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The Man Who Took A Breath

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THE MAN WHO TOOK A BREATH

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Master's Program in Creative Writing

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Robert Allen Crowl

2016

THE MAN WHO TOOK A BREATH

by

ROBERT ALLEN CROWL, B.A.

THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of
The University of Texas at El Paso
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of the Requirements
for the Degree of
Master of Fine Arts

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Finding the Windowpane

In *The Poetics of Aristotle*, he ascribes most forms of writing to “modes of imitation” (7). When considering this collection, I think this is an accurate characterization. These stories, characters, and conflicts have been previously written throughout my life, either in the reality of my experience or the recesses of my imagination that have taken those experiences, deconstructed and reconstructed, disassembled and assembled them into the collection that follows. Later, Aristotle reiterates this thought:

Poetry in general seems to have sprung from two causes, each of them lying deep in our nature. First, the instinct of imitation is implanted in man from childhood, one difference between him and other animals being that he is the most imitative of living creatures; and through imitation he learns his earliest lessons; and no less universal is the pleasure felt in things imitated (15).

My poetics are intimately derived and instructive, this collection finding its roots in my economical, familial, racial, and spiritual lineage. Like Aristotle, writing seems to have chosen me, and from that place of thankfulness, I attempt to honor it in kind by imitating these experiences that have raised me, of pleasure and of pain, ecstasy and tragedy.

That being said, I do know that despite my personal experiences and connection with these characters, these stories need to become autonomous and divorced from any personal meaning or expectation. I want these narratives to breathe of their own volition. In “Why I Write,” George Orwell says it this way, “it is also true that one can write nothing readable unless one constantly struggles to efface one's own personality” (4). And this has been my endeavor, to

remove myself from these stories, these narratives, in order for the characterization and narration to lose its monotony and hopefully tap into more of my imagination.

Recently, the new musical, *Hamilton*, from writer Lin-Manuel Miranda has been my obsession. In the song, "Hurricane," Miranda writes from Alexander Hamilton's perspective, as he describes his tumultuous and tragic past. For Hamilton, the written word saved him: "When I was seventeen a hurricane/Destroyed my town/I didn't drown/I couldn't seem to die/I wrote my way out/Wrote everything down far as I could see" (Miranda). Similarly, and with much less critical acclaim, writing has always been my way out. I wrote my way out of my parents' addictions and the abusive environment I grew up in. My father has been a transient presence in my life, exchanging a relationship with his children for booze, other women, and new wives and kids. In the 1999 film, "Fight Club," the narrator, played by Edward Norton, and Tyler Durden, played by Brad Pitt, are having a conversation about Norton's character's past which accurately illustrates my own feelings:

Narrator: I don't know my dad. I mean, I know him, but... he left when I was like six years old. Married this other woman, had some other kids. He like did this every six years, he goes to a new city and starts a new family.

Tyler Durden: Fucker's setting up franchises (Quotes for Tyler Durden).

Like Norton's character, I've felt bastardized by my own father, and writing has helped me cope with his effective absence. Somehow, these demons lose power on the page, relegated to their rightful place, yet realizing that no matter how many pages I write, I can't escape these things.

I'm at a point now where I've realized that my childhood has sculpted and informed my poetics immeasurably. I tend to write about spirituality and family, because they've, for most of

my life, eluded me. I tend to be inspired by men who wouldn't earn any national acclaim, instead favoring men who are marked by relentless selflessness and dogged resilience in the face of harsh reality. Like in "*Skyscrapers of a Wasted Life*," I pay homage to a simple man, driven by simple principles instilled in him by his family. Modeled after my wife's father, my surrogate father, I wanted to give value to the valueless, men and women who esteem family and honor those who sacrificed for them. The struggle is to tease out the complex internal conflicts that are raging within these people. Even in the most trivial routine, there's suffering, temptation, and hope:

Because we don't want to fall in." His mother laughed, the little boy's brow creasing. "Papa's Daddy opened those bottles, never starting one he didn't finish. He jumped in so many bottles of whisky that your Papa pretty much raised himself." She ran her hand from the boy's head to the top of his neck. "Your father has always feared missing your life for a bottle and swore it off" (119).

Here's a man whose history and family still echoes inside of him. It's that simple moment with his mother that preserved him from his own proclivities. There's a legacy of honor in his abstention conceived in the indelible and beautiful nature of her memory. I'm reminded of the song, "Heart of a Girl" by Brandon Flowers that says "I can see the time drippin' down the clock/We've been trying to hear that ancient refrain/It's the one that knows just when our heads are down/And reminds us of the place from where we came." I'm fascinated by characters who live by these intangible, familial and spiritual codes. We all grew up hearing these "ancient refrains," the stories that built our families. I want to create characters that force the reader into strange, uncomfortable, and simple histories, all of which are filled with innate beauty and value.

Another important element of my poetics is liberating myself from authorial intention. Several professors, at UTEP and those littering my literary experience, have instilled in me its irrelevance. As a writer who primarily began writing as a means of dispensing angst and personal tragedy, this has been an especially difficult charge. How can I allow my art to be interpreted in any other way than the one I intended? And I set about correcting those who read my work, in classes, in workshops, at coffee shops, after poetry slams, etc. In the book, *Narratology*, by Mieke Bal, says, “My concern to make this distinction is not to deny authorship but to emancipate both author and reader from the stronghold of a misconceived interpretive authority” (523). So I’ve learned that letting go of my desires for how my work is received liberates me and readers. It frees me to trust the work to take on new meaning and liberates readers to derive whatever meaning and beauty from it they want. Bal reiterates this idea when she writes, “the margins built within art and the reigning concepts of beauty leave some space for the production of works that cannot be exhausted by mainstream response” (529). The funny thing is that this has always been my poetics, that art affects us all in beautiful and unique ways, our souls extracting instruction, seeking intimacy, in someone else’s space.

Maybe because I’m a closet masochist or maybe because it’s comfortable, I’ve always been drawn to writing that holds tragedy in the faces of readers, forcing them to look at its complexities and the refinement it can affect in those who endure it. I believe literature should affirm and deconstruct us, enabling us to see ourselves in order to gather their spirits to characters that, like them, feel both utterly lost and wonderfully found, at times. Its characters like these, whose humanity and eccentricity make readers feel a little less alone, that brought me comfort throughout my life. That’s not to say that some characters and narratives feel so foreign, honest, and desperate that they challenge our worldviews and concepts of beauty and suffering,

of right and wrong. Great characterization should also make us squirm in our chairs either for its familiarity or its oddness, for its ecstasy or its tragedy. Similarly, Aristotle says “Character is that which reveals moral purpose, showing what kind of things a man chooses or avoids” (29). I want characters that represent the spectrum of morality, revealing that all of us make choices that redeem and condemn us on any given day. In creating rich characterization, I’ve learned that characters’ actions, thoughts, and speech can more aptly unveil their morality than pages of narrative exposition. Aristotle says it this way, “...the incidents should speak for themselves without verbal exposition...” (71). Whether from a place of hypocrisy or integrity, the characters’ interactions with their world speaks volumes to their inner constitution. This technique also, as mentioned earlier, opens a character’s morality to interpretation, liberating me from intention.

In the story, “Someone’s Budding,” Ethan’s wrestling with his own restlessness in the face of social graces, routine, and responsibility. It seems as though time is standing still, and he feels alone in this crowd. His claustrophobic fit is mostly internal, forcing his mind to discern some kind of purpose and meaning in the face of the moment’s monotony:

Ethan thinks of her muscles, how each day brings some new gesture, new position. Then, he checks the room, sees everyone locked in their patterns.

Like his brother in laws’ thumbs doing their methodical circles atop their devices may have once held crochet needles. Or his grandmother and grandfather’s silent exchange may have predated language—cavemen and cavewomen alerting each other to predators (136).

Ethan’s loneliness is made apparent through his hunger to connect with the “polite” people surrounding him. His characterization of those around him helps to define his own inner

struggle with finding joy in the routine. His daughter and the other children exploring and discovering become the antithesis to the adults in the room, their apparent authenticity and impulsivity at odds with all the social calculation around him. Ethan's desperation for connection and validation is found in his daughter:

At his knees, Ethan lets go of his daughter's vice grip and she takes two clumsy steps into his arms, flinging her chubby arms around her father. Ethan weeps into her hair, the two of them burying their faces into each other. His daughter laughs. The room erupts in applause of someone's budding. Ethan pictures the first seed ever planted in the deep, cool soil, imagines them encircling the first green sprout in communal awe (137).

Ethan's morality is revealed through his actions and thoughts, a man surrounded by family from whom he feels disconnected, finding redemption in fatherhood and his daughter's honest need and bond. Ethan's truth lies in the "incidents" and his interaction with and refraction of them through his perspective.

In this collection, I've ventured into scenarios in order to confront the reader with characters, both real and imagined, who have haunted me. Just as Toni Morrison's Milkman has in the book, *Song of Solomon*, his mother nursing him as his legs dangle to the ground. I can still picture him limping, one leg shorter than the other, to Pilate's house, his wild aunt who was born with no navel and who's oddness estranged her from her family. Or the mother in "Blackberries" by Leslie Norris, whose conventional, stern, and frugal relationship with her son is subtly communicated, but no less potent, in contrast with the father's intimate, blithe and spontaneous persona. Norris tells so much with so little: "Not too much off. I, my husband and I, we thought it was time for him to look like a little boy" (40). In this bit of dialogue, the mother corrects

herself, illustrating the gap between the couple. The haircut was her idea, this tiny phrase speaking to the couple's disharmony and the mother's allegiance to social norms, not allowing herself to own a decision apart from her husband's co-signing. Norris' subtle moment of revelation hearkens to Aristotle's assertion that morality, a character's inner-self, is best communicated by what characters' say and do.

The mother's frugality and stern nature is further communicated when Norris writes, "They put his cap, still in its bag, in a drawer when they got home" (41). Again, this small action is so telling of the mother's persnickety nature and is starkly contrasted when the father comes home, and the son "leaned against his father's knee while the man ate his dinner...the man lifted the dry gravy with his knife and fed it to his son, very carefully lifting it into the boy's mouth, as if he were feeding a small bird" (42). Norris creates disharmony through her imagery and characterization well before the couple's argument.

Similarly, I used oppositional characterization to create tension in the story "When Stars Die," Tobias' narcissistic and vain inauthenticity emphasized against his brother, Ginsberg's, irreverent, damaged, and crass behavior.

Ginsberg took a pull from his beer, his lips making a loud suctioning sound after each chug. His shirt was too small, and Tobias could see skin between the buttons. Tobias also noticed the wrinkles standing out against the pressed tablecloth. He imagined his brother rooting through his hamper, the wrinkles having had time to make their indelible crease (128).

In moments like these, the characterization is clearly at odds with the narrator whose invoking Tobias' judgmental and vain perspective toward Ginsberg in order to highlight the two

character's oppositional nature despite their blood relationship. In this way, the characterization speaks to the conflicts we encounter within our familial circles, despite the kinship and bonds we've built and endured by way of proximity and time. Most of us can't choose our families but are rather placed there by way of happenstance or providence. Despite your spiritual philosophy, family is a truth and a conflict common to most of us, either in its intimacy or its absence, its synchronicity or its estrangement.

Harkening back to Flowers' "ancient refrains," I'm deeply concerned with spirituality and theology, particularly how it affects human behavior and relationships. This life long crusade is inseparable from my poetics. Growing up in a home where prayer and God were invoked almost exclusively in reaction to tragedy, it wasn't until college that I started seeking my own theology and beliefs, trying to define morality on my own terms. My family runs the gamut on spiritual matters, my mother's parents essentially believing all of reality is a figment of our imagination, and sickness is the result of a lack of faith. On the other hand, my father's parents warned against frailty and sin, insisting salvation and God's favor are as fickle as a dog in a bacon factory. They also warned against using instruments to praise God, lumping guitars and pianos onto the list of damnable forms of worship. Growing up in this hot-bed of fantasy, delusion, and hell-fire took its toll, rendering me spiritually tangled and theologically lost. I don't think I'll ever know the extent of the damage which is one of the many reasons I'm still "writing my way out."

I knew this spiritual history would infiltrate my poetics and the stories I write. For example, in "The Man Who Took A Breath," I wanted to create a character who has one foot in the spiritual world and one hand outside it. Enter Jacob, an angel who's still fascinated by things of the natural world and hell. In many ways, Jacob represents one whose heart still breaks for

those who are not allowed entrance: “Jacob cringed, as he did every time he heard the portal swallow a new arrival,” and “Jacob watched until each lover rested from exhaustion. After each vision, the Pearly Gates seemed less pale than before” (63, 65). In these moments, Jacob’s sympathy and horror humanizes him, it all culminating when Jacob, an angel, sins in heaven and allows Alana to bring in something from the natural world. In addition to exploring the afterlife, Alana’s dilemma with leaving her experiences and relationships behind, conjure up most of our wrestling with our own mortality and what it means for those we leave behind. And if there is life after death, will we remember those we were intimately acquainted with while on earth?

Another focus of my poetics is imagery. In "Blackberries," Norris uses setting and imagery to build suspense, saying, “Mr. Frensham’s hands were very cold. His hard fingers turned the boy’s head first to one side and then to the other and the boy could hear the long scissors snapping away behind him, and above his ears” (40). This detail is frightening and visceral from the narrator’s perspective which is meant to capture the young boy’s innocence and anxiety. Norris’ meticulous diction and detail create this suspense with words like “very,” “cold,” “hard,” “long,” and “snapping,” that place the reader in the barber’s chair with the young boy. In a similar way, I use imagery to build suspense and tension in “The Meek Shall Inherit the Asphalt,” when I write:

I envied his sculpted body and swagger. Trying to correct my slouch, I was well aware of my curved spine, angular shoulder blades that jutted out like wings, and my untamable mop of dirty blonde frizz. Watching her, I ran my hands over my hair to will some of the loose hairs into place. Unlike James Dean, standing at ease was work, unsure of how to pose my skinny limbs. My aviator prescription

frames kept sliding down my nose from the sweat, and my finger had to reposition them again and again (22).

Like Norris, my imagery is meant to create conflict between the two characters who are clearly polar opposites, physically speaking. There's tension in the disparity between these two characters' descriptions, which are not only visually humorous, but also foreshadow the two men's inevitable stand off. This quote also explores the social hierarchy student's are thrust into in high school. The speaker's insecurities stem from his search for identity and validation, a quest we never stop defining and redefining as we evolve.

My deconstruction and reconstruction through writing has also come at the hands of powerful metaphors that help readers interpret the world and its realities in new, more meaningful ways. Tina Hall does this beautifully in her story, "Visitations," where the couple's home takes on the character of their festering and eroding relationship. Hall opens the narrative behind of the wheel of this vehicle saying, "there was a squirrel trapped in the wall behind my stove in October. We could hear it clawing back there, but what to do?" (37). Immediately, the narrator's communicating her feelings of entrapment and fear through this image that she only expounds and deepens as the story winds on. Having lost one baby already, the squirrel becomes a tangible representation of the narrator's fear of losing the child she's presently carrying, and the stench of her souring relationship: "even with the cold autumn air stinging my nose, the smell lingered, crouched at the back of my throat, and no amount of swallowing would get rid of it. "We have to do something," I said, the next time Paul called. He said, "Let's wait it out. It won't last forever"" (65). The couple's intimacy is dying, like the squirrel in the wall, all that's unsaid between them starting to fester. This juxtaposition of the growing stench, and the woman pleading with her apathetic lover reinforces Hall's metaphor.

I've created juxtaposition and metaphor in similar ways in my collection, taking from brilliant writers, like Hall, who weave them in with such grace that the reader senses them without needing any context. And I'm learning to use the physical landscape in my narratives (Although with far less grace than Hall does) to reflect the emotional and spiritual landscapes of my characters. For example, in "Cut Through A Hill," the road Stephen's driving home connects deeply with his and his wife's struggles with infertility:

Each discarded pregnancy stick grew it, and it echoed through the empty house in numbing silence.

Ahead, Stephen sees brake lights, and his car comes to a stop under a cluster of bending trees, not quite touching. He wonders what causes the branches to reach for one another like that, bend themselves over something lifeless.

Maybe, it's the slant in the landscape with nothing to correct their bend, or maybe, there's something in their nature that longs for intimacy (68).

The branches' longing for each other echoes the couples' relentless reach for a child, and like the unnatural road wedging the forest from itself, Stephen and Michelle's infertility has interrupted their paternal and maternal longing. In this way, the landscape enriches and expounds the conflict and tension. And the empty house resembles Michelle's hollow womb, the absence of a heart beat mimicking the quiet house.

Foreshadowing has also aided in my poetics, and like Hall, Norris uses foreshadowing to hint at the boy's loss of innocence. Starting the narrative in the barbershop is brilliant: "I, my husband and I, we thought it was time for him to look like a little boy" (40). Again, this fragment of dialogue not only reveals the mother's conventional and unilateral nature, but acts as a symbolic moment in that his haircut represents his transition from infancy to boyhood. Why else

would the mother make the comment that she wants him to look like a little boy? Of course this culminates when “he began to cry quietly, to himself, knowing that it was a different weeping to any he had experience before, that he was crying for a different pain. And the child began to understand that they were different people; his father, his mother, himself, and that he must learn sometimes to be alone” (44). Norris brings the narrative to a close, the boy’s innocence falling away like the strands of hair he watched fall to the ground earlier.

Similarly, in “Shedding Ourselves,” I used flashbacks to Henley’s mother, to foreshadow the explosion at the Grove and his inevitable reunion with her. And in “Ruse Made Real,” I foreshadow the wife’s suicide by replaying her husband making the bed with her in it, gesturing toward the culmination of her grief over his death burying her: “I felt like I was wrapping a mummy when I pulled the sheets tight. We both laughed as I watched her disappear beneath the lumpy duvet and even further still beneath the pillows.” Ironically, his death would also result in her own burying, like this memory of his literal burying of her beneath the sheets and blankets.

This project has been a strange exploration in a fairly new medium for me. At times, I’ve felt like a man wondering a dark room, my background mostly holding residence in poetry, spoken word, and songwriting. As I mentioned earlier, in the beginning, my poetics were mainly self-serving in nature. I was more concerned with the musicality and cathartic nature of words. That’s not to say that this collection has not had any therapeutic merit, I’ve just learned that, in fiction and poetry, when I strain over my own experiential vision, the art suffers. I’m learning to abandon stories that start with dense exposition, instead employing *in media res*, unraveling characterization through situations and incidents thus preserving the story’s momentum. For example, in “Before the Concrete Dries,” I originally started the story with a detailed exposition of the narrator's past bouts with suicidal thoughts, transitioning into his history with Daniel

Dominguez. Inspired by Aristotle and professor Chacon, I wanted to unravel the two boys' similarities through the plot itself in order to restore literary momentum:

I'd just finished a tutorial with the delicious Mrs. Benjamin who tried to teach me the horrors of the Civil War while I fantasized for 30 minutes about the color of her panties, my ears still ringing from the thudding of my mother's fists against my father's chest the night before. Mrs. Benjamin dismissed me, her tight ass jiggling beneath a spring dress that crept up her milky thighs as she erased the top of the chalkboard.

As I entered the hallway, I saw, high school heart-throb, Daniel Dominguez, being smacked on the ears by an older man, their faces nearly identical except for the older man's pot-hole like scars (55).

The narrative is not bogged down by unnecessary exposition now. Instead, the reader is immediately struck by the narrator's and Daniel's like experiences with abuse. By establishing the conflict immediately and delving into the plot, the story's pace is sustained instead of paused by exposition and back story.

This project explores various thematic dichotomies such as spirituality versus delusion, dream versus reality, power versus frailty, strength versus weakness, temporal versus eternal, redemption versus damnation, poverty versus affluence, social graces versus authenticity, and fidelity versus adultery. Knowing these spectrums intimately has made this project both personal and creative. Other themes and motifs include family, addiction, social hierarchy, identity, youth, economics, class, power, loss, anarchy, divorce, abuse, race, entitlement, fertility, marriage, sex, remorse, grief, bureaucracy, tradition, identity, enmeshment, religion, confession, sin, and

forgiveness. While my scope is wide, the common thread lies in each character's search for truth and/or redemption.

My poetics also focus on human relationships. So much of our lives are marked by our relationships. As I said earlier, some relationships are thrust upon us without consent, in regards to family, career, and circumstance. Regardless of how these people came into our lives, these are the relationships we're obliged to abide, grow, and, at times, suffer through. Both of my parents are alcoholics and addicts, so I've witnessed and endured, first hand, the effects of this. I truly desired stories and characters that would reflect the power, positive and negative, found in relationships. For example, in "Dreaming of Men Dreaming," Hector's confronted with his grandmother's strange doctrine that all of reality is a dream:

His mouth gaped like a cave lined with teeth. He wanted her to acknowledge her own finiteness, her humanity, instead of lording herself over the room. Grandma looked at Hector and smiled, her purse squeezed securely in her lap, eyebrows slightly raised. Hector wondered if her husband's amputation and paralyzed body was a dream. He wanted to ask her if she ever tried to wake herself when she buried her oldest son (19).

Nothing could be the same between these two characters after Grandma's revelation. We've all experienced moments like this when those we've grown up with become strangers before our eyes. Sometimes, it's caused by sin, other times and in Hector's case, it's caused by someone's philosophy, like his Grandmother's theology that in one moment isolated two people who had to that point been intimately connected by blood and history. Hector's now forced to reconcile his love and affection for his grandmother with his own personal grasp of reality. In

this way, his relationship has been instantaneously redefined. His grandmother's convictions will not change, and neither will Hector's, so the reader is forced to realize that some relationships can transcend and endure each other's convictions, while others can't.

Despite working on these narratives for months, I'm still working on them. My poetics are still evolving and being honed by authors, poets, mentors, and fellow writers who continue to amaze with their revolutionary and impactful use of the craft. Orwell encouraged me in this regard when he said, "I find that by the time you have perfected any style of writing, you have always outgrown it" (4). My literary goals are to publish these stories, but I will continue to seek the counsel of accomplished and seasoned writers in order to prevent plateauing in my art. I realize that several of these narratives can be realized more fully and deepened in their use of perspective, imagery, plot, and metaphor. For example, I would like to deepen "Skyscrapers of a Wasted Life," because I feel the conflict and tension are lacking. While the imagery and flashbacks are telling of the main character's hereditary tendency toward addiction, and give a context for his uneasiness and morality, the character needs some kind of struggle or complication to give the plot more tension and, ultimately, resolution.

Furthermore, in "Shedding Ourselves," I want to build in meetings between Henley and Nate prior to their reunion at the Orange Grove factory. I believe this will add momentum back into the narrative, because I can unravel the two men's friendship and history without having to be so heavy handed and expository. Also, I was hoping to deepen the father and son's relationship in order to show the father's inability to relate to his son since his wife died.

In the end, these stories represent my poetics, because these characters are the products and composites of my experiences and reckless imagination. Even though they derive from very personal origins, I hope they are universal in scope and autonomous of any authorial meddling,

because at the end of the day, “Good prose is like a windowpane,” and “I just want to write less picturesquely and more exactly” (4). People from all walks of life are forced to endure familial relationships of some kind, which can estrange and bind, tear us down and build us up. And regardless if you or your family has been touched by addiction, we all live amidst these people who are trying to find a way out from under or a way deeper into these dark recesses that so easily entangle. The spiritual crusade is one we all are seeking as well, even if our journey has taken us to the opposite end of the atheism spectrum or the agnostic realm of contented cynicism. I hope the characters and scenarios I’ve crafted, imagined, and in some cases, lived, will force readers into the lives of real people, making them consider foreign and deeply personal experiences in order that it might widen their target for compassion and understanding. In other circumstances, I hope my work will strike an all too familiar chord with readers, comforting them that their own eccentricities and frailty are not without company.

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Dreaming of Men Dreaming

Hector stared at his prim grandmother. She held her chin up. Hector's body crumpled in the couch, his tongue stopped. Hector had always struggled to defend himself in these religious exchanges.

Behind Grandma, an exotic woman read headlines above scrolling stocks, green decimals streaming. Uncle Joe cooked plump sausages and fluffy eggs in the kitchen. Even the sweet grease of pork couldn't distract Hector from the old woman's calm demeanor in light of the heaviness of her words.

“So this is all a dream?”

“Yes.” Her eyebrows ascended as her head made a humble tilt.

“How is that possible?”

“Have you read Genesis?”

“Well...yeah, but—.”

“Remember when God made Adam?”

“Yes...but wh-”

“God realized Adam was lonely, so he put him to sleep before extracting a rib to make Eve. Even though Eve was made, there's no record of God ever waking Adam up, hence everything since that moment has been Adam's dream.”

His mouth gaped like a cave lined with teeth. He wanted her to acknowledge her own finiteness, her humanity, instead of lording herself over the room.

Grandma looked at Hector and smiled, her purse squeezed securely in her lap, eyebrows slightly raised. Hector wondered if her husband's amputation and paralyzed body was a dream. He wanted to ask her if she ever tried to wake herself when she buried her oldest son.

The attractive anchor with no pores informed the living room that 30 civilians were killed last night in the Middle East by a suicide bomber.

In the kitchen, Uncle Joe bit into a link, the casing made a high-pitched snap, and a small cloud of grease plumed at his lips. He chewed rigorously, half listening to Grandma's rant, half loosing the eggs from the edge of the skillet with a rubber spatula. Hector's mouth watered from the living room.

"So, none of this is real."

"Right."

"If that's true, everyone who's ever existed is a figment of Adam's imagination, and as soon as Rip Van Winkle wakes up, this imaginary world will end." She rolled her eyes heavenward.

Nasdaq climbed 22.18 points and Rafael Nadal took the Roland Garros crown for the 7th time according to the screen in Grandma's periphery. He finally leaned against the soft leather, thinking he'd located a chink in her wrinkles. Her eyes drifted back toward her reclining grandson, and she opened her cave.

"The world will only end as we know it. We'll still exist in the mind of God." She pulled her purse closer to her breast, legs and feet in line and touching thigh to toe. The President was shaking a Vietnam Vet's hand on the matted screen beside Grandma; while the scrolling bar let the room know that Dow was up 12.75 points.

Uncle Joe entered bare foot carrying two porcelain plates each with two sausage links and a pile of steaming eggs topped with melting shredded cheese. Black flecks of pepper and clear salt crystals dotted the yellow heaps. Two pieces of toast jutted off the side of the plate like neighboring mountains snow capped with butter and jelly. Uncle Joe landed the plates in Hector

and Grandma's laps with care, his face beaming, lips still coated in a savory sheen. He then headed back into the kitchen before returning with utensils and pulpy orange juice. He winked at Hector as he sat down the pregnant glass and headed back to the kitchen.

The imaginary young man sat his plate on the leather and grabbed two TV trays from their wooden cradle. He then ushered one of the mini-oak tables to his grandmother in the oversized leather recliner. She leaned over her purse and set the piping porcelain on the wood. After propping his up, the two figments ate their breakfast in silence, one tasting a dream, the other tasting nothing. A hot female apparition was interviewing the author of a book on debt freedom. Hector laughed mid-sip, spitting pulpy nectar on the floor, a little streamed down his chin and neck, and onto his collar. Even the pretend woman eating over her purse laughed. Hector couldn't help but wonder if she was laughing at him, or herself.

Hector could hear the sound of plastic bristles agitating against a skillet. He imagined the bubbling of suds. He thought of a fig-leaved man sleeping in a garden dreaming, and felt remorse for someone that dreamed so small. Beside Grandma, a man signaled toward a blue screen that a tropical storm was brewing off the Florida coast, assuring the living room that it would never make landfall. Gas prices were up 8 percent.

Sipping the orange juice, Hector pictured old movies where the walking dead, riddled with gun shot wounds, attempted to consume a drink, the liquid escaping through the bullet holes while it was being drank by them. Hector smiled as the drink left his mouth tingling and sweet. He tried to dream himself shot, looking down at his chest, waiting for the orange juice to spray from his wound. But nothing happened.

Hector heard the faucet baptizing the bubbles from the pan and saw the fluttering of eyelids. His ears buzzed with the rushing water, his Uncle Joe's plump hands still scrubbing dried

bits of egg from the skillet while grandmother crunched into a smeared crust of bread. Hector wondered who this was all for; was he a part of Grandma's dream or was she a part of his? Or were they both a part of Joe's, all that toil and utility for three figments, three apparitions, filling themselves?

The Meek Shall Inherit the Asphalt

The asphalt scorched beneath me as a man in the marching tower spoke through a megaphone. A football field painted the parking lot, canary yellow hash marks and yard lines. The marching band stood in a series of horizontal rows, perpendicular to the passing cars.

My eyes could have lived in that brown curve of skin. Her blue eyes resembled the veins that showed through my skin; her soft cheeks begged to be danced next to. The sun lit her blonde hair. She stood on the sidelines, her attention fixed on the marching tower. She was a drum major, one of the upperclassmen who directed us on the field. Her cheek was turned to me as she watched the director in the tower above us.

Next to her, the other drum major stood, thumb hooked just above the crotch of his soccer shorts, a white t-shirt draped over his shoulder and shaved chest. He ignored the megaphone, checking his own stomach for missed hairs. His auburn hair was short and pushed back, a modern day James Dean. He smirked at the blonde girl, her shoulder freckled, hair the color of the hash marks. Her white top hung off that brown curve of skin. It seemed that his eyes wanted to live there too.

I envied his sculpted body and swagger. Trying to correct my slouch, I was well aware of my curved spine, angular shoulder blades that jutted out like wings, and my untamable mop of dirty blonde frizz. Watching her, I ran my hands over my hair to will some of the loose hairs into place. Unlike James Dean, standing at ease was work, unsure of how to pose my skinny limbs. My aviator prescription frames kept sliding down my nose from the sweat, and my finger had to reposition them again and again.

The director's megaphone gave a short burst.

“BAND!” he screamed. Most of the kids' chins fell to their chests, hands and arms flat against their sides.

New marching band recruits, like myself, followed their lead. The drum majors and upperclassmen snaked through the rows of marchers, checking the new recruits' posture. Like mannequins in a department store, our arms and hands were posed by the upperclassmen, the brown curve and James Dean making their way through the rows as well.

I kept my face glued to the asphalt. Sweat soaked my blonde mop of hair. My hands clung to my side, and my fists clenched. Everyone was silent except for the upperclassmen positioning us. The director looked down on his creatures from the marching tower, our heads bowed in service.

His jowels bulged on either side of the megaphone as if fat with his next command. Above the bell of the megaphone, his metal glasses framed his eyes. He wore black cotton shorts and a white polo. His tucked shirt revealed pleats and a braided belt that wove in and out of itself like the upperclassmen making their way through the rows of musicians. His hands gripped the metal railing of the marching tower, as he looked at his chess pieces below. His socks crept up his ankles from polished white sneakers—a deity walking on clouds. When he looked at us, he saw geometry, like the choreography of clouds above him. His computer bent our numbers across yard lines, expanding and condensing us into forms that pleased him.

It was the first day of our training, so the man in the tower was hollering marching commands that sent us into different poses. The sun climbed higher than our new god in khakis, preteens wilting like flowers as they tried to hold their imaginary horns. He called us to attention, which we learned meant making ourselves straight and tight like soldiers.

I clicked my arches together and fixed my spine straight as a yard line; then, I folded my hands a foot in front of my lips to mimic a horn. Before we were allowed to march with our actual instruments, we had to learn to march without them. To mimic real instruments, our hands needed to be folded in front of our lips, our forearms at an almost 90 degree angle, elbows parallel. We all looked like soldiers praying to the same tower. Our triceps had to parallel the asphalt.

Upperclassmen continued snaking through the rows and posing us, our eyes asking forgiveness when they moved our limbs. It was a game of degrees and angles, elbows 20 degrees off their mark, hands two clicks below our lips. A few times, the shirtless drum major passed me and moved my hands a fraction of an inch in either direction, each time undoing what he'd done minutes before. He stalked down the rows with his shoulders back and his hands closed. He kept trying to meet eyes with the blonde girl who seemed not to notice.

We held our imaginary brass and woodwind instruments as the heat reminded us we could glisten. The freshmen revealed themselves, eyes widening, hands drooping and shaking from fatigue as the afternoon drew on. My arms radiated, and my shoulders burned under the sun's weight. I took deep breaths and made subtle moves to comfort myself.

We were just learning how to hiss our fake horns up and down when a gangly boy on my right sputtered, bending at the waist. His arms drifted down as his strength failed. If his horn had been real, his notes would have been hitting the pavement. I started to hear soft, and then loud groans from his direction. Suddenly, his hands fell to his stomach, and his head fall forward. The vomit was chunky like cottage cheese. A smirking James Dean carried the frail boy to the shade beside the school. His face was white as a sheet.

Through his megaphone, the director held us at attention, our skin sweltering. I started to hallucinate. I swore I saw an angel appear in front of me, her wingless shoulder exposed, her ponytail tossed in the breeze that trailed her. Her eyes were ice blue, and her lace blouse reminded me of clouds. *Heaven must be in those clouds*, I thought. I wanted to sleep on those clouds, far from this giant hotbed of acne and the sour stench of cottage cheese. She took my forearms in her hands and spoke.

“Pull your elbows further apart. It will feel more comfortable.” Her soft hands widened the distance between my bony elbows, and I breathed easier, my chest less closed. I smiled a thank you as the director screeched us into our instrument groups.

“GLIDE STEP SECTIONALS!”

My arms went limp at my side. We scattered to different territories of the parking lot.

I found my group and fell in line. James Dean led my group, soccer shorts pulsating as he barked at other kids who slouched and cracked their voices like me. He began demonstrating the way we were to move. We were forbidden to walk. Instead, he said he was going to teach us to glide. Assuming attention, he extended his heel to the asphalt in front of him and rolled the sole to his toe. I was amazed at how smooth his stride was, the gravel hardly disturbed beneath him like he walked above it, shoulders and torso still, so still.

“It’s like driving a stick. You ease the gas with your front foot, your back foot letting off the clutch.” He jested.

As we marched, our upper body needed to remain still above our hips and feet. The glide step was meant to keep our instruments still, which would prevent our clunky steps from sending vibrations from our feet to our mouths that were trying to produce sound. This was another command that trickled down from the director in the tower.

I felt clumsy taking those first steps, like relearning to walk. "We would practice until our feet rolled like clouds," the director said. The upperclassmen in our group laughed at us when we stumbled. Sometimes, they'd scream spit at us to scare us into focusing.

About an hour later, in the early evening, all the marchers were summoned back to their places. The director stood on his tower, the megaphone still pinned to his lips. The two drum majors gathered back on the sideline, one hooking his thumb below his hairless navel, and the other trying to separate herself from him by taking small side steps toward the director's tower.

Although weary, the sun continued blistering our skin as all of us fell back into our destined rows. Our fingers threaded themselves, and our arms rose back to our mouths.

"BAND!" Our heads fell in fists and feet spread, a choir of shame. The tower smiled.

"DETAIL ATTENTION!" The arches of sneakers snapped together, heads shooting up.

"BAND HORNS UP!!"

"TSSS!" We answered our director in aspirated praise, hands folding in unison. Every marcher was a carbon copy of his neighbor, hands folded before faces, parallel arms, an invisible line connecting elbows.

They'd trained us well, most of us. I looked around without moving my head. With each order from the tower, there were recruits stumbling, forgetting the day's fill. Heads were snapping up too early, and others were posing themselves in wrong positions entirely, garnering James Dean's screams.

The drum majors started walking through us again. James Dean yelled at the pale boy who'd vomited earlier. The boy was refusing to put his arms up from fatigue, so James Dean sent him to the sideline, his hair undisturbed as he shook his head at the boy who'd changed shirts. The frail boy walked to the sideline and pooled on the concrete.

A few rows ahead of me, the curve of skin wined the crowd, her jean shorts hugging her shapely hips, her blouse almost too short, offering a sliver of stomach to me. I swallowed her with my eyes. I wanted to digest her, absorb the nutrients of her. My ears lost the screech of the megaphone, plunging themselves into that curve of skin. My head followed her. Her eyes found mine. She acknowledged me, her hand rising then tracing the lace neckline above her breasts, her icy eyes piercing the curtains of heat that partitioned us. A scream broke our stare.

“RECRUIT!” My face misted with spit as I woke to the hairless chest and dimpled chin of my section leader screaming in my face. Our faces were nearly touching, and his puffed chest heaved near my chin. I tried to correct my slouch.

“WHY AREN’T YOU FOLLOWING YOUR DIRECTOR’S ORDERS?”

All the other marchers faced the ground, my hands still laced in front of my lips. I started to remember where I was, the angel retreating from my mind. The other chess pieces were quiet and still, but I knew they were searching the edges of their eyes for me. I sensed the director's eyes burning my scalp like the midday sun. I let my arms fall and looked past James Dean to that curve of brown skin. I squared my shoulders to my accuser.

“I GOT DISTRACTED, SIR, BY THE BEAUTIFUL GIRL AT 3 O’CLOCK! IT WON’T HAPPEN AGAIN, SIR!” The light refracted off his nylon shorts. I heard the blonde girl laugh, other chess pieces joining her. James Dean's clone sucked in air, preparing to unleash more spit. I made myself tall toward him, my shoulders pushing back, chin angling toward the tower. James Deans' nostrils flared.

“WHO THE HELL DO YOU THI-“ he said, his soccer shorts shaking.

“DE-TAIL, ATTENTION! JOSH! LEAVE THE KID ALONE!” The megaphone squeaked as the Director’s finger released the amplifier. Josh snapped his head toward the tower,

his fists as tight as the fresh shave on his chest. He looked back at me, my body held at full attention, arms in instrumental pantomime, and then stormed toward the shade of the school. The chess pieces were chattering. I looked ahead, my stomach holding that curve and those cool eyes as tight as the denim held her hips.

“FORWARD MARCH!” The Director called, and we all stepped forward, heels rolling to toes. The gravel crunched beneath us as we marched. My chest puffed beneath the tower, his bent wrist against his hip, the other hand holding the edge of the tower. At the side of the school, James Dean was shaking his head and drinking from a paper cone. He crumpled it and flung it on the ground near the pale boy he'd sat down earlier. The pale boy was laughing to himself.

The black asphalt had cooled in the evening fade and cars were gathering near the concrete field to pick up kids. There was a slight breeze meeting my face as I marched heel to toe to heel. On the sideline, the blonde girl stood, her light eyes fixed on the elbows she'd set right. My shoulders were still inched back, and I kept marching, waiting for the next command from the Director. I pictured that brown curve of skin bathed in twilight, and wished for a day when the horn I held wasn't an apparition, but a gold, brass mass of twisted metal.

Shedding Ourselves

A cicada buzzes in the oak tree outside. There's a creek from the springs as Henley Daniels leans forward. Starting at the lowest lace, he pulls on either, the black laces cutting his skin white with each tug. In his front yard, the cicada's buzz stutters into a screech. On his nightstand, there's a picture of a lithe woman in a floppy paper hat. It's tied below her chin and she's knelt in the sand studying a shell. A hulking man is behind the camera and his thumb blurs the edge of the photograph.

He walks to his nightstand where a large seashell bowl holds a pronged, gold-coated badge engraved with numbers and letters. The shell is white with splashes of rust on its bottom; the inside is a milky white with sharp peaks and rounded valleys.

Picking up his badge, his hand grazes the grain of the bowl, and he pictures a wild boy's hand scraping sand flat into the shell's belly. The sun seems absorbed into the matted gold strands that hang wild and dreaded from Nate Langley's scalp.

Henley's mother is stretched on a towel beside the two boys. Her hair hangs in wet ringlets above her face that grins at them. She digs her toes into the sand, a book shading her chest as she laughs at their makeshift sand buckets. This was before Henley saw her laid on the bedroom floor, her chest soaking the sheet in red pools.

Like Nate, Henley's scalp is clumped with sand too, as he packs the shell tight with his pruned palm. Then, Nate turns the shell over on the sand so as not to lose the sugar in its belly.

Henley runs his hand over its intricate rust work and radial ribs. He remembers the slow lift of the shell, the two boys watching the unveiling. The meaningless sand had transformed into a shell's echo.

Henley collects a pistol from the nightstand drawer and sheaths it in his holster. He returns once more to the mirror as the cicada to its buzzing. On a tree outside, it sheds its coat, Henley donning his. He closes the door, leaving the shell, silent.

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Across the interstate, Nate Langley scrapes the top of a milk jug with the edge of a garden hose to knock out some of the jug's overflow and caps it. Pushing the hose into a new gas tank, he starts siphoning into a new jug. He stole the six feet of garden hose from the dumpster behind the Gerland's Foodmart. His ribbed tank top is dirtied from yesterday's wear and reeks of gasoline. His wild hair hangs in his eyes as he watches the gold fluid flood the jug.

His brother, Cash, sits at the diner's edge. Cash's fingernails are yellow at either side of a Marlboro red. His undersized overalls tug against his ass each time he raises his cigarette to his chapped lips.

Nate caps another milk jug and heaves it into a shopping cart. He's about to wrap up when he sees a familiar car. He yanks the hose from the minivan he'd been draining, leaving the gas cap and fuel door wide open behind him. The hose trails gasoline behind him.

Near the diner door, Cash takes another deep pull on his Marlboro, burning it to the filter. He exhales a series of uniform rings that expand as they drift in front of him. Cash eases his hand through the furthest ring, wearing it like a handcuff and laughs to himself. The diner door dings, Mr. and Mrs. Johnson exiting the buzz of the diner. The smell of chicken fried steak and white gravy wafts through the door. Cash bolts to the edge of the diner and bends his head toward the parking lot.

"Nate! We got company. We gotta bolt."

Nate lets out a cough, spitting gas from his mouth as he jams the spewing hose into another jug. He pushes his wild blonde hair from his face.

"Are you fucking kidding me? I got Chief Daniel's car, here! You asked to be a part of this, so show your worth!"

Cash snuffs the butt of his cigarette against the red brick of the diner as Mr. Johnson guides his wife toward the edge of the pavement to avoid Cash who steps out to meet them.

"Hey, Mr. Johnson...er...Judge Johnson. How's this heat treatin' ya?"

"Fine, Cash. What brings you here? I don't think I've ever seen you, here. Then again, we don't see you anywhere except at the courthouse. I hope that will change, someday."

He smiles to himself. His wife's body is tense, and she won't look at Cash. Cash's jaw twitches as he throws the cigarette butt into the street, the corners of his mouth pulling in.

"Wish I could say you won't, but unless something changes down at the Citrus Grove factory, you probably will. No healthcare. Still at the national wage. Undocumented workers taking half what us natives make. Enough to make a 5th warder lose his mind."

"I hate to hear that. I knew your family fell on hard times with your wife's illness and all. How's she doing?"

"She still has cancer. Chemo treatments are bleeding us dry since the strike. Then again, you probably knew that with Mrs. Johnson, I mean, Dr. Johnson being the only doctor in Stevenson County. By the way, I saw you bought another boat. Big, beautiful fucking thing. We'd love to take a ride, sometime. After all, your wife said some fresh air would do Estelle good. It has to be hard having so much while most of us are dying with nothing."

Cash flashes a smile, broken and missing teeth lining his mouth. Behind the building, Nate caps his last jug and chunks it in the cart. On the ground beside him, he leaves the hose, gasoline still pouring out. He stashes the cart in some thick shrubs that line the parking lot.

"Work hard, play hard, right, Cash."

The elderly judge gives his wife a nudge to head toward the parking lot. As they pass, Dr. Johnson raises her hand to her nose for the smell. Cash stares at the ground behind them, his arms limp at his side. Nate rounds the corner, nearly running into the Johnsons.

"Oh, excuse me, Judge Dickcheese and Dr. Crook. How's the day find ya, other than fat bellied and pocket lined?"

They continue to their car, Nate forcing them to walk around him.

"Maybe we can talk about a time share on the coast, sometime. Cheerio, motherfuckers."

He flips a middle finger at them as they give a last turn his direction before getting into a spotless SUV.

"Black Escalade. Next time," he says to himself before spitting a milky brown discharge from a loaded lip. Nate turns to see Cash leaning against the diner.

"It's on, brother. I probably got 30 jugs." He raises his hand for Cash to slap, but his brother doesn't move.

"I can't wait to level the playing field. And for the Johnsons, Daniels, and all these other fat wallet fucks to know our struggle. It's gonna be sweet, Nate, sweet."

"Me too, man. Let's get outta here before anyone else comes out."

The two men push the gasoline filled cart out onto the dirt road that leads to the 5th Ward, the parking lot still flooding with fuel.

*

"Calling all units. Code three reported at the Corner Store on 7th Ave. and Olive Branch Blvd. Suspect seen fleeing the scene on foot, northbound. Suspect's wearing a purple Addidas jumpsuit..."

Henley cues his siren and U-turns. He takes the short cut behind the diner, a dirt road that leaves downtown toward the 5th Ward. Dirt clouds around his cruiser as he passes the diner where him and Nate would spend afternoons filling car handles with shaving cream and standing full coke cans in front of car tires. Then, they'd hide under the bushes and watch patrons leave. Henley can still hear them both laughing each time a customer would get a handful of shaving cream, their faces twisted in disgust as they shook the cream from their hands and cursed the sky. Or the loud pop and hiss of the aluminum cans bursting beneath their tires. Nate would have to hold Henley's mouth, sometimes; his laughter would be so deep and uncontrollable, and Henley remembers the smell of Nate's wild hair and the sand from his hands coarse against his lips.

Henley swings his cruiser onto Olive Branch Blvd. to see a man dressed in purple sprinting about three blocks ahead of him. He pictures cutting his cruiser at 16th and Olive Branch, the suspect turning down 16th that has no outlet. As he cuts the distance to one block, Henley sees that the man in the jumpsuit is swinging a plastic grocery bag. He speeds past him looking for any bulges in the man's waistline or socks. He cuts off the suspect's path, sending him toward the cul-de-sac that butts up against the wall separating the 5th ward from the ocean. Throwing his cruiser into park, he grabs his radio.

"Pursuing suspect on foot at Olive Branch and 16th. Send backup. Attempting to make arrest. Suspect is not armed."

He sprints from his cruiser. The man swinging his head behind him to watch Henley's pace. Legs churning beneath him, Henley remembers scaling that concrete wall.

"Stop! That's an order!"

The plastic bag is swinging furiously at the man's side. When he reaches the dead end, he throws the bag over the 9-foot wall, then backs up to get a running start to scale it. Before he can take off, Henley tackles him, the two men falling to the concrete.

"Get the fuck off me! I didn't do anything!" His eyes have filled with tears, and he refuses to offer Henley his hands. Henley's arms lock like a vice to pin his arms at his side. In one motion, he also wrapped his legs around the black man's legs, pinning them together.

"Please, relax. I saw you throw the stolen items over the wall. You're under arrest for suspicion of theft."

The man's body relaxes, and his voice softens. He tries to turn his face toward Henley.

"Henley? Is that you?" Henley realizes the man in purple is Evan Williamson, a local orange picker at the Grove. He loosened his grip but not completely. Evan had ceased to struggle, almost as if to offer himself to him. The two men were almost holding each other, not for violence, but for comfort.

"Evan. Why the hell are you stealing?"

"Are you really asking that? Has it been that long since you worked at the Grove?"

"I need you to quit fighting me. If you let me handcuff you, I'll hear you out." Evan's body loosens, and his hands move behind his back. Henley draws his handcuffs and laces them around Evan's wrists. He moans as the metal teeth bite against his bones. Henley's eyes water at the acidic scent of oranges on Evan's neck. He pictures his father's hulking hands stroking his hair from his face, the smell of orange peel permeating his gentle palms.

Henley grips the chain in between Evan's hands like he used to grip the woven baskets at the Grove. Both grips held something fragile, trying not to spill the contents.

The two men jump to their feet, their heart rates finally slowing.

"Never thought, Henley Daniels would catch me. We must've raced the Navarre coast a thousand times, and yo' ass spent every race coated in the sand trail I kicked behind me."

"That's because I was slowing down to catch a glimpse of Kelly Thompson rolling over without a top on."

The two men laugh, Evan's gold canine glinting in the late day sun. In the distance, a siren can be heard, and Evan stops laughing and looks toward the wall. Henley remembers the bag he'd thrown over. Henley watches Evan's face run away from the moment the way his father's will anytime he sees the photograph of the woman in the flimsy paper hat on his nightstand.

In the photograph, the wind is trying to steal the hat from her, so she is pressing it to her scalp while trying not to laugh at the cameraman. Her feet are almost lost in the milky sand. At her tender hip, a little boy's cheek rests, his arms hugging her bare thigh as the sand continues to bury them. The boy's mouth is frozen in the same content position as his mother's, his hazel eyes squinting in the sun like his father's behind the camera's shutter. On the right side of the picture frame, a tiny wave is frozen at the peak of its crest, its white foam matching the color of the sand it's about to meet.

"You have to let me go, Hen. Annie needs that formula," Evan says, his eyes still full.

"Come on, man. You know I can't do that." He holds the chain. Evan's pants are open to the heat, the concrete having torn the fabric and his knees when they fell. Blood is spilling down his legs in thin streams.

Although his back's to him, Henley hears Evan hyperventilating. He looks toward his police cruiser for the backup he radioed for and seeing an empty street, rests the palm of his hand

on Evan's shoulder. Suddenly, a cruiser squeals into view, sirens wailing like the cicada that morning. He lets the hand on Evan's shoulder fall to his side.

The police car comes halts beside these two men who used to collect cicada skeletons together. The siren makes Evan's eyes squint, and a tall, rough faced man steps from the car toward them.

"Officer Daniels. What do we have here?"

"Evan Williamson. I ran him down before he could clear the wall." Henley looks into his father's averting eyes.

"Nice work, Daniels. Escort Mr. Williamson to my car. I'll run him to the station for you."

Henley swallows hard and leads Evan, still mumbling to himself and weeping hard, to the cruiser. Henley puts his hand to the back of Evan's head to help him into the car. He lets his hand linger on his head a few moments before putting him in; Chief Daniels looks away from his son. Closing the door to the cruiser, Henley looks at the wall that hides the ocean from the three men, and then walks back toward his father.

"Those Williamson boys. Never knew one of them who didn't wear a pair of cuffs. Giving their race a bad name if you ask me." Henley didn't respond. His father's voice was cold and metallic, as it had been that time the Batman stickers slid out of Henley's shirt in the toy store parking lot, as it had been since his mother's death.

"He was stealing formula."

"He was stealing."

"I heard he was let go at the factory, last week. An undocumented worker took his job at the Grove."

"And what's your job, son. If anyone knows the cost of lawless-" There's a catch in his throat. The Chief strides to his car like he had the hearse that bore his wife to her grave. His car exits the cul-de-sac with the drone of the engine growing faint.

Hearing the engine leave eyeshot, Henley runs to the wall and leaps, grabbing the top with his fingertips. Lifting himself onto the wall, he swings his feet toward the ocean, now a giant emerald chasm opening to the horizon. The sun is still torching the sky like some blinding baby mobile the sailboats are reaching for. Henley sits on the wall, as he would with Nate, Evan, and Cash: three boys who dreamed of islands filled with mothers and fathers with soft voices and pregnant iceboxes. Henley mostly imagined a woman in a floppy straw hat, his arms wrapped around her leg, forever singing as she rinsed the soap from his eyes.

Henley rotates to face the wall, sliding his butt from the top as he turns. He athletically grabs the top to interrupt his fall and then lets go for the last couple feet. His clunky boots sink into the sand. He looks around and spots the bag, its contents strewn along the beach, and he grabs the bag to collect them: a box of formula, some diapers, bottles, and a broken rose. Henley carefully throws them into the bag, knots its handles, and ties the bag to his belt. The burning sun is still an hour above the horizon as Henley picks up a clump of sand and watches it fall through his fingers before heading back into the 5th Ward.

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Nate looks over his shoulder and down the street before exiting the alley onto 15th. The two men wheel the cart across the street and directly up a gravel driveway that leads toward a deep-set garage beside an overgrown back yard. An overweight Mexican man in coveralls guards the side door to a detached garage. He breathes heavily as he sips a beer. He props the door for them. As they enter, they give him a nod, the sky streaked with yellows and pinks from the sun's

set. The large man throws his empty bottle into the yard, closing the door and locking it at their backs.

Inside, a solitary bulb is lit, and several men stand over a long table littered with paper, mumbling with cigarettes and paper cups of coffee. Nate flicks the switch, and the room goes silent, all eyes turning toward him.

"We have it, fellas. Everything we need to take that shit down." Nate crosses his arms and waits for the room to catch up. Cash stands off to the side, lighting a fresh Marlboro with a dying one. Most of the men look at the ground or meet eyes with their neighbor. Alfonzo, the droopy-eyed guard in coveralls, breaks the silence.

"Wait, Nate. Are we ready for this? I mean, what about the night custodians?" Nate shakes his head at Alfonzo who's looking around the littered garage at the frozen faces.

"Fuck yes, we're ready! This ain't some shit we threw together. Don't worry; your ass won't be doing any running." The room erupts in laughter, then the silence resumes. "Cash is the head custodian and already spread the word to his people. That place will be a ghost town."

"But, what'll happen to our jobs? Some of us can't survive without that paycheck."

"What about another strike?"

"Another strike?" Nate throws his hands and face at the ceiling, his eyes flashing. "You remember what happened last time. Nothing. We were on strike for 60 days, all of us giving up two months pay, our families living off scraps to pay the lawyers, in hopes that Judge Johnson would approve at least one of our demands, but the Grove interest groups suffocated that bill under piles of money."

A man drops a cigarette on the ground and snuffs it with his shoe. Other men shake their heads. Cash spits on the concrete near the Mexican's shoe, Alfonso furrowing his brow at him. Cash raises his hands and eyebrows at him.

Nate pictures men with picket signs in front of the Grove entrance. He remembers Henley beside him, the two of them throwing rotten oranges at the scabs entering the factory. He continues his rant.

"We need a voice that you can't throw money at. A message that will billow and billow until God himself makes it right." He tilts his eyes skyward, thrusting a finger at the ceiling. "This fire will reduce their machine to ashes. I have worked at the factory for 15 years, Cash has been there for 20. I'm sick of pulling the utters on this cash cow, then handing the fresh milk to someone else, while our families scrape along the bottom of Stevenson."

The worn faces and hands begin to nod in rhythm with Nate's gesturing, hollers of affirmation rising like the ocean tide on the other side of the wall. Outside, the sun is split in half by the horizon, but most people in the 5th Ward only see cement. Clumps of soft seaweed bob in the ocean along the Florida coast, collecting on the beach after each wave's retreat.

*

A fat officer sits behind the front desk of the station, a few officers in the cafeteria drinking coffee, empty sugar packets and creamers on the table. The Stevenson Police Station goes quiet at night like a mother after her kids fall asleep. There are sleeping quarters for officers pulling turn around shifts. Henley sleeps in a cot between shifts when the door to the sleeping quarters thunders open.

"Daniels! Daniels!"

Henley sits up, dazed.

"I just got back from the diner, where I left my car. Someone siphoned every drop of gas out of it, left the hose hanging out of the tank."

"That's weird. Kids pulling a prank?" Henley feels Nate's coarse hand over his lips.

"That's what I thought, but Martinez said we've had 15 or so calls with the same complaint. Something's up. I want you to head to the Langley place."

"What evidence ties them to this?"

"No ties, just a hunch."

"Don't you think we should wait until we get all the facts?"

"I need you to comply, son. I'm spent on justifying myself to you. Lately, you've loosened, somehow." His face is firm, and he stands over his son, giving him a nod before leaving the room. The same nod he gave after telling Henley about his mother's murder. He said the drive by was the result of his own role in the end of the Grove strike. He said he'd had a hand in forcing the workers back to the factory, helped get legal grounds from Judge Johnson for bringing muscle to the Grove to clear out the picketers.

Behind Chief Daniels, the door closes like the sting of a coffin lid.

*

Nate pulls his F-150 onto the chained trailhead, the cabin filled with smoke from Cash's cigarette. Alfonzo sits in the bed of the truck surrounded by jugs of gasoline and pressure cookers.

The trail runs inland from the coast toward the Grove just outside the Stevenson city limits. The truck's headlights cut through the darkness like the wall cuts the ocean from the Ward. Cash jumps out of the cab into the pitch-black air. He checks the street for headlights while unhooking the chain.

Nate accelerates through, Cash closing the trailhead behind them. Nate eases the truck into the narrow trail. The headlights flash off the eyes of a small herd of deer just off the trail.

Henley pulls up to the Langley's house. He parks in the driveway, eyeing the windows that are dark as he approaches the front door. He knocks and rings the doorbell for safe measure. The doorbell echoes through the empty house

He takes out his flashlight as he descends the steps and heads toward the garage. The driveway is blanketed in leaves, pinecones, and spots of motor oil. There's an old rusting engine under a maple tree in the backyard and old beer bottles spilling out of a trashcan near the side door to the garage.

Checking behind him, Henley walks toward the side door, side stepping broken bottles and empty crockpot boxes. He puts a hand on his gun. Behind him, cicada shells clench the maple trees, and there's a light breeze rustling the tall grass in Nate's backyard.

Henley pulls the door open to an old Chevelle gutted on cinder blocks, various tools all over the floor along with endless cigarette butts and drying coffee spills. On one side of the garage is the folding table where, only hours earlier, Nate and Cash had divided the bomb locations. Nothing remains except an ashtray packed beyond capacity and the faint scent of gasoline mixed with the tart citrus residue of the orange factory.

*

Nate parks just before the thick woods. The three men strap on backpacks loaded with armed cookers and jugs of gasoline. Each man's hands hold two military issue duffels stuffed with more jugs. Crickets are singing in a nearby pond, and the men are jittery from the crack and

creak of the surrounding forest. Each man wears a hard hat mounted with a tiny bulb to cut the darkness.

Alfonzo's breathes heavy as the three men kneel before the clearing. Nate hears Henley laughing through tears beneath the bushes at the diner. Likewise, his group is hidden by the edge of the wood. 50 yards ahead sits the factory, the steel sheeted siding resembling a giant tin can. Cash is sucking down in long gasps. Nate hits the cigarette to the dirt and snuffs it with his fist.

"Are you kidding me? We're walking bombs needing a spark. Think."

"Sorry, man."

Nate puts his hand on Cash's back before taking off through the tall brush. He's bent low, Alfonso and Cash tailing him to the factory wall.

Nate's the first to reach it. He unscrews a grate at the wall's base, withdraws the ticking cooker from his sack, and slides it through the chute. It slides about five feet and comes to rest beneath the factory floor. He slides two jugs of gasoline in behind it and seals the grate.

At the next building over, similar cookers and jugs are sliding into doors and chutes around the sanitation and packaging wings of the Grove--an army of utter pullers poisoning the cow.

Nate runs the perimeter toward the next grate, the hum of the plant droning in his left ear. To his right, the public access road that buses in the 5th Warders is quiet. He reaches the next grate and slides to his ass, his back against the metal wall. Cash runs past him and takes out his cooker. Alfonso finally catches up, sweat raining his forehead, the volume of his wheeze escalating like the adrenaline in Nate's veins.

Cash is fastening the grate back to the wall when he notices a cloud of dust stirring at the head of the access road. The streetlights cut through the cloud of dust just enough for Nate to make out Henley's police cruiser, barreling their way.

"Shit! How the fuck did he know?" Nate says to himself.

"Let's bail, Nate!"

"Hell, no! We only have one more grate to stuff. Otherwise, the whole building might not fall." Nate's hands clasp behind his head.

"Is it worth getting pinched over?" Cash's eyes are wide.

Nate smiles at Cash and grabs the backpack from Alfonzo, taking off toward the last grate. Cash and Alfonzo grab the bags and head for the truck.

Henley pulls up to the factory his lights illuminating the parking lot and surrounding fields. He steps tentatively from his cruiser, the gravel crunching under foot like sand in his teeth, like cicada shells in a boy's palm.

He draws his pistol before walking the factory wall. All he can see are the string of lampposts between two factory entrances, the side of each building rounding to a clearing that leads to dense forest. The light from the parking lot runs toward the field but dies at the building's edge, finally giving way to the thick darkness.

He tries the door to the main factory, but it's secure. He decides to round the side of the factory and pulls his flash light from his belt, matching the level of his pistol. He aims both at the factory's edge before continuing into the fading light.

He steps off the gravel lot and into the field, the smell of salt water and citrus in his nostrils. His father comes to mind, the citrus before the loss, the salt after. Henley's shoulder grazes the exterior of the factory as he walks. He starts to hear a rustling, so he turns off his

flashlight. Suddenly, a dark figure is kneeling 30 feet in front of him, attaching a grate to the factory wall. The figure has wild hair that is spilling out the back of a hard hat. Henley continues his slow walk, kneeling into the tall grass as he creeps.

When Henley is within 15 feet, the man bolts into the thick darkness. Henley runs after him, the flashlight falling to the grass.

"STOP!" Henley screams.

The man keeps running for the forest's edge, but Henley is gaining on him. Beyond the tree line, Henley hears a truck engine start, two headlights cutting into the field like the eyes of some great beast. Henley can almost touch the person, reaching with fingertips as his legs churn under him. Henley can also hear a familiar grunt coming from the suspect's strain. The woods are only 20 feet away, but Nate's hood is flapping behind him. Henley is finally able to grab the back of the suspect's shirt and pull down hard, throwing him to the ground. He flips him onto his back and straddles him, the pistol aimed between his eyes.

"Nate Langley? What the hell are you doing out here?" Nate's hands are flat against the ground like a boy ready to be buried in the sand.

"Communing with God, old friend." He gives a crooked smile. "How did you know this was the night I like to do my meditating?"

"Your congregation all smells the same. Left their stink all over your garage."

"Clever, boy, the Chief raised. Good thing he took you away from us 5th Warders. We'd of corrupted you, something fierce."

"She was all over that place. Still is. He had to get away from her?"

"Had to get away from us, you mean," he corrected. "He may have gotten away, but some us can't. Don't want to. We just want to survive. Level the playing field." Nate shoots a glance

toward the factory. "We gotta go, Hen. There's no time. God's coming back for this place. It can't be saved."

"What about me? Who'll save me?" His throat fills thick.

Henley lets his gun down, staring at those palms that built shells from sand. He rolls off Nate into the grass beside him. Nate springs to his feet and heads toward the eyes of the idling beast at the forest's edge. He looks back at Henley who has his hands behind his head and his legs crossed. He almost speaks, but instead keeps walking, tears cresting his eyelids like the tide that tears down the day's sandcastles.

Henley hears the slamming of a car door and the spinning of tires beyond the tree line. The Stevenson sky is cloaked in stars and the ground shakes from a sudden blast that ripples through the earth. Flaming bits of debris and smoke fill Henley's view like the fireworks the 5th Warders watch from the wall. He closes his eyes. Behind his eyelids, a woman's hand strokes his back, the ocean bathing and burying their feet deeper and deeper.

A Ruse Made Real

The alarm sounds, and she pulls herself from the mattress. The house is quiet. All she hears is the slow pull and push of air from her mouth. Her body's weak like tissue paper. She slowly pitches her legs off the side of the bed, feet dangling six inches above the hardwood floors. Her gray eyes fixate on her pale feet, hovering with chipped and faded nail polish.

Preparing for my burial, she pulls the crumpled sheet to the head of the bed, smoothing the wrinkles with her palm, stuffing it between the left side of the mattress and the box spring, like an embalmer preparing a body for viewing. She walks around the foot of the bed, behind the bench seat, to the right side to repeat the action. My nightstand is still littered with me: "Down The Highway: The Life of Bob Dylan," a Mini-Maglite, a canvas covered Kindle, a black click-pen, a dull Ticonderoga, a picture of my grandfather, and a post-card from Washington D.C. She ignores these, but making the bed wasn't her idea.

Yesterday, she came home to find me in bed, empty prescription bottles tipped and teetering on my nightstand, my body quiet. There was no note, only bottles and bottles, their caps threatening to roll to the floor. At first, she thought it was a joke, but the longer she stared at my body, the more anxious her breathing. She watched my stomach, waited for it to move, but it just stayed frozen, like her memories of me. I left her alone with her memories of the scotch she sipped in her professor's apartment, and my manic heart after their affair, left her with my cold silence after I heard the voicemail of him wishing she was sharing his bed.

Making our bed, she thinks of those mornings we'd make it together. Her on the left, me on the right, we'd pull the sheet taut. Then, we'd smooth the wrinkles and drape the comforter. Sometimes, I'd make fun of myself, stretching my hands toward the sun and bringing them down in a grand, sweeping motion against the edges of the comforter. Her head would tilt back in laughter. I loved the way she laughed with all of her body: head back, ember-red hair vibrating,

hand above her breast, one foot resting on the ball of her foot, and stomach making subtle breathy punches.

Today, she will join me again, but first, she kneels on the hardwood floors, both fingers pressed firm into the down as she ensures the slight overlap of the blanket and the bed skirt. She remembers me walking back and forth in a workman fashion, just to make the drape the same on both sides. If I pulled much on one side of the bed, I had to fix the other side. Her eyes sting sweet at the thought of my pacing. She remembers my frightful hair, sun squeezing its way through the sheer curtain and flooding the valley of muscles on my back.

After the affair, we stopped making love, our backs turned to each other most nights, the porch swing thudding against the house as it had that weekend she told me she was with her girl friends. She was actually with him, and I remember the day it happened even though I had no idea it was happening. There was a storm and the wind pitched the swing against the house in repeated and terrible blows. It was one of my most sleepless nights.

Once the comforter's in place, she collects the pillows. She picks up two white pillows and places them against the wall. My pillow sits beside a paper-shaded lamp on the edge of my nightstand.

Some nights she'd wake up to its yellow glow, my glasses crooked against my cheeks, a book resting on my chest like a paper mountain. She'd gently fold it flat among the other flattened mountains. Next, she'd ease my glasses off and kiss the place they'd been resting.

She presses her face into the pillow, inhaling what's left of me: oak moss, salt, coumarin, sunscreen, a sour smell, and something indistinguishable, like the lingering notes of a meal already consumed. She exhales, hesitating several seconds before drawing another labored breath. The two suede pillows follow, then the patterned ones, and, lastly, the miniature pillow

with the fringe border. She looks at the horizontal V pattern of her creation. It resembles a bouquet of fresh flowers, the front pillow, the collection of stems, and those against the headboard, the blooms.

She remembers begging me to make the bed with her in it, one morning. The sun faded through the blinds as I went through my routine with her flat against the springs. I felt like I was wrapping a mummy when I pulled the sheets tight. We both laughed as I watched her disappear beneath the lumpy duvet and even further still beneath the pillows. If not for the tiniest bump that began just after the deepest throw pillow, no one would've ever known she was there. She can still hear us laughing at the ruse we'd created.

At the gravesite, she gets out of her car, empty pill bottles sitting in the passenger seat. Men, women, and children file past my casket that hovers over a neatly dug hole. She sits on the front row, her vision blurring and her strength waning. Broken people sing a few melancholy hymns, and the preacher reads a few verses before I'm put down. My wife stares at the hole that would become my bed.

She asks to help bury me. The black sod butts the edge of my resting place, except for a few bent and torn blades of grass, which she is sure to prune flush. *The ruse has to be perfect.* Like the duvet, she helps the gravediggers drape my casket in blankets of dirt; the soil hugging me like the comforter had hidden her. She beats the heap with the back of her shovel, making sure to strike a sunward pose before bringing it down in grandiose swats.

To smooth the dirt, she gets on all fours, running the palms of her hands foot to head and head to foot, a wave rushing in and dragging out. She feels me pulling the comforter soft against her, senses the pillows lining her back and hears our laughter, feels the weight of each pillow with each gasp for air. When she finishes, she stands, wobbling, at the foot of me and tries to

find the tiny bump. She hopes to see the soil vibrating with laughter and the subtle outline of my legs, but the soil lays silent and tight against me. *A passerby would see nothing but a perfectly made bed*, she thinks. *It's perfect, perfect.*

She stays long after the gravediggers have peeled away. She kisses my tombstone and lays in the dirt at its face. She inhales it and swears she smells me through the soil, nestling her cheek into me. Her breathing slows as her body goes limp in the loose dirt.

Things Made Scarce

Rafael kept putting his things into the suitcase: button-down shirts, t-shirts, socks, jeans... He was methodical, filling the spaces like a game of Tetris. He didn't want this. He wanted to stay, but she'd told him she'd had enough of his drinking. She'd taken the kids to a friend's house, so he could leave quietly.

He'd tried rehab after rehab, but could never escape those aches, that thirst. Every time he drove past a bar, something in his bones took hold of him, and the rest of the night would be a blur.

The mesh pouch on the back of the suitcase was stuffed plump with socks folded like tentacles and crumpled briefs. He added more underwear and tentacles to the pouch, cleaning out the drawers in his dresser.

He opened a small, decorative box with a metal latch. It was stuffed with bracelets his daughters had woven for him. Blare had bought them a kit filled with colored yarn and strips of plastic. They'd sit in their rooms and weave for hours, Mary's tongue just out of her mouth as she overlapped the yarn like girls braiding hair. When he wore them, they made him feel connected with his daughters, even those nights he couldn't bring himself home.

He started pulling them out of the box. Some were zigzagged in bold colors while others were frayed and faded from wear, their colors a dull version of their former selves. He held a baby blue bracelet with a white stripe twisting through it. He tied it around his shaking wrist and kissed it, his eyes filling.

These weren't the only boxes. There were empty and half-filled boxes all around the house, resembling tiny, cardboard freight cars.

All that could be heard was the *hiss* of the coffee pot and that thirsty ache. He had no

need entering some of the rooms. Rafael breathed out, turning toward his dresser, picking up two crude napkin holders. The inside of the fired clay bore a troop number and his son, Drake's, initials. He ran his fingers over the jagged clay, picturing his clumsy son engraving it. His handwriting wasn't any better, his cursive erratic and messy. He wrapped the napkin holders in stiff packing paper, placing them in a nearby box. The tape screeched the box closed, and he ran his hands over the parts that had trapped air underneath. He noticed the mutilated fingernails on his hands.

Outside, a car door slammed, jolting him to the window only to find an empty driveway. He looked at the grass he'd spent countless hours mowing. He had a ritual: a blue bandana folded neatly and tied snug around his forehead, the paisley border darkening with sweat as the sun rose, frayed jean shorts, and tennis shoes stained as green as a Heineken label lit beneath a blinking neon.

He remembered raking the cropped blades into soft mounds, his son and daughters pouncing on his work. His brow would crease at these moments of innocence, and he hated that he hated their reckless abandon, always wishing loosen his grip on their youth. His father never did, the ache for the bottom of the bottle strong with him too.

He'd labor in the heat, his body bright with sweat, chest hair hanging dark and heavy, until every blade was bagged and edge of yard trimmed flush with the concrete. As his presence at the house had lessened, the grass had since crept onto the concrete and toward the sun.

He hung his head before returning to the dresser and retrieved an 8x10 picture frame stuck with seashells and dried clumps of hot glue that were coming loose in his hand. Strands of dry glue were also chipping and flaking onto the floor. Inside the picture, he and his daughter stood in matching grass skirts. They both seemed to strain a smile. His arm disappeared behind

her, and there was a space between them. The bottom of the picture read, "Father Daughter Dance 1994." He collected another two sheets of newspaper, wrapped the frame, and eased it beside the napkin holders. It tilted and fell pushing the other contents in the box aside.

On the wall behind the box, he saw the outline of the new piece of sheet rock, newly patched. He pictured his son taking him by the wrist, his body heavy and blundering. On the bed in front of him, his wife laid, crying, fingerprints red against her arms, her purple nightgown torn. Then, Rafael remembered his son shoving him through the wall, his ass embedding in the sheet rock. Weeping, his son ran from their bedroom, curling himself onto his mattress.

Now, the house was as quiet as his new home would be. He walked toward the kitchen, but before turning left down the long hallway that opened to the dining room, he stopped in front of the two doors that led to his kids' rooms.

Drake's room was strange, because despite their distance, there were traces of his own obsessive-compulsive personality everywhere. For instance, his old wicker shelf was neatly packed with his son's jewel cases and VHS tapes, and the shirts that hung in the closet were assorted by color. The bed had been made with military care, and the picture frames hung with leveled precision.

The mattress reminded him of the time he pinned his son's face beneath his palm, Rafael's knee digging into his son's squirming spine. His son had looked at him with such hatred.

In his daughter's room across the hall, there was a dollhouse filled with Barbie's and Kens, an ironic army of perfectly sculpted people, their faces painted in fixed smiles, their hands always open. The girls no longer played with these dolls, innocence fading like the rhodium plating on his wedding ring. He pictured them brushing their hair with tiny combs, making the dolls play house, everyone so kind and respectable.

Also in the room was the girl's trundle bed. On nights his and his wife's fights would drag the hallway, he remembered three sets of eyes peeking out between the trundle bed and the frame, his kids huddled beneath.

The kitchen tile was cold on his feet, as he poured himself a cup of coffee, the ache in the back of his throat growing. There was a knock at the front door, and he hurried to the bathroom mirror to check himself. He ran his fingers through his hair and looked between his teeth before bounding to the door. He opened it to a dark haired man with wrinkles at the corners of his eyes, a silver pendant hanging at the base of his throat.

"Hello. Can I help you?" Rafael asked.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I was looking for Blare. I think I'm early." Rafael stared through the glass door. He stared at the man's pendant, a circle surrounding a triangle that held a smaller circle inside it. "Who are you?"

"I'm Patrick, a...friend of Blare's."

He brought his fist to his palm and looked back toward the road like he was expecting someone. As he turned, Rafael noticed a yarn-spun bracelet on Patrick's wrist and recognized its threading. Suddenly, he felt his body begin to grow hot.

"Well, she's not here, so... Maybe try again later." Rafael's voice was cold as he started closing the door.

"Sure, man. I'm sorry. Hey, man, I see you have a lot of boxes. Can I give you a hand?"

Rafael swung the door open and burst through the screen door so fast it almost knocked Patrick's nose. He took the man's collar in his hands, a fist gathering over his shoulder.

"Are you gonna hit me, Rafael? You're not mad at me, man. I didn't do this."

His hands were over his shoulders and open, the bracelet trembling against Patrick's

wrist. Rafael stared into the man's courageous eyes and for some reason thought of Blare, Drake, and Mary. His hands were shaking with Patrick's collar spilling between his straining fingers, Mary's baby-blue bracelet on the ground at his feet. Rafael's eyes began to spill, and he released Patrick's shirt. He turned toward the house and went back inside, slamming the door behind him. He crumpled to the floor, the door nestling his back. He fell asleep on the cold, entryway tile.

He woke to the low hum of an idling engine and bolted for the door. The hinges squeaked their irritatingly familiar song, and when he looked through the glass screen, his shoulders sank. Two portly men in black back braces awkwardly hopped from their 26' freight car on wheels. The buttons on their shirts were strained against their stomachs. Their back braces looked like cummerbunds held by suspenders.

He taped up the remaining boxes as the two men started carrying some to their truck. The packing tape would screech each time he let enough out to seal a box. Each closed box felt like he was erasing himself from that house. The house was becoming something new, something strange, and something familiar.

The last box of him was packed in the moving truck, and the mover pulled down the accordion door with a terrible rattle. In the cab, he was pinned against the window, the two rotund movers moist and sour against him. He felt the thirst again and wondered what would keep him from it now. When he leaves, who will keep the grass from creeping onto the driveway. He smiled, however, knowing that with him gone, those eyes wouldn't need to huddle under the bed or hesitate when they see a pile of leaves.

Before the Concrete Dries

I'd just finished a tutorial with the delicious Mrs. Benjamin who tried to teach me the horrors of the Civil War while I fantasized for 30 minutes about the color of her panties, my ears still ringing from the thudding of my mother's fists against my father's chest the night before. Mrs. Benjamin dismissed me, her tight ass jiggling beneath a spring dress that crept up her milky thighs as she erased the top of the chalkboard.

As I entered the hallway, I saw Daniel Dominguez, being smacked on the ears by an older man, their faces nearly identical except for the older man's pot-hole like scars.

"You have to stop fucking around! I know you skipped class yesterday!"

"Whose fault was that? You were too wasted to drive me!"

His father slapped him firm across the cheek, Daniel's face hardening, and his eyes red.

"What I do is no concern of yours, boy? If you miss another class, we'll pull you out of school and put you to work. I have plenty of jobs for you. You're the only reason we let you come here."

"I don't want to lay concrete the rest of my life. Ms. Williams says I can be a writer."

His father threw up his hands and stormed off, a slight sway in his walk, one I'd seen the night before by my father. When Daniel saw me watching, he stormed toward the cafeteria, his pants concealing his shoes except for the soles.

Daniel was older than all of us, but no one dared ask how much. He wore flannel shirts buttoned tight to his throat, and starched blue jeans that stood on the floor around his shoes, making them appear inflated. Because they drug the ground, the cuffs of his jeans frayed in long wisps of denim.

Daniel had the face and frame of a male model, his sharp jaw line and muscular body standing out in the sea of undeveloped boys. All the girls wanted him, tall with olive skin and jet-black hair. He wore classic Nike's, with soles like shark teeth. His hair slicked close to the scalp. He had it buzzed tight on the sides and the back leaving a strip of black hair. The strangest and yet most revealing thing was that Daniel walked the school with a permanent scowl like a boy who needed rescue.

His girlfriend, Nicole, trailed him around campus. She was his voluptuous shadow, olive skin that matched his. She had deep, brown hair that fell in sheets against her shoulders, blonde strands here and there.

Everyone knew never to look at her, but geeks, like me, fantasized about Nicole. Maybe it's because we believed she could save us. God knows I wanted someone to save me from what waited at home. All those broken plates and fist sized holes seemed a lot quieter when Nicole sat a few desks across from me, the soft skin below her neck drowning out my thoughts of suicide that hid deep in the valleys of my brow.

She looked too fragile to be in Daniel's company. He'd leave marks on her thin arms and legs. I never understood why she stayed with him. Did she love his strength or maybe he loved hers?

One day, I was leaving the band hall with my friend, Brian, a fellow band geek with pale, chubby cheeks and a head like a box. He wore his hair in a military flat top. We were the two ends of the weight spectrum, me, the gangly boy with pepperoni sized acne, and Brian, a humble kid in undersized Polo's that exposed his under belly.

Brain and I saw Daniel as soon as we walked in the cafeteria. He sat on the table near the entrance where he could oversee the lunchroom. At his table, similar throat buttoned and sharp eyed young men stood.

Hypnotized by Nicole's green eyes, I accidentally set Brian and I on a path to pass Daniel's crew. In an effort to fly below his radar, I looked at the floor.

"Hey, where are you going?" Daniel asked.

Brian and I froze, our heads still bent. Eying the floor, I could see his shark teeth soles biting into the ground, his jeans hovering just above them like frayed haloes. I had just become aware that my heart was beating. Brian's head shined with sweat. His gang elbowed each other.

"I like your little outfits," Daniel said.

The two of us looked at our clothes, forgetting what we'd worn. Nicole released a giggle, and Daniel's mockingbirds at the table followed.

"Turn around for us and model them," he ordered.

Behind me, I could hear Brian whimpering. I felt as if I'd been draped in shame, and for a moment, I pictured the knife block on my kitchen counter. I wondered if Daniel was picturing himself his father's heavy hands.

We each lifted our backpacks off, our faces still glued to the tile floor, and began a slow, shameful turn. Most of the cafeteria had gone silent to watch the show Daniel was directing. Nicole's face seemed to show remorse as she, too, eyed the ground. Daniel was hollering and cheering us as we turned, his gang laughing behind him.

"That's enough, Daniel." Nicole's voice was frail.

"What?!" Daniel snapped, his eyes tightening into fists.

Brian and I continued turning, Brian's eyes red and glassed, and my heart knocking in my chest. Daniel grabbed Nicole by the arm and raised his fist above his head. Even his gang tried calming him, most of them looking anywhere but at Daniel. Nicole wasn't breathing, her body bracing itself for the strike. Just when I thought he was going to smack her, Nicole made her body loose, her shoulders pushing forward. The soft flesh of her breasts squished and lifted toward Daniel.

"Let them go." She stroked his arm and stuck out her bottom lip like a sexy child. It took a couple minutes, but Daniel's body began to unclench and his eyes seemed to soften. He turned toward us, Brian and I still turning like a carousel.

"Get out of here!" he screamed.

We grabbed our bags and hauled ass out of the cafeteria. As I ran, I couldn't help but think of Nicole.

*

A year or so later, I was sitting in homeroom while the Principal read morning announcements. I was only half listening, because Ms. Benjamin was wearing her flowered dress that had wedged itself between her butt cheeks when my fantasy was interrupted:

"We have a sad announcement to make. It is with deep regret that I inform you that Daniel Dominguez died yesterday. Daniel was a bright and kind young man, who will be sorely missed. Our counselors are available to any students that need comfort in this regrettable time. Our prayers go out to his friends and family."

I stared at the kid in front of me, who stared at the kid in front of him. I remembered that day in the cafeteria, remembered my prayers for Daniel's death. I'd imagined lifting him by his

slim tuft of hair, imagined doing unspeakable acts on top of Daniel's bleeding corpse. It all flooded back, like a dam cracking under the weight of something.

The bell rang and I wondered the hallway.

Did I do this? Had my prayers and pleas for death been answered?

As I turned the corner, I saw Nicole. Her face was buried in someone's shoulder, her body heaving and convulsing. She pulled her mascara-streaked face from her friend's shoulder and looked at me. She hadn't changed, arms and legs skinny as stems, but hanging puppet limp. Her face returned to the shoulder in front of her.

Later that day, I learned that Daniel had shot himself through the temple when Nicole broke up with him.

Lying in bed that night, I pictured Daniel's resurrected body and wondered how it could be any better than his human one. I ran my fingers over my eyebrows to smooth out the deep, pimpled crease.

I thought of Daniel's father. I pictured him smoothing concrete all day before coming home to find his son's head opened all over his bedroom. Maybe Daniel ended up in his father's arms, where he'd always wanted to be—a humbled, gentle soul speaking louder than any scream or fist could be thrown.

A few days after the funeral, I saw Daniel's father at a stoplight. He was standing in the middle of chaos: bull-dozer's unearthing large sections of concrete to make way for a new traffic lane. Dark-skinned men scraped the backs of their shovels over sheets of concrete, smoothing the new pour in long, dissonant strokes. Dust was pluming the construction site so that a thick haze enveloped the entire intersection. In the middle of it all, Mr. Dominguez stood, watching the concrete dry, his face white with debris.

Dented Things

Everyone's left the instrument room except Will who's sliding his tattered trombone case into its locker. Strips of leather peel away to reveal the raw wood beneath; band logos scribbled where the leather's missing. The handle's a plastic grocery bag. He is wary that he's alone, as most freshmen would be.

A freshman tuba player had recently been put in the hospital with broken ribs thanks to some instrument room hazing. The band directors rarely entered the instrument room, so upperclassmen, larger in size and number, could easily haze any feeble, unsuspecting newbie who happened into the instrument room at the wrong time.

Will's no stranger to guarding himself in instrument rooms. In middle school, there were two boys who made his life a living hell: Bobby Stinson and Blake Thompson. Bobby was built like a linebacker, barrel chested and bowling ball calved with a curly brown fro and silver glasses. It's weird, his top half didn't look intimidating at all, but below the neck, he was imposing.

Blake Thompson was like his lanky and snarky sidekick, blonde spikey hair and long, rigid limbs. All the girls loved Matt's wiry, athletic frame, like some cross country runner with a giant chip on his shoulder. He loved using his trombone slide to whack younger musicians on the risers in front of him.

They made Will's 6th grade year a paranoid nightmare. They'd shove him into instrument lockers, punch him in the kidneys when the teachers had their backs turned, and pretty much call him every profane name under the fluorescent lights. If he played a wrong note, they'd empty their spit valves onto his shoes or down the back of his shirt.

But lucky for Will, Blake Thompson went into sports in High school, and Bobby's parents put him St. Timothy's Catholic school. These facts made Will rejoice, hoping to be finally done living in lockers and icing his kidneys. But as fate would have it, word around school was that Bobby's parents ran out of money, which landed him back in a public high school, and worse, back in band with Will.

Will closes the gate to his locker and feeds the lock through the door. Snapping the lock closed, he hears someone stroll into the room. He turns to see a familiar head of ringlets, Bobby Stinson.

“Hey, Willie.” Bobby bounces past Will, carrying his trombone with the usual swagger.

After sliding his Bach Stradivarius into the locker near Will, he brings his left hand against the back of Will’s skull. Will rolls his eyes, smoothing down his hair.

“Seriously?” Will asks.

“Oh, I’m sorry. Someone’s panties are twisted tightly.”

After slamming his shut, he leans against the rows of grated lockers that hold the instruments. Arms crossed and face in a smirk, Bobby stares at Will.

“I can’t believe you’re still pretending you can play that thing. I thought you would’ve quit after middle school. Man, you were fun to fuck with back then.”

Will keeps his mouth shut, his teeth clenching. His gaze moves from the huge instrument slots reserved for tubas and euphoniums down to the smaller slots for flutes and clarinets. He wonders if they are still filled with moisture and where the moisture will go. *Maybe it'll evaporate in the air Bobby is breathing right now.* Will laughed to himself at the thought of Bobby inhaling his spit.

Right then, Michael Vincent, a small effeminate boy in short pants, turns the corner into the instrument room to put away his flute. For a second, he stopped, his wide eyes avoiding Bobby and myself. It was clear in the way his small body tensed that he hoped the room had emptied. He hurried, kneeling at his locker to fiddle with the combination.

“Unbelievable. What are the odds of two faggots in the instrument room at once?” Bobby laughed to himself, his head bobbing like a metronome.

Will’s cheeks flush as he looks at Michael, his eyes wet like the spit filled instruments in their lockers. Michael had restarted his combination, frantically spinning the dial clockwise to reset it, his hands shivering under Bobby's smirk.

“At St. Thomas, they didn’t allow queers in the band, but I guess it’s different here.”

“If you hate this place, why did you transfer back?” Bobby kicked off the lockers to step toward Will.

A French horn case fell over behind him, teetering on the rounded bell. Bobby’s khaki shorts floated above his knobby knees and hairy calves. His Nike’s were tattered and his socks were pale. Will stood his ground.

“Because private school isn’t cheap. Not that your poor ass would know.”

Will felt his warm breath on the top of his head.

"I thought you’d be happy to see me.” Bobby grinned again.

Behind them, Michael was frozen. His flute was sitting on the floor, and the lock was still latched. Bobby noticed him and stepped around Will, throwing his shoulder into Will’s as he passed. Will didn't react, his arm throbbing from the shot.

Will started taking small steps towards the door, but stopped to look back at Michael. Bobby had backed him against the wall of woodwind lockers, the combination locks and metal

grates digging into his back. Michael's eyes had dried, and he looked past Bobby at the tuba slots over his shoulder. Will was amazed at how unflinching he stood.

"I like your adorable case. Do they make these for boys, too?" Bobby gave it a kick, the case spilling the flute in pieces toward the door. A few pieces collided with the large foot of Jamal Davis who had just rounded the corner to put his tuba away. Jamal, like most tuba players, was a large man. He had a bowl-legged and pigeon-toed walk that only added to his beast-like frame. He made the tuba look small, swinging it with ease as he walked.

Jamal knelt down and started collecting the pieces of Michael's flute. His hands dwarfed the silver pieces as he put them back in the case.

"C'mon man, leave these kids be." Jamal commented, handing Michael back his case.

Michael took the case and returned to his locker.

"I'm just playing with them," Bobby said.

"No, he's being a dick." Will had calmed down, the bunch in his jaw loosening.

"Will, what would mother think?" Bobby, again, laughed to himself, his eyes going to Jamal's. Jamal just raised an eyebrow, as he walked his tuba to its slot, slinging it with one hand like a rag-doll. Will, and the others, watched Jamal slide it into one of the highest lockers with a gentleness that one wouldn't suspect of a man size.

Michael was still behaving like a statue. Jamal started walk toward the exit, his pigeon-toed steps .The whites of Jamal's bug eyes contrasted his black-brown skin. He had a casual look, his T-shirt massive and fitted against his round gut. The bottom of his stomach hung out the hem like a swollen brown tongue. His athletic shorts barely fit him, causing him to hike them every few minutes.

"You all right, man," Jamal asked in his fluty voice.

“Yes.” Michael said, giving the dial another furious clockwise spin. He was clearly still shaken by the people in the room.

Bobby had resumed his lean against a locker, his arms folded in triumph, face crooked with joy. Michael finally got his locker open. Before depositing it, he’d opened his flute case to check for dents. Will was eyeing the exit, but not moving.

“Damn, dude. You’re a big man. How are you just a junior?” Even Bobby had to look up to Jamal.

“I’ve always been big. My Momma’s big. Dad’s big, too.”

“Is it true your Mom’s the assistant principal, here?”

“Yep.”

“You must get away with everything.” Bobby swiped Jamal's tricep with the back of his hand.

"Nothing to get away with. Not that I could if I wanted to." He laughed to himself, but not like Bobby. His laugh seemed more reverent, his mouth bent in a soft grin at the thought of his mother.

Bobby was becoming irritated. His forehead wrinkled in Jamal's direction. Near the humble lockers, Michael pulled each piece of metal pipe from his flute case, holding it up to the light. Will knew what he was doing. He was tilting the parts of his instrument, making the refracted light run a straight line in order to check for imperfections. If the light's reflection darkened or changed direction, the metal had been dented. Will did the same thing with his trombone if he accidentally knocked it against the trunk of a music stand or collided with other marchers on the practice field.

Bobby watched Michael, his eyes on his silver mouthpiece like a marksman trying to fix his prey in the cross hairs. Bobby buried his chin in his chest and shook his head.

"The tubas sound great out there. Tight. Wish I could say the same for the woodwinds." Bobby was tilting his head toward Michael as he spoke. "The flutes sound like a bunch of drunken whistlers."

"It's early in the season. We'll get it together. Always do." Jamal started doing stretches.

"Not likely. St. Thomas would already be competition ready by now. Tight as a fuckin' drum."

"That's cool, man. Is that where you're from?" His plump cheeks dimpled against his bottom eyelids. Bobby looked confused, his stance seeming to harden even further at the big man's kindness.

"Hell, yes, but my parents screwed me out of that opportunity." For a second, Bobby's chest sank. He looked solemn, human.

Michael finished inspecting his flute and the *clack* of the latches woke Bobby. Michael slid the arm of his lock through the latch and *clicked* it shut. He gave the dial a spin for safe measure, and then stood to leave. He headed toward the exit. He didn't notice Bobby's outstretched foot in his path, and he tumbled where the tile met the carpet. As he rose up, his eyes were again moist, and his right forearm scraped raw, blood filling the scrape like hot air through an instrument. Bobby was muffling laughs with a fist, as Will ran to help him to up.

"YOU'RE AN ASSHOLE!" Will's hands were out of his pockets, and his body was turned square at Bobby.

"What are you gonna do, pussy?" He was still heaving with laughter. Jamal watched for a moment, then spoke.

"You're one to talk. "

"Wh...what do you mean?" Bobby barely managed through his laughing fit.

"The way I figure it, these freshman ain't the cowards, picking on those the good Lord made fragile. Yea, man, I think you can't talk about "pussies," being that you're behaving like one."

Bobby stopped laughing. His mouth stuck open. His eyes bounced between the two underclassmen and Jamal.

"Your mom can't talk with my dick in her mouth."

Jamal took a giant, pigeon-toed step toward Bobby, his massive arm matching the distance of his stride, meeting Bobby's chin. Bobby crumpled against the lockers like a paper ball. Jamal's fists pummeled Bobby to the floor. Bobby's glasses fell to the floor.

Will and Michael watched like musicians glued to a conductor. Bobby tried crawling out of Jamal's relentless reach, but Jamal pinned him between his trunk-like legs, his meaty hands now operating as pendulums marking time on the sides of Bobby's curl-covered skull. The two underclassmen began to squint, even looking away at times. When he did watch, Will saw Bobby on all fours, taking Jamal's blows with no sound or protest.

By the end, both boys were sweating. Parts of Bobby's face were red. Out of exhaustion, Jamal's fists began to slow--a metronome losing time.

"Are you finished?" Bobby asserted.

"Are you finished talkin' 'bout my Momma?" Jamal thundered.

Bobby didn't respond. Jamal backed away from Bobby, huffing air through his lips. Bobby collected his glasses with a sniffle, climbed to his feet and dusted the dirt from his

clothes. He didn't look at Will or Michael, but through them. He looked around the instrument room floor one last time, his eyes never rising above the concrete, then left.

In the leftover silence, Will noticed that several of the grated lockers were bent inward from Bobby's weight. Will pictured Bobby's red and swollen face, his ego and pride resembling these locker doors. He imagined their owners trying to bend them straight again.

Cut Through A Hill

The voicemail has been a year in the making, which is why Stephen hurries home through the winding back roads that nestle the Texas hill country. On either side of the road are tall arching trees whose branches almost touch, and he likes to imagine that they are trying to intertwine like hands. In rare places, the branches have grown into each other so that it is hard to see where one tree ends and another begins. At home, his wife, Michelle, holds the results of their infertility treatments.

Driving home through the dense forest, all he holds is the fear. It had been conceived a couple years ago after months of scheduling sex, researching ovulation patterns, and failed pregnancy tests. Each month had taken a little light from Stephen and Michelle's eyes. The sex had become heavier, more mechanical. Each discarded pregnancy stick grew it, and it echoed through the empty house in numbing silence.

Ahead, Stephen sees brake lights, and his car comes to a stop under a cluster of bending trees, not quite touching. He wonders what causes the branches to reach for one another like that, bend themselves over something lifeless. Maybe, it's the slant in the landscape with nothing to correct their bend, or maybe, there's something in their nature that longs for intimacy.

The street is the only man made part of Stephen's drive home. Everything around it bursts and is rampant with life. Tall grass and weeds can dwarf a person and broken boulders lay on the shoulder in pieces, having fallen from the nestling, open-faced hill. To build the street, planners had cut through, exposing its jagged insides to the road. The hill was vulnerable like a patient splayed open on an operating table, weeds and roots jutting through the rock wall that framed the two-lane road.

After a year of trying, Michelle and Stephen found themselves in the office of a respectable, fertility doctor, and Stephen had to give a sperm sample. A nurse took him to a room with a leather recliner and a flat screen. She opened drawers, pregnant with pornography.

"There are magazines in this drawer or movies in the bottom. When you finish, put the filled cup in the cabinet."

As the nurse left, Stephen heard the receptionist's keyboard clicking only a few feet from the recliner he had no desire to see under a black light. Near the door was a box-fan, so Stephen plugged it in, and its droning seemed to dampen the exchange of sound. He slid a disc into the television, and the screen lit up, and eventually, so did Stephen. When he finished, he put the cup in the cabinet and tried not to make eye contact on his way out.

A week or so later, a doctor sat behind black and white portraits of his kids and told them that Stephen's sperm count was low. He said they had a five percent chance of getting pregnant on their own. While he spoke, Stephen stared at the photo of a little boy in a rope swing. His father, the doctor, held the rope above him. The boy and his father had dark brown eyes and their faces curved the same. Stephen used to picture a boy with his blonde hair and blue eyes, could see himself brushing his cheek with the back of his hand as the boy breathed slow in the dark. As the doctor spoke, this image began to darken.

When his droning stopped, he handed them a packet of graphs and paragraphs that detailed Stephen's disparaging sperm count. They left the office in silence, Michelle's arms cross, Stephen's hands searching his pockets. Stephen noticed a large space between them as they walked the long hallway.

The elevator bell announced their arrival into the lobby. Stephen felt a shudder and excused himself into a nearby men's room. He entered a stall with his fertility report in hand. He

held it for a moment before balling and shredding into the toilet, his face reddening under the fluorescent light. Then, he took out his phone. He glanced under the stalls before taking out his penis. Two strangers fucked each other on the small screen of his smartphone, and for a few minutes, Stephen's body let him forget about the doctor's metallic voice, his and his wife's callous intimacy, and his own revealed inadequacy. The moment he finished, it all returned. He straightened himself up in the bathroom mirror before returning to Michelle who sat on a bench in the lobby looking frazzled and dim.

*

A shadow drapes Stephen's car as the road meets the face of the hill. In the grass at its base, broken boulders lay sprawled here and there. Stephen would sometimes imagine boulders rolling onto his car without warning. He wondered if he'd have time to swerve or if it would come loose at the exact moment his car passed underneath it. These images of him being crushed had increased since the treatments had begun.

He shudders as he passes a small bare patch in the dense woods that line the road. It's just a small, dirt roundabout for cars to turn around in, but Stephen had been using it as a place to stop and watch porn over the past few months. When the treatments intensified, it had become his weekly routine.

Stephen's tests led to Michelle going under the knife. The doctor said he needed to clear out any tissue and inflate a balloon inside her. Apparently, her uterus was heart shaped, and the balloon could correct the shape so the fetus could have room to grow. After the tiny cameras and scalpels did their work, Stephen and Michelle could start take further steps to getting pregnant. After the surgery, Stephen watched his discolored wife come to. He thought of those branches reaching for each other as he pressed his lips to her forehead.

When her uterus had healed, the doctor removed Michelle's balloon. They tried placing Stephen's sperm inside her, where her eggs would drop. The doctor said it was like giving Stephen's weak sperm a boost. Stephen and Michelle held each other the night they learned the procedure had, yet again, failed.

On the other side of the hill, light starts pouring through Stephen's windshield, gaps in the arching branches and leaves bearing it to him. The hash marks split his lane from the oncoming cars. Stephen thinks of what another failure might mean. If they aren't pregnant, he knows Michelle will slip deeper into that fear, her body crippling under her mind's weight.

He'd watched it grow heavier as of late, watched her walk into the pink bedroom, a stuffed blue elephant sitting in the corner of the room by itself, waiting. He'd thought buying things for their unborn child was a bad idea, but she said she couldn't help it, said the elephant spoke to her on the shelf. It was light blue with a white belly. It had floppy ears and a curled trunk. Michelle had sat it in the room they wanted to make the nursery. Every now and then, Michelle would open the door and stare at it. There would be a longing in her eyes, a reaching.

Stephen turns onto the main road, leaving the ceiling of groping trees and cut hill behind him. He passes a pharmacy where he used to pick up syringes and vials of hormones. Months before, he'd had to inject Michelle each night, and he could still remember pinching the skin at her abdomen before jabbing the needle in.

He'd always hated needles and blood, but somehow had overcome his hatred for their unborn child. These shots helped the doctor retrieve Michelle's eggs. Once he harvested her eggs, he'd inject Stephen's sperm into one and put the fertilized egg into Michelle. When the doctor first described the process, Stephen felt his heart drop. The pictures of the doctor's son on the

rope swing seemed deeper on the desk than before and the dream of the blue eyed boy whose cheeks shared Stephen's dimples seemed to retreat a little further into the recesses of his mind.

The night after the doctor put the fertilized egg in Michelle, Stephen came home to his wife curled on the floor of the pink room holding the plush elephant. He came and lay behind her, his arms intertwining with hers.

Stephen pulls into his driveway and sits there with the engine groaning, fingers laced in front of his nose. He opens his wet eyes to a light tapping on his passenger window, and Michelle opens the door to fill the seat beside him. She holds her phone and rests it on the dashboard, the two of them joining arms and fingers. Michelle pulls the elephant out from under her arm and sets it beside the phone. Stephen laughs and kisses her hand.

The two look at each other for a moment without speaking; then, Michelle starts the recording. The recording has barely started before they wrap into each other, the recording still playing for no one. Their bodies shake and weep, the fear losing its weight.

Upside Down Stream

I remember the old Ford Model T parked in the Elizabeth River near our house in Virginia. None of us knew its origin; only the thrill we felt driving upstream. The water swirling in and around the rusted car terrified our Mother, and she forbade us to go down there.

“Water Moccasins are all in that river. And who knows what else. Not to mention the current. Any one of you could be swept up in it, and how could I live with myself?”

“Mom...we’re careful. What else are we supposed to do?”

“You could help me in the garden, or read those cosmetology books I left on your night stand.”

I threw my hand up and left the room. My thoughts were you could read about mystery or breathe it. That old drowning vehicle in the Elizabeth River embodied that mystery. Where did this wading time capsule come from? And even more perplexing, when did it come from? How does a hundred year old automotive relic end up in a river near a naval base? It was this intriguing fantasy that drove the three of us to it. We each felt a tangible connection with history in that ancient machine, surround by the relentless current that mirrored the pull of our collective fascination.

It didn’t help that I was her only daughter and the wildest of the three. I was 12, Douglas was 13, and Ike was 10. Even though Douglas was the oldest, I was the tallest by 3 inches. To compensate, he’d always make himself tall in pictures, making his spine straight and standing on his tiptoes. Douglas had hair that wasn’t quite blonde or brown. Momma called it dirty blonde, which he hated. He had the hands of man, calloused and muscly. He rarely spoke like father during his brief stints home from the battleship.

Ike was obsessed with horses. He sort of resembled one too, long snout, hair shaved like a mane so it was longer in the middle than the sides. He'd use pomade to spike it like Sid Vicious which furrowed mother's brow. Ike was fearless and would sometimes get this wild flash in his eye that meant something devious was being conceived.

The next morning, the sun took rest between clouds, intermittently shading Norfolk. There was a light rain spitting at our vegetable garden much to Mother's delight. Mother had awoken early to read her Christian Science Monitor before passing out in her azalea patterned lawn chair. This was what we'd been waiting for. The three of us quietly unhooked our bicycles from the towering garage hooks. Douglas nearly spoiled the whole trip when the flimsy milk crate broke beneath him as he reached for his candy daredevil, as he called it. Luckily, Douglas' torso broke the bike's fall, and he exhaled with an "Ugh!" Eisenhower or Ike, as he was known, had to bite his lip to keep from laughing, choosing instead to pull the bike from Douglas' stomach. I admired his mission focus.

"Quit screwing around. Let's get outa here," I said, sitting on my bike ready to tear out.

"Thanks for the help sis."

Picking himself up from the pavement, Douglas straddled his candy devil, Ike followed suit, and we were off. I led the way. I always led. The boys had found the Model-T months ago but had thought nothing of it. After recounting their discovery a bolt grew in me, and I had to see it. I'll never forget the first glimpse of it. It was a roadster, with a canopy top that while discolored, still kept the driver shaded from the sun. The windshield was spider cracked directly in front of the driver's side in an almost perfect web pattern. Some days as I sat in its hull, eyeing the river's aggression, I'd imagine myself playing chicken with riverboats. In these visions, neither man would swerve; I'd slow motion my forehead into the cracked web

screaming in jest, while Douglas, in the passenger seat, would laugh tears. Ike preferred lying on the hood, facing the sky. His converse soles showed their fragmented stars through the fragmented windshield as I drove the three of us toward the war to fight alongside the mythical sailor said to occupy those waters. Ike would backstroke pretending to paddle. Maybe he believed he just might move the metal beast. He said he loved seeing the world upside down, the river the sky, the sky the ground.

Sitting in the front seat, possessed an eeriness like our house at night. Not just because of the murky river water that obscured the happenings beneath your knees, but also because of the occasional shifts and gyrations of the vehicle on the riverbed. It was as if it never had its footing, and that was a mystery I chose not to dwell on. The water level averaged about 4 feet, unless it rained.

We finally reached the riverbank, and dismounted our bikes. We looked at each other for a moment fascinated by what took shape. All that was visible of our mystery machine was a sliver of broken glass and the gold top of the windshield. The front seat canopy was jutting out of the swirling water like a periscope.

“It must have rained all night,” I thought with a strange thrill.

I looked at Douglas whose frame had slightly crumpled, forehead wrinkled in fear. Ike had a smirk on his face and mischievous twinkle in his eye. We both wanted what Douglas would surely want no part of. I began disrobing down to my underwear. We couldn't leave the house in bathing suits, as Mother would suspect foul play. Ike was working on a knot in his shoe, before ripping it off in a frustrated frenzy. Douglas had taken a casual seat on the bank in an unspoken gesture of defiance.

The water was warm and as I came up for air I was nearly at the rear of the canopy. Ike had jumped in right after me and was pulling on my ankle to slow me down. We'd usually do a simultaneous countdown on the bank in preparation for our race to the car, which I'd forgotten due to the newfound excitement. I was able to slip his grasp and grabbing the edge of the canopy, pulled myself against the forceful waters, around the edge of the car's jutting cover. I searched blindly with my feet for the seat cushion, my grasp on the canopy being tested. The rain had added to the current, but Ike was still able to find the canopy too. With one hand holding tightly to the canopy, I grabbed the windshield with my left hand. I was then able to descend from the seat cushions to the floorboard in one motion, and now had both hands on the top of the windshield. Ike swam in the passenger side to join me. The top of the steering wheel barely cleared the water. I wrapped my hands around it. I knew that if I tried to sit down the water would be about mouth level, and for the first time I felt an indiscernible tremor in my gut.

"What are we waiting for?" he said, chest deep, hands gripping the top of the windshield next to me. The paces of the current made the water roar, as if to dare us to defy our lungs in the name of that mystery. I screamed "ONE, TWO, THREE!" Out of the corner of my eye Ike pinched his nose and we both plunged ourselves beneath the current into our underwater time machine. Either I had misjudged the depth or the water had risen, because as my ass hit the seat cushion the only part of me not submerged was the crown of my scalp. Even behind the windshield the underwater current was begging me from my seat so strongly that I had to wedge my bare heel between the ignition and the door-less gap on the left to secure myself. I finally had the courage to open my eyes against the incoming watery road. I could see perch and minnows defying the current. The lighter stones were being swept downstream by the current as if skipped by invisible children.

The underwater voyage caused me to forget about my courageous partner to the right, and as I looked around, I saw Ike's dimples and eye whites wide to the river road ahead. His left hand was on the dashboard, and his right hand swung like a cowboy trying to noose a steer. It's amazing how everything underwater appears in slow motion. Ike's rodeo pantomime energized me, and I hammered down the imaginary gas pedal in hopes of catching the villainous sailor we'd spent so many days in that river searching for. I turned the wheel with new found strength, Ike hooting and bouncing next to me.

I would sometimes imagine that the old Model T moved, but it was never as real as it felt at that moment. The only difference now was that we seemed to be losing ground on the villain I pictured in dress blues, polyester neckerchief flowing behind him like an afterthought. In my dream I called to him, from somewhere desperate. His Dixie Cup head began to look back, but just as his profile took shape I started to shake. Ike was tugging violently at my arm from the surface. I stood up. The water had been pulling the vehicle downstream at a rapid rate. It was as if all our dreaming was being made manifest in some sick retroactive nightmare.

“We have to go! The rapids!”

He pointed through the rip in the canopy behind us, and we could see the fast approaching rocks jutting from our watery road. I gave an urgent nod. Ike pushed himself free of the car. I hesitated to make sure he was clear of the metal monster. Once he broke the surface, I followed suit pushing through the opening between the windshield and the canopy top, but in my haste I misjudged the dimensions. The corner of the windshield took hold of my bra strap and I was swung back into the jagged metal beast by the current, my bare wrist snagging on a section of the rusted hood; a cloud of red emitting like smoky sinews from my lacerated wrist. I could see the underwater slope on the riverbed, leading down to jagged boulders. The Ford was

moving at such a rugged pace that I couldn't get my bearings to loosen myself. I imagined someone embracing me from behind. I knew it was the dead Sailor, come to escort me to my watery grave. Despairing, I wrapped my arms around his, in resignation, my wrist oozing downstream. But instead of descending, he sprung us from the riverbed, and I gulped for oxygen as we surfaced. Choking on the fresh water, I looked behind me and found the bank dwelling Douglas. Through heavy gasps he asked if I was all right. I didn't speak. Once ashore, Ike wrapped me in his shirt and tied a sock around my mangled wrist. We walked home deflated, like day old birthday balloons.

As we opened the back gate, Mother was mortified by my condition, but even though her eye's burned judgment, she never said it. It took the doctor 43 stitches to close the three lacerations on my wrist. The monster's hood had left three distinct parallel cuts. Three months later the stitches came out and all that remained were three side-by-side scars resembling white trails of smoke like the cuffs on navy dress blues.

My brothers and I went back to the river a few months later to check on the fate of the Model T. We retraced our steps all the way to Elizabeth's treacherous rapids. The water level had since diminished, but the Model T was no longer visible from the riverbank.

"The rapids probably ripped it to pieces, all its guts and bolts strewn across the riverbed."

The three of us stood on the bank as the sun pulled into port beneath the horizon, and I imagined a world where sailors drove Model T's on riverbed roads, and the sky was the floor and the river, heaven.

The Man Who Took a Breath

The pearly gates sat somewhere between the mesosphere and the thermosphere, or so its citizens were told. Heaven was tucked behind a star at about 80 or 85 Kilometers above earth. Supposedly, there was a microscopic rip in the firmament that was a sort of keyhole into the afterlife.

Behind said star, Jacob was bent over the scroll of names in exhaustion. He had worked for the Heaven admissions department for 5 years now. It was a hell of a lot better than being on wing stitching detail. He could still hear the screaming. That myth about not feeling any pain after you die was bullshit.

The Pearly Gates were luminous gray slats that weren't quite white, which Jacob found odd considering the exclusively white and gold décor found beyond them. It was as if these pale fences harvested from the shells of sea creatures, were the last earthly glimpse the dead were allowed. Often passersby, admissions packet in hand, would graze the pearly posts as they entered eternity, trying to take sensory snap shots of life before they took their last breath. They'd run their fingertips over the near white posts, like an addicts last cold turkey drag from a cigarette.

Jacob usually worked the counter, where the souls made their arrivals like airports or state line welcome centers. He'd been drilled to stick out his wings and the corners of his mouth when someone waltzed through the keyhole. Once the arrival was processed, he opened the gates triggering the choir, and the gate swung open.

So many souls wound up at Jacob's desk due to miscalculations or supernatural anomalies, so Jacob was often the bearer of bad news as the beaming smiles glided toward him through the rip in the thermosphere.

“Name.”

“Billy Fulton!”

“Oh...you’re at the wrong desk.”

“What do you mean?”

“You should be at the southern admissions desk.” Even Jacob hated the departments scripted responses. He understood cushioning the blow, but this was ridiculous.

“Southern admissions desk? Where’s that?”

“It’s right through the ominous fiery portal on your left. Here’s your boarding pass. Sorry for the inconvenience.”

“NO! I’ve lived a good life!” The obstinate gentleman was running for the bluish gray gates that stood in judgment.

“Security!” Two rather buff angels flew in and snatched Billy by the arms like a rag doll. He had wrapped his arms around the bars of pearl in defiance. From inside the gates, the man looked like a prisoner of anywhere else but heaven. One of the goateed angels pried his straining fingers from the gate, and poor Billy was lifted from the powdery ground. The angels then swung the rag doll like parents would a child, counting “1...2...3.” The damned man was then hurled through the dark portal. Jacob cringed, as he did every time he heard the portal swallow a new arrival. In those moments, he wished he could take a deep breath to relax himself, but his heavenly frame didn’t have lungs.

Maybe it was the unknown of it all. No one in Pearl City knew the particulars of Hell. Other than the stereotypical earthly myths: hot coal floors, sofa’s made of fire, steady diet of hot pockets, horned dictator with a pitchfork for punishing, and the like. The other heavenly citizens speculated the reasons for God withholding the true nature of Hell. Most chalked it up to

ignorance being bliss, or cats killed by curiosity's sword. Novels were written in the Pearl City that pondered such things.

Jacob had a fascination with the fiery destination. When no one was dying, Jacob would peek through Hell's portal in hopes of solving the mystery.

The portal frame was a circular ring ablaze like a circus trick only no applause awaited the tricksters; just smoke so thick it was impossible to breathe. And there were no brave Lions poised to enter, rather terrified sheep with salty cheeks. The actual hole was a murky black expanse with flits of shadow and magenta. It resembled an overgrown manhole cover, and in certain lights one could see piles of insects and snakes intertwined and undulating. Jacob would creep within inches of the blazing border, face almost touching the blackened space; skin leaking its moisture, eyes squinted. What he saw the first time changed him: a baby without eye's crying, blood running from the black cavities, a rattle just out of reach, and the mother in a nearby cage watching. Jacob retreated in terror, vowing he'd never look again, but like femmes fatales, Jacob was lured daily to Hell's doorway.

His second vision was of a young couple. Her eyes avocado green, skin the color of porcelain. There was a thin piece of glass separating her from a man wearing a gold band. They were both wept as they clawed at the seemingly paper thin glass. His fist beat the unbreakable shield, which kept him from the woman. The glass must also have been sound proof, because Jacob noticed them drawing large breaths before releasing soundless gasps, the veins in the green eyed damsel's neck bulging in desperate attempts to communicate something. The man's eyebrows and ears were poised, in hopes of discerning the slightest tone through the transparent divider. But the border couldn't keep them from reading each other's lips. They would slowly

use mouths and gestures to mime that which they couldn't hear or feel. Jacob watched until each lover rested from exhaustion. After each vision, the Pearly Gates seemed less pale than before.

The scroll with the celestial recruits was a massive text. After all it contained every man, woman, child, alive or yet to be born. When a new recruit approached the gates, they'd announce their name and the scroll would unroll itself, and Jacob would give them their divine assignment, which consisted of lodging information, map of the city, token to the memory-burning center, and their new body. Then Jacob would flip a pearl lever under his desk, and the gates would creep open while a multi-part harmony would swell from some indistinct origin. When the line lulled, Jacob thumbed through the names. Next to each name was a short biography, estimated time of arrival, and their heavenly occupation.

One day, a woman approached Jacob carrying a briefcase. She had pitch-black hair and penetrating gray eyes. Her frame was frail, yet she walked with some internal possession, like something bestial resided beneath her breasts. Jacob's heart quickened and he reached for a glass of water, forgetting his heavenly body felt no thirst. Once she reached the marble desk, she placed the briefcase in front of Jacob. When the case made impact with the metal desk it emitted a hollow rattle.

"Hello."

"Welcome to Pearl City. May I have your name?" Jacob was struggling to breathe, again forgetting angels, being spirits, need not breathe.

"Alana Copeland." Jacob eyed her briefcase, realizing he had to stick to the admissions criteria.

"I'm sorry Ma'am, but you can't bring anything in, Pearl City policy. All belongings must be thrown into the portal." The dark woman's hair chased her face as she rotated her neck

toward the fiery ring. Her chin tilted downward slightly, and she began taking breaths through her nose as her gray eyes glassed over.

“Are there any exceptions? I can’t send it there. I’ll do anything!” Her voice was sharp and desperate, and Jacob’s mind went into the portal, as they said in Pearl City. Jacob’s curiosity was becoming visible, and the woman’s sinewy fingers began spinning the golden numbers on the top of the case. Once each digit was in order, she pressed the release, and the gold clamps flipped up, unlocking the briefcase’s precious contents. She turned the case toward Jacob before opening it, either because she knew its contents so well, or because in that moment the sight of what might be lost was too great. Her milky fingers began their ascent, as they held either side of the case. Jacob’s mind ran to fantastic places, as the mystery opened its mouth. The contents weren’t jaw dropping. In fact, all the case contained was an empty mason jar with a rusting silver lid. Jacob wrinkled his brow and handed the expression to the woman.

“You want to bring an empty jar with you?”

“No! It’s what’s in the jar.”

“It’s empty.” Jacob said, thinking this one must have arrived via the asylum.

“No it’s not! It has my breath.”

“You’re what.”

“My breath. I asked my family to bring me a jar, and when they knew the end was near, I asked them to hold the jar open before my mouth, in order to catch my last living breath. In the last moments before I arrived here, I exhaled one last time into this jar.”

“But I’m confused. Why keep it? Once you walk through those gates, your memory will burn, and you’ll be given a new body that doesn’t need oxygen.”

“But you see, I will miss those breaths...the labored breathing I felt as I pushed my daughter into that world...the last breath I heard my Mother take, before succumbing to the cancer that had ravaged her body...and the awkward exchange of adolescent breath when lips were new muscles to learn. Like the labored inhalations I sucked after that marathon, my legs like putty, my body aching with relief, but my soul triumphant. Or the pure incline of my daughter’s diaphragm while she slept, the rain clambering against the shingles. And the feeling of my wedding dress tightening against my breast, my Father stabling my clumsy gate toward the altar, an-.” Her voice broke like a record skipping.

Jacob gathered her recruitment packet, and looking over his shoulder slid the jar into the bag. He flipped the pearl lever and the angelic choir sounded lifeless for the first time since his arrival. Her white cheeks were streaked with black mascara as she embraced Jacob tightly, squeezing his feathery wings into his back, before entering the city, a breath in her hands.

The Penance of Fertilizer

for Carol Ann

I just left. No note, no premeditation, just bare drawers and wire hangers. She probably called my name, key still in the dead bolt.

“Hey honey!”

But her voice fell on no one but the dust mites in our mattress. She would’ve wondered why I wasn’t home. Then she probably set her leather purse on the Formica counter in route to the bedroom, the scent of leucophyllum wafting through the window screen. In front of the bed she would have balanced on one foot, sliding off one heel, then the other. Her feet probably sighed in relief. I know she then went into the closet and saw its emptiness. One side packed tight with dresses made to breathe, made to entrance. Dresses that she put on for me. Dresses that I took off for us. I remember her legs, clean-shaven and reflecting light in those delicate fabrics.

It was also laden with blouses that guarded her heart. The unbuttoning took time. She must have been stunned by the absence, the aged metal bar suspended beneath a bare wooden shelf, a few lone hangers like skeletons clinging to the chrome, the carpet beneath holding no shoes, just crumbs of dirt from someone’s treading. She probably started to feel her own absence then, the post-work hunger, the expanse between her organs, the space between her resting tongue and roof of her mouth.

I wonder if the dresser was next. Her frame weakening, she approached the bronze knobs, hesitating. She would have stared at the space between the frame and the drawers to gauge the sink. Mentally I’ll bet she was willing weight into wood, praying the fabrics she cleansed and creased rested where she left them. The leucophyllum losing its sweetness, she

made fists around the bronze knobs. Still willing. Still praying. She pulled the drawer toward her breast like an embrace, and the imbalance became real.

I know I wrecked her, my stirring belly and lead foot leading me west. I was a crazed escapist, needing a new fix. Forgiveness is rarely granted for cowardice; the absence I left was unwarranted, she who hung garments on my hangers, like flesh on bones.

Her garden probably suffered after. The perennials, the morning glories, the hibiscus, she slaved to life. I loved to watch her, knelt in muck, tugging and pulling weeds loose. Then she loosed their replacements from the little cartons, the black soil base, worm like roots, pushing to stem, to bloom. The black soil made the colors pop. Her hand became scoop, and she'd divot the dirt just enough for the black base to rest. Then the base and roots were draped in their sister dirt until one. I liked to imagine the dirt intermingling like lovers, the roots like legs twisting between the soil, the dry dirt falling over and growing through the moist black of the plant, the blossom smiling at what took place beneath its stem.

I imagine the weeds have returned in the wake of the imbalance. I regret these deaths. I regret the littering of her perennials. As her morning glories wilt and rodents forage her soil, I offer my penance. The running is my payment. Her knees in that soil, those buttons, are my payment. They run with me. I can't escape them. But I apologize for the mad dash; the dust turned up must have stung her eyes wet. The skeleton metal closet deserves to burn. I beseech her to burn and bury the me that's left. I am the dirt; cover me in fertilizer. I deserve the shit. She is the bloom, and the shade, and the stem birthed in shit, conceived in dirt, but raised anew. She is the blossom that spites the absence.

*

She's probably inserting the key teeth up, hands steady as a cruise ship. The turn is aggressive for the flesh on the other side. He greets her, teeth first, the door closing on me. Her purse and keys are, more than likely, on the whimsical tile and they kiss as blouses packed in closets. Two blooms in the garden out back are wriggling in the summer sun. He's telling her to sink into the sofa. He's picking up the purse and keys from the floor, ushering them to Formica. Water boils above a gas flame. There's pasta or something doing figure eights amid bubbles and savory scents. She's beaming morning glory pink, her cheeks wet with his lingering dew. He's a stirring or sautéing thing to fill her. The closet is full: two pairs of running shoes caked with familiar dirt, two pairs of denim with blackened knees, two shirts unbuttoned, hanging easy on their wire skeletons. No bones or crumbs in the closet, just flesh. The dresser is plump like a fatted calf. The garden is probably in bloom, the perennials and morning glories packed by two sets of hands. The imprints in the fertilizer are interlocked. The fertilizer has been beaten down tight by the side of a fist. The propeller like petals hovers above the shit, without looking down. When the two are full, she kisses sauce from his chin and they become like the garden, all ovaries, stamens, and filament. Then he fills her absences with his body or so I hope for her.

Killing Her Small

She said it was the little things that killed. Like the man in line at the bank whose profile resembled George and the rusted blue bike in the back of the shed, the handlebars still stained with his sweat. Sometimes, her brother would show up in the middle of Ms. William's Algebra class, not translucent like ghosts on TV, but fully animated.

He'd perform the standard ghostly pranks, tapping her classmates on the shoulder, blowing his cold breath on the back of kids' necks. They'd whirl around, confused. She'd giggle, drawing the eyes of the teacher who'd usually reward her with equations on the chalkboard. Her meek approach made the other girls in class smile tall. The dusty chalk would almost always break as she tried to write legibly, George distorting his face in jest right in front of her. It killed her to watch the chalk dust disappear into his shoulder instead of coming to rest on it.

George also liked to walk with her in the hallway, his body morphing in and out of student traffic. Carol would cringe as his face bent like elastic into someone else's face before reemerging as if birthed from the back of the student's scalp. These visits were fleeting.

3 years ago, George had been murdered at Pizza Palace after a man with little bullets pulled a small trigger aimed at her wiry brother. He was 24.

The night it happened, George lay leaking on the grimy tile, while more two inch bullets entered his coworker's chest. His body fell a few feet from George. George noticed the storage freezer door was only a few feet away and cracked. He felt the icy air discharge in his direction like some cold fortress, making his skin pimple. His coworker's eyes were shut, and he was still.

George crawled toward his bleeding coworker, his body losing weight by the second, and grabbed the man around the neck. With the pit of his elbow nestled under the man's chin, George drug himself and the man playing dead to the storage freezer, inch by inch, blood

marking their trail. While willing himself to the icy resting place, he yanked the curly cord, pulling the telephone to the floor. He prayed the tornado like cord would make itself straight enough to reach the storage room. Once he'd pulled his friend's lifeless legs into the freezer, George was able to kick the door closed. He then, still losing weight, dialed 911 while his lifeless friend slept.

“911 emergency!”

“There’s been a shooting at Pizza Palace on 1334 Shepherd St. Two men are wounded and hiding in the storage freezer.”

“Is the man still there?”

“I don’t know. Please hurry.”

“I’m sending an ambulance right away. Where are you shot?”

“The chest and stomach.”

“What about the other victim?”

“He’s calling me to dream.”

By the time the paramedics arrived, they found George passed out but breathing, and the other man, dead. George's legs were spread, his back leaning against a shelf filled with grated mozzarella and containers of fresh basil. His chin sat in the hollow of his neck, and his arms limp with both palms turned out like someone crucified. In his right palm rested a black telephone emitting a dial tone, the twisting cord taut against the freezer door ascending to some unseen place. Between his legs a man slept with his head on George's chest, like a son soothed by his father’s heartbeat. Later that night, a dark skinned man with small bullets and a snub nosed pistol was arrested, claiming that his lead kept the racial numbers even. He said the two

men were simply white lettering that manifested in his black eight ball that evening. George had been killing Carol small ever since.

For instance, last week in Herman Park, Carol had laid a blanket on a quiet patch of damp grass to read *To Kill a Mockingbird* for Mr. MacLeod's English class. She had brought a lime green thermos, hot with homemade cocoa. The maple trunk casted a perfect shadow that framed Carol's reading spot. It was a cool October afternoon, the chill of autumn prickling her forearms in the soft sun. She lay on her stomach, legs bent at the knee, gathered ankles. Her elbows dug into the blanket, which dug into the earth. She was at the part with the fire, and Scout's mysterious blanket that brought sadness in its mystery, and Carol glanced over her shoulder in hope. Nothing was there, not even Boo Radley comforting her with his ghostly maneuvers, no Jem, to make mischief with. All she had was the cool breeze and her tiny marshmallows, liquefied into a perfect G in the steaming mug.

Along with being the town jester, George had also been Carol's bodyguard. She was habitually eating food that had kissed the middle school floor via some bully's nudge, or felt the blunt sting of the lockers by way of a pelvic jerk. If ever in eyeshot, George would levitate said bully against the sheet rock, their Converse magically floating. Carol watched with a sick vengeful joy as the bully's adolescent windpipe was impeded by George's two-inch thumb. It amazed her, the damage that thumb could do. Insect nations were laid to waste by the mound-full with that thumb. President's disappeared beneath it, when he prepared for a coin toss. The sun was humbled by that thumb as George applied his pregame eye-black.

George came to Carol again at the supermarket. She dislodged the stubborn metal cart before entering the automatic doors. Once inside, Carol pushed the wounded shopping cart toward the produce, the front left wheel spasming like a child begging for candy. The colors

were vibrant and organized into towers and bushels. The cherry tomatoes stood in heaps, while the romaine slumbered like sardines. All the produce was freshly misted and had translucent beads clinging to its flesh. Carol loved assessing the produce and believed her ripeness sense unequalled. The mini-corn on the cobs always made her laugh. She remembered George's typewriter nibbling technique, and smiled before dying a little. Carol continued to browse the produce. She came to the Roma tomatoes, which were separated into three tiered crates. They were divided by ripeness: the ripest in the top crate, firmest in the bottom, and the perfect balance in the middle.

Carol liked to classify the crates in terms of age. The nursing home tomatoes were on top, mid-life crisis tomatoes in the middle, and adolescent or green tomatoes were on the bottom. Carol often disagreed with their tomato placement. She'd help restore order in the ranks, properly discerning ripeness, and then placing them in their appropriate crate. This day was no different, there were seniors mixed with adolescents, and mid-life crises hanging out at the nursing home. She began her routine. Carol's head would give a subtle shake when she found firm tomatoes in the top crate. In fact, today, there were an inordinate number of green tomatoes alongside their withered counterparts. She continued sorting, and the bottom crate was filling rapidly. She gave a, "tsss" every time she squeezed young, unripe flesh in the top crate, and quickly ushered it to its appropriate home. Carol went to place yet another green tomato in the overfilled crate below, but the young red tomato fell to the ground taking one with it. Embarrassed, Carol inched down her skirt and knelt to rescue the two young souls. Both tomatoes were dented up pretty bad, but as she rescued them, she noticed something.

One of the tomatoes, still shiny from its routine rinse, had a fingerprint on it. It was as clear as if finger-painted. She knew it was a thumbprint, fat at the base with an abrupt almost

horizontal curve at the summit. Someone, maybe even her, had handled this tomato and left their mark. Like George's thumb on the bully's throat, Carol couldn't breathe. She sat on the floor beneath the crates of red and wept. Suddenly, she felt something warm on her shoulders, but when she turned, there was no one there, just a tower of mangos offered up like some heavenly sacrifice.

The skin on the mangoes was green and speckled. They appeared so balanced, so sturdy. Carol sat on the floor and watched people taking mangoes from the top of the pile and carelessly toss them into bags and into their cart. If only they knew how easily the whole stack could fall, how easily their skins can bruise and pierce.

Standing, Carol brushed her skirt and ran her hands under her eyes to clear away the leftover tears. Her hands smeared the mascara that ran to her chin, fading and feathering it into dim wings on her cheeks. She picked up the two tomatoes rested them in the bruised crate.

An Itch and a Spark

I began to hear a buzzing. It was growing from some distinct, restless spark inside my chest like a cough. The buzz had started that morning when a frigid Assistant Principal corralled me in her office after walking in on my student aide alphabetizing graded papers. Her hands clutched a buzzing walkie-talkie as I was escorted back to her office.

"Paragraph 43, Section 2 of the Dickenson Independent School District Teacher's Handbook states that teachers can't disclose student data to other students."

"Don't I get a warning? I honestly had no idea. I thought it was common practice."

"Too many things could have gone wrong."

"I'm being written up for what *could* have happened?"

Her face was expressionless, her mouth hard. Arms crossed over a tight-wound metal lanyard and a black top over black finely starched pants. It was the same body language she'd used a month ago when she learned a student brought donuts to a before school tutorial session. She said it was against the law to aide in the distribution of foods of minimal nutritional value. Apparently, if the donuts had been infused with kale and were glazed in flax seed oil, all would've have been allowable.

As she continued speaking of grading protocol from behind her desk, I thought about the nights and weekends I'd spent grading papers, calling parents, and tutoring struggling students after hours. I thought about the years I'd opened my classroom door and taught my students, knelt beside them to pour through their words bent on them learning. I never expected an applause or acclaim, but I had expected empathy, grace, and humanity from a district I'd labored seven hard years for.

The buzzing followed me into our weekly department meeting where four chairs clothed in gold and red thread faced a giant white board. A subtle white cord hung from Stacie's ear, her thick brown hair hiding the ear buds. Our department head, Laura Sebastian was squeaking bullet points out in red.

Joseph and Stacie watched as if waiting for a prophecy of their death. My mouth rested on my fist as I brooded—a marker with the cap left off. Joseph was watching the muscles on Laura's calves as she pivoted on the balls of her feet. Laura screeched a line over bullet point one and swiveled toward us.

"I love scratching things off a to do list. There's nothing more satisfying than that squeak that signals something's accomplished!" Her hair bounced over deep-set dimples. Joseph covered his mouth for his laughter, the hand with his wedding ring moving to his thigh under the table. Stacie feigned a smile before returning to her Facebook feed.

Laura flashed her dimples and said, "Does anyone have anything else they want to add to the list?"

I inhaled. "I was think—"

"Oooh, we should have the kids make line graphs for their learning goals! What do you guys think?" She looked at Joseph, my words lost in the black holes of her cheeks.

I gritted my teeth so hard, I worried my rage was visible along my jawline.

"I love that idea!" Joseph's body language was immediate, his hands grasping the arms of his chair, his back erect. Stacie raised her eyebrows and gave a subtle nod. On her screen, a baby monkey clung backwards to the back of a shuffling pig. Stacie's eyes met mine, and she offered a smirk before returning to her video. Laura kept talking.

"I'm glad you guys are on board, because I've found this awesome program that's super easy to use. Now what you'll want to do is put the dates in column A, that's the Y axis, and the scores in column B, that's the X axis, but make sure that the students create their own goals or the line graphs won't mean a hill of beans. So we'll make them chart how many minutes they read per week, but we have to model, model, model, so our little babies don't get lost. How else will they own these graphs if we're not making them, ourselves? Once they get to this screen, they'll open this link, and they have to be careful..."

As Laura chirped on, the itching from that morning grew. I could feel every thread of fabric on my chair, and it was like the brittle legs of a June bug, working their way up my back in a slow crawl. I cracked my neck and started counting down from ten in my head, but my toes started to clench and extend, my feet feeling strangled and caged by my shoes. It spread to my scalp, my fingers digging for it, until I stood with start.

"SHUT THE FUCK UP!" My body ebbed and flowed. My scream made statues of the room, again, Stacie's one ear bud loosing itself from her ear, a song about baby monkeys faintly ringing from them like a whisper. Even the June bug had stopped its brittle creep.

"I have sat here for years and listened to you two kiss each other's asses for the last time. So, here it goes. I don't want to do a fucking line graph about reading minutes. Kids lie about that shit. It's pointless. I actually want to let the kids read, imagine that, which is what we'll be doing in my classroom while the rest of you will be teaching the kids how to chart their reading. And if the principal has a fucking problem with it, I'll make her a line graph showing how much time's wasted making fucking line graphs! And Laura, I'm sick of you reaching your immaculately manicured hand into my classroom via these tyrannical one-woman shows. Oh, and your constant smiling and dimples don't make your suggestions less shitty or your monopolizing of

these department meetings easier to swallow. And Joseph, please, just tell Susan about you and Laura. You guys couldn't be more obvious if you bent Laura over Principal Kemp's desk during her televised announcement about your precious learning goals. And as a bonus, it will make the faculty picnics less awkward, because there will be no one drinking themselves to sleep while you playfully tackle Laura during ultimate Frisbee to cop a feel. By the way, I'm through letting you two bully Stacie and I into these shitty ideas, constantly cutting us off with your over-dramatic enthusiasm and fake apologies that just segue into another endless rant. Which brings us to Stacie. If you'd occasionally chime in during these meetings instead of Youtubing Minecraft tutorials and sardonic memes, maybe I wouldn't feel so fucking alone in this department. I know you're sick of being ignored and silenced just as much as I am, regardless of your choice to escape into your digital world, so please say something! In the end, you all suck, so I'm going into my room to actually read while you guys make a line graph about how this meeting went."

Ghosts In This Place

"What took you so long?" His voice was loaded.

He continued scrubbing the dishes, as she hung her purse on a hook by the door, a wedding picture on stretched canvas shaking an inch toward the edge of the shelf.

It was a black and white photo of them kissing on the steps of a quaint chapel. The canvas puckered at the edges a little against the wooden frame. Cars lined the street behind them.

"I was swamped with parent phone calls and..." She stopped, exhaling deeply as she opened the fridge.

"I wished you'd called. You said you were getting off at five. It's seven. I was worried."

He opened the dishwasher and started loading plates and cups. She closed the fridge and turned toward him. He still hadn't looked at her.

"Sorry. I just got caught up in everything."

"Yea."

She slipped off her heels. "I'm gonna change."

He stopped doing dishes.

"So that's it."

"What's it?"

"Conversation over?"

"What else is there to discuss?"

"You disappear for 2 hours, and all I get is "I just got caught up." I think I need a little more."

"What do you want?"

"I want an explanation."

"Please, don't do this."

"Do what? After all we've been through, you can't keep doing this? It's not fair."

"I thought we were past that. You said you'd forgiven me, that you trusted me."

"Honey, I trust you, but you've been home late with no phone call countless times the last couple weeks. And I'm here, wondering if someone raped you in that lightless parking lot or if I should go ahead and eat without you. Remember, you told the therapist that you'd start communicating better, stop disappearing."

"You know my job's crazy."

"I know your job's hard, but I think you add the crazy. It's not healthy how you work. And, by the time you do get home, there's nothing left for me. Hell, you can't even fall asleep you're so wound up, much less be intimate."

She walks away toward the bedroom. He drops the towel and follows.

"Seriously, I just got home and can't deal with this. It's been a shitty day, and I need some time."

In the closet, she starts undressing.

"Baby, I'm sorry for attacking you, but I need you to be a little more considerate or..." He cut himself off.

"Or what?"

"Nothing. Can you just shoot me a text or call me when you're gonna be late? Is that a ridiculous request?"

She doesn't look at him and slides one leg into a pair of pants dotted with seahorses, then the other. He looks at her face, just her face. He leaves the closet, and she hears the door slam, the picture rattling against the dining room floor.

Legacies For Sale

The buyer told me to meet him here, this suburban pharmacy parking lot. I needed the money. Since my wife got sick, I've been bleeding money to doctors and specialists, none of whom are able to tell us why she's deteriorating, wasting away. Each month, she's growing more and more pale like colored paper left out in the sun. Her organs have decided to stop working.

Now, the baseball card is fixed between two sheets of thick plastic, and the afternoon sun is playing on its surface, camouflaging the stout player and his post-swing twist. I hold it like a giant, my throat thickening.

Above me, a bird circles, looking for food. It weaves around a lamppost like a foul ball, landing on the rim of a trashcan. It begins pecking at a bag of peanuts. The bag's teetering on the rim, every thrust of its beak spilling more onto the parking lot.

A car coasts through the parking lot, the driver craning for something. I gesture his car to the parking spot beside me, the heat from his exhaust mingling with the Texas scorch.

Across the parking lot, the bird has spilled all the peanuts, now, and has descended. His black feathers camouflage him against the asphalt. He pecks them from their shells. I watch its beak break them with care.

As he approaches, the driver's sunglasses reflect me in rainbow lenses, his balding scalp offering me the sun's gleam. He has his hand out before I can reach it, and one of his cargo pockets is clearly more full than the other. The man takes off his sunglasses.

"Is that it?" He asks, folding the sunglasses into his shirt collar and nodding toward my dangling hand.

"Yea. This is the one."

I glance down. On the card, the player's plump cheeks weigh his lips into a half frown;

the same look my father gave me when I led him to the vertical dent that ran from the hood to the bumper of his prized 1967 Fairlane.

"That this was in mint condition! How the hell did this happen?" He screamed, his cheeks going flush.

"I told you, it was pouring rain, and I swerved to miss a dog."

That was a lie. In reality, my friend DJ used to think it funny to hurdle the bench seats while I was driving, and on this night, his flailing limbs violently pulled my right arm from two o'clock to six o'clock, the mailbox an unavoidable bystander.

Dad cherished the Fairlane. He had bought it from the widow next door, Mrs. McAllister. He loved telling people that it only had 4,000 miles on the odometer, Mrs. McAllister only using it to go the grocery store every couple weeks after her husband passed. Most days, the car sat in her garage like a museum artifact with no visitors. But, I couldn't tell Dad the real reason for the wreck, because he wouldn't let me hang out with DJ anymore, my best friend. So, I just listened.

"Swerved to miss a dog? That's bullshit, and you know it. You just don't get it. I trusted you with this. That car was a classic, a piece of history. You have to cherish history, son. We are our history. I understand shit happens, but I've trusted you with things like this before and you've been careless, time and again. First, there was the game-day-glass that your grandfather sipped bourbon from during every Dallas Cowboy's game. Oh, the hell we caught if anyone used that glass. And you smash it playing basketball in your room. I know these are just things, but some things build a legacy. The way you cherish those things honors that legacy, helps it live on."

I was grounded for weeks. I thought about the quilt my grandmother sewed in the hospital as the cancer took her, each patch representing a week she defied the odds. My father said she wanted to create something that would remain as she was being taken. In her will, she

left it to me.

Senior year, I took the quilt to the beach with some friends only to leave it in the sand when a bikini with emerald eyes offered me a ride. I went back the next day, but it was gone, probably blanketed in sand by the tide or taken by someone trying to keep warm as it had Grandma during the months of chemo.

On the last day of my punishment, dad strutted in wearing a Yankees cap, his jowls pulling toward its navy blue bill, the "Y" on his cap resembling Grandpa's slingshot hanging on the rack by my door. He was also wearing a faded white jersey with blue stripes.

"Let's go!" trying to hide his thrill.

"Go where?"

"I'm taking you to a ball game. We're going to partake in a bit of family history. The buzz of the stadium, the cavity inducing cream soda, foil wrapped hotdogs, father blindly shelling peanuts for us without looking down once. I thought it time you were a part of that."

The Yankees lost, but Dad and I left the stadium hoarse from screaming, Dad's jersey stained yellow from mustard.

My arm dangled out the window on the ride home, trying to stop the wind with my foam finger, an epic struggle that left it on the New York expressway. Dad and I searched the grassy shoulder in the dark only to find a family of deer frozen in our glaring headlights, a fawn bookended by its parents.

The Fairlane eased into the garage that opened like an eyelid. Dad stopped me from getting out, the smell of hot dogs and peanuts permeating the cabin air. The AM radio played something scratchy and true.

Dad reached into the glove compartment. He fished out what looked like a plastic brick, a

precious stone, so thick it looked like bulletproof glass. Inside the case was a card picturing a heavy set man in stripes in full swing, the bat draped over his shoulder, the stripes on his jersey twisting from the swing. His eyes and the slingshot "Y" on his cap aimed skyward.

My father held the case for a moment, his thumb running the length of it. He said it had belonged to his father's father, a man with dirt under his nails, who drank his cornbread in a glass with milk, who loved the same woman his whole life, and only had this one treasure to give his son.

Then, my father cried. Eyes warm with tears, he handed it to me, his other palm coming to rest on the nape of my neck. I could feel the salt from the peanuts on my skin, tiny granules from his shelling. My eyes went liquid.

I was careful as I took it in my hands, Dad's shaky voice breaking the silence as my throat thickened and swelled.

"Cherish it, son. This is our legacy. Your legacy."

*

The slightly balding man wearing his sunglasses as a necklace is staring at me, his eyebrows twisting. I can tell by his confused look that I've been daydreaming for some time. Even the bird eating peanuts has vanished, broken shells and an empty bag left.

"Finally. Was worried about you? So are we doing this?"

The man pulls out an over-sized envelope from his cargo pocket. It bulges in the middle like the player in my hand's shirt stripes. I look down at the card and lift it to my nose. I *still* smell the sour mustard on Dad's hands. I realize how ridiculous that is, as many times as I have meticulously cleaned the case, inside and out. Every time I clean it, I think of my great grandfather's nails, thick with the soil from the fields he tended, eating his cornbread milk from a

glass with a spoon. The buyer wakes me.

"Fifty thousand, right?"

"I'm sorry. I thought I could do this, but I can't," I muster.

I shake the man's hand, the sunglasses around his neck shaking too and slide in my car.

The black bench seats sear the bottom of my legs. Holding my legacy, I wonder if the case really is bullet proof before putting it in the glove compartment. Driving home, I imagine a young passenger, the two of us dressed in stripes and mustard stains, a legacy stretching the length of a dirt diamond paved in peanut shells that, when tread, mimic a grand applause.

Twin Creeks Hall

Hills roll in every direction, the occasional mailbox marking a gravel road to some hidden house at the other end. Remy is thumping his steering wheel, feigning calm as he searches for the Flat Creek Winery entrance that he's pretty sure he should've seen by now.

Nightmares of his sister, Jenny's, scornful face plays in his mind, and he watches himself interrupting the wedding procession to find his seat. Her groom stands beside her, two of his fingers at Jenny's chin to bring it back to his own.

Who would hold him now? he thought.

The forest is dense on either side of his VW Beetle, its silver paint reflecting the Texas landscape. It isn't until he pictures himself accidentally stepping on Jenny's train, tearing her ridiculously delicate gown to the floor and bearing her to the entire wedding party that he decides to ask for directions.

It's then that he sees the yellowing marquee that reads, "Twin Creeks Hall." He pulls into the narrow dirt parking lot with cement blocks for curbs. The front of the bar is sided with metal sheeting and fading road signs, like some graveyard of old landmarks. Remy steps out of his Bug, dust pluming at his feet when the car door shuts. His tuxedo shoes are misted with the powdery dirt of the gravel lot.

His is the only car. The front door is propped open by a box fan, and the open sign hangs lit from the door jam. The oaks and cedar trees hug the exterior of the building, and Remy remembers all those nights Jenny had held him from the screams, breaking plates, and fists trying to steal his innocence. He shook against her chest, knowing his father had their mother.

A hill ascends at the bar's back, the trees making their ascent toward its peak. Above the peak, the sun is softening into citrus hues, Remy remembering Jenny's dream to walk down the

aisle at sunset, the sun finally setting on their childhood. It wasn't until recently that Remy realized that although he had Jenny to protect him from their father's drunken rages all those years, there had been no one to hold her, until now.

To the left of the entrance, a dingy patio is scattered with dirt-dusted tables; the chairs lean into the tables like drunks on bars. No one's on the patio except a few cedar branches, fallen from the overhanging limbs.

Remy heads inside, the buzz of the open sign mixing with the mournful strings and staccato brass from a flickering jukebox. It looks like picnic tables have been cut into halves, salt and peppershakers made from bottles of Lonestar and Pabst Blue Ribbon. Rolls of paper towels sit on some of the tables, dried beer dotting most of them like crude leopard spots. The jukebox sings for no one.

I was born by the river in a little tent

Remy walks up to the empty bar, dusty bottles of booze lining a mirror that runs the length of the wall behind it. The mirror's smeared and filmy, Remy's face resembling a fun house reflection.

Oh, and just like the river I've been running ever since

"Hello!" he calls into the barroom.

Remy looks for some door to another room. He swears the building looked larger from outside. It must be a giant kitchen and storage space. Two metal doors are at the end of the bar, the windows too smudged to see through. Remy's straining his eyes, just about to give a last call when the doors shot open revealing an elderly man, his thick glasses distorting his eyes as he hobbles toward Remy. A thick mustache hides his lips.

"What can I do you for?" the man asks in a smokey, guttural mutter.

“Umm, I’m lost.” Remy gets out.

The old man stretches his suspenders as he laughs, easing back on his heels.

“Not sure I can help you with that. This is a bar, after all, not a church.”

Remy nervously returns the laugh.

“No, I mean I’m trying to find Flat Creek Winery. Can you point me in the right direction?”

The jukebox continues its soulful song.

“Doesn’t ring a bell. Do you have a map?”

The bartender's thumbs hook his suspenders, their silver clasps reflecting what little light the bar has. Remy notices the man’s dense flannel shirt and thinks of the sweltering heat wafting in and out of the stifling room. The box fan still labors near the entrance.

“No. Just my GPS, but it doesn’t even say there’s a road out here.” Remy laughs more confidently this time, the man looking at him intensely.

“Well, seeing that you’re stuck here for the time being. What say you have a drink?”

Remy looks out the front door at the sunset, its rose colored eyes half closed to the thickening darkness of the wood. Remy pictures his sister making her slow creep down the aisle, white petals crushing under the high heels she’d been practicing in for months for fear of falling. The petals behind her will eventually be swept into the trash. Wiping his eyes on the cuff of his sleeve, Remy eases onto the silt-coated stool and loosens his tie. He thinks of the peak of the hill, wonders if anyone’s ever climbed it only to find another gravel lot instead of rose petals.

It's been too hard living, but I'm afraid to die

Cause I don't know what's up there beyond the sky

Sacrament of Penance

A young man enters a Confessional, a tiny vented window opening as he sits.

“It was wrong for my middle finger to be the last man standing against the driver’s side window after the woman riding my ass felt the need to blow past me. I also shouldn’t have retaliated by cursing the steering wheel so loud my voice cracked, subsequently going partially hoarse as I mashed the gas pedal, thus closing the gap between myself and the bitch-on-wheel’s chrome bumper, who felt the need to repay my gesture of revenge by sending buckets of windshield washer fluid over the roof of her car. This immature act put serious lives at risk, as my vision was severely obscured, but sensing the increase in my body temperature, I released pressure on the accelerator, lengthening the distance between myself and the whore whose text was more important than the other beating hearts on the asphalt.”

The priest clears his throat.

“Having said that, I guess I need to also admit fault for speeding past the Facebooking slut in the silver Mercedes with tinted windows only to release copious amounts of my own windshield washer fluid onto her freshly polished SUV in hopes she might stop liking pictures of girlfriend’s babies to watch the road. All I remember, Father, was her driving past me, her tinted windows hiding everything except an illuminated face bent toward her lap as she raced down the expressway, cradling her precious phone in one hand and scrolling with the other. My guess is that her knees were steadying the wheel. Then, my head shook, hand drifting to the horn, in hopes of waking her from her selfish stupor. I laid on the horn for several seconds, but she refused to unbury her face from the light. This act of blatant defiance made my skin crawl like unedited status updates, and so the baptism of her windshield became my last option.”

The priest is silent.

“The other day I was watching TV when a Victoria’s Secret commercial came on. I should have changed the channel immediately, but the tight stomachs and shallow belly buttons stayed my hand. The remote lay idle on the coffee table as these starved creatures danced behind see through curtains in see through garments, my eyes indulging every crevice. I felt blood rushing to the center of me like an army of demons congregating in my briefs.”

The priest is still silent, but the young man could hear him shuffling.

“When the boy with the chin that reached further than his top row of teeth, eyebrows an eternal V, was sent to alternative school, I breathed easier. I shouldn’t have cursed him for knocking over desks while I was bent over students who weren’t scowling. And when he swept his textbook and pencil into the classroom wall when I asked if he needed help, it was wrong of me to picture him falling into a pit of flames and praying for spontaneous anvils to crush him into a pile of bone powder and twisted organs.”

“Is that all, my son.” His voice is brittle like dried spaghetti being cracked.

“Just a few more: for owning more than one pair of shoes, for letting my eyes linger on the bank teller’s cleavage, my wife at my side, for ever eating at a buffet while skeleton families crowd men throwing bags of rice, for masturbating beneath a blanket in the car while my sister slept next to me, for not listening to the wind in the trees more, for not holding every crying person I see, for not shaking the spotted hand of the man wearing the military cap pierced with gold and silver buttons, for not..”

“Absolution!” The young man heard the priest’s door slam before he could finish.

From Great Heights

Geoffrey's Fine Dining is quiet, except the pianist thumping major sixths and minor sevenths to black silk tablecloths and elegant stemware. In the kitchen, white cheddar grits, garlic rosemary potatoes, and sweet potato mash soak in a hot water bath. Behind the restaurant, cars with chipping paint and rusting edges hide out of sight of the customers. Two men in black vests and bow ties plunge sterling knives and forks into a steaming glass of water, polishing them with white silk napkins.

Will, a not so young man with a buzz cut and beer gut sweats in his white button down and black vest next to a younger man in the same outfit. Their bow ties are open, and Brandon's long blonde bangs bounce with the motion of his polishing.

"I'm so tired." Will shakes his head as he wipes the steamed face of a steak knife, the overhead lights reflecting off its surface.

"Yea, man. I'm right there. The treadmill is real," Brandon laughs.

"Treadmill? What are you talking about?"

"Life, motherfucker. It won't quit. I got a full load of classes, but instead of studying, I'm stuck here."

As he talks, Brandon swings the fork he's polishing, flinging water onto Will's face.

"Dude, watch it! That shit's hot!" Will punches Brandon's shoulder.

"Can't you just take out loans?" He says, wiping the water from his face.

Brandon rubs his shoulder and laughs. "I did, but they barely cover tuition and books. I'm already burying myself alive in debt. They might have to bury me with my debt. Two burial plots, side by side."

In the back of the kitchen, the door swings open, and a young boy runs in. He wanders between cooks and busboys, nearly knocking over a waiter carrying a tray of lobster bisque. The waiter bobbles but stables the tray, light orange cream running over the sides of the bowls. The boy runs over to the salad bar and starts eating the mandarin oranges out of the prep station. Before he eats each one, he sucks the juice from their surface, the sweetness running down his chin.

An overweight cook in a black apron walks over to the boy. His belly protrudes in a snug chef's coat. His pants are black with white stripes and his rubber shoes scoot as he walks. He's carrying a pair of silver tongs. Coming up behind the boy, he pokes him in the ribs with his tongs. The boy curves his body away before moving on to the candied pecans. He doesn't turn around.

"Hey there, Caleb. How are you today?" The portly chef asks.

Caleb doesn't respond. He takes another pecan from the metal container and crunches it in his teeth. In the other room, Will calls to his son.

"Caleb! Don't eat those, buddy."

His son smiles, but takes another, before running over to Will, throwing his arms around his leg. Suddenly, Caleb lets out a deafening scream through a toothy smile. It startles the kitchen workers, but they continue their work. Turning toward the dining room and back to his son, Will crouches down and takes Caleb by the shoulders.

"Hey dude, we can't do that here."

The boy stares at his father with big, brown eyes. Will pulls him in and hugs him tight, the little boy's arms dangling at his side.

"Hey little dude, where's your Mom?"

Caleb looks toward the back door where a woman with hair pulled into a messy bun leans against the door jam, holding keys in her hand. She half smiles at Will before pointing at her watch.

"Ok, buddy. Have an awesome night with Mom. High five?" Will holds his hand up, but Caleb just smiles and runs toward his mother. He grabs another orange on his way out. Juice drips on the floor as he shoots out the back door, the disheveled woman following him. After the door closes, Will goes back to polishing the silverware.

"How's Caleb? Heard he was having some problems." Brandon dips another knife into the steaming cup.

"Yea, man. Thanks. He has autism and goes to a school for kids with disabilities. It's crazy expensive, but he's getting better. Learning how to communicate and handle his social hang ups." Will exhales and clears his throat, his eyes looking the fork up and down for smudges.

"That's hard man. I'll send some prayers ya'll's way."

"Preciate it. He's a freaking genius though. Plays the piano like a boss. Can tell me any note I play without looking at the keys. His piano teacher says he has perfect pitch or something. Crazy good." Will smiles wide, his eyes glassy.

"Fucking, Mozart!"

"I just wish I didn't have to work so much. I miss a lot working all these nights. Caleb's usually asleep when I get home. And here I am, surrounded by people who have so much they need an excuse to blow it. I just wish I knew what it was like to not struggle."

Brandon nods his head and dunks a fork into the steaming. On a nearby shelf, a television plays music videos. A young woman sings into a microphone wearing a catholic schoolgirl

outfit, a white button down tied just above her navel. She's wearing a plaid skirt that yields to tan thighs and stockings. Brandon looks at the screen.

"Damn, that girl's fine. I'd eat Hershey kisses out her asshole," he says, looking at Will with a crooked grin.

"Are fucking serious? That's sick. Get help, man." Will says, walking outside to the put the clean silverware behind the bar.

Wine glasses hang upside down above the bar like a massive chandelier. Behind him, vodka, whisky, rum, gin, and flavored liqueurs offer patrons their labels. The walls are black, covered in black and white photographs of Broadway and Vaudeville actors. Will stocks the polished silverware into cubbies behind the bar. Brandon comes out from back of the restaurant carrying his own polished silverware.

Brandon walks behind Will, sticking his finger into the butt of Will's pants. Will jumps dropping a handful of newly polished silverware on the floor. Brandon runs toward the front of the restaurant, Will chasing him.

The owner, Michael, enters the restaurant, and Brandon goes from a run to a walk. Michael flashes Brandon a look before heading to the host stand. On the top of the podium, a thick leather book with gold embroidery sits. He opens it as Brandon shoots a grin at Will who turns back toward the bar, shaking his head.

The front door makes its stealth swing, a hulky man in white linen pants holding it for a sinewy, tan woman. His name was Clint Williams. He owned a local construction company that did new builds in Crowne Pointe, the most affluent subdivision in Tuscaloosa. He was known at Geoffrey's for his metallic personality and young, hot dates which was never the same woman

twice, but he was mainly known for his size. The man was built like Arnold Schwarzenegger in his prime.

At the host stand, Michael greets them, his scowl widening. He ushers the stiff couple to Brandon's table. Brandon smiles as they pass, shooting Will a middle finger when their back's turned. After seating them, Michael flashes his eyes at Brandon before walking back to the host stand.

Brandon slides up to the couple and pulls out small notepad. With little affect, Clint points to a wine at the bottom of the list, his date admiring her artificial nails. The piano player steps up his game, his jazz riffs becoming more exotic and intricate with the couple's arrival.

The restaurant is mostly quiet, but for two other tables. Will's section is empty, wasting ambience like a middle school dance. Brandon walks up to put in the couple's order. He's trying not to gloat.

"Man. Did you see that watch? Massive Rolex with a shit ton of diamonds," Brandon bragged as he punched Clint's order in to the touch screen that gave his face an eerie glow in the dim restaurant.

"Yea. That thing's ridiculous."

"His date's tits are ridiculous."

Will shakes his head and grins.

"Let's hope he tips ridiculous."

"Fuck you."

Brandon laughed his way to the wine cellar. At the table, Clint and his date stare straight like cars in separate lanes. Their lips are moving, but they rarely make eye contact.

Will starts picturing Jim's house in Crowne Pointe: flawless models strolling his marble floors naked, as he did curls on his micro-fiber couch between fuck sessions, his bejeweled watch dangling haphazardly above his bear skin rug. Then, Will imagines Caleb, thinks of all he could do with a fraction of the money that men like Clint consume and discard.

Outside, the Tuscaloosa heat was refusing to relent as the sun pressed into the horizon like a man punching his time card to go home. Bus boys put out cigarettes at the side of the restaurant with their shoes before heading back into the kitchen. Brandon hurried back to his only table clutching a bottle of wine.

Anxious, he tilts the label to Clint who glances before nodding his meaty head. Brandon fumbles his wine tool free and begins spiraling it into the cork.

Michael comes out from the back of the house to join Will behind the bar. He's wearing a blazer over a pressed shirt with no tie. Everything on him is neat, nothing out of place. He looks over the empty dining room except for the equally neat couple in the corner booth. He holds his hands behind his back. Will stands beside him, arms crossed.

"No tables?"

"Not for a while."

"Well it's only six, give it time. How's Brandon doing?"

"Good, it seems."

"What's he doing?" Michael's voice is frantic.

At Clint's table, Brandon struggles to open the wine. Will and Michael watch him twist the metal in and out of the cork in hopes of getting a better grip. After each try, Brandon puts his hand on his chest and nods to the impatient couple. Now, Brandon's forehead is visibly glazed as he props the butt of the bottle just above his knee.

"He'll break the cork into that wine, and I'll take his life!"

Will starts biting his thumb nail, the humidity from the Alabama evening seeping into and mingling with the jazz player's notes. The wood floors creak as a waiter carries a tray of Filet and Sea Bass past Brandon.

Michael snakes behind Will when he sees Brandon's elbow point north. Brandon's trying to muscle the breaking cork out by bracing the bottle against himself.

The pianist changes to a song in a minor key as the cork finally comes free of the bottle, but the force of the pull sends the bottle from Brandon's grip. It spins toward Clint and his tan date, showering them before breaking on the wood floor. In silence, Brandon stares at the couple. Red drops trickle from his face onto his pressed shirt and pants. His pants are also speckled with wine, shards of glass impregnated in Clint's pants and the skin between the straps of his oiled Birkenstock's.

Clint takes a breath, sips his iced water, stands and walks toward the door. His napkin falls into his bottle's remains, as he marches toward the waiting heat, his tan date giving chase. Almost to the door, he slips, his muscled ass hitting the hard wood floor. He falls a few more times while trying to stand, the waiters behind the bar and the pianist fighting back smiles and laughter. Michael bolted after them, nearly slipping himself.

Brandon and Will watched the owner grovel through the blinds, Clint only offering his meaty palm before slamming his Tesla's suicide door in his pleading face. Brandon and I cleaned up the 500-dollar tragedy. Will imagined Clint weeping over his wine stained linen and sandals, the fermentation making its way deep into his saddle-leather upholstery. For a few minutes, we cleaned in silence before the pent up laughter began to free itself. The laughter swelled like a

wound filling itself, the two waiters' bellows drowning out the midnight buzz of the open sign
and the clank of plates piling the sink.

Skyscrapers of a Wasted Life

He examines the cubes of ice in his Coke, stirring the drink with his straw. A neon buzzes on the wall at the end of the bar, where a waitress is bent over the beer trough explaining the latest craft brews to a customer. Because of the way her body is bent, the small of her back is exposed. He notices the small crack peeking out the top of her daisy dukes but quickly turns his eyes to the non-slip floors behind the bar. *That's industrial grade rubber.* His teeth glint, the gold on his left hand *clinking* against the pilsner packed with ice and soda, a tiny black straw creeping out like the Bartender's ass crack from her jeans.

In the parking lot, the banner boasting "Best Burger In the City" tremors against the shingles above Tom. He looks at the flat screen above the bottles of liquor; skyscrapers of wasted lives. He wonders if it tastes the same as it did the last time.

He remembers his mother in a floral print apron, the sun landing on the reddish brown hair on her shoulders. Behind her, smoke was swirling from a pot of boiling water, her delicate hands pulling a cup and saucer from the yellow wood cabinet. He sat at the table, nose dripping like the faucet down the hall, his throat thick and sore. She pulled a lemon from an oversized wooden bowl filled with oranges, apples, and kiwi. His eyes widened as she filled a second pot with just sugar and water, letting it simmer. She tipped the small pot above the teacup, the steaming water falling perfectly into the cup. Only a few drops from the pan spilled onto the Formica countertop. Smoke was billowing from the cup like it had from the hood of their Ford pickup on the I-45 shoulder, his father cursing the engine while his brothers laughed in the cab. She turned to the sugar mixture and stirred it, the tendons and muscles in her arms delicate and tense. She pulled a tea bag from another cabinet, her movements calculated but graceful, a ballerina spinning on the balls of her feet. She dunked the plump filter paper into the steaming

cup, the water browning immediately. She then pirouetted to the pot filled with sugar water, killing the flame and giving the pot one final whisking. She pulled out the metal utensil shaped like a chrome tornado; strings of syrup caught in its vortex, and placed it in the sink. When the water finished drawing flavor from the bag, Mama took it out and set it on the counter. Then, she squeezed a wedge of lemon into the cup and added the simple syrup, which made his taste buds water.

“This will make your throat feel better and help you sleep, darling.” Her voice was sure like a diesel engine. Next, she added a clove, which looked like a tiny onion on the end of a twig, his face crinkling. Mama laughed. Then, she went to the cupboard above the refrigerator and pulled out a tall glass bottle with a black label wrapped around its torso and tip. It was nearly filled with liquid the color of sweet tea.

“What’s that?” Her face pinched, but then softened.

“This will help you sleep, honey.” She unscrewed the cap, and tipped the bottle over the cup and saucer, less smoky than when she emptied the pan. The light brown liquid dribbled into the sweet and sour concoction. She only let a small amount run out before quickly depositing it back in the cabinet he and his brothers weren’t to go in.

“Right, but what is it?”

“Whisky.”

“What’s it taste like?”

“Warm. That’s why it’s so good for a cold.” She gave him a wink as she carried the saucer to the table, her two fingers and thumb holding his remedy.

“Drink, precious.” He tipped the cup covered in cherry blossoms to his lips, blowing before tilting the drink into his mouth. The simple syrup hit his taste buds followed by the bright,

sour pucker of the lemon. He thinks the Whiskey happened next, the back of his tongue burning then dragging his throat and belly warm.

“Why don’t you or Papa ever drink Whisky?” She looked away for a moment like someone visiting a memory.

“Because we don’t want to fall in.” His mother laughed, the little boy’s brow creasing. “Papa’s Daddy opened those bottles, never starting one he didn’t finish. He jumped in so many bottles of whisky that your Papa pretty much raised himself.” She ran her hand from the boy’s head to the top of his neck. “Your father has always feared missing your life for a bottle and swore it off.”

The Bartender in plumber’s pants drops the red plastic basket in front of Tom. The red and white-checkered paper glistens with grease from the golden fries and messy burger, Tom’s nostrils filling with the smell of toasted butter and charred red meat. The man takes a pull on his Coke, cleansing his palate before the first bite. The sweet tomato bursts in his mouth as he chews his meal. A few feet in front of him, the Bartender takes a bottle of the tea colored booze and tips it into a tumbler for a neighboring gentleman. Like his mother, her pour is smooth yet measured, not a drop of liquid wasted. He dips a salty fry into a pool of Ketchup in his basket, the shelves of liquor staring at him like fermented black holes left in the wake of nearby stars.

The bottom of the cup slurped as Tom pulled at the remnants in his glass. A balled up napkin sat in the empty basket with some crystals of salt and a smear of Ketchup. Most of the lunch crowd had tabbed out, and the neon buzzed for a few men and women trying hard to fall into a bottle. Tom opened the door, light pouring over the stars at the bar that were teetering on rims of warm snares. The door slammed behind him, the city of liquor shivering on the shelves.

To Tear a Veil

The car door flung open wildly, as Jeremy exited the SUV. His mother watches him bound through the middle school crosswalk, Jeremy's hand at his ear as if receiving confidential information. It helped him hear his voice when the student body was infiltrating his personal space. It was like speaking into a seashell, his voice reverberating palm to fingers, to drum. These messages were only for him.

He often humored himself, putting his whole body into a few words, and then staring at nothing specifically, he'd break out in laughter. He did voices too. Students would hear him rendering peculiar phrases in guttural, almost inhuman tones, before showcasing a more effeminate voice for his next rant. In fact, no one knew which voice was the real Jeremy. As he entered the front of the school, he was met by Mrs. Conner.

“Elephant cannonball!”

“Ha. Good morning to you too, Jeremy. Can I get a proper hello?” Jeremy kept his head tilted down in a slight bow, then methodically extended his hand toward the aging woman that smelled of lilac.

“Morning, Mrs. Conner.” He consciously made his eyes meet hers, and gripped her hand as normal as he could. His was an odd shake that seemed noncommittal, thumb pressing just below the middle knuckle, limp fingers lightly resting in the center of the palm as if Jeremy was taking her pulse. He quickly retracted his hand back to the invisible, secret service earpiece. This message must have been urgent, as Jeremy's face went still. Mrs. Conner's mission returned, as she tried to get Jeremy's attention.

“Ready for class? Mr. Grant hates when we're late.”

“Skull!” Mrs. Conner smiled agreeably. Jeremy had recently developed an obsession with the human skeleton. It had become a serious problem. Teachers in charge of tracking Jeremy often found an empty desk where he should’ve been. Next, a search party was assembled. Jeremy’s schedule was disseminated, as well as favorite hiding places, hangouts, and then they’d scatter like roaches from the fluorescent lights in the hallway. Some days he was found admiring the ballet class during their stretch routines, hand to ear, as if he didn’t want to be distracted. Other times, he was quoting Ms. Schultz’ inspirational door posters:

“Dreams aren’t waited for, they’re strived for! A day without laughter is a day wasted!” and “you can’t change your past, you can change you future!”

In light of his most recent skeletal affair, Jeremy must have received classified Intel, regarding the mother-load of bones. The science classrooms were all side by side, in order to share access to the Lab storehouse. The storehouse was full of un-dissected reptiles, glass beakers that reminded Jeremy of wine decanters, test tubes, Bunsen burners, hand held torches, and several life size skeletons propped on aluminum stands. The first time he was discovered, Ms. Schultz walked in on the Secret Agent spouting the entire skeletal system in a catalog of voices and inflections, while popping the M&Ms meant for projects. All she could do was applaud. Needless to say, the science teachers began locking the storehouse, and watching for the skeleton obsessed young man, who’d stalk their doorways in hopes of catching a teacher with their back turned. Mrs. Conner didn’t understand Jeremy’s obsession with bones. Maybe it was because they were solid, unlike the intangible veil that kept him at bay. Maybe it was the way they connected, locking joints and vertebrae like a well-constructed harmony, but Jeremy’s body and mind were dissonant sounds, never in agreement.

Mrs. Conner had known Jeremy since elementary school. He'd pace the classroom corners, like a wind-up toy, and when approached, it was as if Mrs. Conner had broken the obsessive spell. Jeremy would return to reality, but only briefly, before something grabbed him again. The cycles grew closer as he grew. By the end of 2nd grade the mannerisms made him more visible to those huddled on the center of the carpet, meanwhile an urgent message dragged Jeremy to where the carpet met the wall. Mrs. Conner believed he could be helped.

She would fight the spell with words. Diving into Jeremy's protected world, forcing the broken boy to talk to her. Jeremy hated his messages to be interrupted. Pacing the corners raw, fingertips to the ridge of his ear, he'd find new corners to get lost in. When he moved, Mrs. Conner would follow, the whole time attempting to make contact through the invisible veil. But somehow, her words were dissolving against the veil covering this innocent secret agent. If she tried to stop the meticulous gate, an animal would awaken. It was as if Jeremy's spell had its teeth in him. The crowd grated against the messages he received. Body connected to mind, connected to carpet, connected to hand, connected to ear, connected to fray.

Mr. Grant was already teaching, dry-erase marker scribbling numbers on the white board. Mrs. Conner slowly turned the handle, in hopes of entering undetected. Jeremy put an end to this notion saying, "femur, cervical vertebrae!" in drill sergeant style.

"Good morning, Jeremy. Get out your Algebra notes. We're solving two-step equations." Jeremy unzipped his bag while receiving another message. He pulled his folder from his bag, and quickly was ready, #2 in hand. Jeremy's aptitude for math was fascinating. The agents must have been feeding him answers through his earpiece, thought Mrs. Conner. The class often looked back in scorn, when Jeremy would interject an answer while Mr. Schultz was still writing the equation.

“So guys, when you’re solving these equations, the goal is to isolate the variable. This letter needs to be alone. He can’t be mingling with the numbers. They don’t get along. You with me?” 30 hormone factories nodded in unison, as Jeremy continued his rant: “humerous, ribs, pelvis, scapula!”

“By using the inverse operations, we can gather the numbers to the opposite side of the variable.”

“Patella, ulna, tibia, fibula!”

“Once we’ve isolated the variable, we’ll know its identity.”

“Phalanges, clavicle, avenue!”

“To check our answer, we just plug the answer into the original equation.” Mrs. Conner wondered why the Secret Agent’s formula wasn’t as easy to decipher. If only she could isolate this brutal variable that stole him away, that pulled his eyes to the corner of the frame. She was beginning to understand something, but she couldn’t quite grasp it. “Isolate the variable.” She kept repeating it in her mind. She saw a curtain. Behind the curtain was a boy that resembled Jeremy, but not exactly. His posture was less strained, and his face free from the spell. The curtain was nearly pitch black, like a window covered in grime, a transparent web of filth. Jeremy had his ear firmly against the curtain that seemed to move like sheet metal in a breeze. The curtain extended in a circular fashion, enclosing Jeremy within. Outside the curtain was the Secret Agent, elbow extending from his body like a spike, directionless pacing, and veiled eyes. Mrs. Conner was there too. She ran to the metal curtain, seeking an opening. She frantically inched her way around the curtain. She used her fingernails, searching for a groove or blemish in the steel. Her clammy fingers felt something. She retraced her path slowly. It was a small metal tab, the size of a needle. She clamped the edge of her index and thumb on the sliver of steel, and

began to pull. All of a sudden, the metal tab felt like string and the curtain resembled a gray spool of thread. As she pulled the curtain began to rotate, the metallic thread digging into her hands. She ignored the blood. The spool was gaining momentum. Mrs. Conner could see the top of the curtain coming down. Behind her, she could see the Secret Agent advancing toward her.

He leaped on her back, causing her to drop the metal rope. As her knees buckled, she couldn't believe the weight of him. Although pinned, the Secret Agent had forgotten about the rope, which was within reach of Mrs. Conner. She used her unpinned torso to grab it, and had enough energy left to tie the Agent's legs. She then harnessed some dream like strength to roll the Agent onto his back. She rodeo tied him in record time, ankles to shoulders. She instinctively picked up the remaining slack to resume freeing Jeremy from the curtain. The metal spool regained its momentum, like a tetherball between hits. The curtain was the earth, spinning counter clockwise, turning back time. When the curtain ran out, all that remained was a boy with walnut hair and powder blue eyes. No veil. No messages. No spell. Just innocent skin and bones.

Mrs. Conner came to, when the second period bell rang.

Jeremy must have already gone to class, she thought.

As she peeked into the hallway, students flooded in and out of classrooms, weaving between each other. She saw a boy, hands at his side, a confident swagger, as if his bones were at peace. He looked like her Secret Agent. Just before entering a classroom, Jeremy made eye contact with Mrs. Conner, and after mouthing something that resembled yawns, he winked, and then disappeared into the crowd of bones. Mrs. Conner bit her lip so hard the veil tore and she

began to bleed, all the while deciphering the word *heroine*, from his blue-eyed lip service. In salutation, she lifted hand to ear, and said to herself, “message received.”

Bearings

The seven of us stand at the rear of the black hearse, sun bright as thoughts of heaven, skin blistering. The mortuary attendant is ready to open the trunk door, and his sunglasses reflect the sky. The rear window fills with sky, seven bearers squinting with hands folding. They sweat and when the time comes, he says reverse the box. The bearers set her coffin above dug earth on a chrome frame. The metal rollers glide her to rest; fellow bearers pass on right, left, in between, carried by canes, carrying each other.

They chain link arms, tissue palms, bearing her in heaving chests, in watery ducts. The ground yawns for her coffin, coffin yawning for rest, and 14 shoes rest on dirt. 28 laces are tied, 50 or so hearts undone. Dust clouds as cars stop, gravel crunching beneath treads, then car engines go quiet, everyone's quiet. Lips shut, eyes close, doors shut, and the lid's brought down. The trunk opens, 6 bearers muscle in and grip silver handles with salty palms. Everyone's quiet. The box is quiet; the bearers don't speak.

The bearers can't drop her, handle holding fast to porcelain siding, screws flexed in grain. Everyone holds like rain gutters filled with water, leaves, and dirt, all running down. Her coffin rolls on black rubber and chrome, one last push, box finally at rest. Bearers release silver handles; no one dares dust hands.

Nothing more to carry but those bearing witness to woman shut up, bearing the sun and dirt and sky, bearing witness to the dark gold beyond. We all face box framing man in robes, robes bear cross, cross bears red and gold. Robes are like green stems bending loosely over box, like petals littering lid. Her case is at attention as if saluting, bearers at attention toward box.

Man says, "remember," man on front row broken like dirt beneath box, crumpled like program bearing picture of barren corpse. His eyes fill like coffin, coffin filled unlike ground that

yawns beneath. He drops tears on ground that's poised to swallow her soft into eternity. The bearers swallow hard, throats bleeding sighs, because bearing cuts like shovels opening dirt.

When Stars Die

Tobias cut his food into like-sized, geometric shapes, his knife swift like the pianist's melancholy standard bearing itself to the quaint dining room. Ginsberg sat across from him, his attention pulled by the muscular thighs of the teenage waitress placing a plate in front of Tobias whose hands folded in his lap over a black silk napkin. Ginsberg's eyes followed the waitress until she disappeared into the kitchen.

"Ugh, honestly, Ginsberg, you're in your forties."

"I'm just admiring god's creation, brother. She's the one provoking my animalistic tendencies. I mean look at that skirt. It almost shows all god's country."

"Must you refer to every vagina as god's country? Frankly, I don't see what all the fuss is about, such an unsightly piece of anatomy."

Tobias shuddered at the thought, his fingers precisely holding his fork so that he could slide the prongs from his teeth with delicate grace, the tender protein falling on his tongue like the soft jazz on their ears.

Ginsberg took a pull from his beer, his lips making a loud suctioning sound after each chug. His shirt was too small, and Tobias could see skin between the buttons. Tobias also noticed the wrinkles standing out against the pressed tablecloth. He imagined his brother rooting through his hamper, the wrinkles having had time to make their indelible crease.

Ginsberg leaned back in his chair, leg resting on his knee, bare ankle stuffed into scuffed oxfords. He nodded to the silky notes emitting from the piano. They seemed to ooze out with each key's hammer, making a chromatic climb through the dining room's stratosphere, and then dying like meteors when the player's finger released the key.

"So, how's work, little brother? They treatin' you ok over there at the University?"

"Splendid! I'm currently writing my follow up to my last book that analyzed the algorithms that lead to the housing market crash. My new book focuses on systemic violence in minority communities. It's fascinating when one thinks of how much of our misfortune stems from lack of education and reckless self-indulgence. These families are caught in cycles of ignorance, passing them down like family heirlooms. It really comes down to our government's gross misappropriation of-

"Oh, man! It's not just her ass that's flawless, but she has a pair of tits so perky they deny gravity. Come on, brother. What's say we hit the titty bar after this."

Tobias discreetly placed his fork prong side down on the edge of his plate. He made a subtle check of the tables in earshot.

"Brother. Must you be so crass? This is one of the few places you haven't embarrassed me at with your unpolished decorum. I mean really, I'm not surprised Haley left you. Do you hear yourself? When we were in school, you soared in your academics, only to abandon med school to pursue horticulture? It's just like the thesis of my 1st book: pursuing education based on fanciful, romanticized delusions of grandeur only perpetuates poverty in our country."

Tobias returned to his braised pork tenderloin, the chimi-churri sauce glistening against the slightly undercooked meat. As he chewed, he stared at some indiscriminate point behind Ginsberg, who sat silent, his mouth hardening and knuckles white around the black silk napkin.

"You know what? Fuck you, dude! I can't believe I reached out to you. Who the hell are you to diagnose me? We see each other once a year, twice when Mom and Dad died, and you think you know me? For your information, "doctor", Haley left because I spent a year at the bottom of a bottle over a third trimester miscarriage."

Some of the tables near them had stopped eating, Tobias' hands frozen around his fork

and knife as if he'd felt the crude weight for the first time. Ginsberg's taut face gave way and buried itself in his napkin. Tobias wished he could reach him. Ginsberg lifted his face, flush and raw from the napkin's rub.

"Her name was Maya. I wanted to name her Primrose. We could never agree. At least Haley gave me the middle name. A week before, I painted tiny, pink blossoms above her crib, imagined her looking up at them. Most nights, I'd sing old country songs to her, her little feet kicking Haley's stomach, so soft and strong against my cheeks. I did everything to make it right, but it didn't matter how many coats of paint. I could still see them. I see them still."

Ginsberg's voice trailed off like a dying star, his face burying itself back into the black silk. Tobias stood to move his chair beside him but yanked the tablecloth, his silverware and plate crashing to the floor, the dining room going silent. It was like the whole room had burned up in Ginsberg's descent. Then, draping his arm around his weeping brother, Tobias pressed his head against Ginsberg's, the two rocking each other in the stillroom.

Be Still

On the wall, a man sleeps in a boat tossed by towering swells, the indifferent moon, a speck gripped in the wave's curl. Olivia remembers childhood talk of a Jesus' stilling the ocean while wiping sleep from his eyes. Olivia looks around the waiting room. A couple sits in the corner reading magazines. Another woman sits alone, her belly swollen like the sea in the painting above her. She strokes her belly in recycled sweeps like Olivia had her duvet that morning only there are no wrinkles on her shirt that's pulled taut against it, belly button peaking out like the moon in the painting above her.

A door swings open and a dark haired woman in scrubs calls Olivia back. Olivia stands, offers a weak grin before heading back.

The doctor's office is colder than the waiting room, and Olivia's hands are folded neatly in her paper gown. Hands wedge it into her crotch for warmth making the gown bloom at her knees. On the floor below, her clothes are folded in a tidy pile. There's no point counting the tiles again. Her eyes are heavy, and her feet bounce against the stillness.

The door lunges open, the doctor's gloves snapping closed as he grabs the stool. Olivia shoots up.

"Is this the one? Don't answer that." He says, readying the ultrasound. Olivia feigns a smile.

He fishes out the stirrups like a magician readying a trick, her body falling back against the table. Her breaths deepen. Her feet fill the stirrups to the wet squirt of ultrasound gel. She smiles as the doctor smacks the nozzle against the machine. Air farts between clumps of gel, forcing them into a laugh.

Olivia doesn't look, but knows the clear gel heaps the top of the wand in a clear coil. The first year, the gel was just gel, a strange formality like high heels. Eventually, the gel started to look like an invisible snake bent on poisoning her womb. Now, Olivia noticed it as much as she did the robotic drive home from work, her car somehow finding its way to her driveway. The probe found its way to her.

She tenses for the cold push, her hands tight around the table's vinyl cushion. It enters, Olivia's reflex numb. She imagines the sleeping boatman, tries to let herself go there, the wand plumbing her. She pictures the stillness. The ultrasound is always still like those waters when he wakes. She's come to know the stillness, made peace with it.

At first and on her knees, she'd beg the waters to stir, hands folded into her mattress, husband's hands warm against her shoulders. Her knees would ache from the strain, her heart from her belly's silence, and its absence of beating.

Other times, she'd hold still as her husband would fill her blood with hormones shot from pregnant syringes. When she got the nerve to stick herself, she went to the crook of the canoe in her mind. Still. The skin at her abdomen pinched in her hand, the needle entered quiet like the wand that now fished her for swelling.

She later sat still as the doctor described the balloon that held her uterus open and how he'd cauterized the endometriosis from her ovaries, hopefully rendering her womb more habitable. She was still then too as he drew pictures of her heart shaped uterus while describing the path his tiny instruments had taken to make her paths straight. And she nodded slightly as he flipped through yellowed photographs of tissue bulbs on her pelvis that he'd torched. Even then, all she could imagine was the stirring like the rhythm of the ocean's roll and drag. She craved those rhythmic poundings that flutter on repeat.

At night, when her husband slept through the storm, she'd listen to samples of infant heartbeats, learned they sound more like someone's thick treading through molasses or a flag whipping in the humid wind. She wanted to memorize every nuance so there'd be no mistake. She loved to examine the peaks and valleys of them like the crest and trough of a wave.

Olivia is in the boat now, the hum of the ultrasound machine and the doctor's dull penetration her soundtrack. She wonders if this is what sex becomes for pornstars, a benign falice, and an exercise in indifference. If so, what would conception be, what are they desperate for? Perhaps it's money or some exotic orgasm.

Somewhere, outside her wonderings, she hears the faint turning of a heart. It must be the periphery of her consciousness. Her eyes become heavy with sorrow like a makeshift dam giving way, and she lifts her gown to catch the runoff, her soul's shedding. Releasing the gown, Olivia hauls her fists toward the ceiling tiles before bringing them down against the table like waves bent on capsizing a boat. The collision sends vibrations through the examination table, startling the doctor to his feet, the vaginal probe left hanging inside her.

"Don't. Be. Still!" She yelled through her clench, raising her fists for the second wave, and then bringing them down so hard, pain shot through her knuckles and joints in throbbing ripples.

"DON'T. BE. STILL!"

"Olivia!" The doctor's voice pleaded, Olivia's pounding repeating itself like thunderous prayers.

She knew her hands were broken from the beating, but she welcomed the agony, anything to steal the stillness, the numb drape. She imagined each pound as an angry swell, the boat

flooding with water, Christ's gown and sandals wet with rage. She just wanted to stir him, to awaken him to her.

Hands bleeding from the table's edge, she heard the doctor screaming for the nurse. She could feel the lingering wand shake with each pound. She heard something else, the beating from her dream. It began to soothe her hands' swell, the fatigue in her arms making itself known. She finally looked toward the doctor, his chest heaving like the disciples' boat, arm thrust toward the still machine that flickered and pounded like an echo through a deep, dark cave.

Someone's Budding

The living room is swathed with bodies. Everyone's sitting around a strip of polished wood balancing on a stump. Babies crawl the floor searching for light sockets to plug, cords to tug, and surfaces to scale. A woman with black hair watches one of the babies while, beside her, a baseball capped gentleman fingers the screen of his smartphone. She catches her son before he falls to the tile, returning to her cushion. The man beside her continues fingering. Seated on his left, a young man pushes his black frames up the bridge of his nose before returning to his phone's toil. His head is bald except for a black halo of hair buzzed almost to the scalp. The hairs look like seedlings on a sparse and barren land.

In the kitchen, a woman's magenta hair remains nearly motionless despite her labored walk. Her cheeks have a slight hang, and her legs are skinny and odd under the heavy torso she carries. Behind her, the dips have grown skin and the burgers and hot dogs cooled.

Ethan watches his daughter's hands smack the oak coffee table. Her body bounces with each swing of her hand, the impact sending tremors through her. Ethan continues sending looks toward the two men on their phones. His wife sits across the room, staring at the same child as the woman in black, the two of them exchanging words without meeting eyes. Every few seconds, they nod their heads and mouth words of affirmation.

Ethan checks the time, thinks about cleaning the bottles for the car and sweeps the room for toys. On his right, an older woman wears heavy makeup, her clothing neatly pressed like her words. Her husband sits on her right, the room resembling a museum of the stages he's lived and has yet to live.

Ethan realizes the three generations under the same roof.

“So how is your church?” Ethan plants a seed. His grandmother and grandfather look at each other then look away. His grandmother folds her hands, her spine straightening. His grandfather clears his throat before answering.

“Well, we recently left our church. You know, the one with pastor Mike.”

“Oh, really? What happened?” His grandfather looks at his sweet wife, her smile withholding.

“Well, you don’t want to hear about that.” He smiles, the skin bunching in the corners of his eyes.

Ethan looks confused. He sees his daughter investigating a cord that disappears under a rug. Her fingers reach in slow motion before clasp around it. She begins to tug, a lamp on a nearby table teetering with each pull.

Ethan runs to her, his hands easing under her armpits. Releasing the cord, she kicks the air. The lamp stops teetering. Ethan’s body comes back to rest on the edge of the recliner. His daughter balances on the balls of her feet like before, her body shaking from her perspectives’ newness. Ethan thinks of her muscles, how each day brings some new gesture, new position. Then, he checks the room, sees everyone locked in their patterns.

Like his brother in laws’ thumbs doing their methodical circles atop their devices may have once held crochet needles. Or his grandmother and grandfather’s silent exchange may have predated language—cavemen and cavewomen alerting each other to predators.

In lieu of lamp cords, Ethan imagines booby traps laid to snare woodland creatures as his brother in law tilts his cap lower like a lizard camouflaging itself from predators. Ethan shakes his head to himself, as brother-in-law-2 looks up for a second only to rebury himself in his screen.

Ethan feels himself panicking. On his left, his grandparents, wearing pleased smirks, watch the infants crawl and pull up on the wooden slab. On his left, his wife laughs the appropriate length at his sister's joke. Everyone's so composed. Ethan's frantic mind continues its sift through the moment for truth. He wonders if this *is* truth. Is truth residing in the cyclical up and down of his daughter's pulls and stumbles?

Ethan takes his daughter's fingers, and she pulls herself toward him. She places one foot on the top of his shoe, her eyes in a squint and her body the stillest it's been. The other foot moves onto Ethan's other shoe, her fingers firm around his. Instinctively, Ethan straightens his legs from their bend, and she continues her ascent, softly padding past his ankles. His jeans pose an obstacle, the denim giving and gripping against his skin beneath. Reticently, Ethan begins to smile.

At his kneecaps, she bursts into dance, her body shaking, Ethan's grip tightening. Her foot hurdles his knee, and Ethan's stagnant heart quickens. Finally at his thighs, Ethan graces the barren air.

"That's it, sweetie! Almost there! You can do this!" Ethan's voice awakens the room, the screen dwellers unburying themselves.

The posture of the room's bodies begin sprouting, spines erecting and cheeks creasing in his daughter's climb. Ethan's body's bouncing in sync with the rhythm of his daughter's dance as ribbons of drool pull across her father's jeans like the thin stretch of a slug's treading.

"Come on, girl! Get Daddy!"

The room joins Ethan's bursting, hooting and hollering into the budding air.

At his knees, Ethan lets go of his daughter's vice grip and she takes two clumsy steps into his arms, flinging her chubby arms around her father. Ethan weeps into her hair, the two of them

burying their faces into each other. His daughter laughs. The room erupts in applause of someone's budding. Ethan pictures the first seed ever planted in the deep, cool soil, imagines them encircling the first green sprout in communal awe.

Ethan lifts his head and turns his daughter to the room. He lifts one of her arms and one of his own in victory.

Vita

Robert Crowl was born in Tulsa, Oklahoma where he lived a somewhat tumultuous childhood. At the age of 9, his parents moved him to Houston, Texas where he spent the rest of his school and earned an associate's degree in liberal arts from Lonestar College.

From there, Robert picked up and moved to Tuscaloosa, Alabama where he studied English at the University of Alabama, earning a Bachelor of Arts degree. While at Alabama, Robert was a member of the inaugural poetry slam team. After winning the university slam and earning his place on the team, Robert competed with his team at the National Poetry Slam Convention in Albuquerque, New Mexico. He received yet another honor, when Alpha Psi Omega, the theater arts honor society on campus, selected two of his poems to be performed by its members at a variety show meant to honor UA's talented writers.

After getting married, Robert and his wife, Amy, settled in Austin, Texas where Robert began teaching middle school math and English. Recently, Robert and his wife became the overjoyed parents of fraternal twins. Robert's also been published in the Stonecircle, Marrs Field Journal, and Down In the Dirt Magazine. Robert still lives in Austin, Texas where he teaches middle school English, writes, and spends time with his family and friends.

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This thesis was typed by Robert Crowl.