip-flops!

—Get the fuck out of my kicks.

Behind Gaspard, his white swimming trunks knotted at his hips, his blackish hair still dripping poolwater, the tattooed brother speaks. Fear now coming to the groin of the boy Gaspard. The tattooed brother speaking so quietly it is a sort of loudness.

—Take them off.

The sisters nowhere to be seen. Vis-à-vis with the brother, Gaspard sees now the brother will suffer no amends, wants only a general mêlée. Around his hips, the duck Michel tenses.

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—They're not yours, Gaspard says. They're mine.

—You wear flip-flops twice the size of your feet?

The boy Gaspard considers this.

—Yes.

—I don't think so, says the tattooed brother.

From the brother, a faltering-of-fists, yet—it seems as much, as the brother now glances toward them—this only because of the many naïve toddlers here at the pools, staying here with their parents, come to visit the parks, the lot of them unexposed to bloodshed and other ordinary cruelties. Some sit in the shallows nearby, their swimsuits ballooning from the sogging of their diapers. Their parents stand ankle-deep, staring now at the tattooed brother and the boy Gaspard.

—What's going on here? a pool attendant asks, hefting her armful of wet towels.

—Nothing, says the boy Gaspard. Just playing a game with my brother.

Gaspard steps backward out of the flip-flops, staring at the tattooed one even still.

—I'm not his brother, the brother says.

X. What Occurs Once Gaspard Is Again In His Bare Feet

Along the bathhouse, someone has puked onto the concrete path.

From his perch atop the bridge, Gaspard stares at the janitor who has come to clean it: a man with a mop, wearing a gray button-up. Hairless arms, fat earlobes, jaw jutting out quite farther than his nose. The puke is the color of liquor, with what looks like lime pulp in among it.

Gaspard knows this janitor is the keeper of this hotel's paradise, just as Gaspard's father is the keeper of another. These keepers being paid to soak up anything hellish into their mops, then wring them out again into their buckets.

Gaspard feels as if he would like to shout at the man from where he is perched—yet he does not know what to shout.

XI.

In the canal winding through prickly shrubs and hunch-backed sugar palms, between the pool with the slide and the pool near the outdoor café.

Gaspard hides under one of the stone bridges, between its drapes of foamy water, gripping the wall with white-knuckled hands to resist the canal's flowing. Michel the duck snug at his hips. Gaspard's legs swaying underwater, toes unable to even graze the pool's bottom. *Gaspard here waiting to waylay the sisters upon their next passing-through.*

Yet this with only the soupçon of bravado left to him after his almost-mêlée with their brother.

The drape of water lifting, guests inner-tubed now drifting into the bridge's underside. An ambiguous family: on one tube, a saggy-faced man in gray swimming trunks and a white polo, with a horseshoe of black and silver hair, a glass of fizzy soda on the crest of his belly; in another, a woman in a yellow one-piece, wrinkles crouched at the corners of her eyes as if ready to spring at the rest of her face, bearing a lapful of papers covered in graphs and numbers; on the other, a shaggy-haired man in fat sunglasses, his skin tanned the color of an orange cat cap-à-pied, a glass of pale liquor on his tube, a cut of lime at its rim; none of them talking. Father, mother, wayward son? Brother, sister, wayward youngest brother? Cousin, cousin, cousin's wayward lover? For the boy Gaspard, impossible to tell. Gaspard sees the wayward one's arm is tattooed with a word, but all Gaspard can see of it is its end—its UTH. Perhaps the name of his mother, his sister, his lover—the woman in the yellow one-piece? RUTH? This wayward man the sort Gaspard has always imagined populates the casinos along the ocean where his parents spend their off days and sick days, the same ocean they'd gambled on in Portugal weekends they'd lived in Marne-la-Vallée, getting what pleasure they could from the slot machines with their coins, *as if*

spending the day with Gaspard, the wayward one, had been a pleasure.

—Hello, the wayward one says.

—Salut, Gaspard says.

—What? the wayward one says.

Like Gaspard's, the man's swimming trunks are ill-fitting, ill-colored, passé. As he drifts by, his foot jostles Michel, jostling Gaspard. The man's tube bobs clockwise, Gaspard seeing now just enough of the tattoo's first letter to make sense of it—an R, a RUTH, as he'd suspected.

Yet as the ambiguous family drifts back into the sun, the canal spins the man's tube so that his arm, before disappearing through the drape, shows Gaspard its tattoo in full: TRUTH.

The other drape then parting, in drifting the sisters upon their duckless inner tubes.

The sister of lopsided shoulders wiping the water from her eyes, then seeing Gaspard.

The sister of yellow braces then the same.

All ennui fluttering now from their faces, replaced by the birds of something uncertain.

And with this Gaspard thrusts himself from the pool's side and into the canal's flowing.

XII. A Disloyalty

—I like your duck, the sister of yellow braces says.

They float now from under the bridge, the drape of water knocking across their bodies, Gaspard's feet kicking happily underwater.

—Will you play a game with me? says Gaspard.

—What kind? the sister of lopsided shoulders says.

—I know a game of pretending-to-be-animals, says Gaspard. I know a game of pretending-to-be-grownups. I know a game of pretending-to-be-in-love.

The sisters consider this.

—But also after our game I should like to go with your

—For dinner? the sister of yellow braces says.

—Well, says Gaspard. And then also forever.

The duck Michel feeling limp at Gaspard's hips.

—What's wrong with your duck? says the sister of yellow braces.

The duck Michel's head then wilting onto the surface of the water and Gaspard feeling a sudden sinking-of-self. Gaspard struggling to stay afloat! The same Michel-around-waist that made it possible for him to float now making it impossible for him to swim.

—Hey, you're splashing me! says the sister of lopsided shoulders.

—Wait, says Gaspard, his arms slapping at the water, please wait—

The duck Michel now so lifeless that Gaspard dips underwater, mouth open! Comes hacking and sputtering back to the surface, then dips underwater once more! Still underwater, Gaspard fumbles at Michel's underside—finds the plastic tube undone!

Gaspard plugs the plastic tube to thwart further such leaking. Upon surfacing, Gaspard thrashes to the wall, gets his elbows onto it, inner-tubeless and unable to keep up with the sisters.

—Goodbye! the sister of yellow braces shouts as her tube hurries her away.

—But I'm coming with you! says Gaspard.

—But we're leaving!

The tubes taking the sisters from the canal, bestowing them now to the pool beyond. The sisters shouting to Gaspard their adieus.

—Goodbye, duck boy!

Gaspard saying nothing, only watching from the wall.

—

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Hunched among the pipes and the wisping steam vents, from Gaspard a puffing-of-air into the duck Michel: yet on this occasion, for not an honoring, but an interrogation!

—What betrayal is this, duck Michel?

Michel the reinflated considers.

—Perhaps you failed to properly close my tube after giving me my prior lungfuls of air.

—Impossible, says Gaspard, panting from his puffing.

—Perhaps I want only your happiness but fear you will abandon me if you were to find a new family.

—So that is the reason! You fiend.

—Do not say such a thing if it is not meant.

—The sisters have left me—even now might be toweling their hair and gathering their flip-flops!

—Is a duck not enough for you?

—You fiend, says Gaspard. You fiend!

XIV. Feat Of Feats

Swiftly now, frantically, trickily especially: a pattering across the concrete island, flitting between deck chairs, between umbrellas, through man-made groves of sugar palms. The boy Gaspard comes upon the deck chairs of the family that is not his own, their towels and shirts still slung over their chairs. Gaspard thieves the brother's flip-flops, the duck Michel snug at his hips. Then away with Gaspard! If the sisters will not have him, then will he not make amends with the grandchildrenless grandparents, and be their grandson forever, fishing from the prow of his new grandfather's paint-chipped rowboat, nibbling on his new grandmother's almondy blanket still warm from the oven? *Yes, so it shall be, so away with him now to the pool with the slide.*

The grandparents at slide's end as always, alone with their clapping. Gaspard blasé at seeing the children-of-guests come knocking into the water, knowing his own splashing can once again win the grandparents' fondnesses, plotting even now to

regale them with feats a gogo.

A mob of teenage guests comes spilling through the pool's metal gate. Gaspard thinking, the more here to see it, the better. Gaspard entrusting his duck now to the bush near the stairs.

—Do you still hate me for my sinking of us? says Michel.

—I cannot, says Gaspard. You are the favorite creature of my knowing. But please do not ruin these hopefully grandparents for me.

Gaspard climbing the stairs now, sans Michel. His gait that of one who will not be defeated. A gleam of dark bravado in the brown of his eyes. Swimming trunks swishing at his thighs. Gaspard shoulders past the few children-of-guests waiting in line, sits at the slide's top, ignores the pool attendant saying, now hold on, kid, and crouches on the tattooed brother's flip-flops in the foamy water, *launching himself thus into the tubes, still crouching!*

A terror then. Flip-flops skimming back and forth across the slide's surface, knees wobbling from the keeping-upon-feet, hands hovering near his hips at the white strip of belly marked by the wearing-of-Michel, Gaspard tearing down the tubes with wind shrieking up at him, the pool attendant shouting from above, someone shouting something down below, and then Gaspard careening around a bend and seeing the slide's end, the sunny water there and the guests gathered about it, and Gaspard crouches deeper and then springs into the air, arms wing-like, knees tucked up at his sternum, shutting his eyes and waiting for the glory of the splashing.

Underwater, Gaspard unable to help himself from smiling, imagining his coming fête.

Yet, upon surfacing—a general nothing.

The grandparents looking not at Gaspard, but at the mob of slouchy teenagers in their multicolored swimsuits, talking to them as if they know them. Laughing with these teenage guests. *Referring to them by name.* Jeffrey, Andrew, Jonathan, Benj.

A sickening in Gaspard's belly. These grandparents posing

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as grandchildren, having had grandchildren all along. The shame of it!

Gaspard looking now to see if Michel at least has noticed Gaspard's feat upon the tubes.

Yet Michel's bush empty.

The duck Michel neither perched upon any other nearby bush, nor sitting overturned upon the poolside, nor floating upon the pool.

The sickening in Gaspard's belly now almost unknowable.

XV.

Gaspard does not want to be his father but already can feel himself becoming him. As he runs down the poolside, searching the waists of children-of-guests for the duck Michel, he feels himself as someone older, his cheeks now gaunt, his hair thinning into wisps, his teeth stained by the espresso and the wine he hasn't yet drunk. Gaspard's heart beating against his ribs in a wild frenzy over his carelessness as he looks for Michel, just as his father had run along the gates of the airport in the metropolis of Philadelphia after being sidetracked into a wine shop, this after his mother had entrusted Gaspard to their father while she napped at their gate, this on their move to Disney World; just as his father had run among the picnic tables and overflowing garbage cans of a playground when again he had lost the boy Gaspard; just as his father had run down the aisles of the grocery store nearest their apartment; just as his father had run down the cobblestone streets of Fantasyland the one time they had used their employee passes to take him into the park. This father who had brought them here to the metropolis of Orlando because he thought that here they could be different, that even if in Paris' Disneyland they kept him selling tickets and pushing brooms, that at Disney World he would become somebody, have his own office, write screenplays, buy a house along the ocean—would become somebody happier. This father who was always imagining himself somewhere else, meanwhile losing the boy

—Michel, calls Gaspard, Michel! But Michel does not answer, as Gaspard knew he would not, as Gaspard knows that someone who is lost is unable to, because when you are lost you are somewhere the searchers are not, somewhere you cannot hear them. Gaspard has been lost enough times to know well the death-soon-or-worse feeling Michel must now be suffering.

Gaspard sees a spot of pink in one of the canals, an inner-tubed child-of-guests bobbing toward the drape of water blotting out the underside of a stone bridge. Gaspard flip-flopping now through the prickly shrubs along the canal's side, across the bark mulch, shouting for Michel. Gaspard leaps from the poolside into the canal! Comes sputtering to the surface! Shouts for Michel, wiping the water from his eyes!

Yet the pink inner tube disappearing even now through the drape of water is not Michel, instead a duckless inner tube, Gaspard seeing now that it is not even a Michel shade of pink. Gaspard swims to the wall, gets his elbows onto it, resting them near the spray of the drape.

—Hey.

Above Gaspard the duck Michel's beak poking over the bridge's side.

—Michel!

Then the face of the tattooed brother.

—Hey, kid. Throw me my flip-flops, motherfucker.

A kidnapping! Even worse than a lostness!

Gaspard's lungs empty of air. He cannot fill them up again, cannot breathe or even speak.

—I'm serious, my family's leaving, let's go, toss them up.

—Give me back my duck.

—Give me back my kicks.

—Fear nothing, Michel! Tonight we shall yet have our soirée.

Michel unable to answer. Impossible to tell from down below—perhaps gagged? Or simply too fearful to say even a word?

Baker: The Misfortune That Summer

—I'm not kidding, kid. Don't make me come down there.

—I'm throwing them, you roué. Then will you throw Michel? From this brother, nothing. Gaspard keeps an elbow on the side of the canal while tugging off the flip-flops of the tattooed brother. He grips a flip-flop, flings it up to him.

—Now my duck, then the other.

—No, now the other.

Gaspard flings it up. The brother steps into them.

—You're too young to be ogling, says the brother, and my sisters are too young to get ogled. If I had time to come down there, I'd beat you pink and purple.

Then the brother holds Michel to his lips—as if about to bestow upon Michel a lungful of air—and bites Michel's neck.

Then with his teeth tears a hole into the plastic skin of the duck Michel.

Michel goes limp, but this time the sort of limp from which there is no returning.

—You're lucky we're leaving, says the tattooed brother.

Then dumps the body of Michel onto the bridge and flip-flops away.

XVI.

Gaspard is found on the bridge by a pool attendant carrying an armful of wet towels. The boy Gaspard holding the dead body of the duck Michel, his shoulders shuddering, his lips at the plastic tube in Michel's underside, bestowing lungful after lungful of air that leak out of Michel back into the air of the metropolis.

—Come on, don't cry, says the pool attendant.

The pool attendant tries to take Michel from Gaspard, but Gaspard will not let go of him.

—Will you stop crying? the pool attendant says. Let's go find your parents. Where are you staying, kid? Do you remember where you're staying? What's the number of your room?