Couching Westwood

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Aside from clothes and textbooks, the only thing in college that truly *belonged* to me was a daisy-yellow sofa I kept on my apartment complex's front lawn, and now the sofa was gone, stolen, vanished without a trace, except for a four-by-eight rectangle of dead grass looming loud. I stood on that patch of brown turf with clenched fists, thinking of how, thanks to the sofa, I'd once made out with a nun. Now I could forget about that ever happening again.

"Dan!" I yelled. "Get out here!" Dan's my roommate. He didn't come, so I hollered "Get out here, now!" twice more before I heard the apartment door open and shut.

"Where's your couch?" he said, walking across the lawn. "I thought you liked it." Dan is Chinese-Canadian, originally from Shanghai by way of Quebec. He emigrated to Canada as a kid, then moved to Westwood after doing high school on a Blackfoot reservation in Montana—he came as a foreign exchange student and never left, picking Idaho potatoes every summer to pay for college. (Crisscrossing state lines probably helped throw immigration off his trail, too.) He got into college using a fake social security card. He's on the university's Native American dance team—a talent he picked up on the reservation—and he tries to look the part, wearing his black hair at waist-length and beaded moccasins on his stomp-calloused feet.

I swallowed hard. "Someone yanked it, Dan. I was coming back from school when I noticed." Dan had a textbook, *The Bible According to Eight Californians Claiming to Be Angels and/or Demons,* in his right hand, a finger stuck into its pages; he just nodded, thumping the book softly against his right knee. He's a theology major, studying to be some kind of nondenominational pastor. "Just a sofa," I continued, "I know, but makes me feel violated."

"Violated is a strong word, Paul," Dan said in his pinched tenor. "For a thrift-store couch?" I nodded. Dan shifted the book to his other hand. "Call the police, sure, but don't let it eat you. You've had it out here for two years and nothing's happened. I'd say you've been lucky." He sat down cross-legged on the lawn. "After all, sofas are sofas."

"Two and a half years, Dan."

"Right. Just call the police, and we'll . . ."

"Dan," I said, a little louder, and my voice creaked, "have you ever had something stolen from you? Something you actually cared about?" His calm was sandpaper on my nerves, and I'd had it. "Sure—it was a used sofa. But it was *my* used sofa. Rent an apartment—landlord ups the rent, you're gone! Buy a house—earthquake shakes it down! Boats sink,

countries dissolve, churches go bankrupt, but for two and a half years I had *my* place, and I needed that."

"A country tends to last longer than a couch."

I paced a three-yard track next to Dan, back and forth, closing my eyes against the setting sun. "Yeah, but human decency should outlast everything. What's next? I mean, I understand stealing a car or a million bucks, but this was a sofa!"

"Sit down, Paul." I did, on Dan's right side, cross-legged, like him. He wasn't smiling anymore. "I'll get serious. You asked me if I've ever lost anything," he said, slowly. "I have." Dan held up his hand. "It's still rough from potato picking, you know. Wasn't just for college money." He looked up at the hills. "My family never understood why I went to live on the reservation," he said, "but I loved the culture, the beliefs. Still do. Probably my religious studies thing." Glancing down at his textbook, he continued, "When I was seventeen, some Sioux guys down in Kansas got it through their heads to put on a Sun Dance, the vision quest, like the old timers did. My parents gave me permission to go, even after I told them what went on."

I shifted on the grass. "What does go on?"

Dan's mouth opened, then closed; he bit his lip. "Kinda hard to explain. The main event involves piercing the skin on your chest with big hooks. Then you attach the hooks to a tall pole with rope and pull against the hooks until they rip out of your chest."

"Then, what, you see a vision?"

"Yes." Dan paused. "You see whatever you want to see, really. I certainly wanted a vision." He leaned over and ripped a few blades of grass from the lawn. "I picked potatoes all summer for cash, took a bus down to Kansas in August, and met the guys on the res. You should have seen the pole, Paul, standing against the sky. Looked like Jacob's Ladder to me." He rubbed his finger and thumb together, grinding the grass and sprinkling it into the air. "The health department showed

up; they didn't want us messing with the hooks and bleeding all over the place. We figured that it was pretty stupid to dance without the hooks and broke it up. There was a Denny's nearby, so we went and blew my bus fare on pancakes."

"And no dance since then?"

"Nope. University won't let me; wouldn't be the same, anyway." Dan picked up his textbook and cleared his throat. "Gotta get back to homework." He shouted, "Hope you find the couch!" over his shoulder as he went back into the apartment. I lay down on the lawn and began thinking about the nun again.

Two years ago, I'd just arrived from Utah, and, aside from the apartment's provided bed, I didn't have any furniture, so I picked up the sofa at a Wilshire Boulevard thrift store. Dan, my then-new roommate, made me stick the sofa out on the lawn. "It smells skunky," he said—whatever that means—and "I don't want to give people the wrong impression." *Fine,* I thought, and dragged the sofa out onto the grass. Nobody seemed to mind its presence, even the complex's gardener, who ignored the possibility of dead grass in the sofa's shadow.

The plan was to leave the sofa outside for a few days and ventilate the smell away, but about that time, Dan joined the dance team and began practicing in his bedroom, filling our apartment with the leathery throb of drums and moccasin-clad feet, making it impossible to study. So I left the sofa outside. One night—about a week after I got the sofa—Dan was banging away in his room, I was lying sideways on the sofa, studying, and suddenly this leggy girl appeared, coming down the sidewalk right at me, stumbling every few steps when her high-heels caught on a crack. She wore some kind of hooded cape—it clasped only at her neck, leaving the rest of its length to flutter open. A miniskirt danced on her hips, a red vinyl number that reached maybe six inches down her thighs, and she tugged at its hem with one hand while the other swung a small purse by its strap.

And then I was praying, hands clasped together and eyes wide open, begging that she'd stop. That was as far as my prayer got before she leaned hard to the left and fell on the grass, about a yard away from me, and I sat up. "Are you okay?" I squeaked through the knot in my throat.

She sat up, too, before crawling over to me on her hands and knees, the hood still over her head. "Ne'er been bedder, baby" she said, "Ne'er bedder." Rising to her knees, she dropped her purse, grabbed my shoulders, and pushed me down onto my back. That's when I saw that it wasn't a hood she was wearing—it was a habit, white-layered-on-black.

"N-Nun?" I stammered, her torso snaking onto the couch. Brown, liquid eyes appeared above mine. Every one of her eyelashes stood black against the linen skin beneath.

"Call me Mudder Superior," she drawled, placing rattling hands on my face and tracing jagged circuits around my nose and mouth with her right forefinger. I kept my eyes open when she brought her face closer, her lips tasting like wet flannel as she lowered hers to mine. My cheek muscles grew taut.

Jerking her head back, she stared at me, her brown eyes even wider than before. She chuckled and said, "Bedder stop 'ere. Vow to keep." Backtracking across the grass, she picked up her purse. "Dig the couch," she said, playing with the clasp of her cloak. "Keep it 'ere and I'll be back." She laughed—louder this time—and began wobbling away.

"Wait!" I said, sitting up from my reverie, but she didn't stop, and I didn't get up from the sofa, which I've left on the lawn ever since.

So now, lying on the dead grass and immersed in fading twilight, possible culprits filled my head. I remembered back to last semester, around midnight in the middle of finals week—I ran to my window when I heard someone revving an engine outside. There they were, five or six slack-jawed fratboys squatting in the back of a pickup truck, barreling down the street with bowling balls held aloft over their heads.

It reminded me of those ancient cave paintings in France—the Neanderthals hunting? They made a few bombing runs, screaming "Sigma Psi! Sigma Psi!" and with each pass, I heard the balls thud against the sofa before rolling down the sidewalk. I surveyed the damage in the morning, and I was downright proud. One of the wooden legs had been knocked off, but the fabric still looked great, no rips or bulges. That's my sofa—chick magnet, prizefighter. I reattached the leg with screws and contact cement, and the fratboys never came back. One of their bowling balls lay stuck in the complex's bushes, and I keep it like a trophy in my bedroom.

The Sigma Psi frat house was less than a mile away, so I decided to check it out. For the first time in my life, I wanted a gun. Sigma Psi's house is impossible to miss, a two-story cubist's dream covered in white stucco. Its incongruous, box-shaped rooms balance on top of a hill west of campus, like all of Los Angeles' aborted building projects were dumped in a pile and cemented together in Westwood. There's a long stairway up the hill to their front door, and I took them two at a time. I'll just stare at whoever opens the door, I thought. I'll stare him down; if he took my sofa, he'll be overridden by guilt and give it back. Then I'll make the frat pay for steam cleaning.

I confess hating fraternities. It's because of my father, who rushed a fraternity at Utah State. For initiation, the fratboys took him up to the peaked second-story roof of the frat house—naked—and tied a ten-foot rope around his neck. My father wasn't blindfolded or anything, and he watched them tie the other end of the rope to a cinder block. The fratboys spun him around, away from the edge of the roof, screaming at him that he'd have to trust his future brothers with his life.

Now, while they were shouting, a different fratboy was supposed to sneak behind the group and cut the rope in half; they were all drunk, though, and nobody did. So the fratboy in charge of the brick yelled something like, "Be careful who you trust!" and threw the cinder block over the edge of the

roof. The fratboys laughter was interrupted by my father's head whipping back, followed by his body, and then they were grabbing at his heels as he slid toward the edge of the roof. They stopped him, sure, but they were so drunk that it took them five minutes to untie the rope, my dad choking the entire time. The stunt got him in, though I can't believe he still wanted to join.

I banged on a massive oak door at the top of the stairway. There were footsteps inside, and a skinny, pale kid opened an iron speakeasy-style slot in the door. His face was covered with shaving cuts, and he held a piece of shredded toilet paper in his left hand, dabbing at an excited slice on his neck. "'Sup, dude," he said in his best surfer voice. "Uh, pledge week's over, dude, sorry to say." That was funny, I guess, and he laughed; the braces on his teeth gave him a smile like a whirring chainsaw. "Yeah, and the costume party tonight is for members and ladies only, sorry."

"I'm looking for my sofa," I began, "and I think someone here may have taken it. It's yellow with wooden legs, and I had it on the lawn…"

"Oh yeah!" The kid was suddenly enthusiastic. "Brothers had me yoink it for initiation, right before they paddled me with golf cleats. Had to drag it back to the house buck naked, dude! Some of our brothers threw basketballs at it last year, and they knew where it was. Man, after two blocks, that sofa's legs were jacked!"

"Two blocks! That's why you're the man!" someone shouted from inside. "Sigma Psi!"

"Sigma Psi!" my host shouted back. "So, yeah, we needed the sofa for the kegger tonight—all our furniture got broken at the last one." He resumed doctoring his cuts.

I hadn't expected this. "Golf cleats, huh?" I asked.

"You should see my butt, dude."

"Ah." I peered through the open slot. Over the kid's shoulder, I saw the sofa sitting towards the rear of the house,

back by a sliding glass door that led onto an outdoor basketball court. "Well, can I have my sofa back?" It was worth a shot.

"No can do, man. Party's tonight. Oh!" he started, smacking himself on the forehead, "I gotta get the brew, dude!" He slammed the slot shut.

"And they threw *bowling* balls!" I shouted, pounding on the door with my fist. "I've still got one!" No one answered this time.

Sitting down on the front porch of the frat house, I felt my temples pound with blood and my feet begin to sweat. The sun had set, and I looked at the moon rising over the Hollywood Hills. Then an idea hit me like a ball-peen hammer. I ran all the way from the frat house to my apartment and threw open the door, panting. Dan sat studying on the living room floor. "Did you find the couch?" he asked, stretching his legs across the carpet.

"I need your dance costume," I said. "It's for the sofa."

Dan shrugged. "Sorry, but I just dropped it off at the dry cleaners. The leather was getting stiff with sweat." I stood there, trying to regain my breath, my belly inflating and collapsing like a croaking frog. Dan watched me for a minute before saying, "Well, I do still have the loincloth."

I smiled for the first time that day. "I'll take it!" I shouted, jumping in the air.

Dan recoiled slightly against the wall. "What gives?" he asked. "What's it for?"

"Bastille Day, Dan. Liberation." He didn't blink.

"Just wash it before you give it back," he said, standing up.

I followed him into his bedroom. As he pulled the loincloth out of his dresser, I asked, "How did you prepare for your Sun Dance? I mean, you picked a lot of potatoes, but what else?"

He handed me the loincloth, and I cradled it in two hands. "Well, I guess I just focused on my center." I raised

an eyebrow. "The reason I was going. I concentrated on my desire to dance, that rush I got whenever someone said the words 'sun' and 'dance' together in a sentence. I don't know how I got the urge, but it was there, and I made sure I never lost sight of it. With that focus, nothing could've stopped me, short of the government." He paused, then added, "And I did take some salvia."

"What's that?" I asked.

"*Salvia divornum*. It's an herb," he explained, "from Mexico. I was going to use it during the Sun Dance. Isn't traditional, but I wanted to be sure I got a vision. Believe me, if you want some deep focus, salvia's the ticket. Nothing'll phase you."

"It's not illegal, is it?" Dan said he didn't think so. "Hook me up," I said. Dan went into the kitchen and returned with a large brownie in a plastic bag.

"I baked it in—pretty nasty tasting by itself. Only eat about a fourth," he said. "It's strong." He left, shutting the door behind him, and I locked it. I picked up the plastic bag and took out the brownie; it was a little larger than my palm, and heavy for its size. For the first time that evening, my stomach growled, and I realized I hadn't eaten anything since I'd come home from school. So I ate the whole brownie.

The clock read 9:15 PM, and I figured the party would be starting soon. I stripped off my clothes and tried tying on the loincloth. At first, I strapped it on tightly, for modesty's sake, but my immediate discomfort made me loosen it, letting its midsection sag low and limp between my legs. (From the front and back, it still wasn't terribly revealing.) I practiced moving with it, striding around my bedroom, learning how to move my legs and maintain maximum coverage. I even did a few squats and jumping jacks for good measure—they made me dizzy, enough to see splotches of light appear in my vision. That wasn't normal, I thought, but I felt fine, so I threw open the bedroom door. Dan was sitting against the wall, eating a bowl of cold cereal and watching TV.

"Wow," Dan said, seeing me emerge. "I always wore something underneath." He took a bite of cereal. "Sure you're okay?" he mumbled.

"Never better, baby. If you wouldn't mind waiting up for me, I'd appreciate it." Dan nodded. I felt better, even though I doubted the two of us could take on an entire fraternity. He turned back to his sitcom, and I walked out the door, over the dead spot on the grass, and toward the Sigma Psi house.

The party was audible at the bottom of the hill; as I climbed the staircase, throbbing bass notes reached out from the house, pushing against me. At the top, the oak door was wide open, and the music coming from inside sounded like an amplified blender. A fat bouncer in a tight black t-shirt stopped me at the door.

"Gimme the handshake, brother," he demanded, slapping his pudgy white hand against my chest. It knocked the wind out of me, and I tried not to flinch.

"I'm no brother," I said, shaking the hand. "But I am with the band." I still saw the splotches of light: they'd turned orange.

"There's no band," the bouncer said, his flabby face moving closer. "We got a DJ." His breath hit me like onion-flavored fog.

"Well," I stammered, "you've got a band coming, too. And if we have to haul our equipment all the way down the 405, we're going to get paid. Who's in charge here, you?"

The bouncer stepped back, his pupils bouncing from side to side. "Nah, man, some skinny dude," he said quickly. "I'll go get him. Stay here!" he barked, disappearing into the house.

I took a deep breath and stepped over the threshold into the noise. The air was a pudding of rap-metal and marijuana smoke; I sensed movement all around me, but my eyes hadn't adjusted to the darkness yet. Staggering forward, feeling my way with arms outstretched, my fingers poked into soft flesh. "Dude!" a deep, male voice shouted, and an oaken hand

clasped around my throat, lifting me onto the balls of my feet. I couldn't make out the guy's shape; the more I squinted, the more my eyes burned from the smoke. The grip got tighter, and white light flickered around the periphery of my vision. The splotches turned purple and began to spin, cyclone-like. I tried to speak, but I gagged and spit saliva on the hand, which squeezed harder. I think I heard the guy say "...try that again," but I couldn't be sure. The veins in my forehead throbbed. Finally, I grabbed onto the guy's hairy forearm (my hands barely fit around it), hung on it, and swung my foot up, estimating where his crotch would be. My big toe rammed his zipper and I knew I'd won the lottery.

He grunted, his breathing audible over the music. I fell to the floor, along with a beer bottle and a fat cigar. I could see a little now, and I scrambled on all fours across the floor of the house to get away. The splotches stopped spinning.

It was the closest I'd ever come to being in a riot. People in togas—the costume of choice for most, it seemed—reverberated off the walls like trapped moths in a bell jar. Everyone had a beer in hand, forty-ounce bottles, and many wore baseball hats with beer funnels attached to the top and foamy tubes extending down to their mouths. On one side of the main room, a closet gaped open, and several revelers were helping themselves to its contents, throwing rolls of toilet paper. A few rolls of toilet paper hit the rotating ceiling fan, ricocheting like pinballs.

The DJ ruled the scene. His PA equipment, set in the northeast corner of the room, could've easily announced football games at the Rose Bowl; the speakers were seven feet tall, easy. He ran two turntables at once, walking the records back and forth with his fingertips, scratching them on the needles, rippling the air in waves of static and cat-like vocals. If that didn't make the Greeks bounce harder, he'd shake up a can of malt liquor and spray it into the room—I watched the dancers lick it off their lips.

Once my eyes fully adjusted to the dark, I fixed my gaze on the sofa; it was still by the back door, and a couple in togas was rolling around on it, lashing each other with their tongues. They'd balanced a bottle of Jack Daniel's on the armrest, and I winced as a dancer knocked it over, spilling all its contents into an absorbent cushion (and the couple, who didn't flinch).

I walked up to the DJ, ducking in behind his speakers. "You got a mic?" I screamed into his ear. He nodded. "Someone left their Porsche's lights on. You mind?" I continued, holding my hand toward the microphone.

"Nah," he screamed back. "I gotta whiz, anyway." He started to leave, but he stopped and said, "Put on another song when this one's over—can't let the crowd stop, man."

I thumbed through the records and pulled out "Three Dollar Bill, Y'all" by Limp Bizkit; it should do the trick. The music was winding down, so I loaded the album. Grabbing the microphone, I climbed on top of the PA speaker; it was so tall, I couldn't stand upright. ("Check out the Indian!" someone screamed from the dance floor.) The room began slowly rotating, and my mouth tasted like coinage. *Focus*, I told myself. I felt pinpricks below my ankles where my feet had been.

"Brothers and sisters!" I bellowed into the microphone, my voice echoing off the drywall. "Have you come to party?"

The crowd roared; I assumed it was in approval.

"Well, then," I continued, "do you like to mosh?"

Their voices made the house tremble.

"Rock on!" I couldn't keep from grinning, in spite of the oscillating room. "Now, *anyone* can float their girlfriend," I began, and several party-goers did, "and anyone can float a frat pledge." A body went flying through the sliding-glass door. "But only a select few can float...can float..." I stuttered in anticipation, "th-th-the sofa!" I pointed at it; the couple on top was still going strong, oblivious to the gathering crowd

around them. "Are you ready?!" I shrieked, dropping the needle onto the record. "Can I get a 'so-fa-float'?"

"So-fa-float!" the crowd began to chant in rhythm with the song. And, with their chanting, the splotches disappeared. My ankles sprouted feet. Standing on top of the speaker, I could see the party-goers' faces in detail, the shadowed creases, the moonlit cheekbones, the shining teeth in their idiotic smiles. They picked the sofa up and dumped the resident couple off, garbage truck-like, onto the floor, before tossing the sofa in the air, higher and higher until it scraped plaster off the ceiling.

"To the front door!" I ordered over the music, pointing to the entryway. "Now!" The throng oozed toward the door, picking up any party-goers who stood in their way. I leapt from behind the PA and walked before them, feeling like Moses directing a marching band. I ran out the door and stood on the porch. Circling my hands around my mouth, I yelled "Keep coming!" and beckoned them onward.

Someone ran into me from behind, knocking me to my knees, and I looked up. That skinny kid—the same guy I'd met that afternoon, except now he was wearing a black pleated skirt and carrying a plastic sword—stood between me and the crowd, which was struggling to wedge the sofa through the doorjamb. "You!" he hissed as I rose.

"The sororities are all down the street," I said.

"I'm William Wallace, the Scottish warrior!" he shouted, his pasty face red and twisted. He pointed his sword at me. "You stay here—I'm calling the..." His sentence was interrupted by a loud crack, and the sofa burst through the doorjamb. "Stop!" he cried, turning to face the approaching mob. "We need that!" The revelers kept coming, their chant of *So-fa-float, so-fa-float* growing increasingly louder as they drew close, nearly drowning out the heavy metal blaring from inside the house.

"Brothers and sisters, listen to what I say!" I shouted, drawing myself up as tall as I could. The crowd jostled to a halt. "You are impressive, indeed!" They cheered. "Now, prove yourselves further—how long can you last? Just down the stairs?"

"No!" they bellowed, holding the vowel out long and clear.

"Only to the end of the street?"

"No!" It was a challenge, a declaration of war.

"Then on to where that sofa rightly belongs! Crush the pale cross-dresser, and follow me to your destiny!"

They marched toward the stairway. The skinny guy stood directly in their way, waving his sword, but it was no use—the crowd shoved him to the ground and pelted him with beer bottles. As we descended the stairs, I saw a pickup truck approaching. Running ahead of the group, I flagged it down.

"Is this the Sigma Psi party?" the driver asked. He didn't have a costume, but I noticed several kegs of beer in the back of the truck.

I nodded. "It was. I need your truck—just drive straight down the street until I tell you to stop." The driver agreed, and I hopped in the back, finding a place to stand amid the kegs. There was a keg tap rolling around in the truck-bed, and I held it aloft like a scepter. "Turn up the radio!" I yelled to the driver. "Anything heavy! Show me what this baby can do!" The truck fairly hopped with the stereo. I banged on a keg with the tap, keeping time with the radio, my loincloth billowing in the humid breeze. The crowd followed my steel rhythm in a lockstep march.

"So-fa float, so-fa float!" they chanted.

The stars shone like grinning children's faces, and the moon was close enough to grab with a baseball mitt. Curious neighbors crept from their houses and apartments, warily eying my army as we passed. "Join us!" I invited, my arms outstretched. A trickle of people soon became a stream, and our ranks grew until we stretched across the entire width

of the street. Droplets of whiskey cascaded from the soggy cushions, glowing red in the truck's taillights. The marchers underneath the sofa craned their necks to catch the drops on their tongues.

We reached my apartment, and I hopped out of the truck, ordering the crowd to drop the sofa in the street. The driver parked his truck on the side of the road. The crowd was silent now, circling around me and the sofa. I looked at my sofa—two legs had been ripped off, leaving craters. Gently, I slid my hand over the back of the sofa, the armrests, and my fingers stuck together with spilled alcohol. My head hung low, like a half-deflated helium balloon. I turned to the truck driver, who watched from his open window. "Heat up the cigarette lighter," I said. Then, louder, to the crowd, I said, "Tonight, we party, but morning always comes. And *you* can go home. But for over two years," I continued, facing a different section of the circle, "this sofa has been my home, my place—and I'll be homeless soon." The truck driver held out the lighter, and I pinched it between two fingers. "Because it's time to send the sofa home." Holding the lighter out at arm's length, I touched the throbbing red coil to the sofa. The latent whiskey detonated like napalm, covering the couch in a tapestry of blue flame, painting icy shadows on the asphalt.

There was a tap on my shoulder. "I never thought you'd do that," Dan said, shuffling his moccasins on the pavement. The entire sofa burned now; flames leapt ten feet into the air, and my cheeks radiated a sweaty heat.

"I guess I'll let the grass grow back." Dan smiled. I heard police sirens approaching in the distance, yet nobody in the circle moved. "I know we're missing the hooks," I said to Dan, "but I've got the sun, if you want it."

Dan laughed. "Okay," he said, and began stretching out his arms and legs. I had a thought.

"Where are you, my followers?" I yelled to the crowd. "Send the sofa home with joyful noise!"

"So-fa-float," they began again, pumping their fists in the air.

"Keep it going!" I bellowed. Dan bobbed his head along with the crowd's grunting.

"Not a bad rhythm. I think it'll work," he said, peeling off his t-shirt. We both stretched our open palms to the sky. "Follow me," he instructed. Dan threw his head back and tapped the ground with his right foot before stamping his left. Slowly at first, then riding the crowd's rhythm, I started to dance.

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Jeffery Tucker has alternately been an actor, a missionary, a guitarist, a businessman, and a teacher. Now he devotes his time to writing and his graduate studies, which, luckily, coincide. Jeffrey enjoys writing work that explores the role of form in fiction, which is, he says, "fun."