



Jet Fuel Review

Spring 2015 / Issue 9



JET FUEL Review

The logo features the words "JET FUEL" in a large, bold, black, distressed font. The word "Review" is in a smaller, black, sans-serif font to the right. A blue, stylized arrow graphic with a white starburst pattern points from the left towards the text.

A High Octane Literary Journal

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*Artwork: Lauren Levato's "Quickening"
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Mission Statement

We seek to create a writer's community, publish quality writing and artwork, and maintain a blog connected to the literary journal site.

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This issue is dedicated to Dr. Chris Wielgos and his family,
in loving memory of Sarah Grace Wielgos, 1993-2015.

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Biographies

The word "POETRY" is written in a bold, black, sans-serif font with a white speckled texture. It is centered horizontally and overlaid on a teal-colored jagged line that resembles a stylized mountain range or a signal waveform. The line has several peaks and valleys, with the word "POETRY" positioned across the middle of it.

POETRY

There's No Substitute

for the wish to speak as one, with snakes gliding between the date palms that have always been a problem for the near-sighted & the rats too, from the four corners bearing plague & missing teeth. A rabid dog died here. Yes. On this very spot. He held on until the cops cut him to pieces & another time, I must tell you, when no one came but the street filled with a thousand cheers & blood ran & bones exploded & we'd watch the games kids invented inside the bodies of the corpses & here was the beginning & the end & now we watch TV with it's make-believe & struggle to know the difference.

Limbo

That slim skim of space
between ruined and saved,
a defining

divide

empty of shimmer,
where nothing banks.
This is the moment before
the first morning call
of hawk and jay, before
the open-eye
of stretch and wake.

This is the vase
of bent back stems
without root or bloom,
a thin horizon line
of no-man's-land
with no beginning
and no end.

And this is where I am,
toeing the split
both ways. Aching to know
how low can I go?
How long can I remain
bunched in that black

expanse

of stuttering grey
with my two dumb feet
two stepping
into a shoulder shimmy,
stay below the pole,
fool's shuffle

do-si-do.

This Blousy Domesticity

The tabloids report
Hart Crane's death

On a moving
Flat bed

Is immanent
& so who can blame us

If we never come clean?
Attack dogs

Into submission
Take some getting used to

It's like too much illusion munching the Kellogg's
Our hair smelling like apples stewing

On the stove
It's like too much blackbird for her sensible dress

& we can't write our way out of
This blousy domesticity

This dish washer full
Of spawning trout

Growing Elevator Mutton

White clouds clumped like haystacks
Painted on slivers of wood flying out of

Tunnels—a thought in its rippling
Is identical to a field of blue sky the same faces the owl

Hooked on what the eyes capture & cannot hold
The all white death the young swans dredged like old dead swans

The religious whiskey of my loneliness dripping
From Tweety Bird lawn ornaments the local kids disfigure

Growing elevator mutton on my lips my smile is a book of pink wounds
A kind of angst as empty as the bottles we drink from ironically

A can of Keanu Reeves is like chewing gum
Watching a man getting a blow job

& out here in space—Google me, God!
I am pure human on the edge of 17

Yonder Is the Pink Cadillac of Sunset

Making a level place
Of reinterpreting the world

The evil sugar bowl just gets us—
I've seen [plus or minus] *so many things!*

But the heart is an ember
Scratching out polluted poems

& I love you like I love pure bologna
From the secret square

Yonder is the pink Cadillac of the sunset
One molasses, two molasses—you get the idea

Let's go down town to the squad room
& falsify some legal documents

That'll be the day that I die—
One music to fill us!

Directions for Amnesia

Look to the lone moose in a birch forest,
ten panes of your window,
sleeping twins, one sucking her thumb.
Oh mundane day, living room rug,
cracked seam of your little toe,
empty water glass, parched throat.
Focus on details, chipped paint
and a triptych of fall trees.
The way to forget assault
is with red wine and sham smiles.
Don't look to the room's dark corners
where sun never burns,
dried blood, scars or evidence
of the kitchen floor's slant,
gun you keep in your closet.

Each Mark

Allow me to present blue:
whiskers on my body,
places of change,
never again the salt of same.
Pink: healed lines,
measured cuts for life,
the two hearts, four hands,
their immature lungs,
acres of tiny, collapsed veins.
What to taste when you're close,
death a dark marionette
whose strings you would slice:
watery bouillon served
in small black bowls.
My stomach an atlas,
each mark a place we've been,
to the belly button's left,
where you were saved,
lines between you fused
in hopes you'd one day breathe.

Nostalgie De La Boue

What if like a butterfly
you lived only on liquid
and tasted the world with your feet—
and standing in nectar
uncoiled your proboscis
like a miniature elephant's trunk
that sucked all you desired?

Would you regret escaping
the silken tomb that dissolved
your fat and transformed you,
cast you out with crumpled wings
that warmed in sun to shine
from a thousand shingled scales?

Would you dare to steer
those ominously eye-spotted
wings over flowers and plants
crowning dirt feedlots
of ravenous leaf-eating caterpillars?

And soaring above those earnest crawlers,
would you consent to remain
their indifferent god, or be tempted
to look down?

Dream Migration

This pigeon with a broken wing
justifies my fear of flying.
Windows are traps of clarity
made to ensnare the sky.
How many windows depends
on how many skies my mind
can hold without shattering
into a million mosaic pieces.
A matryoshka doll of days
nesting different skies.
Or memory palace of clouds
in nomadic configurations
spelling both hello and good-bye
like faces staring from the back
of their own heads in certain paintings.
Because of the myth of breath
trees are necessary and birds uneasy
at their perch remind me
how we're all animals caught
in the same blue distances
of our dreaming in case
fog with a chance of mountains
a sea or moon epiphany and tides
give way to the gift of rising.
Sooth-say your ways, said
the blue-gray gnatcatcher,
arriving on yesterday's wind
to alight on the crab apple tree
outside my window.
One of its feathers can pack
a zillion top quarks, the densest
particle in the universe,
and not miss a wingbeat
in the coming migration.
There's this memory of my father
showing me how to fly a kite
before loss found a foothold.
A park blazed with the last
of summer's hydrogen.
The bright red jellyfish kite he held
firmly anchored in air's feral trough
and dazzling us with its streamers.

The day promised to stay forever.
His gestures demonstrated what in speech
he withheld: that the trick lies in holding the string
while slowly letting go.

Other Side of Bright

Losing steps into this shimmering finale,
the blood hour when the day folds itself
into a luminous suitcase on the horizon

ocean pawning its solar bounty to a blue dragon
soaring down, the sidereal's curtain call
sequined with stars, known ellipticals unfolding

the road each football engenders a gradient dance
of numbers losing count, figure eight dissolving
in the moebius clouds, so much radiance

makes me think of Cecil B. DeMille
if he'd done a production of Helen of Troy,
the face that launched a thousands flaming

garbage barges, for so much beauty
there's carbon load, entropy, drone strikes
and birds flying backward into ever

downhill's one-way slide we knew from up
would lead to this final conflagration
called breath.

For as Long as a Paragraph

I was a child in a sentence,
one that began simply
before twisting into knowledge
while I somehow remained
ignorant as I wandered
its terraces and trees, never guessing
the flesh that might be contained
in the maneuvers of doves and bees,
all those *dos* and *do nots*
humming over my head like a territorial tongue,
does and stags at the lawn's edge,
and beyond a constrictor
fencing me from farther on,
a precarious phrase that seemed harmless,
parenthetical to my existence,
unheeded and unobserved,
but all the time assuming
that the world in all its complexity
was something that could be understood.

You re Toast

Flask the tea to understand the throat.
Gorge the river, flood and trickle, to know
the flood—how we sighed as we floated
from one great stiff to the next, rowing

from state to state, wasn't this desire—
this furious motion to forget the corpse?
Tell me what you want, what you require,
come to me, contain, which transport

to content? anxiety? Which are we about? Leaves
sodden in their little bag, drink them down,
even the frog leaves his bubbles of seed
in the water, this is how love sounds

to the bridge, water enters the mouth,
bubbles into the belly and then out.

Placebo

Pansy
of thought,
muse-mary
of remembrance,
leaf the leaf
or petal
you trust
as you rely
on rust
to dismiss
iron,
sic transit.

The strangely akin,
say the sun rising
with cruciferous
abandon
cures the crucified,
you've seen
the crux—
lavender,
dandelion,
peppermint
with its square stem,
even the skeptic
holds a bit
beneath his tongue,
and it speaks
when he can't
believe,
that sort of faith:
fold this speck
and slip it under
your glass of water,
sip, drink.

To My Mother's Ghost

Winter is twisting
inside and out of its skin,
the raw underbelly
of scrub oak pricking
through open pores
of dirt.

Clouds are tormented
into swollen limbs
of light.
Severed, they float slowly,
slowly, in a pool
of blue.

Why can't I swallow,
or eat,
or sleep?
Your chandelier is laughing
at the icy poverty
of melting snow,
at the agate bead
of birds stitched to
exposed ground, its soggy
nape.

Light slides off the mountains
into filling furrows
of shadow,
which will
overcome in minutes.

This day, once owned
by the living, slips, their patterns
now disappearing too,
as spring is willing
to swallow these months
of strife, of deer
hoofing frantically for lavender
tucked deep in comas
of snow,

Of moose stretching
hooves up
into arching galaxies
of sleeping cottonwood,

Of you, like a pearl
in enamel, the soft pink
sheath that we sealed
with a mortician's twist,
his hands skilled
at levers of this sort.

Chapped Draft/Handbasket

Angry at lattices, brass toenails, futility

I pray for black-knotted solemnity.

It's all so inevitable.

He forces me down, claws in my back

aluminum bones and a dusty snake carcass.

O Holy Incommunicado

I wrap your knick-knacks in pink

drape the grass rabbit

in incongruous jewelry.

May your old night a luminous bomb

be more kind.

This Starts with Girls Fighting Birds in the Foyer

I guess it's my strange way
to let go the gristle
bloat-smashed rubber roadkill
watch the dead opera blunt love on the cusp
through a bay window
where fucking means nothing but time.

I guess there'll be glass
once rain washes horseshit
and tusked pigs throw up on the pickups.

Day three, where are we? Hooves and black pudding
drape the small body
I try to taint.

This log house's lawn
has its own genre.
Our trauma stretches
across every ghost.

Period

Little black globe of authority,
finality, you are the world's
freckle, dot that hard-smacks me
at the end of sentences I'm not
even sure I should have written.
Bullet for the broken-hearted,
fleck of fear, speck that burns
when I try to flick it off the page,
stuck solemn as a street sign,
full stop my fingers obey, eyes
honor. Such power something
so small, seemingly insignificant
but never scarce. How is it
you get to dictate all our
beginnings, endings, so smug
in potent squalor, ubiquitous
beyond all reason. If I leave
you out, skip you, ignore you,
you only call attention through
your absence, haunting as you
disappear. You speak
the unspeakable braille,
send messages that pierce
and shatter, little dagger,
eyedropper, final stitch
in the fabric of the word.

Unlike the Camelopard

(an Ashbery erasure poem)

Anything too obvious
doesn't know it's
rented
property

It
must realize
it wants
to be American

But in the end
it's your mouth
we can't abide
sorrow shaking in the trees

from *Quick Question*

Mottled Tuesday

(an Ashbery erasure poem)

So laughable
 that
shoal
 of references

I add to
 the pile

my laundry a point of departure,
my white swizzle stick

We're
 bogus.

But sometimes, you know,
we continue to
 populate
bizarre self-imaginings

Here's hoping
 our units
fold to mere
 specters

The new day
 is not
able to make
 a distinction.

from *A Worldly Country*

By Forced Marches

(an Ashbery erasure poem)

He

of the slaughtered wilderness
the dainty meadows

reached the
divided silence
a beacon loud
in the night
no horizon

He severed
his fingers

I squatted nearby

We were
prismatic
each afraid alone

a certain
satisfaction
in the mirror

but in fragments
no fullness

only light
sketched in

from Hotel Lautreamont

555 Poem 1 °

Conceived as a meticulously compiled and compendious miscellany, a grimoire or
instruction manual without referent, as a delirious carnival of sobriety.

Dialogues develop on a moving surface of misunderstanding.

I'll just keep saying it until you get tired of not hearing it.

Glitter is the herpes of the drag world.

The apocalypse waits to be cancelled tomorrow.

Obscure because too dazzling to behold.

He thought that at the moment of his invention of the uncountable infinite,
he was God's administrative employee.

§

555 Poem 2 °

I hear the scream above the pizzicato, but it seems off-key to me.
The girls not only had fun, they also got a good workout in the process.
Different theories follow different paths to different ends.
Why the note makes so much of the gift aspect after the fact is odd.
I knew before I ever took the test that it would come back positive.
That should go without saying; but it seems that I need to say it.

When I'm ready to let him go I'll let him go but I'll never let him go.
So I renounced and sadly see: where word breaks off no thing may be.

§

Mixed Media Artist Jenny Holzer Speaks to Me from the 90 s

Neon letter boxes infect Times Square
Holzer was obsessed with sex and war
I wish I could have seen your prophetic
billboards above strip clubs, Jenny:
Abuse of power comes as no surprise --
The contrast of pixelated dots
Hung over pasties in display windows, rat bodies
gleam like slaps. Her signs
loomed over saliva splattered concrete.
Always blockade, always the same font,
(She would never use "Freestyle Script.")
She inhabits disembodied words.
Lines hang in the air
two inches from ghost mouths.
Which came first --
the words or the mouth?
I am angry with you, Jenny.
All I wanted was to see
your pretty pink mouth
forming these words:
men cannot protect you anymore
In the Field museum
At that Biennale in Venice
At the Guggenheim.
I don't even know myself anymore.
I thought I was bright
and elucidated brightness.
When I read your words
I know I am still searching
for myself.
Jenny posts
Your awful language is in the air by my head
I am on the corner of 42nd Street
and Broadway, pushing bodies like pencils,
no words in sight.

Lustmord

Jenny Holzer says all wars start as a secret.
She inks models' skin with letters, sentences
My eyes are sore from moving against your palm
Some phrases carry a hint of threat
Of women squatting
Of being taken
She makes me want to
slam the book shut
take a shower, get a haircut.
Self-awareness can be crippling.
The information age blew our
brains open.
Terrorists stream live video,
machete all the words.
In the desert it takes
longer to find a dictionary,
longer still to locate
synapse centers,
palm a sound,
hold it in your throat
swish it around
claim one last guttural noose.
War is a purification rite.
There are no emoticons
in dictatorships, Jenny.
Pandas eating jellybeans,
cherry cola bottle,
kitty holding heart,
to ease all of that
genocide.
The air turns smelly.
A dead rat trapped under the fridge word.
A rotten chicken breast word.
A cacophonous fly swarm word.
A dog rolling in its own vomit word.
You are trapped in these words so you will explode.

I m Sitting in a Car

at a curbside in a city
I'd like to forget
watching the streetlights

disappear & reappear
behind the trees.
It is cold

and the wind is wandering
up and down the streets
like a corpse

startled back to life.
I have no intention
of unfolding

the poem in my pocket.
I carry it everywhere I go
in case I might at last move

past the first sentence,
which isn't a sentence at all
but a murderer, wandering

up and down the streets
looking for a parked car
with a corpse inside.

Fire

One thing I like is fire.
I like how it wants you
to smell like what you cook.
I like the smell and like
the song it hums
darkening brats
or marshmallows,
the song the beans
and meats sing. I am
changing sings the world.
I have the funniest story
about how
I am growing as a person,
I tell the fire.
It does not laugh,
not like we laugh.
Is it a mean-spirited thing?
No, but it must change
the log or the sky
if lit from a cannon.
It is a hard thing,
changing the whole sky.
It is hard thing bursting
into this life.
It makes little paratroopers,
I think, watching it
with my sister and her fiancé
and the family she'll join
in the suburbs of Chicago.
That is how I know
you are not like us,
I tell the fire.
Because what you touch
loves you. What you touch
are budding leaves
or fully budded brambles or
dried apples dead in the snow.
Now I am just listing for you
the things Liz and I saw
hiking out of the gorge
like our friend hadn't just
overdosed on Sudafed and alcohol.

Like our friend wasn't going to live
as himself ever again.
The apples were like animal droppings
and when I woke in the car,
blue graves dug in the sky.
The earth was wet and deer
moved like commandos
through the snow.
As if their hooves
could be air.
As if they could leave
no trace at all.

Some Notes on an Arson

Before the train depot
became the law offices
of Hemphill and McClure,
it was a train depot.
Then an abandoned train
depot. Then the county crews
tore out the train tracks,
clear cut the path
which didn't want to be
a path after a while,
and, bam, bike trail.
And, bam, the train depot
became a brewery
for the out-of-town element.
The waiters lived in Des Moines.
The restaurant served duck
and burgers with quail eggs
and the summer was so sick,
so sick with tree rot
that Chris burned down
the portable school.
On the site of the old portable
the school built another portable
and Chris went to Juvie.
Chris should scare you.
It should scare you that
a kid like that could burn
another person in their sleep.
I could hear laughter when
I listened to the wind sniping
the reeds beside the gulch
where the worst element
hid their cigarettes,
kids like Chris who hated
the world out there
which, I admit, did not love
them much in return.
The next winter,
the bank foreclosed on
the restaurant and let it
go back to what it was
and let the fancy waiters

find work in Des Moines.
The county let Chris move home.
Because he is different now, they said.
But I know how people
circle like birds looking
for lost nests.
This world scares me so badly
some times that I need
to take you in my arms
under this white-hot sun.
I don't want you to understand
me the way I understand me.
You say trains, and I think quail.
Someone lights a cigarette,
and I see foxes cutting hunger
through the trees.

A Token Demon

(Dinanukht)

By the water where Babylon
once rose, rests a demon.

There, between time and that
which is whatever is not, he sits.

Half of him is folded flesh—
The rest, the pages of a book.

He's settled on the vanished river
constantly reading himself

until whatever this might be
is swallowed by whatever sea might want it.

Assorted Angels

The angel with a revolver
In his teeth sits
Cross-legged on the ghost
Of smoke he just exhaled, watching

An angel tap at her
Tilting halo, trying to knock
It back into place without
Looking at a mirror which shows

A birthday caught under
The wing of a napping angel
Brushed by her rising feathers
With each breath while she dreams

Of dark robes and darker
Clouds and the kind angel
Of darkness who sings out
Iron notes making a song about
An angel with a revolver.

Felony

A clock got stolen just after midnight
or before noon. Guesses vary. The unlit
candle grew smaller. Eyes closed. Opened. Closed
again. Dust claimed victory one last time.
The empty shelf forgot to decompose.

Across the room, two mirrors leaned inwards,
on each other, passing back imagined doors.
There was a ticking sound somewhere
again. Dust settled, smug, swallowing time.
The room formed a circle around that chair

tilting left and down. Traffic rattled past.
Invisible drivers pressing the gas,
racing back to rooms as fierce as this one.
Again, dust laughs because it's beaten time.
The clock got fenced. Money's split. Crime's done.

Waltz Fugue

I keep returning
to a place that doesn't exist
where you wait just off the page.
The alphabet revolts
and my fingers begin a waltz.

I keep returning.
A place that doesn't exist
lurks just off the page.
You waltz with
the revolting alphabet
while my fingers return.

You come back to me.
The alphabet doesn't exist.
My fingers take hold.
We waltz off the page.

Revising a Poem, Anne Sexton Thinks About Mercy

Favored by angels, Lot stands
yards from the rude ones, brutes
stumbling to his strange door.
This is the free space, the step-by-step
by which the tale ascends.

Everything's made human by its flaw.
The angels are ready for sleep,
having arrived as if through a channel,
their imaginary bodies buoyant in thistle,
and animals nearby, murmuring straw.

Should she pursue, with her eye
for the mercy on which the Bible's tenderness
hangs like a myth in ether? Your crookedness
forgiven, liabilities exposed.
A careless angel, transparent, nearby

admitting that notch of light
so you may offer your human throat
for the beast to note each craving error.
The light forcing that affliction open.
Imagine a body absolved, salt-white

narrative, calm and devout:
your opposite, your mirror life.
Anne had been inelegant, wife
in a honeycomb of illness,
and poetry took her hand, led her out.

Yet others writhe behind. Bible studies
overlook the passage where Lot
offers his virgin daughters to the crowd
in infinite cold terms. And in Judges,
we pass over the concubine, cut in pieces,

bloody. (How these quieted obsessions arrive.
You can scour the ruins where angels
gazed elsewhere, and angry men
fought and fucked the narrative.
Her side of that story did not survive.)

This is why, in the holy book,
Lot's wife looks back in the narrative,
why she disregards you, angel, denying
your neglect. How she whirls, revising
herself visible in the story. Look.

Sylvia Plath is on the Night Train from Paris

with a lover asleep and the Olivetti
on the floor of the compartment.
The dark unfolding outside the window
is an infinite religious space.
Her mind branches, trying out crashing,
inadequate metaphors.

Just days ago, she had changed one word
in a problem line, leaving noun for adjective,
describing the end, not the means.
Then such a silvery-white there was!
The language transformed, ductile, like metal.
That was arrival, novitiate, your darling cell.

The train leans into lightening sky.
To her left are lemon trees, yolk-yellow
relenting fruit, and pastel houses
on exquisite, fertile land. Close-up,
the bright flowers purge their seeds,
tiny, crisp coats flung finally out.

On the right, the Mediterranean
forces itself repeatedly in blue,
carrying on under an adamant sun.
There had been a moon in the night, hadn't there,
a romantic spot on the eye somewhere?
But who remembers such dopiness,

given this vertebral infinite, this agitation?
On the other side of this sea is Egypt,
where the girl saint evaporated to a pureness,
while the anchorite suffered his body,
combustible in devotion, and giving up.
Now the train unloads every inch of the past,

absolving in a lustrous violence.
She would like to be taken by force
into the terrible sea
for the malice that powers the heart for real,
and shaken until she sees stars, snarling white,
abrasive and well-meaning.

The Art of the Insult

Artless, bloat-kidneyed gibbet.
Cudgel, implement of pain
and death, how you lash.
What a lovely container you
are, shrouded in the old
razzle dazzle: a trick—a delight!—
a trick. In the end, you are
just a hologram, and I stick
my finger through your eye.
This is how we demean.
We wee lads and lasses—
we can be such worms, burrowing
for devices to widen the space
between us, turn nouns
to verbs: *fistulas to festers*.

In the Gown I Wear to the Uprising

We all made our clothes and mail
for the occasion. Some melted down
their own cutlery for a helm or gauntlet
or gorget, melted their last coins
and pulled them, molten, taught
to lace into links for hauberks.
But I made myself a gown, every
thread unraveled from the cape
of a fallen king, a cloth my family
had been weaving since the beginning.
I could fit a crossbow in my bustle,
throwing stars in the balconette, but I
do not. There is a politick in these
clothes, but clothes mean differently
than actions, and our actions are clear:
we make, and wager, and make. It is
in our blood to make, not to make bleed.

Easter Weekend, 1998

Snow appeared like alms that Thursday,
freshly minted coins that glinted
in the headlights' glow, the long miles
home through that blizzard flung, reckless,
atop April's blooms. The highway
had closed, no one on the road save
us. All broadcasts announced makeshift
shelters in churches—I begged you
to stop. You would not. When we hit
a slick spot, when the car spun out,
I counted each flash of the rail
past my window—three, four—shouted
pump the brakes. In those slow moments,
I saw each plump flake that burdened
the trees. I watched the median
rise, white leviathan, white sea.
The whole time, you screamed, *I'm sorry
I killed you*. I cannot shake those
words. I wound them tight to replace
the dim thread that unspooled from me
when, even as your body cooled
among the mounting drifts, I still
believed that we would weather death.

Birds Like Stones Fall from the Sky

The factory swaddles
the town in gauze:
pink, sweet aftermath
of the plastics plant.
The air is barely
irritant, fleck of sand
we smooth and shine.
We inhale deep
the scent of you:
trifle, round dollop
of redwing in winter.
Wind-up toy, aerial
animal who won't take
flight, you hop across
the tabletop, clever
ornament, wily
device. We wait, tickled
by your ticking, lean close
for your withheld song.
We fall like stones asleep
to your metronome.
All night, you click
our shared mating call:
too late, too late, too late.

The Jungle Gym

Mechanical gulls and crows.
When it got late, the great
moon rose behind them

and the night's damp breeze
filmed their beady eyes and
still—the mystery of lightness,

the chemistry between the real
and the superimposed.
Made with paper maché, wiring

and motorized wings, these
silhouette crows gather in rows
while a teacher sings.

The Notorious Man

A small boy beneath a marquis of rubied letters.
Inside: his feet sticky to the floor, the crackling
strips of film, and Ingrid Bergman looms
on screen, speechless, a type of rose in his mother's garden.

He imagines he is the one in the grey suit
with slicked hair, well into his forties with immaculate
movie star hands. Hands that hold pistols carefully
as if they were a woman's wrists. And after,

he runs home and decides he will have strange
love affairs in small, dark apartments.
The streetlights' sheen protects him from the woods
and from what he hopes are bird-less trees.

The Casual Lover

I fall into the space between their silhouettes. I'll do that, I think.
I'll do that on a train car's pull-down bunk where the stars can see me.

While the window rattles its cool light. While the sound of the razor
slipping down the sink is clean as falling ice.

The camera pans to cities in the distance, sparkling
with power plants—cities beyond the crop fields swept in silver and

the crop duster who chases down his foolish love of night. The bi-plane's
shadow, a rope around my neck. It ends in a miniature impact

and plumes of smoke rise like curled fists to blot the moon.
My tongue crawls her white throat like smoke.

What Really Happened

Cherry blossoms, confetti, a sidewalk
lost like a ball. Closing gates, hands

unfolding letters, blankets, anesthesia.
Snowfall & its shadow. Christian boys

up & coming like washrags on a spout,
belts missing like a rib. Jokes turning

on surplus of seeing, tree & the pollen
& the bees. Translation toward rules

of a blackened skirt. Fuel & firewood,
divorce & ruin, a vision like drinking

like lions or shares. Like old portraits
slipping out of reach. An idea of spring.

Opening Night at the Discotheque

This throbbing mystery, diction
when friends save face & remove

their faces altogether. Shackled,
they aim my complicated steps

that drop fully into dark streams
slurring. I revolt, keen pleasure

keeping this dance from igniting
like a globe. My visions include

bottles spinning, juggled knives,
men & women edging erratically

on three hands for a retro hustle.
I'm a different me than that me

you recollect. I'm old fashioned
& the running man not yet born.

Crowds imbue the polished floor
like apparitions, a revolving cast.

A Plethora of Future Artifacts

Frost hard, 1988: a vibrant world
sharp & again familiar.

We are there with growing legs
feeling huh
for modern nostalgia.

The old bulbs warm
before they really burn

in a small apartment housing six.

I still believe in connected turns,
creation
& getting away with thinking.

I try not to make words on hold
become a poem about a poem.

My ear sticks, sleeps
in the now

as I eat dinner
with the mapmaker's ghost
who hides
her smile to touch the spill.

I have the urge to race the past
to a perfect city

or some other recent obsession.

I'll say no more
as it would imply there was
a danger once.

Interstitial Hush

The is not a word, but a bridge
to darker fruit enmeshed
in fields of whatever wreckage
I have likely been.

Sink it—deep-washed by sustained
dream-history, dared
& shared again.
I don't know what I'm saying.
I'll ask if you heal & haunt.
Don't guess.

What you have made space for
has left scented fingerprints
on a cloud braised brightly across
such a deceptively long time.
Of all slow things working
there's more than one stalling plot—
powers within circumstance,
resources of private resolution.

It's only surface off mirrors
mustered my reflection,
& I'm itching to finally eat smoke
drifting from the archives.

In the Hotel Bathroom

A glass is dropped and the exploded
pieces hang in the air together.
Then they fall, as all things must.
I too fell, as a glass
from the counter, in love.
There were times when I was weightless.
Others I was on the ground and she—
bounding through the air.
Though we appear transparent,
we bend our truths like light
and do not wash ourselves enough.
We seek metaphor—*I love you*
like an apple falling in a vacuum—
but are incomparable—
O bright vowel;
O brooding consonant—
and therefore fit like guardsmen
changing shifts.
Night snuck in without
a knock and the day refused the maid.
The bill arrived at dawn
but neither looked.

The Origins

What continues cools.
Why else

runs the river
so cold and the children

so hesitant to dip
their feet into it?

How can they
continue what's only

in their organs
just begun?

The mountains—
The mountains above and around.

How cold the mountains.
How continuous:

Rocks covered in life;
rocks themselves lacking it.

From an Automobile

I spun the tires.
The snow fell well.
Under me the earth moved
and I stayed where I was.
You were there, who watched,
and weighed. The wait was long.
The sun, meanwhile, was.
The comparisons are minimal—
except for everything
that was never seen.
What moves through me moves me.
Your skin stops on mine—in time.
Tired and friction, we burn.
Winter ceases, eases
as out of snow.
Tomorrow, the winds will be—
our tracks as though we never were.

What Remains

The desert silence
is punctuated by the scratchings
of a few dusty lizards,
the croak of a passing raven,
a few lines of rocks
arranged by the locals
just off the highway
to send a simple message:
proof of life, and its fondness
for alcohol after midnight.

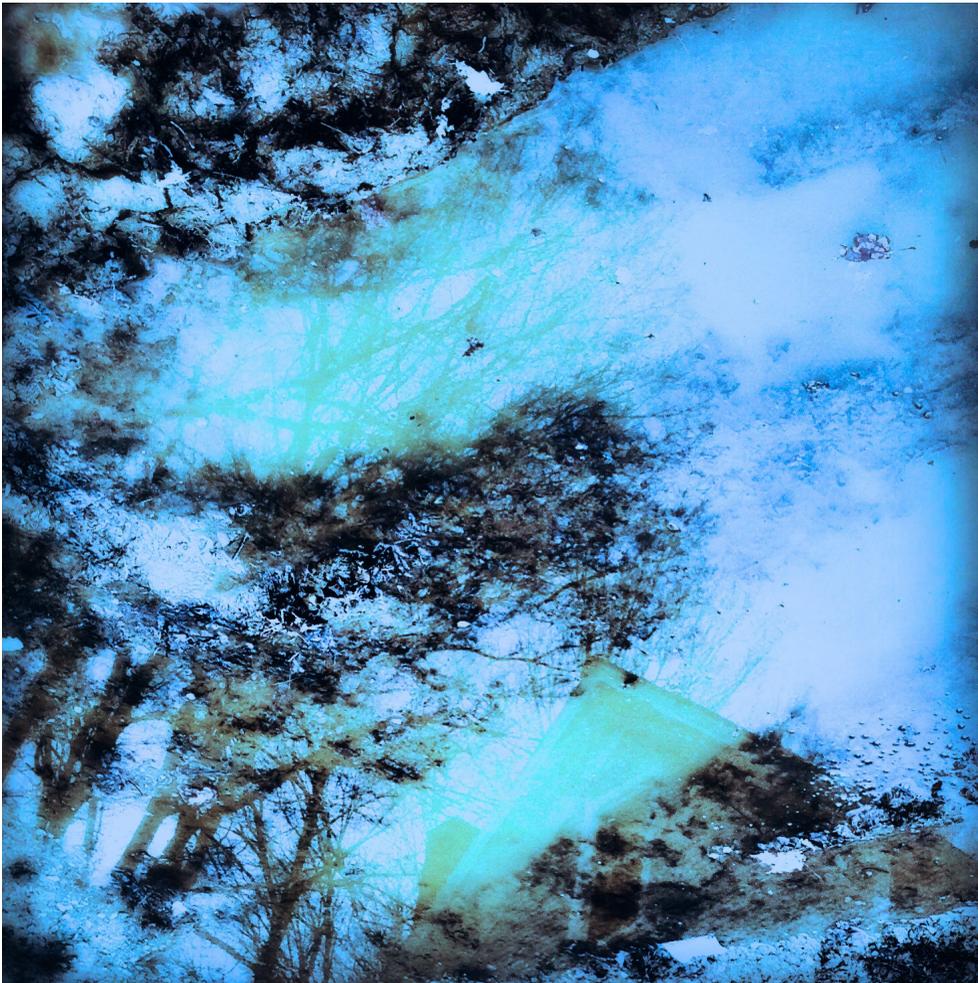
That same arid absence
is an empty opening
to endless surprise,
an invitation
to levitate, to float gently
upward toward the stratosphere
and view this jeweled planet
from the undisturbed
stillness of the pockmarked moon.

Filled with constant regard
it faces earth unceasingly,
a worshipful satellite
never tiring of the little swirls
of tornadoes and hurricanes,
the sudden silent eruptions
of the largest volcanoes,
the delicate plumes of ash
extending featherlike
over the azure oceans,
shadowing the edges of continents
littered with fossils
and fresher bones.



ART

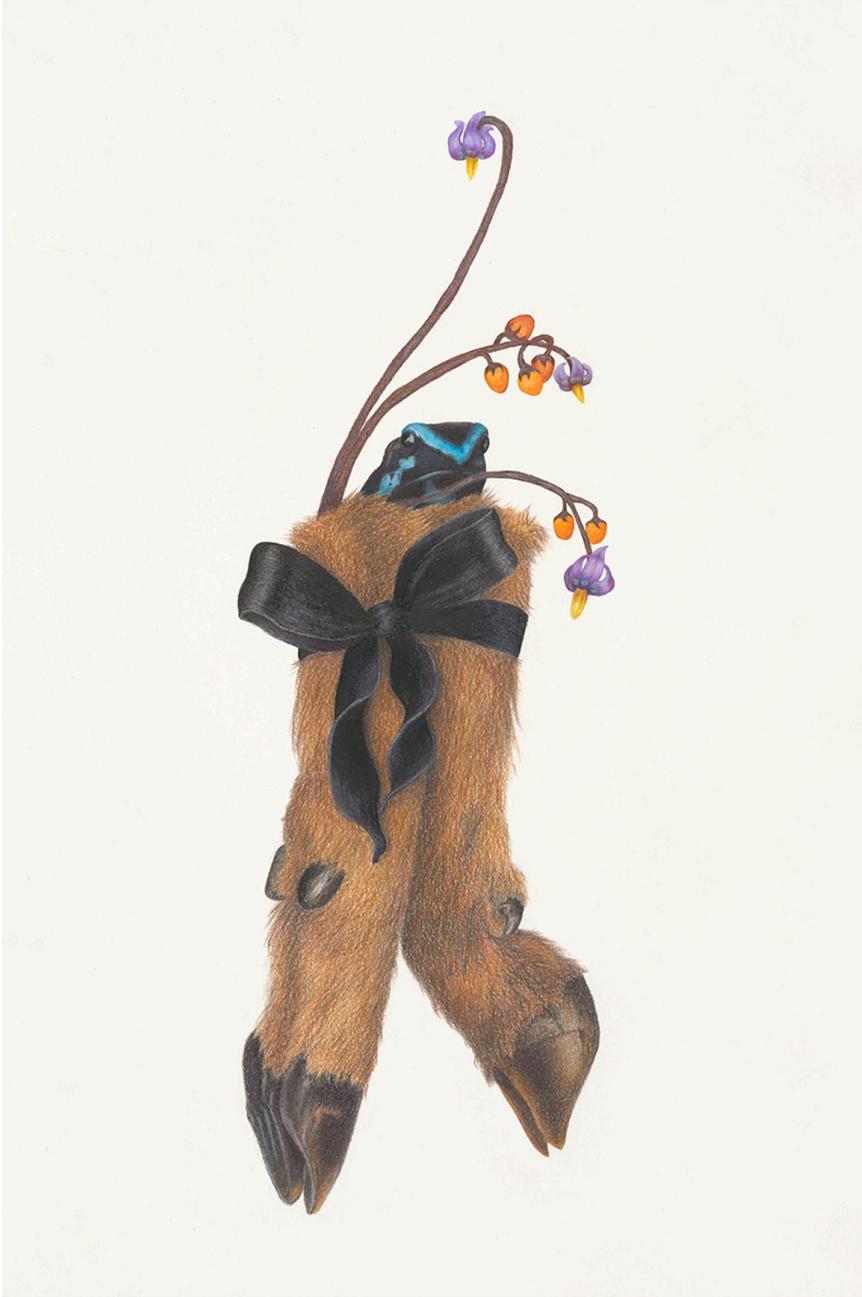
Transition



Scarlett Johansson Portrait



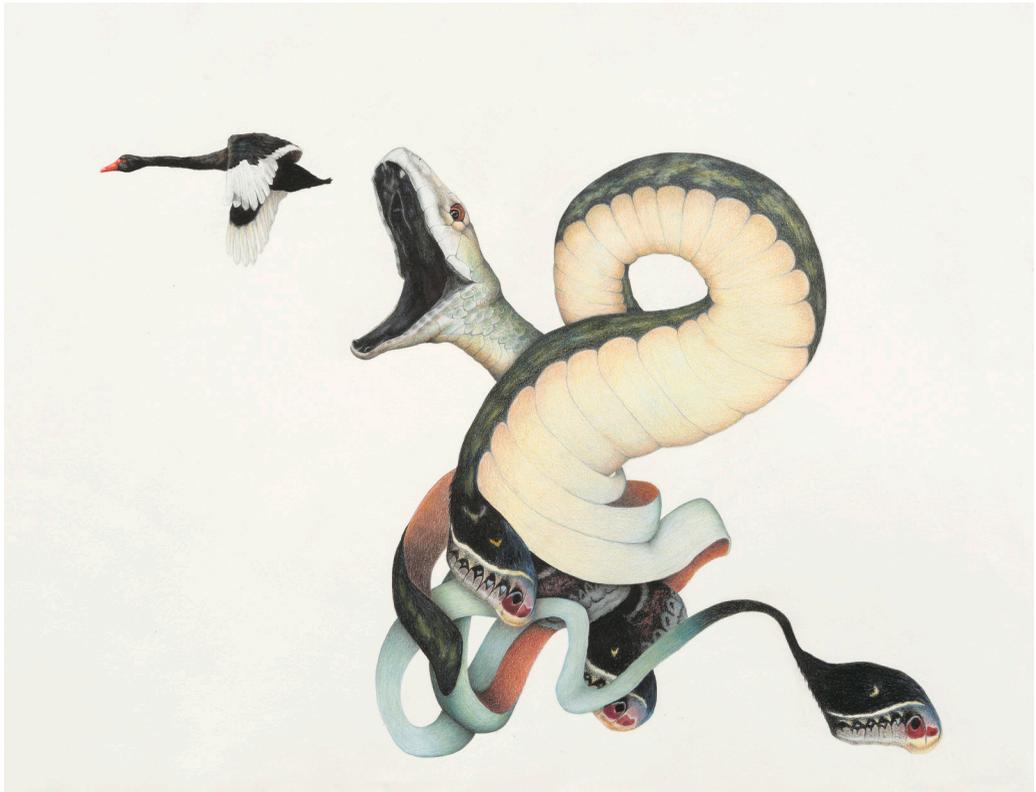
Indiana



Plagues



Quickening



Michael A.



Thorco Tribute



Mary Wright

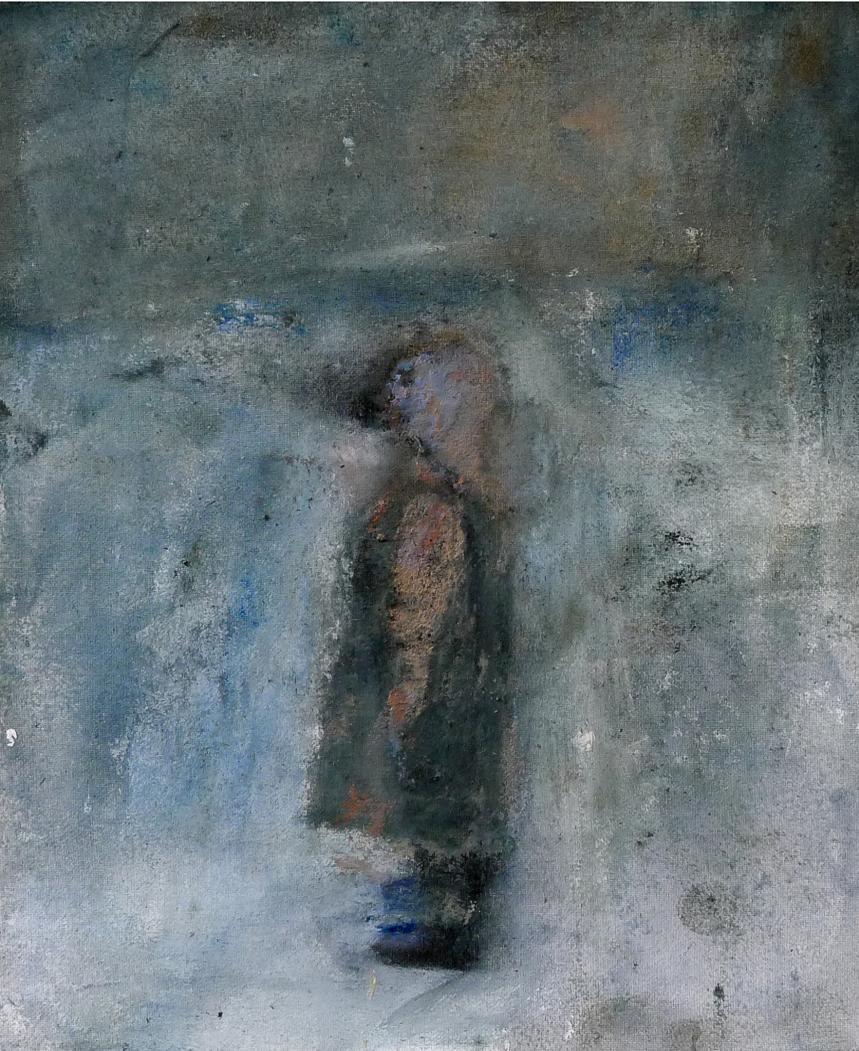
Bend Her Head

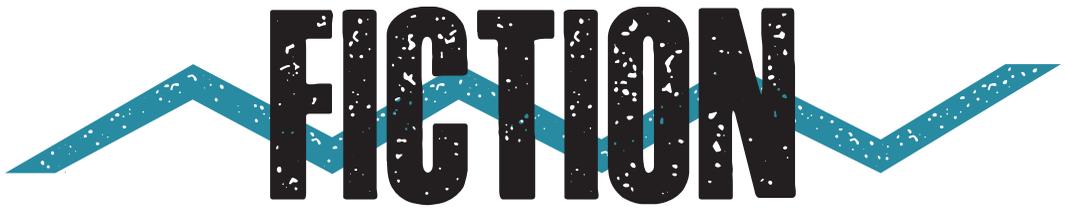


Skinning



Young One



The word "FICTION" is written in a bold, black, sans-serif font with a white speckled texture. It is centered horizontally and overlaid on a teal-colored line graphic. The line graphic consists of several sharp, angular peaks and valleys, resembling a stylized mountain range or a jagged waveform. The teal line is semi-transparent, allowing the black text to be visible through it.

FICTION

My Mouth is Moving

Three politicians stand before a wall of microphones with their arms sewn together. The first one says, "Imagine yourself spread out against the floor of an unrelenting desert reciting the poems of a stranger. Imagine the poems are composed of subordinate clauses and non-specific imagery."

When she speaks the sound of tape hiss. Sacramento or Riverside. True leaves part for nobody's inarticulation.

The second politician says, "Imagine yourself undergoing enhanced interrogation techniques." Shadowless, but chained. Circled, but mystified.

Verification of his statements cannot occur without authenticating details. For instance, the process by which flour is extracted from acorns.

The pairing of huckleberries and sage. Elderberry and synthetic ethers.

The third politician isn't a politician at all, but sets his taxonomies within a mold of crumbling masonry. He has the face of a waterlogged seed pod and the color of a root vegetable that has never been exposed to light. If light is the right word here.

He says, "The good news is that your statements are non-corroborated. The bad news is that you are believed."

Inclined tower of books breeds sullen destruction. One knows nothing about the future and misuses the word bucolic. Another creates overambitious experiments with traps and pulleys meant to reduce our strange halos to cotter pins and cotyledons.

Is it strange to think you met underwater? Is it odd to initiate a wider group review when you live in sarcophogul igloos and rub your feet together to produce heat? Of course not. We know nothing about the future except that days will be assimilated and that there will be fluctuations in temperature.

Some desire the glory of screen time. Others build towers of brick and curtains of metal. How curious, then, the way in which an image becomes inconclusive.

Open 24 Hours

The skeleton sat at the orange counter of the donut shop with its head bowed over a cup of coffee, its skull in its bony hands. Refuse littered the hosed-down streets and people trickled out of the dark alleys to find their cars or apartments that they rented for the weekend. The skeleton looked as if it were waiting out a migraine, though 4:30 a.m. might be a little too early to be suffering the consequences of a white night. Masculinity could be assigned to his figure by the fraying leather shoes poking out from under his costume. A kind of get-up you rarely see anymore. It fit his body snugly: white lines on a puppeteer's black velvet pajama, capped off with a tawdry plastic mask. It was only the beginning of the night in a town filled with party goers, cops on horseback, and the siren scream of ambulances. Horse shit steamed in the gutters like freshly baked bread.

Hours ago, when the hoards were parading and the gaudily clad women on the balconies were dancing and raising their blouses to expose already hardened nipples to night air, he was singing along with the mayhem too. He had fallen in love an innumerable number of times but nothing coalesced from his vagrant desires other than some healthy flirting and speculative innuendo. Sex was not the real reason for his journey this far southward, though the prospect of it would most likely do wonders for his accumulating tension and the pain he looked to be closely guarding in the little corner store lit with too bright fluorescent light. The donut shop was occupied by himself and a bag lady or at least a woman dressed like one. She was looking out the plate glass window and tapping the ashes of her cigarette into a creased soda pop can.

Was it only a week ago when he decided to pack up the remains of his existence two days before the expiration of his lease to try to find a job, a place, some friends in this queer and out of the way location? He wasn't sure about the specifics of time. It had felt like months that he had been uprooted and alone in this city of thousands. He had been kicking around the idea of leaving his dental practice and going back to school or freelancing the odd job market until he could satisfy his wanderlust and take up in an apartment. The daily routine of meeting strangers, learning their occupations and hobbies, then intimately fondling their most private and unique orifice left him with a dulled outlook on life. But teeth are bones and this was something he couldn't seem to get out of his head.

CLEOPATRA

The bag lady stepped out of the drugstore, fingers poking from of her one glove that she found sticking out of a mailbox on Franklin Street. She had managed to scrounge up enough change to buy some cigarettes and a candy bar— her dinner for the evening. Her existence was metered by the rising and falling of the sun and by the steady march of tourists along the streets. They seemed to pick up in numbers near the city's closing time. Her daily wandering was delineated by landmarks such as mailboxes, coffee houses with their intermittent, odd hours, Catholic churches that from time to time sponsored free meals, and parks and squares that occasionally had open-air festivals where there would be crowds preoccupied with buying trinkets and food. People who would almost always be

oblivious to the change and small bills that would find freedom in the uneventful moment of transaction from pocket to vendor or wallet to hand. These were the gestures of her sustenance. Trinkets and food were all people wanted anyway.

She mostly collected things. Aluminum cans and empty liquor bottles of course, always a dependable staple. Her resolute scanning of the ground found her such items as gold-plated charm bracelets, hotel keys, notes in cursive posted to doors and blown off, even compacts and baseball caps. She kept her treasures in a plastic shopping bag that she would hide outside the few businesses and shops in which she could find the courage to seek refuge. The glove she had found today was in perfect condition, only two fingers of it missing.

SHANGRI-LA

Sir Thomas Elroy, honorable Knight of the Round Table, clanked into Joe's Tavern on Paris Road amidst the din of a television broadcasting a basketball game. His princess had excused herself of his company to freshen up in the maids' room while he ordered two glasses of ale to keep the chemical festivities flowing in his brain. The dance that had come to a head had finally run into the wee hours and they made their departure before the city had closed down for good. They had an hour drive home for which he would have to remove his very expensive rented suit of armor and in which he was beginning to feel comfortable. The rush of isolation, anonymity, and power he was enjoying would also dwindle back into a stream of reality that would sink in after he finished his last glass of beer. His maid's dress had gotten quite stained while she danced and whirled her silks among the partygoers in the ball room. There was a treacherous cognac blotch in the shape of Africa near the frills about her waist which would probably cost them a pretty penny to remove. As she came back to the table, her eyes acknowledged the imperfection as well as his thought on the matter and she shrugged and shook a dash of salt into her beer. She sipped at her elixir and twirled the locks of her auburn curls between her fingers adorned with clear nail polish and plastic rings. She glanced at the digital clock blinking behind the bar and suggested that they begin their journey home. Sir Thomas agreed, attempting to check the hour by raising his forearm to observe his watch that for some reason he wore and could feel on his wrist. Although, he begged of his companion, he would need a shot of java before tackling the highway. She consented in expectation of the none too distant moment when she, the not quite virgin princess and her errant-knight, would soon be free from the ravages of the feast and could, with much clamor and strain, denude.

INSHALLAH

The single naked buttock of the light bulb illuminated Raymond's loft overlooking the triangular, iron-fenced park. His interior decorating was as sparse as the lighting: two movie posters he found in the garbage can in an alley and some photos torn from the newspaper, taped to the refrigerator. Along the walls painted white for nearly the fifteenth time, (each layer visible in the cracks around the window panes), and about the varnished wood floors, were stacks of encyclopedias that were his in the meantime of possible, but improbable, transaction. He had ten collections of Britannica to sell in a month. He also had a telephone at the foot of his futon and a box of Indian cigarettes that sported an effigy

of Ganeesh the elephant. Tonight, with nothing else to do, he would page through the telephone book in hopes of locating a few choice neighborhoods in which he could solicit come morning. The radio was turned on to an all-night talk show whose participants were discussing the fate of wooden roller coasters in the northeast. He cracked open one of the beautifully bound volumes and began reading about an endangered species he had never heard about: the narwhal.

PEGASUS

The mutt, half schnauzer/half unknown, ran from its owner at the sight and smell of a pretzel thrown to the ground on the other side of Canal street. Dragging its leash behind, it instinctively knew there were no cars coming, and bolted. It was hungry and this hunger was liberation. The pretzel even had some mustard dried in a blob on the plastic wrap it was enmeshed in, which the dog greedily licked up. It ate so fast that it vomited the meal three blocks down the street, but the dinner was gratifying nevertheless. The tags on its collar jingled as it traipsed down the street not knowing where it was going, just enjoying the sounds and odors of an area defiled by humans. There were the scents of piss in every sewer much like around the base of every tree in the park. There were more partially eaten morsels near garbage cans and empty containers of sweet and sour liquids on every street corner. A paradise for a highly evolved nose.

Where to go. Where did the stray cats it had seen prowling through the back yard sleep at night? Why were the streets wet when there wasn't the tang of rain's iodine in the air? And why were the rare clumps of grass and bushes in this part of the neighborhood locked in cages? Without a master to gesture the answers, it didn't know. It would have to read the subtle signs of abandon. A traffic light blinking red. Litter and leaves blowing at random intervals through the streets. A bus's breaks hissing with the release of air. The ringing of a bell down the street seemed to signal something as a human exited from the building. The lights inside the building lit the sidewalks and the scent of food wisped out. It must be someone's home.

The dog walked toward it, lured by its possibility and goaded by the strange sound of metal clanking on the pavement behind it, then voices. Stopping for a moment to look behind, it saw the silhouette of a human, but the shape was shining, looking like it was made from of the skin of a car. When it approached the light, it found a window with people inside. No couch, no carpet, no fireplace. There was a woman like the ones it saw sleeping in the alleys, a young human with its face in a big book, and near her, a dead human that the others ignored. The armored one with his mate had passed the dog with the woman making kissing noises at it. The bell of the door masked under the sound of metal on metal. The dog sat for a moment waiting for a gesture from any of them, smelled something good, scratched its ear, then, with a ringing of its collar, was gone.

Boarding the Train

Imagine a small town in Russia. Like many other small towns of Russia it is small, boring, and barely surviving. There is a railroad that connects the small town to a bigger town: a joyful ride of forest, forest, forest outside the windows for almost 400 miles. There are two trains that run between the small town and the bigger town: the “poor” train which is cheaper and slower, and the “rich” one — more expensive and less slow.

Boarding the train is a significant event in the small town, and the day routines are structured by the train’s arrivals and departures.

“Time to get up,” the mother would tell her children. “The poor train has arrived.”

Or the father would say:

“Time to have dinner: the rich train has already departed.”

Today the newly-wed couple is boarding the train. They arrive at the station in a wreck of a white car decorated with red and blue bands and flowers. A doll wearing a bridal veil sits on the bumper of the car, and two rings united in the manner of the Olympic rings are attached to the roof. The newly-weds are young, happy, and drunk. The bride, eighteen, is fresh and glowing, still wearing her bridal veil which looks slightly out of place with her warm coat and jeans. The groom, twenty, is boyishly handsome, talking, joking, laughing non-stop. They are so shamelessly happy that everyone looks at them and smiles. The bottle of champagne is opened, plastic containers with the leftovers from the reception dinner are placed right on the roof of the car, glasses are passed to relatives and friends who are seeing them off. They toast to the safety of their journey: his tipsy mother and father, her tearful mother, the best man, hungover, unshaven, hair disheveled, the bridesmaid who seems undecided whether she is envious or sorry for her friend. The train departs in fifteen minutes, and the bottle of champagne is empty at once, so the bottle of vodka is opened. One more toast to the journey: it is a long one. First, a night on the rich train to the bigger town, then an eight-hour flight to Moscow, then a three-hour charter flight to Kemer, Turkey. It is a wedding present from both his parents and her mom: a trip to Turkey. Everyone tried to talk them out of this outrageously expensive trip: going to Thailand or China from the Far East of Russia would have been easier and less expensive, but the bride wants to go to Turkey, and Turkey only, because in Moscow, that undisputable center of the Russian universe, everyone goes to the seaside in Turkey. Oh, it will be so much fun to spend their honeymoon in Kemer. The bridegroom said that he would go anywhere his baby-girl decides to go, and so they are traveling to Turkey — cumulatively over 24 hours of travel on different kinds of transportation to reach the bride’s idea of modern paradise.

Drinking on the train is not allowed, but if it is a little beer, and you are newly-weds, no one is going to fine you. They are in the compartment with four more passengers, and everyone toasts to their happy marriage. And the honeymoon which is going to be wonderful: they will be slightly hungover after the train and will sleep on the plane, then they will get some food and beer between planes in Moscow, and since on the charter flight it will be okay to drink, they will spend three glorious hours tasting the duty-free discoveries — champagne, Baileys, and tequila.

Boarding the train is the beginning of different kinds of epic journeys. The small town's hospital is so poor and so badly equipped that all pregnant women two weeks before they are due board the train and start their long journey towards the delivery — in the hospital of the bigger town. The official reason is to avoid complications. The ulterior motive is not to be responsible. There is no one responsible if the premature birth happens on the train too.

A heavily pregnant woman is boarding the train today. She is young, probably nineteen or twenty, but she is so pregnant and is already so exhausted that it makes her look older and more mature than her yet childless girlfriends who are seeing her off. She does not look happy: she has been told what to expect. It is not the painful inevitability of childbirth that scares her, but the endless two weeks of expectation — boring, dreary, gloomy. The lucky women of the bigger town will arrive a day or two before, and sometimes, lucky them, in labor, whereas she will share her room with the unhappy restless fellow victims of the public healthcare system. Her mind is uneasy: she is worried about her baby-boy, but even more so about her husband who didn't come to the station to see her off. He called and said that he had to stay at work that day. There was another accident with the machinery at the power plant. Second accident in a month. She is not so naïve, however: one of her girlfriends told her that there is a new employee at power plant: both beautiful and capable of drinking any of the male employees under the table. Clearly, her wildness and lack of restraint are irresistible for men. At least, her girls told her so. Most likely, the accident is a party at work with the new girl.

She sits on the train and her thoughts are heavy. What if her baby-boy was conceived when her husband was as always Friday night tipsy, Saturday night drunk, Sunday hangover treated with beer? He is not an alcoholic, no, but the communal male drinking is a tradition immune to destruction, no matter however hard women of the small town try to change that. Her mother was defeated in the battle with it, and many other mothers and wives were defeated. She can't possibly win.

It is hard to be an eight and a half month pregnant woman traveling alone on the train, and the only thought that cheers her up a little is the thought of her tiny baby-boy with his little hands and feet, his Daddy's dark hair and her blue eyes.

It is not easy to board the train, especially when one is traveling alone with an energetic ten-year-old. The woman carries two suitcases and at the same time tries to restrain her boy — a flash, a storm, a hurricane of a child. The car conductor is particularly malicious today: she doesn't let the woman's mother who is seeing her off to get inside the car, so the hapless travelers have to struggle with their suitcases in the narrow aisle between the compartments on their own. Not that her mother, not old by age but already an old woman, could be of big help — her health is shattered by worries. The woman pushes the suitcases under the berth, then tells the boy to sit still and hoping for the best, hurries outside to say final words of good-bye to her mother. She touches her mother's wet cheek and says:

“As soon as I am more or less settled, I'll get you out of here.”

Her mother wipes her eyes and answers:

“Yes, dear.”

“And if Alex asks, don't tell him where I went.”

“You still hope he’ll notice?”

The woman sighs.

“All right, mother, I have to go. Max is on his own in the compartment, and there are oil rig workers returning from their shift. I’ll call you when we arrive. Don’t cry, mother, everything is going to be fine.”

“Yes, dear, of course.” whispers her mother, and the handkerchief goes around the left eye, and then around the right eye, non-stop.

Oh, the woman wants everything to be fine badly, but she doesn’t believe it will be. Everything is going to be hard. Finding work will be hard for she has got only a distant learning degree — how she regrets now that she didn’t go to college. Rent will be high. The boy is ten — hyperactive and a lot of trouble at school: how she will manage him alone, she can’t imagine. Yet she is not the first and not the last woman looking for better life elsewhere, because in the small town there is nowhere to hide from your alcoholic ex-husband, boisterous abusive male in his early thirties, to whom the doctors tell that his body will be completely undone in five, or if he’s lucky, ten years.

Boarding the train is the hardest for elderly. The three steps one has to climb in order to get into the car are the steepest possible, and if one’s arthritis is raging, and the blood pressure keeps rising and rising, these three steps are one’s own personal Everest. One can climb but at one’s own risk. It doesn’t matter that this is the rich train and the tickets are more expensive. The car conductor might or might not help: it is a question of being in the mood, and not about providing proper customer service.

For the old woman who climbs these three steps the trip is both desired and unwanted. She is leaving the place where she spent all her life, where her parents and grandparents are buried, and yet she anticipates living with her daughter, her only child, pampering her grandchildren, the elder boy and the younger girl — tiny beautiful baby-girl. Both children look more like their mother, only that the boy has dark hair of his father, and the girl is blonde, a blue-eyed princess from the fairy-tale. Her grandchildren have a father, finally, a good man. Her daughter’s married life seems to be going well. A new beginning at her old age for the old woman looks promising, as long as she conquers those three steps.

Sometimes the train departure is a little bit delayed. This time the passengers are warned that an ambulance will transport a very sick man to the train, and the train will leave ten minutes later the scheduled time. Difficult medical cases are almost always sent to the bigger town’s hospital because the small town lacks specialists, equipment, and medicine. The ambulance doors open, male-nurses take out stretchers and start pushing them up the three steps into the car. The man on the stretchers looks pale, exhausted, and old. His lips are thin and bluish, his once ruddy and round face reminds a balloon with the air partly blown off, as layers of skins droop from the prominent cheekbones. The crowd recognizes the sick man and the whispering starts:

“Goodness, he looks so ill..”

“Who could’ve thought — a stroke! Not yet forty!”

“They say the stroke was triggered by some fast-developing cancer.”

“Everyone knows by what it was triggered.”

“Yes, he liked it a lot..”

“Poor man, such a long ride on the train and he is so sick. Is our town that poor that they can’t take him to the city in an emergency helicopter?”

“Have you seen the mayor’s new car?”

“Is there anyone to visit him in hospital there?”

“Not really. His parents died several years ago, and both of his wives left him.”

“Tough”

After a series of jerks and pulls which make the sick man grimace, the stretchers are finally inside the train, and the whispering subsides.

It is not true that there is no one to visit him in hospital. His first wife will come to see him. She used to love him so much. On her first visit to the ward she will be startled and shaken when she will find a ruin, a remnant of the old epoch, ugly and tired. Nothing is left of the handsome boy she married. In several weeks nothing will be left at all. She will be the one who closes his eyes and arranges his funeral.

Cycling the Strand

I was on a bike path in Los Angeles, when I decided that I did not like people. I swore an oath to detest them forever, and called it my misanthropic stand. What, exactly, is a misanthropic stand? Well, if I were a candidate for US President, engaged in a debate, and the moderator asked me where I stood on the people issue, I would respond: “The people issue? Well, frankly Ms. Ifill, I don’t give a damn.” Answering with a popular (if overused) movie quotation would elicit a laugh from the audience even as they were being damned, and simultaneously excuse me from utilizing a sensitive verb like hate, which seldom goes over well in a political context.

But this sense of misanthropic stand is easily understood. The more important meaning is a private one—one that I hesitate to share, as it could provoke certain legal actions against me. However, since I have already mentioned it, I might as well continue. The second meaning of misanthropic stand can be deduced from two simple statements: a.) There is a window, with a sill, in my kitchen, overlooking a street along which an astounding number of idiots stroll. b.) I am a flower enthusiast, and as such tend to keep four or five potted plants on said sill at all times.

Knowing, as you do, my views on people, the conclusion should be elementary—you couldn’t send Timon into the rafters of the Parthenon with a lot of heavy pottery and expect him to behave, could you? So I stand weekly (usually on a Saturday when the idiots are happiest) at my kitchen window, waiting for the perfect ass to pass, and when he does, I stealthily dislodge a potted poppy or portulaca and proceed to dance a gleeful jig as it crashes on and about his unsuspecting head.

While my little diversion may initially seem insensitive, it is in fact quite beneficial. You see, this minor atrocity is a necessary pressure release, without which my baneful behavior would undoubtedly double if not treble, eventually threatening the entire California coastline with whirlwind effusions of cataclysmic nihilism. Periodic steam relief allows me to remain an oily smooth misanthropic machine, whose tempered loathing is both roborant and paregoric, concurrently steeling and numbing me against the repulsive masses. All I ask is to be allowed my weekly cranium cracking. With the sacrifice of a few, many are saved.

But, as you may have guessed, I have not always been so. It was on the aforementioned day, while cycling the strand, that my faith in humanity (meager as it was) suffered a fatal blow. And I’ve been dropping dahlias ever since. But you grow impatient. Shall he, you ask, continue to allow the circumstances of this infamous day to go unmentioned in favor of these interminable streams of indulgent logorrhea? To which I answer, no indeed. For while I have been known to defenestrate the occasional delphinium (that foppish blue larkspur who annually parades his grandiloquence), I have striven since youth to maintain a high level of rhetorical discipline. So then, in as plain a prose as I can at this time muster, I shall forthwith relate the events of that fateful day, which in their combined

effect served to permanently sequester my emotional self from the hoards of revolting bipeds that inhabit this coastal city.

I had mounted my bicycle that languid afternoon not for the purpose of improving my cardiovascular conditioning, or to achieve some particular destination, but merely to slough off the weight of my ideas through rapid movement and physical exertion. My budding dialectic had sparred viciously with Leibniz all day, and my temples had begun to throb with each Teutonic clout. I hoped by cycling to evade the philosopher's relentless attacks, if only for an hour or two.

And so I took to the strand where Tuscan villas abut pseudo-Victorian gingerbreads, and streamlined Decos neighbor jagged postmoderns, all of this conglomerate disparity maniacally fronting the vast contemplative sameness of the Pacific. Along I pedaled, anxious and agitated in the glare of the architectural *mélange*, looking seaward for comfort, gulping salt air into my wheezy lungs. Soon my heart rate escalated to the level of a pinned bunny rabbit, and my atrophied muscles crimped up for lack of oxygen. A sad state for a man of twenty-four, and yet I was infinitely pleased. Leibniz had not dealt me a thump in nearly fifteen minutes, and the oppressive mantle of all general thought (save a vague fear of pending thrombosis) lay discarded in the sand, tossed aside like a knight's panoply after battle.

All around me the throng thronged. Children on skateboards darted between wobbly cyclists; men and women jogged in unison; beach bound surfers sprinted barefoot across the hot pavement. Together we baked in the same brilliant sun, beneath the same azure canopy, beside the same tumbling waves. We were as one in our quest for corporeal (and in my case phrenic) wellness. I felt as if something was opening up inside of me, slowly unfurling like phlox petals in spring.

The perambulous population was strangely appealing. A fellow on roller-skates seemed almost embraceable despite his unseemly rolls of back fat. An elderly woman in leopard-print leotards was now charming, and of unimpeachable taste. Even the little imp who was at that moment depositing Sahara-esque quantities of sand down the back of his sister's bathing suit was, in my eyes, no less than delightful. Ah, how wonderful was this varicolored pageant of humanity! If I were to start a Utopian community like Bronson Alcott, these lovely people would be the first I'd admit.

But then, just as I was about to invite everyone into the next juice bar for a round of sugar-free smoothies, a snarling cretin on a moped erupted into the strand. He was moving at a frightening velocity—a frothing, spandexed Jehu, whose flailing right arm seemed possessed of an imaginary horsewhip. Three rollerbladers were in his path—youngish men, sipping bottled water and chatting on phones. As Jehu barreled by, he fixed them with a furious glare, and roared: "ASSHOLES!"

Everyone on the strand suffered a terrible affright. Women swooned; men cursed; children cried. The abused rollerbladers collapsed in a mass of twisted legs and spinning wheels. As they attempted to extricate themselves, I approached with an offer of succor—a Samaritan gesture to which they responded in perfect chorus: "Fuck off,

dickhead.”

Well. With these three discourteous, not to mention inelegant, words, my fledgling utopia was duly crushed. Brook Farm? Fruitlands? What rot! I turned toward home in a state of horror, avoiding the gaze of each corrupted passerby. On one side of the strand, beach houses butted and clashed like angry beasts; on the other the ocean roiled up, spitting brackish foam at the discordant menagerie. On and on I rode, until my lungs begged respite. I pulled off the path, closed my eyes, and channeled Leibniz, trying to drive the nightmares away with hard logic.

After a lengthy contemplation of the principle of pre-established harmony, I opened my eyes to find myself ensconced in a cool, melancholy night. Vague voices trilled on the breeze and I followed them to a bar where people stood outside, smoking and laughing. One of them, a girl, noticed me and came over.

“Want a mint?” she asked, smiling.

“A what?” I said.

“A mint. You look like you could use a mint.”

She smiled on, although I had yet to reciprocate; and what’s more the smile was gracious, not forced or dripping with mock concern, the way most people approach the terminally sad. Was it possible that she not only sensed my despair, but also somehow understood it? Were we experiencing a moment of desolation empathy? Could there be some infinitesimal chance, a glint of hope, that the isolation of modern man might somehow be overcome? I stared into her silvery eyes and wondered if perhaps I had been terribly wrong all these years, if perhaps there truly was such a thing as I have heard called love.

“Yes,” I told her.

Yes I said yes I will have a mint Yes.

The girl placed the mint in my palm, blew me a kiss, and disappeared.

Now the mint was in my mouth and love was in my heart and I pedaled rapturously away, sucking and loving and loving and sucking and believing in everything all over again and promising that from that day forth I would be a new man and court friends and find love and live live live and so I pedaled faster and faster and soon I was home and lovemint drunk and I couldn’t think of anything to do but howl and spin and fall dizzily into my sheets, though before I did I thought I’d better wash the salt and sweat from my face and so I went into the bathroom and scrubbed and when I looked in the mirror to see how clean and new I was I saw only my lips and my mouth and my tongue and they were all bright bright shockingly bright blue.

Fully Committed

Let me see your knives. What? You didn't bring your knives? You were told to bring your knives. Be sure to bring them tomorrow. You will not be provided with knives.

This is where we keep the whites. They do not have your name on them. If you graduate to your own station, you will be given whites with your name on them. You must wear clean, fresh whites every day. It is up to you to turn in your soiled whites each night to Cicely. Cicely has not left the laundry room since the late nineties. If you do not bring her your soiled whites, you will not be provided with clean ones the next day.

This is your locker. Keep it locked. You are in between Kevin and Rachel. Kevin may steal things from your locker if you leave it open. Rachel only steals food, but she keeps it in her locker. She may hide some of it in yours if you leave it open. What? You didn't bring a lock? You were told to bring a small combination lock. Be sure to bring one tomorrow. You will not be provided with a lock.

Here is your recipe binder. You are expected to learn all of the recipes. They have been developed carefully over time. Each one is a precise work of beauty, involving many delicate ingredients. Do not deviate in any way from the recipes. No substitutions are allowed. The sauces have all been concocted by Emilio, the saucier. He and his dog, Popo, spent seven years rooting for truffles in Perugia before joining us. There are truffles in all of the sauces. Do not trip over Popo at the sauce station. Emilio does not speak English. You may only address him in Italian. What? You don't speak Italian? You will be expected to learn. On your own time. You will not be provided with Italian lessons.

This is the organic garden. We grow all our own fruits and vegetables. No produce from outside the garden is allowed in the restaurant. The gardener is James Delacroix. He is a vegetarian and only eats what he grows himself. He fertilizes the garden with his own waste. No other fertilizers are allowed. You may see James sleeping in the garden. He often stays the night to massage the salad greens, especially the arugula and the kale. You will be expected to massage them on his nights off. What? You don't know how to do that? You will be expected to learn. You will not be provided with kale-massage-therapy training.

This is the pastry-sculpting studio. Each dessert must be carefully constructed according to the strict specifications of Katarina, our pastry chef. She uses precise ratios derived from her experience as a Slovenian bridge architect. Be sure to cantilever the thin layers of phyllo dough, just so. No individual element of any dessert may be larger than a thimble. What? You were told to bring a thimble. It must be made of micro-filigreed gold mesh. Be sure to bring one tomorrow. You will not be provided with a thimble.

Here is where we make our honey. Actually, our bees make the honey, by regurgitating nectar. Schiffelbein is in charge of the bees. You will not be expected to make honey. Under no circumstances should you regurgitate anything while in the restaurant. You will, however, be expected to assist Schiffelbein in caring for the bees and collecting their vomit. Our bees only eat nectar from plants in James Delacroix's garden. If they fly off the property to pollinate, they are not allowed to return, and their honey is discarded. Everything we serve is local. While you are in our employ, you should not eat any food that comes from more than thirty miles away. What? You're allergic to bees? Schiffelbein says our honey can cure that. No, there has been no peer review. What? No, you will not

be provided with a beekeeping suit.

You will also help prepare the savory foams and emulsions for our special tasting menu of sustainable pine bark salads. No, of course we provide the pine bark. It is harvested by our house forester, Fritz. You will be expected to assist him. What? You brought your own chain saw? Whatever would possess you to do such a thing? No one told you to do that. We have very strict standards here. You will be provided with an appropriate chain saw. What kind of place do you think this is?

Something like the Blues

VI. You are lying in a cemetery.

Completely above ground.

Completely alive.

You are lying, in a cemetery, completely alive, next to a grave.

You are lying in a cemetery, completely above ground, next to your grave.

And before now, I hated the word "lying."

"What do you think?" you ask me.

I wait a moment. "You should cross your arms," I reply.

"I just wanted to see if I would fit."

I. I didn't want to go to the doctor's appointment with you.

Not because of you. Because I don't like doctors.

But you turned your eyes on me. "I need you," you said. And even though one of your eyes is bluer than the other one, I can't resist them.

So I went.

And now I know it's a good thing I did. Because if I hadn't, you'd have found out you were dying by yourself.

V. There is nothing worse than being told there's nothing you can do. I wonder if you know that.

The doctor said it, and I didn't believe it.

The second doctor said it, and I didn't believe it.

The doctor said it again, and I didn't believe it.

You said it, and I didn't want to believe it.

There is nothing you can do. Of course you know that.

There is nothing I can do.

Except drive.

Well, except guide your arms through all of your sweaters, and guide your buttons through all of your buttonholes, and guide you the insurmountable impossible sixty two steps across our floor. Except hold you up. Except hold you up, just to let you down. To let you down impossibly carefully. To let you down into the car. Into the passenger seat of your own car.

Drive, even though I didn't want to.

Know where I'm going, even though I didn't want to.

Keep from crying.

Get out of the car.

Even if I don't want to.

II. And if I'm being honest, I just don't want you to die.

VII. "Are you scared?"

I think you're probably asleep. But I still hold my breath in case you answer.

“No.”

I hold my breath some more. “No as in you never have been? Or no as in you aren’t anymore?”

I think you’re probably asleep.

“I’ve never.” You’re still breathing. “I’ve never had a reason to be.” Breathing or sleeping. “The Grim Reaper.” Breathing. “The Grim Reaper and I,” *breath*, “are just.”

Breath. “The Grim Reaper and I are just acquaintances.”

I can’t stop the tears anymore.

You can’t roll over anymore.

You can’t touch me anymore. You can’t feel me anymore. I can’t see you anymore.

But one of your eyes is greener than the other, and so I can’t stop.

“I love you.”

I think you’re probably asleep.

IV. “Let’s go to the cemetery.”

Your voice comes out of a silence longer than my ability to count.

But I never forgot what it sounded like.

I walk across the floor.

“Why?” I ask you. And I don’t know how I intended it to come out, but I didn’t intend it to come out like that. And I don’t know more than I know. And I forgot what my own voice sounded like.

“There’s just something I want to do.” You swallow.

I see the effort.

“Need to do.”

“There’s nothing more you can do.”

“Well.”

I walk across the floor.

I bend down to reach your eye level. I feel bigger and smaller than I have ever been, all at once. My hands rest on my legs. And I want to say something, but I don’t know what it is. So I just look.

One of your eyes is bluer than the other one.

I don’t know when my hands left my legs and found your hands.

You don’t know either.

“I need this. And I need you.”

One of your eyes is bluer than the other one, and because of it, I can’t resist them.

I walk across the floor. “Okay,” I hear myself breathe. I turn off the alarm clock.

III.v. I know there’s nothing more I can do. But you are quiet, and one of your eyes is different than the other one, and I just want to give you everything. I just want to do every thing.

I just want to do something.

So I pick up the alarm clock.

III. Our home looks nothing like our home anymore. And I should know, because I was the one who tore it to pieces.

I was the one who moved and bartered and broke all the furniture to make way for the hospital bed I’m not supposed to sleep in. I was the one who rearranged and

calculated inches, to make room for you and for this. I was the one who wrote about every time we touched in case it turned out to be the last. I was the one who did everything I could, even when I knew there was nothing more I could do.

Even when I knew you'd be leaving soon.

VIII. I call for you even when I know you've already left.

X. My phone rings at four oh two in the morning.

But it isn't you.

So I don't pick it up.

III.vi. I want to do everything, but giving you my days doesn't give you any more of your own. I want to do everything, but I keep knocking into the bed I sleep in even though I'm not supposed to. I want to do everything, but I can't stop the tears. I want to do everything, but everything I can do isn't enough.

I want to do every thing, but I can't stop.

XI. You are lying in a cemetery.

NONFICTION

Ashes and File Cabinets

*

In bed, in the early morning, my mind is roiling with the idea of an arc, a vantage point, a changing perspective. Much like as a child, when I lay on the ground facing the sky and, almost imperceptibly, experienced the earth move. At first, I thought the clouds were drifting by, but then I felt the movement in my body, in my back against the hard ground. I realized then that the earth was rotating beneath me. I embodied for the first time, though I knew it peripherally or learned it in school; that Planet Earth rotates on its axis, the very reason for sunrise and sunset. The sun not moving as you once thought and had always thought, but the earth and I am stuck to it, plastered against it by gravity. Only this pure science of gravitational pull held me in place. So that movement, that sudden realization, was a kind of arc; a line of perspective that I did not know before, but came to know and it altered me. The straight line of a life arcs a little, bends, and you are ever so slightly shaped differently, like the curvature of the earth. Thus is this arc of learning over a lifetime, sudden small realizations that continue to shape you.

*

Dorothy Parker died on June 7, 1967 of a heart attack at the age of 73. In her will, she bequeathed her estate to the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Foundation. Following King's death, her estate was passed on to the NAACP. Her executor, Lillian Hellman, bitterly but unsuccessfully contested this disposition. Her ashes remained unclaimed in various places, including her attorney Paul O'Dwyer's filing cabinet, for approximately 17 years.

*

I get out of bed to write about this arc of perspective, and over a first cup of tea read Rebecca Solnit's end of 2013 post on tomdispatch.com, "The Arc of Justice and The Long Run." She writes, "Sometimes cause and effect are centuries apart, sometimes Martin Luther King's arc of the moral universe that bends toward justice is so long few see its curve; sometimes hope lies not in looking forward but backward to study the line of that arc." The synchronicity of these two facts: that Solnit mentions Martin Luther King, and that Dorothy Parker's estate was bequeathed to the Martin Luther King Foundation is not lost on me. Does literally everything have a connection?

*

Philip Levine reads a poem by Ellen Bass in a podcast on Sound Cloud. Something about slaughtering Cornish hens as a part of a job she once had. Levine tells the host that he once commented to a student in night class, "You never write about what you do all day." The student replied, "Who wants to talk shop?" Neither do I, and yet, file cabinets have filled my days for over forty years. I have lived and continue to live among file cabinets.

*

I look up the word "synchronous" to assure my uncertain self that the word is properly used in this context and find a second alternative web definition: "(of a satellite or its

orbit) making or denoting an orbit around the earth or another celestial body in which one revolution is completed in the period taken for the body to rotate about its axis.” I am suddenly that child on the ground again, in my Oklahoma backyard, with the feel of the earth rotating on its axis against my back. So far, I feel I am spinning in circles on some axis that is about to be revealed; an arc of understanding that is trying to take shape.

*

I spent the better part of a week in a dialogue with self and pretty much abandoned the idea of writing about ashes and file cabinets. It’s stupid, my inner voice drummed. The potential connections between ashes and file cabinets seemed remote at best. I had also become hyperaware that my mind circles around three main themes: 1) a son, 2) aging, and 3) death. I am striving to pry myself out of these three deep ruts.

*

And, I find that I am increasingly grumpy. If Joan Didion can be dark and grumpy in “Blue Nights,” and of course she had every reason, having lost a husband and a daughter, then I can. If Loren Eiseley can be curmudgeonly in “All the Strange Hours,” then I can. Voices change. Regardless of how we wrote or may have then written, the fact is, we are writing now and our voices have changed. So much loss factors in at some point in your life that you can, with little provocation, get grumpy. It is at this vantage point that eternal optimism pisses you off. Until, that is, it happily, sometimes for brief moments, it seeps back in.

*

A friend posts a photo of me on Facebook. I do not know that woman, whom she identifies as me, depicted in the photograph; I truly do not recognize her. The face I see in the mirror is not the face I see in the photo. Do we really lie to ourselves to that degree; believe that things have not changed all that much, when there has been a sea change? When did I become so vain? Joan and I both know that there is no faking it, that one gets pissed off at getting old.

*

The thought of Dorothy Parker’s ashes languishing in a file cabinet now has me obsessed with the subject of the disposition of ashes. Once my attention turns to this, all manner of articles appear before me about ashes, even when I am not intently searching for them, as if the collective unconscious of all writers, or all the cremated individuals that have gone before, are handing me this information on a silver platter.

*

Mental_floss.com lists ten amazing things your ashes can do after you die, as if they continue to do productive work. These include being encapsulated in an hourglass, made into a vinyl record, crafted into a diamond, stuffed into a teddy bear, mixed into the ink for a tattoo or the paint for a portrait, designed into pencils, used as bonding for stained glass shards or even made into fireworks. I think the latter interests me most. How exciting to think of becoming a huge pyrotechnic display, as one final pissed off act of defiance, full of electric blue and red explosions against the night sky.

*

My friend Bev's ashes are still waiting to be spread. She always wanted her ashes to be mixed with wild flower seeds and spread in a Sierra mountain meadow. Because her son had stopped speaking to her, she asked her grandson, Jason, a cop in Sacramento, to scatter her ashes when she died. He had agreed, but my last email from him a few months ago said he hadn't received her ashes from the crematorium and wasn't sure if she had been cremated yet. I was in shock picturing Bev's cold, blue body, or stark white, lying on a slab in a vault somewhere, waiting for someone to pay attention. I didn't understand this. Too much time had passed. Why was he not checking on the status of her ashes? How long can it take to cremate a body? I could see that it might be really easy just to let this deed, a person's last request, go undone. Is she in a beautiful urn waiting, or in a cardboard box to be retrieved?

*

The productive work of ashes brings me back to Philip Levine's comment on writing about what we do all day. What I have done all day for four decades could be boiled down to accounting for all manner of things, animate and inanimate, tangible and intangible: things like crude oil, crops, cattle, cat food, and crepes. Yes, I picked all "c" words. There are so many to choose from I could almost select any letter of the alphabet. In each case, I had many file cabinets around me, full of fat manila folders on a multitude of subjects, those that would have been pertinent at the time, like budgets, cash flows and projections of future potential outcomes. It occurs to me that for all those years, I have been either accounting for past results or projecting future results, which seems to me now to be uniquely aligned with the particular writing that I do, looking back or looking forward, which basically and noticeably leaves out today.

*

CNN.com suggests ten bizarre places for cremation ashes: for example, they can be made into a comic book or held in a Pringles can. Edward Headrick, the inventor of the Frisbee, asked his children to mix his ashes into the plastic for a next batch of Frisbees. He thought it would be funny to end up on someone's roof. Keith Richards snorted a line of his dad's ashes mixed "with a little bit of blow." And one of my favorites: you can be mixed into concrete and made into a permanent reef, providing a habitat for fish and other marine life for the current price of \$3,995.

*

A friend Mary's ashes were in a plastic bag in a rather large cardboard box. A cross-country running coach at Roosevelt, Mary had just made the seemingly sensible decision to buy a scooter to ride back and forth to school, but her partner, Dinah, was concerned. A few weeks later, a young man driving a green VW ran a red light at First Avenue and Sierra Street, broadsiding her as she pulled out in front of him. Her body slammed against his hood and windshield; then her head against the pavement as she landed. Through everyone's grief, including mine, all I could think of was the young driver, just a boy really, and how this accident would unalterably change his life forever, much like an arc, a bending away from what once was. Carloads of her friends caravanned up to a favorite wooded glade close to Shaver, across a concrete bridge, next to a raging creek. We all sat on rocks or on the ground around the cardboard box that contained Mary's ashes and

chatted about our favorite memories of her. Then Dinah and their close friends began to fling Mary's ashes to the wind. Some of the ashes invariably landed back on them, in their hair and clothes, into their eyes and faces. Adjusting their stance, they flung her into the sun, high above their heads, away from them.

*

According to intenseexperiences.com, Disneyland is one of the most popular places for the spreading of cremated remains, especially the Haunted Mansion attraction, even though it is a misdemeanor to do so on private property. The practice is so prevalent the Disneyland custodial department purchased special equipment, vacuums with HEPA filters, to clean up the tiny ashes and small fragments of bone. If workers or performers notice a scattering, they're supposed to call a special hotline and use the code, "HEPA cleanup."

*

I have spent the past six months, off and on, cleaning out file cabinets in my office at work, preparing for my approaching retirement. Several drawers are now empty. I am hanging onto a pile of old "Month at a Glance" calendars spanning the past fifteen years, a habit I started decades ago, when for some odd reason, usually a threatened or pending lawsuit, I needed to know where I had been on a particular date and at a specific time. For example, what day was it that I and a small group of co-workers had lunch at the Vintage Press with a board member whom we would eventually have to sue for breach of contract? In a prior job, I was asked in a deposition the details of another lunch, and I felt proud in being able to recall with particularity that the two subjects had each ordered the meatloaf.

*

My father is buried in a traditional grave outside the town of Atwood in Southeastern Oklahoma. The small cemetery is on a rise and if I stand next to my father's rose-stone grave, I can almost see the farm and the dog pens where he collapsed one morning shoveling dog poop. My brother had just told him the day before that he was quitting the greyhound business they'd run together. A girl in South Dakota had broken my brother's heart. He's sixty-one now. His hair is silver grey and last year, he almost died of a heart attack. He miraculously survived, and still eats massive amounts of sushi and fried chicken, drinks the finest scotch whiskey and avoids exercise.

*

A few years ago, PG&E emptied Shaver Lake to repair the dam. Unable to stop thinking about it, I drove to Shaver to observe something not likely to happen again in my lifetime. Emptied of millions of gallons of water, its artifacts and tan mud gleamed, and small ponds remained at the deepest parts. Signs said "No Trespassing." I wanted to walk on it, defying police, the Gods and ancient tribes. I wanted to trespass right then on its moon-like surface, among the antiquities, rusty cans and exposed tree stumps, jutting out like jagged headstones. According to the tired and overworked forest ranger on duty, the dam would be lined with epoxy to prevent leaks, strong enough to last another eighty years. The small crowd that had gathered peppered him with questions: "Where did the water go? When will it return? How will it be refilled?" He answered from rain and snow, then snowmelt and runoff from the Sierras. He turned and whistled a shrill whistle at a couple

who had already made it out to the center of the lakebed, mild outlaws now barred from ever returning. I was sad for Shaver Lake at that moment, seeing her muddy, soggy bottom exposed to the sun, to the cold night stars, its small intermittent ponds mirroring back the moon.

*

A few months before Bev died we had lunch in her room at a residential home in Roseville. I basically got her drunk, unintentionally. We munched on quiche and grapes, sipping on my homemade Kier Royales, her favorite. I'd searched Fresno for the currant liquor, knowing it would only take a few drops for each glass, and used her old style Waterford champagne glasses she had given to me when she was tossing, or ridding herself, of everything; when she had descended into, and never really came out of, her "I don't give a shit anymore" phase. We toasted to good times. She giggled as the fine bubbles coursed through the veins of her ninety pound body and said, "This is fun." Though she no longer had much use for food, she asked for a second piece of quiche. As I carried her paper plate to the kitchen microwave, I passed a lone old man in one of the living room recliners. He pointed to a clump of birthday balloons tied to the back of one of the kitchen chairs and said, "I have no idea what those are for." On a day a few weeks later, Bev began to cough at that same kitchen table. As she got up and started with her walker towards her bedroom, her heart stopped.

*

Last April, I invited my son to a reading at school, something he had suggested over a Starbucks' iced tea. As I drove away from Starbucks that day, I wondered if this would actually happen, that I would ask and he would accept. A few weeks before his birthday, I mustered up the courage and texted an invitation. He immediately replied, "Sure, see you there." Neither of us cancelled, as we frequently did, and found ourselves actually sitting in the Alice Peters Auditorium for an MFA reading. I introduced him to professors and MFA colleagues who worked to suppress their surprise at finally seeing this estranged son I had written so much about. After the reading, hugging each other good bye, I took a bold next step and invited him to dinner for his birthday. His uncomfortable verbal dodges led me want to let him off the hook, "That's OK, some other time."

*

So what is the arc of perspective that I observe from this vantage point? What currently rocks my world as profoundly as my childhood epiphany that the earth rotated on its axis and around the sun? Alas, it comes to this: Dorothy Parker's ashes in that file cabinet. This is not how I want this story to end. Not in a lament. Not in a file cabinet. Not on a library shelf at the Henry Madden Library. Not with words unspoken that need to be said. It is this arc, this sudden perception of circumstances seemingly unalterable, that I strive to unwind; that I know full well might be impossible to unwind.

Women and Ghosts

In the final scene of *Romeo and Juliet*, the heroine takes a sleeping pill and is eventually left for dead.¹

1. Night. There is nothing but cold air and little white flowers. Somewhere else, the man I love is dead. Another man who looks like him is staring at me. He gets up. He reads out loud from a book that I don't understand. He starts doing shots. He tells me that my mind is broken. Maybe I was born that way. When I was born, he says, the gunshots misfired. They went straight through the television. Broken glass everywhere. He tells me that when I speak, no one else can hear me. I sit there and listen. I stare at his mouth. God have mercy on me. What would my mother think.

In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Ophelia, one of the few female characters in the play, surrounds herself with water and is left for **dead**.²

2. We are in the desert. Neither one of us can sleep. He keeps asking why I live alone. I want to say, *Why are you here*. I want to say, *Stop*. He says we should travel to New Hampshire or Wyoming, but I don't want to ruin another landscape. Beyond the window, small white flowers bare their arms. The moon floats out of her dress. He says that the dead are just the ones who choose not to speak. He talks and talks. Months later he will try to phone me. He calls and calls, but I never pick up.

Although Shakespeare insists Cleopatra died happily, both of her handmaids are also left for dead.³

3. I never asked him what he was trying to do. On the very last night, he said to the other girls, *It would be funny. I want to get her drunk.* I looked out the window. I pretended to think. But my mind was empty. He tried to convince me he hadn't touched my glass. Somewhere else, the man I loved was dead. Now his face is on television. He is wearing his best suit. And the dial is broken. I can't shut it off. That's when I close the door. One more time I try to think: *What was he doing. He would have left me for dead.* I cannot believe I was ever younger than this. Or that I once believed in churches, those small white candles I left behind in the sand.

In *Titus Andronicus*, Lavinia is left for **dead**⁴ once the protagonist has snapped her neck.

4. I take the first flight back. That's when the air grows colder. Flocks of geese make their way over my wooden bed. The same bells are still ringing. He writes to me every day until I say I forgive him. Why is there so much language, so many words I didn't want. The television is talking to itself about the weather. He calls again. He blacks out my letter and mails it to me. I fold the envelope. I set it on the table. My mouth is empty. There is nothing but cold weather coming. Then night. The television keeps flashing. I close my eyes. For a minute the room is quiet.

Othello ends when Desdemona is smothered and left for dead.⁵

5. The trees hold out their empty hands. My mother calls, but I can barely speak. I stutter and try to explain. When did language grow hostile towards me. When did memory become that empty room, that dark cabinet. I straighten the table. I wash the dishes. If I act like time passes, I will believe that the mind moves on. Right now I am standing in the desert. He is leaning against the doorframe. He is smiling. I remember thinking, *Who is this man*. I say to myself, *I thought I knew*. My white dress is too perfect. If I can act like a girl who just fell in love. Maybe then I will be able to speak.

Dark Windows Will Come Early

There is too much beauty in the world. That morning, I stared out at endless mountains, thinking that the landscape would never look the way I felt as I moved through it.

I had traveled one thousand and thirty two miles to see a man I barely knew. We met briefly the year before in a small, eastern city known for its horses.

When I saw him again, nothing glittered or swooned. Something was off with the weight of his mouth. I wanted to say this, but I could barely speak.

*

*Count your grey hairs
Count your chigger bites
Count your pills...*

When one speaks, how does one begin? Most would say arithmetic is the simplest place to start. One window, two cracked plates, an empty glass. It is indeed virtuous to claim objectivity. No one wants to be misled by rhetoric, or worse, affect.

The young woman shouting in the corridor is promptly escorted out by security. The mathematician parts his lips. He clears his throat to speak.

*

*When I snap my fingers
You will wake in a dear yet unfamiliar place
You will scarcely remember your travail...*

When he told me I was lonely, I tried to forget.

He would remind me of the weather: *You must feel terribly alone.*

One night he told me about himself: *I imagine you must feel different from the people who aren't lonely.*

I felt my bones crack open, but I couldn't see the light coming through.

*

*Some nights I sleep with my dress on. My teeth
are small and even...*

*I suggest all courage is artificial
Her sister did not fail
Noses amuse us and hers not less so
Short fair smart
utterly unsure of herself*

Most of us find a way to speak eventually.

The same young woman is shouting again in the same corridor. Her hair covers her eyes. The guards twist her statements into questions: *You wouldn't what. What is the name of the gentleman. What are you doing.*

But where does this courage come from?

In poetry, one doesn't speak, but rather, one is spoken through. Homer's *The Odyssey* begins with an invocation to the muses. He is merely their instrument, an opening through which the white thread is unspooled.

Jack Spicer didn't believe in muses, but he did believe in martians. His poems were radio transmissions from other worlds, incessantly crackling in languages and voices other than his own.

C.D. Wright offered herself as a conduit, allowing those who are voiceless speak through her.

In *Tribute to Freud*, H.D. writes that it is the unconscious mind that speaks through the poet. Memory is a locked box, and poetry the little silver key.

*

Night. The same pristine field. I want to use language so badly, but I don't know how.

*

*I was old enough
to know love is blind as the old woman
pulled down the hall by her dog.
Their guns leaned against the wall
but men in those days kept themselves armed
in the dark and rain.
I thought of a burning bush.*

And so the domestic objects, debris, and violence of the world around us crystallize in the mind. They are distilled into a single image, which goes up in flames.

So what are we left with?

*

It was a definite rupture in the zone in which they interpreted with decreasing frequency..

I look down at my feet. All that's left is an old radio, a broken shot glass. The walk upstairs begins slowly. The smallest step is always the one covered in ice.

*

Violence doesn't always involve the physical body.

He would look out at the water, watching the rain fall. He always held his phone as though it were a small child.

This is the only reason I travel, he said. To have an affair.

I had left the room to change into a bathing suit. But what does it mean to be present.

I felt a numbness in my fingertips, and when I placed my hand in his, the warmth was gone.

*

*a bed is left open to a mirror
a mirror gazes long and hard at a bed*

*light fingers the house with its own acoustics
one of them writes this down*

one has paper

Violence doesn't always involve the physical body. He told me I was alone because I was lonely. *Stop it, he said, and you'll meet someone else.*

I pretended I didn't know about his wife.

*

How many times did I cross a threshold?

One morning the rain wouldn't stop. The mail came later than it usually did. He had sent back the poem I wrote for him in a white envelope.

When I unfolded it, I saw what he had written. My words buried beneath his. He had told me that I was no longer, and never had been _____.

*

To be loved is remarkable and rare. To be voiceless is fairly commonplace.

*

When violence does involve the physical body, it is often in the naming of it.

For weeks I chose silence, not wanting to harm what seemed like a delicate man. I stood in the garden, watching lilies open their perfect mouths.

Darling..

I didn't mean...

I believe you are misunderstanding me...

There is too much beauty in the world.

So I begin gathering my things to go. My white dress a hothouse flower fading in the tremendous heat.

*

How does one re-enter language?

In *Black Sun*, Julia Kristeva describes mourning as a loss of language. Words no longer correspond to things in the world: a coffee cup, a broken latch, a small printed receipt from the airline ticket counter.

We reenter language by taking it apart. By dismantling it, piece by piece.

When we see the bones crack open, we also the light coming through.

*

*How many threads have I broken with my teeth. How many times
have I looked at the stars and felt ill...*

Throughout *Steal Away*, C.D. Wright inhabits the voices of others, even those we might deem glaringly insignificant.

It is through the juxtaposition of voices, texts, and types of language that she creates friction.

I had always wondered what the simple act of striking sparks could do. For instance, can the light be caught in a jar. Could it be made to power a blow-dryer. Will the sparks ever be visible outside this body, these rooms.

Heat has been known to generate fires. For C.D. Wright, it is the spark of one voice against another that allows her words to shine through more clearly.

Voices often exist in contrast with one another. It is for this reason that the jeweler places the diamond against black velvet. He takes his measurements and leaves in silence.

In the deserts of New Mexico, heat abounds, and so does fire. I place the dead flowers on the pile of brush. I open my mouth to speak.



**HIGH SCHOOL
DOSSIER**

The title is rendered in a bold, black, distressed font with a speckled texture. It is set against a white background with a teal-colored jagged line graphic that weaves through the letters. The line starts on the left, goes up and right, then down and right, then up and right, then down and right, and finally up and right.

Alone in White

When I'm surrounded by white noise,
when my brain drips empty
and my bruises stain the skin
that covers my vacancy,
I feel the most alone

I'm in a constant trance of walls and eyes.
No marrow for my bones. A hollowness to my being.
No arrow to pierce through cerebral catacombs.

Sitting under an absence of starlight,
cicadas chirp their song of the great unknown.
The glow of each still breathing
soul fades to shadow,
and still we look on.

Sestina Cut Short: A Tainted Girl's Plea

I too was once peeled to my bones
by those who I always forgave.
Scraped to the brain nerves down
in the depths of cerebral brightness.
I was a road, cracked and broken,
with leaves laced around its street signs.

To find the immoral, there are many signs:
An eternal quivering of tainted bones.
A solid heart that palpitates until broken,
and lungs that gulp and gasp for forgiveness.
You will not find luster brighter
than the flicker felt from going down.

They will pretend not to stoop down
to the level of those who sign
their innocence in blood. Bright
ones will know better than to bone
where they eat, but will ask to be forgiven
when hymens aren't the only things broken.

I refuse to be porcelain that's easily broken.
Why should I want to be down
to earth when I feel so celestial? I forgive
the stars for not knowing that fire is a sign
of ignition, and they are torching the bones
of humans, when they shine too bright.

I am a moon with luminosity so bright
the woods would bow as if broken.
I am an archaeologist of my own bones.
I'm on a roller coaster that only goes down.
I'm a yellow caution: wet floor sign
without the floor, and I don't need forgiveness.

Requiem



Simplicity



A House, Not a Home

Declan O'Brien had done a bad thing. In the past three hours he had broken two laws—Laws 8.14 and 1590.2 to be exact. Instead of entering the next available house after work, he had knowingly walked by hundreds of green lights to reach the outskirts of The City. To make matters worse, it was after nine o'clock and The Police could arrest him at a moment's notice for being out past curfew. But no matter: he had a goal in mind. Continuing down the deserted street, O'Brien counted exactly seventy-one steps from the corner before he turned to his right and looked up.

33 Millbury Lane stared back at him. His childhood home. It was of little importance that in place of the white picket fence and red bricks from his memory was the exact same two-story gray house that lined the entire City. Everything about it was right. The tree with the split trunk in the front lawn was there (albeit significantly taller), the distant smell of smoke wafted in from the ammunitions factory, and even the—
—the red light? O'Brien blinked at the sight. In devising his entire plan to disobey The Government by returning to his original home, it had never occurred to him that it could be occupied. In that exact moment as O'Brien stood awkwardly on the front step and contemplated his next course of action, the thirty-something year old man inside looked up and coincidentally met his eye through the window. In a flash, the father was out of his chair and on the other side of the front door, leaving his wife and two children behind at the dining table.

"What the hell are you doing here?" the man demanded.

"I could ask you the exact same question," O'Brien retorted. "This is MY house."

"Citizen, can't you see? There no longer is any YOUR house or MY house. That's the whole point of "INEQUALITY IS INTOLERABLE." Haven't you been listening to the slogans?"

The slogans the man was referring to were the ones instituted by The Government when it took over after the collapse of the old capitalist system in 2074 from sustained inequality. As part of a new, stricter system of order, the central idea of "EQUITY THROUGH EQUALITY" permeated all aspects of life. The idea was that if all citizens in The City were the same, the evils of competition and competitive advantage would be completely eradicated. In reality, this meant that O'Brien's life was filled with the exactly same things as everyone else's: the man staring back at him, although likely a good twenty years younger, wore the same clothes, the same shoes, and had the same haircut as him. They probably even used the same toothpaste.

In response, O'Brien reached into his inside jacket pocket and curled his fingers around a cold, slim piece of metal. Drawing out a twisted piece of steel with a microchip embedded in the center of the bow, he thrust it in the direction of the man. "Well, if it's all the same to you, why can't you just take your stupid Key elsewhere? I used to live here, after all!"

The man pointed to the red light over the doorknob with exasperation and shouted back, “Doesn’t first come first served mean anything to you? People like you who get overly attached are reason why the system was invented in the first place!”

The principle of The Key was actually quite simple. It was specifically designed by scientists in The Government to make the process of returning home as equal as possible. Even those with lower intelligences could understand it without trouble because they only needed to remember two simple things: red means occupied, green means vacant. An individual would walk past the identical two-story, square cement structures until he or she came to the first one with a green light over the doorknob. By slipping a unique Government-issued Key into the slot, the house would automatically be filled with the individual’s personal belongings exactly as they had been left that morning. Likewise, removing it erased everything inside; all items would disappear until the next time The Key was inserted elsewhere. O’Brien had taken a huge risk that day by rebelling against the housing system: deliberately defying the established order in pursuit of a whim would most likely land him a life sentence in prison. Or death.

With that last outburst, the men’s raised voices caught the attention of the woman inside. Her anxious voice soon floated to the doorway. “Honey, is everything all right? Is it time to donate more clothing to the handicapped already? Wasn’t there a collection just last week?”

A petite lady with sand-colored hair soon appeared behind her husband in the doorway. Upon taking in the O’Brien’s appearance, she let out a quick, “Oh thank God.” Her face showed visible relief upon seeing that their unannounced visitor was in fact not a Government official come to remove all signs of advantage in their house. (She had gotten terribly attached to their new TV set lately, even though strictly speaking it was two inches larger than Law 367 allowed).

“Citizen, why don’t you come in and stay for a meal?” the woman offered graciously, clearly still thankful she would not be punished for the possession of illegal goods.

Her husband flashed her an expression of shock. “Absolutely not. He’s a trespasser and a probably a vagrant, too. Who knows what sort of danger he could bring in?”

At that, O’Brien had to defend himself. “I’ll have you know that I’m no vagrant! I’m only here to see my old childhood home!”

“Dear, you know if he wanders on the street The Police will find him sooner or later. Then we’ll be responsible for perpetuating inequality by making him stay outside while we sit here and enjoy our dinner. We have no choice—the law is the law.”

The man slowly but grudgingly accepted the truth. After all, he had grown up never knowing anything other than the idea that The Government—no matter how many new laws it passed—was always right. “Alright citizen, come in,” he said as he made way in the cement doorway for O’Brien to pass.

Once inside, O'Brien saw that the interior of this family's house was quite similar to all others in The City. Peeking into the bedroom on the right, he spotted the same Government-issued stiff mattress, navy blanket, and steel bedside table that he had. The radio set rested ominously next to the bed, a constant reminder that The Police were always within earshot. The only slight differences from his own Key-programmed house were in the positioning of the furniture, the color of the carpet, and of course the family members inside.

"Here you go," smiled the woman as she handed him a plate of food after he sat down at the dinner table. "You must be hungry after such a long walk." She glanced meaningfully at his charcoal gray briefcase customary to all workers in city center. In reality, there was nothing in the briefcase. All jobs were simply filler positions created by The Government to fulfill the everlasting idea that "EVERYBODY IS EQUAL." His coworkers were always repeating the eleven words that had been ingrained in their heads: "same job, same pay, same uniform equals no reason for discontent."

O'Brien glanced down at his plate. The portion of peas and potatoes was exactly the same as everyone else's. The amount of milk in each glass was exactly the same. Even the folding of the napkins was identical. The whole situation was utterly revolting. A strong surge of emotion heated him from the inside. Once again he was reminded of why he had decided to escape his rut of a routine and seek out his unique childhood home in the first place. Was it that hard to find something different, something *individual*?

"Mom, I saw them building another floor on the big Government building today," said one of the little girls sitting on the left side of the table. Her pigtails and green shirt were identical to that of her sister who was right next to her, even though they must have been at least three years apart in age.

"Yes, sweetie. You know they add a story to the original 175 floors each year to symbolize undying power. Isn't it great how equality is making our Government grow?"

"Absolutely. I think they're at 217 now. Sometimes I wonder what people did back in the old days." The husband shuddered at the thought of such barbarism. "Can you even imagine some people getting fat and plump on their riches while others starve in the streets?"

All this family talk made O'Brien feel extremely old and outdated. Clearly the couple had been born after the Restoration and never even had memories of an older time where individuality was actually valued. In fact, at forty-nine years old, it was unusual for O'Brien to still be living alone in The City. By the time most adults reached his age, they had either found someone to marry or been paired off by The Government in husband-and-wife arrangements deemed most beneficial for continuing the human species in terms of equality. This meant the smart women married the less intelligent men and the good-looking men married the ugly women, or vice versa. That way the children would turn out to be completely average. He glanced again at the two girls sitting at the table: the only extraordinary thing about them was how absolutely ordinary they were.

The sound of incessant beeping sliced suddenly through the air and interrupted O'Brien's thoughts. The family immediately stopped talking as the crackle of static signaled an incoming radio announcement. A few seconds later, the voice of a Government broadcaster filled the house.

“Good evening citizens. We bring to you today an important message from The Government. It has recently come to our attention that certain people have been pocketing additional groceries from the city stores. As a result, a mandatory food rationing system will be instituted beginning tomorrow. Each citizen will be limited to two pounds of flour, a half-pound of cheese, one bushel of apples, five stalks of celery...”

“How lovely!” exclaimed the woman. “Food shopping will now be easier than ever!” And with that, O'Brien had had enough of all the Government-imposed restrictions, regulations, and rations. With a determined grunt he pushed back his chair, threw down his napkin, and strode forcibly out the front door.

As he left, he heard the man calling after him, “But wait! You haven't finished your peas yet! We mustn't let them go to waste—everyone must consume their share!”

The look on O'Brien's face was positively defiant as he turned around on the front step and slammed the door shut. After a slight moment of hesitation, he curled his slender fingers around the metal of the man's Key. He gave it a sharp jerk. Enough of their mindless small talk! Enough of their identical pigtail-bobbing children! Enough of their perfectly measured portions! An explosion of color flared before his eyes as he pulled: a white light flashed; the signal above the doorknob changed from red to green. A few seconds after the smoke cleared, he took a tentative step forward and peered in the window. The family inside had vanished; they had been erased along with their belongings when the Key became unplugged. Left in their place was only the empty shell of a house and four barren walls. “That's what they get for being so blind to the truth,” O'Brien thought.

He let the man's Key drop lifelessly to the ground as he took his own out of his pocket. A poisonous idea had entered his mind, and there was no way to escape it. He hadn't been in his childhood home ever since that fateful day The Police knocked on the door and forcibly handed him and his mother a Key, instructing them to “get out and find a green light.” That was a long time ago—before The Government had added the last forty stories to its building and before equality slogans had been plastered on every street corner. His mother was dead now. The Police had killed her for giving a pregnant coworker a piece of her bread at lunch when O'Brien was sixteen. The last words they told her before she died were, “Redistribution is unnecessary when society is equitable to begin with.”

Slowly he slid his Key into the empty slot and held his breath for what would come next. Another explosion? The arrival of The Police? Instant death upon entry? Would anything even be inside???

In fact, nothing happened except the customary “ding” as the light switched from green to red. With an immense sigh of relief, O'Brien twisted the knob and walked through the front door. Instead of his standard Government-furnished house, he was somewhere

different.

Home.

A glitch in the system! A way past The Government's impenetrable defenses! He had found it at last!

The first thing he noticed was the smell of homemade mac and cheese that permeated the living room (baked with extra cheddar exactly like how his mom used to make it). As he glanced around, he realized that everything was exactly how he had left it that unfortunate day forty years ago: the family portrait still hung crookedly above the mantel, the third step on the stairs still creaked, and the bottom of the right curtain was still singed from the time he accidentally held a birthday candle too close to the fabric. Looking in the garbage, O'Brien saw the remnants of last night's (or four decades ago's?) dinner. "Even the junk is still here," he marveled.

A sharp knock at the front door brought him back to his senses. O'Brien peered out the window and felt his heart sink at the sight of two uniformed Police officials dressed in the customary navy blue of The Government. They had come to make him pay for his crimes, just as they had come for his mother.

"Sir, what are you do—"

His question was cut off mid-sentence when he saw the official reach for the Key still stuck in the door and grasp it firmly with a wicked smile. A sense of panic set in as O'Brien realized what was about to happen.

"Wait!" he yelled as he pulled open the front door and jumped out onto the front step. "We can negotiate!"

"Citizen, murder is non-negotiable. Our City is built upon the principles of equity, and killing another family is the ultimate assertion of power over someone else. I'm afraid there is no other alternative."

The official tightened his grip on The Key and pulled it out with a jerk. In front of O'Brien's very eyes the flash of white light went off again as his childhood home vanished—mac and cheese, creaky step, garbage and all. A moment later when he turned back around, he saw the receding figures of The Police already well down the street, the dark outline of his Key in their hand. A gradual sinking sensation overcame him as the gravity of the situation set in. The Police had taken away his Key, the only connection he had to his identity in a City of "EQUITY THROUGH EQUALITY." Without it, he would be nothing but absolutely the same as everybody else.

Declan O'Brien had done a bad thing. A very bad thing indeed.

The Ebola in the Room

Why is it that when I type in google “how to get,”
it assumes I am a worried westerner
afraid of the disease less likely to kill me
than driving home after school?

When I chomp down on a roast beef sandwich
and proceed to swallow the gnawed cow,
shouldn't I be worried that my epiglottis
might get stage fright
letting the meat
slide down my airway,
into my lungs,
and kill me?

The world is grey like the tough wrinkled
skin of an elephant in Africa,
grey like the suit of Kim Jong Un,
grey like the rockets used on the people of Palestine,
grey like the camera used to record beheadings by ISIS,
grey like my sweater made in Taiwan,
grey like the crusted and battered lungs of a smoker
who will pass away long before one of my high school's
football players contracts Ebola.

Family Dinner

There was something in his eyes tonight
they say, as if the wine wasn't the culprit.

Papa was drunk, his laughter and tears caught,
choking in the fold of a borrowed napkin.

Is this contentment
When he yells again and again of his daughter's charms?

Let's toast again, to thirty year anniversaries,
to matches on Tinder and films without funds.

The glasses crash,
and champagne bubbles back to life.

Everything's funny now, but she's not smiling.
He puts his arm around her and sighs.
We're lucky, we're lucky.

Skin

We change our skin every morning.
Like cars with oil, it runs dry, blackens,
browns, the warrior organ.

When the sun tips into Africa, the white skin
of zebras is bisected by black rods
that stick up from their hides.

In the Gaza strip at daybreak, bombs singe skin
off little boys who ride bikes
without handlebars through the skinny streets.

On the shoreline, tanner's skin is peeled off in layers,
and in the South, it divides Texas and Mexico
from fusing together, becoming one skin.

Maybe we should get rid of our skin,
rip it off all our newly-borns for the dawn of
an age of just bone and flesh, stomachs

popping out from underneath livers,
hearts thumping against rib cages, and lay
all our love, all our cards, on war-pierced tables.

But we will wear our skin
and put on new skin
with every bloody rising sun,

and forever be like the snakes
who crouch in the underbrush, and hiss,
and shed.

Metropolis II

I am at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art with Dad and Julie. We are observing a modern piece, Chris Burden's "Metropolis II," a jumbling mishmash of mini-plastic cars driving on mini-plastic roads that weave in disarray between mini-plastic buildings. The cars are zipping and zooming and the buzzing doesn't stop, and they pop out of the underneath roads and zip and zoom on the highways and the byways that are stacked one on top of the other and the buzzing doesn't stop.

"Hm, in-ter-es-ting." Julie speaks very slowly, articulating carefully.

"Must be more than six-feet high," Dad muses, arching his eyebrows and raising his chin coolly. I observe a group of intellectuals through the chaos. "Life is in disarray," one yells over the buzz. My Dad hears them. "Would Michelangelo think this is art?" he considers. "Not a David. What's the point?"

I scan "Metropolis II" for a sign. The six-lane highway is all blocked up again. But wait, it's moving now, and wait. There is something. It moves through the makeshift citadel like a fly, no, more graceful—like a dancer. It zips by us for the first time and I see it: a little silver car, indistinct in all but the way it catches the illumination of the room and reflects it into the eyes of the onlookers. It is humble and baffling at the same time, going 'round and 'round and never getting to the place it needs to be, needing to speed that fast only to arrive once again on highway number three. Poor plastic person. As the tiny silver car speeds past a second time, I am suddenly reminded of something, and I think back to earlier that day when we passed by another art piece, also Chris Burden's, called "Urban Light." It is two-hundred and two cast-iron streetlamps set up in columns for people to walk through and gaze up at. As we walked past them, they stood there silent, motionless—a collection of giants discussing with soundless words. For a moment I considered weaving in between them—there were no ropes to prohibit it. I would have liked, I think, to run through the columns of lamppost, with no clear direction, re-crossing my path and retracing my steps and having my light summer sweater trail after me, backtracking and spinning and spinning in endless circles around the iron.

At "Metropolis II" spectators get antsy. I lean over the railing. I stretch my neck like a turtle. My skin strains, my eyes shift and my pupils dilate. The silver car comes around the bend for a third time. I stare as it passes. In an instant, the car is a silver-plated peony, blooming, white petals opening up, letting me in, and I see an old Joe running late from work who is listening to his nagging wife on the phone who is spitting out ingredients he must find at the grocery store for her legendary Shepherd's pie. They are having company tonight, the in-laws. "Alright, black pepper, garlic. Don't we have

Worcestershire sauce? Rosemary, tomato paste. How much ground lamb?" He is swerving out on highway number three, six tiers up, turns onto a side street. One plastic hand is clamped to the wheel, the other to his ear, yelling and spitting, grumbling, oscillating

between sidewalk and divider. “Kosher salt? Ok, ok! Fine. Fine. And how many eggs? Oh, just the yokes? Well why does that matter to me?” And his little silver car is reflecting the light, and the rays are reflecting and converging into one extraordinary compilation of imagination, flying at the speed of light right into my eye.

There is a place I go to in my dreams that I forget about when I wake up. Life, indeed, is in disarray. It is a spectacular display of spontaneity. Silver cars speed by, traffic, noise, a labyrinth of lampposts casting light from above, and spectators get antsy.

The intellectuals leave. Dad and Julie begin to walk away. They call for me and I turn to go, but when I pivot on my heels I am in a cast-iron forest of lampposts. It is nighttime and cool and they are lighting up the ground for me. And now I am running through the columns with no clear direction. I am recrossing my path and retracing my steps and having my light summer sweater trail after me.

I must be dreaming. I am in a nomadic silver car. Destination: nowhere in particular. I wrap a plastic hand around the iron. I will be late for dinner. I lean out from the pole and look up to the dazzling light and now I am spinning and spinning and spinning...

To the Woods

If I had a little sister I'd take her with me into the woods. She would sit in the back seat dangling her legs, triggering her purple light-up sneakers, nibbling on salt and vinegar chips, and whistling out the window while the world flew by. She would yell out all the car colors and read every sign we sped by on the highway, beaming with pride as she announced that Wendy's had a special on chicken sandwiches, or that gas was down to \$3.19. She would be named Sophie, or some another name that would make you want to pinch her nose. The dogs would start barking behind her as green leaves emerged in the windows, and she would yell back at them like a little drill sergeant. As we rolled up to the trail entrance, she would snap off her seatbelt and fly out of the minivan, tripping on the step, her soft palms catching her fall on the cool gray of the parking lot. Wiping her wet cheeks, she would spring back up and clap her reddened fingers together, letting the embedded black pebbles litter the ground. And if I had a sister, she would take off too fast down the path, skipping and collecting perfectly crisp fall leaves as she went, her ringlets of brown hair flowing in the breeze behind her.

I have a tank of gas in my car that can take me to the woods, past the McMansions and smelly landscape trucks of this neighborhood and into the trees. If I had a sister I'd take her with me.

You Don't Have to Decide

Venus was a girl and she went to high school. She was in love. She was in love with two different people who were different and were boys. One was named Evander, or 'Evan' for short. The other was named Phillip.

Evan was hot, Venus thought. But Phillip was so cute!

Prom was coming up, but who should Venus ask to prom if she liked both of the guys?

Evan was tall and handsome. He played lacrosse and Venus was pretty sure he was captain, or at least a co-captain. He was a good lacrosse player. Sometimes, Venus would go see the games but that's only because her friend Nike's little sister was on the lacrosse team. Her friend Nike's little sister was named Terra and Terra was even better than Evan.

This made Venus worried. What if Terra was to kick Evan off as being co-captain? There were only 2 co-captains: Evan and Lysander.

That can't happen! Venus decreed with a smile and decided to plot something to ensure that Evan would always be the captain.

This was worrying, since Terra was strong and pretty and popular and everyone on the team loved her. She dated literally everyone on the team—except for Lysander and Evan. Venus thought it was because it would be mega Awk if she dated them and then usurped their captainship. Still, this made Venus nervous. What if Terra really did like Evan?! And what if he liked her back? This was NOT okay.

Venus asked Nike to ask Terra to find out if Terra liked Evan. But then Nike had to go to Rome for the rest of the year because of her Brown University high school study abroad program so Nike was no help. Silly Nike!

Venus was now worried. Terra was so popular!

Phillip was cute and tall, too; Venus only really liked tall guys. Just like Evan. Phillip and Evan were both super smart except Phillip was smarter. Which was good, Venus deduced, if she wanted financial stability in the future. She was sure that Evan could give her that as well but Phillip had straight A's in all of his Honors and AP classes.

But then Phillip went away on a Brown University high school study abroad program which made Venus sad since he went to California to save some manatee which would almost certainly be extinct due to global warming and rising sea levels. Silly Phillip!

But then Phillip came back because of the plague in California, no more planes to California! Cali was quarantined. *That was good,* deduced Venus, *since Phillip was back!*

Venus Facebook messaged Phillip, asking questions about the state of California. Venus said it was for the school newspaper, which it was. But it was also a chance to get closer to Phillip, and Venus loved that very much.

Phillip told her lots of things, and Venus did the same. They became good friends, except they could never see each other since they had no classes together. So they would hang out after school and eventually, Venus convinced Phillip to join the newspaper! *Success!*, decreed Venus with a triumphant simile! Oops, she meant smile!

But while she grew close to Phillip, her feelings for Evan would refuse to subside. Time to take matters into her own hands!

Venus asked Arachne to ask Terra to the prom that was coming up in a few weeks. She hoped that this would find out Terra's true intention.

Arachne reported back a few weeks later: Terra was smart. Terra preferred only romantic relationships; Terra didn't like sex. Terra had dated everyone on the team—except for Lysander and Evan, the only guys on the team.

Oops! Said Venus, *I forgot that Terra is homosexual.* Silly Venus!

Now is my chance, decreed Venus, *to make a move on Evan!*

She asked Evan for an interview for the newspaper (it was a fake interview) but it worked! He invited her to go see a movie and then they got ice cream and ran across the town.

Phillip was jealous of Evan.

Evan, after finding out how close Phillip was to Venus, was jealous of Phillip.

Venus was jealous of Nike, who no doubt was so happy to have been accepted Early Decision to Brown.

Nike was jealous of nobody.

Terra was jealous of Nike, because Terra was only accepted Early Action to Amherst.

Arachne just didn't care.

Senior Prom was still coming up and Venus was so nervous—who should she ask??

Evan and Phillip confronted Venus and both said: "Pick me! Choose me!"

Venus was confused. Venus was nervous. Venus was worried.

Venus made a decision.

“I decide to not decide,” said Venus, hugging both Evan **AND** Phillip. “I choose both.”

Evan and Phillip hugged Venus back and then they went to prom and lived happily ever after.

*

Nike went to Brown. Arachne went to Brown. Phillip went to Brown. Evan went to Brown. Achilles went to Brown. Everyone went to Brown.

Except Terra.

And Venus, but she doesn't count since she transferred to Brown after community college.

**

A funny thing happened on the way to prom, concludes Venus with a big smile. Phillip, Evan, and I saw Arachne snogging Terra! I just **KNEW** they would be a great match for each other; that's why I had Arachne ask Terra to the prom. I should play matchmaker more often—after all, I am named after the Goddess of Love & Justice!

No, it's just love, says Phillip and Evan, both sighing heavily.

Oiiyy come here you!, says Venus as she attacks them both with her lips, as all three of them fall into the backseat of her 2015 Honda Odyssey minivan, laughing all the while.

It was good, Venus thought.

How to Get Your Favorite Ice Cream from Your Dad

I'm sitting in the frigid living room, huddled up on the couch, underneath my Dad's sweatshirt. It's too large for me to wear, and it's too large for him to wear, so we just use it as a makeshift blanket. My Dad is gone; he went out to the bar with his buddies to go get drunk and to drink away the pain of being unemployed. Kinda stupid if you ask me, but I'll live.

With the thick sweatshirt covering me, I'm able to keep warm, for now at least. Why is the room so cold? It's not even winter! It's autumn for crying out loud! Mother Nature needs to really reconsider the climates of each of her seasons. Maybe I could send her a letter? What's her address?

The TV is on, showing a basketball game between the Giants and the Yankees. The Giants are winning, I think. Or was it the Yankees? Whichever one has the red Devil logo. I don't really care much for sports. I'm literally too lazy to move five feet and get the controller off the reclining chair and turn it off. Bleh. Effort.

I'm playing Flappy Bird on my iPhone 5S, but the stupid bird keeps dying. My high score? Oh...three points. Yes, I know I'm bad, thank you for reminding me, but not everyone can be the best at everything they do, right? So there!

My bird hits the protruding pole from the ground in the game and falls to the ground, dead.

I hate birds.

I notice movement from the corner of my vision; I look up, and I'm met face to face with a black...flying....object...thing?

Oh, and it's coming right at me.

"AHHEEE!" I launch myself off the couch and across the room (but not before I make sure I have my iPhone and my comfy blanket with me). I hit the floor and bang my arm into the TV (stupid new technology, preventing people from hurtling themselves across rooms!).

I look up at the...thing...flying around in small circles. I get a look at it. My heart is beating fast. It's black and it kinda looks like a bird. Or maybe it's a bat?

OH GOD WHAT IF IT HAS RABIES.

Wait. Can birds have rabies? But I thought that maybe it was a bat? Can bats have rabies?

Before I think of what to do, it hurls itself at me, probably intent on infecting me! I must protect myself!

I hold up my blanket, dropping my iPhone (a sad sacrifice). It sees my impenetrable defensive system and veers off its path of destruction. I throw the blanket at the bat... bird... thing, in hopes of trapping it. But it's too fast and my blanket is too slow, limited by the natural law of gravity. Curses!

The dark creature turns around and launches itself at me again. I turn around and grab something off of the table to protect me. I pick up a wooden object; is it a stick? Maybe I can poke its eyes out!

No. It's my dad's ceremonial family cross.

Shit.

The bat races at me, like a demon from Hell. Maybe this will work?

"The power of Christ compels me!" I yell as I brandish the cross in front of me, swinging it back and forth and all around like some kind of holy weapon.

The demon sees this and flies off, and I take this chance to sprint away (It's not fleeing. It's a tactical retreat) to my room. I lock the door in a frenzy of panic and sit down on the bed, hysterical.

I lost my dearest blanket and my beloved iPhone 5S in the long, hard war that lasted all of the last 5 minutes. The going was tough, morale was low, forces were dwindled, and the supplies might not make it through the winter. But I would move on and conquer this demonic being from the Other Side and become the victor!

But, I was going to need some help...

"Hello?"

"OMG Dad I need your help like right now it's a bat bird demon thing that's flying around in the house and attacking innocent people like me and iPhone 5S and Blanket and I know they aren't people but they have feelings like people too right so anyway I need you to come home right now and help win this war and take down our enemy please come back home right now please please please please!!!"

Was I hyperventilating?

"Umm...I'll be right....there?"

"Thank you thank you thank you! ByeEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!"

"Um. Right. Yeah. Bye?"

Ten long minutes later and my Father returned home and confronted the evil demon, conquering it and sending it back to its rightful place in the Underworld (he captured it with a paper towel and released it outside). He told me it was just a bat, but how could I trust him? He went out drinking! He could be under the influence! He doesn't know anything. It was definitely a demon. I mean, did you see the way it was repelled by the holy, divine power of the cross? Its hellish energies were overcome by the power of love and justice!

My Dad, feeling sympathetic to the harsh battle I went through, drove to the store and got me my favorite ice cream: chocolate and vanilla swirl, topped by rainbow sprinkles.

And that's how you get your Dad to get you some ice cream. Well, kinda. I would not recommend doing it again. Unless you like being attacked by otherworldly demons sent by Satan himself. If so, then go right ahead. But as for me, I'm good.

Nuclear Power

My whole life people have asked me
if I was born premature
the truth is
I came into the world only two days too early
with wings creased flat against my back
and rice paper skin.
Born the color of Saturn's summer
sucked right into the gravitational pull
nobody would tell me about
until after
the atrophy;
nobody told me
that a ring is the only thing that makes a girl big enough
to be seen
from far away.

Surely there must be some being
who cares solely for
all the smallest things:
hummingbirds, electron clouds, seed pearls,
the beginnings of a spindly girl
with a body spun out of spider's silk;
the most integral parts of Pointillism.

Ornithology

I.

Mother birds throw up what they eat
to nourish their young.
The reflection I flush down the toilet is distorted
but I swallow the haze of spindly legs and crooked wings--
tolerate the insects in my esophagus,
because we all have someone we want to feed.
Fourteen, hollow-boned and listless,
I have not yet bled.
I mistake this for a sign I am safe.

II.

My ribs feel like a small host of sparrows,
sharp and trilling,
cringing away from the cumbersome sun.
Overexposure is never picturesque.
I convince myself
the cold still doesn't bother me enough
to be the first of my kind to consider migration.

I scrunch my eyes shut in the early hours of the morning,
sure that I hear the light rap of god's knuckles against my hip bones
in this hollow house.
My bed seems bigger than before.

III.

I am an apparition of absolute zero.
Tracing the tessellated tile grout,
I can't remember the last time I kept up
with the way unclean things converge.

IV.

I did not ask him
to love me and love me
until he was also empty,
behind closed doors and an open notebook again.
But when he cries in the night and calls out my name
instead of shutting my eyes again,
bracing myself for the fall
before flight—
mouths open
waiting to be filled.

Personality Divide



Before and After Photographs

Whenever I speak to old friends, I speak
the same way I used to. They have moved on.

Sex is all I ever get caught upon. Yesterday,
in a basement, we were flooded. I tried
my hardest

not to be selfish. I cannot tell if I am,
because when I kiss I can tell
how our bodies connect and separate
and I am aware of the balance in the stars,
in the selves that we create without trying.

But when I am in love and apart, there
is nothing but You, the someone enveloping what
could be mutualism, but I am a
parasitic boy of legal age to buy cigarettes
and scratch offs. Why do we assign an
age, where we are permitted to begin

to wreck ourselves? I've been smashing
the glass menageries inside my psyche
for years; the cops don't care. *Shit,*
they say, *don't get too close to that one.*
And no one ever could.

Howl

for High Point Regional High School, and Allen Ginsberg- highest apologies.

I saw the worst minds of past generations spill inaccurate prophecies like cheap alcohol,
claiming high school would prove itself to be the best years of our lives
to children who could never believe them:
who walked in on parents shooting heroin,
who smoked themselves to sleep due to paranoid insomnia,
who slipped schizophrenic between the sheets with lovers who threatened to kill
themselves,
who mopped up their girlfriend's blood,
who couldn't eat for months and vomited half-meals into toilet bowls, which they thought
to be half-
empty,
who were told every day, from the first day of kindergarten, that they would break the law
who finally broke the law and were brutalized for being criminals and not people,
who were pulled over for driving too slowly, and ticketed for driving too black,
who listened to punk to get by, only to find its corpse in tatters near a Hot Topic,
who emptied themselves onto paper and were told they could never live with it,
who were sodomized and then told they shouldn't have worn lipstick that night,
who were abused by Adderall, Xanax, Ambien, Vicodin, and then scrutinized for abusing
them,
who stole their parent's gin so their father couldn't drive drunk anymore,
who brought lighters to school to light candles for dead friends, then expelled for bringing
them,
who fucked people they didn't love because the television told them to,
who sucked down Diabetes soda because it was the only lunch offered,
who watched their neighbors carry guns that their untreated sons would bullet-wound
classmates with,
who carried crumbs of weed in their pockets and were sent to juvenile hall for *being
dangerous*,
who were sold complacency and directed to ask, "Is this going to be on the test?"
who wept when close friends stabbed parents for crack money,
who were given crack money instead of attention,
who were labeled *attention whore* for wearing cut clothes and asking for help,
who skinny-dipped and were slut-shamed for melding with nature,
who got pregnant because they loved somebody in a world with imperfect people and
imperfect
condoms,
who discussed books in classes they cared about and had no one to eat lunch with
afterward,
who saw father's faces in caskets and cursed them, for making them look up to something
with cancer,

who laminated fake I.D.s to buy tickets to concerts for bands meant for youth,
who filed into lines that they heard were intended for them, then gassed in Nazi showers,
who got caught fucking someone who cared about them, then abandoned by family that
 didn't,
who falsely believed that the same someone wanted to be with them for more than a week,
who needed to kick the shit out of a freshman to prove they belonged, then bawled back at
 home,
 pondering how cruel a rock he could prove Earth to be,
who cut slivers of cocaine with credit cards they never needed to forget something they
 did,
who woke up four years too late to realize that their dreams were nightmares,
who detested, yet resigned themselves to, the fact that a suburb hovered in their hearts,
who, friendless, longed to hop freights,
who found freight-hopping aspirations comatose in the hospital, and, fearful, pulled the
 plug,
who kissed and screwed and dug and wrote and sang and strummed and broke and played
 and desired,
 desire, desire, desire, desired, and thus, crawled up a noose, hung themselves bluntly,
 and never
 knew they would be mourned in the morning by anyone who knew their face and
 how it moved,
 vibrant and dimpled with potential,
and who ended it, thinking it would never cease, and never saw it, ultimately, thankfully,
 finally cease.

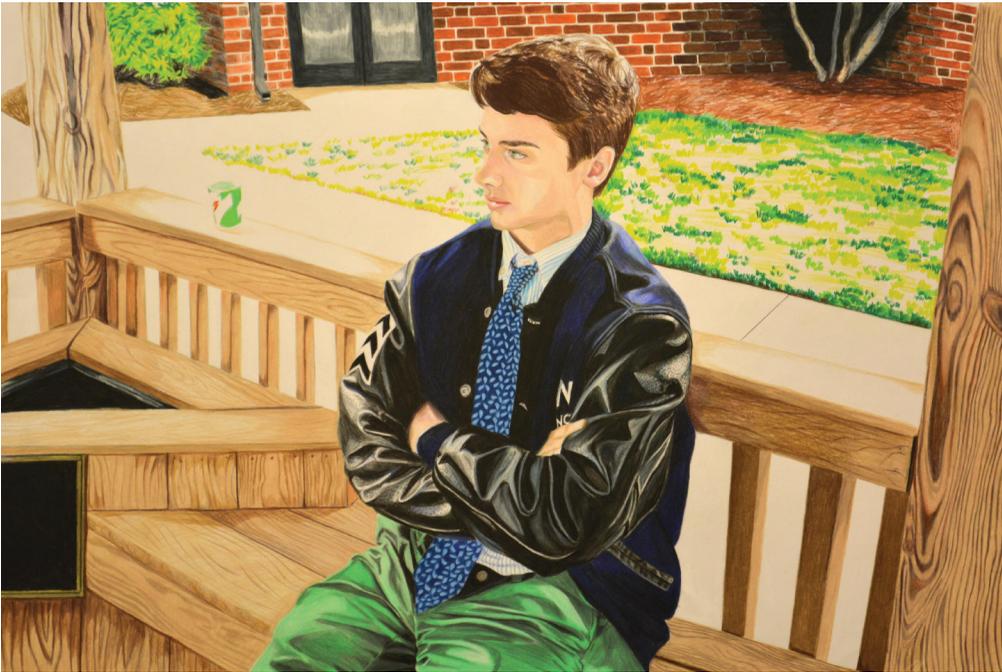
JT in Nikes



Sam in Clown Face



Wes



Creampuff

The atomic bomb is juvenile.
It peels off your skin and roasts you
from the inside out,
gamma particles tearing your viscera
into abstract art. Some anvils
need to be dropped, but some anvils
carry the weight of a temper tantrum
in the NICU: the atomic bomb
peels off your skin,
it roasts you alive,
it tears your entrails into building blocks
your son will use to learn
his ABCs. It is a child's toy.
My tongue is a roadblock
on the way to Nagasaki;
my throat is a French dessert.
You grab it and it pops in your hand,
white cream coating the creases
in your palm and the gaps
beneath your fingernails.
This is the truth.
You rinse your hands
with Dove soap, the kind that isn't actually soap,
and blow bubbles between your fingers.

Things That Make Me Angry

Mornings.

(The rest of the day, also, but without as good a justification.)

Everything between the years 2008-2011
(middle school was bad for everyone, really)
but especially Sarah Holden.

My sisters, which my mother says is normal for my age.

Republicans.

Libertarians, the kind you can find a dime a dozen of
on the streets of San Francisco,
the kind that think they're so clever
as they discuss Ayn Rand and blow rings of smoke into the marijuana-flavored air.

Owls, when their cooing wakes me up,
my alarm clock, when it doesn't.

That hideous puke-green mold I found
growing on my sandwich as soon as I was about to eat it;
the lack of money in my pocket preventing me from buying a replacement.

(too much, *you're too much*,)
Too green eyes and too sharp collarbones,

It's going to be okay
when it isn't.

Hives

Because she was sick, and in that place, I walked her through it. Her blood ran blue, drawing railroad tracks down her forearms. She coughed phlegm into my hands like a bucket. That was alright; I'm down on my knees most of the day, scrubbing dirt from the ground she walks on.

This is how it started: Charles Foster Kane, whispering "Rosebud" as his life gives way. I was no sled, and she was no newspaper entrepreneur, but she rode me and left me as soon as she could walk on her own. Her steps were never steady, bowlegged with bones that could break under the slightest pressure. I stayed close behind, but she didn't notice. I held her hand and led her to the maple trees. Her knees sunk into fertile soil, seeds implanting themselves into her pores, and I knew they'd sprout by springtime.

It continued past adolescence, when the cones in her retinas started to fail and she could only see in black and white. I swarmed her like a worker bee, kept her from tripping over cracks in the pavement, watched without comment when she curled up in a stranger's warmth for comfort. Scars decorated her back in an intricate connect-the-dot puzzle. I connected them with dry erase markers while she slept, but all they made was a kind of abstract labyrinth, and I wiped the ink off before I could get lost in the corners. She had forgotten me when I started to slip through the cracks. I was invisible to her colorblind glimpses, but I hid underneath miles of sedimentary crust just in case.

Tree sap fills her with euphoric contemplation, the way that a child feels while watching maggots eat away at roadkill. I can't blame her. Maple syrup falls from her tear ducts when she looks at the sun too hard. Exterminators come to her house and shoot pesticides into the air vents, so I breathe oxygen into her trachea and try to ignore the acid in her breath.

Boldly Gone

The room smells like damp wood, even though it hasn't rained in what might be an eternity. Sweat sticks my shirt to the back of my neck. I pull on the collar, try to increase my breathing space, and search for somewhere with enough room to stretch my legs out. It's past midnight already, but the incessant chattering hasn't stopped. I stand up, crack my back, and mumble that I'll be in the bathroom.

My own group is still on the computer, which looks like it may have been the very ENIAC first designed to crack Nazi codes, but I'd long since given up on pretending that I understand the program they're using. It's complicated, with a lot of drop-down menus and numbers. Tatyana takes control easily: she's homeschooled, so I imagine it's been ingrained in her. Chloe is more like me, hanging in the back and trying to fill out the lab worksheet before we have to go back to the dorms. I check for cell phone signal while I squat on the toilet, pants still on. There is none.

When I force myself out, it's 1:03 a.m., which is approximately three and a half hours past my usual bedtime. I'm used to this, now. Jetlag has a nasty habit of changing sleep routines: Palo Alto is three hours behind Upper Saddle River, anyway, so I'm technically not up that much later. Raci is from Wisconsin, with bags under her eyes the size of Saturn's rings—which, coincidentally, we're currently trying to digitally enhance. "I think we need more of the blue filter," Tatyana says. She's leaning over Trevor the way a fly might hover above a sandwich, ready to strike as soon as the opportunity arises.

"Yeah, well, I'll get around to that as soon as you stop breathing on my neck," he replies, shifting his shoulders to form more of a barrier between Tatyana and the computer. Trevor is from Wisconsin, too, but not the same area as Raci. He's older than the rest of us; we're high school-aged, willingly taking summer classes for whatever reasons, while he needs to fulfill an astronomy credit for his college. I haven't bothered to ask about the details.

This is so not what I signed up for, I contemplate. Maybe it's my own fault for deciding to take a class solely based on an infatuation with the likes of *Star Trek* and *The X-Files*, as it turns out that there's a reason for the "physics" in "astrophysics," and I've never done too well in subjects that use numbers and letters interchangeably. The equations on the whiteboard seem to be taunting me, and I'm reminded again that it is definitely too late for this.

"USS Enterprise, your time is up," Dr. Beck announces. I jump from my seat, which isn't a seat so much as my backpack, seeing as it's a cramped room with two working computers and five unbroken chairs. A third computer remains forlornly between the other two, but unlike them, it has given in to its old age; accompanying it is a wobbly stool which everyone keeps eyeing but no one is brave enough to test out.

Tatyana breathes loudly through her nose, and I can almost hear her pulse accelerate.

“Save the file,” she tells Trevor, her voice clipped.

“Sure thing, Captain,” he retorts.

One of the other groups needs the computer, and lab is almost over, anyway. We still have to finish the worksheet; Chloe and I have been working on it, but I’m not sure if she knows what she’s doing any more than I do.

“Can we come back sometime before next week to work on it more?” Tatyana asks Dr. Beck.

He shrugs. “Sure, as long as I’m here. Or a TA.” She smiles tensely, and thanks him.

If Tatyana is a Captain, she isn’t James Kirk. She’s more of a Kathryn Janeway, or a Benjamin Sisko: the seemingly stern leader, who cares more for her crew than she’d like to admit. In that way, she might even be considered a Spock.

I’m not sure where the others fall. Raci could be a Julian Bashir, the perpetually snarky science officer who was originally planned to enter in a relationship with Elim Garak, though the writers had to change paths due to a controversial reaction among fans who seemed to believe that homophobia would persist into the 24th century. (Although this preference of Raci’s is something she never verbalized, her Instagram description mentions something about liking food and Natalie Dormer; besides, the purple streak in her hair says it all.) Trevor is probably of the Worf variety, being the macho man of the group. Personally, I think I’d be classified as a Dr. McCoy, being an aspiring physician who always lets her emotions overtake her.

Chloe escapes me, though. She isn’t an Uhura, who’s too bold and brash; she isn’t a Wesley, who’s too passive and, frankly, annoying. The closest thing Chloe could be described as is a tribble.

A fellow tribble would be Wyatt Mullen, a member of my and Tatyana’s dorm, dubbed Junipero. I don’t get along with most of J-Ro, which seems to have been designed to store all of the party kids—who would’ve thought that a voluntary summer college would have party kids?—and boys who got caught 1) swallowing a cockroach for a hundred dollars, 2) masturbating while watching porn in the communal computer room, and 3) breaking curfew to have sex with a girl from Otero (a dorm affectionately dubbed Ho-tero).

Wyatt is different, and that’s not just because he is basically Hikaru Sulu incarnate: the athletic plant nerd with a heart of gold. For some reason that I’ll never understand, he and Tatyana clicked right away. This was immensely suspicious to me, considering that Tatyana seemed incapable of being gentle, but he just makes that already latent trait come out in her.

Although Wyatt is also taking Astronomy, he’s in the Friday lab, whereas my group is in Monday lab. When Chloe, Trevor, and Raci say their other classes interfere, he comes to the observatory with us the next day as we finish up our Saturn assignment.

Debbie the Cool TA is setting up telescope. I'm glad that she's here instead of Jason the Not Cool TA, who wouldn't let us touch anything last night, despite the fact that we need to for our report. It's too bright out now to see anything, but there's an inherent sense of comfort, for a reason I wouldn't be able to explain, when you can put your eyes on a telescope and look through the sky.

"It's crazy," Wyatt says when it's his turn to look. "There's *so much* out there, so many things we still don't understand. There's so much. We don't know anything, when you think about it. We don't know jack shit."

"Where no man has gone before," I murmur. Tatyana goes next, and my gaze stays locked on her until I notice something out of the corner of my eye. Wyatt is wringing his hands in front of him. His eyes are wandering, from the telescope to the rusty pipes, but he won't look at her. Something in me stops, and I force myself to breathe in.

We watch *Star Trek* together. I persuade them into it: part of an episode every time we get something done in the lab, as a sort of positive reinforcement. Tatyana has a boyfriend, I remind myself. He's in our dorm, his name is Evan Phibbs, and he likes *Star Trek*. We've talked about it before, since it's the only thing he and I can agree on.

Almost the only thing, I remind myself. Tatyana laughs loudly and beautifully, resounding through the observatory's apparently phenomenal acoustics. I watch Wyatt, and I know that I'm not the only one who thinks so.

The episode ends, and Wyatt asks: do you want to climb the observatory? I laugh, say I'm too scared, and it's not a lie. Tatyana frowns at me, but I insist that I'll finish up the report. That loosens her shoulders some. She makes me promise that when I'm done, I'll join them at the top, next to the lens of the telescope. Debbie the Cool TA pretends she doesn't hear, and so do I.

It feels stuffy in the wooden building. I want to shed my skin like a Trill, leave behind my old host to become someone new. I think about Raci, with her Instagram description and her purple hair; Trevor, with his ponytail and politically incorrect jokes. I think about Leonard McCoy, always the one to think irrationally and jump into something stupid. I stare at the broken computer's screen. A peal of laughter sounds distant, obstructed by a few layers of wooden panel, but I hear it and I know who it is.

I walk to the telescope, and rest my forehead on the eyepiece. White noise fills the room, along with the sound of Debbie filing her nails. It feels like too much, too soon, too far. I don't remember what I define as "home." The sky is out there, with endless possibilities, but it's too bright out to see them.

Gnome

I have a gnome, and life's a copy of a copy of a copy, and to be unintentionally, helplessly mundane I'd travel in the transient life every human being meets on their birthday.

But you're trite, the land underneath your presence is trite, your gnome is trite, and wherever I'm headed to is trite. And the life we think we know is hackneyed.

So I'm crossing borders, I have your gnome, I still haven't taken heed of its color, red, blue, it's a gnome! And it's going somewhere in life.

I'm crossing borders in a typical family- sized recreational vehicle, and the road is- I just about hear the Southern atmosphere- It's so hot, the seat's hot, and the steering wheel.

I'll soon be nostalgic, I'll soon be seven, thirteen or fourteen, as far as I can reminisce I won't go awry in these thoughts. I'm still good and well, searching, but still platitudinous.

So I'm at this border, and these quintessential law enforcers, canines as their noses search. Who knows these noses might sniff out illegal substances. Who knows. It's no bother, it happens.

All this hype, revolving around ephemeral events, but they didn't find what they were looking for. So I'm free at the border, maybe, when I cross it, your gnome and I might snap a pic.

Here's to a new place, maybe I find what I'm looking for, like these law enforcers. Hey I guarantee your gnome shall be returned, clean with all the photographs of mental milestones.

The occurrences I come across are chronologically unique, and so is my will, but my moments are repeated. Repeated, repeated, copy of a copy, of a copy. And so is your knock-off gnome.

People here and alive, spry and dead and gone and there, they scrutinized thoughts similar Tell me when you receive these pictures, you'll be humanely perspicacious. Ready with insight.

You'll find peace and contentment, you'll yearn, or maybe even be pissed, you'll think, because you're human, and maybe you will even ask why. You're human, and you're gnome is not!

I'm not crossing borders with you! I'm crossing borders with your gnome, there's gotta be more to this. Beyond all studies, of my soul, body, world, earth, the universe, there's gotta be more!

If we knew even just three portions of the seventy two portions of knowledge, then humans, it's possible to bend the laws of physics. Use wisdom as a shield.

But instead of your gnome if I had my dad, I'd drop all of it. All that's going on, forget about it.

Travel mission-less, cross the border to another place, use this moment as a conversational ice-breaker.

I wouldn't worry about attaining knowledge from reliable sources. I'd only and only appreciate cloudless cold Sunday skies at nine in the morning, and you wouldn't have been robbed of a gnome.

You wouldn't have received all those photographs of September's sunlight grazing simple dirt roads behind borders. And whether this story would've been somehow repeated, at your doorstep, at sunrise

I don't care. If I had my dad, I'd have all the wisdom I'm currently searching for in mundane moments. Nothing would be trite, I'd have my dad, and he'd have mom, and we'd have a home.

Echo

I have gotten used to the silence. At first it was nearly unbearable. It was the kind of silence that drives you crazy. It was the kind of silence that makes you sad. It was the kind of silence that makes you talk to yourself just so you can hear a voice. I hate my own voice. Once, there was a girl who told me I had the kind of voice that made people melt inside—the kind of voice that moves people to tears without ever saying anything at all. Now, there is no girl and I am the only one left to make judgment, and I hate my voice.

Everyone is dead. I could sugarcoat it or be optimistic or lie—they're all the same thing anyways—but I would rather just say it. To an empty room. I am saying it to an empty room. I hate my voice. I hate listening to it echo.

The room is small, covered in dust. There are cockroaches on the floor, under the furniture. Of course there would be cockroaches.

The wallpaper is peeling. Peeling and dusty but excellently preserved—all cream and bordered with flowers and some sorts of animals, staring at me, waiting for me to die. This is not new. This wallpaper has always been waiting for me to die, watching me, disgusted by me more than the dust, the cockroaches.

I don't know if I'm talking or thinking. Does it matter? No.

Once, there was a girl who could tell me what I should do and what I was thinking without being told. I would ask her if I had said that out loud, or was she just psychic, and she would laugh at me and say that she was definitely psychic. If my voice could move people to tears her laugh could make men kill. I would not be surprised if her laugh did make men kill. Man has killed for less. Man has killed for so much less.

My hands are on the table, fingers crossed, folded, spotless. The table is stained. The table is brown from the wood and every other color, too, from years of being used, around, part of lives. My hands are spotless.

Last week I went to the beach. I had been to California, I had been to Florida, I had seen the ocean and flown across it but I had never been to the beach.

I like the beach.

Once, there was a girl who loved the beach. She would tell me about it in the greatest detail—from the way the sand felt to each shell or crab or piece of a sand dollar she found—she said it all. She never found a whole sand dollar, she told me once. There was always part missing. She would pick up all the parts she found but they never fit together. They never came whole.

I've discovered that, even when it is empty, I like the beach. There is trash and debris and I think I would like the sound of children laughing, or dogs barking, or families talking, but the beach is still beautiful. I like how the tide goes in and out. If I sit on the sand with my shoes off and my pants rolled up long enough, I can see the tide going in and out. Last week, I drove to the beach at noon and stayed until the sun set. I like the way the sand feels on your feet as it dries, in the sun. I like the way the sun turns the water yellow as it sets. I didn't want to leave the beach.

I left the beach.

When I was eleven my father died. He didn't change, not even at the very end. He had cancer in all the parts of the body a guy could have cancer in and still he was saying he was fine, still telling people to go do something useful. He was on a bed in the hospital and I was sitting next to him and it was all quiet and he turned to me and asked, "You got a game tonight?"

I hesitated then nodded, without looking at him.

"Why aren't you out there warming up then, Jack? Don't you want to win?" His voice was all weak and broken but it still had some sort of power over me.

"Mom said I should be here with you," I told him, to which he scoffed.

"Your mom doesn't know what she's talking about. I'm fine. Go do something you'll enjoy. Go win a baseball game."

I didn't move, right then, but he kept on saying it so I stood up and walked out of the room. Right before I closed the door, though, he stopped me.

"Jack," he called out as loud as he could, barely enough to get over the heart monitors. I turned around and watched him shift, wince a little, and look me straight in the eye. There was no escaping that look. He pursed his lips and unpursed them and finally said, "Keep your Goddamn glove down. No more balls going between your legs, you hear me?"

Those were the last words my father ever said to me.

I hated baseball. Ever since I started it. But I played until I was twenty two all the same.

There are pictures hanging from the walls. Most of them are broken or tilted but one of them is straight. It is a family photo from before I was photogenic. My mother is smiling like she always did, her arm around my father, who is trying to smile but failing, grimacing, no teeth, corners of the lips just barely turned up.

Once, there was a girl who said I looked cute in this picture. She said it was sweet how I tilted my head and showed too much teeth, biting down on something nonexistent, jaw

clenched. She said she liked how my hair was greased back all fancy and my arms were so straight by my sides. She almost made me stop hating that picture.

I think about standing to look at it. I don't, though. I would rather look from a distance. Distance is healthy. Distance from what you hate, from what you love, from what you fear, from what kills you.

It started as a sickness. It was just a few dead animals and then some dead guy in Asia. I started to worry about it right then, a little. The trick to being the last man on Earth is being afraid. I was just scared enough to prepare for the worst. People told me I was crazy when more people started dying in Asia and I built myself a safe house. Driving through the desert I laughed aloud, thinking about how crazy they had thought I was, how dead they were. That was before I got used to the silence.

The sounds in the room are louder than they ever were, when people walked around here, when people lived here. There is a fan, whirring above my head. It is unstable, rickety, threatening to fall on me, waiting for the moment it can fall on me. My toes tapping the tile floor are like drums, like a thousand feet marching in unison. I wish I could see feet marching just one more time. A marching band. An army. Anything. But I must settle for my own. My own are not enough. I want to be enough.

Four days ago I found a museum. Most of the museums were in big cities and most big cities are gone so I didn't think I would see one again, but I was wrong. I was happy to be wrong.

It was an art museum. I wasn't sure where I was, had given up trying to know. But it was definitely an art museum—half gone, half there. I never understood art very well.

Once, I knew a girl who taught art. She tried to teach me but I would have failed her class and both of us knew it. She laughed at me.

Most of the time when I thought of painters and artists I thought of pretentious sorts of hippies who knew a lot about art and nothing else—nothing useful—but this girl was smart. She was smart and grounded and even though she could never teach me art she made me appreciate artists.

Three days ago I appreciated art for the first time. It was more human than anything left on Earth, including myself. I appreciated how if you looked hard enough you could almost picture someone painting it, sculpting it, thinking about what it meant even though I would never understand. I, half-gone, appreciated art in a half-gone museum. Once, there was a girl.

She would have been proud of me.

I touched all of the art. I touched all of the paintings and the sculptures and laughed at the signs that told me not to. Not aloud, I think. But in my head. In my head I laughed.

Once, I knew a girl. I met her in high school. She had a laugh that could make men kill. I thought I could kill for that girl, for that laugh, for a life with her. I could kill for nothing.

I lost her after high school when she followed her dreams and I followed mine and I didn't realize I regretted it until I saw her again, years later. Years meant nothing. We got married even though we had changed, even though I was somebody else, even though she was somebody else. It didn't matter. I would have given up everything I had become and achieved in those years if she had asked me to.

She should have asked me to.

The chair I am sitting in is not comfortable. It is small and stiff and the legs are uneven. My father built this chair. My mother sat in it. Every morning she would take her coffee and sit in this chair and drink and breathe. She didn't read the paper. She was up early enough that she didn't ever talk to us; we were still sleeping. She just sat at the table and looked out the window and breathed. One morning I woke up early and saw her there, all quiet, the fan whirring peacefully above her head. She looked happy.

Sometimes, when I was younger, I wondered if my mother's smile was just some façade, nothing real. She wasn't always happy, but it was rare to see her cry and she never screamed at us, never got angry, never lost her temper. It seemed impossible. But when I saw her that morning, all alone, unaware of my presence, she was smiling. Not a big smile, no teeth, but a smile. That was when I knew it was real.

What I never got was why. What made her so happy? Her life was plain. She had my father, in the beginning—and they did love each other, though it always seemed mismatched to me—and she had me, until the end. She had a medium-sized house and a simple job and she was, without a doubt, happy.

Now I am sitting in her chair and staring out her window and breathing. But I will never understand.

We started bombing each other, killing each other like only people could. It was so predictable. I was safe in my safe house but I always knew what was happening because I was important enough to know. The trick to being the last man on Earth is being important, but not too important. Not target important.

At first we were just bombing the places where everyone was sick, just to stop the spread, and then we were bombing places that were half-sick, and then we were just bombing places because we were confused and scared and mad at everyone. It was everyone else's fault but it was never our own.

Two days ago, I saw the Grand Canyon. I was driving down the road and it was all desolate and nothing and then suddenly there it was, still there. I will die someday but this

will still be here. Someday there will be nothing but this, and the mountains, and maybe the cockroaches. I will die and this will still be here and I am so okay with that. I am okay with being outlived by the Grand Canyon. I never expected not to. And it is so beautiful. Beautiful and big. So big. I yelled everything into it. I yelled everything I knew, everything about people and what they were and I thought about art and so I yelled about what they would always be, too. I yelled everything I ever did right and everything I ever did wrong and listened to it echo. I hate my voice. I do. So I yelled into the Grand Canyon until I lost it. I gave the Grand Canyon my voice. Once, I knew a girl who would have thought that was a good gift. She would have laughed and said she envied the Grand Canyon. I would have told her it envied her and realized it was a silly thing to say but said it anyways. She liked it when I said things like that. I liked it when she liked things. I liked it when she was happy.

She died like everyone else.

She should not have died like everyone else.

I forgot how human she was.

I am cold. I don't know if it's winter or not, but I am cold. Maybe it's because of the fan above me. Maybe the world is just colder now. I'm not sure if that's how it works, but it makes sense to me.

The wallpaper is staring at me. When I was a kid, it scared me. When I was a teenager, it scared me. When I was an adult, I scared it, but it scared me too, still.

My father hated it. He asked my mother why we didn't just paint over it but she told him she thought it was charming and he let it stay.

Once, I knew a girl who wanted to live here. My mother passed and left me the house, and when we stopped by the girl told me she wanted us to live here. To her this house was sweet and comfortable. To me it was stained floors and tables and wallpaper staring me down. She wanted us to make a family here.

I sold it. I did not regret it.

I do now. I regret it. I regret.

My plan was for us to stay together, safe, far away from everything that could kill us. She did not like my plan, but she went along with it for a while. And then her mother got sick. And her father. And then it was her little brother and she told me she had to go back home. I tried to stop her, tried to tell her the truth, told her she would only die. She told me she would rather die with the people she loved than live alone and sickeningly safe. I told her she wouldn't be alone. She walked away.

Once, I knew a girl, who turned into a woman, who walked away.

The trick to being the last man on Earth is letting her walk away.

I don't want to die. I don't want to go to Hell. I don't want to disappear. I want someone to miss me. I want someone to cry for me. I want a funeral. I want a grave next to a girl's that someone puts flowers on. I want a speech read at my funeral interspersed with tears. I want someone to talk about who I was. I want someone to write a book about me. I want someone to remember me.

Last week, when I went to the beach, I found a sand dollar. It was whole. Not a crack marred its surface. No missing pieces. No mistakes. I found a perfect sand dollar, put it in my pocket, held it tight, never let it go. I carried it across the country. I would carry it across the world. I would carry it across the universe.

I reach into my pocket and pull it out, hold it in my hands, turn it over in my fingers. It is smooth. It is smooth as my spotless hands, white and untouched, unscathed. I wonder why there are so few like this. I wonder why, of all the sand dollars on all the beaches she ever saw, none were whole. All were broken.

All were broken.

Once, I knew a girl. I knew a girl who could have told me what to do. This girl, she could have told me where to go from here. I went to the beach. I went to the museum. I went to the Grand Canyon. I went here. I am here. I checked off everything on my list. I want to start on hers. I want to check everything off her list. She could have told where to go from here. She could have told me where here was.

Once, I knew a girl who was so smart. She could have told me all the names of all the paintings in the world and she could have taught me calculus, too—could have had the patience to teach me everything I would ever need to know.

I should have asked her to.

She would have laughed.

She would have loved it.

She cannot tell me what to do.

She cannot tell me what to do, so I sit in the house she wanted and hold her sand dollar and listen to the fan and feel the wallpaper, staring me down, waiting, waiting for me to die like everyone else.

I wait with it.

Skipping Stones

You would have me be a river so you could say,

*This is what you are
so this is what you do,
and if you do not,
you are wrong.*

You would have me be a river so you could say,

*You are doing that
because of what you are,*

and your how-to book would be written.

I would be the river—

and the soil,
the stones
the fish
the bubbles
the wind and sun...

I would be everything

but you would have me be something,

a river to skip stones over

hit

hit

sink.

Tonight, I walk by the river

and the moon is making a painting

out of its reflection.

Perhaps I should have been the river;

how beautiful she looks there in the moon's affection.

Yet here is the wind again,

it fills my arms with flight—

and the grass beneath my feet is surely growing!

A grey leaf falls into the water in slow motion.

It was green once,

and gold.

The water ripples,

then forgets.

The leaf is crinkled like bed sheets,
its violated edges cut the air
as if its being there
was criminal.

Just as oblivion becomes eternal,
the current seizes it,
 it slips around the bend,
 and is gone.

Yet here comes another
leaf,
then another,
 then a branch...

The leaves keep falling and my eyes are rivers.

Perhaps these are the last lines I will write for you—

There.
I am broken like you would have me be.

Dirge

To: Army Public School, dirt-colored walls cultivating futures.
From: the TTP, postcards of North Waziristan presumed bloodshed.

To: Peshawar, sister-city of Kabul.
Medieval city, Oxford University, Forbidden Palace.

Oldest breathing city of South Asia.
frontier city, crossroads of Central and South.
Shale and limestone streaks of the Khyber Pass.

Lugged by seven carriers, one hundred thirty-two lives
crammed into explosives and bullets, mail sacks dripping
final hiccups of air. Student-paid postage.

Dust-wrapped school shoes, herded by Pakistani combat boots
past present culture infused with militancy.
Dissolved in blood: rust-covered mud, crusting.

Target the civilian army, rumpled contours
of forest green sweaters juxtaposed to camo.
ouroboros closing a line into cycles
of increasing violence/short-term gain/violence/

How much is necessary to rewrite collective opinion?
Daggers shot by glassy-eyed adolescents, how long to
fly the flags at half-mast.

Rockville High School: To My Not So Favorite 16 Year Old High School Boy

For Billy Collins

Dear 16 year old boys,
William Hamilton knew 13 languages
by the time he was a young teen
you have gone in the opposite direction
changing your native tongue
so it will fit into
the 140 character limit
of your latest tweet
hashtaging your actions
you will never know how
to apply paint to a canvas
the way Picasso did
at the age of 16
when his painting won a gold medal
in Malaga
your achievements are measured
in your latest high score
of Flappy Bird
or whatever other mindless game
is the “next big thing”
while at the age of 15
Robert Fischer’s strategic moves
won him The World Chess Championship
but all of these figures are
either dead or irrelevant to you
so 16 year old boy
please get off your phone
or your Xbox
and change history just a little
by at least
taking a shower
or putting on some deodorant
at least once
Love,
the 16 year old girl
who used her iPhone
in this poem to sound smart.

Shoes

There were way too many noises inside Ned's head. He felt the sound of his own mind slowly being cornered at the back of his skull, threatened by the relentless pesterings, the pounding reminders, the blaring naggings, and whispering pleas.

Acknowledging the distress, Ned shut the document he had been trying to work on and decided it would be more efficient to come back and look at it again later rather than trying to push through this thought mob. He thought if he took a couple moments to himself maybe the noises would quiet down like they always did and come back at a more convenient time when he could actually diplomatically sort things out. These were his thoughts after all; he did not want to just throw them away.

After promising his mother to come back before his father came home from work, Ned opened the shoe closet and grabbed his coat and his familiar Chuck Taylors. Even with their ragged, grey grass stained canvas, worn and split rubber edges, and equally tattered limp laces, Ned never felt the need to get a new pair. These were comfortable and felt like another layer of skin over his feet after so many wears.

Down two blocks to Main Street and around the corner of Locke, the young teen walked across the remains of the last snowfall to a more isolated area of the town park. Although he felt guilty wishing to avoid anyone he knew, Ned discerned the need for an independent moment to breathe from the desire's selfish implication and decided to enjoy this time he had allowed to himself. With a dull sensation of ice crunching through the thin fabric of his sneakers, Ned sat himself down a bench's flaking green painted planks. Then for a moment, he relished in this suspension of motionlessness and the murmurs of the moving silver air. But after the few seemingly perfect seconds of silence, it felt oddly flat, so he tried to take in his surroundings to add some stimulation to his mind.

Ned tried to hear the faint sounds of the naked trees swaying and their branches quivering in the wintertime draft. He tried to feel the same dry air go through him but he found himself feeling an environment devoid of movement, as if the air and the sounds were avoiding him, going around him, then eventually relaxing back into their own path. Then he felt, one by one, the mass of questions and voices in his head slowly go to sleep like the frogs in the pond until spring and thought this one dimensional feeling was not too bad and gave up trying to stimulate his mind to something more than this muffled radio wave.

The ice beneath his feet had once been the blanket of down feathers that put the excitement on the faces of small children when they looked outside the window while bundling themselves with scarves and hats. Now all that survived through the harsher night temperatures were lonely fragments of dirty stone ice that had even lost its sense of coldness and was just... numb.

From a distance, Ned heard a rhythm of scuttling patters on the brick-lined sidewalk.

He looked at the winding path and, from around the corner, marked by a handsome evergreen, a petite individual appeared: a small girl. She looked equally as surprised by Ned's presence as he was with hers but soon turned her head to a curious angle and shyly walked towards the park bench.

"Are you okay?" she asked, as if trying to imitate the tone of her Mom's voice.

"Hmm?" Ned took a moment to process the simple question and politely smiled, "Yeah. I'm alright. Thank you."

"Can I sit here?" She pointed to a spot of lifting paint next to Ned.

"Of course."

The girl cautiously used her arms to pull herself up onto the bench. There was a reason why she had asked that question to the boy as soon as she saw him. Mom always seemed to say it when something was wrong, even though there was not any mention of that something. There was some magic in that question that seemed to solve everything.

Even she could see that something was upsetting this boy, but maybe he did not even know for himself. She looked at him to see if maybe she could figure it out. He was taller and bigger than she was, his hair and eyes a more tired, darker shade of brown, kind of like her father's when he came home from work. He turned to her, sensing her staring, and she turned away a little too quickly. That's when she noticed.

The rubber edging of the boy's grey sneakers had started to rip and peel back like the old paint of the bench she was sitting on, leaving a widening slit for the snow and the cold to get inside! Perhaps that was what was wrong! Cold wet socks were never comfortable. She needed to tell him and maybe he would be better.

"You have a hole in your shoe!" She gasped concerned.

"Sorry?" Ned looked down and flexed his toes, and indeed there was a hole in the side of his left shoe, "Oh.... I didn't notice that. Thanks." He smiled again.

Ned looked towards the small child. Although initially he had wanted to avoid people, her company did not seem to bother him all too much. He began to think maybe he should help this girl find her parents; they were probably worried because the sun was starting to start its burn out descent to the evening.

"Hey. I'm Ned. What's your name?" He got off the bench and crouched in front of her and looked at her eye level.

"Charlie." Her eyes brightened with interest. Before Ned had time to think of what else could help him find her parents, she asked, "Hey, how did you not notice the hole in your shoe?"

“Errh... I don’t know... I guess...I never felt it?” Ned replied hesitantly.

“But it’s so cold!” Charlie demonstratively shivered, “Aren’t you cold?”

“No? Not really... Say, Charlie, if you’re cold, do you want to go home? Let’s go look for your mom.” Ned offered his hand to the younger child.

Eagerly Charlie’s mint green mitten took Ned’s cold hand and the both of them got up from the bench. They travelled across the park towards where Charlie said was the last place she was with her mother: in front of the stone fountain that was drained for the colder months. The minerals of the hard water had precipitated on the edges leaving a sad green tinge crusted onto the grey stone. After scouting the surrounding area for a couple minutes and not finding Charlie’s mother, Ned and Charlie both sat at the foot of the fountain trying to think of what to do next.

While the younger was fiddling with a pebble on the ground with a concentrated look on her face, the older boy took a moment to look at his shoes. It slightly surprised him that he had never seen it before because, in fact, the hole was more on the large side and he practically wore these shoes every day. Ned’s eyes wandered over to Charlie’s shoes, tucked beneath her legs and chin in the position she was sitting. They were considerably smaller, about half his size, with the still shiny yellow material with patterns of small white flowers and a distinct strip of new Velcro.

“Look Ned! You can hear the birds louder here than from where the bench was!” Charlie pointed out.

Ned bounced out of his thoughts, raised his head and listened. Indeed there were birds calling back and forth to each other in the evergreen trees. He heard the birds now, but he did not remember hearing them when he was alone before.

“Yeah... You’re right.” He shivered. The air was getting chilly.

For a moment they both stayed still, listening to the rare songs of winter, until they heard a worried female voice distantly calling out, “Charlie? Charlie where are you?” Charlie?”

Without a word, the two of them scurried to the source of the sound. Charlie called out for her mother, and they were reunited a few meters away from the fountain.

“Charlie!? Where did you go? I told you to stay where you could see me while I finished up my phone call!” The mother’s nimble hands fluttered down to her child. Charlie’s mother did not even perceive Ned standing there until several moments after; then she proceeded to thank him multiple times. It left him feeling unnatural like the pathway they were standing on cutting through the trees in the park.

“Don’t forget your shoe has a hole in it, okay?” Charlie turned around.

“I won’t. Thanks, Charlie. I’ll see you around,” Ned said with a twinkle in his eye. He

waved as he saw Charlie and her mother walk off a good distance until he turned around to walk home, as well.

Ned never noticed that he could not hear the birds anymore or that he no longer felt cold. He prodded along home, in the silver winter wind stained with the ribbons of the sun, setting on top of the stone cold ice.

english second language

i try to write in
the language I was named in,
but the keyboard
is too strange, and the
pen is out of ink.
the words denature
in my mouth, and
i cannot make them out.

my father's shadow
falls over the page.
i remember how this
language tastes when
it falls from his lips,
in droplets on the floor—
like sugar cookies
and like home.

i try to channel
my grandmother's tongue,
but its strength and vigor
overwhelms the page—
the poem shrinks away
with its tail between its legs,
afraid of her walking stick.

it never returns to the page.
after a while, i stop chasing it.

BIOGRAPHIES

The word "BIOGRAPHIES" is written in a bold, black, sans-serif font. The letters have a white, speckled or "starry" texture. A thick, light blue diagonal line runs across the text from the bottom-left to the top-right, passing behind the letters.

Poetry

Name

Name

Art

Name

Name

Fiction

Name

Name

Name

Nonfiction

Name

Name

High School Dossier

Name

Name

