

from Chapter One of *The Annunciations of Hank Meyerson, Momma's Boy and Scholar* by Scott Muskin:

In the spring of that eventful year, I took up hammer and crowbar and tore apart the sole bathroom in the bungalow I owned with my wife, Carol Ann. I ripped and scraped and pried out everything except the toilet, down to the studs: pickled pine paneling, speckled four-inch shower tiles, rusted recessed lighting, tinny cavity of medicine cabinet, petrified linoleum glued over an infuriatingly thick plywood floor. This was new work for me—I was a freelance proofreader at the time and hardly versed in demo, let alone the plumbing, tiling and dry-walling to come. Bemused and stained, unkempt and scowling, I had let my diet go by thirty pounds, and my hands were as slick and pale as the spring issue of *American Literature*, which I received at home, still on the student rate. A tool belt did not become me.

But I liked it. The dust and wholesome aroma of age-dried lumber, the clattering tile and snapping lath, the bullying it took to move the cast iron tub into its indefinite internment in the backyard—it left me a pure, voided, swept-clean space that was as foreign and marvelous to me as the ham salad sandwiches Carol Ann made as my reward. I'd go in there and sit, cross-legged with my sandwich and a bottle of beer, impressed with myself and careful with my crumbs.

I had no idea what I was doing, and by April the whole thing took on the shorthand term "The Project." The Project was noble. The Project required a small truckload of tools. The Project was good for my self-esteem, but the project might have to be scaled back some, since cutting a window into stucco was apparently kind of complicated, and involved diamond-tipped blades. And with all the tools and tile and drywall and new fixtures, I was afraid I would spend too much money on The Project, but then again The Project would return 110% the investment when it was finished. When The Project would be finished was tough to say—it felt Herculean just getting the insulation stapled in under 2 mil plastic sheeting. Not to mention the Minneapolis building code, which read like Borges.

I have to say that Carol Ann's acquiescence was impressive. Without plumbing or a tub, we were forced to bathe in the basement, standing over the thoroughly bleached mainline sewer drain with a washcloth and stainless steel bowls of hot water. At the tail end of winter, both of us pale and traumatized and still reliant on at-the-ready fleece blankets collecting dog hair—well, disrobing in the basement wasn't exactly a pool party. But the previous owners had insulated well down there, and all in all Carol Ann gritted it out—she never complained, never called me an idiot. No, one thing about Carol Ann, at times of hardship, she knew how to show her mettle. Early in our

marriage she had worked in the non-profit world, helping poor neighborhoods hoods retain businesses and market themselves for development dollars, which required a certain brute optimism, not to mention courage. Both of which served her well when, that previous January, she sat me down and told me she'd had an affair, a serious one, and wouldn't it be better if I went and stayed at my goddam brother's place, since I was always over there anyway?