

JOE RAVETZ

Bus Riders #1, 2013
Photographic Collage, 16 x 12 in.



courtesy: the artist

JANE VANDENBURGH

Designing Family

It's a few years back and I'm visiting my family in Salt Lake City when my aunt draws herself up, looks down the long table at me and my cousins, and announces: *I would like for you to go find George.* Janet—now well into her eighties—makes it sound simple, like it was just an oversight, something we just got busy and forgot to do. Like we are all still little children and have come in from playing, absently leaving George out there in the dark and cold.

My younger brother has, at this point, not been heard from in nearly five years.

George, my older brother, Hank, and I are the three members of a tight but unenviable unit formed by a childhood of intricately entwining tragedies: our father, an architect, killed himself when I was nine; our mom, already losing her mind, then exited all sense of shared reality, going first through the door marked Alcoholic Oblivion, then on to spend the rest of the time we were growing up in the locked ward of a mental institution.

Hank, a teenager, was sent away to boarding school while George and I went to live with our aunt and uncle in the San Fernando Valley—Janet and Tom already had four children of their own. This was a few years in advance of his moving us en masse to Utah, where Tom and his partner were introducing their chain of hamburger restaurants to the intermountain states, setting up Big Boy's headquarters in Salt Lake's downtown.

Because we were white; we seemed to exhibit good health, strong bones, straight teeth; and *there were so many of us* who'd come tumbling out of our station wagon or vw bus, we'd be taken for some nice normal Mormon family, an impression that insantly evaporated as they'd hear our surfer slang, riffs of fluent profanity, bursts of raucous laughter. We also spoke a private artfully invented language made up by us for the express purpose of simply annoying anybody else who didn't speak it.

Close as we kids were, we'd been sincerely torn down and patched together by those serial crises and dislocations, concentric waves of disruption causing the term *immediate family* to go wobbly and indistinct. George and I were both troubled and undisciplined and our aunt and uncle's taking us skewed the dynamics of their own family, as adoption of foundlings always will. It may have been the sheer pressure of population—all those children, all