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## Animals

Maria Alicia Gomez  
*University of Texas at El Paso*, mari\_alicia\_gomez@hotmail.com

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ANIMALS

MARIA ALICIA GOMEZ

Department of Creative Writing

APPROVED:

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Jose de Pierola, Ph.D., Chair

---

Marion Rohrleitner, Ph.D.

---

Jeff Sirkin, Ph.D.

---

Benjamin C. Flores, Ph.D.  
Dean of the Graduate School

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Maria Alicia Gomez

2013

## **Dedication**

To my mama, my family, and Ryan, who've inspired and supported me.

ANIMALS

by

MARIA ALICIA GOMEZ, B.A Creative Writing, B.A English and American Literature

THESIS

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With thanks and admiration to all of my classmates and teachers of the University of Texas at El Paso, who've taught me what I know, and what I don't know.

## **Abstract**

*Animals* tells the story of various characters and their lives in the neighborhood of Shadow Street. The novel is structured in shorter fragments that cycle through multiple characters from the local bar owner, to the homeless men that roam the alleys, to a horse that finds his way into the life of an old widow. The novel treats themes of isolation and friendship and community.

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## CRITICAL PREFACE: Discovering Process

*Animals* is a fractured universe. The project was about discovering a writing process and experimenting with the novel form as I have come to understand it. The whole venture is a clumsy stumbling, as if feeling around in the dark for the light switch, except there is no light switch; there is no one source of light. There are only moments, like lighting matches that keep going off before the path becomes clear; what is visible then is only a flash of what's immediately in front, enough to allow a few steps forward at a time. It is in this way that the unfolding of *Animals* has given me insight into my creative process and developing poetics. Experimentation, I learned, is not looking for rules and conventions to break, but allowing the work itself to break them and find fitting solutions. Experimentation means trusting the process and following instincts often obscured by what one thinks one knows. The story will slowly clear its own path. The moments in which I was able to stay away, were the moments that guided the entire project both thematically and structurally.

The novel, as a versatile form calls for a long developmental process as the story emerges and changes. As the project develops, daily life marches on and the outside world, your day in and day out, continues onward. In a project of this kind, external experiences of daily life continue to enter the work as it is under construction. This maintains the ability to allow the work to shift directions, to become influenced, or slowly change as one's understanding of the work itself increases. In this way the process is a strange exchange between past and present impulses, thoughts, and ideas. The fragmented structure of *Animals* surfaced as the story and the characters themselves were emerging. One did not come before the other.

Writers have often alluded to this way of thinking about the process in a free flowing way. In his book "On Writing," Stephen King compares his writing process to an archaeological find

or the story as a fossil embedded deep in the earth that must be excavated through long, meticulous work. King writes, “I believe plotting and the spontaneity of real creation aren’t compatible.” (159) In his fossil metaphor, King states a similar idea about his creative process and how a story is ready to be discovered and one only need find it and follow its clues. An archaeological dig is never pre-defined; the work changes with the condition of the landscape, weather, and decisions about the appropriate or most efficient tools to use. The work will provide a guide, certainly, but it does not give answers or solve problems or emerge in a complete and perfect state. King says, “I lean more heavily on intuition because my books tend to be based more on situation rather than story.” (160) King discusses the simple beginnings of his stories and the way they expand and change and blossom. *Animals* was dependent on intuition as well and began with a moment and one single character. The important thing is that one follow these fleeting bursts of intuition so that the expansion of the story remains organic.

Once I began working I realized that I was approaching the concept and idea of story in a slightly different way. The story became something fractured while trying to connect and form a unified whole. A film by Terrence Malick sparked some ideas in this regard. The *Tree of Life* is a 2011 film that Malick wrote and directed and it treats the idea of a story in a more expansive way. He uses a succession of images to construct suggestiveness, or creating a story based on a series of suggestions. Various scenes contain very little dialogue and simply use the actors and the camera angles to suggest tension or conflict. This opens up the film to multiple interpretations and impressions.

Malick’s approach to storytelling in previous films, but specifically this one, seemed particularly relevant. One of these ideas was a certain focus and emphasis on the individual moment and a search for visual impressions. Of course in film the resources for creating imagery are different: actors, setting, cameras, and lights, resources, of course not available to

a writer. In Malick's film, for example, there is a scene that shows the mother receiving a telegram, show her reading it, and reacting and without any words the viewer understands that she has received bad news. Visually, Malick has a very distinct style where angles and light and varying focus add beauty to the scenes. Not long after this sequence the film cuts into various images of outer space and the creation of the universe. By juxtaposing the two situations, there is a suggestion occurring, a visceral, impressionistic telling of the story that crescendos into an epic, multi-layered effect. By placing the two scenes together, inevitably, a narrative is formed and the viewer attempts to make a connection. I like to think that I borrowed some of these ideas of suggestiveness. In *Animals* each moment is important to the characters' lives and serves as a microcosm for the character's life at that time and becomes a captured instant, a photograph of their existence. Each piece attempts to hold a certain weight for the character, communicating not only something about them, the way they see the world, the kind of lives they live, their daily routines, but also the way they relate to the setting. A conversation, for example, between Orchidia and Tommy reveals their particular dilemma: a young teenager unexpectedly pregnant, but the moment in which they are discussing it becomes representative of their character and sensibilities. Orchidia's internal conflict is not seen, rather the reader witnesses Orchidia grappling with the issue through conversations; it is through these short glimpses the reader can infer her internal emotional conflict. The reader is then placed in a position of great responsibility in creating this intended whole. The reader is, in some sense, filling in the gaps, imagining what happens in between these glimpses.

The individual pieces are not working towards the development of a plot, or a great emotional climax or reveal, instead they are functioning as self-contained, but dependent fragments. Their arrangement is suggestive and creates a sense of progression and time. Each piece communicates something about the character, their subjective reality, and their relation to their surrounding landscape. What does it say about the world of Shadow and Anima



Streets? Each story is a piece that contributes to the culmination of the entire book. This fragmented structure is necessary to emulate the lives of the characters that inhabit this fictional universe.

The pieces represent the very fragmentation of the characters' lives. Their reality and worlds are somewhat lonely. The book creates this community by concentrating every character within it and yet there is no real togetherness between the characters, only sparks of shared moments. This structural idea relates to the world of today, in which friendship and community are somewhat illusory. People's definition of sharing and togetherness is changing and being replaced by an artifice. In this sense, the structure is an inherent and necessary part of creating the effect of the book. These characters live in isolation, each alone in their own universe, their own psychological space. The setting, in fact, is perhaps what is holding the characters together; it is through the setting that the rare occasions of friendship are made possible. At the same time the neighborhood of Anima and Shadow Street also appear to be abandoned by the rest of the world.. Herman for example, is among the only ones interacting with other characters. The consequences of his friendship with Maury and Joseph Word leave Herman in loss; his constant witnessing of the young people's self-destruction also deteriorates Herman the way that his bar is deteriorated and in the end, when someone steals his beloved Marilyn Monroe poster, he is reminded that he too is alone.

Reality is not one whole, discernible entity; it is a collection of small vibrations, and fragments, which create the illusion of a continuum. Focusing on small moments and building a fractured narrative allowed for more freedom in progression and in the shape of the story. I knew from the start that I could not tell a traditional story and that a broken narrative was what made most sense to me. It seems relevant to me now that this could be a consequence of the times. Daily existence is fragmented in a similar way in the modern world; reality is constructed through flashes, constant interruptions, advertisements before music, YouTube

videos, and perpetual bursts of information. All this accumulates to an existence made up of fleeting experiences. It made sense then to create a world in flux, in movement, and it becomes up to the reader to connect the dots.

Perhaps *Animals* is an open work, in the sense that Umberto Eco described in his book *The Open Work*. Eco begins to define the ideas of the open work as one that espouses “suggestiveness” to create multiple possibilities and allow the reader to adapt his personal world to the emotional world proposed by the text. In this sense, an open work is not definitive and proposes a larger emphasis on the participation of “the consumer,” again in this case, the reader. Eco also defined these as works in movement, “because they characteristically consist of unplanned or physically incomplete structural units.” (12) While here Eco refers largely to music, the same principles of the open work can certainly be applied to written texts. Eco describes the open work as a work that through its structural form, questions and challenges the traditional pattern and in so doing encourages not only a different relationship between the interpreter and the work, but also questions the reality and increases the potential message it transmits by its suggestiveness. He often calls it, a “work in movement,” which requires a sense of mobility and “kaleidoscopic” capacities that allows for viewing the work in different ways. *Animals*, is in some ways arranged in a way that it can be read differently by each reader, since so much of the stories is left unsaid. Eco himself writes that, “In every century, the way that artistic forms are structured reflects the way in which science or contemporary culture views reality.” (13) The structure in *Animals* is a fragmented existence, a solitary life that nevertheless harbors moments of friendship, love, and patience.

In an interview with the *Paris Review*, William T. Vollmann told the interviewer, “It’s easier to create coherence and beauty on a small scale. Organize a block, re-read, and rewrite from beginning to end. Afterward the blocks can be arranged in a narrative or archi-tectonic way, re-jiggered accordingly.” (6) Vollmann is referring to his 1994 book titled, *The Atlas*,

which is a book constructed of short prose pieces. The book follows an unnamed narrator who travels all over the world and encounters strange characters and perilous and tragic situations. By the end of the book, though it is composed of short pieces and features no main character or single storyline, the book creates the overall, all-encompassing effect of a novel. Vollmann creates impressions of the places his narrator visits; he gives the reader a glimpse of these people's lives and their world with a single moment. The idea of beauty and coherence created in a smaller scale is an idea I find especially relevant. The arrangement of the individual pieces creates movement, a shifting of time, a sense of rhythm and progression. The structure in *The Atlas* is related to the book itself and its ideas of travel, coming and going, leaving people behind, etc..

Throughout my search for a similar kind of structure, I came across *A Tomb For Boris Davidovich* by Danilo Kis, a book that Vollmann mentions in the above interview as inspiration for *The Atlas*. The book was published in 1976 and translated into English from the original Serbo-Croatian in 1978. It uses a similar structure, in which shorter, self-contained pieces connect various characters in themes of deception, violence, and revolution. The book creates a kind of continuity throughout these short pieces, extending the gray tone and themes that by the end of the book have formed a unique effect, emotionally and thematically complex, but employing a certain type of poetic language that gives the entire book an almost mythic-like quality. Kis' book vacillates from a poetic dimension to a prose dimension. In *Animals* I venture into using some characteristics of the prose poem to alter the tone and rhythm of the work. Pieces such as "The Night from the Inside" and "Sounds" often play with these ideas of the prose poetry by crossing over to a magical realm, toying with logic and reality.

Some of the individual pieces acquired a more abstract and poetic prose style. The narrator is often what I might call a distant cousin of Mario Vargas Llosa's "mythical narrator." This is a voice that narrates action from an outside and panoramic view of the fictional

universe. Vargas Llosa uses the narrative device in novels such as *The Green House*, where the reader might encounter a long introduction to the chapter, where time is expanded, altered, and made elastic by taking a panoramic view of the setting, group of characters, or action. I attempt to create a fictional universe that oscillates, evoking a type of mythical element and realistic element. Some of these mythical elements might arise in the use of animals and their interactions with the human world. Given that each character is in their own psychological time and space also emphasizes that the character's reality is often their subjective one; the moments in which reality shifts into a magical realist realm indicates even further the state of the individual characters while at the same time creating the overall idea of what can happen in *Shadow and Anima Streets*.

The creation of setting and Time is another way in which to form this reality and create the overall effect. Some of the more abstract pieces like those mentioned above: "The Night from the Inside," "Voices," "Sounds," all try to achieve a kind of bird's eye view, so that occasionally the reader can see the setting from a zoomed out perspective. In *Letters to a Young Novelist* Vargas Llosa writes about the idea of "live time vs. Dead time" The concept of "dead time" is what the narrator uses as "fillers," in an attempt to create a more three dimensional space and social context. He writes, "It would be unfair to reproach a novelist for the existence of dead time, of episodes in his novels with nothing more than a linking function. They are useful too, since they establish continuity and create the illusion of a world, of being immersed in a social setting, which novels must foster." (71) These more abstract pieces, serve as the ideas of fillers, of creating an atmosphere, a backbeat, to the rest of the stories that gives color to the world of *Anima and Shadow*. Part of the construction of the fictional dream is the depiction of the setting. The book takes place in an intersection of an inner city neighborhood that appears forgotten and neglected by the rest of the world. The houses are old, buildings are decayed and dilapidated. And the setting serves too as a kind of collective unconscious, a

strange realm where the darkest desires are born and repressed; it's a place where thoughts, ideas, and emotions take on a different shape, a kind of monstrosity with the hope that in the end a kind of consciousness of a place is suggested.

The creation of time also plays an important role thematically and in the way the novel is structured. Leo, for example, is plagued by the idea of forgetfulness; he wants to keep everything, he collects memories, objects, and mementos. Aurora gets a kind of disease that makes her body age quicker and eventually turns her into stone. In *Letters To a Young Novelist*, Vargas Llosa writes about the ideas of psychological time and chronological time. Psychological time is essentially the time as it occurs in the mind of the characters and the chronological time is within the larger story. The characters in the book occupy their own psychological time and so each piece is focused on the character's subjective mind and its interactions with their surrounding world of Shadow and Anima Streets. The reader is in some ways experiencing time/space and reality the way that the characters themselves might experience it, but by experiencing various realities the cumulative effect is the larger consciousness of the neighborhood. This creates various timelines in the book. Orchidia's story throughout the book, for example, takes place in a span of 2 weeks, while Leo's story, which frames the book in some ways, portrays his entire lifetime.

If fiction is meant to transport the reader, or "compete with reality," as Henry James claimed, then the world the reader enters must feel real enough that their imagination fills in the rest. In his *ars poetica*, also titled *The Art of Fiction*, John Gardner describes the important of what he calls "the fictional dream." This refers to the construction of continuity, tone, color, voice, etc, that keeps the flow of the story throughout the novel. Fiction, after all, is a collaborative effort, a joining of voices together to recreate one sliver of reality. While the structure of *Animals* was not typical, creating this dream of sensory cohesion was equally important. The building of Shadow and Anima Streets were imperative to create this visceral

continuity. And, as in dreams, the fictional world should operate under slightly different rules. Every fictional universe should exist as a slight alteration of reality, given the impossibility of actual realism. That is, it is impossible to translate reality without adding a layer of experience as experienced through the living entity recounting it. Charles Olson, in his essay “Projective Verse,” says that verse that wants to remain must “put into itself certain laws and possibilities of the breath, of the breathing of the man who writes as well as of his listenings.” (2) Olson refers to the literal breath of the poet as well as all the spiritual elements that make that breath. Fiction, as an alternative reality, should give insight into a particular view of the world. There is an attempt at “mirroring” reality, but the very act of bringing a fictional world into the page will change this reality, provide nuance; it must be filtered through consciousness. This much is inevitable. The writer is then, in some ways, the limitation of the work, as opposed to simply the creator.

The novel creates an experience, but it cannot possibly depict every aspect of the experience and thus the work must choose its focus. Fiction must provide a slither of the totality of a world. “Experience,” writes Henry James, “is never limited and it is never complete; it is an immense sensibility, a kind of huge spider-web, of the finest silk-threads, suspended in the chamber of consciousness and catching every air borne particle in its tissue. It is the very atmosphere of the mind...it convulses the very pulses of the air into revelations.” (James, 5) The world is too vast to be fully explained in any work, but a pulse of it can be captured, just enough so that something is communicated.

In the same essay James tells the story of a woman who was able to accurately depict the lifestyle of the young Protestant youth by catching a glimpse of a few of them sitting around a dinner table. The woman was able to obtain, from the moment she witnessed, an impression of their lives and their concerns and passions. In this particular project, life is presented particularly in these types of fleeting glimpses, bursts of energy, that might communicate

something larger about the character and their existence in general. If the eyes look at something for a long enough time and then close, the object or scene remains in a subtle state. In photographic terms this means our minds create an imprint of the image in the negative, a type of impression. And when we receive impression after impression in ceaseless combinations of light, these images begin to converge into some idea of reality.

In a fragmented novel such as this a lot rests on the momentum and rhythm that is built as the book moves forward. This was one of the great challenges of the book: to keep a constant rhythm and momentum that would propel the reader to continue reading. In his essay Charles Olson speaks of poetry as a “high energy construct.” To Olson the body itself of a poem is a living thing and every part, beginning with the syllable contributes to the work. To him a poem is an energy field, “a poem” he writes, “is energy transferred from where the poet got it (he will have several causations), by way of the poem itself must at all points be a high energy construct and, at all points, an energy discharge.” (1) This means that the work, or each fragment, must be a transfer of energy.

The structure of the book contains the illusion of order with repeating titles and creation of familiar images. This, in some sense, creates a “work in movement,” constantly adaptable, always changing. The book requires the reader to be engaged with this exchange; they connect the dots, form associations, and perhaps fill in some of the character’s stories. Each story is a burst, a flash of light, a photograph and it provides just enough so that the reader fills the rest. Each moment or fragment, functions the way that a moment in real life might occur, in a fleeting flash of time that we then connect to another moment and interpret as reality, as a flowing connected narrative.

What then constitutes a novel? Vargas Llosa writes in *Letters to a Young Novelist*, “Novels are long unfolding over time (a self-created time), and they play at being “histories,” following the path of their characters within a certain social context. This requires that the

novel present informative, connective, inevitable, subject matter, as well as the cruxes or episodes of maximum energy that propel the story..." (71) Novels must strive for creating this energy that pushes the story forward and engages the reader's senses and psychology. The reader must feel that the world of the character is real; this means the world that shapes them, the rules of their universe, the fictional space. This is along the lines of what Gardner would have called the "fictional dream." Novels have the ability to create time and space because of its length; therefore, it must do so, it must give a sense of an entire world contained. In writing about the fictional dream, Gardner discusses the importance of creating these surrounding fictional walls. "According to this notion, Gardner writes "the writer sets up a dramatized action in which we are given the signals that make us "see" the setting, the characters, and events; that is, he does not tell us about them in abstract terms, like an essayist, but gives us images that appear to our senses." (97) A novel in fragments, as is *Animals*, is still responsible for creating these sensory experiences of the setting. Novels are a kind of history, placing characters in situations and varying social worlds and, to some extent, showing the way these worlds operate.

All the above ideas of suggestiveness, Eco's "open work," and energy might beg the question of how all these things connect and inform the main intent of the book. The discussion of intent is difficult because it requires narrowing down aspects of the work into argument-sized intention. In some ways the book was simply looking for a way to write a story using small moments that would accumulate to a whole story in the end. However; my initial hesitation with this discussion of intent forced me to revisit the question of what this intent really refers to. Intent, in some ways, implies a pre-meditated goal or purpose driving an idea of what the reader's response should be. If indeed intent means that the book was working towards a particular reader response, at what point does that intent become motive? A motive would imply that the writer is doing certain things in order to achieve this goal and perhaps



compromising a sincere development of the work. If *Animals* is claiming to be an “open work,” adapting as it expanded, would too specific of an intention be contradictory? It is the question of intent that made me hesitant precisely because of this uncertainty between intention and motive and whether an intention eventually converts into a motive, something that might compromise precisely the elements of the work that were discovered along the way.

In his essay titled “David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction,” Adam Kelly discusses this idea of intent vs. motive and its relation to the quandary of sincerity in a writer of what he calls this new movement of The New Sincerity. David Foster Wallace grappled with this idea and the question whether a writer could ever fully remove themselves from anticipating a particular reaction from the reader. The question is however, whether this anticipation, if it becomes too controlling and defining of the work (and its ideas), is regarded as intent with a motive: in other words, as a kind of insincerity.

The term sincerity was alluded to by Wallace himself in his essay “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S Fiction.” In the essay Wallace looks at various aspects of television culture: the manipulative advertising, “passive reception of facsimiles of experience,” as well as what is often a contradictory love hate relationship with television programming and how aided a culture of insincerity and irony. (74) In the end Wallace calls for a different literature that moves away from the postmodern tendencies of irony, self-referentialism, nihilism. He writes:

The next real literary rebels in this country might well emerge as some weird bunch of anti rebels,” born oglers who dare to back away from ironic watching, who have the childish gall to actually endorse single-entendre values. Who treat of plain old untrendy human troubles and emotions. These anti-rebels would be outdated, or course, before they even started. Dead on the page. Too sincere...The old postmodern insurgents risked the gasp and squeal; shock, disgust, outrage, censorship, accusations of socialism,

anarchism, nihilism. The new rebels might be the ones willing to risk the yawn...Accusations of sentimentality, melodrama.” (81)

Wallace yearns for a new kind of literature that departs from the often sardonic tone of postmodernism and arrives in an attempt to refocus literature to the essential human traits. In Wallace’s view ideological passion has been obscured by this notion of irony that has been the “hip” mode of expression since the sixties. In “E Unibus Pluram,” Wallace discusses how irony, which he attributes as a main characteristic of postmodernism, is useless in the sense that it provides nothing to replace “the hypocrisies it debunks.” (67) A trend in postmodernist literature is to aim at a depiction concentrating on the negatives of society, the dehumanization, the emptiness of technology, a satirical view of everything, and often neglecting common human traits as love, trust, and faith and where they stand among everything. Similarly, in his essay “Joseph Frank’s Dostoevsky,” David Foster Wallace notes that novels after the modernists were usually studied and revered for their formal experimentation and innovation: “Serious Novels after Joyce tend to be valued and studied mainly for their formal ingenuity.” (Lobster, 271) In the essay Wallace looks at why Dostoevsky is important for the modern American fiction reader: his works’ ideological passion. This means that, according to Wallace, the sincerity of the novel, or the ethical value of the story, becomes almost secondary to the study of the form and technique or, as he puts it, “aesthetics raised to the level of ethics.” (Lobster, 272) This is where the new movement comes in. “The New Sincerity” is a term being used in reference to not only American fiction, but popular music and what seems to be pointing to a new, more humanistic worldview. Adam Kelly looks at a brief historical framework for the word “sincerity” beginning with Lionel Trilling’s definition of it as a “congruence and avowal of actual feeling.” (132) He writes how the literature of the New Sincerity struggles with the fact that sincerity, or the attempt at it, can

never fully be measured or proved. Therefore, like any gift, it can be misconstrued as manipulative, or driven by motive. It is in this very inevitable risk that the movement relies on. For the writers intentions can always be misinterpreted or read differently, but that is the point: it requires a responder. Therefore, The New Sincerity rests in accepting that it is an exchange and the final reception occurs ultimately in the reader. Adam Kelly's premise is to find a re-conceptualization of the term "sincerity" and its relation to a particular kind of American literature, specifically the ideas that Wallace himself espoused as well as some of his contemporary followers. Sincerity is then discussed as intent without motive.

With all that in mind, the initial intent of the book was to tell a story that portrayed the everyday struggles and idiosyncrasies of life/reality in short pieces that would add up to a novelistic effect. Yet, this was not the main driving force for the story; the story was driven by the characters and their own little individual conflicts; as the number of characters grew the structure adapted accordingly. Perhaps more accurately then, the main intent of the novel was to have as little control as possible in order that the structure emerge to accomodate the story itself.

The issue of irony is important when looking at the characteristics of this new movement. This question of irony and gaudy cleverness become key in Kelly's definition or re-conceptualization of the word sincerity. *Animals* didn't feel to be embracing postmodern qualities. While *Animals* discusses ideas of isolation and the nature of community in modern times, it is not ironic, or satirical in its overall approach; it does not seek shock, and it is not nihilistic, or interested in the political. The world of Shadow and Anima reveal the small and petty little moments of compassion, humor, pain, and magic that exist in a small section of a regular old neighborhood. Herman, for example, is not a tragic hero, he is not a fallen man of modern society, he does not represent anything other than a resilience and patience often found in unknown corners of the world. The Killer that kills for aesthetic principles truly

believes that his work is important because it is the work of personal justice, freedom. This, of course, is meant as a humorous approach to a desire many of us might often have. Aurora, although distanced in her own way, talks to Avery about the voices in the neighborhood, about compassion. She says to her young daughter at one point referring to the lost homeless voices: “Those voices, she said, don’t belong to just anybody, they belong to everyone, those are *our* voices too, yours and mine. Their anger and their sadness is ours too, that I had the same hunger and the same misery, ” At the same time The Lion roams the streets helping in his own strange ways; Iggy and Ernie exhibit some of the noblest moments of sharing in the book, while David, the knife salesman, trapped in his own circumstances, is bewildered and humbled by the odd crumbling lives he encounters.

*Animals* is then difficult to situate in a literary tradition, but it’s certainly trying to move away from postmodernism. In his essay on the New Sincerity Adam Kelly quotes Steven Connor who stated that “being modernist meant not really knowing you were so, whereas being postmodernist always involved an awareness that you were so” (qtd in Kelly, 145). Kelly then concludes that being ““post-postmodernist” of Wallace’s generation means never quite being sure that you are one, whether you have really managed to escape narcissism, solipsism, irony, and insincerity.” (145) This is of course the crux of the movement of The New Sincerity. One of the reasons why this uncertainty is key in this movement is that this new theorization of the concept is informed by postmodernist literature and a departure, yet nevertheless a dialogue with it; it is a reaction against some of its tendencies. *Animals* is not postmodern or high modernist; it attempts to distance itself from those terms. The intent was not to challenge structure for the sake of challenging structure, or as some ironic statement about the human condition in America. Rather, the intent was to allow the characters to dictate the nature of their story and by doing so allow that story to represent reality, consciousness, the way the characters perceive and experience it. The doubt that Kelly discusses about sincerity being un-

provable applies here too. I cannot prove that the use of structure was not intended to call attention to itself. I cannot prove that the use of magical-realist elements was not intended as a distraction or had some pre-determined purpose, but rather that it was a component of the fictional world.

This is not to say that I am deeming myself of Wallace's generation, or what Wallace called "the new rebels." I am not suggesting that the book is successful in its attempt to engage questions of everyday life, or portray the spirit of a population struggling with their own situations. Wallace himself said that when sincerity is pointed out or discussed, it immediately vanishes. Consequently: in the act of trying to distance myself from the already tiresome postmodernist temptation of hollow irony, and bleakness, or overt commentaries on capitalism, gender, identity or the regular menu items in a liberal arts course, I have vanished any sincerity that might have existed in the work.

*Animals* is an attempt (and certainly there were shortcomings) at a novel that engages the reader viscerally and visually. Part of the intent is to represent life in all its absurdity and peculiar little inklings, which sometimes borders on the ridiculous and the fantastical. *Animals* aims at exploring the wonders and absurdities that exist in a life and to exaggerate them. It hopes to appreciate our stupid, but precious little lives and to examine the desperate measures we take to find understanding and meaning. And if it cannot do that, at least, most importantly of all, I hope the novel finds some humor in some of it.

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## ANIMALS



## **Butterflies**

Leo sat by the window listening to the voices outside, the sounds of a moving world around him. His clothes and toys, as well as his mother's belongings, were still packed away neatly in boxes.

This is our new house, said Leo, turning back to his brother Orson who sat wrapped in a blanket. Do you like it Or?

The roofs of the surrounding house were faded and tattered with paint coming off of the sides. Cracked sidewalks, stained or carved with the names of couples, lined the streets while cars with flat tires and missing bumpers crowded driveways. Slanted mailboxes and boarded up windows tagged with graffiti gave the sense of abandonment. On the corner of their house, right on the intersection, there was a small tree, just barely struggling out of the ground.

Where is she Leo? Orson asked.

Orson was six years old and had not spoken much since it happened. It was sad to begin a story like this. Leo was afraid that his brother might not understand, being younger than him. And yet each time Leo recreated the moment he saw it clearer and clearer, as if it were a real memory.

He sat across from Orson on the floor and began the story.

Mom was alone in the house. Dad was working and we were over at the park playing baseball with the older kids. That's when they went into the house, Leo said.

Who? Who went into the house?

The goat men.

Goat men? Asked Orson.

Half human, half goat. They stand upright, but they have hooves and the head of a goat. So Mom looked for a hiding place: she looked under the table, in the closet, and in that spot

behind the couch. Remember Or? When we all played hide and go seek? Mother would be good at hiding and it would take us a long time to find her?

Yes, Orson said.

Behind the couch, that was the best hiding place, said Leo. But she didn't have time to get there. So she hid from them as best as she could, afraid of the sounds of their hooves as they came near. Her heart was beating fast and she started to hear music. Then they found her. She threw her wedding ring at them and said here, take this, take it all. They shook their heads and said: Don't worry Darlin, we will take everything. Mom knew what everything meant and she thought of you first because you are the youngest.

What did they want? What did everything mean?

Everything, Leo said, means more than you have, more than you can ever give, more than belongs to you....So after they took her ring they told her that they were sorry but this is how it had to be. Mom told them to take everything and leave her alone and they said: Yes, we will take everything. The music got louder. Then they forced her to dance with them. She had to Orson, though she didn't want to dance. They made her. First, one grabbed her hands and danced with her. His hooved legs were strong. Then the other goat man came in and danced too, it hurt her to dance and he danced much faster than the other. They danced and danced and danced. The sweat on his forehead dripped from his beard onto her face. And then one of the men took out a violin bow and told her that he wanted to play her like music and he slid the bow across her throat as if her throat were a violin and the skin were the strings slowly vibrating with sound. She knew this was the last song she'd ever hear and she tried to hold on to that last note. She tried to remember the chime of the piano and gurgle of the cello and her throat opened up like a flower. The petals fell and the pollen got into their eyes and their clothes. The piano died down and the cello slowly quieted to a moan. And as her song spilled out of her, she saw the sun in her mind and understood the way light moves through all things

and how music lives inside us and how the stars call us back to their soft glowing beds and that last moment Or, was the greatest moment anybody could have ever known.

## **The Rooster**

Next to a small house on Anima Street, Mrs. Rose, the widow, had a chicken coop and a small garden and vegetable patch. Among the dirty streets and dilapidated houses, the bright green grass and the pink and purple of the flowers stood out like the sun against darkness. In addition to her five plump chickens and an arthritic hound, the woman also had a Rooster. He was known for his hot temper, his fluffy tail, and his waddling around at all hours of the night. And of course, he was known throughout the neighborhood because of his loud unforgiving cry at dawn.

The bird watched everything from behind his fence, often squawking at passing drunks or flapping his wings at strangers walking by, following them behind the fence as if to antagonize or challenge whoever was near. He often paced in circles while the chickens laid their eggs and made a wild ruckus at strange hours of the day. He watched couples as they held hands and kids as they ran around the playground or smoked cigarettes in the park. Sometimes it even seemed the Rooster challenged the rising sun itself, with his loud and piercing cry that'd tear through the morning like a hot knife. The morning chorus was composed of his cry, the songs of birds, groggy yawns and the gurgling of coffee machines, sputtering car engines and water running through pipes for morning showers. Yet, more than anything the Rooster was the keeper of time, ensuring the night continued its cycle onward.

## Butterflies

The cameras shuttered. A hundred clicks, fluttering at the speed of a hummingbird's wings. It was by the intersection of Shadow and Anima Street, in front of the large tree that people drifted towards the unexpected visitor. How did he get here? A voice asked. A large crowd had now gathered around the stranger and a dozen pairs of eyes watched him with curiosity. Shoulders pressed against each other, children pushed their way through legs and hips and elbows, and a few tiptoed around trying to get a peek. People whispered and mumbled. A man ran back towards the crowd: Ambulance is on its way, he said, I've just called. Then, murmurs and scattered relief. What are we going to do with him? A voice asked. Will someone take him home? Asked another. I hope he's not badly hurt, a frightened voice said.

When the ambulance arrived, two paramedics stepped out of the vehicle and squeezed their way through the crowd that was opening a gap for them. The young paramedic, in his early twenties and still showing remnants of adolescent acne, stopped in his tracks when he saw the injured stranger and said: That's a horse.

Well of course it's a horse! Said a voice, it needs help, look at his wounded leg. The young paramedic began to sweat and asked: How did it get here? We don't know, answered a voice, but if you don't help him, he's going to die! Does it belong to someone? Asked the paramedic as he looked around the crowd. Not that anyone knows of, said another voice, he must be lost. The other paramedic said: We can't fit a horse in the ambulance. The crowd groaned, protested. Please help him, a voice cried above the others, or you're just going to let him die there on the floor for the children to see? Are you going to leave him as food for the vultures? The two paramedics looked at each other and shrugged. Ok, the young one said, let's get him in. The crowd stepped back and the men came forward to help. They struggled to put a sheet under the horse, who all the while was very cooperative and quiet, watching as if

intrigued by the process happening around him. Once the sheet was under him they counted 1, 2, 3 Lift! They pulled on the sheet and lifted the large animal into the ambulance. A local reporter made it to the scene. And the next day the paper was flooded by photographs of the wide eyed horse inside the ambulance as the young paramedic held on to him with a worried look on his face. The Caption read: HORSE IN THE HOOD.

## Leo

The sun beamed into the ocean water the way light enters a cathedral: diffused, touching the inner architecture, the obscured figures and reefs. Down below, the jellyfish drift by, opening and closing. They float waywardly, wandering the depths. Schools of tiny copper fish pass between the legs and arms kicking and swirling around in the water. Other fish swim away from the splashing of a dog's paddling paws. The jellyfish continue to move with the current. Some of them are pushed away from shore by currents caused by swimmers and motor boats. Others move towards the beach. Leo is walking along the shore, looking out into the horizon. Nearby, a stingray lifts itself from the ocean floor, woken by the motors and the paddles, its fin grazed the foot of a young swimmer. To the swimmer the fin was but a breath of the ocean. Leo's feet sunk in the sand. As the waves swept in, a jellyfish carried by the salty foam washed up by his foot. Leo squatted down to observe it as another wave came in and swept it back in, vanished. He looked at Orson, who played in the water not far away. Leo saw his mother hidden in Orson's face. At least she still existed in the world, even if it was quietly. He collected seashells and a dead crab and put them in a box labeled: Trip to the *Beach. 1 year after mom's death.*

## **The Bar Owner**

Every night before closing Herman, the local bar owner, made sure no one hid under the pool table or inside the bathroom stall. Drunks were always trying to use his place as a motel. Those bastards, always wanting something for nothing. He got damn tired of those old drunks sometimes and wanted to just close it all up and move somewhere near the coast, where he could become a fisherman and not bother with these fools. This place was worn down by sorrow and scum. Who the hell would want to sleep here anyway? Jesus Christ. The pool tables had stains on them; tables were broken, wobbly, sticky. Chewing gum of all different color decorated the walls, as did the smell of piss and tobacco. The walls had at least two holes in them from men punching their frustrations into the cheap drywall.

Then Marilyn, his beautiful Marilyn, had been manhandled and whistled at by every passing filthy minded man that thought himself worthy. The Marilyn Monroe poster was something he'd put up when he first opened up the bar and since then, she has been the guardian angel, watching him as he serves drinks, wipes counters, and interacts with the clientele. The edges of the poster are roughed up and someone had drawn a happy face looking up her dress.

There was a small television in the corner that received only one channel. It happened to show mostly daytime civil court shows and Latin American Soap Operas. The tiny television drew a few middle aged women however, a steady clientele, who showed up at exactly 7 p.m. for their program, sometimes with a dripping buttery pack of popcorn.

Herman picked up trash from the floor as he checked corners and possible hiding places, and then went in to the bathroom. Is anyone here? He squatted down to look under the stalls. He didn't see any feet, but something kept him there: a presence. He listened, walked over to one of the stalls, and slowly pushed the door open. Nothing. He went over to the other



one and pushed the door. There inside the stall, a young man was up on the toilet seat, being very still. Herman knew this son of a bitch. It was some dirty kid that showed up regularly, never had any money and always with the look of a hungry dog. The young one was crouched down with his shoes on the seat and his hands outstretched to the sides of the stall for balance. He looked like bat in his cave.

The boy's eyes were closed, concentrating on not making noise, or perhaps already trying to sleep.

You little bastard.

The young man opened his eyes.

Mr. Herman.

I'm closing up, son.

I won't break anything.

No. You have to go.

Mr. Herman, One tiny corner, I won't move from there. I need to sleep. Just one tiny corner.

Son, ain't you got nowhere to be?

I need a place to sleep.

He shook his head and grabbed the young man by the shirt sleeve. If he lets one, the others will flock. He knew this.

Please, Herman said, don't make this harder for me son. You gotta go.

The young man must have weighed no more than a hundred pounds. He struggled to walk, one of his legs appeared to be wounded.

What's wrong with your leg?

Oh is nothing.

The young man limped trying to get to the door. Most likely a runaway. The young

man's t-shirt ripped as Herman held onto it. Sorry. He let go of it, and instead pulled him lightly by the arm. The young man, feeling the chill of the night, turned to Herman once more and pleaded.

I won't steal. I promise. I just sleep. There, the young one pointed to a corner by the pool table, I won't move from that spot.

He pushed the kid outside.

Sorry, son, he said. This ain't a hotel.

He locked the front door behind him and stopped for a moment letting out a deep breath, filling with sadness. He wondered if the boy had any parents, if he had family. Then he put it out of his mind, turned off all the lights and went upstairs to his old wooden apartment.

In the morning Herman went out for the paper. The young man had not moved. He slept soundly in a fetal position, shivering by the door, his torn shirt exposed his shoulder and a small string of saliva trickled from his mouth.

## **The Blind Woman**

She didn't remember her age, but knew that she was old from the way her bones cracked every morning and from the way her skin felt loose and wrinkled. She knew she was old because she carried her past on her back and it made her hunch, more and more every day. She knew she'd had four kids and a husband and that he had left, or died (that detail was now lost on her). She missed him daily and believed that pain was the ghost that kept her company. All that was important was that she'd been in love and that its force had dominated her life for a long time that everything else had to be remembered around it. She'd been left alone with her children and she worked two jobs, sometimes three. One was a seamstress job, where she hunched for hours putting string to a needle and sewing pants and seams, the other was in a bakery, where the heat from the ovens often burned her eyes. And in her spare time she knitted doll clothes and sold it to the little girls of the neighborhood. She worked to put her boys through school, to dress them properly, to give them money to go to the movies. Somehow she survived on little sleep and food, feeding herself with the relentless desire to see her boys prosper.

The old woman survived on a meek diet. Every week a boy in a bicycle would bring the woman her soup, milk, corn and oatmeal. He also brought along yard and string for her sewing. On special days the woman would order herself a slice of apple pie or a peach. And there the old woman passed the time, knitting, humming, hearing the world move around her.

For so long life had been exhausting, slowly eating away at her youth and eventually her eyes. There were days now where she could see the occasional shadow, but mostly she saw nothing but what was left rattling in her head: the faces of her boys, her husband Morgan, his silhouette against the morning sun as he bent down to get the paper. She remembers the way trees sway and dandelions scatter in the summer breeze, she remembers her image as a young

girl, how she loved to dance. Sometimes she found a conversation in her head, like her boys talking about a movie, laughing and joking around. She'd replay this conversation and join in, the way she never could years ago. But most of the time she listened to the sounds of the streets, the cars passing, the children laughing, and the rooster at dawn.

## **The Alleys**

There is always something lurking beneath the surface. Ernie walked down Shadow Street with his hands in his pocket, looking around at the old broken houses, admiring the decaying architecture. Everything naturally leans towards disorder. The streets, although ordered with boundaries and stop signs are a place where chaos emerges. Look at this place, left behind like an old dog. The currency here is smoke. Ernie hobbled down the street asking everyone he saw if they had a cigarette. Herman, the bar owner, was sweeping the sidewalk. Hey, you got a cigarette? Not today Ernie, he said. Smoke and alcohol were the streets sanctuary, a vague white to get lost in. Of course, for those who could make a buck, they often jumped into the undertow. The heavier stuff, that is. The snow. And then a dozen golden arms glowing in the night like fireflies, sniffing noses and brains in ecstasy. These guys didn't even feel the cold then, nor minded sleeping curled up in the alley, and for a moment their minds went somewhere free of the truth of their lives. But smoke was the street man's vitamin. A few smokes made a rich man, but a man never felt rich in these parts. Ernie continued his search, asking finally a man standing near a bus stop. You got a smoke? The man did not respond at first, trying to avoid Ernie's pleading eyes. After a moment, the man gave in, reached in his pocket and handed a cigarette, lighting it for him. Thank you kind sir, Ernie said, elated, filled with joy. He was rich. Just for a moment, he was rich.

## **The Rooster**

Children frequently dirtied their shirts and pants as they crawled under the fence into Mrs. Rose's backyard. Mrs. Rose was a widow of twenty years. It was because of her husband's absence that Mrs. Rose, first name Olive, began to venture into various hobbies to pass the time. She converted the dirt lot by her house into a nice yard filled with grass. Then she planted flowers, tomatoes, vegetables, and finally built herself a chicken coop and bought some chickens and a rooster. She loved the old bird dearly and often looked out the window to catch a glimpse of him as he strutted along the fence. She had built a small house of wood for the Rooster and painted it red, to match his comb. A few years back she'd adopted a brown basset hound with arthritis, whom she walked at least once a day.

Mrs. Rose sold fresh chicken eggs for twenty five cents each. Children were often sent by their mothers to buy one or two for a late breakfast. But sometimes, the children liked to dig a hole by the fence where they could squeeze under it and sneak into the yard.

They'd crawl through for a laugh. "Alright," the head of the group would say, "bets are in. Who can catch one?" Then an eager boy would jump and say, "Me. I can do it in less than two minutes." The boy would then proceed to chase the chicken around the yard, stirring the whole bunch as the children cheered and laughed. The chickens would spread out, hide in the small bushes, behind the wheelbarrow, and in the flower beds or tomato plants. Then another boy would say, "No, he can't do it. I'll do it." And the other boy would then try to catch a chicken with some of them folding over laughing and giggling as the chicken ran and clucked and the boy with outstretched hands ran awkwardly behind it.

At some point during their game the Rooster would emerge with a shrill cry chasing them out, flapping his wide wings. He pecked at their sweaty ankles. He puffed his chest out and looked the boys straight in the eye. Most of the time the boys would run, knowing it was

time to go, but sometimes one of them would get brave and chase the Rooster down with his baseball bat or a long stick. The Rooster would scatter off, running into his little wooden house where their dirty hands could not reach him.

## **The Horse**

Although the Horse's uncanny appearance was reported by the local newspaper as some kind of mystery, the newspaper failed to report the events that followed partly because the editor thought it had no shock value and frankly because they were more interested in covering the woman that squealed like a pig and the man with the reptile skin, who sun bathed in a busy intersection.

The Horse was calm and cooperative despite the cramped room on its way to South General Hospital, but when the paramedic attempted to shine the light on his eyes to check his pupils, the Horse jerked back, startled. His head pushed the paramedic backwards and the young man hit his head near the Defibrillator equipment stored on top and was knocked unconscious. When the ambulance arrived at the hospital the door was opened to find the Horse sitting quietly and the young paramedic knocked out and limp at his side.

An experienced nurse ran over and cleaned and bandaged the wound on the horse's leg. She then asked the driver to take a photograph of her next to the Horse so she could show her young son the importance of Mommy's job. After that, she told the driver to drop the Horse off where he came from. That very night, the Horse was back on the corner of Shadow and Anima.



## **Butterflies**

David tried not to make eye contact with the man sitting across from him. The man's receding hairline reminded him of a hard-boiled egg. He had a somber face and dead eyes like captured cows, that kind of dull stillness cows get when confined to manufactured grain and narrow stalls, dumb with monotony.

What do I do now? David asked.

You go out into the world and find a job.

Like what? Who the hell is going to hire me?

Well, said the man, anything, a small shop, a mechanics. Raise some money and then you can start your life again, slowly cleaning your record. Get yourself a little place to live and move on. You're a free man...so to speak.

David fidgeted in his chair, biting his lips, sweating.

I'm not really free though, am I?

Well, you'll never erase past, if that's what you mean.

That's not exactly promising.

This ain't exactly paradise.

I did my time. I should have a clean start.

It's the way the world works. You start from the beginning. You must redeem yourself in the eyes of society.

What do you know about how the world works? You sit this office all day.

I see things. Troubling things. I see people that lose their way and never re-adjust. Look, I know a place that can give you a job to start you off. I'll give the man a call.

David could punch the man straight in the nose. And for a moment he was caught in an elaborate fantasy where his fist and his first two knuckles punctured the man's dead eyes,

bleeding out the puss and shit that had probably accumulated for years. He pictured the man bending over in pain, weeping. But that was the old David, he was not like that anymore.

Find yourself a little life to live, it's all any of us can do, the man said, nobody is indispensable. Trust me on that. So the best we do is simply to move forward with a stupid little life.

Thanks for the pep talk.

David stood up and walked out of there.

David! Called the man after him, you're due to come visit me again in two weeks. I want some good news.

## Leo

It begins like this Or, you and me. We're brothers, said Leo as they made their way towards the playground. That means we're tied together, we cannot escape it. Your blood is my blood and that's already decided. We carry the same history.

Leo snapped a Polaroid. It showed Orson standing by the stop sign. Leo took the photograph and wrote on the back:

Orson: *7 years old. One and a half years after mom's death.*

Then Leo hugged his brother and said, I will take care of you.

They crossed towards Anima street and up towards the playground. As they neared Orson slowed down his pace, reluctant. The playground was filled with children laughing and playing around. Go on Or, Leo said, play with them. I'll be right here. Leo pushed his brother towards the children. Orson looked back at him every few steps as he walked forward. Go on Orson. Orson stood for a moment just watching everyone by the slide. Then a boy came close, touched Orson on the shoulder and said: You're IT. The boy ran away laughing. Orson ran after him. He was finally playing with other kids, engaging with others. Leo smiled, but when Orson caught up to the boy he pounced on him like a bear and slammed his fists against the boy's face. Leo jumped in and pulled his brother away dragging him home, as the other boy cried and all the others gathered around and stared with a frightened look on their face.

## **The Bar Owner**

Herman prepared to close the bar for the night, looking under the tables and in bathroom stalls, making sure no one attempted to sleep inside. He didn't like the idea of having to kick people out, but it had to be done. He walked over to Marilyn and stood there for a moment, admiring her. Hey Love, he said to her, it's been a long day. Herman let out a sigh and leaned against a pool table. Sometimes it's like I'm all alone in the world and the bar is just my head and everybody is just me in a different life and I get this fear that I don't know what goes on out there at all. Herman winked at Marilyn then went towards the heavy wooden door. He was about to close and lock the door when a hand slid in through the crack and stopped it. A voice behind the door said:

Herman, one drink man, just one.

Herman knew the voice and when he recognized it, sighed and opened the door. Maury stood there like a wet dog. His nervous tick, that tiny quiver of the neck, making his jawline tremble.

You son of a bitch Maury, said Herman, you always do that, making them little puppy eyes. You know what time the bar closes.

I know, I know, said Maury, I ran late, I was doing business.

Alright Maury, come in, just for a few, I gotta rest tonight.

Why, something going on tomorrow? Maury said with a mocking laugh.

Nothing, said Herman, nothing, I guess.

Maury followed Herman into the bar and sat down, taking off his coat and fedora.

Herman knew old Maury was in one of his talking moods. Maury said, he'd thought about his mother today when watching an elderly woman cross the street alone. He wondered about that woman's children, where they were, to leave her alone like that. Maury's childhood

had been a happy one, Herman had heard it a thousand times, filled with strict chores, but always love. When he went to school, Maury would worry that he'd come home one day and his mother, his only friend, would be gone, or that he'd forget his way home and never find her again. So he used to draw maps in his notebook of how to get his house. There were several routes and everyday he'd look at them and decide which one was the best to go.

You know, said Maury, when it rains, dogs lose their sense of smell.

Is that right?

Then, they can't find their way home. It's the same with people. That's why you see people wandering out in the street when it rains, everybody is lost or uses the rain as an excuse to get lost. In some ways, I suppose, it's a bit of a cleansing, where people can start over. The dogs wander for days until they can regain their sense of smell, but sometimes, they are too far away from home to find it and they get lost forever.

I never liked dogs, said Herman.

Maury sipped wine, had not even bothered with the glass and drank straight from the bottle instead.

Been thinking about Spain a lot lately, said Maury after a long pause.

Spain?

Yeah, I think I'm going to try and escape there soon. It seems like a right place for me. The young girls like older men and it smells of oranges.

Where did you hear that? Said Herman.

I don't know, said Maury, taking a drink, maybe I saw it in a dream.

You do know they speak Spanish there, right? Asked Herman.

I'll learn, said Maury. I also heard that there are young little love workers that are plenty affordable.

Love workers?

Yeah, you know...

I know, said Herman, then changed the subject. What kind of business you conducting exactly, if you thinking about running off to Spain?

Ain't none of your damn business Herman.

Are you paying me with dirty money?

Oh come on Herman, everyone here pays you with dirty money. All money is dirty.

Maury, listen to me, people see your face and they see someone without much sense, much street smarts. They're going to get you into trouble. You've got too big a heart to be out on the streets.

I know my way around Herman, said Maury, don't you bother with me. I can take care of myself.

I tell ya what, said Herman, I have a test.

What do you mean a test?

A test to know when you can trust someone.

Is that right?

Works every time. Like a fucking charm. Here's what you do: You tell them a personal detail, nonchalantly, of course, in conversation. For example, my kids are eight and ten. Then, the next time you meet them, you bring it up again and you say, my kids are six and eight. You watch how they react. You watch closely. If they ask you about it, it means you can trust them if they don't, it means they just caught you in a lie and they will use it against you.

That doesn't make any sense. What if they just weren't paying attention the first time?

If they want to hurt you, they will. Trust me. It works, but you got to watch their reactions and you have to do it subtly. See, people are like books, the answers are all there, you just got to read carefully.

I've never read a book like that, said Maury.

They both laughed and then were quiet. They sat that way until morning, hunched and leaned against the bar, occasionally Maury retelling some funny story Herman had heard a million times. Maury talked of his anxiety, his constant feeling that the world was against him. They talked about old age and how it felt when life slowly dimmed.

When The Rooster crowed, announcing morning, Herman yawned and Maury grabbed his hat, thanked him, and went out.

## **Dogs**

In a house on Anima Street, a mother and her daughter had been cleaning their small yard, pulling out some of the weeds. The young mother, recently taken by gardening, had wanted to put in some flowers and the little girl, about seven, did what her mother told her and tied the doggie to a post in the corner of the yard, so he wouldn't come wagging his tail and interrupt their work. When they finished pulling weeds and digging out toys, and clearing the rocks, the mom and the little girl went inside for cool drinks. While they were inside the phone rang and the mother answered, talking for almost an hour, something about child support payments. During this time the little girl wandered to her room and turned on the television to watch Big Bird and the Cookie Monster spell things out. That night the girl slept holding her teddy bear and in the morning the mother turned on the news with the volume high on the television so she could listen as she dressed for work and prepared her suitcase, as well as helping the girl brush her teeth and comb her hair. They left early that morning when the air was cool.

The sounds began rather early when the dog, still tied to the pole, heard the sounds of them leaving. But the mother's preoccupation with clean teeth and matching socks, kept her distracted from the barks coming from the backyard. The loud agonizing wails began towards mid-afternoon, when the sun was high in the sky, piercing at everything below. The dog had never felt the thirst scratching at his inside the way he felt it now. It was like a living thing eating him. He tried to dig a hole in the ground, to get where it was cool, but he couldn't get very far. His paws became weak and he began to whimper and yelp. People passing by were afraid to look back there and so they didn't. The afternoon got hotter. The sounds split the clouds above, dissolving them into droplets of water that never reached the dog's tongue.

When the little girl returned from school that evening, she was eager to go out and play



with the doggie, but when she went outside she saw her dog lying limp at the corner, still tied to the pole with the knot she had made the day before.

## Leo

Sometimes the voices outside seemed so close that Leo was afraid they'd gotten in the house. It kept Leo awake late, sometimes listening to the night as his own private concert. Soon Leo wandered around the area, taking small containers with him in which to collect things. Each one he labeled carefully.

*Dead caterpillar. Back yard, two years after mom's death.*

*Found pair of glasses. Anima Playground. Two and a half years after mom's death.*

*Orson's shoelace: Three years after death.*

*Cassette Tape. My father's voice: Three and a half years after death.*

Everything he touched would be gone eventually. The thought haunted him. Was it better not to love anything? It was indeed a strange phrase: "to take someone's life." Perhaps it's because the two men took not only his mother's life, but his own life with them, carrying it out in their arms as if it were a thing to carry.

*A hobo's hat: Four years after mom's death.*

His father too had died in a way and would leave when Leo turned eighteen, until then he was like a ghost that hovered in his room and floated to work. So Leo took it upon himself to fill the new house on Shadow Street with recorded sounds and stuff he found on the streets in order to give it life. He'd bring in a pair of dirty glasses he found, or a sock, or maybe a kids deflated basketball. Sometimes he'd sit with his tape recorder in front of the playground and record the kids playing and laughing, only to play it back when he was at home.

*Kids in Playground: Day: Four years after mom's death.*

*Butterflies at Night: Four and a half years after mom's death.*

The butterflies he collected lived for years inside their little jars. They were preserved in time. Was it the butterfly that was still alive, or did he perceive it moving when he saw it, only

because it triggered a memory? He was not sure.

## **The Horse**

The Horse's leg was bandaged and sore, but he made his way along the houses and open windows. Children stared out with little bulging eyes and lollipop faces. He sniffed what appeared to be corn and followed the smell and came to a house where an old woman sat on her porch knitting under a soft pool of white light. He approached and watched the hunched figure.

The blind woman stopped her knitting, sensing a presence. She listened intently and then asked: Is there someone there?

The Horse nickered and stomped his front leg on the grass, kicking up some dirt.

What was that? Who's there?

The Horse did the same thing again, louder this time, and waited. The woman got up from her chair, listening intently for where the sound came from. She moved slowly following the sound of breathing and the Horse's excitement as he kicked his leg against the ground again and again. The woman came down the steps, her hands before feeling around in the air, searching for the visitor. Her hand came upon the Horse's soft muzzle. She stopped. What a big boy! Her hand went around the Horse's face, touching his muzzle, his big wet nostrils, his brow and mane and then down to his belly. You are a big boy, said the woman, big and strong. Are you lost? She asked. Are you hungry? The Horse gently rested his muzzle on the woman's shoulder.

You are a nice fella, aren't you? Wait here, said the woman, as she slowly went back up the steps, feeling her way with her hands, holding on to the wooden railing. She disappeared into the house and came back a few minutes later with a big plastic bowl full of cornmeal.

There you are old boy, good warm dinner.

She listened to the visitor slurp up her dinner. It had been years, she thought, since she

had any visitors. She knew this was not a dog, but she convinced herself it was and decided to keep him.

Come on boy, she told the Horse, let's go inside and warm you up.

## **The Work Day**

The Manager standing in front of David, uncomfortably in front of David, was not obese, but there was something about his presence that seemed large and gluttonous. Acne scars plagued his skin and the smell of grease and sweat emanated from his pores. Behind him was a large sign that said:

*Sharp Knives, What every kitchen needs!*

I've been with the company, the Manager said, for nearly thirty years and I am proud to say I train good salesmen, but it is not an easy job.

The Manager lowered his chin so that his eyes watched David from the top rim of his glasses. This guy was pompous with self-delusion. David could smell the illusions of grandeur; he could see this guy looking in front of the mirror every morning and smiling, combing his hair as he whistled, and deciding, consciously deciding, to leave the top two buttons of his shirt undone, exposing a fleshy hairy chest.

Selling is like a seduction, the Manager continued, his eyebrows raising as he pronounced the words with a quiver in his voice. He mimed holding an invisible fishing rod in his hands. The actions and movements oddly accurate and rehearsed.

You have to reeeeel them in slowly, bring them out of the water, wet and slippery, court them, and then move in for the kill.

The kill? Asked David.

So to speak, the Manager said.

David broke out in a sweat. He was surrounded by the clearing of throats, men in formal wear looking uneasy, the uncanny brightness of the lights, the soft faint sound of corporate music filling any available air molecule with its trite melody. Men that looked like ex-cons, or men that could be found at nights in a mosh pit at a rock concert with tattoos and braided hair,

moved silently in a line, signing forms, picking up folders. The Manager continued his speech, oblivious to David's discomfort.

David, said the Manager, people like confidence. They want to see prowess. Vigor. The lady customers, especially. Holding the knives is like holding your manhood. It can be a weapon, if used correctly and with skill, or, of course, it can be used against you.

I'm sorry? Said David.

You know what I mean don't you?

David cleared his throat and eagerly ended the conversation by stepping back. The Manager was finally bored of him.

Well, he said, if you have any questions you can move on over there now and they'll help you finish up signing the necessary paperwork. We're going to give you a two week trial period, see how well you can do.

Others around the room held scripts in their hands, practicing their lines, trying to be natural, shaking hands with the air, middle aged men held knives and gracefully diced invisible vegetables. On the next table somebody was giving a training on how to make a tomato flower to impress potential customers.

This was the feeling of being in an incubator, the fluorescent lights, white walls, and the space cramped and sweaty. He felt, in fact, the same way he'd felt most of his life, inadequate, imprisoned.

David spotted the Manager walking over to a young girl filling out her forms. The manager was leaning, his face next to hers. The girl cringed but smiled politely. Then David saw the manager's mannerisms slowly grow more confident and finally at the end of his speech, the invisible fishing rod in his hands as the girl watched, bewildered.

## **Orson**

Orson fumed the halls with his dark spirit. His laughing heart intruded with the teacher's lesson on the three branches of government. He threw his pencil at the teacher and it erased her right arm. She continued with the lesson anyway: Checks and balances, she said, is how we know that nobody cheats. Heads nodded. Sleepy eyes listened. Orson threw his milk at her and covered her in white. Because this country believes, she continued, that all men are created equal. Everyone cheered. One girl wrote the words down on her notebook and cried. Another boy stomped his foot repeating, "I have a dream, I have a dream! Orson threw his book at the teachers and the words spilled all over her, sticking to her milky skin. The teacher said: We have fought for our freedom. The students celebrated. One boy began to dance on his desk, another boy colored his face in black marker, another pretended to shoot a gun up in the air, one girl danced in circles asking for rain. The teacher begged silence. Somebody called Orson a WEIRDO. Orson's fists went down on the boy's face like brush strokes, so necessary and without effort. Revolution! Yelled one kid. Other children picked up their papers and pencils and threw them up in the air, but they never came down. Men stormed into the room and swept the kids off their feet, taking them to detention. This is a revolution! Said one girl, You can't stop us! We demand our lunches! Said another. I demand a phone call! Said a girl. Orson was asked questions and taken away. Then quietly everything was put back and the other students returned to their seats and continued their notes as the teacher slipped the words off from her skin and put them on the board.



## **Butterflies**

The clouds raced above her, going in and out of shapes. The hiking trail was quiet and Aurora squatted near some of the stones and formations, running her fingers along the rocks. This side of the mountain was composed of granite, giving the mountains a reddish clay color. To any hikers around she might have appeared somewhat strange, as she put her ear to the ground and listened. Their world was as violent as ours. She related to their quiet and violent existence. She often felt eroded by weather, changed by the wind and the passing days.

You're alive, She whispered to the stones. Why do people think of a stone as a dead thing? They live. Yet, people kick them and throw them around like worthless, lifeless things, but they are the past. The breeze picked up then and was rustling in her long hair, caught in her tangles. There were just a few hikers down below. She waved and they waved back.

Further up, off the trail, one could find geodes. She thought it wrong to steal these from the land, but she could not help herself and took the geode into her backpack, anxious to break it apart with her hammer when she got home. Hammering rocks was one of her favorite things, to watch them open up to her like a flower, to examine them and read their stories.

When Aurora was seven years old, she went to the doctor and was told that she had a condition. A serious and rare condition.

Young lady, the doctor said, your body appears to have a different internal clock. Your body reads time differently.

Aurora had noticed changes in her body, the shifting of it with the weather, the aching of the bones. She understood that Time was a living thing and that it lived inside her.

When she turned fifteen and her body twenty, she met Leo. Leo once said that Time was how everyone was connected to each other and to all things. He said that Time and memory were reality. Leo took a photograph of her and labeled it:

*Aurora. A new friend. Thirteen years after mother's death.*

Memories were not lost, she thought. One could see earth's history in layers of stone; their very existence was the evidence of a past. Did it not work the same way for people? Any given moment, after all, is the proof of the accumulation of time.

She and Leo grew close and he told her of his fear of losing memories, his fear that he would forget something and lose his place in the world. He recorded something about every moment and often stopped their conversation to write it down in his journal or to take a photo of her.

The fear of erosion was futile, things eroded and deteriorated, then were replaced. Aurora knew this. Yet, before she understood what had happened, her belly grew and Time swam inside of it, growing for nine months.

## **The Bar Owner**

The piano player counted his tips and looked at Herman disappointed.

Could be worse, said Herman. At least you're not blind, he said laughing.

Jazz sure has died, he shook his head in disappointment. Maybe if I was blind people would at least feel sorry for me.

Jazz ain't dead, Rich, just resting, history will bring it back. Plus, this ain't exactly the jazz crowd. Give me some blues though will ya? I'm feeling an itch.

Shhhhhure thing Hermannnn..

The piano player hunched over the ivory keys. His wife, a tiny little thing, sat on a stool writing in a little notebook. No one knew what she wrote and she never spoke. Her name was Dhalia and Herman called her the piano man's girl. She went with him everywhere. Mostly they came by Thursdays and Saturdays for jazz nights, which usually ended with drunken people requesting popular songs, none of which were jazz. Rich wasn't much for singing, his voice was a raggedy raspy thing, which worked well for the classic Robert Johnson blues, but that's about it. But his favorite was when he could just improvise and get lost in it.

People tipped him for requests though, so he played it to make a buck, he played the Elvis tunes, the happy birthdays, The Piano Man by Billy Joel, the Mexican ballads, but once somebody requested some song and Rich yelled at the drunken girl and stormed off the piano in a fury.

Herman zigzagged his way back to the bar, passing his array of clientele standing around or sitting at the tables laughing madly. Two men played pool. One of them watched the other aim for stripes; he held the cue in one hand and the beer in the other. A woman in tight jeans watched them intently. One of them would take her home and know the hard side of her, the side that didn't blink, even in deep intimacy. She wore black boots and lots of black

eyeliner. Other drinkers stood outside smoking their cigarettes. Two old men sat together without speaking. Their silence was of a long term friendship, a companionship that didn't need words. The young one stared at the television while sipping a whiskey someone had bought for him. Herman refilled the ice and cleaned the glasses.

Rich was at the piano making an elegant ruckus, going deep within himself the only way he knew how, through wild arpeggios and entranced chord progressions. All he needed was a damn drummer. Herman looked at Marilyn and smiled. He wondered what she thought of this old place.

I'm doing the best I can love, Herman told her from across the room, but this world ain't easy, it ain't beautiful, it's just a long sad road.

After some time the piano player came over.

Yo Herman you need to tune up that piano man. It's all over the place.

Yeah, that's just somewhat of a luxury right now.

Luxury? Herrrrmannn, a badly tuned piano is like a sick child you refuse to take to the doctor.

Yeah, well I've never been much of a father anyway.

What you got for me tonight?

Twenty Five.

That's it? I played for almost three hours.

I know man, I'm sorry.

Damn. How about a little whiskey on the house for the walk home?

That I can do. What about one for the wife?

Yeah, two then.

## Orson

Orson's inner animals were hidden like shadows in the shifting of his eyes. When an animal knows it's being hunted, Orson said to Leo, it understands that its life is a solitary thing. A thing with a greater purpose of ensuring the continuation of *all* things. Death is a duty. Still the animal has pure and ferocious intentions to live. This is the great irony. For us death is a ceremony, an existential crisis. An animal's duty is to die for the sake of another animal's survival, for the sake of the ecosystem, for the sake of everything. And ours? What does our death matter now, Leo? An animal is necessary. We are no longer necessary animals. Our bodies are so corrupt they hurt the soil.

I feel, said Orson, that we have been cut off from everything by the death of our mother. Through her death our lives have ceased to exist, lost their connection to a past. Look around you Leo, he said, most of these lives have been made unnecessary and that's when you *know* that nature has been tampered with. These lives are passing dust.

One night as they lay in their sleeping bags, Orson whispered to his brother: We are being hunted.

By who? Leo asked.

Time.

## **The Blind Woman**

The old blind woman welcomed her new four legged friend into her life with great joy. Sometimes a voice inside her told her that her new friend was not a dog, and thus his paws were not paws, but hooves, but quickly she stifled the thought and ignored it. In the meantime she loved her best friend. On Thursday nights, she combed his mane. The Horse, enjoyed endless oatmeal and corn and was happy to stay quiet for a time, observing the strange hunched creature before him. He slept standing up next to the old woman's bed. She talked to him before she went to sleep, while underneath the covers with her teeth out on the nightstand, saying things about her life, her children, about the weather and how her bones hurt in the rain. The old woman talked until sleep overtook her. Then, the Horse listened to the noise outside and slowly drifted. The Horse learned to block out the snores of the old woman and, in fact, when she didn't snore, the Horse made sure she was still breathing. He learned to duck his head when passing through doorways and learned that the old woman followed sounds, not light. He learned to stand without making noise, swaying like a stalk of grass in the wind, but when the old woman went out to the porch to knit or listen to her radio programs, he would wander the streets. He'd trot to the park and playground where children played and often fed him sweet things and tried to climb him. The Horse knew to come back before dark, when the old woman set out his evening meal and turned off the lights, though sometimes he would go back out in the middle of the night. The old woman left the back door open for him.

But the sounds the hooves made on the wood floor, made the old woman nervous. She had to do something about it. She knew the truth, on some level, but the truth was now only a distant sensation, it was something she had long forgotten to recognize. Her mind already a labyrinth of old walls and faces, she quickly buried this feeling under the rubble and went calmly to sleep with her friend by her side. Every time saying: good night, good night old boy.

## The Work Day

David's assigned neighborhood did not seem like the kind of place where people would buy fancy kitchen knives. Was this a joke? Those sons of bitches. He knew it. It was all a big fucking joke. The houses were close to abandoned and the trees seemed dried and curled over themselves. David sighed and marked on his calendar: Day 1. House #1. The house was a quaint little brick house, with overgrown grass in the front and a small patch way of white stone leading up to the front door.

Yes? Who is it? A voice answered behind the door.

David was not sure how to proceed. The script did not specify the kind of introduction that should be given to a closed door. Should he say his name and then what he was selling? If he said what he was selling, would they laugh? Instead he said:

Do you have a moment?

What the hell do you want? The voice said.

David pulled the script out of his pocket, searching for the answer, but it was not listed. The closest question was: Can I help you? And the given response was: Actually, I am here to help you. That seemed a bit rough, but that's what he said.

Actually, I am here to help *you*.

And then the door swung opened and an old woman stood at the other side.

You can help me huh? Can you dispose of unwanted relatives?

I am here to demonstrate my knives.

You're what now?

Knives, kitchen knives for your...kitchen.

Are you a friend of Johnnys?

No m'am, I don't know Johnny but I'll tell you what I do know and that's the power of SHARP knives. Did you know that these beautiful knives were first invented by a poor one armed butcher? They are not just any knives, they are SHARP knives.

How sharp we talkin?

No I mean they are top of the line, special knives made by SHARP CO.

The woman's house had curtains around the windows so no light entered. He laid out his knife kit on the table as he began to notice the state of things. There were clothes thrown about the house, lamps knocked over, broken on the ground. Dozens and dozens of liquor bottles and beer cans cluttered the kitchen counter and the coffee table. It was then David realized that this was not an old woman at all. It was her skin that looked old, her face, upon a closer look, was that of a middle aged woman.

A dingy old cat appeared and brushed against his leg and then another and another and the woman finally said, You don't mind them do you?

No.

David awkwardly demonstrated cutting up the tomato flower. See this tomato, he said, any regular knife would have a hard time slicing through this thing without making a mess, but SHARP knives cut right through it. David cut the tomato into the shape of a flower and showed it to the woman who was smoking a cigarette and already looking disinterested. David continued.

Look at what SHARP knives do, he said, to a thick and stubborn piece of meat. David cut through the meat keeping one eye on the cats and one eye on the lady. Every time he looked up there was one more cat, either perched on the couch or surrounding his feet.

Does that thing cut like that through human meat?

David laughed nervously and continued, but before he went on to cut the honeydew melon, David heard a bang somewhere in the house. A loud crash. The woman didn't move, nor



did she acknowledge hearing anything. Her face was expressionless.

David continued: So with SHARP knives you'll never worry about having to struggle through the thick skin of a melon. The sound came again: a loud bang, somewhere in the house and then the voice of somebody yelling. Still, she was expressionless and didn't move except to ash her cigarette.

Is this a bad time? David asked.

A bad time? No. Why would it be a bad time? The woman reached over for the tomato and took a bite out of it, licking the juice that rolled down her wrist.

Well, I'm almost done here anyway, as you can see the special handle of the knives-

A loud bang and the sound of something crashing came once more from the bedroom. Gloria! Yelled the voice.

This time the noise was unmistakably clear. The woman continued smoking, her eyes fogged in a defiant indifference. Her arms were not simply thin, but they were the kind of sickly arms one saw in the bodies of hospital patients.

The special handle of the knives, David tried to continue, is made with a universal fit, designed anatomically with thermo-resin material.

There was another loud bang. It was somebody trying to get out of one of the rooms. Gloria! You can't keep me in here forever you little bitch!

David looked at the woman and the woman seemed half asleep, her eyes somewhere in her inner clouds.

Well, said David, Gloria is it? I must be going.

You wanna have a drink?

No thank you ma'am I must be going.

So you really came here to show me knives? You're not selling anything else?

What else would I be selling?

Oh, you know. A little something, make time pass.

The loud crash in the bedroom continued. Smashing of glass, or lamps, or a mirror.

David imagined the man's body crashing into the wooden door, again and again.

Gloria! You damn junkie, you can't finish the whole thing yourself!

David packed up his knives, forgetting one there on the table, and running out the front door, kicking cats on his way out and with the sound of the muffled voice screaming, Gloria!

## **Orson**

Orson slumped against the side of the house. He found company in cigarettes and what he called, “his Lady.” His Lady was the snake inside him, slipping through his veins, excreting poison. Orson’s laughing heart was made for water and colors and the obscure worlds of the mind. He was made to fill himself to the brim, to stand on the limits of self. To be unafraid of the unknown and the dark. I don’t mind dying with her, he told Leo, she’ll take me quietly. We dance together. We meet the stars. He had her every night, under the moon and she danced inside him as morning slipped in. The night spun in wild bursts of light. Exploding synapses gorging on chemicals. The snake slithering to the heart, wrapping its fangs around it.

One of those nights, as he sat outside, Orson saw a hole open up in the sky and he reached out and touched it. He stretched it open, put one leg in, feeling the cold on the other side, then the other leg, then his body. He covered the black hole behind him and stood in awe of the empty space before him. He swam to the moon and dug a hole there, burrowing under the surface.

No one ever saw Orson alive again.

Leo collected his brother’s things. His raggedy clothes, his old wasted shoes, his cigarette lighter, and put them all in a box marked: Orson: Fourteen years after mother’s death.

## **Voices**

It was through the voices that she was first introduced to the world. She knew her name was Avery. She heard the word over and over and the name became part of her. Mainly, there were two voices: One was like a red fruit, filled with rain; it cried often and was the voice that carried her. Its name was Aurora. Then, there was the other one, a gray, slightly heavier voice, like pleasant smoke. The name of that voice was Leo. She could feel the sun, through her cocoon. She knew what the sun was. She knew the moon. The sweet voice had explained it to her.

Aurora was her carrier, the sweet voice that was always near and always talking to her. I'm scared Avery, she'd say. I don't know if I'm ready.

The gray voice would come near. Hello? Avery? Are you there? She could feel the reverberating walls, the voice nearby. She wanted to touch it. Can you hear me? This is your father speaking. Her excitement made her squeal and move around in the liquid. She's kicking! They'd say. She's kicking! The gray voice asked the sweet voice: What does it feel like? What does it feel like to have her in you? It feels like, the sweet voice said, I swallowed a star straight from the night sky, warm and ready to explode with light.

Other times the gray voice would be farther away and become just a melodic sound. This was music. This would make small waves inside her little cocoon and slowly, the cadence, the warmth, the rise and fall, the tidal, would put her to sleep.

## **The Alleys**

The talk of the neighborhood was that this man carried his heart in a plastic bag. He was first seen standing in the corner, waiting for the bus every morning on Shadow Street. No one knew where he went or what he did. Daily, he emerged from the alleys, always carrying an old wrinkled plastic bag with a knot on top. It was possible to see something inside the bag, but one could not tell exactly what it was. Everyday upon returning from his journey, he disappeared back into the alleys. This man was often recognized by the locals, particularly because as he walked, or sat on the bus, there was a peculiar sound that was heard coming from him. It was a loud and steady pulse, like a drum that followed him everywhere he went. Children turned around and stared, a little girl tried to dance to the beat, but her mother grabbed her and told her that was bad manners. Some people covered their ears while they were near him. Others put music on their headphones. Only a few had approached the man and tried to talk to him, but he hardly spoke clearly, unable to pronounce words correctly. Some people thought he was a mute, others thought he was a mental patient, and others, more politically correct, referred to the man as mentally handicapped. His responses were gibberish.

This man, someone said once, is already dead. Yes, he was dead long ago, said another. After that people watched the man suspiciously, carefully, a little afraid and a little curious and they tried to ask the man what that sound was that he carried and didn't he think it disturbed people on the bus? Finally, a large woman on the bus had enough of the sound and could not concentrate on her thoughts because of the beat and she asked him: What you got in there? The man avoided her eyes, looked down on the floor. I said, what you got in there? She repeated. The man once again moved his head around in circles and guarded his bag, but the woman, being large in size and confidence took the bag away from the man and undid the tight knot. There was a strange metallic smell, and a softness to whatever was inside, like a water balloon.

It was an odd bloody thing, pumping, wet and slippery. But the woman respected the dead and she knotted up the bag once again and handed it back to the man. Here you are sir, she said, God bless. Then she turned to look out the window to see the city flow by.

## **The Bar Owner**

Herman cleaned dishes and dried shot glasses as Maury opened the door. The cool air of the evening swept into the bar. He wore his fedora hat and carried his briefcase. Maury was probably in his sixties now, or looked that way, a beaten down man with droopy shoulders and a nervous tick.

Evening Herman.

Maury.

Glass a wine please.

Herman never really knew what Maury carried in his briefcase. Maury has come into the bar every day for almost three years and he'd told Herman quite a bit about his life. He described why his first wife left him (partly his drinking problem and partly that she was a whore), why his second wife left him (his drinking coupled with bitterness and some anger issues, mainly though due to that wife also being a whore) and why no woman would ever love him anymore (the drink, age, his stagnant job, and his initial mistrust of all and any members of the female species due to the fact, of course, that they were all whores). Maury seemed capable of recognizing the pattern in everyone else, but himself. He spent a lot of time justifying himself, blaming the women in his life, their mistakes, their lies. This frustrated Herman. A man should recognize his own faults, learn to correct them. Nevertheless Herman had grown somewhat fond of Maury, saw him as someone just not cut out for love, but destined to wander the bars of the world, destined to be noble and ultimately a tragic figure. He understood Maury the way he'd understood characters in books, the kind often unfit for reality, limited by their one flaw.

Maury was up to something, Herman suspected, had made some bad decisions, maybe a bad business deal, maybe talked to the wrong people, because for the last month he'd come in

here flustered and jittery and just last night someone had come looking for him.

Maury hunched over his wine and Herman, standing, cleaning the glasses began to talk.

Some fella came in here the other day, looking for ya, said Herman.

In here?

Yes, in here. Asking about you.

What did he look like?

Tall, mustache, pretty well dressed.

Pretty well dressed?

Yeah, well dressed.

Like a suit and tie? Working clothes?

Definitely not a working man. Suit. No tie. Good posture, very persuasive.

Persuasive?

Yes, Persuasive.

Herman pointed to the broken television in the corner. Maury took a drink of his wine, avoiding eye contact.

He broke my television.

I'll pay for it, he said. He began to shake, to stutter before he spoke. Herman hated the fact that he inevitably got involved in people's lives. This was not the first time. He had to constantly offer sympathy, advice, and often compromise his own safety. He thought of that poor young one that came in with a face of a dog, looking for a place to sleep and how many times had he been forced to kick him out of the bar, forced to let him sleep outside. It killed him. This, the whole thing, everyone's sorry lives, including his own, killed him.

Herman wasn't sure if this was something he could help, or if it was inevitable due to his job and the nature of it. Or was it something about his face? Did he look like a talkative



guy? He always figured that if he'd saw himself in the streets, he'd stay the hell away, given that to himself he looked like a bad tempered madman that would steal your cigarettes. He had no interest in being anybody's father figure.

Sorry Herman. I swear to you, it won't happen again, said Maury.

That's what I'm worried about Maury. Next time, they'll find you. You better get yourself outta whatever mess you're in, and don't involve me in it.

What did you tell him?

What do you think Maury? I told him I had no idea who you were.

I'm sorry Herman.

I told you to watch who you did business with.

Herman I-

Get yourself out Maury. Whatever it takes. Get out or stop coming in here. I can't help you now.

## **Dogs**

The girl braided her dolls hair on her porch as her small dog licked its paws nearby. From time to time, when the puppy got anxious, she'd play with it, throwing an old torn up tennis ball for him to retrieve. The dog was not allowed beyond the porch. One day the little puppy disobeyed, was not tied up, and chased the ball, which had bounced off of a wall and down the steps, into the street. The man approaching in the car, his life so little his own, felt something under the tire strike, swerved to the left, and kept driving, afraid of what he had hit. When the dog shrieked, all of time stopped and the girl left herself. And when she returned to her self, she walked down the steps of the porch onto the street. She knelt near her dog and tried to pet his head, but it crumbled like dust under her hand. The girl looked from side to side and towards the windows where she could see silent curious faces through the glare. A procession of ants approached quickly and the sun began its work on the body. The girl looked at her folded dog, its stomach and lungs out on the street beginning to dry. And how quickly, she thought, death comes to it. It was then her mother, a large brute woman, spotted the girl standing by the road. The mother pinched her daughters arm: Come on, you little runt. I told you to stay off the street! The woman slapped the girl. Don't cry, she said, I didn't teach you to be a cry baby!

But the girl wasn't crying, it was that her eyes had gone to some other place. The mother yanked her inside and closed the door, but actually the little girl remained there. She stood on the road near her dead dog for years. She stood there in silence looking down, sometimes sitting on the curb and looking at the blood stain on the concrete, sometimes walking in circles in desperation, and at night curling up to it and going to sleep. One could see her years later, the same girl standing there. She never cried, she never screamed, she only stood there, looking around and waiting and trying to understand

## **The Night from the Inside**

Music from the bar spills out into the street and the alleys nearby. Night souls stagger out inhaling moonlight. A cat straggles by. Three men scatter out from Herman's bar. One man lights a cigarette, puts his arm around the other man and says to him: It's like this, it's like this, you grab her by the hand and you look into her eyes and you say, I just want to marry you. No no no! Said the other, None of them fall for that, it's the 21st Century. There's the feminism, none of them want marriage anymore, they want freedom. The young one had his hands in his pockets, whistling, and looking for a star in the night sky. It seems the night gets darker every time I look up, said the young one. The others paid no attention, their conversation was elsewhere. What if I ask her for just one night in her bed? Said one of the drunken men. That's all I really need at this point, said the man laughing. The other folded over laughing with him, snot coming out of his nose and the beer bouncing in his belly. You can't ask a woman for just one night! If one of them agrees, you better be careful, it's usually not a good sign. The men laughed and laughed. The young one watched, amused, at the two bickering and stumbling in front of him. He didn't dig them all that much, he didn't understand them, but they had a house with no furniture and some blankets. They never denied someone a night there, never asked any questions, so he followed.

## **Butterflies**

Maury opened the door and walked into the illumination of the porch light, wearing a fedora hat and carrying a leather briefcase. He locked the door behind him with one hand and then looked around before walking away from the door as if he felt somebody watching him. His car was a few feet away, his steps were cautious and calculating. It was midnight. And the streets had hushed. He got to his car as the streetlight above him flickered; he looked up and stared at the humming planet of mosquitoes around the white globe of light. Then he turned the key to open the door. He unlocked the car and before he opened the door looked both ways again, listening for something, sensing, perhaps, that he was being watched. Then, he opened the car door and went in, placing his suitcase in the passenger seat, turning on the engine and leaning forward to turn the knob of the radio. His skull was just visible from the street lights and the car window. It was at that moment, before the song played its second beat, when I shot him.

## **Aurora**

Aurora had her hands on her pregnant belly, looking up to the night sky with her mouth wide open. It appeared she was trying to swallow the night whole. Leo came out of the house to see his wife, with her open jaw facing the moon.

What are you doing Rora? He asked.

If I open my mouth wide enough, she said, like this, Avery can see the moon. I feel her getting excited when I do it. Rora rubbed her hands on her belly: Yes, I feel her kicking. I think the moonlight bathes her, she said.

I don't think that's possible, said Leo. Rora turned sharply.

Why not?

Well, I don't know, he said, just doesn't seem likely.

Rora turned her back to him. Well what does it matter to you Leo, you think it's possible to collect time, instead of letting it live and pass through you, the way wind passes through clouds, you want to own it. That sounds just as unlikely to me. Rora looked up to the sky again and opened her mouth wider, looking somewhat like a werewolf howling.

## **The Bullets**

Maury's final elation was Elvis on the radio. As a kid he'd listened to his mother playing Elvis on the radio as she mopped and dusted the bookshelves. As his mother's face appeared in front of him, the bullet began its work. It traveled like an ocean wave, building momentum as it advanced. The bullet, beginning on some distant shore, picked up speed as it reached its destination. And with the force of waves hitting coastal rocks during a storm, the bullet entered the scalp and tore its way into the bone. Elvis's voice quickly melted into black and Maury saw the face of his mother the way she looked when she danced around the house, wearing a towel around her head. Oddly enough, the second before all his memories were lost to the tidal wave he thought of his friend Herman and could hear Herman calling him a son of a bitch. His only true friend in years. And of course it would be Herman who would call his ex-wife and let her know what happened. Then, just like that, his world bent over and slumped down into the passenger seat with half of itself dripping out.

## **The Bar Owner**

Herman woke to a loud roaring sound that rattled the windows. The echo reached far into his dreams and pulled him out of it with a gasp. The stillness of his apartment filled him with unease. He grabbed for the glass of water on the night table and looked at the clock, which read midnight. Had he been dreaming? He was familiar now with the creaking of the old building, the wood cracking with cold or hot temperatures, but the sound that had woken him was not a familiar one. He laid his head back on his pillow and as he drifted back to sleep he heard sirens in the distance.

In the morning Herman went out to pick up the newspaper and noticed the streets were still and quiet. He prepared some hot tea as he read the headlines and the caption of the front page photo. The caption read: RESIDENT SPILLS BRAIN ON DASHBOARD.

God damn it, said Herman out loud, God damn it.

## **Avery**

The cocoon contracted, everything pulsed and grew hotter. Avery kicked to stretch her legs, but it was too small. Voices around her felt louder, as if they were inside with her.

Avery, the sweet voice said, Are you afraid? Are you afraid to come out? The gray voice was far away and suddenly came closer. She felt the warmth of it near the wall of the cocoon. Avery, you coming out? Beneath her, something was opening and she began to swim towards the opening pushed by breath. She grabbed on at first; not wanting to leave, but the pressure was too strong.

No, no, said the sweet voice. No, I'm not ready yet, she said, I don't want you to come out yet Avery. Not yet. Wait awhile. Wait.

She has to come out Rora, said the gray voice, It's time.

No no no. Not yet Leo, tell her to wait. I'm not ready.

I can't tell her to wait. She's ready.

The walls trembled and everything felt slippery and she felt a sudden urge to breathe, to explode, to open her mouth and let sound out of her. Everything opened up, swallowing her.

For a moment her body felt suspended in air, floating and everything stopped hushed, as the light entered her. In a rush, the voices entered. She heard them in torrents. She screamed and writhed inside herself and twisted and called for her cocoon. She did not know where she was and she cried out, loud, part of herself tearing through the air, tearing through her and the dark voices and the sweet words and sounds and the sounds and the sounds.



## **Butterflies**

When he was born the nurses gathered around to inspect the “little monster.” Old men walked around in their walkers, a man in a wheelchair and other patients in the hospital and waiting rooms heard the commotion and huddled over to see. The doctor posed for a photo with the baby, holding him upside down by the ankles, as if the child were a rare wild fish. The photograph was captured by a skinny reporter and came out in the newspaper with the caption: LITTLE MONSTER BORN ON SHADOW STREET!

It’s a little Hercules, one of the nurses said and thanks to that the mother decided to name him Herc. It had surprised everyone, the fact that a baby that size (18 lbs) had come out of that small soft spoken woman. When she took Herc home, he grew exceptionally fast, walked around like a small gorilla with his long arms dragging about and grunting for his bottle. Once he started school Herc often got in trouble for being unable to measure his strength or understand it; he’d go to the Principal’s office for accidentally pushing someone, throwing the football too hard, or tackling too hard, or kicking the soccer ball too hard into the goalie’s belly. He began to understand strength as what was keeping him from belonging and the thought long and hard about it and what it meant to be strong. He could not use the slide for fear of getting stuck there and he could not use the swings for fear of breaking them. Herc cried because of this.

Herc was a contradiction in body and mind. He realized that his strength was all he had. The world constantly pushed against him and he had to push back. Yet, he did not always feel strong so he wanted nothing but to keep growing, to get as big as possible and as strong as possible and test the limit of the human body. So he started lifting things, finding big tires to haul, sledgehammering old walls, cutting down trees people didn’t want in their yards. His body became addicted to growing. Strength, he’d say to himself, is a way to discover the world.

It is the only way to live.

## The Bar Owner

Herman leaned over the bar with a pencil and a notebook. He began writing:

*Maury Simpleton, 55, a lifelong resident of Shadow Street was viciously murdered passed away died unexpectedly in the early hours of Wed. At approximately 12 a.m. From a bullet to the back of the skull tragic fate. Maury was a lover of life and of the imaginary worlds. In his spare time he read classic mystery and erotic novels. He drank hot soup in a cup and wore a fedora hat. He always said: everyone is remembered by whatever they repeated most and I don't want to be remembered as the balding lonely gray man. Maury was fifty, but had the heart and spirit of a hormonal twenty year old. He was a good friend with a loyal heart, but didn't always understand that the world was cruel and unforgiving. He loved watching the rain and driving alone at night. He was a friendly wine drinker, who told jokes and dreamed about traveling to Spain and meeting young prostitutes, hoping that he'd find the one with a heart of gold. Maury is survived by his daughter Prudence who had not visited or called her father in ten years and his bitch ex-wife Margaret that made Maury a broken man. Maury would have asked: What kind of a damn death is this? Maury was at peace with his life. Maury was a man always perplexed by the world. Funeral Services will be held on Friday at noon and donations for the funeral expenses are encouraged. Goodbye old friend.*

## **The Work Day**

His notebook had yet to have any sales on it. Day 2. House #3. The house had a red wooden door and before he reached it he found a tiny baby shoe on the floor outside, withered and soggy with rain. David took a deep breath and knocked on the door. The more he told himself to appear natural the more his face sort of twisted and twitched.

A young woman answered the door holding a baby. Her face was gaunt-like, exhausted, as if she hadn't slept in months. The baby was squirming, trying to escape the woman's arms, making faces.

Yes? Can I help you, she said.

Good afternoon, my name is David. You have been selected to have a special demonstration of our high quality knives.

Me? I have been selected?

Yes, you. SHARP knives only sells to people who could appreciate the high quality of our product.

Well, I'm a little busy now.

Don't worry, it'll only take a second for you to see Sharp knife quality. Our high quality and convenient payment plans will have you wondering why we make it so easy.

Alright, I suppose I can take a minute. Come in.

There were toys scattered around. He noticed two babies crawling about in the living room, one baby was in a crib, and another sleeping on the couch peacefully. One toddler was hitting a little toy drum and looked up to him and said Daddy! The toddler ran to him and hugged his leg.

No No, Steven, the woman said to the kid, that's not your Daddy.

David froze, afraid to touch the toddler's head. The woman came over and peeled the

toddler off of him. Bah bah bah. The toddler said in tantrum.

I'm sorry about that. He's having some trouble. Some of these kids are a bit troubled, you understand?

Yes. It's quite alright, David said looking at the baby in the woman's arms. His eyes are bright blue things, pure as the idea of heaven.

And this is Little T. The woman took the baby's arm and forced it to wave hello. Say hi Little T. Say hi to the nice sales man. The baby laughed and moved his chubby little fist.

So you run a day care?

Not exactly. Mostly I'm just a baby sitter. The problem is sometimes parents leave them here.

Leave the kids here?

Yeah, well, some people are working. Sometimes they just get fed up and bring me some money and leave the kids here for days, to get extra hours on their shifts, or, most of the time, to do whatever it is that they do. Eventually they pick them up. This one's been here for almost two weeks straight. I'll wake up and find two envelopes slipped under my door and know that two of the kids will be staying an extra night.

Wow, tough business, said David.

I do it because I know they'll be fed well for a few days out of the week. I teach them things, I'll play with them. That kid over there. She pointed to the kid who'd confused David for his father. He's almost four years old and can barely talk. He just learned how to use the toilet.

The toddler was rolling on the floor, tumbling and laughing. One of the babies in diapers began cooing at the woman.

Now this one here, she said, this one got something special. She a philosopher, always observing things and never crying. A warrior type.

David squatted down and said hello to the little philosopher baby. The baby smiled and

watched him with big sad eyes.

So now, what did you want to show me? The woman asked.

David felt wrong about everything now. How could one pretend that the world needed any more useless things, but he smiled and went into the part of the script that discusses the pros of having good dependable knives.

You know, these knives were actually started by a young boy who dreamed of becoming a butcher.

What kid dreams of becoming a butcher? She asked.

I don't know, David said, a strange one.

He got the knife kit out and began demonstrating the knife slicing through a pineapple, no mess, no struggle. He watched the woman as she played with the little babies fingers and how she turned around every few seconds to check on the others that played along in the living room. He watched the baby sleeping and how softly his chest rose up and down. David stepped outside of himself and watched his ridiculous self-demonstrating how to cut through a tomato while the woman watched politely, nodding her head every few minutes, but her gaze really lost on something beyond him. He saw the children grow up alone and frightened, feeling less of themselves until they got into their first fight and felt what it was like to be alone. He saw himself and how ridiculous it was that he wore a tie and recited the script for the woman who was polite enough to listen. He wondered about her and how long she had thought that life was a sacrifice. Perhaps that's what she thought, that if one sacrificed themselves a few could be saved and that was more than any job could offer in terms of eternal salvation. Her youth had gone and her weary eyes wandered through the empty space in front of her. The little toddler banged a block against the carpet, one baby sat there crying softly, the philosopher watched David curiously. David felt dirty. He stepped back inside himself, gathered his knives and thanked the woman. He said goodbye to the little ones and left her to her life, taking out the

small notebook from his pocket: House #3 No Sale.

## **Aurora**

Cuddling with Avery in her arms, Aurora pushed back the curtains and stood by the window, looking out.

See where we are? This is where you will live and that out there is the world. Can you hear it? Listen. The world is a constant concert.

You see there? There's the old tree. When I was younger the tree was about your size, but it has grown since then. Trees get old too, they have long lives and see more things than any of us can ever imagine. It always keeps watch and some people say that if you listen hard enough, you can hear the trees sing when it's windy.

That's the Yellow House across the street. There was once a boy named Carlos lived there, but his mother's mind slowly rotted from too much smoke and he was taken away, but sometimes I see a boy that I think is Carlos staring back at me from the window, as if part of him stayed there all this time. A man named Lizard also lived there. He was crazy. One New Year's eve, he shot a few bullets up into the air and everyone that night was afraid that bullet was going to come down on them while they slept. Some people say the bullets are still up there, wandering the skies.

And over there, the brick building with the red door is Herman's Bar. Herman's a good man, practical, and with a sense of humor about things. He's very young and he'll probably be running the bar all by himself soon. You'll meet him one day. You should learn now Avery that things are always changing. The weather changes and slowly the world changes with it, but Time is nothing to be afraid of.



## **The Night from the Inside**

The kids move sideways with the music, inhale with the major chord, exhale with the minor, sway with the guitar sounds, and shake with the bass. Take a breath. Scream with the verse and cry with the chorus.

Guitar players watch the swaying bodies as the drummer taps into earths' heartbeat and loses himself there. Intoxicated minds draw electricity making the street lights flicker. Their moments sink in history, unguarded by the angels, and softened with the sun. A girl lifts her skirt on the dance floor, two boys understand misery. She laughs as another girl vomits into a toilet. Somewhere a boy writes in his journal about his confusion regarding speaking. One girl takes her first kiss and throws it into the river, another rips her dress on a rogue nail. The singer sings into the microphone. The kids' ears fall off and they drop to the ground to find them. By the end of the night, the janitor sweeps up the unclaimed ears with a broom and puts them into a trash bin. Some kids go without ears all their life. A girl says the word "love" for the first time and her teeth fall off but she keeps them in a tin box. A boy writes in his journal about his confusion regarding death and dying and how was he supposed to react to this eventuality? The song rises to a climax, the instruments fighting the war against silence. One girl plans her future in a notebook. A boy, fifteen maybe, reaches into the sky for a star and grabs an asteroid. The song quiets and the final note approaches. Two sisters hide under their beds, a few boys smoke cigarettes outside, the same boy writes in his journal about his confusion regarding repetition and was it intended as a trap? The song ends and there is clapping and cheering and echoes.

## **Butterflies**

Hitler's mother was pregnant once, said the girl, and nothing was ever the same after that.

Yes, well Michael Jordan's mom was once pregnant with him too.

Really Tommy? You're gonna compare the two?

I'm not comparing, just saying. I mean, what about Ghandi's mom?

I guess.BUT what if it becomes a terrible human being?

What are the chances you'll give birth to the Anti-Christ?

Do you think Hitler's mother could have done anything different?...I don't know. I mean, what if I do one thing wrong and then it turns out all twisted and demented.

Orchidia, darling, I think you need to calm down. You're going to upset the zygote.

Don't call it that, she said.

The boy pushed the hair from the girl's face. He too was scared, but her eyes were the only thing he understood and he hoped that these eyes wouldn't turn against him, though he knew they would, eventually. After all, he had, in her eyes, caused this.

Orchidia let Tommy's hand caress her face. She thought about the strange sensation she felt, nausea, but something much farther away and she had wondered afterward if that feeling was the soul of the child, forming inside her. Did a child's soul take from his mother's soul? Would her dark sad soul corrupt the baby from the start?

What will your mother say? Asked Tommy.

My mother? I don't know, said Orchidia. She will think I'm a whore.

No she won't. She had you when she was your age.

Orchidia's eyes retreated, went somewhere inside herself. He had not been the one to force her, in fact, he hadn't really even known what he was doing and had felt, throughout the

entire time how ridiculous it was, and awkward. He was ashamed, humiliated. He distrusted even his own words. Orchidia would hate him, eventually. He was sure of it.

Whatever happens, Orchidia said, no matter what happens, this will have a million consequences, some of which, we are not even aware of yet. Isn't that crazy? I feel dizzy, like the world is spinning.

Calm down, said Tommy.

Orchidia stood up. There were a few people still at the park. Two girls played in the swings and a few other older kids smoked cigarettes near the metal turtle, laughing. The trees swayed softly with the wind. Tommy put his arms around her, her small shoulders bending to his embrace. It was just one moment. Just that one stupid moment.

## **The Horse**

The blind woman's closet was stockpiled with shoes. Shoes of all kinds. The old woman was kneeling now, sorting through to find the right ones. Her late husband's father had been a shoemaker and her husband Morgan too had been a shoemaker, so for years she'd received lots of them and kept them all. Morgan used to say that one can know a man by the state of his shoes. The old woman had then collected shoes from everyone and if she knew of someone getting rid of an old pair, she would keep them, as a way to remember people. Her hands felt through endless pairs, leather, suede, and rubber boots. I got just the ones, she said to the Horse who watched her curiously from the back of the room. I found them, she said, her hands feeling the leather and the shape of the shoe. Two identical pairs, she said excitedly, hand crafted leather shoes, nearly new. The old woman came out of the closet and towards the Horse. Here, try these on, she said, setting the shoes down in front of him: one pair for the front and one pair for the back. The Horse was hesitant for a moment, but then stepped in the shoes. That's a good boy, said the woman, feeling the Horse's hoof inside the shoe. I want you to put these on every time you come into the house, so you don't make that old racket with them paws of yours. The Horse felt odd dragging these things on his hooves, they were too big and awkward, so he had to skid almost, across the floor. He put the shoes on when he came inside the house and when he left for his walks, he left them out by the door.

## **Strength**

Strength is the scars the soldier keeps hidden. Herc lived on Shadow Street with his mother. He often carried her to work on his back, since they did not have a car. He could be seen, walking like a rhinoceros, with his mother holding on to his back as he made his way down Shadow Street. Kids started calling him the Hulk. At fifteen he was almost 200 pounds. Strength is the body's God, a futile yet worthy trek.

Herc was known for lifting things over his head: rocks, old dressers, and he even hauled an old tire up the big hill. The local newspaper once interviewed the young man:

What is strength to you?

Strength is the body's religion.

Why do you want to be so strong?

I want to be the strongest man in the world. Only then, will I be able to do anything.

Like what?

Build houses for the poor.

## **The Killer**

The pull of a trigger is a philosophical statement. It is stronger than anything said by any so called “thinker” or “scholar.” Boy, academics are a real joke. They live in a different realm that revolve around college campuses and libraries, round table discussions and conferences and yet they try to define, or explain, or intellectualize my reality, our reality, out here in the real world. They “study” and intellectualize the existence of others and claim to understand the world through abstract theories and arguments. What a fucking joke.

There is a common platitude out there, (probably said by an academic) that states: ‘Living well is the best revenge.’ I disagree wholeheartedly with this statement. The best revenge is the revenge that screams and yields satisfaction. What else do we have in this world? One has to know that true revenge is being enacted; this means that the person in question will have to suffer or “depart,” if you will, in a fashion warranted by their behavior. A coward should die a coward’s death, a liar should be deceived, a cheater should be cheated on. An eye for an eye. A tooth for a tooth. And a whole lot of fun.

After all, justice is just a “civilized” man’s word for revenge.

I am a revenge artist.

Why should one resign themselves or accept a betrayal or a wrong?

I have found that my theme in life is the pull of a trigger; this is my philosophy. My art. I explore man’s resistance. Courage is illusory or, if men have it, it breaks like chopsticks at the sight of a gun. My philosophy terrifies men.

Revenge is an art, an art with philosophical implications. It is logic. That’s what people refuse to accept. You do this to me, I do this to you. What is the difficult part to grasp? Why are people not understanding this? Most people can’t do it themselves, and that’s where I come in.

This world, this existence, is chaos and the equation will continue whether we act or not.

But if we are active in the chaos, the chaos will yield to us. True revenge is subtle and explosive like a Beethoven Symphony. It is Romantic. Beethoven's music was his revenge against his maker for his deafness, against those who mocked him. He is a prime example of someone who was active in the chaos. One could only wish to reach his level.

## Voices

I heard them. Outside my window for years, I heard their strange convocations to God, their hyenic laughter, the spare change jingling in their cups or loose pockets. Mama said they were the birds of our neighborhood. They yelled at their women, their children, at each other. A woman yelled at her man saying: You don't treat me right, I'm tired of this. The man yelled back: You lousy whore, can't even make me a dollar. The drunk ones wailed, cooed with mad laughter, sang a trailing tune deluded in the night breath. Their blues contained the dirt and hunger of the street plus a shot or two of cheap whiskey. Another yelled: I'll pay you next week bro. And the response: Get the hell out of my house. And the call: Just a quick fix man, come on. And the response: I'm not a soup kitchen you bastard, buy something or get the hell out! It was like the call and response from all slaved voices of the past. Bottles fell from their slippery hands, smashing in the ground. Mama told me: they are the birds of our neighborhood. Those people outside the window, Avery, are just like you and me. Those voices, she said, don't belong to just anybody, they belong to everyone, those are *our* voices too, yours and mine. Their anger and their sadness is ours too, that I had the same hunger and the same misery, but because the ways of the world, it was them that had to carry it. They carry it for all of us. It is they that must *live* it. Sometimes it's because they don't believe in happiness or magic and that's why Avery, that's why they get sick. Sometimes it's because magic doesn't believe in them. Don't treat them differently. They are you and me and we are them and they are brave too.



## **The Killer**

Perhaps bullets are the best words man ever invented. They are as precise as you want them to be. Certainly, they can say things with more conviction.

I walked into Herman's bar and immediately sensed that people turned to me, watched through their peripheries and wandered what I was doing there. I turn to the bar man and say: let me have a Scotch please. Yes, I am old fashioned that way, people can tell by my mustache.

I sat down at at a table. There were two men at the jukebox, but looking my way. This place is somewhat cozy actually, I could see why Maury frequented it. It's got it's charm. The bar man came over to me and I hoped he didn't remember me from the time I broke his television. It was a distasteful thing to do. Utterly unprofessional. Out of line. I should apologize.

Don't I know you? Said the barman.

Me?

I doubt it, not from around here really, just passing by.

You a businessman?

Of some kind.

You taken care of any business around here lately?

Yeah, as a matter of fact, had a good case to work, right here in this neighborhood.

The bar man, pulled the chair out and sat down on the table in front of me, an intense look in his eyes. He had a sharp jawline, which made him fierce, confrontational.

A case huh? You a lawyer or something?

No, not a lawyer.

He had a family, did you know that?

No.

He had a young daughter, don't live here, but she heard what happened to her father and how he was found.

Maury was a loner.

No. He had friends.....

You can't prove a thing.

I don't need to prove anything.

Look, it's my job.

I know. I get it. I have a job too. Now get the hell out of my bar before I shoot you.

The bar owner stood up and stared at me for a moment. He then walked away, but I felt his gaze, his eyes. There was something about the way he watched with a patience of a lion that made me uneasy. I paid the damn Scotch, gulped it, left some hundreds for the broken television, and walked out the door. I have never killed an innocent man, and I was not about to start then.

## **The Rooster**

A man stumbled down the sidewalk on Friday night. His body ached from the work week, muscles and joints exhausted. He left Herman's bar after one too many drinks and his home, a few blocks down, seemed too far away to reach. He was disoriented and decided that the best thing would be to go to sleep where he was, so he curled up in a corner and closed his eyes. It wouldn't be the first time he slept on the streets.

At dawn, the Rooster began his crow and the man, deep in a drunken sleep, was jerked awake. He cursed at the bird for having woken him. It was quiet again for a moment as the Rooster paused and the man tried going back to sleep, but just as he was drifting the Rooster sang again, piercing the man's ears and waking him up again. Shut up! Shut up, you stupid bird! The man said. The drunkard slapped mosquitoes off of his face, but drifted back to sleep. The Rooster sang again and the man, waking up, yelled: You damn bird! You damn bird! The man kicked his legs in a tantrum, kicking up dirt. The Rooster was silent for a moment, catching his breath, as the drunkard drifted back to sleep. Then the Rooster would call again, booming in with his aria. You stupid bird! You goddamn stupid bird! The man tried to rise and he threw his arms around as if to punch something, but the drunk man's body lost his balance and tumbled to the concrete. The Rooster, unaware of the drunk, waited a bit before his next entrance. The drunkard gathered himself, curled in a fetal position and began drifting to sleep again, trying to think warm thoughts when the Rooster once more announced the dawn of day. The drunkard kept shouting at the Rooster until his shouts were a mixture of sobs and rage and the exchange continued this way until the Rooster's job was done and day had had its fanfare.

## Orchidia

Orchidia's long black hair, shiny like a crow's feathers, glistened in the afternoon sun as she headed to see her father. She'd not been in the bar for some time and had to brace herself to see Herman. Sometimes she could not take his dark humor, his intensity. Sometimes it felt her father knew more about her than she wanted him to. People used to call him the detective because he had this way of looking at someone and knowing about them, so he always knew when she was hiding something.

The streets were dirty, wrappers stuck along the patches of grass and sidewalk, paper cups with ants circling inside them. Shadow St. had been her life and she wondered whether she'd ever get out. As she passed Leo's house she thought about growing old and wondered what the world out there was like. She'd heard Leo had grown old in that house, seen his brother and wife die. Everyone knew how the woman had died, it was the talk of the neighborhood for a few days, until something else happened and people forgot. The house's windows seemed covered up, had a large tree, probably fifteen feet high, in the corner of the lawn. It made the old man's house appear weary, haunted.

When she got to the bar she breathed in deeply before pushing open the door. The place was the same, the dirtied tables, the Marilyn poster, the dirty light bulbs. Herman was sitting at the bar with a book laid out in front of him.

You look different, he said, lifting his head from the page.

No I don't, she said.

You haven't been by in a couple weeks.

I know, I've been busy.

Tommy taking good care of you?

Yeah.

How's your mother?

She's fine. Dad?

Yeah?

You've ever had to make any big decisions?

You don't get to be my age and not have to.

Herman leaned back in his chair, staring right through her eyes. She squirmed a little in her chair, her eyes probably trembled, coming apart in the dim light. This was the look he had, this was the detective.

Why? He asked.

What if I was trying to decide something. Something big. What advice would you give me?

Herman looked at his daughter carefully. He felt her tension, her fear. She interrupted him:

Do you believe in love?

Of course I do, but what kind of question is that?

I mean, do you think people really fall in love?

Yes, I think so.

And then what happens? She asked.

Her father laughed at this and looked up to the ceiling for a way to answer. She noticed he was sweating.

Well, then life happens and people change.

Was I born out of love?

Your mother and I were very young, but we loved both you and your brother. What are you really asking here Orchid? Are you in a bit of a mess with Tommy?

I don't know whether to call it a mess or not.

Well, you make sure and tell Tommy to stay away from here for a few days, until I digest this, but listen to me: I would say think about the consequences. Remember consequences accumulate. Everything you do creates a universe, creates chain reactions. Remember Orchid, he said, that these are different times and different decisions are more accepted now. One has more opportunities to kill the problem.

How do you know it's a problem?

You're right, I don't, but you're very young. Things seem easier when you're young.

You were young once.

Yes, exactly, and look at me now. There are options out there for you Orchid, to make sure you don't rush into anything.

The dank smell of the bar reminded her of why she didn't come here more often. This was not the response she wanted. She wanted someone to be happy for her, to smile and hug her and say how exciting this was. She imagined her father as a young man talking in the same way to her mother. He looked older than she remembered him, deflated. It was only later that she would find out that the man murdered in the neighborhood a few weeks back, the one killed in his car, had been her father's good friend. She'd think back on it, and forgive her father for his brashness that day, but she would never ask him how he felt about the death, she would never really ask him anything again.

## **The Work Day**

Although the sun was out, it was cold outside, the air cooling the lungs as it entered. This gave David a feeling of contradiction. Shadow Street was a long desolate place. One car had two tires blown out and just sat there on the side of the road, it's radio had been stolen. Further up the street, on the corner house, he saw a peculiar tree, nearly big enough to climb.

David walked up to a row of small apartments. One of them had a FOR RENT sign on the window. He knocked on a door.

A man with a mustache, dressed formally in slacks and a dress shirt answered the door. He looked annoyed.

Can I help you?

Yes, good morning, My name is David and I am here because you have been selected to get a special demonstration of SHARP knives.

SHARP knives? Asked the man, I don't even really live here, I'm just visiting on business.

Even better, you can take these with you, wherever you go. SHARP makes the best quality knives on this side of the Atlantic.

I'm not interested thank you. Knives aren't my weapon of choice, I prefer guns.

I'm talking about knives for the kitchen, for melons and things of this nature.

I'm a busy man, I don't have time to for melons.

The man closed the door right in David's face. Employees are often advised that this happens, that potential customers (EVERYONE, says the Manual, is a potential customer) are usually timid at first so they act rudely. One must not take this personally, the Manual says. But

there was something about the way this man looked at David, the way he eyed him from top to bottom. There was something suspicious about the man, something burning inside him, as if there was mischief in his eyes. He would try again. This man, was in denial, David convinced himself, he needed to be educated on knives.

David knocked again.

The man answered. Yes, what is it?

I just think sir that you were somewhat rather quick to respond, perhaps you are not fully aware of the power of SHARP knives. I've brought on a special set just for you.

David did not recognize himself, he often stepped outside of his body and watched his tone change and he never, really, had much control over it.

I told you, I am not interested. The man closed the door again right in David's face.

David went around into the backyard, there was nothing there. David knocked again.

The man opened up and said:

Do you know who I am?

Clearly I have no interest, said David.

You wouldn't speak to me like that if you knew. I'd like to speak to your manager, this is ridiculous.

You're the one talking about weapons. You don't think that's cause for suspicion? You said "weapons of choice." How am I supposed to react to that?

You're not. You're supposed to walk away and hope none of my weapons are needed.

What do you do, may I ask?

I am an artist of a kind, the man said, a special kind of artist, I deal with justice.

You mean like a lawyer? I've never heard anyone call a lawyer an artist.

Get the hell out of here, the man said as he slammed the door.

Something about watching the man's rage coming out in bits and pieces made David



want to aggravate it. This man could explode and David, at least, wanted to witness it, wanted to have someone rip him out of his ridiculous life and wake him up. Rage, after all, was in there somewhere. David remained by the door and knocked again. This time the man brought out a piece of paper.

Who is your supervisor?

Sir, if you want to talk to my supervisor you are in for a surprise. He is a crazy man. He'll probably try to seduce you and give you a strange speech about fishing and how selling is like fishing and how the customer is the stupid dead fish.

What?

I'm just saying.

What are you really selling? Is this some kind of joke?

I have a feeling you're up to no good Mr.

Let me tell you son, my work is necessary in this world. Otherwise, we'd never have true justice.

So you're a lawyer...or some kind of cop?

What are you really doing here? You're not from Shadow Street are you?

What are you?

I specialize in revenge.

That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard. Where I come from, they call you a criminal.

What are you really doing here?

Knives, I told you. I sell knives which is the hard part for you to understand?

Get the fuck out of here before I call the police. The man slammed the door again, this time staring David right in the eyes as he did it. This man, thought David, the man who admitted to having weapons, to specializing in revenge was going to call the police. What a joke. David walked away from the door. As he passed the man's driveway he took out a knife

from his suitcase and stabbed it right into the man's car tire, piercing a hole through it and listening to the air release. He left with a smile in his face. Day 1. House #2. No sale.

## **The Horse**

Come here boy, said the old woman, sit here by the chair. The Horse followed obediently and sat next to her as she covered her legs with a blanket. She felt around with her hands and took out a photo album. She felt around for the embroidered letters that read in a fancy cursive: Morgan.

The old woman had looked at these photos so often before her eyes gave out that she had them nearly memorized in her mind. It was the muscle memory of turning the pages that would trigger the image in her mind, recalling it full detail. She opened the photo album.

This here, she pointed to the photo with her arthritic finger, is Morgan when we first met. He was seventeen years old. He liked to wear these hats, these types of Parisian hats. You see? Like a person of culture, though his father was but a local shoemaker. That is why I have so many shoes; I have kept them all of these years. His father made me a pair of shoes for my birthday, for Christmas, for summer and winter and I could never wear them all out. So I kept them.

She flipped the page, running her hand through the thin plastic as if the image itself had a surface.

This one is of Morgan building this house before we got married. He built it with a couple guys from the neighborhood. They are all dead now.

The Horse looked at where the woman pointed, but was confused and instead sniffed at the woman's legs that smelled of corn and butter. The Horse felt her blood struggling through her veins.

And this one, said the old woman, is of Morgan and me, the night before the wedding. I trembled all night that night, feeling so alone. I don't know why, but I think somehow I sensed Morgan would not be around too long.

The Horse took the woman's blanket in his teeth and pulled it, making her drop the photo album. Hey old boy, it's cold, give me my blanket back. The old woman reached for it, but the Horse stood up and made her follow.

My blanket, she said, My blanket. Her hands reached in the air, feeling her way around. The Horse was wearing the leather shoes and the woman had to listen for his steps. She began to laugh. She laughed and chased the sounds with a smile on her face. My blanket! She squealed with delight like a little girl, chasing the Horse around the house. The game continued until late night when finally he let her have her blanket and she went to bed, the Horse tucking her in and pulling the blanket up to her chin. Then he went and wandered the city.

## Butterflies

The son worked the night shift at a factory. The father, long retired on a work compensation program, stayed awake, falling for rhetoric musings and rhythmic readings of the televised gospels. He sat enthralled with the Biblical jaw-lines, the singed hair of the orator, and the melody of the white robbed choir.

“It’s more than just words, son, it’s that God lives within the syllables themselves, literally *lives*...The word is God and God *is* in all words. So if I were to tear your words apart, like the carcass of a dead bird, and if I looked inside I would find, the state of your God, son. He’d be paltry burned up thing.”

That is why the son refused to speak, for years, refused to speak, afraid that God could come out of him, afraid that he would, by speaking, give birth to a God he wouldn’t want to worship. So the son learned to vanish his existence by wearing animal masks around the house, then at work, then in public, crawling around on all fours, mewling and moaning. At first, his boss at the factory was not pleased by the strangeness of the animal masks, but eventually he accepted this and learned to accept his employee.

Meanwhile, the father donated money to the voices on the screen and sung along with the hymns of the pixilated priests. He came closer and closer to God, in his mind, and saw everything as potential for sin and threw guilt around like it was salt.

“My son is a goddamn rabbit,” the father would say to the person on the Catholic Hotline he called for three dollars a minute. “My son can’t come to the door right now, he’s cleaning his hoofs,” he’d say to friends that would visit his son. “My son cannot talk, he has chosen to become an animal.”

In the street eyes would turn to look at them. The father wanted nothing more than his

son to pray to God. Eventually, the father began talking in tongues of foreign salvations and congressmen who were devils. These repeated pleasures of the word, the cadences of the holy, began to bring the old man pleasure, as the erections of his past years protruded from his sweat pants during the Sunday program. “My son is a vulture of death,” the father dreamt in his sleep, angered by his son’s refusal of the Trinity.

One day the son put on a mask of a lion, adopting the roar as the purest form of sound. This is my place, he thought. He learned to communicate with the roaring sound. He gritted his teeth as he grew stronger. The lion’s might and strength carried him through the days. As his father leaned back on his chair with the pleasure bulging from his pants and convocations of God in damaged Bibles, his other hand greedily at work on himself, as he watched the ceremonious children and the vast cathedral. His son, now a true Lion, watched in disgust at his father’s confusion. One day, the Lion charged at his unsuspecting father. He charged as if he were in the deepest Africa, where nature meets grace and violence in a poetry of convergence. That was the real language. So the Lion thought:

This life is not for you, old man, and then sunk his teeth into his father’s skin, ending the old man’s treacherous existence and beginning his.

## **Voices**

My mother told me that mothers were the open wounds of the world. They walk around, she said, with their hearts nearly hanging out, but they work and they sweat and they sing. They are the cuts that never heal, my mother said, and the bruises that give the earth aches. Sometimes mama slept with the window open, listening to the world outside, even if it came very close. Sometimes the world was so close that it smashed against the glass and tore through screen. Mothers ache, but they make wounds too, she said, when mothers give birth to the raging floods; they create storms through their bodies. All mothers walk the earth vulnerable, in contact with all things. Remember that pain is also a part of this world, said my mother, that's just something you're going to have to remember. This life, so easily fragile, so broken already, will only try and open you up, but don't let it Avery.

## **Strength**

Strength is the soul. Strength is the stories that make us. Only through strength he could reach the true core of life. It hurts to grow, but the hurting is special, necessary. At seventeen years old, Herc was 210 pounds.

I'm going to be the strongest man in the world, I'm going to stop a war, I'm going to be invincible, Herc once said to a skinny reporter who approached him. The reporter however, transcribed incorrectly and quoted Herc saying: I'm going to be the loneliest man in the world, I'm going to war, I'm invisible.



## **Butterflies**

Sleep is man's most vulnerable time. During the hours of the night, when the soft rustling of the leaves marks the turning minutes, our darkest fears and suppressed desires arise. I have been a God fearing man my whole life, raised by a Catholic father and mother, baptized as a child, educated in a Catholic school, and married at a young age, when acne had yet to settle on my face. My father suggested I go to law school. He wanted me to become a lawyer, someone of importance. My mother suggested I marry a simple woman to carry my children. So here I am, a bonds salesman with a dull wife that finds pleasure in baking and that's it. Luckily both my parents are dead.

Things would be much easier if I were not a God fearing man. Guilt is venom for the young. My father killed my young years with guilt about masturbation and love and deceiving God. Now, every night, I dream of myself sinning, of committing adultery and enjoying it.

Desires manifest themselves in strange ways when one is sleeping. They turn into the woman, thinner and younger than your wife, scantily dressed, that opens her legs for you to enter. The worst part is that between her legs you see angels and the blue gates of heaven and you feel, if only for a moment, as if light flowed through you the way water flows through a river. It is at night when that attractive young cashier from the supermarket gives you bedroom eyes and blows you a kiss. It is at night, when you dream, that women respect you and desire you and lift their shirts for you.

This is why. This is why I recently became terrified of sleep. It got out of control. My desires and lust took over every night without mercy. So I began to cling, like a cat hanging on by its claws, to the day. If I was awake I felt I had some control. In sleep, I was subject to the whims of my subconscious and its ability to create attractive women I couldn't resist.

So I tried to stay up. I drank coffee. I splashed cold water on my face. And I paced, back

and forth like a drugged lion, until my body would simply collapse. First, I did this in the bedroom, but I kept passing out on the floor by the bed, making a sound when I collapsed and waking up the wife.

Yes, she asked what was the matter. She worried, but she could not understand. How could I tell her that every time I went to sleep I was tempted by beautiful women and that I betrayed her, every time without hesitation and that, in fact, I hardly ever thought of her in a sexual way anymore.

I tried controlling my subconscious, so I wrote in a piece of paper every night: I love my wife, I love my wife, I love my wife, so that whatever deep and hidden part of me was acting out would be silenced. Unfortunately the wife found that piece of paper and was so touched by it that she hung it on the refrigerator door and asked if this is what I stayed up all night doing.

Sleep, it seemed to me, was God's way of torturing man. It is the true punishment, for no one can escape it. I often addressed this with God in my Sunday prayers, but not once did he respond.

So, the same way that we take in Jesus into our bodies, I thought that perhaps I needed to feel closer to my wife, but I could not get close to her in bed, my body protested in guilt, ashamed of my astral betrayals. I tried to stay awake, to pray, but my body would collapse, even if for an hour or two, which was enough time for me to sin repeatedly and with gusto. I began to know my true self, and then to confuse which one was my true self and which the dream self, my deviant self, my ego, my life of lies. It was soon after that, I started running.

## **The Killer**

I stick to my guns. Period. Most men cannot comprehend me. They are lost in the invisible mechanisms of life, the oppression that hides in everything they are surrounded with. They are told what to eat, what to wear, and they do it.

I have freed myself from that. I have found my true passion. Revenge is an art form. It is high art. Revenge takes careful planning and execution; no mistakes are permitted. Revenge is the art of the true philosopher.

Yes, I do this for a living. I am a revenge artist, but I am NOT a hit man. A hit man rarely concerns himself with issues of style and aesthetics. All a hit man does, is work for money and try not to get caught. There are exceptions in history, of course. There have been some great hit men over the years, but I, on the other hand, create stories. I am an artist in that way.

See, I demand that my clients provide me with full detailed accounts of what has led them to exact revenge. I need to know why, the reason, the betrayals, their lies, to try and figure the best revenge for each person based on their mistakes. It takes calculation and imagination.

I must eat, after all. Yes I do ask for a generous sum, but my work is no less important to the world than the work of a great composer. If justice isn't carried out in this way, than the world grows more and more chaotic. Those that never feel released from betrayals, from being wronged, will carry them in everything they do and they will live with it. This, in turn grows to a bigger consequence and that's why I'm here.

I understand most people will find these ideas somewhat preposterous. I don't blame anyone for that. I look for ways to live life, I look for truths, I am no different than most.

So there it is, I create stories, I end them, but I do it in the real world, not in the fictional one.

## **Aurora**

She first noticed something on her foot. She took off her shoes and felt her toes hardened. She said nothing, but it became evident in her walk. She limped and struggled through the house. What's wrong? Leo asked. Nothing, she said, I'm fine, just a small pain in my foot. She avoided movement when others were around. When someone was in the room she'd stand still, move only her hands, but refrained from stepping. She covered her condition for a long time. She sat outside for hours, going inside when it was dark, so no one would see. Eventually the weather changed and her instep hardened too. Then her heel. And finally, her entire foot. She whispered to Leo one day: I think I'm dying. Leo looked at her foot and did not know what to say. What's happening? He muttered. My body, she said, is slowly calcifying.

## **Voices**

The voice, Aurora told Avery, is the rarest mineral of the body. It hides deep inside the unexplored mines. You can't even touch it. No one knows what it looks like. No one has seen it. We just feel it and hear it.

In its pure form, Aurora said, the voice is worth millions, but hardly does one reach it, for the depths of where it resides are not for the short of courage.

Avery covered her ears, she didn't want to hear the voices anymore. Aurora uncovered them and said: You must listen, it's important.

## **The Alleys**

Samantha's skin had grown a shade of orange-brown from standing in the sun. Her hair, once the hair of a young girl, was now coarse and brittle. Half her teeth were gone. She never had a baby, but she thought about it sometimes, about getting pregnant and how lovely it would be to have a little person in your arms to need you. She tried some time ago, but the streets were no place for romance and mostly it was laying face up on the concrete for two minutes, with her spine rubbing against the rough floor, and her hips hurt and instead she just itched and knew that her body was too wasted and gone to produce life. Oh well, she thought, wouldn't be much of a mother anyway. She hadn't menstruated in a year or so. She felt dried up, a shell. She'd been born not too far from here and had gone to school in the neighborhood. That's why she liked going to the park now and watching the laughing kids. She could remember herself as she was. It was the transition that she failed to fully comprehend. The transition was what baffled her. She lost her job and her family said they didn't want her back if she couldn't drop the vice. They left her out there, in the rain, in the dark. Ten years later, this was her, going into a McDonald's inconspicuously to relieve her bowels. She yet refused to squat by a wall in the Alley. This, she could not do, not even now.

## **Avery**

The ceiling fan spun slowly above. Light suffocated the room with stillness. Avery stood by the side of the bed, waiting.

Mom, she said, you ready for you bath?

Sweet songs of birds rang outside, burrows of worms and squirrels, and the distant stir of the neighbor's life. The girls on the steps spoke in dolls, the arguments of parents behind thin walls, the cats purred while dogs drifted in sleep to the safe underground world. Aurora lay still on the bed, reaching for herself.

Yes Avery, I'll be there in a minute.

Avery stared at her mother from the side of the bed as she struggled to get herself up.

Please don't stare at me Avery, it hurts more when you do. The sickness is going up my legs now.

Avery turned then to face the wall. She often had conversations like this with her mother. Facing the wall gave her mother space and allowed her to not feel watched.

Why are things so difficult for you? Asked Avery.

I don't know darling.

Is it because your body has a different clock?

Maybe.

The barks of dogs and children's chatter slithered through the streets. The dolls falling in love and drinking tea; the girls imagining their future lives. Avery stared at the wall. She resisted looking back at her mother.



## **The Lion**

He stepped out into the sun as the Lion he had become. His father was now but a phantom of his recollection, but always slightly remaining beneath the surface, waiting to tell him his sins, to remind him of his monstrosity. The Lion roared and howled under the old white moon, stretching the sounds over the darkness and walking the alleys with all the other lost men. The Lion's roar was one of the most beautiful sounds and people often approached him just to hear his roar; the roar could kill or heal a man. But as a boy the Lion had refused to speak and now he roared only when it was necessary. The Lion even handed out a dollar here and there to the poor who huddled in a corner, but began to feel that this relief was fleeting. The temporary, he thought, is a waste of time and thus he set out on a quest to find permanence, to find what remained, to change people's hearts, and make sense of time's erasures. How is it, he would ask himself, that his father remains walking through the house even when he is gone? How is it that his father's smell remains on the couch? On his hair? How is it that his father's face is in the echoes of his own nightmares, holding on to the thin walls of his dreams, so as not to be lost forever. His father had understood eternity and had buried guilt deep within him, to keep him prisoner. The Lion roared angrily at this, the sound going out of the alley, knocking over trashcans and shaking windows.

## **Voices**

Orchidia's reflection told her nothing new. There was not change yet, of course, but she thought maybe something in her face would give her away. She only had a few days to decide. You know Orchid, Herman had said to her once; there is a way to tell when someone is young. It's all in the eyes. When someone is young, he continued, there is a sparkle in their eyes. That's life, it's the yearning soul. Some people keep that light in their eyes for a long time and others lose it quickly. Stay away from those who lose it early, although one can learn a great deal from them. What happens when you lose it Dad? She'd asked. It means your youth is gone, it means you understand suffering and have, in one way or other, grown old. She stepped close to the mirror and looked at her eyes. Her eyes had a tiny light in them. Orchidia smiled with relief.

## **The Bar Owner**

Leo walked in early afternoon and sat down. The usual? Herman asked. Leo's drifting face took a while to reach shore, he nodded and Herman went to fetch the whiskey bottle. The piano player sat nearby studying some sheet music. Leo was an odd character, always appeared swimming for his life in some depth of himself. Thanks, said Leo, his eyes on the whiskey. I heard about Maury, said Leo, really quite tragic. Was a good man that Maury, said the piano player. Leo drank quietly. This place just gets lonelier and lonelier, said Herman, sometimes I can't take it.

Outside, children could be heard as they passed after school, the honks of traffic, and the barks of distant dogs and lawn mowers. Leo saw Herman hunched over a drink. You drinking today Herman? Yeah, why the hell not? I'm tired. The door opened and the bright light outside blinded everyone for a second. It was the young one, that young wandering soul that Herman often encountered in the bar. The same one that tried to sleep in the bar. The same one that came in with dirty clothes. Herman was not in the mood to deal with him. What have I told you, Herman said, about coming in here in that state, you look like you've been in a lion's mouth. The piano player watched the exchange with some concern, looking at the boy as he stood there with his sad eyes. I've told you damn kids, said Herman slapping his hand down at the bar. I don't want nobody shooting up in here or coming here to trip out, or using this place as an excuse to escape life. Herman's voice rose. You damn kids, don't you know you're wasting away! You're throwing it away like it was nothing! It's the only life you're going to get, there is nothing after, just death, just darkness and worms, and you're out there spending your life being half conscious, lost in your stupid drooling states. The young one was caught by surprise at Herman's outburst and shaking he said, I'm sorry Mr. Herman, I just came for some tunes. The young one opened his hand to reveal a few quarters. He walked over to the juke box and

played some old ballad. He listened attentively and about two songs later, was weeping into his hands. The piano player walked over and put a hand on the young one's shoulder, it's alright my brother, you're alright. Herman went upstairs in shame.

## Leo

Leo took off his raincoat and his wet shoes and looked into the hall. There was the faint sound of music coming from inside. The halls were suffused with light from the living room. He approached and found Rora in the living floor, hunched; her body slumped on itself and her head hanging from the neck like a dead fruit. And then the empty wine bottles around her. Where's Avery? He asked. Rora tried to raise her head, but before she could, in her jumbled pulsing mind, formulate words, Leo was in the hallway yelling Avery's name. He looked in the bedroom: his hand reaching under the dark bed, under the desk, between tangled sheets. In the closet: between hangers with white wrinkled shirts or inside the laundry basket, inside boxes. No movement. No sound except the rain. No stir. Avery, he said, running now. Her bedroom: under the bed in the toy box in the closet. The bathroom: cabinets, bathtub, behind the door. The house grew bigger and bigger. The kitchen: under the table, in the pantry, behind food on the shelf, in the stove, under the sink. Avery! Running in circles right left back. Then he saw the back door open slightly. He ran out. Then barefoot in the cold dark rain. His thoughts blurred. Avery? There in the mud dark, Avery stood with her clothes wet. He picked her up and felt her body shiver, her heart beating. You've had it Avery, he thought, a lunge into the darkness, you've been there and back. Storms have entered you already. Her little feet dangled as he carried her into the house and closed the door, keeping the night out.

## **The Bar Owner**

Herc's house was right across the street. The boy had some odd ideas about what it meant to be a man. He had tried to tell the boy that strength, in this cruel world, was more about resistance than it was about forcing your will on the invisible. One needed to learn to resist the travails of life, to push against them, but Herc wanted to conquer them and control them. This, Herman knew, was a futile battle.

The boy didn't look like a boy; his features were already stricken with age, the skin somehow rubbery and layered with grief from the loneliness of his life. The boy had developed a strange hobby, if one could call it that. He liked to dig holes in the backyard and hide himself there. That's why Herman sometimes went over with a plate of food. He feared that one day the newspaper would show that the boy had buried himself alive.

Herman went around towards the back of the house, where Herc usually hung out. Hello? He called. He found Herc standing behind a bar that held what appeared to be a couple hundred pounds in weight.

Mr. Herman.

What is this new hobby of yours?

This is called the dead lift.

No, these holes in your back yard, how did they get there?

I dug them up. I like to go in there sometimes.

I see. What does that do for you?

It's quiet.

Son, don't you think you should think about other things in life? Trust me kid, there are other ways to prove how strong you are to the world.

Strength is doing what nobody else does. Strength is doing it right, when nobody is

watching.

Herc got into position held the bar, took a deep breath, looked up towards the sky, and then pulled with all his strength. The bar went above his knees and Herc dropped the bar and collapsed on all fours, vomiting.

Herman went over and held the boys shoulder as his face got red with heaving. It's ok, said Herman. So that's it huh? Said Herman. That's strength. Well, I'm sure your ma would be real proud.

## **The Blind Woman**

The Horse sniffed at the trampled yellow flowers by the side of the house when the old woman came out, calling him. Come here boy, she said, I have a surprise. The Horse sniffed for food, but smelled nothing. Instead the woman held a bright green ball in her hands. The woman descended the four steps slowly, concentrating, but her excitement showing through. The Horse came near and touched her shoulder with his muzzle, showing her where he was. Oh, there you are old boy, look what I have. The Horse did not understand what the bright ball was about. Now we can play fetch! The old woman said as she readied her weak body to throw. She moved her fragile arm as best she could and threw the ball a few feet. Go get it boy, she said, sensing that the Horse was not moving. The Horse looked from the ball on the grass to the woman and back to the ball. He snorted. God damn it, she said, don't you know how to play fetch? The old woman got down on her knees and felt around for the ball. When she finally found it, it was dark and the Horse was hungry. They went inside and the next day the old woman tried again to play fetch, and again the next day, each day, getting on her knees and retrieving the ball herself.



## **The Runner**

I began running because my dreams were overtaking me, sweeping over me like the waves of an incoming tide. Every time I closed my eyes a beautiful girl made me a sinner. An adulterer. They would wrap their arms around me, kiss me. Talbot, they'd say to me, you're the man for me, the one I've been waiting for. What is a man supposed to do? Where did these women come from? Why did they reside in my dreams? I have to say though, the pleasure attained from these dream encounters, frightened me. Running seemed the only solution to stay awake, the only solution to be pure.

Every day, when darkness began to settle in and night was imminent, I was filled with anxiety. I tried reading a book, but the words would mesh together. I tried watching the news, but I could never pay attention and exhaustion would inevitably take over, but I did not want to sleep. I could not. I did not want to be a sinner.

Yes, the wife would ask if I was coming to bed. I'd say: in a few minutes. Instead, I'd be putting on my running shoes and ready to go out for the run in order to save my soul. My running was sluggish. My body, having not been exercised for the majority of twenty years (my job involves sitting in a chair and, if I'm lucky, getting up to make some copies and phone calls) nearly broke down. To anyone watching, I might have looked like a madman. I sure as hell felt like one. I don't think I'd ever really ran in my life, except when I was five and we use to chase the ice cream truck. Now my feet and arms are out of sync with each other, as if my limbs were trying to detach themselves from my body, flaying in all directions. I'm sure I looked like a man who thought he was on fire and was running in an attempt to extinguish the flames.

And still every night as I ran, sleep would overtake me and I would fall wherever I happen to be, whether it was by the stop sign, in the middle of the road, by the playground, or near the alleys, I would drop and cuddle up to sleep. And then the sinning would begin. I'd

climb right on top of whatever woman walked before me. I'd climb her the way I used to climb trees as a child. Then I wake up and I'll be laying in the middle of the road or by Herman's bar, disoriented and lost, and have to drag myself home.

## **Aurora**

The stone had grown past her knees. Rora gripped the hammer tightly with both hands as she sat, hunched over by the window. She lifted it, aimed the hammer head right at her kneecap and waited a moment and glimpsed outside at the empty street. A cat strode along the sidewalk. A street light flickered nearby. Then, with a jerk of the hand, she brought the hammer down right on her kneecap. Behind the skin there was pain, but on the surface the stone showed no sign of cracking. All night, the sounds of the hammer against her knees echoed through the house.

## **Avery**

The door of the Yellow House opened and closed. Opened and closed. Dirt accumulated in the corners and mice propagated in the basement. This was my daily symphony. Did I imagine it? I watched through the window as the shadows shifted and the voices slipped in and out. The screen door slammed against the frame as a man walked out holding onto his head. Then woman staggered out with her hair on fire, a man with holes in his body, teetered in and out. This is the place where happiness is sold by the ounce. But it's complicated, my mother said. If I squinted my eyes enough I saw inside the house. The men grew wings and flapped them all about and women took off their clothes and slithered like snakes along the walls. What you see, my mother said, is only a reflection of what you think about the world. What does that mean? I asked. You never see what is really there, she said. Outside, men and women often slumped on the porch, looking half asleep with a fan on. One time a man walked out of the Yellow House quacking like a duck all the way down the block. Quack Quacking into dark. I never understood what I was seeing until much later, until I knew how badly people sought escape. Do you see that mother? I asked. Do you see the man walking like a duck? No, she said, I see a porcupine shooting its quills into the moon.

## **The Rooster**

Shadow and Anima streets pulsate as night draws near. People stand out in their porches, smoke cigarettes on the steps, or walk to and from Herman's bar. The playground fills with children playing tag and dangling on monkey bars. The older kids hang out by the metal turtle smoking cigarettes and badly rolled joints. The Rooster paced along the fence. One particular winter night a man holding his girl by the waist passed and caught glimpse of the beady black eyes in the yard. The man, thinking the girl would be impressed, asked if she wanted to hold a cock in her hands. Before she could even feel indignant the man was climbing over the fence awkwardly, pulling his weight up with a struggle, laughing at his cleverness, his pants coming unattractively below his waist. The girl walked away insulted, leaving her date behind as he struggled to get over the fence, his belt loop caught in a rogue nail as he grunted and heaved to get over. The man landed awkwardly on his side where the Rooster waited and charged at the man's face, flapping his wings wildly. He let out a shrill little cry and pecked at the man's calves over and over again as he tried to run away from it. At some point the man managed a little kick to the Rooster's belly and it only made the bird angrier, but somehow he managed to jump back over the fence, faster this time, but somehow allowing his pants to tear and expose him to the wild night.

## Avery

She's turning to stone, I told the neighbor. His eyebrows went up. How do you mean? He said. She's turning into stone, I repeated, but the neighbor seemed not to understand and looked confused at my mother who was half out of the ground, only a torso and a head under the sun. It must have been a weird sight, I admit, a woman half buried in her own backyard, with her legs seemingly inside the earth. You see, I told the neighbor, it's because she has a disease and her body is turning into stone and our neighbor Herc dug us a hole so my mother could put her stone legs in. Herc is real good at digging holes in the ground. Where is your father? Asked the neighbor. Oh, he's somewhere, collecting life in a jar, I said.

The neighbor must have called the reporter, for not long after he left a skinny man with a camera showed up and peaked over the fence. He took the photo and the caption in the paper read: WOMAN GROWS OUT OF GROUND.

Nobody saw the painful aspect of it. That is, my mother dragging herself through the house because her legs didn't work anymore, they were too heavy. Nor did they see my mother losing all Will at times and talking of life as a rotten thing. Outside however, she was happy with the sun, for she said she felt closer to the earth and she didn't mind that Time was ravaging her body.

## **The Alleys**

The plan was that each of them would take a corner and hold up a sign and whatever they collected in three hours, they would share. Ernie looked with hard concentration at the piece of cardboard.

You're not writing a book Ernie, just write it, I need the marker before it dries up, said Iggy.

A hobo's sign is his first impression, said Ernie. People have to like it.

Iggy grabbed the marker from Ernie's hand and scribbled on the sign. ANYTHING HELPS. GOD BLESS.

God bless? Asked Ernie. You don't believe in God, you liar.

So what? Who's going to know?

Oh, they'll know. They sense a liar. Nobody wants to give a liar their spare change. They sense when someone's asking for drug money instead of bread money.

How do you know anyway? How do you know what I believe in?

We've talked about this Iggy. You told me that you lost faith in God the moment he let you become a beggar. And after your father lost his job.

No, said Iggy. I said government. I said, I lost faith in government.

You said God.

No, I believe in God. I pray to him every night.

Oh, piss off. That's not called praying Iggy, that's called looking at old bra catalogs and going to work on yourself. I'm pretty sure God frowns upon that.

I always thought you were sleeping. Well how do you know I don't pray afterwards?

Anyway, give me that marker Iggy.

Ernie grabbed marker and put it to his chin in deep thought. Then he wrote on the piece

of cardboard with careful handwriting.

STRANDED. NEED TO GET HOME TO CHILDREN.

PLEASE HELP, GOD WILL REPAY.

You have children?

I don't want to talk about it.

Ernie? You have children? And I thought we told each other everything.

No man every really discloses everything.

Oh for fucks sake, you have little children. That's not just some detail.

I did once, yes. Now hush. Get to your corner. We'll meet back here in three hours.

Iggy was stunned. He could not imagine his friend as a father and he wilted suddenly with sadness at the thought of those children somewhere wondering where their father was. Ernie hobbled away. Iggy then walked to his corner, trying to picture his friends children somewhere, trying to know what they looked like, would they have his nose and Ernie's long curved forehead? Would they have Ernie's erratic temper? Iggy stood in the corner and waited. A man was coming by and Iggy held the sign. It was Herman, the bar man.

Iggy, Jesus Christ, what are you doing?

I'm working.

I see that, your sign is upside down.

Oh, thanks. Hey Herman, did you know him well?

Who?

That man that was shot awhile back. I heard you were right upset about it, knew he hung out at your place.

What do you care? Said Herman.

I just wonder is all. I saw him often. He was a kind man.

You're right Iggy, he was kind, just made some bad decisions.



Who doesn't? said Iggy.

Right.

Sometimes I wonder why nobody just ends *me* that way.

What did you say?

I mean, maybe sometimes I wish somebody would just end me that way, point a gun and that's the end of it.

You're a stupid son of a bitch, said Herman, handing the man a crumpled dollar, you don't know how lucky you are to be alive.

Thanks for the dollar. I'm sorry about your friend. He was a pleasant fellow, even when he caught me sleeping in his car.

He what?

One night, laughed Iggy, yes one night, I'd had a few of them tall boys and was so cold that I was checking cars to see if any were open, just for the night you know. And I tried the backseat of this car and what do you know? It was open, so I crawl in and fall asleep. Good night sleep, I remember, but in the morning I woke up to old Maury pulling my leg telling me to get the hell out of his car.

Herman laughed imagining this and then winced, it hurt to think about Maury and the funny things that happened to him.

Right fellow that one. Just told me to get out, but it was winter then and he knew that. So every night I checked cars again and every night he left it open for me. This time, a blanket there and I always got out before he left for work at seven. It was like a silent contract.

Herman was silent. The thought of his friend ached him, Maury's stupid generosity.

Alright, that's enough Iggy. Thanks. I have to get out of here.

Iggy watched Herman walk slowly away. Herman too, he thought, is a good man and wondered why Herman didn't find himself a good lady. If he had a bar, he'd have ladies every

night. Iggy became lost in thought until he heard someone yelling his name.

Iggy! Iggy!

What?

It's been three hours, what you got?

Iggy looked into his pocket. One dollar, he said.

I got two.

We can get a 40 ounce?

They walked to the store and Iggy went in to buy it while Ernie waited outside. When Iggy came back out with the big fat bottle in a brown plastic bag he handed it to Ernie. They both smiled and drank happily until the bottle was empty.

## **Orchidia**

The string in her hand unraveled as the kite went further up into the sky, ricocheting in the wind. It remained above her as if suspended, caught in an invisible current the way dancers are caught in music or trance. She ran along the small park with the pull of the kite behind her and her black hair in the wind. The sun illuminated the red and yellow colors of the kite, giving them a glow like stained glass. The colors fought each other, arguing over the light. The kite came down and then up again in a kind of frightened tarantism as children played in the playground. The kite spiraled above everything, so intimately hers and yet belonging to the world, seeing from above what a bird sees. She understood she had no real control, it was the wind that decided. Birds watched from nearby branches curious of the flying object that glided through the air. Orchidia kept on running passed the playground and down to Shadow Street. The kite caught in the big tree by Leo's house, knotted up and wrapped itself around a branch, and remained there until the rain dissolved it.

## **Dogs**

They called the man Big Henry. He was the size of two men and walked like an elephant, slow and torpid. He had yellow teeth and thick rimmed glasses that were always smudged with something, so you could never really see his eyes. He lived up on Shadow Street a few houses up. His two guard dogs were left outside, even in winter the poor dogs were left out without any shelter from the rain. I used to take walks up that alley way to visit them and notice how their food bowls and water bowls would be empty, or if it had rained, the food would be soggy and the water would be brown. So sometimes I'd fill a jug of fresh water and take it to them. There was a small opening in the fence where I could reach in and grab the water bowl and refill it. At first the dogs barked at me, but after some time, they were friendly.

Avery, my mom said, stay away from him, he eats children.

People had seen children go into Big Henry's house. He'd ask a kid to do something for him, change a light bulb, reach in a small corner for something, but the few kids that had gone in there, had never really talked about what Big Henry did.

There were other times where Big Henry would invite kids to clean up his yard. All kids wanted to help because Big Henry gave each one a five dollar bill. And he'd ask the kids to pull the weeds, gather leaves, or clean the yard of trash, or half eaten bird carcasses. He liked to rub mosquito repellent on the kids' legs and told them how smooth their legs were. Sometimes he'd comb their hair and clean their face, his hands on their little shoulders.

One summer he got a big tub and liked to soak in it all day.

Then he was found dead there. His skin yellow and purple and blistered all over. It took five men to get him out, his body was bloated like a giant toad. He'd had a heart attack in the water and cooked for almost a week.

The kids watched close to the gate, the dogs did not bark then, they just laid on the dirt

and watched their dead owner. Did you see that? One kid said, it looked like he had two bowling balls down there. Serves the fucker right, said the older kid, damn fucking creep. The kid lit a cigarette and walked away. Another kid said: Big Henry was a loon. The police and medics grunted and coughed, some gagged, with the big corpse. He damn near cooked himself, a boy said. That's what that smell was? That fucker was there at least four days, cooking like a hot dog. I felt sick. I didn't want to think of the smell knowing what it was. When the coroner and the others put the body in a white van, the police went into Henry's house. One of the boys said: Bet ya there's a big stash in there. Yeah, Big Henry was into that, his eyes always shot red. I bet the cops will smoke it. When everyone drove away the kids wandered off, bored, into the streets. No one remembered the dogs and that night I went back and saw them cuddled together under the moonlight. The next day I took them water and they stayed there in Big Henry's yard until the pound came for them four days later.

## Leo

It had been a year when her disease began its work on the throat. We had known that it would come. Her body's internal clock was moving quickly, aging her body. Rora used to say that instead of her bone marrow creating blood, it produced time.

Leo had taken photographs of the progression labeling the days:

*Day 3: A strange calcification of the foot.*

*Day 15: A hardening of the skin into stone, below her calf.*

*Day 40: Has reached passed her knees. She tries to hammer it.*

*Day 50: She tries the hammer again.*

*Day 75: She lays in the backyard hoping the sun will burn it off.*

*Day 367: near the throat.*

*Day 373: Suicide.*

At some point Rora herself began to understand it as a kind of a joke, nothing more but a simple mutation of the earth, nature's strange reaction to some altered chain of events. When it reached her throat she began to show the fear everyone had expected from the beginning and so it was no real surprise that she chose to go the way she did.

## **Strength**

Strength means understanding pain is as vital as light. At 21 years old and 240 pounds his hands had swollen so that it was difficult for him to close his palm and make a fist. His fingers had thickened, collecting fluid; they looked like sausages. He had difficulty gripping small things. Herc often thought of his mother's death. His strength could do nothing for her old age, though he tried. All he did was lift more things and do odd jobs for people to make money.

Herc made headlines a few months back when a car accident happened some blocks from his house, down on the far end of Shadow Street. Herc tried to help, but he could not run fast enough to get to the scene before the ambulance got there. A shameless reporter had caught sight of him trying to run over to help and saw the way he bent over catching his breath, like a big behemoth slug. The caption of the photo read: **STRONGMAN: FAILED SUPERHERO?** For some kids however, Herc was still the Hulk and in some ways the neighborhood superhero. He often helped fix flat tires, pushed stalled cars, he discarded Christmas trees or pulled stubborn weeds. That year he began entering Strong Man competitions and winning, but no one ever paid much mind to his medals, instead they called him to help build stone walls or to bury dead pets.

## **Leo**

She must be buried quickly, said Leo.

How will we carry her? Asked Avery.

Leo rushed over by where Aurora kept her hammer, with which she'd tried incessantly to break her disease. The hammer would finally fulfill its duty.

In pieces, he said, we'll carry her in pieces.

Leo hammered all night, breaking Aurora into small tiny stones that upon closer examination contained tiny crystals inside them. They put the stones in the car, filling buckets and carrying them down. Then they drove, spreading Aurora among the neighborhood she'd grown up in. The stones would travel along through time, seeing the aging of everything, the collapse. One stone would be found by a hobo and sold for a day's meal, another would be a gift of love from a ten year old boy to his sweetheart, and another would be used to break someone's window, the other will be picked up by a young girl and thrown at a man's head. Another stone would roll down in the rain into a muddy river bank, and then be swept, miles away, into the ocean.



## **The Work Day**

He was not having very much luck with this neighborhood. Now he was almost sure this was a joke. The Manager was probably laughing to himself right now. David had gotten to enjoy the quaint place. Something about the odd sounds and smells. He scanned the nearby houses for his next target and spotted a house that appeared neater than the others. The front of it had flowered curtains and a small plant outside the door. He took the notebook out: Day 2. House #4.

He knocked on the door and put his ear against it, hearing what appeared to be wings flapping. When the door opened David smiled politely, but understood immediately that the gentlemen in front of him was not of a sound mind, especially with the wide grin and the appearance of his clothes, which were ragged and dirty and somewhat inside out. But the man told David to come in, and David, upon entering saw the dozens and dozens of birds inside the house. "Come iiiinnnn," said the man. Upon studying the man's face, his wild erratic movements and long hands David decided that this man's mind had gotten stuck in childhood.

Is there someone else I can talk to? Said David very slowly.

The man said, Yes yes yes, this is Mother.

David walked closer to the elderly woman, hoping she was not cranky. But looking closer realized the pallid color of the skin and the fact that the woman was clearly not breathing or responding and had been, visibly, pecked by birds on the scalp and the back of the hands.

Oh boy, said David, that is one dead woman. Why is your house full of birds?

Friends. You want one?...

Christ, said David, a little nauseated.

He went over to the telephone and dialed the police, informing them that there was a man living in a house with a corpse and somebody should really come over quickly before

things get any stranger or he was attacked by the birds. Birds? The 911 operator asked. Yes, birds. And who are you? The operator asked David and he'd calmly said, I'm a SHARP knife salesman. A What? The woman asked. Sir, prank calling 911 is a serious crime, she said.

This exchange must have continued for some time, until David gave the woman a brief history on SHARP Knife Co. That it was invented by an astronaut up in space, who found time to think about the little things in life. And he explained to her that he had been let into the home and no, of course, he was not trying to burglarize the home and yes the birds were inside the house and no he did not know why.

Someone will be right over sir.

David looked at the man who seemed confused or strangely excited about something. Don't worry, said David, someone will be by to help you soon, to take good care of your old mother.

A few minutes later, the ambulance arrived and the paramedic knocked on the front door and made a face when he encountered the birds perching about. What on solid Earth? He looked at the man and then at David who was now on the floor trying to evade the birds, covering himself. One crow pecked at his elbow.

Are you a family member?

Me? Said David, No, I am not.

This woman has been dead for a couple of days, said the paramedic.

Do they pay you for that kind of insight? Said David. That much is clear. This is her son, he is.....not fully able to communicate.

An illegal immigrant?

No. No, he's what one might call, a man child.

I'm afraid this is a crime scene, the paramedic said.

A crime scene? There is no crime here.

Sir, I see you next to a briefcase full of knives and I see a dead woman and a crazy man.

He's not crazy and those are my knives.

It took another half an hour to explain to the paramedics that the old woman had, in fact, no stab wounds and that thus the knives could have played no part in her death. That and the fact that he had a salesman license from his company that authorized him to carry these knives into public homes and yes, he was aware of how strange it was, but had he not noticed that the house was full of birds? And would he not call that even more strange?

The whole time the poor man child was getting more and more nervous pacing and collecting his little belongings, a toothbrush and a small radio, in a plastic bag. He was taken away with his mother's corpse and the paramedic said nothing about the birds, so David stayed behind and shooed them all out with a broom. Before he left, he took out his notebook and noted: House #4. No sale.

## **Voices**

I'm looking for a grave stone.

Alright Leo, said the man. Our traditional ones are always a good choice.

Yeah, it's mainly for the backyard as a tribute, we're spreading her remains.

How did it happen, if you don't mind me asking? Last time I saw Rora, she was young and a real beauty.

Happened in the bathtub.

In the bathtub?

Yes.

What do you mean?

Well, she was very heavy.

Damn. Did she let herself go after the kid? HAHA Like we don't still gotta look at em, right?

What?

Nothing.

She turned to stone.

Stone?

Yes, stone.

You mean, metaphorically?

No, I mean, literally.

No, you mean metaphorically. Literally is when it actually happens.

I mean literally.

Literally?

Yes.

You're telling me that your wife drowned in a bathtub because she had turned to stone?

Yes.

She was converted into stone?

Yes.

How do you explain that?

I don't. It was some freak occurrence of nature.

That doesn't happen in nature.

Sure it does. It's like a hurricane, or a volcano.

I don't see the resemblance. I've never heard of such a thing.

Me either.

So how did she drown? If she was....

All that was left was her head. The rest of her was stone, so she kept her head under the water until-

Wasn't anybody watching?

Look, I'm here to get a gravestone. If you want the story read the newspapers. I'm sure they'll do a fine job.

But you're telling me your wife became stone? I'm supposed to just believe that?

It didn't happen overnight. Slowly, yes, her legs first and she couldn't move them anymore and then it worked its way up her body.

That's crazy.

It's the truth. I can show you.

You can show me?

Yeah, she's in the car, at least part of her is still in there.

Your dead wife is in the car?

A bit broken up, yes.

And you want to show her to me?

Well, yeah, she's a bit in pieces, we're about to finish spreading her remains-

I'm going to call security in exactly ten seconds and if you don't get the hell out of my face-.

## **The Alleys**

Iggy and Ernie passed a bottle of cheap bourbon among each other. The liquid slowly warmed their bellies. Iggy leaned lazily against the wall, while the other strained his eyes to read the newspaper with the little light he had coming in from the street lamp. They lay in the alley next to Herman's bar, where they could hear music and look out into Shadow Street. They were surrounded by buildings on both sides and with a night sky above them. Farther down, there was a dumpster. Sometimes Herman came out from his back door to give them a hot dog or some peanuts. A black dog wandered through now, sniffing for food.

What happened to the stars? Iggy asked. Ernie looked up from his newspaper and towards the sky.

I don't know, said Ernie, I think they're still there. He went back to his newspaper.

Have we done away with them?

With what?

The stars.

How can we do away with them?

I don't know, maybe they blew them up, like target practice for missiles.

You can't shoot a star, you moron. They are very far away.

Well, where did they go?

It's light pollution. What do you expect?

Why do we need so much light? It's nighttime, it's supposed to be dark and we're supposed to see the night sky.

Cities need light. Street lights, house lights, traffic lights.

It's because we're afraid of it, said Iggy.

Afraid of what?

Darkness.

Nobody's afraid of darkness Iggy, you need light in the city. That's the way it is.

For what? What do people need light for? Night's are for sleeping, or staring at the stars.

People do things at night. They read under a lamp. Hospitals run, busses run. We need it.

No. *we* don't need it. They need it.

We live here too.

I just don't think it's fair. People with houses, with light, warm in their beds, get to have light at night and because of them, I can't see the stars. That's supposed to be for everyone.

Ernie didn't say anything, but looked up again searching for a bright star. Iggy was right, there were none. Just black. He passed the bottle to his friend and they sat in silence until sleep overtook them.



## **The Rooster**

Mrs. Rose always woke with the call of the Rooster, prepared her coffee, and cooked breakfast for herself after the sun finished rising and the morning was bathed in light. The dog slept until ten or twelve, so the house was rather quiet for a few hours, only the faint voices of the public radio and sizzling of eggs and bacon could be heard. She didn't care much for the news or the outside world, but it eased her mind to listen to the changing inflections and tones of the reporters. She could have missed a war and not noticed, she'd probably missed a Depression or an assassination, but the world was just background at this point. The fluctuation of the world was communicated to her by the price of coffee and electricity. None of which mattered much anyway. She drank her coffee black and sat at the table staring straight ahead, remembering her husband reading the paper across from her, eating slowly and collecting crumbs on his tie that she would later brush off. That morning she didn't want to be alone and she called the Rooster in and guided him towards the table. The Rooster jumped up on the wooden chair as Mrs. Rose placed a plate of soft grains before him. Eat, she told the bird, it's good for you. Mrs. Rose watched for a time as the Rooster picked up the grains with his beak, turning his head side to side as he calmly took in the grain. Not long after Mrs. Rose was feeding the Rooster left over egg from her breakfast. She often did this now, invited the Rooster in for breakfast to accompany her on the long silent morning.

## **Sounds**

It's loud and penetrating. It could have been going anywhere, it could have been disappearing. On the train, nothing but ghosts, people whose lives are in transition. It's a long calming reddish sound. The train entered the house through the cracks on the door, penetrating the walls and seeping through, surrounding them. It happened almost every night. How does it get in here? Asked Avery. Sound is stronger than you think, said Leo. It goes through walls, closed windows and even through sleep. Avery took out her fishing net and began hoping from one side to the other, waving the net around attempting to catch the sound. Then she felt something heavy, something pull on her. I caught one, she said. Something flopped frantically inside, squirming to be free, twisting in on itself. Avery struggled with it, trying to control it and they both leaned forward to see. It was a strange looking insect with red eyes, but before they could touch it, it jumped out and disappeared.

## **Orchidia**

They're noisy, said Orchidia.

What are?

Children. They're very noisy, it's hard to keep things quiet when they're around.

Yeah, but then they grow up and you can talk to them, teach them things, said Tommy.

Maybe it was meant to happen and it is a responsibility the world is giving you.

It's not that easy, she said. I was thinking, what if I pass something horrible down to it?

What do you mean? Like a disease?

Yeah, that too, but I mean other things, bigger things.

Like what?

Like nightmares.

Those are not hereditary.

My grandfather fought in the war and they say that the impact of the bombs and the dead bodies and animals was so strong that years later, my father trembled in his bed at night. Meaning he passed on his nightmares to his own son. My father, a bar owner, has never been to war and he saw the bombs in his dreams, he saw mangled faces and limbs.

Maybe he saw it in a movie or from stories your grandfather told him.

My grandfather never talked about it.

I think you're exaggerating.

No, I see it sometimes. I have dreams of dogs with blood in their mouths and bodies with smoke coming out of them. That has to be it. I think I carry all that in my blood.

Orchidia, you have to stop smoking whatever your brother is giving you.

I don't do that anymore. Not since.

You're overreacting then. My grandfather was a baker and I don't have dreams about

cakes.

You're being an asshole.

No, I'm trying to make sense of what the hell you are saying.

I'm afraid of the magnitude of consequences, said Orchidia. Terrified of the responsibility of this life. Afraid of adding things that shouldn't be added to the equation.

I don't know that there is an equation, said Tommy. I don't know.

## **Sounds**

The ambulance siren whirled through the air, spiraled above the houses, then scurried beneath doors, flashed through the windows. Reflections lighting up the street for a second before disappearing. Leo looked out the window and saw red lights in the building across the street, where the woman lives with her husband, the writer.

## **Orchidia**

Her window looked out onto Shadow Street. It was not a particularly exciting view, but there'd be the occasional drunk, the passing cars or bus and sometimes a boy on a bicycle bringing food for the blind woman. This with the music of her headphones would help lull her to sleep. It was late and she was still awake.

Can the life inside her hear music? How does one know if this life belongs to this world? Or if it was a mistake? Are there mistakes? Is it a selfish act to bring new life where it is mostly dark? What if the life inside her turned out different? Sad? Does life begin in such fragile conditions, at the mercy of the world?

A man stepped into view across the street. He could be drunk, for he walked in circles for a bit and then stopped at the fire hydrant. Then something strange happened and the man fell to his knees and hugged and kissed the fire hydrant. He began thrusting his hips, slowly. She wanted to laugh, but the rhythm of his hips was somehow captivating, horrific. That's what it is. That's nature. That's life. A thrust of the hips.

She moved away from the window and melted into her headphones.

## **Sounds**

The siren whirled through the air spiraling, cutting the night with its white blades, passing above houses, then jumping in through the open windows, sneaking beneath doors, invading, like a rodent. Joseph Word saw his death as the masterpiece his wife was keeping him from completing.

## **The Work Day**

He'd grown vastly tired of walking the dirty streets, having homeless men ask for cigarettes or approach him with wild rambling about God and Jesus. His feet developed blisters and he had yet to sell one set of knives. The Manager recently called him the worst salesman in history. He believed that, but he had to work. Had he really no other choice? He took out the notebook and noted: Day 3. House #5.

He arrived at a door and knocked, expecting the worst, wanting to ask whoever opened the door if there was anything he should know about, if there were any mental illnesses, or corpses in the house or any drug addicts, but he couldn't do that. It was not in the script.

A man in a wheelchair answered the door. The man had a cane, he held a cane and also sat on a wheelchair. He used the stupid cane to get around, as if rowing a boat. Jesus fucking Christ. What the hell was the point of that?

Hello Sir, David spat out, you have been selected, pre-selected that is, for a special demonstration of SHARP knives.

Knives? The man asked, lifting his eyebrows.

That's what I said Sir. Knives. SHARP KNIVES. The company dedicated to the production of quality kitchen utensils.

The man let him in, but David was hesitant and looked in the house, searching for signs of chaos, a corpse, birds, broken windows, something on fire. Nothing. Just a clean living room, a television, and a food bowl with the name REX in red letters. He went in.

He walked towards the kitchen and set up his knives, beginning to talk to the man about the company and how it was founded by a brilliant man, a scientist with a fruit fetish.

After five minutes the man took out a small pill box from his pocket and threw a pill in his mouth. Goddamn it, thought David. It was hard not to assume that everyone was



medicated, in some sense or other. That no matter where he went people medicated themselves, numbed themselves, or drank themselves to a state of bliss, ingesting one substance or other. He thought about the word ingesting, injesting?... was it a word? If it was, it seemed fitting. To *in jest*, from the word jest, as in joke. To be IN joke. To always be joking with oneself. To be within a giant joke. Inside a joke.

He was pulled out of his day dream by a growl.

Damn it Rex, the man said to the dog, how did you get out? He's my guard dog, just stand still.

Still? How still?

Don't move a muscle.

David tried to stay still, but his body waned, tipping over like an old falling collapsing building, no longer able to hold. This old loon pushing himself with a cane as if he didn't understand the concept of *wheelchair*.

It's alright Rex. Calm down.

The wheelchair man rowed toward the dog, but the dog ran towards David. One moment the dog was a few feet away, the next moment the dog was in the air jumping at him and the next moment he was on the ground with the dog holding on to his shirt and dragging him around like a squeak toy.

The cripple rowed over with his cane and began poking at the dog with it. Stop, Rex, stop, he's our guest. David, being dragged on the ground and at close range of the fangs, finally understood why the man had the cane. It made sense now and he felt bad for judging the man. Finally the dog was distracted by a treat the cripple pulled out of his pocket and he told David. Run. Just run.

David grabbed his half opened suitcase and ran the hell out of there.

## **Avery**

My father sat in his chair. Elsa, the stray cat that'd wondered in one rainy night, sat purring in his lap. He didn't look up at me, kept his eyes on the floor. His house had worsened. Boxes, magazines, radios, old pairs of shoes, lamps, picture frames, all lay scattered around him.

Are you going to be ok?

I'll be fine. I have an entire world here.

That's what scares me.

My father's vast accumulation was somewhat astonishing. He'd kept every paper, every napkin, every found object that meant something or represented a moment. He had boxes of everyone in his life. One for his mother, his brother, Orson, my mother, and me.

Why do you have a box for me? I asked, I'm still here. All the others are dead.

You're leaving now.

But I'm not dead, why do you need a box for me?

Because this way, I always remember that you are still here. You never leave.

I went over to the box, picked it up, and walked out the door with it. Leo threw Elsa off his lap and ran after me.

What are you doing? He yelled. Come back!

I emptied the box into the trash bins outside. There were photos, toys, drawings, my letters to Santa, my clothes, an old watch.

You don't understand, he said.

Dad, I'm right here. I'm still alive. I'll be around.

I walked away from him then, leaving him standing by the trash bins, in his old robe. I knew he'd go through the trash and recover everything. In that way he would keep me, his

daughter at home, next to him, always.

## **The Runner**

I continued running for a few days, but wasn't sure how much it was actually helping me stay awake. Most of the time I ended up sleeping in the streets, dreaming all sorts of positions and waking up in the alleys, or the sidewalk, near the fire hydrant, or the playground. I never knew it was possible to fall asleep like that, while running. I'd wake up sometimes with my shirt off or my shoes untied. Lord knows what I looked like to any wandering person that happened by in the middle of the night. I could only hope that I was not very physical while dreaming.

I was growing tired of things. My life had become a game of running. I was running from myself, from my own cowardice, my own inability to reason with myself. So what if I was a sinner? Could hell really be that bad? I knew the running was futile and that eventually I'd have to face whatever it is I was running from. I would be discovered soon enough. If I no longer loved my wife, then why was the guilt so terribly heavy in my heart? Why does a sin in another dimension really matter? Is there no escape in this world? Are we really reduced to what is in front of us? Or Is it possible then to live two lives?

If God made the human body, would he deny it of its natural wonders? And would he make marriage so terribly dull?

## **The Alleys**

Iggy and Ernie spotted something out near the alley. It's a bicycle said Ernie, pointing. Did somebody leave it there? Asked Iggy. They got closer and saw that the object in question was indeed a bicycle. The seat was slightly torn, handle bars dirty, the chain a little rusted, but it seemed like a completely well-functioning bicycle.

It's a trap, said Iggy scratching his head, somebody's set it down so we try to steal it and then they come for us. It's called entrapment, the police do it all the time.

Ernie laughed. Stop being paranoid, he said, somebody must have left it. They both stood there for a while looking around, making sure no one was coming to accuse them of theft.

I never learned to ride one, said Iggy.

Are you serious? Ernie put his hands to his head in disbelief. How can you be forty years old and never have ridden a bike?

I just never learned.

Did nobody ever teach you? Said Ernie.

Well, you need a bike to learn how to ride a bike, and I never had one. My sister had one, but she locked it up because it's what she used to get to work.

Well, I'll be goddamned Iggy! Said Ernie, Let's teach you!

At that moment a woman came from behind them and they both jumped. Is that your bike? She said.

Maybe, said Ernie, is it your bike?

No, but I'd love to ride it, said the woman. Her eyes were a distant blue, and her shirt was torn at the sleeve.

Well it is our bike, said Ernie, and I am teaching this guy how to ride.

You don't know how to ride a bike? She asked Iggy.

No, said Iggy, is that so bad?

So Ernie leaned down, old, raggedy, and dirty, to pick up the bike from the floor and set it upright.

Alright, said Ernie, sit on the seat first.

Yes, sit on the seat, repeated the woman excitedly.

Iggy was nervous and his hands were trembling a little. He was afraid to put his feet up and so kept them planted on the ground.

Your feet go in the pedals now.

What if I fall over? Asked Iggy.

Break the fall with your hands, said the woman, it won't kill ya, I'm sure you've seen worse by the looks of you.

No, said Ernie, you won't fall, just keep your balance. We'll catch you if you fall.

Ernie and the woman stood on both sides of Ignacio, their hands ready to help keep the balance.

No, I don't want to, said Iggy.

Come on. They pleaded. Come on don't be afraid! Iggy took a deep breath and put both feet up, into the pedals and lost his balance almost immediately. He fell towards Ernie's side and caught in a panic he was unable to react, unable to catch himself or think to put his foot down, so he toppled over taking Ernie with him. Ernie was caught underneath the bicycle with an elbow to his ribs, yelling: You idiot! The woman was bent over laughing, slapping at her leg and stomping her foot with hysterics. Ernie yelled at the woman to stop laughing and help them. It took her a few moments to collect herself and she did, helping them both back up and ready to go again.

This time, said Ernie, try to keep your balance with the handle bars. Ready?

Iggy nodded. This time when he put his feet up, he was balanced and Ernie yelled: Pedal

now you bastard! And Iggy did, he pedaled somewhat awkwardly that he quickly toppled over. The woman said: You were so close, so close, you almost got it. He tried again and this time the bike went forward and there went the bike slowly, wobbly, down the alleyway where a dumpster sat in the distance. The woman and Ernie were cheering. There you go lad! Ernie yelled: Go Iggy, go faster!

Iggy, on the bike, his hands tightly gripping the handlebars, making his knuckles white yelled out: I'm doing it! I'm doing it! And he was so excited that he lost his concentration and fell over again, but this time everybody laughed and though caught underneath the bike Iggy yelled, I did it! I rode a bicycle!

## Joseph Word

The local newspaper reported that the onetime famous writer, Joseph Word, moved into the neighborhood. He was recently retired, poor, and suffering from rheumatic fingers and what appeared to be clinical and chronic depression. It was also the newspaper that suggested the poor man was experiencing a serious bout of writer's block since he'd not written anything in twenty years. This was of course based on false research, since Joseph's last book had in fact been eight years ago. When asked in a brief and informal interview why he chose to live here, Joseph Word simply responded: It seemed nice.

Much later it would be discovered, through Mrs. Word's testimony, that Mr. Word, now in his seventies, had tried to convince his wife to end his misery (that is, his life). He tried to convince her that she would get his pension and have the house to herself. Mrs. Word however had refused repeatedly, arguing that she did not want to risk hell, if in case there was a hell, by killing someone, even if it was a favor. Mr. Word had been too scared to point the gun at himself, to face the barrel seemed to terrify him, to be so close like that as if to kiss death, and he set it upon himself to try and end his own misery in a different, much more natural way. He wanted a death of literary merit, a death worthy of telling, something original, yet romantic and inspiring.



## **The Lion**

The Lion growled at the judgmental eyes of strangers. The makeup of man was of faulty chemicals in strange combinations, often causing strange reactions. He followed the ones that had his father's religious obsession and watched their faiths collapse into withered old prayers that dried in their mouths. The Lion often found prayers lying on the ground, thrown out of windows and left to rot in the sun, he found them writhing from the cold and being eaten alive by rats. He tried to save these prayers, but knew nature devoured them well. But if he could save a prayer and return it to its rightful owner, he would.

He often dreamed of his father and in those dreams his father would say: Son, Why have you betrayed me?

The Lion would respond: I have chosen nature over faith.

After his night shifts at the factory, the Lion wandered the turbulent streets as the sun rose, running into groggy traffic and the pendulum drunks keeping time with their sway. One man walked alone, looking through the trash bins of each house he passed. He scrounged and took out a few scraps from one of the bins when the Lion appeared to him. What do you want? He asked and the Lion's teeth showed the man how close he was to death and the man cried in relief.

## **Strength**

Herc was twenty six years old and weighed 290 pounds. Strength is knowing you're going to die and believing that the body is your only true connection to nature. Herc's face grew red, oily, and became bloated. His chest was robust. He could hardly ride a public bus without being stared at, pointed at, or asked for a photo. Kids would often stare in awe, and ask if he was a superhero. This, perhaps, made the humiliations and health problems, worth it. His body often became something separate from himself and he realized that digging had become a consolation. He took a shovel and dug a hole for himself in the ground, behind his house. Yes, neighbors watched with curiosity, observing him from their windows or hiding behind the gates or sneaking a peak above his fence. There was something about the rhythmic pace and the way the Earth opened itself up to him that calmed his jittery nerves, his twitching muscles. Her soil was the minerals of life; the sunlight twitched, the rain whispered, the ancient voices trapped inside it, talked to him. There was life there, in the forms of strange colored beetles and worms and tiny little plants. Inside the earth he felt close to something, history maybe, the dead decomposing souls, the earth's unsurfaced thoughts, and he wondered what his life meant and what it meant to be alive down there like any old corpse waiting for the worms.

## **The Lion**

Iggy laid on the ground in the alley looking up to the dark sky as footsteps approached. Is that you Ernie? He called out, but when he looked up he saw the Lion looking down on him. Rumors were that the Lion roamed the streets at night and found his victims in the weakest of men. He sat up. Hey Lion. The Lion roared and in that dark pitch, the wide opening universe of sound enveloped him. Iggy saw himself as a young boy playing baseball with his father. He knew he had to find him; his father was out there, in the world. What do you want Lion? He asked. The Lion heaved as if something was climbing out of his throat, escaping his body. He heaved and heaved and finally the Lion opened his mouth and spit a bicycle out of his mouth. The Lion walked away and Iggy picked up the bicycle and whispered to himself, I'll be back Ernie, and then he rode, awkwardly, clumsily, down Shadow Street and out of his life.

## **Joseph Word**

Joseph Word had concluded that the best way to end his life would be to hang himself. This seemed a still somewhat romantic and poetic way of doing it without causing much fuss or theatrics. His wife, however, was always smarter than he gave her credit for and she was usually home, with one eye glued to him (the other on the television programs, or her knitting, or her washing). The only time his wife would leave would be to the bingo nights at the senior center (something she'd been trying to convince Joseph to do for years). As soon as she left, kissing Joseph lightly on the cheek, he hurried, frantically looking through the house for the rope his wife used as a clothes line. His wife always knew to hide it in a different place. With his old eyes he hardly found the rope before his wife returned complaining about the lousy card. If he managed to find it before her arrival his worthless arthritic hands could not tie a knot very well, let alone tighten one correctly and efficiently. If he managed the makeshift knot, then it was a matter of getting the rope over the stair well, where he'd be high from the ground. Several times, if not often, his wife walked in when Joseph had managed both the knot and putting the knot over the stairwell and she'd find him kicking his legs, hanging from a badly tied knot. His wife called the ambulance every time; so at least, they provide him with sedatives (Hello, yes, it's me again, my husband is hysterical and he is trying to kill himself.) She would say the same thing every time. It was a usual occurrence that the paramedics, (often the same lads to answer the calls) stayed for coffee or hot chocolate, quietly talking as Joseph coughed on the floor with his hands holding his bruised neck.

## **The Bar Owner**

Herman swept the glass pieces near the outside of the bar, the cracked sidewalk, where a drunk had broken a bottle on another man's head the night before. The reason for the fight, as he had understood it from their mumbled anger, was due to one of them getting frisky with the other's girl. He had learned long ago however, that it was best not to get between two drunks fighting. He left that to the police. Fighting, after all, was a primal urge, one wrapped to the teeth in everyday niceties. But it was always lurking, looking for a chance to emerge.

The streets were calm this day, the sun cloaking the beaten gray streets with a little golden light. The fighting drunks had once been common men, but transformed nightly with a self-administered enemy, they became beasts and embodied this primal nature. In a slurred clumsy way. This enemy was provided, after all, by Herman himself. He knew the irony of this, but what other way to make a proper living, than to feed them what they wanted? What they thought they needed? The simple calm in the torrent of their miserable lives. Was this immoral? Had he betrayed himself? His fellow suffering man? Herman had been an alcoholic himself once and remembered the brewery of pleasure within the darkest hours of the night. One was invincible, except against ones' own grief, of course. No lover can ever give such assurance that life is worth it the way the drink does when your body needs it.

In this world the hunt is always on and the prey is anyone who walks the streets vulnerable, heartbroken, or lost.

Herman had stopped sweeping now and leaning on the broomstick, staring off into the distance, where the mountains were barely visible. He felt that part of himself had been asleep for some time now. Was he capable of killing a man? When he was young he'd been in a fight. He doesn't remember now, but he remembers his fist knocking at the teeth. That is what painters must feel like, thought Herman. That is what the masters achieve with years of grace

at the brush, a feeling of ecstasy in making the internal external, in seeing immediately what is inside by the way it changes the surroundings. Fists are the paint brushes of the lost masses. The way of communication of those left at the bottom without words, or with rage. Herman began sweeping again. These streets, thought Herman, were complex universes.

Herman bent down to pick up the broken glass and put it in the trash bin, when he heard what sounded like loud footsteps. Herman took the bucket and the broom inside, where a young man was drinking and playing solitaire on the table.

Hey Herman, the young one said, let me have another.

Herman sat down with the young one as he set the beer down in front of him. The young one didn't meet his eyes.

What you doing here son? In the middle of the day?

I don't know, sometimes it's nicer here, than out there, even in the day time. There's music here.

What you running from?

Nothing.

I hope nothing, because they'll find ya here. They always do.

I know, but don't worry, no one will look for me, the young one said. Plus, I'm leaving these parts soon, I can't take it.

Is that right?

Yeah, I want to go away from here, I want to work for a living, like a proper man.

Son, what's keeping you here?

I don't know Mr. Herman.

What's the fix?

Oh, a little of everything.

You know sometimes leaving is a little bit like dying. You have to accept that you don't

know what'll come next, you got to leave yourself behind and if you can't do that, you'll never go anywhere.

Herman stood up and left the young one to his drink, but as he tucked the chair into the table he said:

That one is on the house and then I want you to get the hell out of here and find yourself something better to do.

## **Orchidia**

Songs are hiding places, she said, and I can hide in this song, the way people hide in their houses.

Her brother looked at her with curious eyes. His sister was not one to speak in riddles. What are you hiding from Orchid? He asked.

Everything. Because life is not just out there, it's in here too. Life is in here. Orchidia pointed to herself. This is life, this body, this organism, not whatever is out there.

You're being very cryptic. If I know anything about teenage girls at this point, is that they are very good at it and I'm usually lost as to what the hell they mean.

If I told you that I had to decide something really big about life what would you tell me?

I would ask you to clarify.

I just need you to help me decide what to do because I don't know what is right and what is wrong and I am running out of time.

Orchid, if you're saying what I think you're saying, my answer is: don't get too emotional. It's not a life yet...

Well when is a life a life?

When it's here.

No.

Ok ok. When it kicks. It has to kick, her brother said. Does mom know?

Yes, she knows.

What did she say?

She said I was a whore, but that she'll give consent.

Consent to what?

To the other possibility, to the thing no one likes to say out loud.



How long you have to decide?

I don't know, one more week, maybe.

## **The Rooster**

A few kids gathered empty beer bottles from the trashcans, collected as many as they could and got together one Sunday evening near the Rooster's fence. There he is, said one kid, pointing at the Rooster that wandered calmly on the grass. Hey bird, said another kid, catch this! The boy took an empty beer bottle and hurled it over the fence. The bottle spun in the air, refracting the light from the moon and the Rooster looked up and watched the bottle crash onto the floor about a foot away from him. When the bottle broke in pieces the Rooster began to run and utter a high pitched sound. The Rooster ran zigzagging his way across the yard, avoiding the falling glass bottles that came one after the other like small bursts of light. He ran to his wooden house and waited until the kids ran out of bottles to throw.

## **The Runner**

Ten nights had passed without me having a good night's sleep and seven of those nights I had ran through the neighborhood like a crazed animal. My clothes were loose, my pants barely held up by the belt around my waist. The wife would ask every morning why I looked the way I looked and why I hadn't slept in the bed. I don't know, I said, been having some trouble sleeping again.

Little did I know then that the wife had a knack for spying and had, the night before, followed me out during my run. She watched me curl up near one of the alleys and heard as I mumbled in my sleep, probably squirming on the floor. What she might have thought of such an odd sight, I can only imagine.

Surely it was that very moment that she began working on the divorce papers, or perhaps she thought about me for a moment and wondered if she had not driven me to such extreme situations with her dryness and monotonous life. Perhaps she looked back at the last two years of marriage and realized that we'd seldom laughed together and hardly made love. Or perhaps she merely dismissed it as the actions of a madman and gave it no other thought.

## **Orchidia**

The Lion's teeth are the mirrors of the world. Orchidia? He roared. Like the flower? Yes, I said, like the flower, lives on light and water. I saw myself as pray and predator. In my belly, there's a world already. In the Lion's euphonious roar, I found the thoughts I'd been looking for, as it turns out, they were not made for words. It was more like melodies layered with dark color and breath. I reached my hand in his mouth for his heart. A puling beating fury. He understood when I kept my hand there for a moment; holding on to his precious life with my fingers, trying to understand what life was, what it meant to carry life. I asked the Lion if he knew about the life inside the body. It was then I climbed into his mouth and hid in his belly for just one moment to think in darkness and flesh. When he spit me out, gurgling like a newborn child, I landed on my back covered with his might and he left me there to dry under the sunlight and think and think.

## **The Alleys**

It was evening, the time that children went out to play, when teenagers smoke on the steps talking of their wild dramas and others ride bicycles with their minds trailing behind like a kite. During this time the homeless, free of the sun's scrutiny, emerge from the alleys and the crack houses and behind dumpsters to engage with the world. Herman's bar opened, his lit sign stinging with acid-like color and already women and men trickled in, eager for the smoky air by the pool tables and the jukebox. Leo watched the action from his window.

A homeless man stood on the street corner staring towards the distance. His dog attracted some attention of a few neighborhood kids that extended their hands to pet its head. The dog wagged his tail and sniffed the dirty palms for food, licking their sticky fingers.

The kids laughed and hugged his dog, while he stood awkwardly to the side. The man took out a deck of crumpled cards. Hey, do you all like magic? He said. They looked at each other and nodded. The man began, shuffling, passing cards through his fingers. Pick a card, he said. One kid picked a card and the man shuffled it back into the deck. Is this your card? The kid shook his head no. Is this your card? The kid shook his head no. This went on two more times. No. No. The trick had betrayed him. The children laughed and pointed. One of them took the cards and threw them on the floor. The man leaned to pick them up as they teased him. As it got dark, the man's dog began to bark while the children left him standing there, as his skin turned to dust and his ashes spread across the neighborhood. Children caught the ash in their hands as if it were snowflakes, teenagers curiously snorted it, causing their eyes to roll back in their heads and their brains to light up with color, their limbs to go limp. The others, some already familiar with its magic, caught it in their hands and held it in their palm like a fragile dying bird ready, at any moment, to take off. The man's dog, seeing his owner scatter into the darkness, barked straight into the night.

## Leo

Ramose shadows sketch themselves on the pavement as fireflies glide frightfully in the dark. Leo staggers home with red eyes and the back of his mind missing; lamp lights hover over him, illuminating the sweating fury of the fluster. He catches a firefly with his hands, holds it in his palm, and continues home.

*Wild Firefly. 50 years after mom's death.*

## **Orchidia**

I want to hear something that will make me disappear, she said grinning as her brother thought deeply about this. I got just the album, he said. I'm tired of thinking, she said, I just want to float for awhile. Her brother stood up and put a CD into the player and pressed play. Orchidia closed her eyes. Have you decided Orchid? No, she said, no one seems to give me any real advice. They just say I'm too young, that I need to be careful, that I have options. The music began to kick in. She felt her body melt into the carpet, dissolve into the music. You're very young Orchid, I just want you to be ok. Do you need the money? I haven't decided yet, she said. The music rose, washing her away into some distant shore.

## **Joseph Word**

Joseph Word's next plan involved jumping in front of moving cars. The idea was that he'd wait behind the bushes near his houses, wait and wait, until a car came down the street. Then, it was a matter of timing it perfectly so that he'd jump out with just enough time that the driver cannot react and hits him. Yet, because of his weak legs and knees, he was not very fast and the drivers usually saw the awkward figure jumping in front of them. One car, an old Plymouth, did not stop in time and actually managed to knock Joseph over onto the concrete, but it had been going so slow that it hardly did any damage. Penny came home to find her husband groaning in pain near the sidewalk. She sighed, went over to him and took him inside.



## **Strength**

Strength is believing that the labor of life itself is beautiful. Herc, was thirty years old and weighed 310 pounds. His whole being felt heavier, even to himself, like his body itself was a burden, like the soul itself had expanded. His hair had begun falling off and he looked older, with his skin feeling like rubber and his mind often wandering outside of himself, sitting in a chair and staring out the window while he did his workout. Other times his mind wandered around the neighborhood, watching the children as they played while his body pulled the weight. But he was the champion and he would become the strongest man in the world. His past time of digging holes had grown and he had now expanded, offering to dig graves at the cemetery and he began then, to work, at nights, as a grave digger. Strength was now harder to define than he first thought, it contained layers, contained a weight he could not lift, it contained that which he'd never seen or experienced.

As time went on Herc became slower. His heart, any doctor would say, was not very strong. He began losing his breath. A reporter once took a photo of Herc sweating, looking dehydrated, in a half dug grave. The caption read: SHADOW STREET SUPERHERO DIGS HIS OWN GRAVE. Herc was used to the reporters by now, there was not much news in the town. Eventually they would lose interest in him. But perhaps next time they would catch a photo when he was saving a child or pulling a bus out of a ditch, both things he often dreamed of doing.

## **The Blind Woman**

A fly hummed nearby searching for an exit. There was a distant knock on the door, but the sound was lost to Leo. The fly gagged, choked by the thick filth in the air, the damp wood. It flew from the living room into the window, crashing against the glass again and again until it gave up and made its way into the hallway, flying over the pile of old shoes. It stopped on an old leather boot, got bored and hummed towards the bathroom, landed on the sink and clumsily scouted the bristles of Leo's toothbrush, until it sprung up and landed on the surface of the water where the old man lay, eyes open, submerged in the bathtub. Leo stared at the jumping black dot above the surface. He punched the water to scare it away and the fly leapt up, going in circles until, in dumb desperation, it spotted a little opening in the window and disappeared into the sky. Leo submerged himself once more spilling water over the edges and onto the floor where the wooden planks were invaded by termites. A termite queen, fresh from the mate, ballooned near the bathtub, her ovaries expanding like wild moons about to burst as the soldiers and the workers organized themselves for war. Leo raised his head just above the water to breathe, while a caste of termite soldiers waited for commands, bumping heads, going in circles, anxious for the attack. Along the walls, a small mouse squeezed in through a tiny hole and sniffed around for food, going in and out of sight.

Another knock on the door. The sound reverberated throughout the old structure, where the termites gathered and the mouse played with its young. The old woman at the door let herself in. She was holding a cat in one arm. Leo! She encountered the cluttered living room. She tripped over boxes and newspapers, stumbled over objects. She moved her free hand in front of her trying to feel her way through. Leo! Leo are you here? Leo, she continued to call, standing like a child, afraid to go further. Then a mouse came out of the walls, towards her, brushing her leg. The cat squirmed and jumped out of her grip, the old woman tried to take a step, tried to

run, but tumbled down to the floor landing on a stack of magazines that crumbled like a mountain beneath her weight, causing a deep rumble throughout the house. Leo felt the thud and jumped out of the tub, splashing water everywhere as the termite queen laid a dozen eggs. Leo, I know you are here, yelled a woman's voice. Leo emerged from the bathtub putting on his robe and grabbing the plunger next to the toilet and carrying it like baseball bat over his right shoulder, ready to swing at any moment. He called: who's there? Who's there? He walked into the living room and saw the old woman's legs up in the air, her body buried under rubble, her lips moving in prayer. And, is that you Leo? Is that you? There's a mouse, how can you live like this? And Leo: Oh, lady, why are you on the floor? The termite soldiers beneath him were given orders to destroy, the workers continued their labor, and the exhausted queen was mounted again, while the mouse was behind a hole in the wall smelling for food. Leo put the plunger down and approached the old woman helping as she struggled to get up. The old woman finally stood up and straightened her long skirt. Her eyes were lost in a white fog. He remembered this woman years ago, when he first moved in, as a mother of three boys. And the old woman said: Leo, I'd brought your cat. Someone told me that was your cat. Will you walk me back? Leo sighed and said, come on old woman, I will lead you out and he grabbed her by the arm and led her out passed the stacks of stuff, the old lamp, the cheap paintings, the stacks of newspapers, and he opened the door, and the light swept in, warming the wood for the termites and warming the tiny paws of the mouse as Leo walked the blind woman out of his house and to her porch.

## **The Rooster**

The Rooster was often spotted awake late in the night, watching out from behind the gate, pacing from side to side. People said he was the night watchman, others said he suffered from insomnia, a rare disorder in birds. Yet people were enamored by the feathered creature and found themselves trying to take photographs of him as he threw his fits or chased after pigeons in the yard.

## Leo

Leo rummaged through boxes day in and day out. The days passed in him wandering through the hills of newspapers, old objects, photographs. He opened Rora's box and found a dress labeled with a tag: *Aurora's dress worn twenty years after mom's death*. She wore it once at the park. He looked at her old shoes, the lock of hair he collected before she lost it all. Is it possible to recreate a moment and get trapped in it forever? Is life just a big looping moment? He pulled the dress on over his clothes and put on her shoes. He walked the way Rora used to walk across the living room and by the window where she and Avery would watch the world. The sunlight that managed to get in through the sides of the curtains, created a dusty glow that allowed just enough light to see. If one becomes what one has lived, then he is everyone he'd ever met, hardly a man of his own, just a conglomeration of moments. He took his camera and took a photo of himself in the dress. *Leo: 51 years after mom's death*.

## Orchidia

Can you hear this? You're in there, I know. We need to talk about something. It's very important. First, let me describe to you, where we are as we walk, so you can see some things. This is Shadow Street. Some people will tell you it's haunted, others, like me, know it's just a wild place. This red brick building here is Herman's bar, these are the windows where you can often look in to see the men drinking. These big red doors are to call attention. My father always said that a red door means something special. The house across the street that's Herc's house, he was very strong once, but in his backyard you can see that he digs holes in the ground and he hides there from something, I'm not sure what. He's so strong though that once he walked the entire block holding a huge rock over his head. Everybody clapped at this. Next to Herc's is Leo's house. Leo is an old man and had a wife that died from some disease. He lives there now with his house full of all sorts of things. Oh, and that tree there, that's a special tree, it's been growing for years and its roots, some people say, reach all the way down to the core of the earth. Kids have always climbed that tree as a way to prove they are strong. That house there belonged to an old lady who was blind, but, people said, she could hear even the smallest noise. So this is Anima Street now and we're headed towards the park where kids play. That house there, that's that crazy man's house, the suicidal man that bring the ambulance in at least once a week. The park is small, but it's real special. See there? It's a young boy, playing with the sand. I don't know why he doesn't have shoes on, it's kind of cold. That little girl over there? With the dirty cheeks, that's his sister and their mom stays home when they are outside. A mom is like your guardian angel, but sometimes they get lost themselves. You can tell because they always have the bags under their eyes, from not being able to sleep. Then over there, by the metal turtle are the big kids; they smoke cigarettes and mostly talk about basketball. They think they are bigger than they are. That man there with the tattered clothes and ripped

yellowing jeans is a lost man. They are what we call homeless. There is another one there, sitting on the bench reading a torn magazine. That one over there, he collects cans because you can get money for them and he drives that grocery cart around. I don't know if they are all homeless. A home is where you live and where you grow. And a house is like your skin; it covers and you can hide in it. Sometimes bad things happen there and sometimes good things. You can get lost there, certainly. The rain gets in, if you don't take care of it. Eventually your mind seems to be like your house, when you get old enough. My mother says if you have a clean house, your mind will have positive energy. I am your house right now, in some ways. There are some kids on bikes; a bicycle is a great invention. It makes you feel like you're flying and sometimes you can go so fast that you think you're going to disappear. I bet you would have been wonderful at it. You would have been faster than anybody. Listen, You musn't cry, these things happen. I'll remember you and you'll come back to me when I'm ready. You want a bicycle? You think it looks like fun? It can be, but this is only the surface. Underneath it all, there is so much more that I cannot possibly explain to you. The lonely people, the way we scrape and hurt each other. You shouldn't be sad for them, they'll be ok. You'll be ok too, you won't feel a thing.

## Avery

After I left, it got worse and worse. He continued collecting. Newspapers of the day, anything the found near the house. He kept an apple core once and put it in a small jar, labeling it: *A piece of the earth 45 years after mom's death.*

Your grandma could be in that piece of apple, he said, it's possible.

I doubt it dad.

It's absolutely possible, she went into the earth and this apple could have contained some part of her.

Or maybe mom's in that apple core too right?

Now you're mocking me.

Dad has never really answered me about my grandmother's death. I still don't really know what happened. Dad sleeps inside different boxes, sometimes inside the box labeled, "mother." He does this and then wakes up with his legs cramped and his spine hurting.

Here is proof, he said holding the jars with the butterflies, that one can control certain things.

I'm not sure exactly what it proves Dad.

It proves that beauty can be extracted from chaos, and owned.



## **The Runner**

I was sipping coffee and staring out the window with the lights off. Outside, it was nighttime and from my room upstairs I watched the stray cats and the passing cars. Had I been reduced to a man afraid of his own instincts? Ashamed of his passion? And what happened to the feelings he'd had for his wife? Life was erasing him, making a joke of his faith. He was going to go to hell for something he could not control.

The wife walked in and asked me why I was drinking coffee so late. I don't know, I said without turning around. Her reflection was visible through the window and I could see her worried face. She had no idea what I went through for her. How I tried to resist the temptation so as not to be unfaithful to my vows. She could not possibly understand the constant battles that she caused in my life. The ungrateful wench. I stood up and foolishly announced I'd be going out for a walk. It would not be long after that, walking down Shadow Street that sleep would overtake me and cause me to fall flat on my face and enter, almost immediately, a dream with a curvaceous brunette that possessed a certain graceful skill with her hands that soon began cutting through my skin. When I awoke there was a dog attacking me, his teeth pulling at my shirt. Who would of thought it would be possible to fall into sleep while walking or running. I was god's old joke. The worst part would be that I'd find out later that my wife had followed again that night, had watched with intrigue as I slowly fell victim to sleep and would stand by as the dog attacked me and perhaps walked away as his fangs tore through my shirt and dragged me a good two feet. How funny she must have found it, the sight of me like a rag doll, between the teeth of a dog. Well she'd never understand, for her conscience breeds nothing. She'll never know the guilt of constant sin.

## **The Bar Owner**

Herman had owned only one necktie his entire life and tonight called for it. He stood in front of the mirror fixing it and going over in his head how he would greet Mr. Word. His small apartment above his bar, rattled every time the train passed, or with a strong breeze, and more so if a helicopter or airplane flew by. After years in the place he'd gotten used to it, but tonight, it made him jittery. He wanted to make a good impression, to make a friend maybe, perhaps even invite Joseph Word over to the bar for a few. This was the closest he'd come to going on a date in years. He combed the few hairs left in his head to the side and went downstairs and out the bar.

Shadow Street was dimly lit, one of the street lights had gone out. Herman heard the voices in the alleys. He turned on Anima St. And walked towards the small brick house he knew was Joseph Word's. The house had a front porch with a lamp and a table up front. Next door, Herman caught glimpse of the Rooster through the fence.

He came up to the steps of Joseph Word's house and hesitated for a moment, nervously playing with his tie. He knocked on the door and waited, hearing the slow footsteps of someone approaching the door. Joseph Word himself had answered.

Mr. Word?

Yeah?

My name is Herman, just thought I'd drop by and welcome you to the neighborhood.

Thanks. You live around here?

Yeah, pretty much my whole life, up on Shadow Street. I own the bar there.

There was an awkward silence. Joseph Word had some bruises on his body and looked rather disheveled.

I'm a big fan of your work, said Herman.

Is that right?

Yeah, your books helped me through some tough times.

Glad to hear it.

You working on anything new?

Yeah, been trying to do this one project for a few weeks now. Nothing seems to work. I always get pulled back into life.

Pulled back into life?

Yeah, you know, the wife, she don't like the idea very much. She wants to have me around another couple of years.

Huh? What is it a new book?

No it's more of a personal project.

What is it about?

It's about death.

Tough subject.

Indeed, indeed. Won't you have a drink Mr. Herman?

The house was warm and cluttered. Books were neatly arranged in shelves, but others were thrown about the room, their pages demarcated, paragraphs highlighted and underlined. In the middle of the room there was a wooden coffee table. Along the walls there were framed photos of white rabbits, each with a name written on the frame: Chloe, Skipper, Snow. Herman got close to the photos, squinting his eyes, making sure he was seeing correctly. The rabbits seemed oddly human-like, they had small bows or a little hat. One had a knitted sweater on.

My wife, said Joseph Word, she had a thing for rabbits. Used to own a whole bunch. They were her children, one might say.

Is your wife here?

She's out at Bingo.

What happened to all of them?

The rabbits? They died.

But they reproduce incredibly fast, I imagine you'd have an endless supply, Herman said as a kind of joke.

Yeah, I put a stop to that, Joseph Word said, one grows tired, Mr. Herman, of rabbits running around the house, jumping on you while you sleep.

What happened to them?

I got a nice bottle of Scotch. Won't you join me?

Joseph brought out the bottle of Scotch and Herman followed him outside to the porch to drink. They sat together and talked under the night.

## **The Work Day**

David walked up Shadow Street carrying his black suitcase holding the knives. He contemplated which door to knock on. He needed a sale, the Manager was already pressuring him about it. He'd been around the area for a few days and had had no luck with sales, had met insane people, poor people, lost people, and some very strange dogs. There were long weeds growing out front, the door was scratched and splintered and the windows appeared to be boarded up with newspapers. The house's color seemed a pallid, worn out shade. This is as good a house as any. Day 4. House #7 He sighed and knocked on the door. The door opened slightly and a face looked through a slit.

Yes?

Hi my name is David and I'm here from SHARP Co. You have been chosen to have a special demonstration on our fabulous kitchen utensils.

The man behind the door was still hiding in the darkness of his house, David could only see his eyes and part of his face. From this he guessed he was about eighty years old, or somewhere around there. The man opened up his door and David could see behind him great massive hills of stuff and stacks of newspapers and photo albums.

You want to show me what?

Knives, I'm here to demonstrate knives.

I don't think I need any knives.

You'll be surprised.

Well come in then and make it quick.

David walked in and could tell immediately he was in some different dimension where Time was compacted and tied down. The air felt thick and damp. There was no room really in the kitchen but the man cleared out some space for David to set up his knives.

I'm Leo.

Well Leo, you got a very... interesting place.

This is my whole life

You a collector?

I collect things that matter to me. This, for example, is my brother Orson.

Leo pointed at a box that contained what appeared to be a wild assortment of junk.

That's your brother?

Yes. My brother.

David looked around, there were other boxes, there were jars with bugs and insects, there were magazines and papers piled up. Everything was covered in dust. David saw a box called Mother and leaned over to look over it. All he could make out was an old shoe.

That's my mother, said Leo.

Yes, I see that.

I don't go out much anymore...

What is that smell Mr. Leo?

What smell?

David moved on, he could not be here all day. He needed a sale. He began talking about the knives and how they were invented by a butcher in the outskirts of Germany who liked to cut his meat fast so he could get back to the many chores his wife had for him. As David prepared the demonstration of the knife and began discussing the rather unique and precise material used to make the knife handles, a rat emerged from a hole in the wall. David froze. It was the biggest rodent he had even seen in his life and he thought that the man too would be terrified by this, but instead the man said calmly not to worry that was only Bob.

Bob is it?

I name them sometimes so as not to get them confused. There are some that bite, but

Bob is a friendly one.

You mean there's more than one?

Well yeah, have you seen the look of this place? I think they're smelling your food. Do you have food in there?

I carry fruit and steak for the demonstration.

Oh oh. There you go.

Another rat came out of the wall, slightly smaller than the first. Leo got close to one of the rats and kicked it slightly with his slipper.

Go on you beast! Not when company's around.

David could not move, all he could see now as he tried to continue was Leo with tiny rat eyes. He tried to continue with the knife handles, but he kept turning to the direction of the wall.

Don't worry, said Leo, they're gone for now, but I'd make it quick if I were you, they'll come back soon. They got a vicious appetite.

I'm about done. David packed up his suitcase, arranged his knives carefully and walked out the door, stepping over magazines, shoes, old bicycle parts and who knows what else. That day he took the knife kit and threw it in a river, watching it flow downstream until it disappeared.

## **Dogs**

On the far end of Anima Street, there was a man that had a dog named Aeon. The man had once been a father and once filled with dreams of the stage, but was now late in his life and living alone. His best friend Aeon was a black lab, a puppy rescued from the shelter. The dog's greatest trick was that he learned to turn himself into a shadow. He was able to fit in places only shadows could get into and sneak up on people when they didn't expect it, as they stood on street corners, bus stops, or walked down the alleys.

When his owner died, Aeon was left alone and let to his own devices to survive. He roamed the streets, played with the children in the playground, barked and chased after birds, sniffed the knees of old ladies at the bus stop and was 'shy' in front of them so they'd throw him some food. The dog scratched at Herman's back door, but the dog knew when to hide and how to discover the crevices of the world. He knew there was an entire world between the visible and the invisible and that only in shadow could one enter those realms. He slept usually near a dumpster. In the alleys, he wandered as a shadow and entered people's peripheral visions and minds. Aeon would wonder under the moonlight, on the wall of the alleys, behind dumpsters or under cars. Even after the Aeon was gone, lost finally to old age and hunger, his shadow remained roaming the streets, appearing under dark nights and in the back alleys where Herman threw away his trash. When children saw the shadow they'd attempt to run after it, but quickly the shadow would hide and never be truly found.



## **The Runner**

I leaned on a light pole, telling a stranger on the street my personal problems. Poor bastard. It wasn't like me to open up like that. I figured the man seemed welcoming, or at least bored. Later I would struggle with the morality of offering the man money to listen to my problems. The man would spare me the internal debate by asking. The stranger seemed amused at first, with his one eye looking off to the side and his breath smelling of booze.

I can't fall asleep because when I do, I cheat on my wife.

How do you mean?

There are women that come into my dreams and make me cheat on my wife. They seduce me.

The raggedy man bent over laughing. The smell of fried food and sweat emanated strongly every time he moved. I noticed his elbows were powdery, white, and dry. The skin of his hands was dry and cracked.

You afraid of a couple dream girls? Boy, if them dream girls didn't exist most of the male species be dead.

You see them too?

Of course I do, every now and again, when I get so lucky.

You don't understand, it happens to me as soon as I close my eyes.

Damn, well, I'm not sure what you see is the problem.

The problem is that I have a wife and every time I close my eyes I cheat on her and now, I can't even look at her.

But in your dreams right?

Yes, in the dreams.

Oh, you talking about adultery. Now that's a sin.

That's what I'm saying. Is it a sin in the dream too?

Do I look like a man of God?

NO. But you're the closest thing I have to a friend.

I don't got friends. Listen, it's not like you can avoid sleep.

That's what I've been trying to do.

Well, no man, you been going about this the wrong way. You gotta confront them bitches, find out what they want. Theys a part of you anyway. Everybody you dream is only a different version of yourself. So in some ways, you're not really committing adultery, yous just masturbating. Ha Ha

How do I stop it?

Hell if I know. What the hell do I look like?

A man that knows his fair share of nightmares.

Well ain't that the truth. That don't mean I know how to stop them.

There must be something. You have to help me.

Confront them, confront your dreams and find out what they want.

I thought for a moment. How am I supposed to do that?

For that, you must wake up in dream, you must be aware, in order to find the truth. Next time you see one of them hunnies, before that girl take off her bra, you tell yourself to wake up.

By the way man, you got any spare change?

Sure, I said, looking into my pocket and pulling out a few quarters.

## **The Bar Owner**

Herman looked forward to Sundays with Joseph, although Joseph's mood would often fluctuate and hit such highs and lows. Last week Joseph tried to break a bottle over his own head, but the bottle didn't break, since Joseph had grown weak in his old age. Then another night Joseph had tried to use a piece of broken glass on his own veins and Herman had to stop him. That same night Joseph tried to run out in front of a car. Herman did not mind so much, he supposed it kept things interesting, kept him on his feet. He suspected Joseph was not a happy man. There was something odd in Joseph, like a detachment, a severe detachment. Sundays had always been difficult to endure at the bar, especially in the winter months, so Herman didn't mind at all.

Brought some aged Scotch, said Herman. Been keeping this bottle for twelve years now. My brother gave this to me when he went to the Service. I promised I wouldn't touch a drop of it, until he got back.

Decorated soul is he?

Very decorated, I don't know if it made any difference, if it helped the transition any, that is. As far as I know, they don't check for medals at the gate.

When I was younger I feared the idea that everything disappears when you die, now it's not so bad, says Joseph.

Herman served two glasses of Scotch and went inside the house to get some ice. Every time he walked by the photographs of the rabbits he had to stop and got a strange feeling.

You know, there's something about Sundays, everything is still, and quiet, it irks me to hell because you know there are bad things happening out there.

The day the beasts rest.

But they're out there, sleeping nearby. You know things are waiting to bubble up. The Yellow House stirs, the homeless moan with hunger, the Rooster crows at odd hours, there are wars being planned, murders being imagined, corruption being handed in a hand shake. I hate Sundays.

Herman takes a drink, the liquid burns through his throat.

Damn, that's nice Scotch though, said Herman.

Joseph raises his glass to make a toast. Herman meets it and sees a few scars on Joseph's wrists, his skinny undernourished arms.

I have a brother, said Joseph, he lives up North. He's a farmer, chickens and cows. There were many times I envied him. He names his cows, can you believe that? Don't concern yourself with the rest of the world, Joseph, he'd say, it'll consume you. This is your skin, and what you touch is the only thing that's real. Son of a bitch is right. What good does it to waste your life trying to write truth, trying to capture truth? It is not to be captured.

Your brother sounds like a sound fella, said Herman.

I'm not afraid of death. I'm afraid of not dying soon enough.

But there is something to be said about what you do and the need for it. We need art to examine ourselves. It's the best damn mirror we got.

I hope so Herman, I don't like to think that I've failed. Maybe I just pointed the mirror at the wrong thing. Ha Ha Ha.

Failure is a big word, Joseph.

No bigger than the rest really.

Herman watched Joseph's eyes glow in the dim light. Something about the eyes reminded him of Maury and the soft spoken painful existence he led for the last years of his life.

## Leo

Leo paced in circles inside his living room, spiraling as if tethered to some invisible glowing center. The old televisions and radios, stacked in mountains of old appliances were producing static. The world was becoming blurry. His glasses, smudged with his own fingerprints made the light that entered his eyes nebulous. Swirls of dust rose from old furniture and appeared as a white haze. Leo was surrounded by stacks of newspapers and bicycles, old paintings, feathers from disemboweled pillows, couches, and chairs. And among all this Leo had managed to mold out a narrow circular path so that he may walk freely in circles without anything hindering the transgression. This created a void. What is beyond Shadow Street? It's been so long to remember clearly, the way the city is, the way people walk and greet each other. He was trapped in a static loop as he climbed and slipped among the deranged topography of memory. As the old man paced a young boy was walking down the street, towards Leo's house. The boy, named Max, freckled and pink, stopped upon the old man's walkway, contemplating something, turning red as his curiosity expanded. During lunchtime he had heard that the old man collected everything inside his house, that piles of treasures stretched out to the ceiling, and that rats ran freely. Max, unable to resist peaked in through the window and saw the old man circling, like a gray planet in orbit, around some white sun. The glare off of the televisions, and the glass jars, and the broken mirrors and lamps refracted off each other to create little stars of light across the room. The boy's eyes opened wide at everything contained there: the dead bicycle, piano, the televisions and radios, the telescope, jars filled with sand and butterflies, newspapers and shiny clocks without hands and photo frames without photos in them, and all of it covered in this silver dust, as the old man orbited, talking to himself inside the dirty universe only he could see.

## Strength

Herc, now a man of 400 pounds, listened to his own heart, a lost fluttering sound, uneven, and barely there. His elbow was a planet out of orbit, his skin stretched out leather, hands plump with fluid. The spine was weakened. He had been born a whale in an ocean of fish and he knew that no matter what he did the fish would always see him differently. Yet, he understood the mythical nature of whales and thought that that was the only life for him: the mythical one.

Herc began to wonder more and more about the mythical world and began asking around what legends were made out of. Some people said beauty, others said bone dust, some said magic. An old man on the street said, a legend was just someone that gave people hope in humanity.

And one day, as Herc tried to figure out how to get into the mythical world, wondering if there was a door one must enter, or a password, two scientists came to his house. They introduced themselves as The Scientists, with a capital letter. They asked about his size. I was born this way, Herc said, and I'm training to be strongest man in the world. They asked why his heart was so large. Did he feel pain? Did he believe in God? Why his faith in those who laugh at him? Herc thought each one through. My heart has grown with my body. I feel pain all the time, he said, constantly. No, I have never seen God. It's not faith, but strength. Strength is faith.

A skinny reporter of the local newspaper had been informed and rushed to get the story. He took a photograph as they measured Herc's heart. The caption read: LOCAL WHALE UNDER STUDY. The Scientists ran tests: his heart rate was like the pulse of the ocean, his blood as thick as mud, and his rib cage larger than a horse's. Another photograph taken showed Herc standing up straight with his belly cut open and the two Scientists with gloves standing at his sides. They found many things in his belly: a bouquet of flowers, some stones, a

car tire, dirt, and a dog. Yes, they rescued a live dog inside Herc's stomach. The dog is now being cared for. Caption read: LIVE DOG IN WHALE STOMACH!

This man, concluded one Scientist, is no man at all, but some kind of super human. Our studies have shown, concluded the other Scientist, this man feels more pain than any other human being is capable of. Strength is the capacity for pain, Herc tried to say, but none of them listened. He feels so much pain, said the scientist, because of the size of him and the way pain is stored in his blood and muscles. For the first time in history, one scientist said, it might be possible to extract pain from a human being and sell it as a weapon. A simple dosage could be stored in the enemies body for years, causing chronic pain. We'll call it Strength powder. After they extracted the pain and sold it to laboratories all over the country, after various companies began selling Strength powder, some in special flavors like chocolate and vanilla, and after being studied and passed from magazine cover to magazine cover, Herc sat in a chair mostly, and watched television.

## **The Blind Woman**

The old woman's stomach gurgled and ached. She struggled to put on her nightgown, groaning with each movement, wincing with pain. It's my stomach old boy, she said. Her head pulsed. She laid down on the pillow without removing her teeth. The Horse pulled the covers with his mouth up to her chin and rubbing his muzzle on her belly to ease the pain. The old woman closed her eyes and tried to relax, drifting into sleep with her mouth open. The Horse watched the old woman's chest rise and fall and rise and fall, until it didn't. The Horse nudged the old woman with his muzzle, but the only reaction was a strange chattering of the teeth. The Horse rubbed his muzzle on her belly one last time, then removed his shoes and opened the door with his mouth, the way he'd learned to do. He walked down the steps and looked back one last time at the old warm house. The woman's knitting lay limp in the chair outside and the Horse galloped out into the night. The Horse did not see the old woman's teeth jump out of her mouth and chatter all the way out the door, down the steps, and into the night. The Horse disappeared into the distance as the teeth perambulated down the street. History of war and strife that he carried in his veins, powered him for years to come as he continued to run, guided by the moonlight, for centuries until eventually he found where he was going and where he was supposed to be.



## **The Night from the Inside**

The old woman's teeth, having been left in her mouth during her dying moment, chattered with her final words, that due to weakness and pain she'd been unable to say. The teeth however, jumped out of her mouth, off the bed, and clanked down the steps and into the street. The teeth passed a few men in the alleys slumped against the wall. The teeth clung to one man's pant legs and bit their way up, but were quickly brushed off and thrown to the ground. The teeth continued along, the moonshine on the white enamel made them glow in the night. A few young kids standing in a corner laughed at some joke as they passed a cigarette amongst them. The teeth jumped, determined, onto a girl's dress, climbing all the way up and jumping into her mouth and before she could react, releasing the final words they'd been carrying:

*Life is a flickering light.*

Then the teeth dropped out of the girl's mouth and shattered into pieces as the kids leaned over and examined them with wide eyes and talk of ghosts and spirits and the haunted the streets.

## **The Bar Owner**

Herman leaned back on the old wicker chair, staring across Joseph who appeared distracted, watching the lights out in the distance. He was pale, somewhat frail looking. Herman adjusted himself in the chair, cleared his throat, and reached for the wine opener and the bottle, waiting for the right moment to speak. Joseph turned to him inquisitively, wrapped in his little blanket.

Alright Joseph, said Herman as he twisted the wine opener into the cork, I need to ask you something I've been curious about.

Does it have something to do with my work?

No, said Herman.

Oh.

What in the hell happened to all them rabbits, Herman let out, as he pulled the cork out of the bottle.

Penny's rabbits?

Which other ones? Herman asked, pouring wine into the two glasses.

Well, it's kind of a long story.

I imagined it would be, I came prepared.

Herman smiled as he took something from his coat pocket. Joseph's eyes lit up as he saw what Herman held in his hands.

Is that a Cuban? Said Joseph.

Damn right it is.

Oh boy, said Joseph, light it up.

A quiet moment elapsed as they each lit their cigars. The faint sound of crickets and the

occasional passing car filled the space between them. Joseph puffed on the cigar and let out a cough.

Joseph, what happened to your wife's rabbits?

When we were first married I promised my wife, I'd eventually give her some children. She's much younger than me.

And she wanted kids?

Yes, she did and I had promised her, but it turned out later I was unable.

I see. How much later?

Much later. After it had been some time and she was older. She told me once, that I had my books, that those were my children, but what did she have? She became sad and despondent. So I bought her a rabbit.

Wait a minute. You bought her the rabbit? Why not just a dog?

Dogs are too much trouble, they bark, and cats are, well, useless. So anyway, she liked the son of a bitch. She liked the stupid son of a bitch so much she wanted another one.....So I bought her another one.

And they reproduced, said Herman.

Like you wouldn't believe. Two months later, we had rabbits all over the house. They don't care for incest, rabbits.

Of course not, they're rabbits.

I would find rabbits in my closet, in my shoes, inside the sleeve of my coat, one rabbit drowned in the toilet once because I left the lid up. This was during *Angels*, my third book.

Oh, there's that part in *Angels*, where the girl gets pregnant and she's too afraid to give birth, so the father has her belly cut open and they find rabbits in her womb.

Yes.

They made that much of an impression on you huh..

They dominated by subconscious I suppose.

And then?

Well, Penny started naming them and putting small garments of clothes on them, so she'd tell them apart. One wore a bow tie, the other a little hat, a red bow, a little dress. She took them for walks, she bathed them, she played with them. They became her companions, her life. She hates me deep down, I know it. That's why she keeps me alive.

What?

Nothing. So anyway, the rabbits, it got out of control.

Ok, never mind, said Herman, I don't want to hear how you did it.

Well, now you have to.

Damn, said Herman, taking a sip of his wine.

Eventually, after two or three years I slowly began to poison them.

Jesus fucking Christ. You are sick man.

I didn't want to do it. I started with the male rabbits, you know, to slowly take away the reproduction possibilities. But the deaths were more gruesome than I imagined. They threw up their insides, they dried up like orange skins.

Stop, please. I don't want to hear it.

One by one, they disappeared, said Joseph, Penny always buried them, had small funeral processions. We'd find one dead in the bathroom, the other in the bedroom, some in the living room. Then when she had one left, she took care of it as if it was a newborn baby. Always with her. His name was Snow. That was the favorite.

You killed him too.

NO, he died naturally, but I never told her how they all died.

What?

I never told her. She thought it was some kind of disease, taking them, you know? That's

what I told her. They're sick and its best that they all go.

You bastard.

I have had a feeling recently that she knows. She figured it out eventually, I'm sure of it.

Has she ever brought it up?

No, but she's found other ways to take her revenge. She keeps me alive.

You're fucking sick, said Herman. And you walk by those framed photographs every day? Doesn't it remind you of your sick fucking self?

Believe me Herman, I am not happy with myself. I'm not. And if it were up to me, I would end it all right now. Quickly and painfully, but I have a feeling that she wants it her own way. Her revenge is to kill me slowly, just like I killed her.

Herman sighed and looked out into the street. He puffed on his cigar and watched the smoke, thinking of the rabbits and the complexity of human betrayal. What a sorry species, we are, thought Herman. What a fucking disgrace. They finished the bottle and Herman went home, managing only a cordial: I'll see you soon Joseph.

## Leo

Leo pulled the window curtain to the side, hiding behind it, stretching only his neck to look out. The sunshine numbed him. The street stretched farther than he could remember, its vanishing point marked a boundary he had not trespassed in years.

The houses were in their mid-afternoon dozing; in a nearby yard a girl was riding a bicycle. The birds on the nearby tree branches spiraled up to the sky and the autumn leaves fell silently and with their circular path downward traced the hindered radius of their existence. Leo remembered the tree when he first moved in. Since then, it had grown tall and stretched its roots several feet outward. Herman's bar was open for the day already, as he saw Herman calmly sweeping by the door. A few kids played near the fence where the Rooster lived, poking a stick through the gate and laughing.

He moved away from the window; his eyes adjusted to the darkness of his house. He sat now and closed his eyes.

There was a knock on a door. He didn't know how much time had passed. The knock came again. Avery, he thought. Oh no.

He should find somewhere to hide, but amongst the stacks of newspapers, magazines, the gutted couch, there was nowhere. The door opened.

Dad, she said.

Leo closed his eyes pretending to be asleep. She walked in, stepped over boxes and newspapers and kicked the old man in the shin.

Dad, she said, I know you're in there.

He had no choice but to open his eyes.

Where's Elsa? She asked.

Outside. I let her outside.

Avery explored his house. He pushed himself back in his chair and squirmed. Avery seemed a monster hacking away at a city, kicking over buildings and breaking his memories into dust ridden worthless piles of matter.

Then Avery stopped. She was looking at the matted ball of fur curled up in a little blanket. Elsa's eyes were sunk in and her tongue was out.

The old man cried and covered his face with his hands. She's only sick, he screeched, she's only a little sick. Avery glared at her father and then went outside on the porch. Leo stood up and started shaking his head, No, No, No, she's only sick. He walked over to Elsa and pet her gently, then dropped to the floor and began to weep softly. He could see Avery pacing back and forth. Avery picked Elsa up and put her in a black plastic bag and walked out.

## **Leo**

He'd collected too much time and now he took a photograph of himself on the recliner chair, his robe tattered, his face pale. Labeled it: *Leo: 53 years after mother's death.*



## **Joseph Word**

Joseph squinted his eyes at the approaching figure sauntering down the street towards his house. Joseph hunched more now, his bald head reflecting the lamp light. He used a cane for walking now and moved slower every day.

Come in Herman, said Joseph from the porch.

Herman followed Joseph into the house and felt, immediately, a strange tension coming from his old friend. The house was still and quiet with Penny out and the clanking of Joseph's cane against the wood floor made him nervous.

Joseph disappeared into a small closet for a moment and emerged with a small box in his hands and a wide grin on his face.

What you got in there? Asked Herman.

A question.

Joseph's grin was wide enough that it showed, for the first time, the fact that his teeth were not real.

What kind of a question? Asked Herman.

A real philosophical question.

Philosophy?

You can say that.

In a box?

Joseph opened the box and took out of it a small, nine millimeter hand gun.

Joseph, what in the hell? Said Herman.

Don't worry Herman, if you do it right, it'll be quick.

Do what right?

Don't be afraid Herman, you've been a good friend, but I need you to do this for me.  
Please.

Do what?

Listen, just listen, I need you to point this to my heart, or my head, like this.

Joseph pointed the gun at Herman in demonstration. He looked straight into Herman's eyes with a pleading look.

Is that gun loaded Joseph? Said Herman, walking slowly away.

I would prefer you hit the heart, it's more romantic, but the head will do just fine. Go on now, the wife will be back anytime now and she'll shoot you first, before you have a chance to defend yourself.

Herman's knees buckled. He had to look down and make sure that he was, in fact, standing on the floor. He had a brief moment of panic when the gun was pointed at him, but now Joseph appeared out of focus. Joseph's face was a strange mixture of sadness and determination. His dentures loose and exposing his swollen gums.

I can still sense that you are uncomfortable with this, said Joseph.

Yeah, a little more than uncomfortable actually. You are asking me to shoot you. You've lost your mind, you old fucking lunatic.

The old man walked forward holding the gun out, pointing at Herman.

Watch your mouth Herman, remember I have a loaded gun.

Remember I'm your friend, you son of a bitch. Don't point the gun at me, said Herman.

Like this? Said Joseph pointing the gun at Herman in demonstration. You afraid of death? Do this for me old friend. Take it! Just take it and shoot, how bloody hard is it?

I'll go to jail.

I'll sign a paper saying I asked you to do it.

Joseph, don't you think about anyone but yourself?

That's exactly why I want to do this. This world doesn't need me anymore. I am doing it for the good of everyone.

Is that right?

Look at me. A damn old man with no courage, no work. My books are a joke, selling for 25 cents at used book stores.

I'm pretty sure Shakespeare sells for 25 cents in a used book store.

That's different. I've seen hobos wipe their ass with my books.

No you haven't. Hobos actually like reading.

I feel like I told the same story over and over. I feel like it was all for nothing.

You're being irrational and ridiculous, said Herman. What about your wife?

Take the fucking thing and just shoot me, Herman.

Joseph Word was so close to Herman now, that Herman was cornered. He remained calm. Lord knows this was not the first weapon he ever saw pointed at him.

Joseph, you think it's easy to keep up one's life for seventy odd years? You think the rest of us don't decay? Grow old? Lose passion? Love? Or you thought yourself so goddamn special? It's the same old ending for everyone, now you either accept it, or try to run from it, but talk about a futile endeavor.

Joseph began to tremble with anger, the gun still pointed at Herman.

I'm not trying to run from it. I'm trying to run into it, can't you see that you, idiot? I don't want to be here anymore, every day; everything is painful.

Then point the gun at yourself. I have nothing to do with your suffering.

Herman was backed up against the wall now, his hands up, waiting for the right moment to go for the gun. A slip of Joseph's finger and the gun would go off. He had to proceed with caution.

Take the gun and shoot you bastard. You goddamn coward.

You're going to call me a coward? Said Herman. Why don't you do it yourself, if you're so fearless? I'll even clean ya up afterward; I promise your wife won't see a fucking drop of

blood.

It was then that instead of words coming out of Joseph's mouth, there was a loud noise, a piercing black noise, like something breaking, so loud in fact that Herman thought the house was coming apart. He felt his heart stop for a moment. Had he died? Boy, he thought, that would have been a sorry ending. Then he looked down at his bleeding foot. All he could think to say was: You son of a bitch. He didn't know if he meant Joseph or himself for not having taken the gun away. You stupid son of a bitch.

At that moment, with Joseph still holding the gun to Herman, shocked at what he'd just done, his wife came in and without hesitation pulled another gun from her purse and shot her husband in the foot. The old man dropped the weapon and fell to the floor. Then the wife walked over to the telephone and called the ambulance. Joseph and Herman were both on the floor now, the pain settling in and none of them said a word until the red whirling siren was heard in the distance, approaching.

## **The Night from the Inside**

The young kids stand on the steps with cigarettes awkwardly in their mouths. They learn the language of smoke, but mirrors stop working when smoke rises. They wait for the next Elvis, but he never comes. Instead, they find clowns with dry mouths. They wait for the flocks of birds, for the rain, and the sweeping storms. They walk into abandoned houses on Shadow and Anima and play inside them. They imagine the lives that grew up there. In the mirrors are the faces of the children, cut into triangles. The light bulbs are cracked and inside are two moths mating, producing natural light. The couches have imprints of bodies and the bodies of smells of souls and the souls have echoes of music. They rummage the carbon trails of someone's existence. They look at old photographs, ruined by rain. They wander the empty rooms, ashing their cigarettes in the hallways. They try on old clothes and make voices of people they imagined wore them. There were the old shoes and sometimes a hair bow. One girl puts on a red tattered dress and moves around in it while the boy wears a suit and asks the girl to dance. Another girl finds a hair brush and softly combs her hair, humming a melody that squirms onto the brush and falls to the floor, writhing. One boy finds an old Halloween mask, and he tries it on. He turns into a cat. A young boy with curly hair finds a pair of shoes, black leather shoes. He tries them on and begins to dance, the other cheer as he dehydrates. They go through the drawers and find remnants of undergarments and old letters, and stained coffee cups, and one boy finds a sock with a hole in it and in the other drawer finds a dead mouse in a trap. The mouse is nearly decomposed. The boy and girl play couple on the couch, rubbing against each other until they make fire and the house ignites in flames that one of their friends puts out with his spit. They tell each other they will be friends forever and exchange blood. They laugh in the shadow and the ruins and they run out talking of their adventure and polluted with smoke, covered in smoke, wearing smoke, dance like smoke into the night.

## **The Killer**

After the Maury job, I found myself slightly depressed, thinking of my fast approaching old age, my many mistakes. It was then I received a call that, luckily, gave me job.

Hello? I said.

Yes, I'm looking for the Artist, said the voice on the other side.

This is him speaking.

Yes, I would like to hire you for a job.

Excellent. Before we continue, I do want to clarify, I am not a hit man.

You kill people for money right? The voice asked.

Well, I wouldn't put it that way. I kill people to restore justice, but my work-

Your ad didn't say anything about justice. How did you manage that ad anyway, out in the open like that?

Have you read the local newspaper? Still, I can't go into detail in the ad, as you might understand my line of work is unorthodox.

So, you kill people for money but you don't want to be called a hit man?

No, my work is precise, my work has an aesthetic, a purpose. I am not a cold blooded killer, I said.

Alright, alright. What do I call you?

Revenge artist.

Right. I like that. Revenge, that's even better, said the voice.

I do want you to understand that my work is carefully planned and executed, you don't need to worry about any unnecessary mess.

I sure as hell hope not. So listen: his name is Joseph, Joseph Word, and he lives on Anima Street on the South Side.

I know the place. Interesting side of town. That name sounds familiar. Is the man a politician or something? Politicians have a higher rate you know?

No. Not a politician.

The man on the phone went on to tell me about this Joseph Word and about how Joseph had not been particularly good to his wife of many years. How once Joseph had killed his wife's rabbits. They were like her children, he said. Joseph wanted to be famous, he was a selfish man. He went on to tell me how the old man could hardly continue his work anymore due to problems with his hands and his dried up heart. I learned the story of Joseph Word as a man of anger and a man of stifled dreams, a man who saw himself as a victim, though he had been privileged and cared for all his life. Also, the man added, his books were complete garbage. What a sad man, this Joseph, I thought. Joseph had dreamed of becoming an important man, or at least a man credited with saying a few important things, but this had not occurred. In fact, most people found Joseph Word to be already forgotten.

Can you do it? The voice said. Can you rid him of his misery? The voice asked desperately.

Well why do you want to kill him?

I....

There was a pause on the phone and the sound of breathing.

I am an old friend of Joseph's. I have seen Joseph treating those around him like dirt. Including me. For years, he left me behind for his work, nearly killed me a few times.

Jesus Christ. I see. He sounds pretty despicable. So for such a man, I suggest a quick death, a death that doesn't allow him final words or drama. Writers are always obsessed by the final words, the words that close their life, so we must not allow Joseph his. And that will be a beautiful revenge.

There was silence on the other side.

You're good, the voice said, that would be terrible for him, terrible indeed. I'm sure he'd say something profound though, something enlightening.

I don't care enough to think about it.

When should he expect you? The voice asked.

I can do the job as soon as I get acquainted with some of his routines.

He doesn't have a routine, just show up at his house on Wednesday night, when his wife leaves for Bingo.

I talked awhile longer with the man, arranging a pre-payment and the rest of the details. Some clients will ask for a certain kind of bullet or angle of shot, etc. But all that is private information between client and artist. I was excited to get back to work and I hung up the phone with a new found relief and freedom.



## Voices

Herman clunked around the bar with his foot in a cast. He moved through tables, picking up glasses and napkins and lemon halves. Joseph, he thought, you son of a bitch. Is he in as much pain? Having to lug around this damn foot. Thankfully, for Herman, it had only really been his toe that had been hit.

The bar was full again and Rich played the piano.

*Herman another scotch please*, a voice said. *Another round of beers over here! Herman what happened to your foot man?* Another voice said. *Turn the music up louder!* He noticed that if he listened from a short distance away all the voices talking were nothing but noise, a buzzing of sound, unintelligible and alien, a locust of men tangling and untangling. Herman began to feel dizzy and hearing Joseph's words: *You're a damn coward if I ever saw one.* Herman stopped his head spinning and the noise swelling in his brain; he turned to Rich who was entranced at the piano. Herman wanted to say: stop. Just for a moment, stop. But the world had never stopped for him. He'd missed so much of it already.

When he awoke Rich and Dhalia were at his side.

I'm afraid they took some things, said Rich.

Of course they did. Ungrateful sons of bitches, said Herman as his eyes opened slowly, taking in the light and the smoke.

I wouldn't take it personally, Herman. These people have nothing.

What'd they take? A bottle of whiskey? Couple beers?

I'm afraid they took Marilyn and some beers.

Those sons of bitches.

I couldn't stop the man. He was quick.

It's alright. I suppose it's time I moved on. I'll find another.

## Joseph Word

Joseph Word hunched over the typewriter hoping to type his final words before his last moment came. He hoped that after his death his wife would come upon his typewriter and find these words and that they may become famous or revered as wise. He stared at the blank page and thought about his life, about the dog he had as a child, his little sister who he stopped speaking to years ago, his mother and her flowered dresses, his father under the engines of cars. He remembered his wedding day and how he was afraid, even then, of himself. He knew he would not be a good husband and went through it anyway. How unfair it is that a person has the opportunity to waste another's life. Perhaps he had killed his wife's rabbits so that she'd pay more attention to him. Rabbits. What a regret to have. He wrestled with himself for his final words, but nothing would come. He had no words left.

L I F E I S

He typed, but no words came. He removed the page and put a blank one in. At least the blank page was quiet, like snow, and didn't taunt him as much as an unfinished sentence. Suddenly he felt he had something. He sat up straight and typed again:

L I F E

And as soon as his finger hit the E, a masked man came in through his window.

This is it Joseph, your time has come, the man said.

Wait, wait, let me just finish this sentence. You're not supposed to show up until Wednesday.

What do you care when I'm supposed to show up?

I had a thought. A beautiful thought about life, give me a second.

I'm sorry Joseph Word. I'm not allowed to grant you final words, said the man.

Shut up. Shut up, you're not letting me think. Just wait a minute. I'm paying you for

this!

What?

Yes. That's right.

You called revenge on yourself?

Of course I did, I'm surprised you don't have more like me.

I believe you are the first.

The Killer cocked his gun.

Don't shoot! Said Joseph.

Joseph could feel the barrel of the gun and he was going for another letter, he had the word on the tip of his fingers, but he couldn't think feeling his impending death.

I can't let you have last words Joseph, said the Killer. That was part of the deal. I hope you remember them, maybe you'll write them in your next life. Joseph looked up, straight into the barrel and he knew the word that was on his tongue and he felt afraid. Very afraid.

And just like that the Killer shot Joseph. He'd be found hours later by, of course, his loyal wife, who dropped to her knees in resignation more than surprise or grief. He was buried a few days later.

## **The Bullets**

To his surprise the bullet didn't taste as sweet as he thought it would. It was bitter, like an old oxidized fruit. He thought he tasted regret, but he wasn't sure. It was a bit unpleasant when he realized that not only were his last words never to be heard, or read, but that at this moment he wasn't sure if he truly believed them. In fact, after an entire lifetime, he wasn't sure what he believed. He was not particularly thrilled either, that the last face he saw was the face of the Killer he'd hired to murder him.

First, the bullets broke through his teeth, shattering everything, like a great white waterfall as it crashes against the still lake. His tongue, made liquid by the hot lead, dripped to the floor. As the bullets climbed up to his brain, they erased his face as easily as the tide sweeps a sandcastle. He saw his wife's face disappointed. He saw Herman sitting across from him on the porch and felt a strange companionship and longing for forgiveness. There was nothing about his writing in those last moments. No revelations, no discoveries, only the vague feeling that all those years spent on his work produced him only a vague sense of time passed. The bullet continued, propelled by a force greater than the mechanism that shoots it. The force goes back hundreds of years into the history of man, when man first discovered the ability to hurt its own kind. It was that ancient force that was the real momentum in the bullet. It entered with a swiftness and an ease that tore through tissue and brain matter as if it were water. The seas felt the rumbling and the ages hardly shrugged as Joseph Word dripped out into the atmosphere.

## **The Night from the Inside**

The Lion roamed the dark veins of the neighborhood trying to make sense of his past. He found a woman curled up in a corner and he put a blanket over her. A man walked endlessly through the neighborhood's labyrinths and the Lion showed him the way out, he saw a small cat trapped underneath a dumpster, a dog stealing bones from his owner, a man imagining that his hand was a gun and pointing it at himself, disappointed when it didn't go off, saddened that shadows were his only friends. He saw whispers crawling around with the rats, birds crawling inside a man's mouth, trees going dry with thirst. He found a young couple on their knees looking for the love they'd lost, a woman looking for a herself as a little girl. The Lion roamed for years, searching for his own self that he'd left in the house where he'd transformed and left his father behind. So he continued showing people their reflections, their past, their mistakes and fading sorrows. The Lion was talked about for years, used in stories and in jokes, drawn in the dirt or with graffiti, remembered fondly and with fear until eventually the Lion became sound. With this, he had found immortality; he was the slow growl of the dark and the roar of the angry night.

## The Bar Owner

Herman leaned up against the bar with the pen in his hand; he glanced at the blank spot where Marilyn had been. The poster had left a rectangular shape of whiter, newer wall. He began:

*Joseph Word, 75, a husband and a writer of ~~outlandish~~ novels, ~~committed suicide in the strangest way was killed by his own request with a bullet to the face~~ died unexpectedly in the evening hours of Monday. ~~The son of bitch chose to die this way, to abandon his regrets and mistakes which he could not come to terms with.~~ Joseph was a fractured soul, perhaps a coward who liked unwinding with Scotch in the evenings and wrote, throughout his life, a series of novels dealing with the oddities and absurdities of life. ~~I greatly admired him, though recognized his flaws.~~ Life is a great comedy, Joseph used to say ~~and the moment I see Life as a tragedy, is the moment I'll die.~~ Joseph sold thousands of copies of his books and yet was a humble ~~lost~~ individual believed that everyone was equal and subject to the same moral code. Joseph is survived by his lovely wife Penny ~~who mopped up his brains~~ who has somehow surprisingly remained at his side through all his travesties and betrayals life has put before them. ~~Joseph, you left me here alone.~~ We wish Joseph a peaceful transition. Funeral Services will be held on Friday at noon and donations for the funeral expenses are encouraged.*

## Orchidia

It was midafternoon when Orchidia walked into the bar, which smelled of mop water and soap. The sunlight entered through the barred windows at a slant, making shadows on the floor. Her father was cleaning the counters, but so many of the glasses were gone. She saw her reflection in the bar mirror, behind the counter, her long black hair hung down from her shoulders. She looked a lot happier than she was. Her father was limping and as she approached noticed that he'd lost weight and his hair had nearly gone.

You're early, he said, while serving her a soda.

Yeah, I thought I'd stop by before mom got home. I need to fix dinner.

Does your mother know about...?

Of course she knows. So what happened to your leg? Mom said you tried to rob someone.

Ha Ha. Your mother said that? Quite the storyteller isn't she?

Yeah, I think her favorite stories are about you. Orchidia grinned and took the soda from the counter.

Orchid, you look vibrant, said Herman.

Dad. What happened to your leg?

My friend shot me in the foot.

Why would he do that?

What does Tommy say about the whole thing?

Tommy wants it. He wants to keep it.

And you?

I don't know. I guess.

Life goes fast; you don't want it to speed up for you quite yet.

Why would your friend shoot you?

Well, you know, life turns us into fictional characters.

What do you mean by that?

You know, we all become what other make of us. We are children of circumstance, not of free will and we're predictable in so many ways. The world chooses our stories, not us. Any control is rare, but sometimes we get a choice. Like you Orchid, right now, you have some control, it's just what story do you want to be?

I'm not a fictional character.

If you need the money, I got some savings. It'll cover it I'm sure.

Wasn't that your friend in the paper? Orchidia asked, taking another drink of the soda.

Joseph Word. Yes. The one responsible for my foot, but don't worry, it's not as sad as it sounds.

What do you mean? He got shot in the face.

He was ready to go. He wanted to end his story, didn't like where it had led him. Turns out, it's much harder to end yourself that then one might think. Listen Orchid, sometimes it's good to think about yourself.

What is it like being shot?

Loud. The bullet just brushed my foot actually. How are *you* feeling Orchid?

I just wish someone would tell me what the right decision is.

*You're* writing this part, kiddo. It's your decision. Orchid, wait, listen, take the money.

I don't know if I should.

Take it, you'll need it regardless. It's not much, but just take it.



## **Leo**

Since he'd stopped leaving his house Leo had accumulated nothing but the memories of memories: nothing new, with the exception of the daily tasks of living, which he'd reduced to the bare minimum. He hardly moved, other than walking in circles in his living room or stare out the window. Perhaps life is not meant to be collected, nor is energy meant to be stored. For as long as things are exchanging, everything is always living, continuing. Everything is eternal. Everything continues, everything transforms. Leo took in a deep breath, feeling his lungs tired and filled with debris. Life, after all, is a perpetual exchange. Then he closed his eyes and let the world take him back.

## **Orchidia**

Hey? Are you still there? Orchidia whispered to her belly.

So this is it. Time has passed and I've made my decision. Everyone told me you shouldn't come here, but I'm too curious. I don't know what you'll be like, I don't know if you'll be healthy or if you'll like to dance or sing, but soon I'll meet you. This is the beginning of something. And maybe we'll get out of Shadow Street, maybe we'll manage it.

## **The Bar Owner**

Herman put the newspaper down with a sigh. No one was in tonight and the bar was quiet, except for the sounds of the old creaking building and occasional passing car. Joseph got his wish, except the unfinished sentence on the typewriter. Herman wondered what Joseph had intended to say. Herman went over to the glasses and began to clean them, wiping them dry with a small cloth. You son of a bitch Joseph, couldn't just wait it out could you? He held a glass against the light, admiring its smudge-less surface. It's all a great big cycle. People show up and then disappear. And what was the rest of the world like? And what did it matter, if the world was at war, or in battle, or blowing itself to bits? What difference did it make to him, completely alone, with his Marilyn gone and glasses to clean every night? He hoped that Joseph's last moment was as happy as he wanted it to be. He hoped that Joseph found peace before his death, perhaps left a note for his wife. Herman went to the sink and began washing the dirty glasses. First Maury, then Leo, then Joseph. Someone would come along in their place eventually. They always do. He finished drying the glasses, stacked them neatly on the shelf and went over to the door and locked it, closing early for the first time in twenty years. Herman shut off the lights and went upstairs.

## **The Rooster**

The moon was high in the sky as the sounds of the incoming night grew louder. In the distance, a train crossed the city and busses dropped off passengers returning from work. Voices from Herman's bar rose and scattered in laughter. Others remaining awake sat drinking from bottles, on their porch or on their couch, bathed in television glow. Some sat reading the newspaper under a lamplight or doing the crossword at the dinner table. Older kids took a walk and went to the playground to see who was out playing. Children listened to bedtime stories as radios broadcasted jazz in the low dark night. In the distance, a woman spread her legs and allowed the universe to continue. Men discarded themselves in lonely moments behind dumpsters, or in empty rooms with wrinkled magazines at their feet. Footsteps shuffled down the alleys. A few rain drops fell from the sky, cooling the dried up land. The Rooster waddled away to his wooden house to take shelter from the rain and to watch the night pass.

## **Vita**

Mari Gomez was born in Juarez, Mexico and spent the early years of her childhood in Mexico before moving the U.S with her family. She attended high school and college in El Paso, beginning her university studies as music major. She received a Bachelor's degree in Creative Writing and English and American Literature from the University of Texas at El Paso in 2009. She studied one year abroad in Sunderland, England and traveled throughout Ireland before beginning the Master of Fine Arts program at UTEP in the fall of 2010. *Animals* is her first full length work.

Permanent address: mari\_alicia\_gomez@hotmail.com

This thesis/dissertation was typed by Maria Alicia Gomez.