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Introduction

To be an artist or a writer is to be in a constant state of self-justification. I am sure many of the talented contributors featured in this magazine have admitted they’re majoring in Art or English only to be met with the same response from family and friends alike: “Yes, but what are you going to do with that?” The unfortunate truth is that, at least in the beginning, not many people care whether or not you make art, and in fact some would rather you didn’t.

I think this general lack of support for art comes from a misconception that it is a relatively private act which only few are able to enjoy and which, ultimately, is not very important. As the narrator of Antoine de Saint-Exupery’s Little Prince laments when adults tell him to lay aside his drawings and take up more serious disciplines like geography and arithmetic:

Then I would never talk to that person again about boa constrictors, or primeval forests, or stars. I would bring myself down to his level. I would talk to him about bridge, and golf, and politics, and neckties. And the grown-up would be greatly pleased to have met such a sensible man.

I wish I could say that it ends there. But it extends to the societal level as well. Take as an example the US federal budget for military spending in comparison with that for the National Endowment for the Arts, the agency that awards support and funding to artists:

Sources: New York Times, AFP

US 2010 Budget: Military vs. NEA Spending

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US 2010 Budget: Military vs. NEA Spending
Regardless of how you feel about either of these particular programs, it’s certainly telling that we spend over 4,000 times as much on war as we do on art. Then there are the financial priorities of this very university, investing a small fortune to replace RedHawk logos in which Swoop is facing right instead of left while every year we have to fight to be able to print 500 copies of this magazine for a student body of over 14,000 undergraduates. We’re to believe that art just doesn’t matter that much.

The existence of literature and art magazines like *Inklings* is a rejection of this kind of thinking. Art is not self-indulgent or superfluous; it is one of the most important and quintessentially human things a person can do, and it is one of the most wonderful things to share. It’s part of the continuing, ever-evolving cultural and intellectual conversation of our civilization and of us, the students gathered briefly together at this university.

All this to say that I am extremely proud of this little book, and I hope you are too. Spending the last four years as a member of the extraordinary community of artists, writers, readers, staff that makes up *Inklings* has been one of the best experiences of my life so far. Try to keep it going.

*Steven Hoffman*

*Editor*

*17 April 2011*
Tammy Jolene Atha

In your limbs split the elbow and creep inside bending as you do.
Motion linked to your curves it is hard to grow here I live in your limbs split the elbow and creep inside bending as you do.

Tammy Jolene Atha
Digging for a Soul

Slice
through this blood infused flesh
and dig and dig and dig until you find a whiff of spirit
lurking, glowing, containing the ghostly particles of me.

Do you see it?
Can you find it within the depths of my anatomy?

Cease the search.

Near death is all you’ll see when you reveal a barely pumping heart, pulsing and radiating Beneath your fingertips.

Taja Bankhead
Well Known Strangers

I.
A fruit
will not stay fresh for long if peeled.
It will grow brown
From time
And grow
So sweet,
Oh so sweet.

II.
You try
To eradicate me
From your memory.
I will seep through
The crevices of your mind
And I will
Dig my roots
Like a dandelion
With the absolute gall
To root itself
In the emerald lawns
Of suburbia.

Don’t uproot me,
Not even to tuck
Behind your ear.
I will wilt.
I will decay
Like dead leaves.

III.
They are faceless.
They are Jane Doe
They are John Doe

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III.
They are faceless.
They are Jane Doe
They are John Doe
Both cursed with blank slate faces
Misconstrued as perfect,
Symmetrical—
Pair of eyes,
Eyebrows,
Nose,
Ears
And lips
In complete harmony.

We journey for the Does even
Though they’re strangers,
and dedicate our
Lives to find them as they are.

Yet, we don’t remember,
We don’t remember
The Does’ uttering a single word
We cannot recall the
Sound of their voices
The colors of eyes,
Their ambiance of their being

We are dazed by their ambiguity.

IV.
We were never
In the now,
Like
Stars and galaxies against the backdrop of the sky,
Frozen in time.
The light of present reality has yet to reach us.

We are so close
That
Soon we will be one

Both cursed with blank slate faces
Misconstrued as perfect,
Symmetrical—
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Eyebrows,
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The light of present reality has yet to reach us.

We are so close
That
Soon we will be one
And time and close proximity  
Will compress us  
Until we are microscopic  
And from us  
black holes will form.

No one can escape  
Not even us:  
Even light  
Was ripped apart  
To shreds.

V.  
They finally found John and Jane today.  
John had no eyes,  
Jane, no lips.  
John was so blind  
And Jane was so speechless...

Taja Bankhead
Hannah and her mother were sitting on a park bench on Page 1,999. The weather was pleasant and the colors were bright, brighter than on any previous Page—so this was their favorite place. Life was easy there, so each was content just watching the happy people in the happy world around them. Think Technicolor; think pop-up book; think in every green. They sat smiling.

Hannah’s mother, Holly, waved to a colleague—Rose—as she jogged by on her daily run.

“See you back at work tomorrow!” her mother called. “That Ms. Briar,” she turned to Hannah, “always blazing by with her iPod blaring hip-hop. What a woman. All my body can handle is Yoga, but at least that’s something at forty-seven, right? Did you hear she ran her third marathon last weekend—a few months after having her fourth kid?”

Hannah smiled one of those amused smiles that younger people wear when they start to find middle-aged adults simple-minded. Holly and Rose both served on the executive advisory board for a lucrative vacuum industry. The enterprise thrived under its founder and CEO, Cinderella. Cindy was known far and wide for her rare blend of diligent work ethic and feminine empathy. Hers was the rags-to-riches American dream.

As they sat, Hannah noted how freely the birds flew. They danced around tree branches that wound about the sky with something to say. Like a multitude of hands holding pens, the branches left signedatured stories, curlicued imprints on soft blue paper. The world was more fluid, exquisite—sensitive, you could say—on Page 1,999. When Hannah took a deep breath she inhaled rainbows.

Suddenly Hannah was bumped into the wrought-iron arm of the bench, a boisterous “hey honey!” breaking her reverie. Holly yelled, “Snow!” and gave the woman who had joined them a warm hug. They exchanged that jumble of
shrill and half-articulate words exchanged between good lady friends who haven’t seen each other in awhile, eek’s and hand-squeezes galore, everything communicated in jubilant sounds, fervent head nods. Eventually the woman got a bit more serious, and straightening her back she said “Actually, darling, it isn’t Snow anymore. And it sure isn’t White, either.” Holly got wide-eyed. She solemnly looked up at the sky, then back to her friend:

“You mean—?”
“Mm hmm.”
“Oh, my.”
“Mm hm.”

They sat in silence for a moment, looking back at the blue above, absorbing the reality.

“So-o...”
“It’s Kelly now—Kelly Green.”
Holly put her hand to her heart, inhaled and whispered with the exhale, “I love it.”

“I know. Boy was it a struggle—ten years, you know. (Holly slowly lifted her chin up, down.) But I really stuck it to the man. Quit trying to write me off as white when I’m dark as ebony, I said—and proud. The fool thought if he just did it long enough, he could write my color out of existence. And words are powerful, don’t get me wrong. But they can’t change what’s true—only cover it until someone like you finally ventures away from the Page and confronts The Writer with it, face to face.”

Hannah sat befuddled, looking from the women beside her to the sky and back, trying to figure out why they looked at the midday blue with skeptical eyes.

“So—Green!”
“Well I hope no one thought I’d be obvious enough to change my last name to Black. I wanted something neither, something new—but something just as beautiful.”

“Is he—angry?” Holly hesitated, looking up.
“Seething,” Kelly laughed.

“Seething,” Kelly laughed.
Hannah imagined a hundred different people this he could be.

“And I owe everything to you, Holly,” Kelly continued, “You’re a bold woman and a bold...”

(Her eyes shifted right, her voice dropped to a whisper.)

“...writer.”

Holly whispered back, wrestling a smile: “Thank you.”

Hannah finally broke the silence that ensued.

“What—are—you talking about?!”

This happened often with Hannah and her mom. Holly would get cryptic, faraway in her words sometimes, creating two spheres within one conversation, placing Hannah in one and herself in the other.

“You write, Mom?”

“Sh!” the women hushed in unison, leaning toward Hannah with wary eyes.

Suddenly the ground gave a hiccup, shifting the three in the bench. The happy people strolling about paused to raise their arms in cautionary shields above their heads, and the calm air was blasted with a violent gust of wind. They seemed oddly composed, as if this were routine. Hannah looked to the sky instead and watched the blue surface fall toward them, heavy and slow. All she heard was rushing wind.

For a split second everything went black, and Hannah felt hurtled from far left to far right, as if someone had swept them away and back with a giant wave of the hand. Just as the darkness faded from her field of vision—from the center outward—Hannah caught a glimpse of everything around her, suspended, dropping gently back in place: pit, pat, just like that. The happy people brushed the dust from their exercise pants, put smiles back on, and resumed their stroller-power-walking day.

Hannah was dazed. She blinked hard and blinked and blinked as she read the wooden park sign to her left: “Welcome to the Page 2,000 Formal Gardens!” But no matter how hard she blinked the script no longer spelled 1,999.
“So you really haven’t told her anything, have you?” Kelly asked, readjusting her hair, eyebrows raised. Holly wore a sheepish grin: “Nnnope.” “I’ll let you ladies talk.” And with a wink she parted. Silence. Hannah shuffled impatiently as her mother sat, squinting her eyes to take her to that distant sphere. “Once upon a time, I wouldn’t have been able to say that ‘once upon a time there was a girl.’ Because there weren’t any.” “What?” “Just listen. I’m talking Pages ago—long before your time. Women existed—physically here in the world, you know, yet there was nothing feminine. We were here but not really here.” With that, Hannah was taken. Her mother always had a way with telling, with shaping a faraway place which otherwise belonged only to her, inviting you to hop on her mystery words and ride until you were there too. “We?” “I’m a lot older than I’ve told you, Hannah. There’s Pages and there’s Ages but the Pages are what matters. Me, Rose, Cindy—we go way back. Would you believe that Rose used to spend every hour of every day in bed?” Hannah’s eyes popped. “It’s hard to believe, I know. All she did was sleep and sleep and wait for her husband, who came every hundred years or so. And Cindy, she used to spend her time cleaning the filth from some rich family’s fireplace. You can imagine how everlasting that job would be. I didn’t have it much better; I was left to spinning wool, because I wasn’t allowed to spin stories. What’s the point of talking if you can’t tell stories? Isn’t that all talking is?” Hannah tried to imagine her mother this way: she couldn’t. The concept was not merely a novel one, but one that simply didn’t fit in her head—square peg, round hole—that type of thing.
“I don’t know what hit me one day. Spin, spin, spin and one day I just stopped. I still remember the silence after the humming, whirring, humming ceased. I heard my pin drop—and I stood, and I walked, and I walked. Hannah, when I left my workroom and went out the front door down the cold stone steps, I cried without knowing why. Everything was in shades of gray—nothing like the bright gold thread I was fed for so many Pages. Leaves were shriveled, grass wilted. The paper sky hung low, suffocating. When I walked I had to push back air denser than water. I didn’t know till later that I was actually pushing back hundreds of Pages.”

Finally Hannah understood the sky.

“It didn’t take long for a pen taller than the tallest tree to pierce the sky. I heard an ear-splitting rip and a furious blast of air as it plummeted toward me, but I dodged the ballpoint. Luckily, it had to fight the Pages just as hard as I did; as I scrambled away it left angry chasing scribbles all over the gray ground. I was terrified, but I outran the pen. The further I traveled the easier it was to walk, and I didn’t stop until I reached the beginning of the Story: before Page 1: the Title Page.”

Hannah was mystified.

“I stepped into a sea of white—white ground, white sky, everything fresh, everything crisp. My footsteps echoed, and the bright, clean air made me finally open my mouth, breathing in to exhale words—at last, my words. And as I broke into a run, arms outstretched to remember the weightless air, I came upon a massive black line. But I couldn’t see the end of this dark and daunting path stretched ahead of me. To my left were steep white steps, which I climbed until I could read from above, in bold and somber marks: ‘WOMAN: BY MAN HIMSELF.’

“I dashed down the steps and found, to my dismay, the words were made with ink. But Hannah, I found a pen in my pocket. In all my spinning days, I had never noticed it there. It’s as if sometime before my memory I was not a spinner, as if
somewhere the Story went terribly wrong. So in my best cursive
I wrote ‘edited by Woman,’ small handwriting but not insig-
nificant, and I hurried away. I had no time to spare; the longer
I waited, the longer women were sleeping, slaving, spinning.

“From there I traveled every Page—1, 2, 3, 4, re-writing as I
went. I woke up Briar Rose and told her to get out of that bed.
Now she goes and goes, running errands and running races.
By the time I got to Cinderella, she was married to a man
she met at a dance—but she may as well have been in Briar
Rose’s position, having nothing to do but look pretty. I knew
it wouldn’t take her long to climb the business ladder after I
convinced her to leave.

“You know, the more I re-wrote Woman, the more beau-
tiful the world became. It went from gray to green, and the
paper sky ascended.

“It was on Page 1,973 that I noticed something missing
in the Story. So I started to write you into it, Hannah, but
before I could finish the other women tried to stop me. They
said you’d hinder my success and you’d cost a lot of money.
You see, He was writing lies while I was writing you, and there
was so much tension on the Pages I thought they would tear
right in half. It wasn’t until 1,999 that I successfully wrote you
into existence. And look at how vivid the world is, now that
you’re here.

“It used to be so dreary in this Story; don’t let anyone tell
you otherwise. The fairy tale utopia was a lie, a plastic coating
to hide the hard edges and the boring grays, and happily ever
after really didn’t come until after—long, long after. I still have
to be careful; He isn’t happy, and a few women aren’t either.
But lucky for us, true and beautiful words eventually speak
up.”

Rachel Barga
“Joan,” in Post-Stroke Cursive

Bless your little heart,
your little heart that couldn’t anymore.
When we left you,
before you left us,
the dandelion wisps were already stirring
tumbling toward our windshield in a cloud that was softly
nostalgic,
softly foreboding.

Yellow dandelions radiated from your yellow farmhouse
where I stood, with my nose at the handle of your screen
door
and your ridged fingers on my shoulder
as you named the yellow birds for me,
Gold Finches pirouetting
pecking at the summer concrete of your porch.

Simplistically beautiful,
the things you taught me.

Fried dandelion stems,
pepper on your fruit salad?
No, actually
I’ve never seen that
Oh, no thank you,
my macaroni’s plenty—
(we both smile)
And turn back to watching ladies with embroidered sweat-shirts like yours
running past the flashing lights because they bid correctly
on an armchair
or a ceramic set

Differently beautiful,
the things you taught me.

It’s okay that we had to finish your jigsaw puzzles,
that your daily news crosswords were set aside incomplete
to absorb the dim glow of your amber walls, amber floors.
It’s okay.
Because you knew how to ask us for
Something That Is Sweet, 4 letters
when you needed to
and you knew the right way to appreciate a sunflower.

That’s perty.

Everything seems to exhale shades of purple now
—your favorite
But they can’t fake warmth here,
no matter how they try
the burgundy drapes are still too heavy,
the maroon carpet’s chilled where the tears drop,
and the flowers are set around stone.

So I’ll go back to where you left things warm
let yesterday’s embers hug me
(I could use a hug)
where the only purple is your five dollar sweatshirt.

Rachel Barga
In Simile

If you look for truth, you may find comfort in the end; if you look for comfort, you will not get either comfort or truth: only soft soap and wishful thinking to begin, and, in the end, despair.

—C.S. Lewis

Like a nametag. Like a courtesy. Like a memory of someone dead. Like reading aloud from the obituaries, or off of a headstone. Like a friendly neighbor with an unkempt yard. Like a child. Like someone else’s child, here to play with hers, wiping his nose on his sleeve.

He had stolen their younger son’s cell phone:

“Hey honey, it’s your mom. I’m at the Grand Canyon right now. Have you seen it? You should if you haven’t. It’s magnificent. Inspiring. I think it would be inspiring to you. Anyway, that’s not why I called... It’s Arthur. The Watsons called me last night and said that he hasn’t been himself these past few months. That he’s become hostile and paranoid... Their words. Look, honey, you and I both know that Arthur hasn’t been himself for a lot more than months now, but this time I’m worried. I’m concerned, I mean, about him, and about the house...”

Arthur. His name. She says it different every time he plays the message. He remembers how she used to say it. Like

—David Byrne

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Same as it ever was.

Same as it ever was.

Same as it ever was.

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Same as it ever was.

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Arthur. His name. She says it different every time he plays the message. He remembers how she used to say it. Like
licking honey off of the spoon she used to stir her tea. Like exhaling the first drag of a fresh cigarette. In the voicemail she left on their younger son’s cell phone, Arthur hears voices and echoes around his wife. When the wind hits the mouthpiece from certain angles, it sounds like bombs going off.

“...I would go myself, but you’re so much closer... and I think that it would be better if you went. It wouldn’t do him any good to have me there again... and he misses you...”

Like a soliloquy. Like reading it off of cue cards. The message was over five minutes long. There was a list in the middle.

“...knives in the drawer next to the refrigerator, and I think there are some flammable aerosol products under the kitchen sink... there’s the baseball bat under the bed in the master bedroom...”

Our bedroom, Wanda, he thinks. You mean our bedroom.

“...your ticket. I’m sorry I left this long message... I feel kind of silly. Please call me back if you need anything, honey. I miss you and I love you...”

And at that moment, Arthur Bottle somehow knows that someone else is with his wife, and that that person is looking into her eyes, and that she is smiling when she says:

“Bye.”

Arthur snaps their younger son’s cell phone in half and drops it into the toilet. He flushes.


It doesn’t matter, Arthur Bottle tells himself.

The World would be coming to an end soon, anyway.

Picture: A sidewalk, concrete panels darkened with rain. A slug watches an ant drown in one of the gritty cracks. Next to the slug is a stray shoelace with a knot in the middle. Frayed at the edges.

Picture: A cracked shard of a mirror propped against a lit candle. Melded to it with melted wax. The surface of the glass is scratched. It reflects a man’s head. Arthur Bottle’s head, his face bisected by a
crack that streaks across the shard like a lightning bolt.

Picture: Conrad Bottle at the table in the kitchen of his childhood home with his hands folded. A pad of paper and a blue ballpoint pen with teeth marks in the plastic are on the table in front of him. He is trying to remember where his mother told him she had hidden the gun.

“Don’t,” he says.
Audra Richter lowers the camera.
“Arthur doesn’t mind,” she says.
“Arthur’s out of his mind,” he says.
“You call him Arthur now?”
“You do.”
“He’s not my father.”
Conrad Bottle looks at the list on the kitchen table. On it he has written:

1. Forty-five (
2. Lighters and Matches (mantle, bathrooms)
3. Gasoline (garage, shed)
4. Knives (kitchen)
5. Letter Openers (attic desk, Mom and Dad’s room)
6. Axe (shed)
7. Hammers (basement, shed, garage)
8. Baseball Bat (Mom and Dad’s room)
9. Rope (basement, garage)
10. Extension Cords (basement, attic)

He folds his hands again and rests his forehead against them and closes his eyes. He becomes aware of his own breathing. He smells Audra behind him, fiddling with the focus of her Nikon. Her smell (patchouli, old leather, cigarettes, sweat) inspires in him simultaneous sensations of nostalgia and déjà vu. It also, to Conrad Bottle’s surprise, inspires an erection.

“He says Wanda is seeing someone else,” Audra says.
“I don’t think he and Mom have spoken once in six years,” Conrad says.
“What do you think?”
“About my Mom seeing someone else?”
“Yeah.”
“I try not to.”
Conrad turns around just as Audra snaps his photo.

Picture: Conrad Bottle. Face younger than his age. White. Five feet, eleven inches tall. Square jaw and pointed chin, dusted with jetlag stubble. Moss-colored eyes and cardboard-colored hair. Paint under his fingernails. Eyebrows, darker than the rest of his hair, raised in surprise over his wideset eyes, sunken and sullen.

“Stop it.”
“Get over it,” Audra says.
Conrad holds her gaze. His eyes do not wander down her slender neck, past her pronounced collarbone, to the modest, braless breasts under her tank top. Or to the soft, chapped curves of her lips. Or to the shallow basin of her exposed navel. He holds her eyes, wide-set like his, but coffee-colored, and with heavier lids. She looks away before he does. He is proud of himself for that. The right corner of her mouth rises, exposing a sharp canine tooth.

“Do you have anything to drink?” she asks
“Corona. It’s in the fridge,” he says.
“Yours?”
“I picked it up on my way from the airport.”
Audra pulls two bottles from the refrigerator.Opens them.
Puts one on the kitchen table for Conrad, next to his list.
“What time is it?” he asks.
She shrugs. Lifts the bottle to her lips. Conrad watches her swallow. He drinks and feels a little better.

* * *
“Dude.”
“What?”
“Dude.”
“What? What the fuck?”

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“Dude.”
“What?”
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“What? What the fuck?”
“What is she doing here?”

The déjà vu is back. They are looking out the window at Audra, who is mowing the lawn. The Watsons wave to her as they pass, walking their four small dogs. She waves back.

“I should ask what you are doing here,” Conrad Bottle says.

“Yeah you should. That would be an excellent way to dodge my question.”

“I’m not dodging.”

“Okay, but you are too.”

“I’m not dodging,” Roman Bottle says, shaking his head.

“It’s just a stupid question, Conrad. He’s my dad too. That’s why I’m here.”

“Did Mom call you?”

“No,” Roman says. Like stepping on something sharp. Conrad thinks he sees Audra glance at them through the corner of her eye. He lets the curtain fall back into place and steps away from the window. It is eleven forty-one AM. It is Sunday. Roman had arrived, unannounced, two hours ago.

“Did she sleep here last night?” Roman asks.

“Of course not,” Conrad says. “She lives in town now. She was here when I got in. Helped me gather up some things and then went home. Apparently she’s been coming over at least once a week since Mom left.”

“No way,” Roman says, peeking through the curtains again.

“You know she and Dad were close,” Conrad says. “He said she was like a daughter to him.”

Roman scoffs.

“Well she would have been his daughter if she’d married you, but she didn’t, so as far as I’m concerned she doesn’t need to be sniffing around Dad for whatever she’s after.”

“I don’t think she’s after anything.”

“She could be trying to get put in the will.”

“She could actually care about him.”

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“I don’t think she’s after anything.”

“She could be trying to get put in the will.”

“She could actually care about him.”
Roman looks at his younger brother and pushes his long, unruly hair out of his face with a pudgy hand. Absently, the index finger of his other hand traces circles on his round, protrusive belly.

“Dude,” he says. Like a condemnation. Like an inalienable truth.

Outside, the lawnmower goes quiet, leaving a vacuum of sound. Conrad takes a step toward the staircase.

“I’m going to go check on Dad,” he says.

“What things?” Roman asks.

“What?”

“Things. You said Audra helped you gather up some things before she left last night. What things?”

“Just some stuff Mom wanted me to get.”

“Mom’s tooling around the greater Southwest on a motorcycle with an amateur tattoo artist, Conrad. What the fuck does she think she’s getting from this house?”

“It’s not stuff for her, Rome,” Conrad says. “Mom just asked me to take some precautions. Get things like gasoline, knives, extension cords, that kind of thing. Anything Dad could use to hurt himself or someone else. We just need it all out of the house while we work on our next move.”

“Jesus,” Roman says. “So what’s the next move?”

“I don’t know yet... I’m looking into some institutions, but that’ll be a last resort.”

“He’s that bad?”

“Audra doesn’t think so,” Conrad says, halfway up the stairs.

“Audra’s a bitch,” Roman says. “What do you think?”

Conrad Bottle stops but does not turn around.

“I think he stole my cell phone,” he says, each foot on a different step. “And I think he hid the gun.”

The music started as a way to drown out the crying, which is constant. Arthur often finds himself wondering where that damn baby finds the energy for all the relentless wailing. It
doesn’t seem to sleep. Nobody feeds it. That is, he doesn’t, and nobody else believes in it. And why should they? They can’t hear it crying, hour after hour, day after day. Arthur can’t hear it now either. He had found his old vinyl collection when he had moved up to the attic and had been playing it, record by record, at full volume ever since. Wanda had packed the collection into cardboard boxes, along with many of their other possessions (Van Gogh print of Skull with Cigarette, stack of vintage Playboy magazines, glass bong in the shape of a coiled cobra), when Roman was born. By the time Conrad was born, Arthur had forgotten about most of these relics of a former life. That is, he had forgotten about them until Wanda left. Until he started hearing that damn baby. Until he learned about The End of The World and moved into the attic to wait.

Picture: Orange pup tent set up on the floor of pyramid-shaped room with blue walls. The corners of the room are filled with disorganized cardboard boxes labeled with black Sharpie pen. Some of the boxes are stacked and arranged like furniture. Visible on some of the boxes: “Action Figures,” “Mom,” “Britannica,” “Misc.,” “Xmas,” “Conrad Paintings 1997-1998.”

Picture: At the apex of four slanted walls, a bare incandescent bulb illuminates dust and carpet fibers suspended in amber light.

Picture: Arthur Bottle’s face, close up to the lens, filling the entire frame. Roman’s round cheeks. Conrad’s pointed chin. Thick hair and beard made of patchwork colors: brown, gray, white, black. Skin creased by smiling. Eyes, narrow and uneven, glinting like razors.

Arthur shuffles through the pictures again. Audra has been giving them to him for months, a new batch with every visit, taken during the previous visit and developed in the interval. She still hasn’t gone digital. Neither has Arthur. The record playing is Talking Heads’ Remain in Light. The song is “Once
in a Lifetime.” After returning the pictures to their place in the album labeled *Baby's First Photos*, Arthur Bottle decides to dance, only noticing his younger son’s appearance at the top of the stairs with a small, quiet portion of his brain.

Conrad Bottle, upon seeing his fifty-nine-year-old father dance around the cluttered lair the attic had become in a rainbow-patterned bathrobe and white briefs, experiences a feeling that could best be expressed as the opposite of déjà vu. It is a feeling of absolute and unexpected foreignness. Like opening his front door to the surface of the moon. Stunned into silence, he watches his father dance.

Arthur flaps his open bathrobe like bat wings. Gyrates his hips and pumps his arms. Prancing and leaping, the force of his weight resonates through the house. Like a force of nature, of entropy, he exudes liberation and absolute inhibition. He dances like he is alone. Like his body will never move again. Conrad, watching him, is simultaneously captivated and horrified. This creature before him used to be his father. This man, flying about the attic like a caveman or a pagan or a meteorite combusting as it slams through the atmosphere, taught Conrad Bottle to use the toilet. Read him to sleep at night with *The Chronicles of Narnia* and *Where the Wild Things Are* and Doctor Seuss. Explained how a man and a woman can make a child together, and how humans descended from apes, and how death, as it came to Conrad’s goldfish, would someday come to Conrad as well. There, in the transformed attic of his childhood home, Conrad Bottle imagines his father, his mother, Audra, Roman, the entire human race, and himself circling the hole of an enormous toilet. Also, he thinks, the music is too fucking loud.

Downstairs, Roman opens the refrigerator and opens a beer and drinks the beer and hears Audra open the front door.


“Hello!” Audra Richter says. Roman pretends he does not hear her.
Conrad Bottle removes the needle from the record. When the music stops, Arthur falls into a stack of boxes. Inside one of them, glass audibly shatters.

“Shit,” Conrad says.

“Shit,” Audra says, jolting as she enters the kitchen and sees Roman. She puts a palm to her sweat-moist forehead. “You scared me. I didn’t think anyone was in here.”

“Hi,” Roman says, smiling.

Upstairs, Arthur Bottle is laughing as his younger son pulls labeled boxes of memorabilia, heirlooms, and miscellany off of his damp, heaving body. He stops laughing when the baby starts its guttural screaming once again.

“What are you doing here?” Roman asks.

“I see you’re off the wagon again,” Audra says.

“Court-ordered wagon,” Roman says. He finishes his beer in three loud gulps. “Unconstitutional wagon. Submit-to-a-higher-power, admit-total-lack-of-autonomy-or-responsibility wagon. The wagon is a lobotomized state of mind. I hate the fucking wagon.” He burps.

“Is that your baby, Conrad?” Arthur asks.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. Here, get up.” Conrad pulls Arthur to his socked feet.

“Can’t you feed it or change it or something? I can’t sleep with it crying like that, and it’s always crying like that, and I can’t sleep. Can’t you feed it or change it or something? I need some sleep.”


“You should leave,” Audra says, pulling the bandana off of her head and wetting her hands with cold water from the sink. She runs her fingers through her short, night-colored hair. “Arthur needs stability right now.”

“He needs family right now,” Roman says through his teeth, strangling the neck of his empty beer bottle. “Not some conniving cunt.”

After drying her hands, Audra lights a cigarette. She drags
twice and taps ashes into the drain. She is looking out the window as she says:

“I don’t expect Arthur, or you, or especially Conrad to forgive me for leaving when I did. I don’t expect anything. Believe me, Roman, I’m not here because I expect something. I’m here because I care about Arthur. Isn’t that why you’re here?”

Roman scoffs. Like the question doesn’t deserve an answer.

“Why are we here?” Arthur asks.

“Because the Band-Aids are in the bathroom, Dad.”

“No no no,” Arthur says, flicking drops of blood on the floor as he waves his hand in front of him. “I mean in the teleological sense, Conrad. Finality, you know? Don’t you ever think about that? Do you think we have a purpose? Some kind of end to all these means?” He gestures toward the bathtub, the sink, the towel rack, the broken mirror.

“I don’t know,” Conrad says, fumbling through a drawer cluttered with loose Q-tips and caked with dried toothpaste.

Downstairs:

“Can I get one of those?”

“Not above bumming from a conniving cunt?”

“Forget it.”

“Here.”

Upstairs:

“You don’t know? That’s good enough for you?” Arthur bellows suddenly, standing from his seat on the toilet. “We’re running out of time. Do you think we have all the time in the world? We can’t just sit here in numb complacency any longer. There isn’t enough time for that kind of bullshit. There isn’t very much time left in the world, son!”

“Ok, calm down...”

“If only that goddamn baby would stop I could think. I can’t sleep and I can’t hear myself think!” Arthur Bottle says, falling to his knees on the linoleum and cradling his patchwork face in his blood-streaked hands.
“There is no baby. Dad! Hold still... Stop it!” Conrad is surprised to hear himself yelling, his voice bouncing shrilly off the linoleum.

Downstairs, Roman Bottle and Audra Richter look at the ceiling.
“T’m going to go see if they need some help,” Audra says.

Nine years ago: August, 2002.

“Do you think Conrad would want this?” Arthur said, lifting a frame. “Maybe for his desk at the dorm?”

Wanda did not turn around. She was kneeling in one of the attic’s four stale blue corners and turning an oblong object in her hands. Reading a headline off of the newspaper that wrapped the object (UN Inspectors to Return to Iraq), she experienced a fleeting hint of déjà vu, as if she had read it before over breakfast perhaps one or two or three weeks ago.

“Babe?” Arthur said.

Wanda ignored him again, tearing at the newspaper with the chipped nail of her index finger. She figured that her husband would think that she hadn’t heard him over the record player, which was playing her Suzanne Vega album Solitude Standing. The song was “Tom’s diner.” She was mouthing the words when she tore away the rest of the object’s newspaper skin. Then she stopped.

“Arthur?” she said.

For some reason, her husband’s name felt alien on her tongue. It forced itself from her mouth, turning up at the end like a fish hook and gagging her. She was holding a heavy,
black, forty-five-caliber semiautomatic handgun. Her palm started sweating.

“Yes?” Arthur said. Like he hadn’t heard the difference in her tone.

Wanda considered carefully what she would say next. She turned around and faced Arthur so he could see what was in her hand, and when she met his eyes she felt the distance between them shrinking, even though neither of them had moved. Like a gravitational pull. Like magnetism. Like a black hole singularity that drew them both in and stopped time. Like she could feel his breath on her cheek. They both spoke at the same time:

“Where did this come from?”
“Careful with that. It’s loaded.”
From downstairs came the sound of Conrad Bottle flushing the toilet.

“Arthur, how long has this been in our house with us?” Wanda said, tongue stumbling over her husband’s name again.

“Not long,” he said, reaching toward her with his left hand. He closed and opened his hand, looking at her expectantly. She shrank away, cradling the weapon like an infant.

“Were you going to tell me about it?” Like an accusation. He lowered his hand.

“Why is this here?” Before he could answer.

“Of course I was going to tell you,” Arthur said. “I meant to, really. I just hadn’t gotten around to it, what with sending Conrad off an all. I didn’t think it was that big of a deal. It’s just precautionary. I’m sorry, Wanda. Of course I was going to tell you.”

Wanda turned the weapon over, watching its black carapace shine like obsidian in the light of the single bare bulb that lit the room.

“Precautionary,” she said.

“Right,” Arthur said, with a look on his face that his wife did not recognize. “What I mean is that I just felt that, with
things how they are nowadays, you know, it might be a good thing for our family to have a gun. Just, you know... for protection. If something was going to happen to our family, I’d like to know that we could do something about it, you know? I just wanted to take some precautions.”

You know. You know. Like a broken record.

“What do you think is going to happen to our family?”

The look that bloomed on Arthur’s face then surprised her. Like he hadn’t even thought about it. Like he had forgotten her name.

“Nothing specific,” he finally said.

Downstairs, their younger son turned on the television.

“Are you mad?” Arthur asked. “You’re mad, aren’t you. Are you mad?”

Upstairs, surrounded by the disorganized boxes that contained the corporeal byproducts of a marriage two decades long and searching desperately in Arthur’s crooked eyes for a trace of the man she still loved, Wanda Bottle, for the first time, thought seriously about living in this house alone with the man in front of her for the rest of her life. And it was with that thought that she was suddenly and forcibly overcome with the impulse to press the heavy, black, forty-five-caliber semiautomatic handgun in her hand against her head.

She forced the thought out of her mind.

“I’m going to get dinner started,” Wanda said, her voice a single note.

She put the gun on the floor and walked down the stairs. In three years, she would be gone.

“It’s like...” Arthur says, talking with his mouth full and twirling circles in the air with the plastic fork in his bandaged left hand, “It’s like when I exterminated that anthill by the shed. Remember? You boys were just kids.”

The record player, which Conrad and Audra had moved from the attic to the living room so Arthur would eat downstairs, is playing the Laurie Anderson album *Big Science*. The things how they are nowadays, you know, it might be a good thing for our family to have a gun. Just, you know... for protection. If something was going to happen to our family, I’d like to know that we could do something about it, you know? I just wanted to take some precautions.”

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The record player, which Conrad and Audra had moved from the attic to the living room so Arthur would eat downstairs, is playing the Laurie Anderson album *Big Science*. The
song is “Born, Never Asked,” and the question Arthur Bottle is answering is “How do you know the world is going to end?” It had been asked by his older son.

“That doesn’t make sense,” Roman says.

“Let him finish,” Audra says, lifting a water chestnut with her chop sticks. Conrad watches her insert it into her mouth.

“I remember that anthill,” Conrad says.

The room smells of curry and soy and mustard seed. Steam rises from the white takeout cartons. Beer bottles, in various stages of emptiness and fullness, litter the table. Roman had bought more beer when he had gone to pick up dinner, an errand for which he had enthusiastically volunteered despite his revoked driver’s license. Conrad had been upset at first, but now, sitting with a satisfying head buzz and a stomach heavy with house special fried rice, he feels a mysterious calm creeping into his body.

“The ants from that hill were monstrous, weren’t they? Black and shining with those visible mandibles twitching on their heads... your mother hated them. Said they were ruining the vegetable garden, but I don’t think the ants were doing as much to kill those plants as she was. Threw pesticides and fertilizers on that little piece of Earth by the bucketful. Remember that garden? The patch is still there, in the back yard, overgrown with dandelions now I think. Full of slugs, too... hey, come to think of it, we should put out some of this beer for the slugs. Slugs like beer, don’t they?”

“They’re attracted to the yeast,” Conrad says. “But they drown in the beer. People put beer in their gardens to get rid of the slugs.”

“Pass the salt,” Roman says.


“The anthill,” Arthur says, “the anthill itself was kind of small, only about the size of a half-buried basketball, but it had subterranean roots deep into the yard. I saw a plaster cast of an anthill once at a museum. It looked like a single organism, maybe some kind of jellyfish. The hill on top dripped
tunnels that extended downward into the Earth, sometimes branching into each other and sometimes not, sometimes bubbling into little chambers. Those chambers have all kinds of purposes, it turns out, like egg storage and food storage and whatever else. And you know how this all gets organized? Pheromones. The ants smell their way around, creating a full-fledged hierarchical society... Can you believe that?"

Roman laughs. It is a labored, wheezing sound.

“I’m sorry I asked,” he says.

“Asked?” Arthur says, looking around the table.

“Don’t pay attention to Rome, Dad,” Conrad says. “He’s just drunk.”

“Dude,” Roman says.

Audra lights a cigarette and asks if anybody else would like one. Everybody else takes one and passes the Bic lighter around the table. Arthur drags his and blows smoke rings. He laughs himself into a coughing fit. For a few seconds, Conrad Bottle sees something recognizable on his father’s face.

“Smoke ‘em if you got ‘em... and drink up, slugs!” Arthur says. Like a toast. He raises his bottle and drinks it dry. Conrad looks to Audra. She raises her eyebrows and shrugs. Roman stares silent at the tabletop with his hair in his eyes, tracing circles on his belly.

“That anthill,” Arthur suddenly says, like a skipping record finding its groove, “had to go, according to your mother. My first idea was just to poison it. I bought a big bag of granulated killer from Home Depot. I ended up buying a bunch of those bags, but it seemed to me that as far as the ants cared, I could have been throwing kitty litter on them. My next idea was to use the pressure washer. I figured if it could take the paint off a car, it could handle some ants, so I stood out there and blasted them for at least a half-hour until there was just a damp crater in the yard. I dumped the rest of my poison in the crater then too, for good measure.”

“They came back though,” Conrad says, suddenly remembering. “They came back a week later.”
"They sure did, son," Arthur says, smiling at Conrad. Conrad feels his heartbeat quicken. "They were resilient little bastards. I wish they had been slugs, then all we would have needed was salt. Or beer, apparently. Speaking of, is there more beer?"

"I think this was the last of it," Audra says.

Conrad looks at the table and attempts to count the bottles. He loses count, unable to hold steady focus with his eyes. He tries to remember how he got so drunk. Also, he thinks, the music is too fucking loud. Laurie Anderson is now halfway through "O Superman."

"There’s vodka and gin in the fridge," Roman says without looking at anyone. "I got that too."

"How long were you planning on staying, Roman?" Audra says.

"This is my fucking house," Roman says, pushing his hair out of his face, narrow eyes blazing. "How long were you planning on staying?"

Audra looks at Conrad. Like she expects him to say something.

What? He wonders.

"Roman," Arthur says, his voice striking a note that stiffens both of his son’s necks simultaneously. Conrad Bottle is hit by another wave of déjà vu. He feels sick to his stomach.

"Get me the vodka from the refrigerator. With orange juice. A screwdriver. No ice."

Like they were still children. Like nothing had changed.

"But..." Roman says, but then he stands up and goes to the kitchen.

Audra drops her cigarette into one of the bottles and stands.

"I’m going to lie down," she says. "I need to sober up before I drive myself home."

She disappears, leaving only her smell behind her. Conrad senses it, above the beer and smoke and cooling takeout. From the kitchen comes the sound of ice cubes falling against...
glass. Conrad looks to his father, whose face has gone amorphous and cold. Unrecognizable again. The record stops.

“Do you hear it, son?” he says. “Tell me you can hear it.”

“Will you finish the story?” Conrad says. “About the ant-hill. I forget. How did we finally get rid of it?”

“The tunnels,” Arthur says, “are like veins. The chambers... organelles. Pumping little ant cells between each other. Like an organism. Like a city. Systematic and self-perpetuating until entropy runs its course... we burned it, Conrad. How’s that for finality? I had you and Roman go at it with shovels and then I poured gasoline into it. More than I should have, probably. Can you imagine? That acrid odor clouding their antennae... no pheromone strong enough to detect over it... blinding them and muting them and suffocating them. I was too close when I dropped the match. It singed my eyebrows off, don’t you remember? Your mother had to draw them on me until they grew back.”

Of course he remembers. He wonders how he had forgotten. Blisters on his palms from digging. The rushing sound of the combusting gas. Arthur rolling in the grass. The blue puddle next to the shed, still burning. Nothing had ever grown there again.

“Nothing in their evolution, in their entire carefully constructed little microcosm, could have prepared them for that,” Arthur says. “There was no understanding it to them. There was no preventing it. It was beyond them, a destruction so complete, orchestrated by forces so far beyond their comprehension... that’s The End of the World, son. That’s what is coming.”

Roman is back in the room. He sets a glass in front of his father.

“That’s not what I asked,” he says.


“I didn’t ask what The End of the World would be like, I asked how you knew it was coming. How are you so certain the world is going to end, Dad?”
Conrad takes the final drag of his cigarette. Arthur blinks. He gives his head a small shake. He makes a sound like laughing.

“The publisher likes them,” Audra says. “Says that the subject matter is very Diane Arbus, which I guess is a compliment. I think they’re just waiting on me now, but I still don’t feel like it’s complete…”

“I hate that,” Conrad says, turning another page of the album labeled Baby’s First Photos and trying to appear more sober than he is.

“Right? It’s frustrating. I’m sure you have the same problem with your paintings. Probably worse, actually, considering you have to manufacture every figment of your image and I just try to capture mine. People like to say photography is just luck, being in the right place at the right time, but that’s an art in itself. Having the presence of mind to capture a place and time from a certain perspective, that’s an art. I think my present problem is my subconscious audience. He or she or it or they are still unsatisfied with some intangible goal for the collection that I can’t even perceive, but still can’t seem to think my way past…”

“No, that’s not what I’m talking about,” Conrad says. “I mean the Diane Arbus thing. I hate it when people assess my work in simile like that. —This painting is like Banksy meets Hieronymus Bosch. —It’s like the artist was trying to map a modern soul.—Like a condemnation of conformist social mores. —Like Warhol if he’d lived under a rock... None of it means anything. What does any of that tell you about any one of my paintings? Can you picture it? It’s nonsense.”

From the attic come the muffled sounds of R.E.M.’s album Automatic for the People. The song is “Try Not to Breathe.” Arthur is already asleep in his pup tent. Roman is in the upstairs bathroom, looking like a murder victim passed out next to the toilet on the bloodstained linoleum. Conrad and Audra are in the living room, sitting on the floor amongst the
scattered couch cushions they had removed in their search for the forty-five. A few minutes ago, Audra had crept upstairs to fetch the album of her photos to accompany what she had called a “fresh perspective” on their search, which turned out to be a cone-shaped joint of pungent marijuana from British Columbia. It smolders now between the fingers of her right hand. Dirt under her fingernails. Incense burns in the navel of a bronze, Buddha-shaped holder on the coffee table. Along with Audra’s body, Conrad thinks he smells cinnamon and limes.

“Well hang on, how else are they supposed to express an understanding of your work?” Audra says, each word a pillow of smoke.

“What do you mean?”

“Like... relativism?” Audra says. “In order to understand anything, don’t they have to put it within a frame of reference that they can understand? Like... the context of their perspective?” She licks her lips and blinks. Conrad shrugs. “This is strong stuff,” Audra says. Conrad nods.

“Relativism,” he says between hissing hits of the joint, “is lazy. It’s just an excuse to dismiss any notion of truth from our discourse. I realize that we all operate within our own frames of reference, okay, but if we give up on approaching truth we become complacent in perpetual ignorance. We might as well be potted plants.”

“You sound like Arthur,” says Audra, exposing a sharp canine tooth with a quiet laugh. Conrad coughs.

“I do not.”

He looks down at the album on his lap.
weeds and yellow, sparking dandelion heads. Laying on the lawn in the foreground is the crisscross shadow of the swing set still standing from days where long-gone children played in the yard.

Picture: Close-up of a half-eaten sandwich on a chipped plate on the floor of the kitchen. Covered with ants.

“What do you have against truth?” Conrad says, turning the page.

“Nothing,” Audra says quickly. Then: “Well, maybe not nothing. Something. I don’t think it’s something we should obsess over. I’m not like Arthur. I don’t think we have this final truth or purpose that we need to discover, but it’s not like I have a problem with people who think that we do. I don’t know for sure, and neither do they. We’re each just working within our own individual contexts.”

“So you don’t think it’s wrong for people to pursue truth, if they feel so inclined.”

“No,” Audra says. “Of course not.”

Conrad finds her heavy-lidded eyes and holds them again. They are wet and bloodshot. He imagines his are too. He says: “Can I ask you something then? Something you need to answer as truthfully as you know how?”

Audra leans away from Conrad. He notices only then how close they had been sitting, her head practically resting on his shoulder.

“Oh,” Audra says.

“What are you doing here? And I don’t mean here, in this room, with me, right now, but in this town. Why have you been coming to see Arthur? Is it just for this?”

He lifts the album labeled Baby’s First Photos. He holds her eyes until she looks away first, again. She searches her pockets, finds a cigarette, puts it in her mouth and lights it before she looks at him again. She says:

“No just that... Actually, that project just kind of happened. I’m a photographer, I take pictures, so I took some
here. Arthur liked them and encouraged me to take more. I sent them to the publisher on a lark and now there’s a book in the works. It’s as much Arthur’s as mine, though, and I think he likes that. I’m not trying to exploit him, if that’s what you were thinking. These are the only copies of the pictures, aside from a few samples I sent the publisher. Arthur gets to keep them. And the negatives. I made sure he knew that he would have the final word.”

“So why did you come back in the first place?”

“I think,” she says, avoiding his eyes, “it was because of the way I left. I still... I regret it, Conrad. You remember what I said before about my subconscious audience? That’s been true for a while, with practically everything I try to create... I think it’s because my subconscious audience is still you at least part of the time.”

“Me?”

“Yeah.” A little smile. Like she was embarrassed.

“I’m surprised.”

“I’m not surprised you’re surprised. I know how it must have seemed when I left but... I was confused. I was young and I was scared and I ran. It isn’t an excuse, believe me now I know there’s no excuse, but I think things changed in my head when I found out I was pregnant. I felt like I went to bed one night and woke up as a different person. Like I’d woken up in a prison cell without knowing how I got there. God that’s awful. It sounds even worse as I say it aloud... and then, of course, when I lost it... Everything was different again.”

Now she is looking at him. Like she expects him to say something. He thinks he should say something too, but he is floundering in his own mind, treading a torrent of the past that saturates his consciousness.

“I was wrong,” she says.

Conrad Bottle feels his cell phone vibrate in his pocket. Sees himself in bed in Audra’s old apartment in Chicago. Feels her palm cracking against his face. Feels her lips closing around the shaft of his penis. Hears the click of her Nikon.
Smells her old leather jacket. Smells pinched-off cigarettes. Sees her backing out of the driveway. Feels his cell phone vibrate in his pocket. Hears her music playing in her car, too fucking loud. Feels the wind on his face through the window, too fucking fast. Sees her holding the thin white stick, leaning against the doorframe with her arms crossed over her modest breasts. Smells her sweating. Hears a train passing outside. Sees himself on one knee, just twenty-three years old, holding out a ring he can’t afford at the nicest restaurant in their hometown in Ohio. Hears people clapping. Sees her crying. Feels goose bumps rise on her skin as he touches her. Feels her shiver. Feels his cell phone vibrate in his pocket. Hears her talking in the other room. Sees that she is alone. Sees the fresh, blank whiteness of a canvas that stays blank. Feels his mind overflowing with emptiness. Sees a pack of cigarettes tucked in a box of Tampax. Hears himself yelling about honesty and truth and lies. Feels her long night-colored hair between his fingers. Hears her cry out as he pulls, too fucking hard. Sees himself weeping on the carpet of their new apartment in Columbus. Smells the still-packed cardboard boxes. Feels his cell phone vibrate in his pocket. Hears it speak with her recorded voice. Hears her saying that she is in her car. That she is driving one hundred miles per hour. That she does not know where she is going. Hears her gasping and crying. Hears the wind from the window hitting the mouthpiece and thinks that it sounds like bombs going off. Sees the ring he couldn’t afford on the counter in the kitchen of their brand new apartment he can’t afford. Hears her saying she was in the shower when she felt the pushing. That the pain was unbearable. Like hot knives twirling in her womb. That she had gotten out of the shower and sat naked and dripping on the toilet. That it had fallen out of her, staining the white bowl with dark, dark blood. That she hadn’t known what to do, so she had flushed it. That she was sorry. That she didn’t want him to call her. That she didn’t think she was ever coming back.

“You came back because you were wrong?”
“To leave like that. It wasn’t fair to you.”

Conrad feels pain throbbing from his fingers. Sees the joint has burned down to his skin. He wonders how long he has been holding it, cooking his own flesh. He sets the roach at Buddha’s feet.

“No,” he says. “It wasn’t.”

“Maybe this is... I don’t know,” she says. She puts out her cigarette and pulls her knees up to her chest and folds her arms over her knees and rests her chin on her arms. “I guess I haven’t tried to articulate it before. I haven’t had to, really. I think the Watsons and the rest of the neighborhood just thought I was appointed by the state or something, and I let them think that... When I lost my job I moved back home, and I used to drive past this house sometimes. Every time it reminded me of you. Like a monument to my mistake. To my inability to do anything I set out to do. To my tendency to fail everyone who matters to me... One day I finally just knocked on the door. I don’t know what I expected, really. Arthur answered the door. He was so happy to see me, and when I saw what had happened to him, that he was alone here... honestly, Conrad, you should have seen what this house was like before I got here... I think then I felt a kind of obligation. No, actually that’s not the right word. I don’t know. Not destiny or purpose but... I don’t know. All I do know is that for some reason it’s made sense to me, taking care of him, more than anything else I’ve done in my life until now.”

I don’t know. I don’t know. Like a broken record.

Upstairs, the record player has gone quiet.

Conrad wonders how much time has passed. Realizes his arm, the one with the burnt fingers on the end of it, is draped over Audra’s narrow shoulders. Knows there was something he was searching for. Something important.

What? He wonders.

“It’s taken me a long time to makes sense of anything since you left,” he says, the words falling out of his mouth. He wishes he could stop them. “I feel empty, still. I would have
been there for you, Audra, if you had let me. I loved you so much. You didn’t have to run away.”

“I know that now, but that doesn’t change anything,” she says, choking on her words. “I wish there was some way to fix that. I need you to be okay. I don’t think I can go on until you are. I would do anything to make you feel whole again.”

She leans over, resting her head against his shoulder. Anything? He wonders.

Like a goldfish flopping as it suffocates. Like walking a tightrope. Like riding a bike he had forgotten how to ride. Like fighting. Like plunging his shovel into the anthill and tearing it apart. Like shredding all the blank canvases and half-finished images that papered the walls of his mind. Like a shot of concentrated déjà vu. They had fucked on the living room floor, Audra on her hands and knees, burying her face in a couch cushion to muffle her moans. Conrad behind her, gripping the blades of her hip bones hard enough to bruise her skin, biting his lip, looking at the few downy hairs between the dimples on her lower back, the flexing shoulder muscles tattooed with black feathery wings, the puckered bull’s-eye of her anus. He had ejaculated in long streaks up her back, and now he sits naked on the couch that he had put back together while she was in the kitchen, wiping his semen from between the notches of her spine with a paper towel. He lights one of her cigarettes.

“Are there any more of those left?” she asks.

“Maybe,” he says. Like he doesn’t know that there aren’t.

She walks back into the room, her bare feet treading almost silently, and sits next to him on the couch. She folds her legs and reaches for the cigarette. He passes it to her.

“How do you feel?” she asks.

“Good,” he says.

“How do you feel?” he asks.

“Good,” she says. Like it is true.
“Good,” he says.
Conrad Bottle watches her hand shake as she passes the cigarette back. She will not look at him.
“You know...” she says, “I don’t think finding truth is as important as you think it is. Sometimes I think it is better just to be, rather than to insist on knowing.”
“What we don’t know can hurt us,” he says.
“You think so?”
“Yes.”
Audra is chewing her fingernails. She says:
“If Arthur would let himself be, instead of obsessing about truth and purpose and finality, maybe he would be able to function. He can’t accept not knowing... he’s just paralyzed by it... so preoccupied with wasting his time that he’s wasting all of his time.”
“You’d rather he be like Roman?”
“What do you mean?”
“Apathetic. Roman doesn’t care about anything but himself, and that makes him a parasite. He just takes what he can get and contributes nothing to anyone. I fucking hate him.”
“He’s your brother.”
“Well I fucking hate my brother.”
“And what exactly do you contribute?” Now she is looking at him, and he is suddenly, uncomfortably aware that he is naked.
“I paint,” he says.
“And what good does that do anyone but you?”
“It’s art, Audra. Are you saying there’s no purpose to art?”
“I’m asking what you think the purpose of your art actually is.”

“Why?”
“Do you have an answer?”
“Yeah,” Conrad says. He drags the cigarette. Exhales. Drags again. Exhales again. Puts the butt at Buddha’s feet. Says: “My art is my expression of what I don’t understand. It’s a conglomeration of the contradictions I perceive framed by
my own limitations. I create it because through that act, I can approach understanding. I can approach truth.”

“So then your goal is to approach and understand truth? Whatever that may be? No matter what? Truth is the ends and art is just the means?”

“Yes.”

“And what if the truth is something awful? Or evil? You find truth and it’s repulsive and intolerable and destructive. Would you still want that understanding?”

“I would. And I would want to paint it.”

Audra looks away, nodding slightly. Conrad crosses his arms over his chest, feeling satisfied. He lets his eyes move up and down her body.

“Then you should know something,” she says, her voice a single note.

“What?”

“I haven’t been honest with you.”

“How do you mean?”

Audra’s lips tremble. Conrad watches her struggle to form the words.

“What I told you happened to me, in the shower, on the toilet, years ago... It didn’t actually happen to me. That happened to a girl I knew in college.”

“What are you saying?” Like a thunderclap from the horizon.

“I’m saying that I didn’t miscarry, Conrad. I terminated my pregnancy. I did it so we wouldn’t have to get married anymore. That’s the truth.”


And he is spinning. And he is falling. And finally, he understands.

Awakening in silence, Arthur Bottle can only think that it had already happened. That The End of the World had come and gone, and that he had somehow (Tragically? Mercifully? Ironically?) slept through all of it. But then there is a sound,
practically imperceptible now to his old, tired ears accustomed to the blaring music he always played or that damn baby’s wailing he always heard. The sound is a low, static tone, interrupted by the occasional pop like a distant gunshot. Rising from the depths of a catatonic sleep and a frenzied dream that he cannot remember (except for the fact that Wanda was in it), he realizes that the sound is his record player, still playing long past the end of the album he had put on so he could fall asleep.

He opens his eyes, and there it is, sitting on his stomach, serene and silent like a golem or a god. It is naked, its doughy flesh billowing in rolls on its belly, arms, legs, cheeks. Its eyes are different colors, one green and one brown, though it only opens one at a time, periodically closing one before opening the other every couple of seconds with the consistency of a metronome. It has both sets of tiny genitals directly adjacent to each other. It has tiny hands that are folded in front of it. Like it is praying. The soles of its tiny feet are pressed together. It is smiling at Arthur Bottle, who finds his body unable to move. He sees that the flap of his pup tent is still zipped shut.

“How did you get in here?” he asks the baby.

It unfolds its hands and reaches them toward his face, opening and closing its fingers. Arthur takes it in his arms, unzips the flap of his tent and steps into the attic darkness. When he removes the needle from the record, it is like all the air is vacuumed from the room. He gasps in the deafening silence, reeling, taking a few steps to keep from falling to the floor. The baby laughs at him.

“Ssh,” he says. “Please. Just for a minute. Please...”

They baby obeys, and cradling it in his arms, Arthur remembers for an instant what it means to be at peace. And only then, in the alien quiet, does Arthur hear the sounds from downstairs. Even muffled through the ceilings and floors, they are instantly recognizable as the sounds of crying.

“What is that?” he asks the baby.

But it has already crawled back into his navel and disappeared.
The scene Arthur finds downstairs is chaos.

“Dad,” Roman says, holding his head like it might fall off, dried vomit streaking the front of his t-shirt, “Conrad’s going apeshit. We’ve got to do something.”

Audra Richter is on the couch in her panties and tank top, curled into a fetal position and weeping into her hands.

“Where is he?” Arthur asks.

“Back yard,” Roman says.

Arthur takes long, quick strides into the kitchen and looks out the window over the sink. He sees his younger son standing in the grass wearing only boxer shorts, a bottle hanging at his side in his right hand and a small fire burning at his feet. A stream of smoke and feathery ashes rises into a star-flecked sky starting to gray with rising sun.

“We’ve got to get him,” Roman says. “Somebody’s going to call the cops if they haven’t already.”

“Okay,” Arthur says. Then: “What are you waiting for?”

“You,” Roman says. He shrugs.

When the screen door bangs shut behind them, Conrad doesn’t turn. Arthur feels frigid dew soak into his socks as he runs toward his younger son in the fresh-mowed grass. Roman hangs back and bounces on his heels, seeming unsure of where to stand.

“Is that my gin?” he says.

Arthur stops when he sees Conrad’s face. Red, vacant, soaked with tears. Moss-colored eyes aimed at the sky, their pupils holding the smoldering light of the fire.

“Son?” he says. “What are you doing?”

The burning thing is the album, Baby’s First Photos still legible on the scorched and curling cover. Conrad draws a deep breath and speaks in a voice his father does not recognize.

“Where’s the gun, Arthur?”

Arthur puts a hand to his stomach, feeling something shift. Like a kick. All around them, birds have begun to sing...
the morning.

“The gun?”


Somewhere, a siren wails.

“Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck!” Roman says, pacing.

“What do you need the gun for, Conrad?” Arthur says.

“Just tell me where it is.”

“No.”

Conrad blinks for the first time since his brother and his father came outside. He turns his head toward Arthur.

“Did you know?” he asks.

“No? Know? What?”

“Did you know what Audra did?”

“Do you want to shoot Audra?”

“Answer me!” Echoing through the neighborhood.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Arthur says, as calmly as he can, “And I don’t know what you want the gun for... or why you’re burning our pictures... Son, what is happening?”

“She destroyed everything. I had to do something. I had to destroy something of hers. She...”

Suddenly, Conrad’s legs buckle. He closes his eyes and falls toward the fire. Arthur charges forward and catches him. Lowers him gently to the cool grass and kneels over him. The siren is louder. Conrad’s lips are moving.

“What? Son?” Arthur lowers his ear down to Conrad’s face.

“I can’t... I can’t even... I can’t...”

Arthur Bottle pulls his younger son against his chest.

“The gun isn’t here, Conrad,” he whispers. “Your mother told you in the message she left you. Didn’t you listen? She took it with her... wherever she went. Didn’t trust me with it. Never did, I guess.”

“I wish the world would end.”

Conrad Bottle becomes very still. The fire has gone out.

Conrad Bottle becomes very still. The fire has gone out.
Back at his small apartment in Portland, Conrad makes his first call on his new cell phone. He calls his mother. He gets her voicemail. He says:

“Hi, mom. It’s Conrad... Just calling to let you know that you don’t need to worry about Dad anymore. He’s been put in a facility in Cleveland. There was an incident and someone called the police on him while I was there. It wasn’t anything serious, but the court decided it was the best option for him. It was probably the Watsons who called. They never could mind their own damn business... Anyway, I got everything you said out of the house, but it doesn’t really matter now. Also, I think Roman’s going to live there for a while. Seems he ran into some trouble in New York and needed a place to stay. With Dad in the home it seemed like the best option. I’m not sure that makes you feel any better about the safety of the house but, honestly, you don’t live there anymore, so I’m not sure why you care... Roman’s cell is XXX-XXX-XXXX if you need anything. I think it would be better if you talked to him from now on. I need to focus on my work... I’m sure the Grand Canyon was beautiful, and I hope you’re safe and well... Bye.”

He sets his phone on his coffee table and sits down on a stool in front of a fresh, blank canvas. He lets his eyes pan over its textured whiteness. Like the palm of a giant. Like a window. Like a doorway or a portal. Like he could step through it, and appear in a different place in a different time in a different world. Like the rolled-back eyes of a corpse. Like fossilized bone. Like porcelain. Like a hermit’s pale, veined skin. Like
an overcast sky that conceals the sun and the stars and the incomprehensible infinity past the atmosphere. Like a piece of paper. Like a blank, rectangular piece of paper where the truth was always supposed to be.

He picks up his brush.
He puts it back down.

Max Bruno
Naked Trees

I
Naked trees, behold!
The dying Fire in the sky
Smothered by darkness,
Sealed within these abundant arms
But sweet, the breath that broods over
Your bareness—
What lingers
Like embers
Pulsing beneath the ash:
The knave’s heart-tellings
Folded inside the lines of your hands
And the lines coursing stray,

“Sow, sow, sow”
Words strewn o’er hollow valleys and
Left for bury by the snow
And seasons’ fray,
“Reap, love, reap
Reap, love, reap
Toward the sputtering
Flames,
Oh, whose roots burn ever sweet.”

II
Withering veins,
Brittle and bitter,
Such a definite and familiar
Savor
Along the determining Current
With cinders spreading
To where the free air won’t breathe,
Reap, Love, reap,
Who knows

Naked Trees

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Naked trees, behold!
The dying Fire in the sky
Smothered by darkness,
Sealed within these abundant arms
But sweet, the breath that broods over
Your bareness—
What lingers
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Brittle and bitter,
Such a definite and familiar
Savor
Along the determining Current
With cinders spreading
To where the free air won’t breathe,
Reap, Love, reap,
Who knows
The winter and the spring:
I knew you once
In songs played on the strings
Of weak crowns,
“And we’ll sleep when the sun reigns ’round,

III
“And to each their own is found
In beds of Eglantine—
Pleasant hauntings; petals wilting
Curling into purple kisses:
Reap, Love, reap
In ruleless
days.”

Emily Conklin
Food Cake

And so the cake said to the baker,
“why would you slice and serve me
when I smell
so sweet and
make eager children
stare and
cause the world to be
envious of your skill?”
Retracting the knife a bit, he replied,
“When affection is the goal and not a byproduct of your being, you have yet to
calculate even yourself, the one who desires the love and
besides, you’re just a cake.”
Ending the conversation with milk

James Earl Cox III
My White Shirt

When I was growing up, I remember how there was only one man in my village that had a gun. I do not know how he got the gun; all that mattered was that he had it. And because of this gun, he had more power than the village elders. It did not matter that he was only sixteen and it did not matter that any one of the elders was easily four times his age; he had the gun and was always in the right because of it.

One day my mother went into the big city and came home with a clean white shirt for me. This gift made me so happy I paraded around wearing it. “What a nice shirt” they said to me as I marched passed. I strode, chin up, through the village center where my mother taught me how to walk, around the communal well, which the other boys and I used to dare each other to jump over. No one ever fell in, although I kind of wish someone would have. And then I marched out of town past the fields. This is when he stopped me. He stood there; sweat dripping down his boney frame.

“Take it off.”

I pretended to not know what he was talking about and asked, “Take what off?”

“Don’t play dumb with me, little boy. Take it off.”

“But why?”

“Because you need to prove that you deserve it.”

I solemnly took off my new shirt and held it in my hands. I did not want to set my clean shirt in the dry dirt and ruin the whiteness of it.

“Hand it over.”

The sun beat down upon us. I remember how quiet it was that day. I don’t think I even saw a stray cat or hedgehog scavenging for food. They were all hiding from the noonday furnace.

“Why?”

He raised his gun and pointed it at my chest, holding it
sideways like they do in the movie. I remember how everyone was crazy about that movie. One day when Dansee came racing back from the market holding the pirated copy. We were all excited, not realizing we’d now need to steal a TV as well.

“Just hand it over.”

I lowered my head and passed my white shirt into his open hand. His palms left brown stains on my shirt. He was covered in filth. We all were, water was scarce, and it seldom rained. My dad once told me a story about a time when everyone was clean. His dad had told him this same story. I didn’t believe most of it. He spoke of dead monsters that went to sleep and became black water. He told me that humans found these sleeping ancients and abused them, throwing them into flames, so the titans, in turn, melted all the world’s ice. An eye for an eye. I think it’s a silly story. I won’t tell my children.

“How dance.”

“But I don’t want to dance.”

“If you want to be worthy of this shirt, you’ll dance for it.” He fidgeted with his gun. Today I know that his fidgeting was his finger flicking the safety off. At the time it just looked intimidating. I did not have much of a choice. I could dance for my shirt, or I could dance for my life.

I started hopping from foot to foot. A slight grin formed on his chapped lips.

“Now do it faster. And with clapping”

I did as he told me. I was not keen on dying that day.

“Now sing.”

At this point, a few grown-ups had stopped toiling in the fields and watched meekly as I danced and sung. They were ashamed for me. Saddened by the spectacle they were powerless to stop.

“Good, that is enough.” He lowered his gun, and began to walk away.

“What about my shirt?” He had not forgotten about it, he was playing coy, waiting for me to make the move.

“Now do it faster. And with clapping”

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“What about my shirt?” He had not forgotten about it, he was playing coy, waiting for me to make the move.
“Oh yes, the shirt.” He tossed it to the ground and spat on it.
“Now it matches your dancing and singing.”

The adults in the fields continued their laboring, not wanting to attract his attention. I picked up my shirt and put it back on. He meant to insult me, yet the dirt and spit he had placed on my shirt were not insults. They were medals. I had survived an encounter with the man with a gun. I wore my shirt proudly for the next few weeks, until the day they found his body in a ditch. He was missing both left limbs and had several gashes on his chest crudely spelling out “eye for an eye.”

Although no one was saddened by this discovery, I didn’t want to be a suspect. Just for a little while, I was hoping people might have forgotten my encounter with the man with a gun.
Please Return Your Tray Tables to Their Upright and Locked Positions.

As Baxton fell from the sky, wind nipping at his face, he knew the emergency chute wouldn’t work. It was sabotaged. Janice the stewardess had done it. She had not particularly fancied Baxton and tried her best to remind him daily. Coincidentally, her last words had been particularly vulgar slurs directed at him. Although largely inaudible due to the speed and altitude of the plane, the way her mouth wrenched signaled her intentions. That is, of course, until a sizable chunk of the airplane’s frame collided with her beautiful face leaving a rather unattractive blemish where her head used to be. Unlike the captain’s death, he was sure hers was relatively quick and, for the most part, painless.

After the captain had finally died from three gunshots to the chest, the stewards began to distribute the emergency parachutes to the passengers and remaining members of the flight crew. This confused Baxton as parachutes were not standard for this aircraft. As he was the second and only other steward, he found it odd that Janice would hand him a chute rather than let him pick his own. She beamed and squinted her eyes as she did so. He figured she was scheming. God, how he loved that smile. Her stewardess uniform still smelled of the cheese soup he spilt on it earlier that day. He remembered her uniform from last week with the stain from the baby back rib incident. Along with the ice cream fiasco blotch uniform before that. And the fruit punch one. But her clothes didn’t matter anymore. At this point her uniform was probably covered in blood. And scorch marks from when the plane finally exploded. Regardless, he knew she hadn’t intended for him to live.

The captain didn’t seem to mind being dead. Baxton didn’t know if this might have changed since he last saw the captain, though. He decided it was a decent time to bail when the left wing’s engine sputtered a horrible screech and...
began to regurgitate flame. Unless his memory faltered, he remembered that upon his concluding visit to the cockpit, the captain had settled down quite peacefully on the floor. Compared to the armed assailant, who went through his whole dying ordeal with quite a bit of childish and unnecessary screaming, the captain was very mature about his situation. Eventually though, after a bit of coughing and the occasional shudder, they both decided to behave themselves and be good lads. Resting peacefully, not making a scene.

As the ground inched closer and closer, Baxton did not question if he would live. It was clear he would not. He more wondered if there would be enough remains for identification. Would the impact pull him apart and scatter him far enough that the investigators may never find him? He wondered if it would be the same for the other passengers and crew falling amongst the scorched chunks of plane. He wondered if they would piece the bodies back together so the respective families could bury them. Teams of morticians putting bodies back together like jigsaw puzzles. What a bizarre thought!

The fall was quite drafty. The atmosphere rushing past. Baxton wondered if he’d have frostbite before he kissed the Earth. He wondered if the assailant would have frostbite when they found his body. If they found his body. Can fire extinguishers cause frostbite? After the first shot had exited the gun, and snuggled itself cozily within the captain’s chest, Baxton had snatched up an extinguisher and rushed to the cockpit assuming something had popped and was toasting the plane. Instead, he ended up spraying down the assailant pointblank with extinguisher goo, causing the man to unload the rest of his shots while flailing naively.

Baxton wondered if the investigation would ever figure out what happened. How the copilot was able to smuggle a gun on. How they had been having relationship-like qualms. The captain not willing to come out and divorce his wife for the copilot. He remembered how he blew Janice’s last nerve by effectively blinding the only other crew member able to
fly the plane. That’s probably what prompted the faulty parachute. Her rude final words occurring only after the left engine blew and he accidentally knocked her chute out the emergency exit. He still did not fully understand the cause for the flaming engine, but figured it must be related to the wayward ammunition. The copilot’s aim was horridly reduced after inhaling such unpleasant foam.

None of it mattered at this point. Baxton was just as much a dead man as the rest of them, and he knew it too. He just had a few more moments to think. Just wished he could have seen Janice’s face after they would have landed. Still had the theater tickets in his pocket. He wasn’t interested anymore though. Didn’t want to date a girl who was lacking a head. That would be just plain silly.

The airport smelled of expensive fast food and watered down perfume. The air was full of the sound of bustling feet and the chatter of frantic travelers forgetting time zone differences. He did not particularly mind these sensations, they were unique to the situation, and furthermore, the airport would have felt strange had this assortment of input not been received. To be honest, he was not paying particular attention to the surroundings at the moment. He was more focused on his phone, occasionally buzzing from an incoming signal. That and not running into the next person on the moving walkway. Gate D20.

Do u miss me? The tiny font stared up at him.
   Maybe, do u miss me?
   I asked first
   Thats not fair u should say it first.
   I do. :)
   Maybe I do.
   Hey I said it, u should too.
   Its hard to miss someone when youre still in contact with them.
Boarding in 5
   But I wont be in contact with you for 8 hours :(

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Boarding in 5
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I shall miss you appropriately for the 8 hours then, except when I am asleep. Because it is hard to miss someone while you are slumbering. Well, you actually miss everything when you are asleep. It is quite hard to not miss anything when you’re not awake.

Three minutes later she responded with “ur wonderful” accompanied by a colon and an end parenthesis. He quite enjoyed the parting text conversation.

Seat 4D, window seat. He hastily shuffled into his aisle, allowing the train of boarders to proceed. A few skankily clad women passed by, then a young couple. And possibly an albino. Across from him, a suited man gracefully took seat 4B. A larger man took up residence next to him, in seat 4C. Almost overflowing onto his seat. When the passengers began to settle in, he enquired of the large man,

“Excuse me, would you mind putting this bag in the overhead compartment? I meant to do it earlier but didn’t want to interfere with boarding pas—”

“Shmr.”

He missed what the large man had said, but the man snatched the carry-on parcel out of his hand and in one motion, forcefully thrust it in the overhead compartment space.

The large man smelled as those who recently ate garlic do.

Please fasten your seatbelts, return your chairs and tray tables to their upright and locked positions. Please turn off your electronic devices, we will notify you when it is safe to use such devices.

The plane left the gate and approached the runway. He laid his head back and closed his eyes, feeling the wheels bounce and spin across the smooth taxi way. He slept well into the flight. Until the large man shook him.

“Hey.”

“hmmmm.”

“Hey you, wake up.”

“What?”

“I hate you.”

“Excuse me!”

“I fucking hate you.”
“I don’t understand.”
“I saw you in the airport, staring at your phone.”
“And?”
“You don’t give a crap about others.”
“Wait, you inferred that from my pho—“
“Shut the fuck up, you little shit.”
“I’m sorry you feel this way?”
“All you young fucks say that, none of you mean it though.
Living in your damn phones. There are people all around you
to interact with and all you can concentrate on is your fucking phone.”
“There’s nothing wrong with texting, and I wish you’d quit calling me a little fu—”
“Who were you texting?”
“Huh?”
“Don’t make me repeat myself, boy.”
“Just a girl, can we please drop it? I’d like get a bit of sleep if possi—”
“Just a girl? You’re not even fucking married yet? Jesus
your generation is fucked up.”
“Just drop it, you’re not pleasant and I’m done talk—”
“Of course you are, you little shi—”
For the first time during their conversation, the large man was the one interrupted mid-sentence. Not by the voice of another, but a series of crashes and bangs, and then a particularly disturbing foamy sound followed by muffled screaming, emitting from the cockpit of the plane. The plane’s announcement speakers came alive:
Arghghghghh, he ssfayed ef raighhhh een maaa faishhhh, raighhh enn maaa fucken faishhhh
Hold him down, try to keep the wound closed. What the hell, what the HELL possessed you to drench him in that toxic shit? Jesus.
I don’t want to die, I don’t want to die. I don’t want t—
Go check who’s knocking on the door.

It’s a passenger? What does she want? The mic is on? GODDAMI—

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I don’t want to die, I don’t want to die. I don’t want t—
Go check who’s knocking on the door.

It’s a passenger? What does she want? The mic is on? GODDAMI—
The announcement went dead. The large man turned towards him.

“Your girlfriend won’t cry for you.”

“What?”

“We’re going to die, and she won’t cry for you.”

“But what would possess you to say that?”

“Because you’re a little shit and I want you to know that.”

At this point, the suited man sitting across the aisle turned towards the large man,

“First you were harassing the poor boy which, to be honest, was none of my business and I had intended to keep it that way, no offense.”

“None taken,” the newly established “poor boy” responded.

“But now, even after that horrifying slip of an announcement, you continue to verbally abuse the boy, going as far to ensure that we all will die. Have you no common sense sir? You quite possibly could have sent the passengers into a frenzy, as if we all aren’t stressed enou—”

“Fuck you.”

“Excuse me!”

“You heard me, fuck you, asshole. If you have a wife, I hope she doesn’t cry at your funeral, either.”

“That’s it, I’ve had enough,” responded the suited man who began to pummel the large man with a colorful assortment of overhead luggage, including the bag the large man assisted in hoisting before the flight.

Just then, a rather noisy and disturbing blast sounded from the side of the plane thrusting the cabin forcibly to the right, causing a heavy bag to fall out of the overhead compartment and land on the suited man’s cranium, knocking him to the floor. The large man began his rebuttal to the suited man’s assault, shouting incoherent profanities through swollen bleeding lips, and slamming plastic luggage down on the suited man’s body.

The “poor boy” sat in his seat, horrified at the spectacle.
The window blew out as the cabin lit up like any number of stunning Fourth of July metaphors, and all he could see was purple, and all he would think of was

*ur wonderful (colon, end parenthesis)*
*ur wonderful (colon, end parenthesis)*
*ur wonderful (colon, end parenthesis)*

They better give me a big compensation for this ordeal. When I land and find my way back to civilization, I’m going to sue for all the trouble they put me through, always forcing me to work with Baxton. Idiot killed the last man who could land the damn plane. The hell? Where’s my parachute? I can still feel it in my hands, the woven reassurance of its plastic straps... Why, God, why?

"**What the fucK, Baxton, I’ve had enough of your creepy stalking shit. Yeah, you just keep staring at me, take a long good final state because I can’t wait till you jump. You have no idea what**—"

Oh cruelest fate of fate, how you cast me out upon misery’s doorstep. How you abandoned me in the endless fields of doubt and infantile hope. He does love me, he does love me. The problem is not that he loves me, the problem is that he cannot love me. Our forbidden love was not meant to be kept secret. Long nights in lonely hotels; it was only time until he longed for my company and I for his. But now, now he has the gall and the verve to dismiss me, to pretend that our lengthy and multiple nights cooing one another, lying interlocked upon the bed sheets of foreign counties, means nothing! Even more so, to deny it. The horror. His wife... she is the devil here, not I! She wishes to retain his true nature, his lust and need for my companionship, but now. Now I have concocted a scheme. A brilliant scheme to set it right.

If we may not live as lovers, we shall perish as such, going down together in flame. What a romantic sentiment! A most romantic sentiment indeed! How would I accomplish such a
task? Oh ho ho! A most easily accomplished task! With this pistol, this cold object of hate and smite, I shall create a unity most deep, a love that transcends life itself. And now, with us, doomed lovers, glistening over all humanity in the sky, I shall make my move. Slowly raising this tube of steel, just a single shot for him, and then a single shot for me. One might compare us to Romeo and Romeo, how quaint! And now, steady hands, guide my fate tonight. One. Two. And pop! Oh, how he now despises me! Do not waste your time with such petty thoughts of smite, my soul mate. Soon you will be free with me, free on the eternal planes! I sadly must wait to join you, just a moment. Just a moment to reveal to the crew that my actions be not in vain but born of hope and oneness. The door, she creeks open as a butterfly emerging from its cac—Arghgghghghh, he sffayyed ef raighhhh een maaa faishhhh, raighhh enn maaa fucken faishhhh

“Hey Susi.”
“Yeah Jeff?”
“I was right, wasn’t I?”
“Right about what?”
“Pshhh, don’t play so coy, Susi, you know what I mean.”
“Not the slightest idea.”
“That the calm night air would feel so good and that the soft cool grass would smell so sweet. That we wouldn’t get caught out here on McMillan’s property.”
“I knew what you meant, I just like teasing you.” She rolled over from her back to her side to face him.
“Nice excuse,” he said jokingly. She lovingly hit him, fooling around, as young want-to-be lovers tend to do.
“Hey Susi.”
“Yeah Jeff?”
“Check it out, a shooting star.”
She glanced up at the sky to view the nighttime spectacle. How the fiery body seemed to fall apart on its curved decent to Earth. The beautiful flames trailing behind. She thought it...
looked pretty, one of the most unique shooting stars she had ever witnessed.

"Should I make a wish?"

"As long as you tell me what you wished for."

She lay there, silent, watching the sky with a pursed smile on her adolescent lips. The only audible sound was that of dusk time crickets, performing their nightly symphony of tranquility.

"Are you going to tell me?"

"No way, that would ruin the wish."

He rolled over to her, close enough to feel her breath on his chest, close enough to smell the sweetness of her shampoo. Close enough for him to wrap his arms around her and lightly press his lips against hers, then whisper delicately into her ear:

"Did it come true?"

She closed her eyes and smiled.

James Earl Cox III
Bluegrass

Strike of match
Flicked-flame
joined by a gray mouse
Tossed in a rag-tag hole down,
2 floors to the right
Hanging a blackman of 6'7
height, gliding to an old tune
Gliding to an old tune
Slim down
nest fiddle
Tick-Tack & big cat house
Wearing them scuffed up brown boats
from 1978
back when folks used pennies
That flicked-flame, burning
in a big cat house
Sing-Sang
Ohhhhhhhhhhh-whhhheeeeee!!
Steam going puff-puff on
Gravel street feet
Sits a blackman 6'7
height
Gliding to an old tune suite
Gliding to an old tune suite

Ryanaustin Dennis

Bluegrass

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Flicked-flame
joined by a gray mouse
Tossed in a rag-tag hole down,
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Sits a blackman 6'7
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Ryanaustin Dennis
With each poem I inch closer to grassy oblivion
I am just human enough to breathe you into me
taking the crumbs of loneliness
Do I sound too vague when I say that
the grass grows from skin?

If I eat a blade of grass will mother hate me
for my foolishness—I need the nourishment
Is that the same as love?
Or is it a human behavior

Would you like to explore the rivers of my brain?
Riding the neurotransmitters until
I dump dopamine into nerve gaps

Memories are the itches of the mind
Let’s go scratch them until they fade
Is that too violent?

Churning in the slop of consciousness thoughts
reach for action; With each act there are ions of acts
Molecular modes fidgeting like children
Its only human behavior to latch on to language
to hid our unconscious deafness

I have grown angry at the moon; It always changes—
Opening a winking eye only to shift its mood
Damn moon—so indecisive
It’s not like the grass that nourishes

But the moon has such a human behavior;
She stole my father and know I breath her into me
And put her nature in between the blades of my shoulder
It is my greatest boon to live the shortest life for eternity
I am the most bizarre fish that swims in the universe
Will you come fish me out?
Please use the good butter and white wine
All is love—atoms have a natural attraction and inconsistent love;
Constant marriage and divorce without sadness
...With each poem I inch closer to grassy oblivion
I am just human enough to breathe you into me...

Ryan Austin Dennis
Shaman

The quick bits
burst in truncated shivers
A shaman comes,
shifting shapes of magic like
that of Yeats and his Irish faires so
densely poetic that they curdle under
the pressure.

Lush quivering visions,
dusty and history laden
pass into the night; with a cut from a shim-
mering cloud come sharp rusted
wings

It is a manipulation of a sweet anarchy

The shaman loosens his fruits and drops
Stones from a milky cliff
    And they roll for industry
focusing their energy on matriculation

A stone is but a man made manageable

Who is to make a woman into stone?
Or a child for that matter

Those quick bits
    of humanity condensed under
    over introspection

The shaman
breaks them of their selfness,
morphing them out of a sterile
science and into the sublime.

Ryanaustin Dennis

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Ryanaustin Dennis
Pastoral

In mobile disparity
we will watch
as the telephone poles waste away.

Strange beast, foreign marker
of the longest bicycle rides down those country roads
the joy of sun and grit
and an afternoon that knew the possibility
of repetition

I learned that I could be alone
in the comforting proximity
of my grandmother and her gin rummy cards

They were reminders, you know
of the immediacy of it all.
I had only begun to understand
the gravity of aging
the hastened pace
of my backyard scraped-knee summers.

I would complain, when I was older
That they interrupted my hikes
“nothing was sacred”
or some other banal sentiment
echoed by my friends

we knew nothing of reverence.

In fact, I think that those wires
have been far more deeply imprinted
by thousands of talons
and their quiver of alighting
than our attempted escapism would allow us.

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have been far more deeply imprinted
by thousands of talons
and their quiver of alighting
than our attempted escapism would allow us.
But I do know this

When they sink and shiver
under the weight of their abandonment
I can tell a story that they will understand
of the longest bicycle rides
the knowledge of aging
and being alone.

Evy Duskey
Of My Brackish Brain (or the Crab Mentality)

I have crab shell bits
in my honest wits;
they cut and cringe
on the very fringe
of my brackish brain.

Those spindly legs
move about the dregs
of gray matter
mess to make a batter
soaked in brine.

Ideas go down bitter
and I feel them skitter
on the ocean floor,
waging crustaceous war
for the right to rule the sea.

But the barnacle encrusted
crown must never be trusted.
The King of Crabs
puts those on the slab
who would drag him down the bucket.

So the Karkinos-thought
is promptly caught
by a boot heel’s best.
Now, my hermit mind rests
in his osseous husk.

Evan Geist
echolalia

what is it to fall in love
to the same songs

when teeth
white-wash words

and lazy tongues
punctuate infinite syntax?

Morgan K. Kiamy

echolalia

what is it to fall in love
to the same songs

when teeth
white-wash words

and lazy tongues
punctuate infinite syntax?

Morgan K. Kiamy
iris

two striated blue irises
flourish

unfold into my eyes
ask me questions
i can’t answer
with words

blink.

close your irises
protect them by immediate night
then blossom with the instant sunrise
of fluorescence overhead

feed—
photosynonymize
invisible breath
and light
and me

Morgan K. Kiamy
preservation

we can read bones.

interred deep within the soil
between the epigraph and epilogue
dead living marrow waits
to be extracted and feed our
knowledge of another time.

is it grave robbing to excavate
the boney language of the dead?

Morgan K. Kiamy
Posty Note Stuck To a Junkie’s Forehead.

Incoherent Viewer
with your Savage Eyes
Take up Worship
Take up Prayer
Escape the ecstasy of the Mongrel Monsters
with Devour You.
Gain Health.
Be Alive.

Robert Henry
Hey, Arnold. Arnold. Wake up.

A shadow intruded the red, squinted darkness in my eyes and I felt the moist, cool lips of Ruth nudge my forehead into the pillow with the force of a brick and the feel of a feather. Alive.

A blink and a smile. Here she is and here I am. Today’s the day...

Fuck.

Shut the Fuck up.

My arm animated before the rest of my body and fished around the covers for my universal remote. Shut that fuckin’ music off. The light poured into the room through the skylight. Everything in that room was the same as it was when I woke up in the 4th grade.

The walls were still blue. I had peeled off the rocket ship stickers one night in a drunken rage. My grandpa found me that morning passed out, covered in rocket ships, and bloodied after I had attempted to open the skylight in the night. When I had pushed it halfway open I spilled my beer and let go of the latch. The glass sheet whack-a-moled me down on my bed and I lay unconscious until the morning when I was woken up by a downpour through the skylight glass I shattered. My own personal raincloud. Perfect.

The window was replaced. Rain still leaks through sometimes.

Off. Thank God. Why I set my alarm for ten, I had no clue. It was Friday. The weekend. The days of rest; at least for religious-less people like my grandparents and me. I was usually awoken by the midday sun and its UV rays digging into my skin, turning my face into a beet and my comforter into a solar cooker. Add that to a hangover and you have a damn good reason to wake up and get on with the day.
“Thanks, Grandpa”
“Yep”

My eggs, Sunnyside-up, stared at me as the bacon slept together. Grandpa had been making breakfast for me on the weekends ever since I could remember. Good times, hard times, and dark times: Grandpa had been there. Grandma was, too. The only thing that really changed at our house in the city was our own condition. Time was told by broken bones, failed relationships, disease, and stages of Alzheimer’s. Grandma was on her way, but not too far along. She always thought she was young. I look at it as her mind finally catching up with her spirit: drawing her soul anew.

“Sleep okay last night, short man?”
“Yeah”

“I thought I heard you walking around your room last night. It was late.”
“Yeah, I was up reading.”

No one had ever gotten used to the way I read. I walked around to keep myself awake and at the same time reminded me that the world was moving outside of the story.

“All right, kiddo... Oh, yeah! You have your reunion tonight, eh?”
“Yep.”

“That should be fun! See all your old friends, where they’ve been. That’s a hootin’ good time, son.”
“Yeah, I’m excited.”

My real feeling was not excitement. It was more like going in front of city hall to persuade the entire city to buy Snuggies instead of clothes: nervous for failure and success. I just want to go and make an appearance. Gerald is back in town. I haven’t seen that fucker in ages.

I read the paper every day on my morning walk around the block. I made it a point to stay overly informed on the personal lives of my former colleagues and the condition of the
The streets were usually empty. I still read while I walked. I would run into people occasionally and they obviously mered a “Sorry” from the man with a newspaper in front of his face instead of the man who was on his cell phone not paying attention to where he was going but having full capability of seeing me walking blindly down the street. We can’t all walk blindly. Let me walk blindly. You watch.

Wow. I never knew I had gotten so bitter. It is hard to stare back into the Sunnyside of life when the world keeps moving on around you regardless of the way you look at it. The sketch continues: colored or gray.

I tried to find my sentimental bones to bring to the reunion. I knew that people would recognize me by the appearance I had kept so well over the years. I still wore the tiny blue hat that my parents had given me before they disappeared on an adventure into the Amazon. My sweater had grown a glow of fuzz from all of the times I had washed it. The yellowed left elbow recalled the time I beat the “human garbage disposal” in an eating contest. Glory.

My sweater always covered my plaid shirt. It was a few decades past its prime but I felt that tonight I would need as much warmth as possible: I couldn’t depend on a warm welcome. I’ll go casual tonight and untuck it. I think that’s what people do nowadays. Skinny jeans and black dress shoes. I walked to the mirror by my closet.

Hi, Ruth.


Hi, Ruth.

“Grandpa, I’m leaving. I’m gonna take the station wagon. Is that ok?”

“Oh sure, short man. Sounds good. Well I remember when I was your age—well, I don’t actually remember but I’m pretty sure that my grade school reunion is where I saw Pookie
for the first time. Or maybe it was grade school. Either way—have a good time!"

“Bye, Grandma.” I went over and kissed her on the cheek like I did every time I went somewhere. Who knows where I’ll go and where she will be when I come back. She would smile and pet my soul with her wide, loving eyes.

It was a cool fall day. The garage was always so cold and frozen in time. The station wagon had to be at least thirty years old. The tools, bikes, and camping equipment all rusted and gray gave a “look don’t touch” feel to it, although it’s more from fear of tetanus than from a museum curator.

All right you son of a bitch, you better start or I will end you.

I closed my eyes and turned the key, inserting all of my will and might with it. It roared back at me. Finally, my body and mind relaxed for a moment. Let’s go.

The city was quiet and offered a peaceful drive to P.S. 118. School wasn’t far. I just didn’t feel like walking. A return of shame or loneliness would be better done at 25 miles an hour.

The parking lot was half empty and the cars were mostly new. My clunker barely fit inside the parking spaces that I had refused to notice when I was a student there. This place was a playground. I could remember in my earlier years balancing on the yellow lines because the blacktop was lava (it was probably as hot) and there was a girl that needed saving on the other side. Maybe Ruth. Or Lila. And then Helga would come and push me off. I never really figured out her deal.

Open. Open. Open open open open. The door was stuck. You have got to be kidding me. And so I climbed over to the passenger side and got out the other door in time for me to embarrass myself in front of Helga and Stinky getting out of their car.

“So football head had to bring himself as a date.” Helga never missed an opportunity. Stinky laughed, walking over to Helga and locking arms with her. They had gotten married last year if I remember correctly from the unanswered wedding invitation. That is the one thing that I had missed: the
marriage cart. Everyone seems to be married now. And I am still living at my grandparents. Missed and stolen chances.

“Helga. Stinky. How have you been?” I felt a faint smile on my face as if it were great to see them.

“Good. We’re living in the suburbs now. When Phoebe and Gerald decided to organize this thing, I couldn’t respond fast enough. It’s such a good idea!”

“Yeah, I haven’t seen everybody in forever”

“Yeah, what happened? I haven’t heard about you since we graduated. I don’t think anyone has. Is everything all right?”

We had reached the steps leading up to the front door of P.S. 118. Oh. Shoe. I knelt down and began to tie my right shoe. This was an interesting phrase: “everything all right.” Nothing had seemed that way since “the incident” that I had been dismissing as rumor for so many years. Why lie any longer? Disappearing from the face of the earth is much harder when you feel faint connections with humanity.

“Well... Remember Lockjaw?”

“Yeah that old-ass turtle that was stolen from the zoo. What ever happened to that?” Stinky finally chimed in his two-cents with his stunning, backcountry accent.

I stood up and joined them on the steps and began to ascend into history.

“He died”

“So what? Did you kill it or somethin’?” Helga was always a charmer.

“Well... yeah. I did. Kinda. It was an accident, don’t get me wrong I didn’t jump in its cage and murder it with a prison shank or poison its food with arsenic. No, I was just trying to help the thing out.”

“All right. So what happened?”

We were about to enter the gymnasium. I could hear the music from our childhood pulsing throughout the party. This is the night of pure nostalgia. Everyone is who they were. At least we begin that way and move to our “new” self. I didn’t have one of those. Just my bitter shell.

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I was about to continue on into the gym but I was held back by Helga’s strong hand grabbing my sweater. They obviously wanted to hear the rest. Their need was not my want; I would do it anyway.

We stepped away from the greeting table with nametags yielding our name and yearbook picture. Phoebe and Gerald were working there. Okay, I will continue. Buy some time until I absolutely have to face everyone.

“Okay okay... Remember that field trip we took to the zoo? Well we were hanging out around Lock Jaw in all of his wonder and that bastard Harold threw a fuckin’ ice cream cone at him. The damn thing was covered in graffiti. Fuckin’ thing was miserable. So I talked to my grandma and she suggested that we should steal it and set it free.”

“She suggested that. Your grandma? And what kind of pea-brained idea is that in the first place? It’s in a zoo, get over it. Its brothers and sisters are eating nothing and he gets three course meals every day.” Helga seemed a little skeptical of this plan despite its completion years ago.

“Can I finish?” Eye-rolling silence. “All right. So we break into the zoo and get him out. Security was nothin’. I mean, who would steal and animal, right? So we get Lock Jaw on a skateboard and get him in the wagon and take him to the pier. Rolled him off and Lockjaw is free.”

“And then the po-lice came? That really bites,” Stinky retorted slowly.

“Not then, no. It took a year or two but they identified me. Gerald slipped the witness. My grandma was able to hide her guilt behind dementia and I had no excuse except that I was young and stupid. That didn’t quite cut it, and I ended up getting a little juvi time. Gerald never ’fessed up to it so we didn’t speak after that. I still don’t know if I want to now.”

Bump bump bump.

“Pookie, get the door,” my grandpa yelled out of the kitchen to Grandma in the living room on the couch battling wits
with Alex Trebek, attempting to stay sharp. She never really knew much, but there’s no hurt in learning at any stage of life.

I was upstairs doing my science project with Gerald when the police came to pick me up.

“Good evening, ma’am is there an Arnold here?”

“Oh yes! That’s my grandson!”

“I am with the Hillwood Police Department and would like to talk to him.”

The detective came with a marine biologist who was dressed in her formal khaki everything. I heard them walking up the stairs, and Gerald and I froze. We had heard in the news about the investigation. Seeing that no one would ever steal an animal, there were no security cameras to capture us in the act.

“Arnold? Arnold? You’re friends are here!”

“Uh, hell-o? What’s going on grandma?”

I looked at my grandma and she simply smiled and turned to go back down the stairs.

“Son, I am Detective Smith for the Police Department and I would like to ask you a few questions pertaining to the abduction of an aquatic mammal the oth—”

“It’s a reptile,” the marine biologist interrupted and immediately realized how much this Smith man simply didn’t care about the turtle. He cared about catching bad guys. And this time, I wasn’t sure which side would welcome me.

“Sorry—reptile. The famous old reptile in the zoo was stolen and I was wondering if you know anything about it.”

“…”

“Son, we have this amateur sketch of the culprit from a witness’s testimony. It seems a little boy was left at the aquarium and was wandering around when he saw some kid with a turtle on a skateboard. He drew this.”

Detective Smith handed over a piece of paper:
Gerald was biting his lip, trying not to regurgitate his memory into the air. I decided to tell them the truth. My grandma and grandpa had taught me so well. If I tell the truth, I won’t get in as much trouble because I will have been honest and accepting of responsibility. Gerald would probably confess too. He just needs a push. Here it goes.

“Detective Smith. I—uh—I was responsible for the turtle getting out. He was covered in graffiti, his water was dirty, and the kids threw stuff at him. So my grandma thou—”

“Grandma? That old coot? Hardly believable. So you stole the turtle and now it’s missing. It couldn’t have gotten far being that you didn’t release it into the ocean. You do realize that you probably just killed that poor turtle?”
“But it was miserable in there! I had to do something!”
“You killed my baby!” The marine biologist had tears in his eyes as he realized that his beloved reptile might be gone forever. Jesus was he a crier.
“But I was just trying to do the decent thing!”
“It was against the law, son. You’re going to have to come with us.”
“Gerald. Gerald. Come on, say something…”
Gerald had a blank stare directed at his textbook. And so the world moved on around him for that moment. Et tu, Gerald?

“That really bites, man,” Stinky seemed horrified and grabbed Helga’s hand in an attempt to reconnect his brain with the things that are good in this world.
“Yeah. So a few years in juvi and I ended up living back at my grandparents. It’s a pretty sweet deal”
“No college?”
“No college. Yeah I know what you’re thinking, ‘What a bum.’”
“No, that’s awful. I’m so sorry.”
“Me too.”
I was truly sorry that my life hadn’t quite fit my potential as a kid. But, you see, it’s much harder to keep to the standards of character that the perfect American family says they preach. My black and white world was turned black forever. Education wasn’t going to bleach that again.
“Hey, Arnold!”
“Harold? Wow, it’s good to see you again. Man, it’s been years since I’ve seen anybody. And I don’t remember you, I’m sorry.”
“Arnold, this is my life partner, Theodore.”
“Arnold, it’s good to meet you!”
“You too,” I said almost in a whisper as I swallowed hard, causing me to cough. Harold and Theodore both smiled and walked on into the gym.

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Harold had been the bully in grade school. He had been through high school, too. A football scholarship landed him in an all-male dorm at college and he started to enjoy the camaraderie of the boys. In practice, the quarterback would send the tight end in motion in a select few plays, tapping Harold, an offensive lineman, on the butt to signal his arrival into position. Harold liked these plays and eventually found out that the tight end liked them, too. Finding love on the gridiron. It was weird.

“Wow.”

“Yeah we got an invitation to his ‘domestic partnership ceremony’ last month. They’re so cute together!”

“Just a little surprising that the bigot becomes the bigot-ed.”

Helga shoved me and she and Stinky began to walk towards the gym.

“Move it, football-head.”

I could see the dark of the gym against the pale-green glow of the halogen lights in the hallway. All that came from that door was sound. I think it was sound in the form of Smashmouth’s “Walking on the Sun.” My feet animated once again and began to take me to towards the portal past-ward.

“Hey, Arnold! In here, man!”

I heard a voice congratulating my step-by-step maneuver to the gym.

Gerald.

“Arnold, so good to see you.”

“…”

“I’m sure you remember Phoebe from school. Did you get our wedding invitation in the mail? We weren’t sure if you’d moved or not. But obviously you’re here, and I’m glad, because it has surely been way too long, man.”

His olive branch extended and tickled my nose.

“Bless you.”
“Thank you. Yeah man, it’s great to see you, too.”

“Well, it is open bar tonight on me, brother! Drink all you want and catch up with all the old gang. I’ll meet up with ya later.”

Another olive branch. He extended his hand to offer a shot at our old secret handshake from grade school. You know, before the betrayal and general douchebaggery. Regardless, we locked hands at the fingers and exposed our thumbs, moving them back and forth but not touching, as we had done so long ago. It was weird.

I walked into the crowd with my new nametag that said “Arnold” and a smiling yearbook picture. I had barely changed in appearance since then.

I saw Rhonda and Eugene at the bar. That was still surprising. Rhonda was so beautiful and classy. Eugene was grasping hold of her waist like a patient cheerleader about to hoist her up on his shoulders. Although, this time, he was holding on until he died. A paper covered the story of their love. Eugene, the class jinx and notorious for his omen of bad luck every which way he went, had accidentally set the hot dog stand in which she was working on fire. Eugene went in the stand (unbeknownst to him that it was aflame) looking for his long awaited hot dog and found an unconscious Rhonda instead. Startled and filled with great courage, he tried to throw her over his shoulder. He took a few steps but then passed out from exhaustion on the way towards the door. Rhonda regained consciousness when she hit the floor and carried him out instead. They’ve been in love ever since.

Fuck me. I stopped believing in fairness a long time ago. Now all I believe in is chance. And boy, has Eugene drawn a beautiful card from the Monopoly deck.

I went straight to the bar. Casual conversation and stories. Where have you been all this time? The drinks started to flow and the stories got juicier. The night went on. And on. Stacking mortar and bricks together to make the edifice that is Arnold. I became more of a wall than a man in the past couple of
And then she came to the bar.

“Arnold?”

“Hi, Ruth!”

“Oh my gosh, it’s been too long I can’t believe you’re like here! It’s been like ten years and oh my gosh it’s so good to see you like where have you been oh gosh one more hug... errrrrr... ah! It’s so good to see you!”

I was surprised at her excitement, to say the least. My face was rose-red from the alcohol and my thought filter had been diminishing with an increase in white Russians. I leaned over and started yelling over the music into her ear.

“Ruuuth. I had... had a huuuuuuuuge crush on... on you when I was in the fourth... wait fourth grade.” I nodded in agreement and satisfaction with my words.

...And still today, you idiot. She laughed at my gut-wrenching and pure confession. So eloquent and poetic.

“What? That’s hilarious. That’s just so funny. I cannot believe that. Why didn’t you like...say anything?”

Excellent observation, Miss McDougal. Truly excellent. Fuck me.

“I guess... I guess I was afraid that you would think I was a stupid football head like the rest of my crushes... HELGA...”

I pointed my drink at Helga whom had joined the circle of conversation at the bar. All of the innocent bystanders watching and listening to the screeching and collision of my life hitting the ground in a flow of truth-vomit. Get out of here, champ. Today’s not your day.

I could make out a black Afro swimming atop the crowd like a hairy, cylindrical shark fin. It was heading towards me at an incredible rate through the sea of alcohol-soaked dancing.

Gerald finally reached Ruth and me. We had been talking for about an hour now. Who knows what I said. The important thing is that she never went away and each word seemed to pull the right strings on her face to make her smile. She was still the cute, fast-talking sweetheart that I never got to
know in grade school. Maybe I built her up into the angel I thought she was because she was actually an angel. That never happens.

“Arnold”
“Gerald! What’s happenin’ brotha?”
“Hey man, can I talk to you?”
“Yeah, sure man, you’re my bro.”
The alcohol always had more to say than my own mind. And better things, too.

I excused myself and moved down the bar. Ruth waded into the crowd and she capsized into the waves. Gerald looked me in the eye, although I could tell he had been drinking almost as much as I. He leaned over and started to speak into my ear.

“Arnold. Man, I’m sorry for all the shit I put you through man. I should have been there for you and I wasn’t and that’s wrong. That’s wrong man, that’s just wrong. Friends don’t sit idly by hoping they don’t get in trouble... they are there... They are there to get in trouble with you so we have great stories to tell when we come back to these kinds of things.”

The music had gotten louder and it had turned into yelling. It was nice yelling, though. Apologetic yelling. In my drunken state I was more inclined to accept but I had other plans.

“You mean that?”
“Yeah man, I do.”
“Let’s steal a fuckin’ turtle.”
“What?”
“Let’s steal another fuckin’ turtle, dude.”
“What?”
What?
“Yeah, we are going out and stealing another turtle. And we are both going down this time.”

“Arnold! Arnold, man...” The song ended. “That’s... That’s crazy. We can’t steal another turtle.”

“I know where to find one! We will just go to the pet store
then I don’t know we are just going to do it! Okay?”

I slammed my drink on the bar and started to walk towards the door. I grabbed Gerald’s shirt, dragging him out the door.

“Arnold, man.”

“Look...” We stopped. “You lived your life and stole mine. We steal a turtle together. I’ll call it even. I don’t see what the big deal is!”

We started to move again down the hallway to the front door. I stumbled a bit and knew that driving was a terrible idea but this was going to make up for all of the things that we didn’t do. The missed wingman opportunities. The missed parties. The missed life of Arnold. All from a turtle.

I was a surprisingly good drunk driver. Gerald and I talked the whole way there. We caught up and shared the stories we both missed while we “took a break.” It was good to finally talk to him in the flesh rather than cursing him under my breath in the shower at home or in my dreams.

I knew of a pet store near the suburbs and knew how to get in the building. There was a door in the back that I had used when I went to get some dog food for my pet pig, Abner. He thinks he is a dog. God has a lot of explaining to do.

The car doors opened and we both crept out into the street and towards the alley leading back to the employee entrance. No one was around. There were surely no cameras in a pet store. I mean, who steals an animal?

I grabbed the handle, turned and pushed the door. No budge. All right, you son of a bitch. Open or shit is goin’ down. I turned and pushed once more with my shoulder. I fell away, wincing in pain from the shoulder strike. It was a second later that I noticed the door had opened with my pull. I acted cool when Gerald turned from his lookout position down the alley. What a façade.

He followed me in and we started to search the place for turtles. I had only been there to pick out pig/dog food before.
“Arnold! Over here!” Gerald whispered so that the animals wouldn’t hear us. I joined him and saw three cages and four turtles. One cage had two which seemed to be spooning or having weird turtle sex. Naturally, I took the big spoon of the pair.

“Got ya, fucker. Let’s go. We’re setting this guy free.”

“Where are we gonna set this guy free?”

Gerald held the turtle, which I named Tetanus: a common symptom of Lockjaw. A shitty name. But I am all for poeticism in this instance.

“Gerald. We are going to set him free into the wild where he is no longer caged and left to the decisions of some goddamn suburban family and whether he ‘fits’ with them or not. Or if he should be named Cuff or Link or Speedy or Shrimp; that doesn’t fuckin’ matter and I’m not gonna leave that up to chance like the whole world is. Look at me! Out of all of the goddamn jerks in life I got the short end of the stick because some parent was stupid enough to leave their kid at the aquarium and my grandparents were too humble to teach me that lying can save me from a world of hurt. It’s fuckin’ unbelievable. That is why we are letting little Tetanus here... I know it’s a stupid name, but who gives a shit. When it’s in the wild it can go back to being Fred or Sheldon or Jesus for all I care. We are going to release this turtle back to its natural habitat where it will have as good a chance as any to be the happiest and best turtle that ever lived. The best.”

“All right, man. Let’s do it.”

We had come to a pond on the outskirts of town that I had visited with my grandpa. We fished all day and I couldn’t help but remember the rural backdrop that even I could nuzzle inside after a long life.

“This is it.”

The pond’s edge came all the way up to the embankment
on the side of the road. Gerald held the turtle in both hands like a dove about to be set free at a wedding. This turtle was about to meet his new bride.

We stood on the edge of the road like two guys about to piss in the pond. The sun had caught fire in the sky in front of us and the fog began to rise. The creatures called to us in their distinctive tones: bullfrogs, sparrows, and crickets. The air felt like a broken fever on my face and I glanced over at Gerald, sobering up for this moment alone.

“Would you like to say a few words for our friend, Tetanus the turtle, before he goes home?”

“Um...” he looked the turtle and searched it like he had forgotten what it was. “Tetanus should be remembered today as the turtle that got a chance at surviving in the wild with his fellow free creatures. Given...the opportunity to flourish among his other turtle cousins. Although we will miss him, we can pray and hope that this act of mercy will redeem our sins and our fallible actions some fifteen years ago to a fellow turtle friend, Lockjaw. For this, we pray to God Almighty in Heaven: Amen!”

He asked my opinion with his eyes; his countenance showing confusion at the words he preached.

“To a better life?”

“Hell yes, Arnold. A better one indeed.”

He set little Tetanus down and we watched the little guy nestle into the grass.

“Feels right. We did a good thing today. That fella has a better chance than any of them turtles to live the happy life it should have. Good luck, little buddy.”

We saluted Tetanus, who had not moved since Gerald set him down. Then a quick and hardy secret handshake. I had just remembered the fact that I had left Ruth at the bar. She was probably waiting the whole night, looking for me. My one shot at love and I stole a turtle. That will be fun to explain to her.

Hi, Ruth. Sorry I couldn’t be there to say goodbye. I left because...
Gerald and I decided to steal a turtle. We set it loose at the duck pond on the outskirts of town. I know you probably won’t get this message until tomorrow morning, but I hope we can get together for coffee or something sometime if you want. So I’ll talk to you later? Just give me a call. Anytime. I’m free. Just. Call. Bye.

The car door shut with a squeak and I looked back at the pond. As I was putting the car into gear, I saw little Tetanus crawling out of the grass and onto the pavement towards our car.

Tetanus tried to thank us for his release. At least that is what I think he would have done if he were a person. I think he saw that he and I weren’t so different and wanted to be friends. So I put the car in park and avoided the bus passing on the other side of the road. After it passed, Tetanus was flattened on the pavement like Wile. E. Coyote.

0 for 2.

Scott Hickey
come undone

[lockets are too small for keeping]
knots of her hair in my bed—
I was glad she came with
hair unwashed, steeped
in kitchen: in crushed mint, cracked
black pepper, cinnamon sticks
curling in (her baby wisps), braids
of leavened bread, (her rising chest), &
lemony hummus she’d learned
to make with ashes (belly of firelight).

her fingers knotted in my hair
pulling careless through bedhead tousle
I tell her my scalp is not tender—
& yes, I’m shivering, rattlesnaking out
of my skin, ecdysis dress, naked
raw red, apple-blushing bright, behind
closed doors, spine curving “S”
from vibrating throat, humming
to quivering tail tip, tucked
under, cataract eyes, blind white
sheets, sweat & soap.

wet knots of hair in my drain,
ablution-flushed dark in that same
pearled soap, sweat, skin—ours.
when she leaves, I will pull it up with
ginger fingertips, deracinated dangle
uprooted, exposed, dripping colder,
dropped into a trash bin of aftermaths &
cast-offs. [nothing that you can keep.]

Katta Howell
(Untitled)
Photograph
Ali Bromberg

103

(Untitled)
Photograph
Ali Bromberg

103
Spotted
Photograph
Chelsea Fought
Copy of Caravaggio’s Doubting Thomas
Charcoal on Paper
Ginny Fulford
Grilled Summer Vegetable Sandwich
Oil on Canvas
Ginny Fulford
Pieta with Ship in the Distance
Linoleum Cut
Ginny Fulford
Bridges
Photograph
J. Kowalski
Flock
Carved Book
J. Kowalski
Gibbous
Watercolor, Ink, & Watercolor Pencils
J. Kowalski
Bomb First
Photograph
Bradley K. Meyer

Bomb First
Photograph
Bradley K. Meyer
Canyon-scape
Photograph
Bradley K. Meyer
Land of Giants 2
Photograph
Bradley K. Meyer
Basset Hound
Colored Pencils on Illustration Board
Mossy

Basset Hound
Colored Pencils on Illustration Board
Mossy
Charcoal Self-Portrait
Charcoal on Colored Paper
Mosby
Summer Sunshine
Watercolor, Watercolor Pencils, & Colored Pencils on Watercolor Paper
Mossy
Aim
Photograph
Julia Munro

Aim
Photograph
Julia Munro
Fog and Forest
Wood Laminate & Spray Paint
Julia Munro

Fog and Forest
Wood Laminate & Spray Paint
Julia Munro
Friends Forever
Photograph
Julia Munro
Major Arcana II: The High Priestess
Digital Collage
Otis Nemo
Conditioned
Oil on Canvas
Allison Polgar
Ginny
Oil on Canvas
Allison Polgar
Searching (Trapdoor)
Stone Lithograph
Allison Polgar
Still Life
Photograph
Sam Richter
Key West Butterfly
Oil & Newspaper on Canvas
Brooke Ryan
Ponte Vecchio
Oil on Canvas
Brooke Ryan
Raw Rabbit I
Acrylic & Oil on Canvas
Brooke Ryan
Depth
B&W Photograph
Rachel Satterfield
Just Passing Blue
Photograph
Anne Snyder

Just Passing Blue
Photograph
Anne Snyder
I want to lock my family in a closet
to see who comes out.

From another,
I release my friends on birthdays.

*  
I had planned to match up old girlfriends
for seven minutes of heaven but
God’s already inside. Says he’s afraid
to come out—that he’ll
wait forever if he has to—

I lock the door anyway
just to be safe.

*  
This one girl would lock herself in
with just a picture of me—pierce my
nipple in the dark
with her nose ring & tell me
I’ve done well
for myself. I’ll find her someday—
let her know she exists.

*  
In the corner I keep the secret
to beauty: her glasses

but in there, when we’re alone
I call them “frames”
If I had ever done anything worthwhile
I’d have captured it there
to study
its breathing
through the crack by the floor.

Anytime someone is better than me
I stuff them in with the others.
Soon the world
will be a better place.

Brandon Kelley
“Do you remember that time we swallowed when we were told to spit?” No. But it would have made for a fond memory at a Chesapeake winery. Phil passes a beer to Sarah and me while pointing out that we’re too young to drink—we tell him that it doesn’t matter because his is the better story. It feels like a moment of triumph to say so.

“How ’bout when we escaped up the fire stairs, Jon?” Sarah asks me—though I would rather her say: “Why am I so beautiful?” because I know the answer—her hair is long enough to tickle the very top of her butt when she’s naked. I also know that this is perhaps the most important phenomenon I will ever witness. But she never asks this.

“I don’t think that happened. But sounds like fun.” These stories are told in the lonely language. The same language which makes one feel sad to consume an entire family-sized nugget pack. “Ask me the phase of the moon.” I want someone to know the right question.

“What is the phase of the moon?”
I linger on the hiss. “Waxing crescent.”

Later we are good and drunk and reading through Sarah’s diary. It is written in the language of a mother to her daughter—Resolution: Stop biting nails!—Find more female friends!—and in the language of regret and ellipses—I’ve been a waste...

I laugh at the last part, telling Sarah “You are the pubescent tears of my high school eyes.” Or I would have had I thought of it soon enough. Phil has become vapid. I tell him he is the moment when a party inexplicably goes silent. He grins ironically in the way one does when going for a walk with no destination and a 64oz slushy—with the freedom to treat the world as the toilet one lives in.

Phil gives it one more shot in the morning. “Remember the
time we wrote memoirs of strangers on white birch in the North?” No. But it would have been in the forest near a cemetery so that we wouldn’t run out of names.

“I’ve never been that far North, Phil. Have you?” Sarah’s reply is spoken in the language that will keep us in Ohio.

“I guess not.” He grins slightly and we talk about the beauty of a field of fresh snow as we ruin it with our footprints.

Brandon Kelley
A Glass of Red

He finally released her.
after 21 crammed years,
she was of the precise age.

Sinking into her crystal confines
the Seductive cinnamon and oak perfume
spritzspritzsplash.

He twirls the clear cage,
the scalloped silk skims
along the Lip,
her dress fans out
slowly revealing luscious satin Legs,
her full-body.

Absorb Her youth.
Drink Her in.

Traci A. Kim
Fast Times at the American University

Such is the trail of cowards
Where faceless many troop on
In the mimicry of scholars
gripping tightly their pencils

their erasers salute that beauty mark
by your cheek, wishing it a fond farewell
and a gentle pat on the back
Next go your lashes, maybe your eyes

Sometimes, your nose
always though, the lips
such are the doings of the sea
threshing and beating
sandy shores
as gulls retreat further inland

Now fangs and wool
litter your lawn, still damp with the blood
of forlorn men
Nearby you may spot
some wasted cigarettes
held aloft like a family of lepers
donning all white

A subtle glance at the horizon
and a mild sunset, birthing shadows
but not exactly
how am I to deliver it justice?
I cannot very well
swoop to the lake
and snatch its ambitious children
like a famished eagle
Each blemish of ink I impart

Fast Times at the American University

Such is the trail of cowards
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and a mild sunset, birthing shadows
but not exactly
how am I to deliver it justice?
I cannot very well
swoop to the lake
and snatch its ambitious children
like a famished eagle
Each blemish of ink I impart
becomes a silver skylark,
skimming surface water
on an adrenaline high

But perhaps I may point out
the carrot-kissed face
from whence it all came
Most likely though, the thoroughbred grit
all men with blue collars
endeavor to achieve
as they stare meekly
into 6 a.m. eggs and coffee

Kaan Koseler
You are not the autumn breeze

speckled with kisses
from eons of man
clutching secrets with sweaty palms

Oh how the lilting wind
would part its lips
and speak of you in hushed tones
kin of Tantalus, you rend me thus
bless me, give me sangria
that I may drowse
and awake to the fume
of chrysanthemums

But nor are you the exultant prayer
wafting from the mouth
of a kneeling hermit
dreaming of salvation
before he is carrion

I think it’s fair though,
to believe you a tree
motionless and leaking sap;
what wondrous limbs
solemn and still!

oh to clamber the boughs
and open my eyes

Kaan Koseler
Beneath this yew
there should be silence.

Under the cedar lid a deafness
and a body in a box.

But living is all around
like a family of ants.

What to do about the unsuppressed cough
and the rustle of black clothes,

the bird calls in the leaves above?
How good to fill

every inch of his—
length, breadth, depth.

J. Kowalski
the body

We are what we are.
and though I sing
day and night,
there’s a cage
in this bird.

J. Kowalski

the body

We are what we are.
and though I sing
day and night,
there’s a cage
in this bird.

J. Kowalski
for Emily

You are only
a feathered thing now,
against my window.
Tell me how cold
the outside is,
tell me how Hungry,
speak in the birdsong
you always tried at.
Tell me even now
you hope,
dead—White Gown lost
in the snow.

J. Kowalski

for Emily

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a feathered thing now,
against my window.
Tell me how cold
the outside is,
tell me how Hungry,
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you always tried at.
Tell me even now
you hope,
dead—White Gown lost
in the snow.

J. Kowalski
May

because Love is real
and she lives
on my street
and she has
her yellow bike
and so many freckles

J. Kowalski
Dedication

My teacher used to play for us, the world’s smallest violin. She played it between her fingers, a pocket sized melody.

We students were soul munching monsters; picking our teeth with cellphones, and wielding a vocabulary of belches. She played her violin all the same.

We sat laughing at her miniature instrument, wondering if it was really there; if you listened closely you could hear the music.

It played the saddest tune that had ever been played; perhaps it was our song, an ode to the world’s smallest catastrophe.

---

John Luckoski
Swings

Loose, swaying in the wind.
Smooth sounding like water.

The laughter stops, you look, you pause.
The talking starts again, seems like nothing happened.

Everyone sees but won’t acknowledge.
Quick, hop off the swing, it’ll be dusk soon.

Quick, hop off the swing, it’ll be dusk soon.
Everyone sees but won’t acknowledge.

The talking starts again, seems like nothing happened.
The laughter stops, you look, you pause.

Smooth sounding like water.
Loose, swaying in the wind.

Katie McCarthy

Swings

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Loose, swaying in the wind.

Katie McCarthy
Reminiscent Hipster-Dude

Those smooth jazz tones that beat through the air
filter back to my brain... stem... cord....
I make a sign with my fingers, give them a signal, the tune
doesn’t change
and I sigh... cough... need a smoke...
Too old for this shit, too young for some pills, too cool to
answer, too smart to shut up
Repeat, repeat, dead beat, last beat, return beat, laughing
apathy in the face, making shots behind my back.
The smooth tones slide through the air, and I wish that I
had a quarter
to spend... to flip... to bite... to give...
There’s a girl in stockings that makes me tear up in joy
as I stare at her matching gloves and thong. She gives me a
promise
between her lips, but that doesn’t mean shit to me. I want
her to comment on the music.
Maybe she’ll think it’s bluesy... or foreign... or God Forbid...
Hipster...
Running, cunning, stunning ladies all in my eye, and I blink
to look at the lights.
The music rolls over to the next song, and a force beckons
me back two shots
then a sober clearing makes the fielding flicker for a
moment.
Something is on my mind. Clips on a reel, sealing the deal,
gripping onto my ribs.
There’s a purple pus seeping from a man’s chest
then there’s a woman with a snaggletooth sneer
and I laugh...

Tomorrow will be better.

Daryl McSweeney

---

Reminiscent Hipster-Dude

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filter back to my brain... stem... cord....
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and I laugh...

Tomorrow will be better.

Daryl McSweeney
Blues in the night

Rain meets rooftop, fingers drumming in the night. Windshield wipers sweep streets clean; the dull roar coaxes the swollen eyes of the city to sleep.

Car radios play soft, low, ghosts, whispers of sorrow and Sinatra.
Gasoline puddles quiver and shine, an injection of muted technicolor.
The sleepless search out solace in the television’s glow; thoughts disintegrate.

A breeze tangles with tree limbs and creeps through cracked windows, quiet houses flooded with the cool.
Wet rust cuts through leafy gutters.

Streetlights hum lovers’ symphonies to indifferent sidewalks. Morning feels miles away.

Matt Metzler
I must not deceive all the angels...

Her glistening white hood cast a shadow over the top half of her face. It had fur along the edge, but was not worn in the same gaudy manner of the “high class” maidens in the cities and universities. The hood connected to a shirt which buttoned in the front and puffed at the sleeves. It stayed close to the skin, but was not close enough to be considered overtly revealing or trashy. Her legs were covered with a leathery white material which I expected would be quite flexible. The same material formed the gauntlets around her arms, signifying to me that she was someone who was prepared to fight, if it came to that. Still, I found myself drawn to the mystery of the hood and of her face. From what I could see of her, I could tell that her skin was almost unnaturally pale, almost to the point of blending in with the clothes that she wore. Her lips were small, and yet they seemed to have a weight to them. There was a light smile upon her face as she moved towards me.

I had been taken aback by her arrival, as just moments earlier I had been taking a break from my studies below and had decided to take some time to look out the balcony of my lonely tower. I had constructed my tower from ancient designs, far from the bustle of the more modern technology and skyscrapers of the city. For several moments I had gazed upon the lands, and then turned away but for a moment to return and find her standing there upon my balcony.

“Who are you?” seemed the obvious question to ask.

“My name is Adiel,” she said, her voice soft yet echoing across my mind. Yes, of course it was. I knew well that the Grand Name Convention had passed it such that no name might bear the suffix of “-iel” except for the chosen few of His Holiness. Those blessed to have the angelic blood, if it could really be called blood, running through their veins. To commit the blasphemy of christening a child with such a name, or
to falsely identify oneself with such a name would be heresy
against His Holiness. The sentence for heresy was the curse
of immortality followed by eternal suffering and torture. Adi-
el, I assumed, would not be foolish enough to perform such
an act. Therefore, I could assume that she was an angel-kin.
Therefore, any attempt I made to flee or fight would fail.

The angel-kin weren’t full angel. The first time angels de-
cided to mate with humans, His Highness gave the Earth a
flood to get rid of the offspring. The second time the angels
mated with humans, it was His Holiness’ way of trying to give
us some help. We had gotten to a point that we had needed it.

“Why are you here?” I asked, although I had suspicion of
the reason.

“I am here to bring you to Judgment.” The echo her voice
put on that word gave it a new sort of ominous feeling that
sent even more chills down my spine than ever before. Be-
cause of the angel-kin’s obvious proof of the existence of His
Holiness, the church was able to take a hold of the ruling of
the world, with the promise of instilling order.

“What are the charges?”

“You know them well.”

I did. I considered my position for just a moment. I could
go with her and be given a fair trial in which I would most
likely be found guilty, or I could try to escape and be beat
down by an angel-kin.

I unsheathed my sword. Guns had gone almost extinct
and were thought of as uncivilized weapons, as the people
preferred to see the sprays of blood that spouted forth from
a good slice. Her arms tensed. I dropped the sword to the
ground. There were some things worse than eternal suffering.
Again, her mouth twitched in a smile. It agitated me that her
mouth moved, taunting me with wanting to see the rest of the
face of my captor.

“How are we getting there?” I asked. She took a careful
and calculated step towards me. She almost seemed to glow in
the pale moonlight behind her. I shuddered in wondering if
she would just deliver her own judgment there. But it was not right. Judgment could only be given with a proper trial. She was supposed to deliver me to Judgment, not deliver it herself. Whereas the talents of the angel-kin might be used to carry out the sentence, the trial would have a very human judge. A high ranking priest of the church. The angels, in not being human, could not obtain ranks of leadership as such.

“Have you ever flown before?” she asked. I wasn’t entirely sure why she bothered to ask. She, of course, knew the answer. “Once or twice.”

“Good. Then this won’t be as jarring for you,”

She reached her hand out and pressed it against my forehead. When did she get so close? I tried to see underneath her hood, but even this close I still couldn’t get a clear view.

What I could get a clear view of now was her wings. Beautiful things really. Glowing golden feathers stretching out five feet in either direction. I envied those wings more than I was willing to say to anyone. Except for Raguiel, but that was different.

Raguiel had been a friend. Someone I could trust and be open with. More than any other. He and I were going to change the world. Which might have been what got me into this mess. But he was gone now. And I had a long flight ahead of me.

As she flapped her wings and lifted into the air, I was carried on beside her within the net her mind had cast. I always tried to stay awake as long as possible through the flight experience in any time I had been brought into the air, but it was never really something that was possible. The angel-kin required all of the passenger’s mental energy to keep the passenger afloat with them, and that meant a good, solid, dreamless shut down and nap.

It also meant waking up tired as hell.

“Really?” I sighed as I found myself in a small room which was dark except for the faint glow given off by Adiel’s wings. Even that disappeared from my view after a moment when...
she broke her mental/spiritual connection to me.

“This will be where you stay to await Judgment.” Her voice was haunting with my inability to see her at all.

“Is it fair to keep the prisoners of His Holiness in darkness?” I asked. “Is our nation not one of light?” I regretted saying that as soon as I did. What if it made her angry with me? I didn’t want to face her violence.

“Indeed it is,” she said. “There are normally no lights down here because it is mostly... my kind that are here. We can see light in all things, even those which you cannot.” I was well aware. It was how I could see that light from her wings when I was connected to her.

I could hear her moving in the room, but couldn’t tell what she was doing. Suddenly, there was a flash of light. The room became filled with a bright, ambient glow that seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere all at once. There were no shadows. There was a white stone table upon which was a notebook and pen, and there was a white bed with white sheets and a pillow. And, standing in the very center of the room, was my captor, looking beautiful as ever, her hands over her head, the top half of her face still hidden. She was frowning, and I wondered how much energy she had just used lighting the room. After the energy it had taken to fly me here. After the energy it had taken to retrieve me to begin with.

“Thanks,” I said. She nodded as she walked towards one of the solid white stone walls of the room.

“Will you require anything else?”

“That will be all, thank you,” I said.

And she left me to my thoughts.

It had been a long time since I had been to the High Temple. I remembered my last visit well, as it was the beginning of everything. It was a Thursday on which Raguel and I had come in from the city. Despite Raguel’s fear and discomfort with cars, we had driven. I had been too anxious to try to accept the cost of flying, despite my interest in it.

“What if things don’t go according to plan?” I asked as
Raguel and I ascended the stairs to the High Temple.

“You have your sword?” Raguel asked. I nodded. “Well don’t be foolish enough to use it. Especially not against one of my kin. They will fill you with a pain and emptiness you can’t even begin to comprehend. They can cut out a part of your soul. And believe me, you don’t want that.”

“You aren’t being terribly comforting.”

“What do you want me to say? That everything is going to go peachy? What we want could undermine the entire order to things, and we’re going to advocate to those who make their living off of that order.”

“And the disorder.”

“And the disorder,” Raguel agreed. “That which the cities are built on.” It was true. The church had brought “order” to the world in that people weren’t all in a chaotic state of constant war anymore, but to walk through the cities was to see a very different kind of war. Between the poor who couldn’t afford to eat and the clubs where people would go to drink, do drugs, have sex, and detach themselves from humanity, it became clear that the disorder still existed and was being used to keep the populace controlled. The church allowed for this. This and so much more to continue. It had to come to an end.

We weren’t twenty feet into the High Temple before we were met by a young female angel-kin who introduced herself as Castiel and asked if there was anything she could do for us. She could, of course, recognize Raguel as one of her kind. We told her that we wished to visit with Father Marvin, and so she led us to him.

“Raguel, good to see you,” he greeted. He looked at me and smiled, but gave no such lavish greeting. He had no reason to fear me, as I was not of position, like him, nor of angelic power, like Raguel. I had no ground to stand on, and I was sure he knew he could destroy me with ease. “Why have you come to visit me here?”

“My colleague and I,” Raguel started. It was a risky move
in a place with such views of holiness and blood, but he was trying to emphasize the idea of “colleague” to give me status to be able to speak as well and be viewed on an equal level with him. “...have a proposition to make.”

Father Marvin’s eyes narrowed. Raguiel had already started his reputation as a troublemaker, and things were only just beginning. A month after that meeting, Raguiel had been exiled from all Holy Land. This meant he couldn’t set foot on any Temple or other consecrated ground. It was a diplomatic move on their part. They didn’t destroy him, didn’t denote him fallen, just exiled. They thought it would keep him out of their hair.

He laughed at the notion. We kept his campaign running strong. Our revolution wasn’t one of violence or chaos, but one of ideas and order. We didn’t wish to shed blood or kill or do anything to further the problems that had gotten us here. It was a matter of changing the hearts and minds of the people. All of the people. To save the culture and ideals of humanity. That was why the angel-kin were supposed to be there after all. Time and time again Raguiel had explained that “the Devil’s Advocate is actually an aid to the Church. If what I am doing makes them, the ones who call themselves the mouthpieces for His Holiness, the ‘authorities’, question their practices and change for the better, then it’s a victory. If it helps the people to question their beliefs and see what is real and come closer to the truth, come closer to His Holiness for real, then it’s a victory.”

He didn’t need to sell to me. Did he forget that I had been just as big a part of the start of the revolution? Was I not just as big a part of the ideology of it? What happened to when I was the colleague instead of the man hiding behind his shadow?

For a little while, I thought that it had worked out for the best. Since he had been taken away and was gone, I had counted it fortunate that I had been allowed to live because I had been cast into the background. The revolution had gone
on in his name, although the amount which I continued to participate without Raguel to help me overcome my fears was limited. I did some, both large and small acts, but not nearly as much as before. I didn’t want to attract attention. Of course, it looked like everything had caught up with me now.

Somewhere amid these thoughts, I must have gone over to the bed within my cell and fallen fast asleep. When I woke, the room was still bright with the ambient light. I had no idea how much time had passed or anything that was going on outside of my cell. I was still tired, but had recharged at least some of the energy that I had lost during the flight.

A shock of pain flashed through my head as a cacophony filled my eardrums. My eyes were forced closed. And then all the hurt was gone in an instant. I opened my eyes again to see the beautiful Adiel standing before me.

“It’s time for Judgment,” I sighed. She nodded and reached towards my forehead.

“You stand accused for heresy and for the murder of Father Marvin, how do you plea?” the judge, Father Eliot, presented. The room was quiet and tense. I sat in a single chair, alone, in the front row of the assembly, looking up at Father Eliot. Behind me were several rows of white stone benches, but they were almost empty. Why should anyone come to my trial? I kept mostly to myself, particularly after what happened to Raguel. The loneliness was hard sometimes, but it was better that way.

“You were asked how you plea,” Father Eliot repeated.

I knew that I was. In older times, there would be lawyers to support and oppose me in this trial. However, several years ago when the Honest Work Force act was passed, lawyers, most business executives, and any other position which relied upon misrepresenting the truth was removed from office. Ironically enough, it was one of Raguel’s and my victories in policy. Even if the church officials had guaranteed their own immunity, it helped with some of the problems outside of it.
Not all of them, of course, but some. Small steps. Raguel was right in saying we wouldn’t see the bulk of our immortality within our lifetimes. I should have known then that he realized and accepted that he would have to die, despite his undying blood. He was brave, and I envied that. Here I sat, unsure of what to say for fear of causing my sentence to be death.

“Answer the question,” the judge insisted, becoming angry. I fought back the tears and replaced them with a light smile.

“To the heresy, I plea innocent. As for the murder, yes, I killed him.” There was no point in denying what they could easily prove. The penalty for murder was much less than the penalty for heresy. At least for that I still had a chance for a positive afterlife.

The jury, a set of six angel-kin to the left of the judge and three priests and four citizens to his right, uttered muffled chaos. The numbers were significant. No matter the influence of the angel-kin, we could not forget that this world was given to mankind by His Holiness. And for better or worse, that dominion over ourselves and our planet was ours to use. That was why the angel-kin could not be members of the clergy leadership. They were there to help, but it was our choice if we support His Glory or our own whims and eventual destruction.

As the chaos of the court room continued, I wasn’t sure what to do. I saw the opportunity to speak, the opportunity to bring the truth to light. Still, doing so might cause me to be sent to what I fear the most.

Eternal suffering. Not something humans were ever supposed to be able to give out as judgment. Truth be told, humans weren’t supposed to really be able to judge at all. But when the angel-kin helped the church come to power, their judicial branch rose with it. The numbers were significant, but the existence of the system was a trouble. Perhaps life and death for the crimes of this life were things that humans should decide upon, but eternity was always supposed to be
the decision of His Holiness. Not the humans, not the angel-kin, not even the angels themselves. What we did with our world was our decision, but the afterlife should have been something we couldn’t touch.

But we as a society, we as a race, did touch it. The angel-kin gave us the power to. I think even His Holiness wouldn’t have been happy with it. They were meant to help our race aspire for paradise, not be sent into suffering. It was a part, just a small part, of what we had been fighting on the church’s side of the battle. And I knew that I could either let that pass or I could take my final stand against it.

“I must not deceive all the angels!” I cried out. That silenced the room real fast. “But I must not deceive my own kind either.

“Yes, I killed Father Marvin. It was a mistake made in a moment of weakness. Father Marvin had been running an off the books operation for the whims of mankind using church resources. He was supplying a sex club downtown with money and drugs. I have the proof back at my tower if you would go back and search there. Raguiel and I had tried to expose him for the liar that he was, but his immunity forbade us from stopping his continued destruction. As we raised the issue to the citizens of this land, Father Marvin gathered his allies within and without of the church against us and had Raguiel sentenced to the worst fate for angel-kin. Soul-destruction. I had seen the cost of publicly opposing him, or any false member of the church, and yet knew that I could not let nothing be done. So yes, I killed him.

“But this problem is not limited to Father Marvin. You may not want to hear this, but many members of the church have been funding the very operations that are tearing down our society. The things that keep the people distracted from His Holiness. The things that keep the people distracted from really being human, from really trying to think for themselves. If we want to rise back up as a society, if we want to find real peace, real harmony, real fulfillment, we must follow a code
of decency. We must prompt the people to think, yes, even to question. We cannot allow their minds to be filled solely with garbage. What? Because it’s more profitable? Because it’s easier to maintain control? No. This has gone too far.

“If you see what I have done as a crime, then punish me for it. But what I have done, I have done for the sake of the people, for the sake of humanity, and for the sake of His Holiness. So what I have done is not heresy.

“However, if you see what I have done as a decent act, as an act for the sake of humanity, then know that there are others fighting. Join with those who would build up our culture, build up our race once again into something worth being a part of. Bring us back to a time when we really can act as the people His Holiness created us to be.”

I could see that Father Eliot was none too happy about my speech and was more than ready to cut me off. The only thing that had held him back as long as it had been was the shock of it all. I knew that I had to finish quickly.

“Charge me as you will. If you refuse to change your mind, if you continue to find me a heretic, then I will accept your eternal damnation. If I must, then this is the cost that I will accept for the good that I have done for all of you.”

I was out of breath. They all looked at me with eyes wide enough to see my own reflection. The rest of the trial proceeded with facts presented both for and against me. I was asked many questions which I answered as honestly as I could. None of this was done by lawyers, as I’ve already explained. It was, instead carried out by those that had taken the place of lawyers. People paid neither by me nor by the church, but by a third, unbiased, judicial party, to investigate and look into my case in search of the truth. The look of shock never left anyone’s face for the rest of the time I was in the room.

When I was moved back to my cell, I went straight to my work, trying to write down as much as I could about everything I had been through, everything that was wrong with the world, and, most importantly, how the people could fix it. It
wasn’t enough for me to say the world was falling apart, I had to give people an answer of what to do about it, and I felt like I could do that.

Not an hour had passed before Adiel appeared in my cell, once again with a blinding and jarring flash of light.

“I suppose that you’re here to bring me to hear my sentence,” I said, turning behind me to see her. I wished that I had more time, as I had so much more to write. I wished that I had started sooner, but I knew that I had been far too much of a coward. Now, perhaps with only hours or days left to live, it couldn’t be nearly enough time.

“No,” Adiel said, walking across the room and sitting down on the edge of my bed. It was strange to see this creature, this beautiful creature, sit down, as if tired. She had seemed so unreal to me since I had met her, that sitting was almost an uncomfortably human action. I realized of course that some part of her was human, despite being angel-kin, but it was still so strange for me to see. I wanted to look into her eyes, to see into her mind, to know what she was thinking, to know what made her tick.

“Then why are you here?”

“You want to help humanity rise back, be something worth being a part of,” she said. Her voice was light and echoing, and it was hard to get an indication of what her tone was in any human sense of the word. Perhaps she had come to kill me, to silence me. Maybe she was purposefully opposed to humanity in favor of some sort of angel-kin rise to power. It wouldn’t have surprised me, given the number of times there have been wars in heaven and angelic betrayals. None so great as the Morning Star, of course. Still, I didn’t know what to say to keep her from trying to kill me. I decided that honesty might be best.

“Yes. Why?”

“My job as a member of my race is to help your race to recover, not to let it sink into new types of ruin.”

“It’s not new types of ruin,” I interrupted. “Just sinking
further back into old ones."

"Still, I need to know what it is that you know. To do my job and help your race."

"There are those above you within the church who wouldn’t like you even thinking of listening to me. They would say this is not your responsibility."

"My responsibility to the church is a facet of my responsibility to mankind," Adiel answered. "When the two contradict, I must side with humanity. I don’t yet know if they do contradict, but I hope in listening to you, I may discover that."

"You remind me of someone I knew once," I said as I moved the chair closer to the bed and sat near her. She must have noticed me trying to look underneath her hood because she smiled and raised her hand towards it, pulling it back slowly. She was, as I had expected, beautiful. Her golden hair glowed in the way that only angel-kin hair could. Her blue eyes were brighter than the skies on the sunniest of days.

I was in my cell for three days while the jury debated what my sentence would be. During that time, Adiel visited me many times. We talked about all that had happened and I imparted what wisdom I could upon her. If the decision was to be for me to be dead or damned, then it was important that there were those who could keep advancing what Raguiel and I had started. And there already were, I knew that. We had touched the hearts and minds of many of the people, and our legacy would live on.

 Douglas Miller
King

Underneath the stairs
In the very back of the cupboard
Across the hard wood floor, creaking and protesting in agony
Beyond the boxes of cardboard, soft and wrinkled in defeat
Behind the rickety sofa, dusty and dripping with cobwebs
Around the tarnished desk, stripped and faded with
splinters
Surrounded by towers of books, quivering and staggered by
gravity
Sheltered by long dark drapes, heavy and sweeping with
fatigue
On top of the busted record player, cracked and sagging with
age
Lies an orange cat.
He slumbers, sleek and superior, fat and satisfied in life.
Purring in contempt, he looks about, alone.
In the darkened room, cluttered and unkempt, He is King.

Kellyann Minardi

King

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In the very back of the cupboard
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Kellyann Minardi
peered out my window as soon as I heard the sirens slowing down next to the Boremans’. There were two fire trucks and an ambulance. Eventually, a fireman came to my house and told me that I should get everyone out of our place in case the fire unexpectedly leapt onto my side of the property.

I stood near the barricade, right on the property line, and watched the inferno eat up my neighbor’s hard work. Joe was led out his front door by a fireman; he was walking backwards, as though he wanted to see the spectacle. He didn’t fight them, but was screaming at his burning house while the paramedics put a blanket on him. I always thought they only gave people blankets in movies, and I still can’t figure out why they felt it was necessary. The crew kept walking him backwards, his steps hesitant and awkward. He was shouting for his child who was being rescued from inside; shouting for the memories he was losing as the fire ate them; he was even screaming at the blaze to stop. I watched, intrigued by the display. My son, Jeremy, stood by my side, watching the pattern of oranges and red bleed into black smoke and roll away from Joe’s once pristine house. I secretly thanked God it wasn’t ours.

Robert closed the leather bound book and wrapped the cord around the sewn-on button of the journal. He took a second to feel the smoothness and malleability of the book before he tucked it in his back pocket and left the park bench.

Robert shuffled home, or to what was his home for the moment. He, his wife Theresa and their son, Jeremy had moved in with her mother because her place was as close to the school Jeremy attended as their old house had been. It was cheaper than renting an apartment, and, with what few possessions they had, the small family hardly over-filled the house. Theresa’s mother had decided to take a vacation herself to give the family a little space after their move.

The walking reminded him of how he had walked to work before they moved, his lanky stride carrying him a half a step farther than the average person, a full step farther than any of
the kids he taught. Robert missed walking from his old house to school every day with his leather side bag, and whatever other artifacts he decided to bring for his seventh grade history class.

The neighborhood Robert had lived in was one of the old Levittowns with identical houses stacked on top of each other. His two-story house was compacted into a tenth of an acre. The sameness had evolved over the years as people had planted trees or bushes—the proud distinction the residents made between the suburbs they lived in and the city; which was a little under an hour by train.

He would cut over a block, pass the stop sign and swing left, and would be at the soccer fields the middle schoolers used for gym class. He had planned on Jeremy playing there eventually; roughing with the other seventh and eighth grade boys after school. The school Jeremy was in now, however, was his mother’s doing—a small private school. Theresa had a certain protection over the boy—their only child. Jeremy, with an overbite and oval face, like his mother, and the same tousled hair as his dad, fit right in to the mold of boyhood.

Theresa worked longer hours to provide her son with what she deemed to be necessary. The family would have gotten by without her picking up extra shifts at the nursing home, but she knew that it was her responsibility to provide for the private school portion of Jeremy’s life. Something about the long hours comforted her.

The conversation the couple had went much the same way it did every time she left for one of those shifts.

“Theresa, you don’t have to go in both tonight and tomorrow night. We’re fine for the month,” Robert would say as she put on her coat and prepared to leave for the third shift.

“No, no. We’ll be even better if I suck it up and do both,” Theresa said as she pecked him on the cheek and turned to leave. “I’ll see you boys in the morning.”

Oftentimes, the longer hours or night shifts would leave Jeremy and Robert alone together at night; the men of the
house fending for themselves. Some of those nights were Jeremy’s favorite—shooting Nerf guns, battling his dad in video games—things that made the house seem less empty in his mother’s absence.

A strong gust of wind brought Robert back to the present where the weather had turned sharper in the last week. He walked home from the park hunched over a little bit with his arms crossed, huddling a little more every time the wind blew. The leaves were almost gone from the trees, scattered on the ground, and made a most excellent swishing and crunching sound when Robert walked through them, his clopping dress shoes and worn khakis pushing the leaves from their original resting place.

“How was your walk, sweetheart?” Theresa asked him as he kicked off his shoes in the entryway. It was her day off from the nursing home.

“Fine.” He put his hand to his back pocket where the journal rested, patting it twice before heading to the kitchen table. The morning’s newspaper was spread over the table, red circles over open houses listed in their justified rows. Robert pulled the journal out of his pocket and placed it on the table.

Theresa stared at it a moment then said, “Hey, do you see? I’ve been looking into some new houses for us.” She motioned towards the newspaper that lay under his journal. He jerked his hand towards the book.

After a pause, Theresa moved her hand slowly towards the edge of the paper and slid a section of it out from under the journal. She laid it on top of everything. “Here, this one, I like it.” She pointed to a thumbnail picture of a one-story, brown, squat-looking home. Under the picture were the bold letters, “Open House Sunday, 1-4.”

“So, we’re going on Sunday then?”

“Well,” she hesitated, “I thought it would be good to start looking, you know. It’s near the old neighborhood, and you could start walking to school again. That is, if you still want to work there.” She avoided eye contact. “I know you don’t...
particularly like it there,” she drew out the word particularly, “so, the sooner the better, right?”

Robert slipped the journal out from under the paper and turned to go. “Sure,” he said, then walked out of the kitchen, leaving Theresa with her ink-stained homes. He headed to the living room, sat on the couch and opened up his journal to a new page.

The insides of the house had just started to glow when my other neighbors first noticed Joe’s house on fire. I started to hear the smoke alarm in his house going off; beeeep, beeeep. I thought the television was turned up too loud in the living room when the first sweep of sirens came through the streets.

The papers later said that it was a towel catching on fire from the gas stove that ignited the whole thing. I never had the nerve to ask Joe whose fault it was.

“Robert?” Theresa had followed him into the living room, and hovered for a moment before continuing. “Robert, we need to talk about something else as well.” Her voice seemed to quiver when she talked to him these days. His always seemed to have a seed of guilt.

Robert worked his gaze up her body and met her eyes this time. He shook his head in a barely visible “no” motion. He was peering out of the tops of his eyes, as if too ashamed to lift the rest of his head when he spoke to her.

Theresa understood the plea. She shifted to lean her hip against the wall. Her once vibrant blue eyes seemed a dull gray now, sunken into her face. Her wispy brown hair pulled to the side in a loose bun. She looked tired and frail. Her freckles had turned into sun-spots, speckling her face. Robert looked away, and started on a new paragraph.

I watched Joe roll up the street in the red minivan he and his wife had bought after—

“Robert,” she said again; she was ignoring his unwillingness this time. He looked up for more than a few seconds and knew the weight pushing on his sternum was going to grow. “It’s been more than a month now. We’re doing all right, I
mean, we’re all safe, we came out of it all safe. You keep taking sick days for work at school, and I know you have them built up, but I don’t think you need to be missing so many days.”

Theresa had gone back to work as soon as she could.

“Jeremy thinks that something is wrong. And maybe there is, but you need to help me out here a little bit. We need to at least attempt normalcy and stability for our son.”

As she talked, his eyes lowered. Robert could tell that after she said it, she was holding her breath, waiting for him to answer. He only shrugged.

“You need to talk about these things if you can’t get over them, Robert. The therapist said you needed to talk to me. You can’t bury the fire forever.”

And there it was. Robert retracted into himself, looked down at his notebook and started writing again.

I rolled up the street in the red minivan my wife and I had bought when Jeremy was born. The car had been loaded with groceries for the week ahead—paper bags full of Capri Sun and peanut butter. Before I pulled onto my street, I had been preoccupied with all the papers I had to grade that were waiting for me at home—cast all over the living room with Jeremy’s science project. I was not excited to read the perspectives of seventh graders on the places they’ve traveled in their life. It was the stupid “getting to know you assignment” I did the beginning of every fall.

I saw the smoke first. My first thought was, Not my house, not my house. Please, let it be leaves burning. Please, let it be the Boremans’. Not my house. The crowds didn’t lie, and neither did the fire trucks. I parked three houses down and ran to the nearest man with a yellow uniform and black boots. I asked him, out of breath, what happened. He said, dumbly, that my house had caught on fire about an hour ago. I sat down in the grass.

“Robert, I’m sorry. Talk to me.”

Just then, Jeremy could be heard opening the front door. “Mom!” he yelled through the house. With one last look to Robert, Theresa glided away, her now bony body making sharper angles under her blouse. Robert knew the exact cheap
smile she was giving their son.

Instead of greeting their son, Robert scratched out what he had just written on the page, inhibited by something he needed to satiate.

_I rolled up the street in the red minivan my wife and I had bought when Jeremy was born. The car had been loaded with groceries for the week ahead—paper bags full of Capri Sun and peanut butter. I guess I was too preoccupied about the papers I had to grade to particularly take stock of my house as I pulled into the driveway. Maybe there was already smoke leaking out of the windows before I stepped onto the front stoop. I had left the sliding door of the van open to run the first batch of groceries inside and recruit Jeremy for help with the rest. As soon as I opened the door, I was hit with the first waft of smoke. I called inside for my son and my wife. They didn’t answer._

Theresa had suggested a therapist about a week after the house fire for Jeremy’s sake. She said the trauma in the young boy’s life needed to be decompressed. The therapist ended up seeing them all, in the end.

“Hi, Robert. Why are you here today?” The therapist’s voice was calm, almost at a whisper. It was like they were in some sort of meeting that no one should know about. His voice was tiny comparison to the rest of his body, which took up the entire chair. His belt cut into the mint green shirt he was wearing, making him look like present with ribbon tied around it. His large wire frame glasses added tinsel.

“I am supposed to talk with you. We’re worried about our family. My wife thinks this is a good idea.” Robert wondered what Theresa’s answer was to this as he studied the way his own belt gapped a little when he sat down.

“Oh, yeah? Why are you worried about your family? Tell me what’s going on, Robert.” The therapist perked up when asking questions.

Robert didn’t want to be talking to this balding man who listened to people complain for a living. It wasn’t the therapist’s place to talk about his life when the rest of his family

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couldn’t even get him to look them in the eye.

“We lost our home to a fire,” Robert finally said after watching the man scratch his round, hairless head with his Bic pen. It caused a sort of rippling on the skin of his skull.

“All right, good. Can you tell me a little more about that?” he asked as he scribbled on his legal pad.

Something snapped inside Robert’s mind, and for the first time since the fire, he let the memory relive itself.

Robert saw Theresa pull up in the minivan and barely park it before she threw herself out of the driver’s side door. She used brute force to shove her arms and legs into the small spaces of people surrounding the spectacle.

“Jeremy!” Her voice was piercing and her eyes searched for some sign of hope among the disaster. “Robert!”

“Over there.” A person directed her force toward the left side of the crowd. Robert saw Theresa lock her eyes on him, hoping that his awkward height would serve as a beacon. He watched as she pursued the fastest course, but he lost her in the crowd as she shoved her way to him. Robert turned to see his wife just as she collapsed onto him. Theresa looked desperately at him and then back to the burning house.

“Where...?” Her eyes, now wide, had strands of her dark brown hair hanging in front of them. Robert could only shake his head and shrug his shoulders. He couldn’t bear to say, “I don’t know.” The answer wasn’t good enough. She turned sharply away from him.

“Stop,” Robert said with a helplessness that did not convince her of anything. She was stepped into the crowd again. Overwhelmed, he grabbed her arm. He clutched her shoulders desperately, thinking if he held onto her, the other loss wouldn’t be so permanent. Theresa needed to move. She clawed at his arms, and tried to hit him, but her petite frame only granted her petty strikes to his chest that did nothing to break his hold.

“He’s somewhere, he’s somewhere, he’s somewhere. Theresa, he’s somewhere.”
There was a commotion near the barrier where a fireman was carrying something toward the ambulance. Robert’s eyes were set in that direction, but he seemed to have forgotten his grip—frozen to the scene at hand. One last hard shove and Theresa broke free, tailing the fireman toward the ambulance, with Robert not far behind. Jeremy was being loaded into the ambulance in a shiny new gurney when they made it to them. There was nothing to him. His mouth gaped open, streaks of carbon on his face. His arms hung where they were placed as the fireman lay him down. His eyes were closed; he wasn’t moving. The EMTs moved the stretcher inside the ambulance. Robert propelled himself inside, and turned to take Theresa’s hand.

“Oh, God.” Robert saw her mouth. Her eyes started to wander in jerky movements around the paramedic, and were unable to focus on Robert or step into the ambulance. Light, stretcher, bed sheet, left ear, bed sheet, wisp of hair.

“Theresa!” He lifted from the waist into the vehicle. There was nothing to her either. She woke up from her coma to realize where she was. Sobbing, she pulled her son’s hand close, fearing to let go, as Robert sat rubbing her back, his hands already heavy with guilt.

“Not really, no,” Robert responded to the therapist.

There was a long pause in the conversation. The therapist shifted his weight to lean on one side of his leather chair, simultaneously shifting the patterns of creases in it and said, “That’s okay if you don’t want to talk to me,” and continued to analyze the unspoken language of the patient in front of him.

Robert avoided eye contact and ran his own fingers through his curly, mussed hair.

“Well, here’s what you’re going to do. You still need to sort out some things about what happened that day, even if it’s not with me. Do you think your wife and son are worried about you?”

The family card curled Robert’s toes a little. He wondered
what Theresa and Jeremy had said to make him believe there was something wrong with him.

“Go out and buy a notebook. Nothing fancy, just something bound and with paper in it. When you find yourself thinking about things relating to the fire, your old house, anything, really, I want you to open that notebook and write down what you remember. Anytime you recall the events of that day or your feelings about it, write it down. We’re just aiming to retell the story. You can do several entries every day if you want. It’s all up to you. Please, and this is the most important thing, don’t worry about getting it ‘right.’” The man made little quotes in the air with his chubby fingers, the kind a seventh grade girl makes. “We’ll go over some of the entries together the next time I see you, if you want. Then we’ll go from there. Sound good?”

“Okay.”

“Great, I really think this will help us out,” he said with a smile; Robert couldn’t tell if it was fake or not. “And even if you don’t end up doing it, we’ll work with what you want to talk about.” He said it in such a way that Robert felt accused of refusal before the process even began. The men shook hands, and Robert left.

Since the therapist had told his son to do the same thing, a trip to a bookstore found Robert purchasing a journal for both him and his son on his wife’s insistence. She was not asked to purchase a journal. Her feelings about the event were free-flowing enough to convince the therapist there was no need for more words. She bought one for herself anyway.

Robert refused to take the journal out of the bag until Theresa finally threw it away, leaving the book on the kitchen table. It exposed the leather bound object, which sat untouched for another half of a week before Robert picked it up.

Jeremy had already been seen writing in his on a few different occasions, and each time, he would look up at his father, and ask, “You started writing too, right, Dad?”

How can the child do that to himself? Robert wondered.
Jeremy had taped his hospital band to one of the pages of the notebook, along with various other items: a leaf, a picture he had found rummaging around his grandmother’s house of the family in front of the old house, one of his mother’s earrings that he had found when he went back to say good-bye to the pile of rubble.

“Yeah, I’ve been writing, Jeremy.”

“Maybe we’ll be able to move back in if we rebuild our house. Maybe we can build a playhouse in the backyard or something too.” The therapist had told him to write down desires for the future. It kept the kid looking forward.

“Mmhmm,” Robert said. Rebuilding, so it could be destroyed again?

“C’mon, Dad. Get out your journal. Write with me,” Jeremy said as he tossed a pen at his father.

“Jeremy, I’ve got other things to do right now.”

“Please, Dad? For me?” Jeremy gave a cheesy smile.

He needed to do something for his son, maybe it would make up for things that had happened.

Robert did not open the book right away, but instead stared at the smoothness of it. He found its virgin pages too delicate to hold such destructive words. Besides, he had nothing to say about the past. But, he started writing, not knowing how the words would come.

There was so much smoke after I left the bathroom. The fire must have leapt onto the carpet by that point, finding my students’ half-graded projects all over the floor. It must have found part of Jeremy’s project on the Louisiana Purchase too, with scraps of color and cut computer paper all over the half-done poster depicting the expansion into the unknown—the West. We were once supposed to move west, or at least experience it. I would have wanted to see the mountains. I would have loved the sunsets.

The fire gnawed on the rest of the house before the sirens came down the street. The firefighters, with their heavy boots and shining yellow helmets promised to save parts of my family’s memory. I sat in the back of the ambulance, alone, wondering if we had lost the cat...
After his first try, he found the re-telling invigorating. It didn’t have to be his story. It didn’t have to be his house. It didn’t have to be him.

Something was never right in the telling, though. So, he kept at it, and would try to fix the mistake—sometimes start the entire story over. Sometimes, he would just describe what was once his house.

The house was built so that when I first entered, I was greeted by the side of a staircase that led up to the two bedrooms. The living room and dining room opened up to the left of the stairs, and beyond that, an entryway to the kitchen. Theresa insisted on the plastic-covered couches like my old aunts, in order to give the living room some semblance of her mother’s house. The imaginary line was drawn near the middle of the oblong room where a dining room table was set.

Going to the right, on the other side of the stairs, was a small bathroom, a guest room and Jeremy’s playroom with the computer and a myriad of Nerf guns and Legos. I would venture in to tell him it was time for bed or time for school. I swear he was in his own world at the end of the hall most of the time, and didn’t seem to hear when Theresa and I would argue about his schooling, my job or her work schedule.

He would start over, finding the mundanity of his old life frustrating, sometimes finding the fire a lively touch.

It was my wife who was at the grocery store picking up the Capri Sun and peanut butter while I stayed at home with Jeremy. She wanted to have pasta for dinner that night, after she got home from her Saturday ritual of 4:30 Mass, groceries and dinner. She stopped forcing me to go with her when Jeremy was 5 years old because I wouldn’t pay attention and didn’t believe. She stopped asking me to go a few years ago. I think she enjoyed the time by herself, eventually. The grocery shopping afterward gave her time to think after the service.

So, I was always charged with making the food for Saturday nights. This time it was pasta. Jeremy was helping me boil the water while she was at the store buying the sauce and praying for our sins.

as well.

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So, I was always charged with making the food for Saturday nights. This time it was pasta. Jeremy was helping me boil the water while she was at the store buying the sauce and praying for our sins.
“You started writing. Good for you,” Theresa said when she walked in to see her son and her husband both scribbling to themselves.

Robert shut his book immediately and stood up, clutching the journal in his right hand.

“Yeah, um, well, Jeremy asked me. I’ve got to go grade papers now, though.” He circumnavigated his wife with his eyes down, the fire burning in his hand, and had a sudden guilt for making it happen again and again to his family.

Theresa found him more withdrawn, and constantly writing in his journal as time went on. She noticed his journaling becoming like an obsession.

Maybe it’s helping, she would think when he would scurry off, leaving her flustered and bearing the load of the household.

Jeremy had stopped journaling after a couple weeks because he would lose it in obscure places, and lacked the motivation to find it. Theresa started keeping her and Jeremy’s journals tucked into the filer by the address books while Robert held onto his. Her journaling increased, too, as Robert withdrew.

The therapist visits had almost stopped entirely for Robert. The journal had become his therapist, making the next appointment his wife scheduled for him his last.

There were entries that the therapist was concerned about immediately due to the blatant lies they told:

Jeremy was playing with the lighter we used for the grill. He was curious, like any 9-year-old.

My wife left her straightener on, and a hand towel too close to it.

The candles were too close to the curtains.

The therapist knew from seeing the wife and child, and reading the newspaper report that a dish towel had caught on fire in the kitchen, and that Robert and Jeremy were the only ones home. The therapist couldn’t tell if the entries overall were heading towards more truth or more lies. He rubbed the excess skin on his forehead before speaking.
“Do you understand what actually happened, Robert?”
“Yes.”
“Can you tell me?”
“I’ll write it down sometime.”

The cool fall day beckoned Robert to come outside and walk in the straggling leaves. On an impulse, Robert slipped on his sneakers and headed out the front door of his mother-in-law’s house with his journal nestled in his back pocket, his wife’s journal inside his coat. He had taken it from the shelf, wondering if her story was more true than his own. He was longing to feel a connection with her again. Maybe journaling was their answer, or maybe her journal would tell him a sufficient one. Her smiles had been fading lately, and Robert could tell that she wanted him to talk or react, or something that would let her know that he was fixing things in his head so that life resume. She expected that his dealing with the fire would make everything better, even her own remorse. He knew she was felt guilty for not being there.

He found a bench by the park nearby, and unloaded the burden from his coat.

He opened to a random page and read.

He left him in the house. He caught the house on fire and left my son in the house. My house is gone. I had it leveled last Thursday under a gray sky. My son suggested a tombstone for it. There, the kitchen. There, the stairs. There, where my husband hid. He is hiding inside himself now. The coward. I want to blame him, but I have to wait for him to come out of his hiding place first. He needs to know what he’s done.

A change in the wind shifted the smell of autumn crispness into one that was unmistakably familiar, and yet it took Robert a moment to recognize it. He turned toward the breeze to get a better whiff of the unknown, an oddly intriguing scent of fall. Another gust of wind came and swept loose leaves across his path. Patterns of red-oranges and crunchy browns danced beside him. It took that last wave of air to figure it out.
It was the smell of burning. Burning leaves. Or maybe, it was his burning house. Robert did not freeze this time.

“Do you know how hard I tried?” Robert shouted at the invisible crowd in front of him, the accosting leaves on the sidewalk. “I thought it was just the stove burning underneath like it always does. I thought that if I left it for a second, I could grab my grade book from my room.”

His heart beat faster, and his eyes widened as the smell of smoke strengthened with another sweep of wind. The leaves were no longer a beautiful symbol of change, but rather fire itself. The dancing yellows and reds were the pits of the fire, consuming him like they had consumed his house. He tried to stamp them down, to swipe them out of the air and crush them. He ran back to his mother-in-law’s, away from the fires in his mind that he couldn’t put out.

Robert lingered in the entryway when he heard his wife on the phone with one of her friends. He paused long enough to know the hushed tones in her voice meant that she was talking about the fire, and, inevitably, him. He stayed out of sight by standing around the corner from the kitchen where she was talking. He couldn’t help but thinking of himself as the coward she described him as, hiding in the corner of the house. He could hear her pacing the room in her socks, more sliding across the wooden floors than walking. The brush, brush noise reminded Robert of a skier.

“He hasn’t been the same since it happened.”

A pause.

“Well, I know, Mary, but he’s taken so much time off already.”

Mary responded to the last statement.

“I don’t know how long we’re going to be staying here. I think we were going to look into renting an apartment for a while. Well, at least I was, anyway. Robert is just apathetic about the whole thing. But he should switching jobs soon.”

“Yeah, he’s seen the therapist three times now, maybe
four. I swear, it’s like taking a kid to get a shot every time. I
don’t know, I think it’s helping. He’s started a journal now.”

“Well, I don’t know! He won’t let me read it. And he’s
evening tearing pages out of it or scratching things out. Lord
knows if it’s helping. I know I can’t tell.”

Mary must have asked something about Jeremy next.
“I think Jeremy is going to be okay with what happened,
eventually. Yeah, he’s pretty well adjusted to school again. Be-
ing out for a week was stressful enough for him. He’s such a
trooper.”

The floor boards creaked underneath Robert when he
shifted his weight.

“Hey, Mary, I’ll call you back,” Theresa said, and headed
over to the entryway where Robert poked his head around the
corner, knowing that he was discovered.

“Hi. When did you get home?” Theresa said in a hesitant
voice.

“I’ve been standing at the door for a few minutes. You
know I’m not for sure about switching jobs, right?” Robert
was playing with the cover of his journal, bending it up and
down.

“Oh, yeah, right. I just thought, you know, we talked about
it before this whole ordeal happened, and we agreed that you
would start looking. You’re not working too much as it is, and
I thought we had this settled.” Theresa crossed her arms.

“I never fully agreed to look for another position.”

“You said you’d try.”

“And look where trying got me.”

Confusion flashed across Theresa’s face, until she under-
stood his meaning. She said with a firm voice, “Stop. Stop
blaming yourself; everyone else has. Stop acting like you killed
half our block. You’re dragging around this guilt so people
feel sorry for you, but I see through it. Pick yourself up, get
yourself a decent job and go from there.”

“I have a decent job,” he whispered as he started flipping
the pages with his fingertips. 

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feel sorry for you, but I see through it. Pick yourself up, get
yourself a decent job and go from there.”

“I have a decent job,” he whispered as he started flipping
the pages with his fingertips.
“What?”
“I have a decent job,” Robert said in a volume that even surprised him.
“I meant to say ‘go back to your decent job.’ I must have misspoken.”
“No, you didn’t. You meant it. I work in the public schools. I have a decent job. I teach kids. I’m sorry that they’re not a bunch of homogenous snobs from money. I’m sorry they’re not riding to school in fucking Mercedes.”
“Robert! Shush.”
“Don’t shush me. I teach seventh graders. Do you need me to be someone else? Obviously, or else you wouldn’t have had me looking at other jobs before this move.”
“You’re not listening to me. You don’t listen. You’re shutting me out. Can’t you see it? I’m trying to put our lives back together. Our lives, Robert. You, me, Jeremy. What are you doing? You’re sitting there, writing in...in that book. You wouldn’t even have had that book if I hadn’t suggested the therapist.”
“No, I wouldn’t. But we wouldn’t be in this problem in the first place, would we, Theresa? I had everything tucked into my head. I had it put away like it should have been. I moved on. And you, you wanted to linger. And now, you opened it back up by having me go see a man that is more qualified to eat a burger than discuss my problems. You’re getting what you wanted. You’re getting me to deal with it. Now you can’t get me to stop thinking about it. Is this what you wanted? Is it?”
“Listen to yourself. You’re...”
“I’m, what, dear? Deal with it Theresa. You’re so good at making everyone deal with their problems.” He didn’t wait for her to respond as he barreled out the door. He left the house and walked. Robert automatically took the train that would lead him back to the place he hadn’t visited in well over a month—the place that was the cause of all his problems. He pulled out his journal and started to write.
I let Jeremy help with the cooking, so he would be proud of himself when his mother came home with the rest of the ingredients for dinner. I had taught him how to ignite the gas stove. He waited for the click, click, click noise before watching the magic of combustion. I put the water on the stove to boil, and we chatted about school, and his friends. I dumped in the pasta, and told him to test it every once in a while. He told me that he knew how pasta worked and would call me if he needed help draining it. I headed in to the dining room to continue grading papers of seventh graders.

I darted past the fire in the kitchen, leaping over the flames with a spurt of adrenaline to save my child. Jeremy was huddled in the corner of the kitchen. I don’t know how the room went up so fast. The narrowed doorway that led from the living room into the kitchen now looked like a gauntlet of fire and traveled fast to where I was. I got the boy to his feet and tested how close I could get without seriously burning my body. It wasn’t close at all. I looked to my other options: the small window above the sink that let the evening light in. My wife had hung a prism there to flood the room with rainbows on a sunny day. Jeremy used to chase after the reflected light when my wife would spin the crystal looking thing. I broke it and boosted Jeremy out first.

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I thought about Jeremy as I ran from the burning house. The entire kitchen had caught fire so quickly that I was almost trapped on the second floor. I thought he had probably escaped before I came down the stairs. Turns out, I was wrong. The firemen pulled him
from the embers of the house—charred and lifeless.

Jeremy was at the babysitters while Theresa and I had our date night. We decided that making dinner was cheaper than buying it since we were already going to the movies. I was cooking pasta while she was showering in the downstairs bathroom, the one upstairs was broken. I had drained the pasta and headed upstairs to locate the tickets. I smelled the smoke and ran downstairs. How did fire spread so fast? The plastic on the couch covers was already melting. Bounding down the stairs and out the front door, I never looked to my left to notice if Theresa was out of the bathroom yet.

The train opened its doors to his stop. In a fury, Robert ran from the train station to the plot of land his house once stood. There was only a mound of gray dirt that served as a marker of where the home used to be. The gravel driveway with grass poking through the middle section still led up the slight incline next to where a house should have been. Robert followed it.

The house had gone up quickly due to its compact nature. Even the firemen at the scene were surprised that there was little left to save after everyone had been safely removed from the building.

Robert squatted near the turned earth and grabbed an almost frozen dirt clod. He crushed it in his hand, wondering what part of the house he held. He sat on his stoop of dirt and exhaled. It was now cold enough to see his breath—smoke rising from the ashes of his memories. It broke him. He hurled the remaining dirt in his hand towards the street, and started to write.

I was making pasta that night for Jeremy and myself, boiling water before Theresa got home from Mass and the grocery store with the sauce. After draining the steaming pasta, I put the noodles back on one of the burners that weren’t in use. They were shaped in bow ties, a detail I don’t need to remember, a detail the police report didn’t state. I had used a hand towel to remove the pot from the stove from the embers of the house—charred and lifeless.

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because it was one of those cast iron pots with the metal handles. After draining the pasta, I put the pot back on the stove with the still sopping pasta waiting for the sauce. The pot was still wrapped in the hand towel. The stove was still on. Jeremy had gone to play his video games in the play room with the door shut.

I went to grab my grade book from the desk in my bedroom upstairs. The grade book was there, under the stack of papers researching various prep schools with openings for a middle school teacher. My CV was in the papers, along with a sticky note on top of the stack that Theresa had written.

“I picked out a few schools on the island that I thought you could check out.” I grimaced a little when I read it, not quite seeing the inadequacy of my current job. I shut the door to our room so that Jeremy wouldn’t know we were considering moving.

I was engrossed in a pamphlet for a prep school when I smelled it. The fire alarm upstairs went off, the one on the first floor being out of batteries that I had promised to replace. I darted from the room and stopped midway down the stairs to survey the living room, already halfway on fire. I could make out an almost clear path to the door, so I jumped the banister and shot out of the house.

My son. How could I forget my son? I reached the sidewalk before I turned in a panic to get him. When I reached the house again, the blaze could be clearly seen through the living room windows. I opened the door to an inferno, the heat blasted me backwards. I could not get back inside. I stood as close as I could, screaming for Jeremy until a firefighter pushed past as I pointed toward the room I had left him in.

They later told me that he was in the bathroom, passed out in the corner when they found him. It took a while before Jeremy heard the fire alarm over his gaming system. Fire safety had told him that if the door was hot, he shouldn’t venture out. Jeremy didn’t know how hot was too hot, and mistook the lukewarm door as a hazard. There were no windows in the play room, so the door was his only option. After a bit, he apparently decided that trying to get out was better than waiting, and opened the door. Walls of smoke must have poured in, overwhelming him. He made it as far as the bathroom.

I was led out my front door by a fireman; I was walking right in the telling
backwards, as though I wanted to see the spectacle. I didn’t fight them, but was screaming at my burning house while the paramedics put a blanket on me. I always thought they only gave people blankets in movies, and still can’t figure out why they felt it was necessary, since the sun was just setting on the eve of fall. The crew kept walking me backwards, my steps hesitant and awkward. I was shouting for my child who was being rescued from inside; shouting for the memories I was losing as the fire ate them; I was even screaming at the blaze to stop.

Jeremy was taken to the ambulance when they brought him out. His face was sooty and his eyes lacked any sort of recognition of the outside world. His limp arms wrapped around the people closest to him.

We three sat in the back of an ambulance and watched our house burn as it drove us away.

The last words left his pen, and shook him with a violent feeling of guilt and blame. He tore the pages from the journal, one by one. The sound of the ripping pages pleased him.

He stood up, as to move from the place he had once called home.

He sat down again to write.

I remembered to put the hand towel back where my wife liked it—on the hook close to the sink.
...Bar...bar...bell

A terrific urge as gravity pulls my sanguine hand to the lever’s crystal ball.

Shift it down and stare aroused with a gaping mouth as hands fix tense, pulses race, don’t forget, it was an honest trade!

Vegas swelled my pride just to Choke on my mirth.

Swallowed numbers lay waste in slot machines with a highlighted clink that sounds like old things mistreated.

Kellie Marie Nadler

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Kellie Marie Nadler
Dirty Ceramic

dishes bore me—
    the creamy lines of my eyes
think about ethics in outer space,

I'm on a dance floor made of stones
not precious,

in the cracks of my face,

I'm a bouncy ball as you embrace me
    from behind while
I wash pots and plates;

in the cracks of my face,

the only time I feel I belong
at the kitchen sink,

    in the cracks of my face,
in the cracks of my face,

I want more from the sun
    in the cracks of my face
twice as much from the stars
in the cracks of my (dreaming days)

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Kellie Marie Nadler
Mother Duck Eggs Hatch

“Those chief warrant officers of yours are very preverbal, mother,”
said the ductless olfactory gland
with the radium legend.

“They are all preverbal, except
One; he is a fair-
Ground and I withdraw,
Could you re-malfunction him?”

I daresay he will growl handy
in tincture and no double standard
he will ghost-write smile-less,

“He has been lurching too long in
The effigy;
That is why his shank
Is not quite rigid,” so

she scribbled his necrosis and
strolled him all over.

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Kellie Marie Nadler
There Goes

a zombie marching
along the salt of the earth—

‘One, two! One, two!’ He had
a sundial on his back and
effortless gestures dangling by his side.
On his way and wanting to be home

he met a blood thirsty anthropologist:
the light bulb above her head
hung down upon her breast
and she was very developed.

‘Good evening zombie.
What fine roots you have and
what a big knapsack! You are
a penetrable zombie.’

‘Ok. Thank you, you
anthropologist you.’

‘Zombie, do you see that great warm paper cup?’ the
anthropologist pointed to a candle lit room
which stood beside them. ‘It’s quite
hollow in there. You will find the
names that were spelled wrong,
and then you’ll see the ink stains

There Goes

a zombie marching
along the salt of the earth—

‘One, two! One, two!’ He had
a sundial on his back and
effortless gestures dangling by his side.
On his way and wanting to be home

he met a blood thirsty anthropologist:
the light bulb above her head
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anthropologist you.’

‘Zombie, do you see that great warm paper cup?’ the
anthropologist pointed to a candle lit room
which stood beside them. ‘It’s quite
hollow in there. You will find the
names that were spelled wrong,
and then you’ll see the ink stains
through which you can let yourself down.
I’ll tie a kite to your body

so in the dark I can construct
a plausible life once more.’

Kellie Marie Nadler

Kellie Marie Nadler
the hills of anhedonia

we will slide into you
    r gut like a knife.
swallow us.
breathe before sleep and know our weight.
we will arrest yr typin fings
we will take 1 by 1 yr friends
into the thick night.
you will know the same day
and you will know the same day
until choking becomes home. come gently
into us. we
will bleed you.

Otis Nemo

the hills of anhedonia

we will slide into you
    r gut like a knife.
swallow us.
breathe before sleep and know our weight.
we will arrest yr typin fings
we will take 1 by 1 yr friends
into the thick night.
you will know the same day
and you will know the same day
until choking becomes home. come gently
into us. we
will bleed you.

Otis Nemo
it is dangerous to be educated.
before you blooms the deep
flushed rose of history, time
& peoples & language
taut like a map, holed like a well
(there is a reason why
cartographers are not young men)

transcend & return:
learn all & then live.
this was our plan
striking toward the sprawled wild
our identities tied to stakes
but when the foundation of the
machine was gradually revealed
& we saw the dark cosmos veins
—our own cities, nude
we found that we could never go home.
we went too high
there was nothing to hold onto.
not even space

Otis Nemo
From, Diary

I know that you must love applying awesome alliteration, but *Dear Diary* is growing almost as old as the frumpy jacaranda you left for me on page 52. What ever happened to *How Are You*?

I might respond: well, Katie, I have about eighty-too-many hearts, about a thousand-too-many chicken-scratch mindless-spelling-error-laden gibberish tattoos, and a whole stupid biography of Billy Carpesio from Gym Class, written on my ass.

So yeah, I’d say dump him. I’d say your little story about your scrapes on your knees the other days was...well...let’s just say it was less than amusing. But who am I kidding? I’m your Diary. So when you walk all over me with your pen today, I’ll smile, lines in my teeth all straight and inviting for writing.

From, Diary.

Mike Norgard
High Dive

Plop, Plip, Plop, Plip,
(I guess that’s how my trembling
feet sound on the cold, slippery
steps, but I have no regard for that
now, seeing as I seem to have left
my stomach back on the ground; and
when I inch up, it gets lower and lower
and lower)
Tip. Tip.
(My feet stabilize on top
now all I gotta do is
dontlookdowndontlookdown.
I just looked down.
blood escapes my dumb head,
and I become the next wavering flag,
the same flag I saw when I made fun of
Kevin the other day.
Well it doesn’t look this high
from the bottom...Maybe I should just turn arou—
But then my eyes catch the “Where’s Waldo” version
of Her. She squints up,
why does she have to be squinting up?
Anyone else would do.
I wouldn’t care if “anyone else” saw me up here, but her?
So I respond with a T-Rex wave [If I could’ve
mustered anything more, I would’ve]
What is it about 86 degree water that makes 86 degree
air feel so cold? I shiver, shiver, my feet like
Crazy 8’s, except for they’re actually crazy,
and I wobble up to the, to the
edge. Nervousness pushes me down.)
Boing, Boing, Boing,
(I just hope my trunks don’t fall off when I hit the—)
Splash

Mike Norgard
Unicorns, Etc:

Floating amongst the clouds
Dipping through starlight
They fly majestically, fantastic.

O’er horses they gleam, proud
Chased by limelight
Exploding vibrantly, bombastic.

It’s amazing, the difference
One fucking horn makes.

Mike Norgard
How to Break up with a Work in Progress

Part I.
Step one. Let's
Begin.
"tap tap tap"
He hits the stand.
Step one – is a dance.
  k
  c
  a
The beginning (is easy). And you
You choose.
The
  Steps
  sTeps
  stEps
  stePs
  stepS
Find rhythm. Find beat.

Part II.
Step two. Let's decide to
Keep g→ o→ i→ n→ g
Step two is.
  A year.
A winter.
  Is. (snowflakes of glass) is. (warm brandy down your
throat) is.
(over) with air that freezes over coal black lungs.
Spring.
Footprints of faces in oxymoronic mud.
This is step two(2) and we stand in rain/stand. In
Thousands by the minute/and feel one.
And the one feels like thousands.
(So) we are content.
With our cliché white bedsheets
And
White noise.

Part III.
Step Three.
is
a drug.
That should not matter, but does.
Step(3) is re-wearing your underwear
Because you’re out of money for laundry
But have a pocketful of X inappropriate content X
And we are not content anymore.
In our clichéd white bedsheets. They are stained.
And I hear (you) no
White noise.

Part IV.
Step four.
Is a hole.
Dark and empty.
But, upon closer inspection—
Full of shit.
And Alice falling. And us next to her.
Because hell—
Where else “would we go?”
Step (4) is a poetically drawn picture of loneliness
that emo kids get when
They google
“emo” on the internet

And the one feels like thousands.
(So) we are content.
With our cliché white bedsheets
And
White noise.

Part III.
Step Three.
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Step (4) is a poetically drawn picture of loneliness
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They google
“emo” on the internet
Part V.
(This is the part where it becomes “about” someone)
This is the part (where) we spun too fast
Spinning spinning spinning spinning spinning spinning
Stop.
We stopped.
It.

This is the part that cements in us
   The stereotype that we are.
Because we are young white upper middle class America
What the fuck do we know?

   And we *roll* our eyes at ourselves,
   along with everyone else.

Part VI.
Step six. Is.

Silence.

Because we don’t talk anymore.

Rachel Peterson
Stuttering

is anxiously
synthesized discourse,
vocabulary
kaleidoscope,
with words too wide
for easy passage.

A short voice sabbatical,
in breathless, silent, syncopated
emphasis while

you’re watching hard-eyed and
waiting
waiting
as I s-st-st
utter.

Syllables lie
smashed and scarred,
but these contingencies
hurt more than
any crowded word.

Tony Ramstetter
An Empty Stage

Returning home to the grimy dimness cast by black paint and thick barriers of cloth filled with years of breath and air heavy with dust.
And the hard wooden floor makes you feel so grounded, like you’re attached from the bottom of your feet down to the center of your everything—the all that is you and the smell of the wood that weighs smooth in my hands in an unfinished way looking around to a flood of memories playing familiar and I feel like I don’t belong here anymore but at the same time like it’s mine and it belongs to me.
I want to put my face against the floor and breathe in my past so that I’ll feel centered from top to bottom for the rest of my life.
But even I don’t understand how much you could miss feeling secure or how hard it would be to get it back.

Marissa Schleuter
I'm like the fruit in the Tiffany bowl on my grandmother's knotted table
vibrantly citrus in face value, but when she turns the clementines over in her hands
there is sometimes a blemish that she guts out with a paring knife

Evelyn Scott
Wings

sometimes you call me ‘your bird’
i hate that what i am to you involves
a wire cage and ornamental song.
i sit perched, wailing an aviary tune
that can only mean let me go
let me go. let me stretch these
tiny hollow bones in sheets of blue
or swallow the damn key.

Evelyn Scott
This issue of Inklings is set mostly in Goudy Old Style. It was designed in 1915 by Frederic Goudy, who worked miserably as a bookkeeper for 40 years before becoming the third most prolific type designer in American history. According to legend, Mr. Goudy once said, “Any man who would letterspace blackletter would shag sheep.” The font that bears his name is also known for a few eccentricities, such as the diamond-shape dots, the calligraphic “Q,” and the canted hyphen and “g” serifs. Goudy Old Style is considered one of the most legible typefaces for print, and as such is the official typeface of Harper’s Magazine and several American universities.

So there.
**ABOUT INKLINGS**

Inklings publishes art and writing by Miami University undergraduates once per semester, online and in a limited print run. All submissions are reviewed in anonymous form by carefully selected and trained undergraduates with experience in art and/or writing. We consider submissions of all sorts from anyone of any major, so long as they are a Miami undergrad. In addition, we sponsor several open mics and speakers throughout the year. For more information, or to submit, please visit [www.muohio.edu/inklings](http://www.muohio.edu/inklings).

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