

GREGORY FRASER

## Very Tall Mushrooms

My son brings home a drawing from school my wife thinks looks like four erect penises. I say they're just very tall mushrooms. Daddy dick, mommy dick, son dick, daughter dick, insists my wife. She believes all boys see the world in terms of dicks. Half of me agrees. The bottom half. The top consents to nothing. It believes in the pure autonomy of art, unfettered by the real. It believes in nonsense for the sake of sense. It believes *You have to draw the line somewhere*, and *You mustn't draw the line anywhere*. Very tall mushrooms, I say again, or maybe a family of lighthouses. This summer: our first real family trip, six Dantean hours to Hunting Island, whose lighthouse entered the National Registry of Historic Places in 1970. Other visitors shot past the plaque out front, but I read it all the way through, then told the kids I was six in 1970, Mom wasn't born. The four of us climbed reinforced cast iron, hand in hand, to stare at the Atlantic from 136 feet. When I hoisted my daughter for a better view, my wife swallowed a scream. That's where *baboolya* lives, I said, pointing across the ocean. In perfect unison, the kids said *Ohh*. My mother-in-law deploras America as deeply as she loves her grandchildren. She scoffs at our food and fashions, luxuriant lassitude. She thinks I kiss the children too much. She doesn't read but if she did she'd hate our books. Most appalling are our cemeteries—right out in the open. Because our city pool abuts a cemetery, she refuses to come and splash with us. *Pashlee*, mom, I say, it's fun. A huge red sign outside the pool reads CHILDREN UNDER 10 MUST BE ACCOMPANIED BY AN ADULT. The same should go, I think, for the graveyard. I think if any boy or girl not yet 10 has to die, by whatever cause, then an adult should climb down in the hole, as well. If my mother-in-law heard me say that, she'd tsk and start chopping cabbage for borsch. But if one of our kids died

and needed an escort in dark, wet earth, she'd push  
my wife and me aside and jump. I love her for that.  
The first time the kids and I drove to the pool, my daughter  
asked about the rows of tombstones. I told her  
that's where dead people live. The moment I said it  
I knew it made no sense. Can they breathe underground,  
my son asked, the way fish can breathe underwater  
but we can't? No, I said, when you're dead, you stop breathing.  
*Ohh*, said the kids. Remember what I said: I said,  
never ever try to breathe underwater like a fish.  
Okay, Dad, they said, then raced for the water.  
I look at the drawing again and tell my wife she's right,  
it's a family of dicks. They look happy, I tell her.  
She agrees. I can see why you say mushrooms, she says.  
Very tall happy mushrooms. Alive, I say, and thriving.