

T H E T O A S T



S T E P H E N K A M P A

Although he'd never meant to, he'd become
 A secret-keeper, keeping not
His own but others' secrets. It had started
 When he was young: he caught
His cousin, whom he'd always thought kind-hearted,
Flooding a teeming formicarium
With steaming maple syrup, and felt he ought
To say – well, *something*, something none too kind,
About the fact; but nothing came to mind,
And after that, his cousin was inclined

To tell him everything. That was his first
 Secret, a whopper by no means
His worst. He seemed to witness, in the flesh,
 The most degrading scenes
Flash-frozen in his memory like fresh
Blackberries sealed in Ziploc bags, seemed cursed
To kick things up – the smutty magazines
His brother hid, which made his stomach drop,
Or that the girl next door gave a firm cop
A please-sir blowjob when she failed to stop

At a red light, or that the doctor's wife
 Certainly hadn't (Doc's words) "tripped
While taking out the trash" to earn her cast –
 No, something always tipped
Him off that Some-Such was a pederast,
That So-and-So "misplaced" a kitchen knife
When X (ahem) "skipped town." He grew tight-lipped,
More secretive, a turn that came to haunt

Him since it only made his neighbors want
 To feed *don't tells* to their dauntless confidant.

Lest he mismatch a secret and its source,
 He had to jot down notes for each
 On index cards. He ordered them in small
 Black boxes he would reach
 For every time his townsfolk came to call,
 Oozing the usual mixture of remorse
 And giddiness for daring to eat a peach;
 And one by one, during those reckless talks,
 They'd notice them, ubiquitous as rocks,
 And wonder who might find *their* small black box.

Once they began to ask each other why
 He listened – loner? sadist? crank? –
 He felt them cool: suddenly, no one talked.
 He made whole rooms go blank;
 When he departed, doors were always locked.
 Soon not one soul would look him in the eye.
 To think of their sneers melting like a bank
 Of snow at the full house they'd have to face
 So warmed his heart, he drank – to their disgrace –
 A glass of Drano in a secret place.