

## *Authority*

When the notes started, I knew something was off.  
The whole thing just felt so weird. I'm not the type,  
You understand, who wanders around searching  
For signs from some invisible world, reading  
Clues into swallows' migratory patterns  
Or decoding the secret meanings hidden within  
Cracks in the sidewalk. I'm not the kind who suffers  
From visions or shamanic revelations,  
And I don't shout down people on the street  
Or carry an apocalyptic sign  
Or anything. I voted Democrat  
And do my nine-to-five like everyone else,  
Which is precisely why it doesn't make sense.  
Why me? I am in no way special, or even,  
As my wife's always saying, interesting.  
The doctors can't even hide their boredom from me  
When they come in with their charts held to their chests  
The way, in movies, you see old-timey preachers  
Carrying Bibles. They say I'm fine, and try  
To smother a sigh, and say to get some rest.  
And that's what's wrong, really: that nothing's wrong,  
And yet I wake up every morning knowing  
I'll find another note, and something else  
I don't know how to fix.

The whole thing started  
When JoAnn—that's my wife—told me about  
The lamp in the back bedroom. It didn't work,  
She said, so naturally I went and changed  
The bulb. Nothing. I checked the plug, and tried  
Another outlet. Nothing. The thing was dead.  
Of course, I'm not the handy type—a fact  
Of which JoAnn constantly reminds me—so  
I told her not to worry, that I'd take it  
To someone who could fix it. Thing is, they couldn't.  
So off to Sears I go and buy another  
And bring it home, and set it up, and: nothing.  
I told her I'd take the damned thing back in the morning.  
But when we got up, we were drinking our coffee  
And kind of roaming through the house to open  
The curtains up as usual, when we noticed  
The note. A sticky-note, hand-written, black ink,

There on our new lamp's patterned white shade.  
What did it say? It said, *LLAR*. Can you believe that?

I'll tell you now, we didn't know what to think.  
JoAnn, of course, assumed the thing meant me  
(As if she never told a lie), and starts in on me  
With questions. Do I have a girlfriend? Have I  
Been sneaking drugs? Am I a compulsive gambler?  
I told her that she knew as well as I did  
I'm home with her every night, and eat with her  
And go to bed with her and fall asleep  
Watching *Fallon* with her. She gave me a look,  
Like maybe I had figured out the trick  
To being in two damned places at the same time,  
Like I'm the type who just *would* have masterminded  
Some magical scheme to wiggle out of the laws  
Of physics in order to get away with something  
Devious. I told her I hadn't done anything  
And she knew it. And then I kind of wondered  
If maybe *she* had been living a secret life  
But I knew better than to poke that dragon.  
The question then was: who had left the note?  
I surely didn't know, and hated to think  
What it would mean if JoAnn somehow knew.  
She said she didn't, and, well, I believed her.  
So we said *kids*, and then *intruders*, turning  
Our talk toward an analysis of how  
Socio-economic pressures cause  
Everyone in capitalist cultures  
Problems, as those oppressed through poverty  
Cannot be seen in isolation from  
Those who oppress them, and the crimes committed  
By the oppressed in desperation are,  
Ultimately, only natural reactions,  
Of opposite but equal force, to the hushed crimes  
Committed by those who are their oppressors.  
We didn't know what else to say about it.  
A mutual sigh. We let it go at that,  
And then got dressed, and went about whatever  
The business of the day was.

The new new lamp  
Didn't work either, and the next week, when  
The electrician came, he didn't see anything  
Wrong in the wiring. We tried to shrug it off,  
And we had almost forgotten about the note,

After about a month, when I got home  
From work one evening and found JoAnn there sitting  
Alone at the dining-room table in the dark.  
No dinner smells, no plates laid out, no greeting.  
I was afraid to ask. It was JoAnn,  
I knew—I've known her ever since high school—  
But there was something different about her,  
A kind of quietness to her, a radiating  
Silence that engulfed me and strangled the voice  
Inside my throat, the way the statues of saints  
In church, back when my mother made me go  
To mass with her, would seem to radiate  
A hush throughout the nave, so that it seemed  
To require a great effort in the lungs to muster  
A whisper, like trying to have a conversation  
Under water. I was afraid to talk,  
And she just sat there like a statue, and weirdly  
She seemed to me in that darkness more lovely  
Than she had been in years, not like these girls  
In their bikinis on the magazines  
But like those women that the old painters  
Put down as nymphs or obscure goddesses  
In such a way you almost believe the women were  
Secretly immortal, and only the painter saw it.  
Then, out of the subaqueous dark in that room,  
A sound it took a second for me to realize  
Was her voice came, and I was so surprised,  
As if a mermaid or the mouth of a cave  
Had just posed me a question, I had to ask her,  
Whisperingly ask her, to repeat herself.  
Another silence, long enough to crawl inside,  
And then her voice again, asking, *What is this?*

I had, of course, like a fool, started flipping  
All the light-switches when she reached her hand out.  
The note, she said, had been taped up inside  
The fuse-box in the basement. You know, *LIAR*.  
We knew there was no point before we tried  
The electrician, but we tried, a bunch of companies.  
The last one rewired the whole house: still nothing.  
Our friends told us to move, and we hoped to,  
But the real estate agents said there was no use  
In listing the house, especially since, by this time  
It wasn't just the lights. JoAnn had opened  
The dishwasher when it wouldn't run one night  
And found a note. And then the kitchen sink  
One morning, a yellow sticky on the faucet.

We put in several calls to the Sheriff's Department  
And got some deputies to stay on watch  
Outside the house, but nothing seemed to help.  
Our cars stopped running, little notes stuck on  
The steering wheels. Then our computers at work.  
Neither of our bosses felt too good about it,  
And they were surprisingly kind, but we understood  
When they said they didn't have much choice about  
Letting us go. It was around that time  
We did move to a smaller place, an apartment,  
And started seeing doctors. But nothing was wrong  
With us, they said, and when the process began  
Repeating at the apartment—the lights, the water,  
And always the notes—we started to accept  
That this is just the way life sometimes goes.  
After all, the local farmers had a drought  
To deal with, no doubt due to global warming,  
And cows were falling dead out in the fields  
From some new bug, dozens a day they said,  
And the town's factories were constantly  
Closing down, leaving people worse off than ourselves,  
So even with the dual housing payments  
And our savings leaking like the damned Titanic,  
We started to adapt, and everything  
Might have kept going on like that and been  
Ok, except this thought that I kept having.  
I couldn't sleep because this thought nagged at me,  
Like a dog scratching at the door to be let in  
Or a baby in another room, crying all night—  
The thought that, since I hadn't done a thing  
That could have brought about such consequences,  
JoAnn must know more than she'd said about it.  
There was no other rational explanation:  
She must know something, must have done *something*.

I knew enough about being a good husband  
Not to ask her about it. Put her on the spot  
And she just gets upset, and I don't blame her:  
I don't like being interrogated either.  
At first I just spent a lot of time in the dark  
Living-room, drinking whisky with store-bought water  
And thinking through what I knew as the facts of the matter.  
The whisky had no effect (there'd been a note),  
But it seemed part of the Sherlock role I was playing,  
So I'd drink whisky until time for bed,  
And then, when she was asleep, I'd tiptoe out  
And delicately explore what was inside her bag

With no real notion of what I was looking for,  
But a sense that there simply had to be something to find.  
There wasn't. Nothing in her closets, either,  
Or hidden in her clothes, or in her shoes,  
Or our increasingly useless furniture,  
Or even stuffed in the hardened pillows and blankets.  
I did, however, in a few places, find  
Some balled up bits of paper that, when unfolded,  
Revealed that same handwriting, the same *LLAR*.

The night it struck me that she might have hidden  
The necessary clue not in her things  
But some place slightly less conspicuous,  
That it only made sense she wouldn't be so stupid  
As to hide the crucial clue where anyone  
Might happen on it, I started thinking outside  
The box, as people say. So, trying to be  
Scientific and clear-eyed about the whole thing,  
I concluded that the only reasonable explanation  
Was that somehow something was hidden somewhere deep  
Inside her. Well, far be it for me to suggest  
Therapy or exploratory surgery,  
And then deal with the fight, the tears, and all,  
(Not that I'm one of those whack-jobs who think  
Women are over-emotional or something—  
There's no place in society for that type,  
Or anyone who would deny the fact  
That we are all the same), so for a week  
Things went on more or less the way they had,  
While I kept thinking how to get the thing  
That she had hidden inside of her out.  
And then one night, we went to bed as usual,  
(Jimmy had Kim Kardashian on that night)  
And when dawn's blue light seeped in through the blinds  
And woke me up, I saw JoAnn was gone.  
I ran my hand along the warm emptiness  
Where she had been until I felt the paper  
And heard its rustling sound, like wind in the trees.

A few days later, a cop called, said they'd found  
Some body-parts down in the rushes there  
Along the river, and they thought it was  
JoAnn. By this point, I'd decided that  
I couldn't trust the cops. I played along,  
And said, *Yes, it must be*, and cried for them,  
But I knew better. See, it couldn't be  
JoAnn they found because she'd never left,

Not really anyway. When I would stand  
In front of the bathroom mirror in the mornings,  
Brushing my teeth, or maybe combing my hair,  
I'd be sort of distracted, and then there  
Behind me she'd be smiling, with a note  
Held in her hand up underneath her chin,  
In front of her throat. A kind of joke, I guess.  
And then, all day, I'll hear her teasing me,  
Or griping, in the room next to whichever  
Room I'm in, and sometimes, in the night,  
When I wake up and turn over, I'll open  
My eyes and there she is, propped on her elbow,  
Smiling at me and holding one of those notes  
In her fingertips, her nails a deep red color  
That seems almost to radiate in the dark,  
Her body posed there in her negligee  
In a way that I can only call *seductive*.  
Of course, I couldn't say exactly why  
She's doing what she's doing, but I'm sure  
She has good reason, so I don't much worry  
About it. I just focus on my work:  
Nine to five, every day, and often long  
Into the night, working on this secret book  
I started around the time I lost my job.  
The cops still call sometimes, or they'll drop by,  
And ask about whatever new thing's broken—  
The Mr. Coffee, the blender, the trash compactor,  
Most of my tools, including the saw and the drill  
JoAnn gave me for Christmas some years back—  
And I will sit, and listen to them talk,  
And nod, certain that their insinuations  
Signal a weak-brained inefficiency  
If not outright complicity in the crime  
Whose repetitions have marked these days and years,  
But I nod, and smile politely, while I work on  
The book inside my head, making my notes.  
The book's a history of religious doubt,  
A kind of paean to the brave free-thinkers  
And philosophical authorities  
Who liberated civilization from  
Despots and the Dark Ages. It's almost finished,  
But I'm scared that I'll die before the end,  
So these days I write almost all the time.