

2022-05-01

Remember When We Tore Each Other Limb From Limb?

Adam Ramsey
The University of Texas at El Paso

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.utep.edu/open_etd



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Ramsey, Adam, "Remember When We Tore Each Other Limb From Limb?" (2022). *Open Access Theses & Dissertations*. 3536.

https://scholarworks.utep.edu/open_etd/3536

This is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@UTEP. It has been accepted for inclusion in Open Access Theses & Dissertations by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UTEP. For more information, please contact lweber@utep.edu.

REMEMBER WHEN WE TORE EACH OTHER LIMB FROM LIMB?

ADAM RAMSEY

Master's Program in Creative Writing

APPROVED:

Jeffrey Sirkin, Ph.D., Chair

Sylvia Aguilar, MFA

Alex Lemon, MFA

Stephen Crites, Ph.D.
Dean of the Graduate School

REMEMBER WHEN WE TORE EACH OTHER LIMB FROM LIMB?

by

ADAM RAMSEY, B.A.

THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at El Paso

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Department of Creative Writing

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

May 2022

PREFACE

INTRODUCTION

When I was a kid, starting around ten or so, writing was merely an outlet for creativity. I would write silly things like short stories or comic strips to pair with the small wooden bears my mother painted and sold to supplement her income as a single mother, or would write short stories about frogs or lizards or whatever I could find while running around the neighborhood. It was never anything serious, of course, and did not bring about any kind of great epiphany that I wanted to be a writer (something I still do not consciously strive to be), but it was simply a way — one of the very first ways, in fact — to satisfy a newfound creative itch that had entered my life, one that constantly followed me around (and continues to follow me around to this day). And though I did not tell anyone outside of my mother and brother about this burning desire to create, mostly because I did not want to carry around any of the possible stigmas that came with being a creative person during that time (and in my area of the country), it felt good. It felt natural.

Years later, in high school, writing took on a new — and unexpected — meaning. My sophomore year, at the insistence of my then-girlfriend, I learned how to play guitar. And once I got good enough, I started to write songs. Which meant writing personal lyrics. I wrote dumb songs about friends, made up sappy love songs for my girlfriend, and doodled things into a notebook. But still, I only showed them to a very specific group of people. I would play a verse or two for my mother, show a few riffs to my brother, and sing the bad love songs to my girlfriend. But like with anything else, I shrugged off any praise; playing aloof was my way of acting like it did not matter to me. Simply put, it was (still) hardly a well-known fact that I played an instrument (or sang) — or was creative in any capacity. I

was a jock. I excelled in sports. That was my thing. That is what I was known for. But I *needed* that creative outlet. I craved it. So, making music became that new (and secret) avenue to scratch the creative itch. Little did I know, however, that that was just the start of it. Because later that year, my then-girlfriend (the same one who got me into playing music in the first place) found one of my songs in my notebook, written in the form of a fully formed poem, and liked it so much that she secretly copied it and submitted it to a poetry contest. Much to my surprise, it ended up getting selected for publication, and on my birthday, she handed me a book — an anthology of poems — with a sticky note on it that said, “Turn to page so and so,” which led me to my poem. I was genuinely shocked. Outside of accomplishments in sports, I had never seen my name in print. Not like *that*, anyway. It was exhilarating and gratifying and, in a way, validating. Though this event still did not exorcise some grandiose thought that I could be the next Hemingway, it did make me believe that perhaps I could write more songs, and more music — and perhaps even write some poetry on the side (which is what I *really* enjoyed). So, I did. And during my junior year, I started my first band, wrote a bunch of songs, and let the world (and my friends) know that I was a musician.

A few years after that, after a few failed punk bands and touring around with a Texas country group, my music career ultimately fizzled out. I was around 23 or so — and lost. So, with very few options in front of me, I decided it was finally time to start college. Like a lot of young and ambitious kids, I thought I wanted to be a doctor and signed up for pre-medical studies. And while I enjoyed it, even though it was more homework than I had ever had in my entire life, it was never enough to outrun that ever-growing creative itch that had been following me since I was a kid. But I kept at it, stayed on the medical route, and was

determined to power my way through and work toward something substantial that could put me in a position to work a practical job and make a respectable living. But it did not work out that way. I found myself at a crossroads, and I did not know what my options were. It was not until an English professor my sophomore year of undergrad mentioned something about liking a story I wrote for her class, that I looked into it and decided to completely change my collegiate path. Ultimately, I ended up changing majors and graduated with a creative writing degree. Flash forward ten years from there, and I am applying to the MFA program at UTEP. And now, three years later, after taking many classes, writing a lot and being asked a lot of questions, and asking a lot of questions of myself and my writing, I have completed my MFA thesis, *REMEMBER WHEN WE TORE EACH OTHER LIMB FROM LIMB?*

INSPIRATION AND DESCRIPTION

Like a lot of people, my interest in politics and social issues has intensified over the past few years, during which time the political discourse in the United States, and around the world, became the most volatile, unstable, and partisan in recent times — most definitely in my lifetime. For me, where issues like global warming, corporate greed, healthcare, racial inequality, LGBTQ+ issues, and others had been a mere tickle in the back of my throat, something that amounted to a passing thought that was quickly forgotten, were now suddenly at the forefront of my mind, important, seen through a different lens. For the first time in my life, I *cared*. Deeply. Coincidentally, this is also around the time I started to pursue a master's degree in creative writing.

Naturally, as my interest in these issues began to grow stronger, I started to ask myself what I can do to alleviate some of my anxieties, make sense of the rapidly changing world

around me, and perhaps bring to light the issues I cared most deeply about. So, I got more involved. I canvassed and phone banked for political candidates that inspired me, worked with my community when possible, and talked with friends and family (in the gentlest way possible). Also, I started to write. And while it did not immediately become clear to me what I was writing, mostly because I did not set out to create any kind of political statement, I quickly learned that, through building this collection of prose poems and short stories, I was doing just that. What I thought was simply a collection of fun stories meant to clear out the ambush of ideas that kept popping into my head, was actually a broader narrative being guided by an insuppressible subconscious yearning to discuss these important issues. And now, after receiving plenty of academic-driven feedback and having the chance to take a step back and analyze the collection as a whole, it makes total sense that the issues that have dominated my world and life views over the last few years have bled into my creative work.

REMEMBER WHEN WE TORE EACH OTHER LIMB FROM LIMB? is a collection of short stories and surrealist prose poems. Most of these are not connected in terms of character or setting. However, there are two episodic stories that reoccur throughout the book, each of them grounded in real-life situations meant to offset the fantastical settings in which the majority of the other pieces are set. The first of these episodic stories is a series of vignettes about a character named Noah, a young man who is taking care of his elderly mother. The other is a series about a young couple named Ady and Kassie caught in the throes of young love, familial strife, and unforeseen tragedy.

On a macro level, *REMEMBER WHEN WE TORE EACH OTHER LIMB FROM LIMB?* is a subtle commentary meant to softly and creatively explore the shortcomings of our societal structures, the hierarchies responsible for said shortcomings, and the predator/prey relationship

that creates; on a more micro level, this collection focuses on the following: the consequences of mindless consumption and the subsequent destruction of ecological structures, the various effects of overtly hedonistic behavior, the failures of capitalism, the ongoing problems with racial inequality, the troubles with toxic masculinity, the (still) ever-growing vitriol being launched at the LGBTQ+ community, as well as a dive into how mental health and medical issues impact individuals and their traditional or non-traditional family structures.

STRUCTURE

The issues presented in *REMEMBER WHEN WE TORE EACH OTHER LIMB FROM LIMB?* do not fit into a neat little box, nor does the narrative follow a traditional arc. In fact, aside from the pieces attributed to the character Noah and the four pieces for Ady and Kassie, which carry some semblance of an ongoing narrative, the pieces are largely disparate. This is on purpose. That is not to say the collection does not have an overall theme or thematic structure, because it does — which is an examination of the cruelties and conflicts brought on by our cultural/political/economic structures, how we think about them, and how familial relationships and human empathy can act as a solvent — but since the issues discussed are wide-ranging and complex, and happen to a wide variety of individuals, I wanted the collection to reflect just that. So, the world created in *REMEMBER WHEN WE TORE EACH OTHER LIMB FROM LIMB?* is a fragmented one, one that is complicated and multifaceted — much like the structure of today's America. This is precisely why I chose to present the pieces as short prose poems and short stories: to have the capability to touch on a multitude of subjects quickly, present the issues in a creative and noninvasive way, and move on to the next.

TRACING THE LITERARY CONTEXT

While I like to think my work is original in its own right, it certainly would not have been possible without the influence of a number of writers and books that have been important to me over the years. These books have shown me unique and inspiring ways to style my work, ways to use surreal and fantastical themes, subtly and cleverly write about important political issues, and the importance of openness and vulnerability.

Stylistically, a huge inspiration for *REMEMBER WHEN WE TORE EACH OTHER LIMB FROM LIMB?* was Daniel Grandbois' *Unlucky Lucky Days*, in which Grandbois uses a variety of different piece lengths to tell his collection of animist epiphanies, ranging from just a few sentences to a few pages, all set to a justified alignment. When stylized, my pieces look and sit on the page in a very similar way. Outside of that, I was also extremely influenced by Grandbois' use of fantasy, surrealism, and absurdity, which can be seen in his piece *Broccoli*:

He was a vegetable scholar. She, an Italian head of broccoli.

When he told her the Latin derivation of *broccoli* means *arm*, she sighed, having heard it before.

Misreading her sigh as admiration, the vegetable scholar reached for her body. His hands withdrew immediately, for she was all head. Something he should have known.

She sighed to herself at having never flowered.

Misreading it again, he put a pot to boil.

They waited together, he watching the pot.

He slipped her in without a splash.

She sighed like a lobster (Grandbois, 91).

The absurdity and surrealness of this piece — and many of his others — really hit home for me. Largely because this is a tactic I heavily rely on as well, especially when it comes to trying to get a message across in an abstract way. Take my piece *A POWER OUTAGE IN PANTHER CITY*, for example, a prose poem about a group of Wall Street types befuddled by a power outage in the city that disrupts their money-making. As they complain, actual letters shoot from their mouths and scatter across the concrete, and a little girl (who represents upcoming generations) picks up two dollar signs from the pile, walks up to one of the complainers, and shoves the dollar signs into his eyes:

The little girl moves in even closer, right up to his face. She lowers her arms, as if she's about to lift the man's hands and place the pieces into his palms, but pulls up completely. Instead, she winds up — like a 1920's pitcher — and shoves the two pieces into the man's eyes, one by one, turning him into a silent, two-windowed slot machine: DOLLAR SIGN, DOLLAR SIGN (Ramsey, 3).

The use of absurdity and surrealism here not only plays well thematically — in calling out corporate greed in a flawed capitalist structure — but also plays an important role in highlighting how society as a whole is generally more drawn to outrageous behavior than it is to normalization.

Another example of this is in my piece *WORSHIPING IN THE LAND OF FILTH AND REFUSE*, a prose poem about a group of townsfolk who blindly worship garbage. Through the use of absurdity (and metaphor), this piece softly pokes fun at a certain political party's unbridled fealty to what I consider to be a poisonous and cult-like brand of politics, while also highlighting how the weaponization of naivete for political gain is a dangerous yet very real game being played in this country.

It should be noted that, for the most part, I am not interested in presenting my pieces in a way that includes a ton of wonky policy talk (I believe the closest I get to this is with the piece *WORLD ISSUES FROM THE HIGH SCHOOL DROPOFF LINE*, in which I blatantly point to the main issue being discussed), rather I look to present the issues in more abstract ways that keep the bulk of the message just below the surface and provides the reader with enough room to come up with their interpretations.

Along those lines, another novel that had a big influence on this collection is Agustina Bazterrica's *Tender is the Flesh*, a book that, among other things, takes on the world's issue of mindless consumption by exploring a world in which all animal meat has been poisoned and farming humans for meat is not murder. In this disturbing yet eye-opening debut novel, an achievement Daniel Kraus of the New York Times described as "powerful in displaying the monstrosities and desires of the hierarchical structure of capitalism" ("Tender Is the Flesh"), Bazterrica uses the veil of the meat industry to highlight the cruelties and conflicts brought on by our cultural, political, and economic structures. This is very much in line with what I am looking to achieve with parts of *REMEMBER WHEN WE TORE EACH OTHER LIMB FROM LIMB?*, which is to use the surreal, absurd, and abstract to bring light to very real issues going on in this country and around the world.

The piece in my collection most inspired by *Tender Is the Flesh* is *THE BUTCHER*. Written almost as an answer to Bazterrica's novel, *THE BUTCHER* is meant to be seen as a revenge piece to show the possibilities of repositioning agency away from current power structures. In this piece, the butcher, just as he is preparing for his day — cutting the meat, packaging it, labeling his orders — experiences a shift in the universe where all of the town's cows suddenly become self-aware and storm his shop:

When [the butcher] curves back around, his eyes are met with the unthinkable: riots of hooves stomping across his hardwood floor, splintering the oak under their massive weight; tables and chairs slung, stabbed, and slaughtered; excrement and urine spread and splattered. He can't believe his eyes. For as far as he can see, it's a sea of black and white, of brown and black, of cattle standing shoulder to shoulder; in the air, the overwhelming clinking of bells and a deep chorus of angry moos plays above the chaos like a surreal soundtrack (Ramsey, 5).

Many facets of our society are driven by money and power and getting it at any cost, even if that means stepping on the little guy to get there. And the systems set in place in America, and many places around the world, are built to keep it that way. Pieces like *THE BUTCHER*, and others, are meant to represent the little guys taking back some of that power.

Another writer I admire immensely is Ocean Vuong, specifically his debut novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*. Written as a letter from a twenty-something son (Little Dog) to his illiterate mother, this novel is a lot of things: poetry; prose; a history lesson rooted in Vietnam; a permission slip to be open about who you are; an exploration of queer, race, and masculinity issues; a coming-of-age story; and a showcase of familial love. But while this novel is rife with all these great aspects, there is one section that has stuck with me since first reading it back in 2019. It comes from a part in the book where Little Dog first has sex with Trevor, a boy he works with. It starts fairly graphic, in both details and language — which is both representative and important to “show” — but Vuong quickly settles into the openness and vulnerability of the scene with the beauty and masterful precision of poetry:

I kissed his shoulders, made my way to his neck, where his hair ended, as some boys' do, with the strands whittled down to a small half-inch tail at the nape. It was the part that

shone like wheat-tips touched by the sunlight, while the rest of his head, with its fuller head, stayed dark brown. I flicked my tongue under it. How could such a hard-stitched boy possess something so delicate, made entirely of edges, of ending? Between my lips, it was a bud sprouted from inside him, possible (Vuong, 120).

Personally, I have no delusions that my writing will ever match that of Vuong's, nor do I strive for such a goal, but I did try to bring this same kind of energy to some of the pieces in *REMEMBER WHEN WE TORE EACH OTHER LIMB FROM LIMB?* — specifically when it relates to queer issues. For example, this inspiration can be seen in *FATAL/BEEPS*, a prose poem that details a fantastical interaction between two gay men in a hospital room:

I get up and put my head on his chest. It welcomes me, sucks me in, teases me to jump. I make legs out of my fingers and walk them up, skipping over each rib on my way to his chest, then use my fingernails to find a small crack just below his throat — one long enough to fill with a few coins — and pick at it, piece by piece, until it's wide enough for me to slide in. I start slow. A hand, an arm. Then jump in headfirst, like diving into a swimming pool, wiggling my way down until every part of me is inside. I'm welcomed by the shallow beat of his heart. It echoes from cavity to cavity — his chest, his tired brain, down to his lungs, his abdomen, even his pelvis, back up to his chest — and each new thump knocks a memory into my head: the first time I breathed the air in front of his door, the hidden kisses at the zoo, the first time we undressed each other and traced each other's freckles with our fingers (Ramsey, 38).

Where so much cruelty and predation is built into so many aspects of life, many of which are detailed throughout *REMEMBER WHEN WE TORE EACH OTHER LIMB FROM LIMB?*, there *has* to be room for a way to resolve that conflict — or, at the very least, minimize it. While

this can be applied to many issues, when it comes to queer issues, specifically, that starts with representation and visibility. Personally, I will continue to include queer (and loving) characters in my writing when possible. Because it matters.

Similar openness and vulnerability can be seen in Nick Flynn's work, one of my favorite authors. His memoir *Another Bullshit Night in Suck City*, a detailing of Nick's battles with addiction and mental health, the suicide of his mother, and his relationship with his homeless father — who he ultimately reunites with after showing up looking for a room at the homeless shelter Nick works at — is a perfect example of this:

Three months now since my father first walked through the shelter door. Tonight he's relatively sober, able to raise his arms for the frisk without attracting undo attention, to move efficiently past the slumbering bodies to the cage, to check his valuables, sign his name. I watch him from across the lobby, but don't approach. Even without seeing him I can picture each step he takes. Once upstairs he will hand in his bed ticket and receive his hanger, shoebox, wrist tag (Flynn 218).

Nothing, it seems, is off-limits for Nick Flynn, and every time I reread his books, or even skim through them, I am reminded of this. Flynn's work inspires me to be more transparent with my own work, to push myself to write about the difficult stuff, and to get more personal. Though I still feel myself holding back a lot in my writing, to the point where I will completely hide what I am trying to write about with metaphors — like with *A SEGREGATED SKY*, a story in which I use two brothers talking about clouds to highlight issues of racism — there are places where my personal life absolutely bleeds into my stories. For example, in the six pieces attributed to the character of Noah, the relationship between Noah and his mother is loosely based on my own relationship with my mother, who is also battling dementia. It is tough to write about, no doubt,

and I can *feel* myself holding back at times, but it is important to try to lean into it. For now, I get out as much as I can, as shown in the piece *ALIVE*:

[Noah] then wanders away completely and starts toward the back of the studio. On the way over, he hears, I— I don't even know who you are. The words are soft but fill every inch of the room. He turns around. The woman's face is blank, her eyes adrift in the distance. And she's mumbling to herself, saying that she doesn't care what Noah thinks — surely a residual response — then tucks her chin into her neck, brings her fingers to her lips, and falls silent. Silent and still. When she finally starts up again, she yells, And I damn sure don't need you touching my face. Just take the damn pictures, cameraboy (Ramsey, 42).

Just as it is important to write about queer issues, I believe it is equally important to write about mental health (and other medical issues) and the impact they have not just on the person most immediately affected but also the impact on their immediate circles (and beyond). Mental health is another area with relatively low representation and visibility, and is one, much like with queer issues, where even the smallest uptick in societal understanding could erase some of the stigmas and may even help save lives.

OUTSIDE RESEARCH/INSPIRATION

Outside of music and movies — undoubtedly my two biggest muses for any creative endeavor — there is one video I consistently come back to for inspiration: a YouTube clip from the TV show *Newsroom*, in which Jeff Daniel's Character, Will McAvoy, a news anchor, details how America is no longer the greatest country in the world (which I do not

fully subscribe to, though it works well when looking at the nation politically). Speaking to a lecture hall full of college students, he goes through his litany of reasons:

There is absolutely no evidence to support the statement that we're the greatest country in the world. We're 7th in literacy, 27th in math, 22nd in science, 49th in life expectancy, 178th in infant mortality, 3rd in median household income, No. 4 in labor force, and No. 4 in exports. We lead the world in only three categories: number of incarcerated citizens per capita, number of adults who believe angels are real, and defense spending, where we spend more than the next 26 countries combined, 25 of whom are allies (Mike Phillips, 2016).

I will be the first to admit that this clip “radicalized” me. And I am glad it did. Because growing up we are taught that America is, as Jeff Daniel’s character describes in the clip, so “star-spangled awesome” that a lot of us do not even dare question the things that are being fed to us. And in return, many of us are left with a feeling of American exceptionalism so strong that it feels blasphemous to think otherwise. But I think it is healthy to ask those questions. We should absolutely be asking things like: Why does dark money from lobbyists and huge corporations pour into our elections and so heavily influence our politicians? Or why is America the only industrialized country without universal healthcare? Or why do we only have two major political parties? Or why do we not have tuition-free college like so many industrialized countries? And so many more.

Again, while I do not have any delusions that my writing will ever be equaled to that of Ocean Vuong or Aaron Sorkin (the creator of *Newsroom*), or that I will ever have the same kind of reach as them, my hope is that, at a bare minimum, a few people will become curious

enough after reading my collection of pieces and, if they are not already, begin to ask some of those questions for themselves.

A CONTINUING HOPE IN THE LITERARY WORLD (AND BEYOND)

REMEMBER WHEN WE TORE EACH OTHER LIMB FROM LIMB? is meant to achieve one main thing: to highlight and emphasize the importance of continuing the trend of bringing certain political, social, and familial issues to light, all of which are arguably on a positive trajectory (in terms of positive exposure and societal understanding). These issues are trending this way mainly because the way we as a society currently view specific issues, both big and small, has changed tremendously over the past several years. For instance, Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Beautiful* likely would not have been so widely accepted, say, twenty or thirty years ago as it is today. I mean, in Allen Ginsberg's day, to go back a little further, Vuong would have been crucified and shunned for putting out such a book — much like Ginsberg was for releasing *Howl*; but today, Vuong has had worldwide book tours, has given countless speeches and lectures, has virtually universal praise in the literary world, and has had his book translated into twelve different languages. But that is exactly the point. Much in the way Allen Ginsburg was a springboard for artists like Ocean Vuong to thrive, that tradition must carry on in a way that continues to make positive progress in the world — literary or otherwise.

CONCLUSION

Writing has always been there for me — even when I did not fully understand its importance in my life. It was there for me as a much-needed outlet to deal with my parent's

divorce when I was younger, where I would write mountains of bleeding heart poems about the anger I had toward my father; it was there during my music career, in which I was able to express my feelings through song; and it has very much been there for me professionally — although I have never fully used my degree for its intended purposes — I have never held a teaching job or tutored or published anything that made any money — my writing abilities have allowed me to excel in many jobs, most which have required massive amounts of communication via email and text.

Everything up to this point has taught me that writing is a part of my voice. A way to be heard. And that is something I understand now more today than ever. For instance, with my newfound passion for political activism, writing has given me a legitimate voice to communicate with different communities and articulate my stances in that space — whether it be my own or on a candidate’s behalf. Whether it is boots-on-the-ground-type work, online canvassing, or even through social media posts, that activism has become a substantial part of my identity, and I truly believe that would not have been possible without the ability to express myself through simple words on the page.

WORKS CITED

Bazterrica Agustina María, and Sarah Moses. *Tender Is the Flesh: A Novel*. Scribner, 2020.

Flynn, Nick. *Another Bullshit Night in Suck City: A Memoir*. W.W. Norton & Co., 2005.

Grandbois, Daniel. *Unlucky Lucky Days: Stories*. BOA Editions, 2008.

The Newsroom - America is not the greatest country in the world anymore.

(explicit). (2016, December 6). [Video]. YouTube.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z2HKbygLjJs>

Ramsey, Adam. *REMEMBER WHEN WE TORE EACH OTHER LIMB FROM LIMB?* University of Texas at El Paso, Texas, 2022.

“Tender Is the Flesh.” *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 1 April, 2022.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tender_Is_the_Flesh

Vuong, Ocean. *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous: A Novel*. Penguin Press, 2019.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My daughter, James, who has taught me selflessness in a world dominated by selfishness; Dr. Jeffrey Sirkin, for letting me know what my writing was *actually* about when I didn't have a clue, and for leading the way during this tiresome process; Jonathan Lethem, whose book *Motherless Brooklyn* was the first book to *really* sink its teeth into me and showed me the power of fiction; Mary Oliver, whose love of nature opened up something primal in me, and who, after emulating one of her poems in an undergraduate class, showed me a love for prose poetry, something I did not even know existed — she is just as responsible as anyone for this collection of pieces; Nick Flynn, who, as already mentioned, taught me to be vulnerable in my writing ; Alex Lemon, who taught me that being a jock and a creative person is more than possible, and that fighting through adversity, while painful, is sometimes necessary to make progress — also, for the years of guidance throughout this process; Olivia Gatwood, who makes me believe in the power of women on a daily basis, and who shows me that getting your work out into the world, in one way or another, is ever so important; Don DeLillo, whose writing was a revelation two summers ago and continues to be a guiding light; Russell Edson, whose poem *Ape* has been the inspiration for so many of my weird ideas; Jonathan Crimmins, also for the years of guidance, and for being my very first creative writing professor; and Bret Easton Ellis, who, before Ocean Vuong came along, showed me that being open in your writing, particularly about queer issues, is something that firmly belongs in mainstream America (and beyond!).

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
PREFACE.....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	xix
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	xx
REMEMBER WHEN WE TORE EACH OTHER LIMB FROM LIMB.....	1
THE ARCHITECT.....	2
A POWER OUTAGE IN PANTHER CITY.....	3
THE BUTCHER.....	5
WARM FEET.....	7
THOUGHTS FROM THE TRUNK OF A CAR.....	8
WORSHIPING IN THE LAND OF FILTH AND REFUSE.....	11
THE BEAUTIFUL COLORS OF THE HUMAN HEAD.....	12
THE CHATEAU.....	15
SALIVA PATH.....	16
SWEET POTATO CASSEROLE.....	17
A DUET OF QUEENS.....	18
THAUMATURGUS.....	19
FIRE RECORDS.....	22
THE BIRD.....	23
WHITE NIGHT OVER THE RHONE.....	24
AN AMERICAN STUDENT SOBERS UP IN HONG KONG.....	25

BRONCO BLITZ MONSOON – PART ONE.....	26
BRONCO BLITZ MONSOON – PART TWO.....	28
A SEGREGATED SKY.....	35
IN THE BELLY OF A TRAIN STATION.....	36
A SCIENTIST FINDS PEACE IN A GREENHOUSE.....	37
FATAL//BEEPS.....	38
PINK.....	39
WAIF IN THE WOODS.....	40
BON CHAT, BON RAT.....	41
ALIVE.....	42
60.1 – SIKI SIKI BABA.....	44
COLD FEET.....	46
MANCHESTER GORILLA.....	47
LITTLE LION.....	58
WORLD ISSUES FROM THE HIGH SCHOOL DROPOFF LINE.....	59
MA.....	60
NOAH’S POEM.....	63
TALL.....	64
VITA.....	65

REMEMBER WHEN WE TORE EACH OTHER LIMB FROM LIMB?

THE ARCHITECT

He came to me with an idea. I want to build a human race in my image, he said. A world, nay, a utopia, a Shangri-La! A place where these humans can interact with one another, evolve into something pure, more beautiful, go beyond the reaches of these limiting boundaries. What do you think?

Well, I said. I'm just an ape. What do I know?

A POWER OUTAGE IN PANTHER CITY

Here they come like a herd of cattle, rumbling in under the dissolving sunset. Bankers, brokers, bosses, blurs of black and white, flapping lines of power red, groups of greasy-haired heads (like they were dipped in oil). And they can't believe their eyes! One by one, they step up to describe the goings-on: the first, a *Wolf of Wall Street* clone, blames it on the *Fucking liberals with their alternative energy sources, electric cars, and meatless burgers*; the next, a man with resting dumb face, attempts some kind of masterful subtraction in his head, using his stubby fingers to *Carry the two*, then blames it on the grid, mouthing something about the chronic bleeding of the city's battery life; the next, a beefy guy with a Dumbledore beard, dumbfounded by the lack of lights, has an idea — a light bulb moment, if you will: *This is the devil's work!* Collectively, their words hit the ground with muddled thuds, and the letters splash against the concrete like a fury of confetti. A group of onlookers — around twenty or so — avoid the spillage, sync up in a choreographed fashion — craning their necks and whipping their heads back — and fully dismiss the men, opting instead to take in the newly blackened buildings. *The city's never been so dark*, one cries. *It's as black as a panther's coat*, another yells. Behind them, in a tiny slice of street where moonlight has slipped through the buildings, a little girl, seemingly as small as a house cat, appears from the shadows. She watches from afar, keying in on Dumbledore, his eyes now red as a cardinal. He raises his arms in a V, and yells, *Why now! Why did this have to happen now?* then melts to his knees. The little girl, calm as a Sunday morning, simply shakes her head at him, like a disappointed parent, then walks over to the pool of spilled letters. She digs around for a few seconds, splashing the pile in every which way, then plucks out two dollar signs. She grips one in each hand then skips over to the yeller-in-chief, where she taps him politely on the shoulder. Dumbledore, utterly confused, doesn't know what to make of her,

doesn't know what to do. So he just sits there, stone-faced. Even when she inches in, seemingly to study his eyes, his movements, he doesn't budge. The little girl moves in even closer, right up to his face. She lowers her arms, as if she's about to lift the man's hands and place the pieces into his palms, but pulls up completely. Instead, she winds up — like a 1920's pitcher — and shoves the two pieces into the man's eyes, one by one, turning him into a silent, two-windowed slot machine: DOLLAR SIGN, DOLLAR SIGN.

THE BUTCHER

Slices of fresh beef slide from the butcher's vertical spit, the pieces tender as butter, fragrant as flowers, and form a neat pile on a stack of parchment paper. The butcher wraps the orders, labels them, sets them aside, then cranes his neck and watches as the morning sun, in all its brutality, splashes through the storefront windows and crawls across the stainless steel counter. Just as the block of light reaches the piles of meat, the butcher, with a slight sneer building on his face — a way to tell the sun *Not today* — uses his pointer finger to gently push the stacks aside; for good measure, he even wags his finger at the light and playfully says, Nice try, his sneer swelling into a full-blown smile. He tosses a towel over the orders and shuffles to the front door, using his hand to shield his eyes from the sun. Briefly, he fiddles with the lock then flicks it open. But just as he does, a group of customers — or what appear to be customers — bullrush the door, creating an instant bottleneck at its threshold. The butcher jumps back, confused. He looks back to the window, hoping to catch a glimpse of the crazed crowd, but instead gets blinded by the wild sun. All that's left are sounds: the cracking and bowing of glass, the tension. The butcher pleads and yells, begs for the crowd to stop, to act in an orderly fashion. But they don't listen. They just push and rush forward, creating more stress, until, eventually, the windows fully explode inward, blowing a hole into the side of the building the size of Rhode Island. Again, the butcher jumps, only this time, instinctively, it's followed by a sprint to the back of the shop where, dodging shards of shattered glass, he settles in behind the counter. When he curves back around, his eyes are met with the unthinkable: riots of hooves stomping across his hardwood floor, splintering the oak under their massive weight; tables and chairs slung, stabbed, and slaughtered; excrement and urine spread and splattered. He can't believe his eyes. For as far as he can see, it's a sea of black and white, of brown and black, of cattle standing shoulder to

shoulder; in the air, the overwhelming clinking of bells and a deep chorus of angry moos plays above the chaos like a surreal soundtrack.

WARM FEET

ADY + KASSIE – PART ONE

Bolts of lightning, boisterous and stentorian, shake the Lake Erie Bridge, flash brilliantly, then dig into the moon-kissed water. The aftermath creates a crown at the bottom of the bolt, splashing water high into the cloud-scattered sky. Ady and Kassie watch from their car. It's spring. Again. And cold, but they're comfortable, the heater on high, both of them crawling over the middle console, riveted by the goings-on, doing everything they can to be close to each other — not just for the warmth, but because they genuinely like being together. Kassie tells Ady stories she's never told anyone before, about her mother battling the hells of addiction, about the piles of pills in her purse that make it sound like she's carrying maracas when she walks, each high or low accounted for by some scar or another; about her father's inability to cope, his storming out of whatever room at the slightest hint of conflict, and his failure to, as she puts it, *Man up*; and her grandmother, the woman she so affectionately calls Mimi, with a mountain of tears building in her eyes every time she says her name. She's everything to her. Her savior. She tells Ady about Christmas, about the wool socks Mimi will knit for him — *The warmest socks you'll ever put on*, she says — a tradition since she was just a little girl. *She'll make you a pair this year, I guarantee it*, Kassie adds. She then tells Ady that she's never been so sure about anyone in her life, that Ady's not like the others, and repeatedly makes him promise that he's not going to go anywhere. Which he tells her. Every time. *I'm done looking*, he says. *I have everything I need right in front of me.*

THOUGHTS FROM THE TRUNK OF A CAR

The size of this particular one is small, as trunks tend to be, and dark — also how trunks tend to be. My hands are tied behind my back, seemingly with zip ties as it feels like sharp plastic digging into my wrists, and my eyesight has been further blackened behind a black hood. And it smells. Like rubber, old tools, dirty laundry, which makes me think this is a man's car. I didn't get a good look at the fucker who chunked me back here, but the hands were meaty and sweaty and strong as hell, so I can only assume. And I'm not sure where we're going, but we're *moving*. Fast. The tires are whirring underneath me, melodically, humming along, and hiccup every time we hit a bump, which tickles my spine. Oddly enough — or maybe *not* oddly enough at this point — I'm not scared. Not even nervous. Or anxious. Because I know who's behind this. I just don't know why. My father has done a lot of things to "straighten me out" over the years, but having me kidnapped is a new one. A new low. Is this because of my drinking habit? My promiscuousness (mostly with men)? My desire to be an artist? Are we headed to another conversion therapy session? Because those are fun. Especially the ones with the chanting and hypnosis, sessions led by some crooked ass priest who probably diddles little boys and swears and drinks and is only at his current location because he got caught being a dirty birdy at his last spot and instead of being prosecuted was merely transferred to another church — as tends to happen: perpetual circulation over brute consequence. And if this *is* another conversion session, I can't help but wonder: will it be one where they swing a timepiece in front of my face and chant dumb shit like, "Have no fear, you are not queer," or will it just be another pray the gay away sesh? I don't guess it matters, they're all equally terrible. However, I do try to have fun with them sometimes. Take the last one, for example — the time I played along. For a minute, I even had them going. Basically, I acted like their tactics were working. About halfway in, just as the

priest was getting into his spiel, I acted like the devil had possessed my hands. I started throwing them around, wildly, slinging them around like one of those blow-up advertisement dolls — I even snuck in some jazz hands for the hell of it — then went all-in on them. I put my hands in front of my face, curled them into tight little fists, then paused, went tombstone still. The priest sat there, totally silent, eyes wide as boulders, and waited with bated breath. After a few minutes, I started acting like I was ripping long tubular “objects” out of my mouth, the way a magician would with that never-ending handkerchief trick, then side-eyed the priest with a can-you-believe-this-is-actually-working expression on my face. The priest, visibly excited, getting that little twinkle in his eye — probably because he had never seen any of his tactics actually work before — leaned in, even started to lift his arms in premature victory. But as soon as he got close enough, right as the stench of his teakwood cologne and the smell of dusty church pews flirted with my nostrils, I brought it all back, flipped the script. I started acting like the “objects,” inexplicably, en masse, were headed back into my mouth. I feigned shock, like I couldn’t believe I was being betrayed by my own body — by *God!* — and began double-fisting them, shoving them back in one after another, even going so far as to choke on a few of them (for dramatic effect). I then started bouncing up and down and laughing and having a gay ol’ time (no pun intended). Of course, this was when the priest caught on. His shit-eating grin disappeared from his face faster than he could chant GAY IS NOT THE WAY! and was immediately replaced with utter despair, a sort of frown/upside-down rainbow that took over the lower half of his face. Needless to say, he wasn’t impressed. He called my father, immediately, and told him to come pick me up. Which he did, immediately. Now, *that* was a bad ride. Extremely awkward. But not quite as bad as that night. That was the night the old bastard sunk an entire bottle of Maker’s, put his rings on, and put dents into my forehead. When he was

finished, the top of my head looked like the top of his Maker's bottle, blood dripping down like melted wax. The time before that wasn't much fun, either. That was the rodeo belt, his favorite one, the one big as a dinner plate, along with a couple cigarette burns and some light tossing down the stairs. The coward! So yeah, whatever this is, whatever trick my father has up his sleeve, will be child's play compared to that. I close my eyes and wait it out. The driver hits another bump. Again, it drums on my spine. I still don't know where we're going, I just hope we get this shit over with soon so I can make it to happy hour in time for Mai Tai Monday.

WORSHIPING IN THE LAND OF FILTH AND REFUSE

A tower of toxic sludge shoots into the air like a spotlight, signaling the hour of worship. The townsfolk don their diamond-studded gas masks, throw on their finest hazmat suits, and limber up (the Mountain of Rubbish at the Holy Ground is steep and requires a certain level of callisthenic chops). On the way over, they're met by a slew of singing worshippers — neighbors and divine alike — but before the singing even starts, they're blessed with a pointed wind that catches a profusion of plastic carryout bags and shoots them into the air like bees in flight. The bags swirl and spin and float and get slapped against the bottom of the buildings, adding to the already caked-on mosaic of transparent and beige litter. Everyone stops and gives praise, goes bug-eyed, hypnotized by the absurd beauty, until, eventually, they shake themselves loose, recover, twist their backs, and resume their journey to the Holy Ground. Upon arrival, they hand fistfuls of plastic bottles to the sherpa — an offering for him to guide them over the range — and head up. As always, the view from the top is magnificent: the glistening of garbage-covered rooftops sparkles under the midday sun, the miles of scattered goods go on as far as the eye can see, and the pool of glorious glop below is as dark and sticky as ever. One at a time, the townsfolk grab a cardboard cutout — the holiest of transportation — and prepare the plunge downward, splashing oil on the windows of their headgear and repeatedly yelling GLOP IS GOD as they scoot their slice of cardboard closer to the edge. They shake with excitement, high-five each other — some even cry — knowing that they're mere seconds away from being dunked into the Holy Gunk of Love.

THE BEAUTIFUL COLORS OF THE HUMAN HEAD

NOAH – PART ONE

Thousands of images flash across Noah's eyelids at night, some good, some bad, the majority of them flashbacks from his time as a travel essayist. But there's one that shows up more than the others. It's an image from his trip to India, in the middle of a Holi Festival, with showers of colored powder raining down on a jam-packed crowd. Noah was on the balcony, looking down, taking pictures as everyone celebrated in the beautiful mess. It's one of his fondest memories. In fact, pieces of that colored powder are still stuck deep in the crevices of his Sony Alpha. There are others, too. Like from his time in Senegal, floating in the algae-rich waters of Lake Retba, a swim that turned his white t-shirt into a faint shade of pink. To this day, it's still the only shirt he owns that he's never washed and has a special place for in his closet. There's also the time he rode a camel through the Lut Desert in Iran, one of the hottest places on the planet, where some of the buttons on his camera melted on his way to catch the most beautiful sunset he'd ever seen.

Those are some of the good ones.

The bad ones are there, too. And even though Noah has learned to tuck them away, and hardly even speak of them, they still come out from time to time.

The worst one is from his time in Syria. It was right after a drone strike during the Syrian civil war. He was walking through what used to be the Al-Nuqtah Mosque, sifting through the carnage and capturing all the photos he could, when he found a shiny plaque on the ground demanding his attention. He wiped it down, looked it over, then used his phone to translate the words. On it was the story of how blood from a severed head — the head of Husayn, the prophet Muhammad's nephew — was on one of the stones featured in the mosque. According to the plaque, this came about after a group of prisoners on their way to Damascus got stopped by a

Christian monk who noticed a light emanating from the head and asked if he could take it for the night in exchange for money. To which they agreed. The monk then placed the head on the piece of stone, and blood from the head fell onto it. The monk returned the following day, with the head, and professed to Islam.

Noah was oddly enamored by the story. By the lore of it. By the destroyed history it represented. He placed the plaque at his hip, like a book, and felt the weight in his hands. He traced the edges of it with his fingers. And as he did, a little girl, no more than five years old, dirty and disheveled, her clothes torn and blackened, ran up to him, sobbing uncontrollably. She took no time grabbing his hand. Noah bent down to her level, tried to ask her questions. Like where her parents were. If he could call someone to get her help. But she didn't speak any English, didn't comprehend a thing he was saying. She was panicked. She pulled on Noah's arm, almost pulling him to the ground, and jumped and pointed and shouted, pleading for him to go with her to a different location. At first, Noah objected, thinking it best if he stayed on his current route, but the little girl was persistent. She tugged and tugged until he finally agreed.

When they arrived, the little girl gripped Noah's hand, tighter than she had the entire walk over, and led him over piles of shattered stone and shards of broken glass. The site was unrecognizable, mostly leveled, though it looked like it could have been a small market. The little girl then pulled Noah around a big pile of rocks and walked him up to a half-broken wall. Once again, she pointed. Noah was afraid. More for the little girl than himself, but still afraid. Of what might happen to her. Of what might have happened to her parents. But also of what might be on the other side of the wall.

The rocks beneath Noah's feet wobbled as he walked, like tiny seesaws. He took it slow, one step at a time, the little girl following in behind him. When he got up to the wall, he held his

hands out and motioned for the little girl to hang back — which she did. As she stood there, quiet — as quiet as she could — with her arms placed behind her back, her tiny shoulders shook as she tried to contain herself. Noah crept in closer. He then looked back at the little girl, who let out a whimper the size of a pea. Yet again, she pointed. It took a few seconds — and a few deep breaths — but Noah finally curved his head around. And when he did, that's when he saw it — what the little girl so desperately wanted him to see. Right in front of him, placed on a broken marble table, was a child's severed head. All by itself. Eyes closed. With a slow drip of blood falling onto a pile of stones below. Before Noah could even look away, the little girl was right behind him, her tiny body leaning against his. She squeezed his hand — this time light and gentle — and whispered, *Akhi*. My brother.

That one is the worst one. The one he never talks about. Not to anyone. Not even his mother.

THE CHATEAU (a ROMAN à CLEF)

A mental breakdown is imminent. All because of one line. One single sentence atop a white page nestled in the confines of Tony's typewriter: *You are not like him; you will never be like him.* He can't get it out of his head, doesn't even know who it's aimed at, or what the fuck it means, only that it sits in his brain like a tumor, eating away at his thoughts, his sleep, choking his progress. He gets up and walks around, tries to catch his breath, tries to redirect his thoughts elsewhere, but the words follow him around like a lost, mangy puppy, tail wagging, skin in shambles, just happy that someone is giving it attention. Maybe it's this place, he thinks: the private patio, the special parking spot, the mile-high shrubbery marooning him from the outside world — all of the magic that supposedly lies within this hotel. Frustrated, he goes back and faces his typewriter, determined to write something of substance, maybe a few words that, together, will shake something loose, get him back on track. He closes his eyes, thinks about the last few nights — the parties, the actresses, the models, the quasi celebrities, the *actual* celebrities, the endless mountains of liquor and narcotics — and it triggers something. Suddenly, he begins to type, freely, feverishly, plotting the end of this hellish line, the meaning of it, its target. And as he does, another thought scares its way up: that even though he's been surrounded by all of these great things — or what appear to be great things — and even though he has more than enough to survive, he still feels desperately destitute. But why? His fingers stop. He opens his eyes to see what's on the page, hoping for something resembling the person he knows he can be, the person he knows he is. But the only thing in front of him, typed over and over again, filling up an entire page, is: *You are not like him; you will never be like him.*

SALIVA PATH

Adele, the adorable little fuckup, the purveyor of slippery tricks, stands alone in the kitchen of her childhood home, hands behind her back, her busy fingers fiddling around like hungry caterpillars. She freezes in front of the fridge, stares straight ahead, and then just... stands there. When she finally decides to move again, she dramatically pulls each of her arms from behind her back, like she's performing a magic trick, and slowly reveals each limb to the stainless steel doors in front of her. Immediately, she grows so entranced by the images of her arms' reflections that she presses her palms firmly against the doors, which makes the images go away, but gives her the idea to create a light beat using the tips of her fingers. The taps start slow, almost waltz-like, and sad, even without a recognizable melody, then transform quickly into something quicker, a beat that sounds like Madonna's *Like a Prayer* but not quite. When the final note ends, she yells a quaking *Thank you!* to no one in particular then rips open the fridge door — a move that shakes and rattles all of the glass condiments on the inside shelf — and snatches the orange juice carton, flicks open the mouth hole, and chugs the entire thing. Strings of orange juice and drool drip from her mouth and leave small pools between her bare feet. With a dismissive swipe, she tosses the carton onto the kitchen floor, tiptoes toward the hallway — bringing her knees up the way a cartoon robber with a sack of cash over his shoulder would — but gets distracted by the stove. She considers ripping it open too, the way she did with the fridge, maybe stuff a few things inside — she even thinks about how funny it would be to open it and make it look like it was talking — but instead continues on her journey to the hallway. She picks up where she left off, again with the tiptoeing, only this time at a much slower pace. When she finally reaches her old bedroom door, after leaving a long trail of orange drool behind her, she collapses at the door's threshold.

SWEET POTATO CASSEROLE

ADY + KASSIE – PART TWO

At Thanksgiving, Mimi, in her fragile state, looks over Ady's feet and, fulfilling Kassie's prophecy, tells him that she will most definitely be making him a pair of wool socks for Christmas. It's an offer Ady can't refuse. *She's amazing*, Ady says, *Just like you described her.*

At dinner time, the smell of her sweet potato casserole wafts from the kitchen into the guest bedroom, where Ady and Kassie sit on Kassie's old bed. They're close to each other, like always, talking. It's here that they make a promise to each other: a wedding, rings and everything, though neither one of them can come up with a good reason to rush into such a commitment. They decide on something small, intimate, immediate family only, maybe a few close friends. They write everything down in a purple notepad and label it WEDDING STUFF with a silver permanent marker. Mimi's guest room becomes their secret oasis, a place where they plan out their entire future.

A DUET OF QUEENS

An aging gang of wealthy and villainous trolls — at least fifty greasy tops with scoliosed backs and sickled feet — ready themselves to observe the night’s show: A Duet of Queens. Clockwise, they drag their chairs to the edge of the dinner table, stuff their bellies under the giant slab of imported wood, kiss their cross necklaces, and, should the show be anything less than satisfactory, prepare their antiquated diatribes that, in their words, “Work for any situation.” But before a single queen even takes the stage, the group catches wind of what the play is *actually* about and let their rhetoric grow so vicious and toxic that a fire gets lit on the lips of the listless gent at the head of the table, the broadest of the bunch, and his cherry red cheeks, for the first time, begin to outshine his pearly white teeth. He lets out a censorious growl, one deep and masculine, then screams *Pussy is God!* while pounding his fists on the table. From there, all hell breaks loose. Red Cheeks leads the way. He knocks over chairs, howls fiery nothings into the ceiling, and leads chants about *Speaking to the head of the theater* and half-baked recitations of *Really* and *Sad* and *This is bad*. Slurs and forks are then forced and placed next to duplicate plates of turkey, pie, and thick slices of ribeye, while each troll, impatiently, awaits their turn to rant and rail against *This abomination of their perfect nation*.

THAUMATURGUS

Bullets fly over my shoulder and find refuge in a man's chest in front of me. His eyes grow wide with rejection, his arms tighten around a frightened little boy, and time, for the moment, cuts ties with reality, grinds to a stop-motion dream: snowflakes pause in mid-air, the sounds of the city collapse into another dimension, and the smell of oil hangs in the frozen fog. Naturally, I freeze, too. Though only briefly. Because my instincts kick in and suddenly I find myself curving behind an empty car, crouching down, and steadying myself on the car's bumper. When everything comes rushing back, I maneuver my neck and peek through the back windshield. I see the man. His body has stiffened, as if to salute his assailant, and is now wobbling like a drunk. Towering above him, the Church of Nikolai Thaumaturgus — white and everlastingly glorious, in direct competition with the freshly fallen snow — is doing its best, though unsuccessfully, to cut ribbons through the darkness at her feet. On any other day, this would be a breathtaking view. One to write home about. But instead, I'm left watching as a little boy attempts to free himself from his father's grip, a pile of fear in his eyes, his face growing white, his screams muffled by the snow. The boy then pauses. He looks around. Looks in *my* direction. For a second, I think he even sees me. But he moves on, quickly, and continues to scream. I tuck my head into my chest, afraid to move. A shiver then rattles down my spine and knocks a sobering thought into my conscious. That even in this moment, even as the gentility of life blows like a bullhorn into my ear, it's painfully obvious what lies ahead for this boy. How tough it will be for him. How it will be a miracle if he ever conjures up a genuine smile for the rest of his life. Because this is the moment that will define *everything*. His every move, his character, his place in the world. Everything will lead back to these few minutes. My eyes drift back to the man. Somehow, he's still standing. Still in shock, but still breathing. For the first time, I notice his beard, short and

gray, his circular glasses, frames just big enough to cover his worried eyes, and his clothes, dark and baggy, topped with a black hat that says Rosneft in bold white letters. My focus drifts back to the boy. I watch as he reaches up to the man, the way a toddler does when wanting to be held, and with his tiny hands peeking out of his oversized coat, places his palms flat against the man's stomach. The man falls to his knees. Again, I slip away. I want to collapse into that alternate dimension, maybe find an alternative reality. Something better. Less evil. Perhaps a scenario where this man is genuflecting, kneeling at the steps of a grand church, making some grandiose gesture to show his son the freedoms of religion and pride within the confusing walls of manhood. An event wrapped in love instead of brutality. A beautiful moment. And as I ponder the possibility, I can't help but ask: Is this what I'll *have* to tell myself when the horror of these images inevitably takes my nights hostage? When they haunt the innards of my eyelids? Is this what I'll have to make myself believe? The man whimpers and falls forward, becoming one with the ground. The boy cries out. And as he does, a pool of dark crimson spreads from the man's body, soaking the thick layer of snow beneath him. The boy, confused, walks in circles — around the man, around the blood — then he too falls to his knees; in the same motion, he swings his fist into the man's stomach, forcing a breath to shoot from his mouth, a small cloud that freezes in the air. I stay quiet, though I feel words trying to escape my mouth. A tickle in the back of my throat dying to become a roar. The little boy sits back up, fixating on the pool of blood, enough to fill a bathtub, then collapses back on the man. I look away, let my head settle on the car's bumper. Out of nowhere, I begin to speak. Involuntarily. My lips moving without my brain's permission. The roar winning out over the tickle in my throat. I slap my hand over my mouth, try to trap it. But it sneaks through my fingers. I stand up. Also involuntarily. My legs also moving without my brain's permission. I hear myself say, out loud, "Please, dear God" — a phrase that

sounds entirely foreign to my ears, like it's the first time they've ever heard it — followed by, “Please send me a miracle,” which sounds equally as strange. I then repeat it. Several more times. Even though I know it's pointless. Not enough. Or even plausible. Because I know a real thaumaturge doesn't live here.

FIRE RECORDS (a ROMAN à CLEF)

A candy wrapper gets caught in the wind, slides up Bee's face, and tickles his nose. It makes him slap himself awake — *hard*. Lazily, he drags his fingers across his eyes and forehead and almost rips off his ratty toboggan. After looking around, he quickly realizes that he fell asleep on the sidewalk. Again. Third time this week. This one marked by sleeping straight up against the door of his record store, a first draft of *Less Than Zero* tucked into his armpit, and an almost empty bottle of whiskey gripped in his hand. He plants his palm into the concrete to push himself up, trying to keep his book and bottle in place, and reaches for the handle. But as he does, he gets trampled by a man in a blood-red suit — a real *mountain* of a man — who bullies his way through Bee to start rapping on the door with his meaty palm. *Sorry, didn't see you there*, he says unapologetically. The man's face is tight, angry-looking, his skin entirely way too tan for this time of year. His voice is hurried and loud. *Is the owner around?* he asks, making an oval with his hands to look through the window. Bee shrugs his shoulders, pulls himself up. Knowing that he never locks the door, he points at it, and says, *Maybe you should just try opening this thing and taking a look for yourself*. Which the man does. Bee slinks in behind him, quietly, trying to gauge his level of anger, trying to figure out what he did to make this man so upset. *Did I fuck his wife?* he thinks. *His brother? Did I forget to pay my dealer?* Inside, the man yells Bee's name several times, looks in every nook and cranny, even pokes his head in the bathroom. He walks up to Bee, his face redder than blood, the tendons in his neck thicker than bridge cables, and looks him dead in the eye. *I'm going to find that motherfucker if it's the last thing I do*, he proclaims. Angrily, he wipes beads of sweat from his forehead and storms out. Bee takes a swig of whisky from his bottle, the last little bit left, and steps behind the counter — where he waits, wondering how long it will take for the man to come back.

THE BIRD

NOAH – PART TWO

Noah stared at an old photo and remembered the time he was forced to get into his grandfather's death bed with him to take it. He recalled his grandfather's papery skin feeling the way he imagined an elephant's skin feeling, dry and flaky, and that his skeleton was protruding from it — as if his bones were trying to escape his body before his soul did — and that his mother, the self-proclaimed family's photographer, was pointing her camera at them, telling him to get closer, that *Papa Joe won't care*, then inching in but being scared out of his mind — because he was ten and didn't know anything about death other than it was scary — and then his mother telling him to smile, which he also did. He remembered his grandfather's shallow breath playing in his ear but feeling more like a hurricane than a soft wave, and this triggered a different memory, one from the week before when Noah was standing outside that same room, listening to his granny trying to calm his grandfather down as he tried to scream over and over again, yelling that he didn't want to die, that he was scared, and the words getting stuck on his tongue like they were caught in a beartrap. It was the scariest thing he had ever seen. He then remembered that, after the hurricane breath, his grandfather's hand, all bone and flesh, had brushed across his face, chilling his entire body. Fits of laughter followed from the lookers-on, mostly family members Noah didn't know, and he had no clue why they were all laughing. But it turned out that it was because his grandfather had then lifted his hand in the air, extended it out as far as it would go, and shakily flipped everyone the bird. In that moment, Noah looked to his mother, who dismissively waved him off, then turned back to his grandfather, who, still holding up his middle finger, looked Noah's mom directly into her eyes and, slowly, as if to savor each individual word, said, *Fuck you* — just as she snapped the picture.

WHITE NIGHT OVER THE RHONE

Every inch of blue leaps from Jack's Van Gogh and nuzzles next to him, between the posts and under his Egyptian cotton sheets, until every drop is drained from the canvas. Jack lays there, awake, and stares at the saltless sky. The silence — strangely, recklessly, even though there are no more waves, no more night — becomes alive. The buttery yellows and glowing whites, the lights of Arles and the incandescent multi-tipped stars, unable to reflect, beg for attention on the now open whiteness; the three unmanned boats, sunken at the bottom of a waterless abyss, stay grounded as a man and his wife, spectators enjoying their view from the quay on the east side of the Rhone, take in what is left of the river's knee. The man, more than the woman, seems disturbed by the goings-on — the leaky sea, the disloyal sky — and removes his straw hat in an apparent fit of rage. He then shoots a look, a dirty look, one meant for a man who has done something wrong, into Jack's pillow so bullish and resolute that it shrivels his bark. But why? Jack is merely a fixture, an observer, a lover of the delicate brushstroke; his pleasure here is driven purely by visual victory, a release to cool his nightly self-indulgence. But the man is insistent. He cups his hands and fetches a spot of river water from the inside of his boot, splashes it on his face, and yells at Jack over and over again, *Vous ne devriez pas être ici. Vous ne devriez pas être ici.* You should not be here. You should not be here.

AN AMERICAN STUDENT SOBERS UP IN HONG KONG

Wasting away in a rundown food market in Hong Kong, with the unfamiliar Chinese language filtering in behind him, an American student takes out a pen, opens his notepad, and tries to remember the night before. But only fragments trickle up. He recalls a bartender, an obsequious Chinese girl he took home from the bar, slept with, and left a note on before sneaking out and maneuvering his way through a sea of sleeping bodies in the living room; a moment in Central — miles from where he is now — where he stood in the middle of the street, looked through the mountains of skyscrapers, and thought that if the smog doesn't kill him surely the disgusting heat will; and Lei, his best friend, who, last he can remember, was with him at Tai Lung Fung — the last place in the city he remembers stumbling out of — but very well could have been one of the bodies he stepped over to sneak out of the house. That was it. He gets back to his notepad and casually flips through the pages. As he does, a small piece of paper falls into his lap. The edges of it are worn, as if it had been in there for decades rather than only a few hours, and almost falls apart when he opens it. The writing is in Chinese, the letters small, almost illegible. It says, **GET BACK TO THE HOUSE. IMMEDIATELY.** Or at least that's what he thinks it says.

BRONCO BLITZ MONSOON

PART ONE

(4:45 p.m.)

A Tuesday afternoon.

From his porch, the cowboy watches as two blackbirds fight over a field mouse. He names the first one Bukowski, after his favorite writer, and the second Bronco Blitz Monsoon. The mouse, due to its insignificance — for the purpose of his birdwatching, not in the world — gets a simple name, the generic designation of Field Mouse One.

Bukowski and Bronco Blitz Monsoon begin to poke and prod at Field Mouse One, mostly from its eyes and belly, and it starts to bleed profusely. This only hastens the birds' frenzy to feed on it, like sharks smelling blood in the water, and, out of pure instinct, they start to circle and yawp and jump and flap their wings.

Naturally, Field Mouse One is scared. But it's a fighter. And even though it can no longer see, because it is impossible to see without eyes, it is able to feel around the yard, navigate the dirt and grass, and before long, find refuge in a small, nondescript box — perhaps an empty parcel thrown out by a UPS driver. The cowboy, generously, starts to have hope for Field Mouse One, that it might survive, walk free. Though this turns out to be a silly idea. Not because the cowboy is generally an irrational man, but because since the mouse can no longer see, because it is impossible to see without eyes, fear overtakes its little body and, out of sheer fright, does the only thing it can, which is to run out of the exact same hole it just ran into for safety and right back into the arms of the blood-thirsty birds.

However, the mouse's imminent death is delayed — though only briefly — because Bukowski and Bronco Blitz Monsoon begin a fight of their own, for supremacy over who rules

the yard — and, ultimately, the rights to the mouse. They work through a preliminary bout of squawking and pecking, which turns into a round of high-pitched squeals and hollowed knocks — a testing of the waters, if you will — and finally devolves into an all-out brawl. The cowboy sits up in his chair, his ears perk up like a Doberman, and he even scoots up to the edge of his seat. Though this also turns out to be a silly gesture. Again, not out of some irrationality, but because, just as he does, the battle ends and the birds separate. And Bukowski, the apparent loser, flies away.

Which means Bronco Blitz Monsoon is king.

The bird quickly regains a sense of its surroundings and immediately locates Field Mouse One, who has run out of energy and is now only able to make slow circles in the middle of the yard, leaving small tracks of blood behind it. Bronco Blitz Monsoon flies to it, hovers briefly — a way to toy with Field Mouse One — and fiercely grips its neck with its claws, making blood squirt from the mouse's empty eye sockets. Then, with its beak, Bronco Blitz Monsoon swiftly separates the head from the body, secures both sections of the mouse with its claws, then it too is gone. The yard goes tombstone still.

The cowboy slaps his palms on the arms of his chair in excitement, falls back, folds his arms, then closes his eyes.

And that was that. A Tuesday afternoon.

BRONCO BLITZ MONSOON

PART TWO - THE COWBOY'S POV

(8:15 a.m.)

The rowels of my spurs dig into the checkered linoleum floor as I make my way to the back of the pancake house, my steps staying in rhythm with the fading *TING* of the bell above the door that screamed when I walked in. I don't think I've ever heard a bell so loud. Must mean there are a lot of older people in here, which today, is probably a good thing. Everyone in the dining room falls silent. I can feel them, their eyes. It appears my rowdy entrance made a bit of a stir. Maybe I shouldn't have dressed like Johnny Cash today. Not that it would matter. Any way you shake it, I'm the odd man out. I take a booth seat and grab the menu. Though I don't know why. I already know what I want. And what I'm here for.

I slap my menu against the table and jerk my head up. Ten nosey noses dart to laps. The bell above the door, on its last leg, squeaks out a few more *TINGS* then falls silent. It's replaced by rounds of whispers. I look around, try to locate a waitress. Somehow, I actually feel like eating. I peel back the corner of my menu, let it fall back to the table, then play with the sugar packets.

When everyone finally gets back to their business, talking and eating, I pull the menu back up to my face, fake like I'm looking at it, then gaze out the window past the road. Smoke starts to trickle out of the flue of gas stacks from the industrial plant across the street. Time to start today's pollution, I suppose. When I look back to the menu, a pair of too-far-gone Keds shuffle up to the table.

"Hey! I have a chicken coop," the waitress starts. Her voice is younger than I expected. I peek over the menu. Her teeth are crooked, her nose sharp and large. The light purple circles

under her eyes are the color of the sky when the dust rolls in at dawn. She's mid-30s. Single. No ring. Alone. She kind of reminds me of a vulture.

I lay the menu back on the table. "Excuse me?" I ask.

"Well, you're a cowboy. I have a chicken coop," she explains. "I was just putting the two together."

"Oh," I reply.

"I have a baby girl, too, ya know," she continues. "She's still in that drooling stage. Her spittle looks like a slow-motion yo-yo. The food is good here."

"What?" I ask. My voice is sharper than I intended. "What the hell are you talking about? Can I just have some blueberry pancakes, please?"

But before the waitress has a chance to reply, the bell above the door screams again and distracts us both. I turn toward the door. And that's when I see her: sweat-drenched blonde, white tank top peppered with dirt, ripped blue jeans, lips the color of blood. She hits me with a smile — a sea of red, a sea of beauty — and my heart lunges in my chest. She walks in and takes a seat on the opposite side of the diner.

The whispers reemerge, the way they did when I walked in, but this time they cool down much quicker. For good measure, I slide my hand inside my right boot to check my inventory. My persuader is nestled safely in her holster, where it should be. I run my fingers down the etched lettering on the handle, feel the word Makarov. A nervous tic. *Why the fuck does this one have to be so goddamn gorgeous?*

A hand then cups my shoulder and my whole fucking body jumps. It's the waitress. She rubs my shoulder like she's trying to smooth out a wrinkle on my shirt, and says, "Whoa, easy there, cowboy. A little jumpy, are ya?" then uses my shoulder to balance herself to lean over and

drop a glass of water on the table, her face right in front of mine. Pulling closer, she whispers into my ear, “I can climb to the very top and ride.”

My whole face involuntarily scrunches up, like I just sucked on a sack of lemons, and my body shoots to the back of the booth. “What? No, just the pancakes,” I reply. “Thank you.”

Embarrassed, the waitress snatches the menu, storms off, bolts over to the main cook, shyly gives him my order, then plops down on a small stool in front of the cash register. Placing her face in her hands, she begins to cry. I ignore it and look back out the window. The smoke from the industrial plant is getting thicker, turning the open blue sky to gray.

Focus! I tell myself, perking up, craning my neck, darting my eyes through the waterfall forming between the waitress and the counter. I peek again at the woman. She’s still sweating, like an ice water pitcher. She must have walked here. *What a beautiful mind she must have. And that smile, those lips. My god. Fuck, I really need to get over there and get this over with before this shit gets out of hand.*

But I wait — a far cry from normal. And my contemplation comes in the form of 10-second intervals. First, I unfold the napkin containing my cutlery, place the knife on my left, fork on my right, then wipe everything down: the plate, the silverware, the rim of my glass. I try to look normal. Beads of sweat creep down my temple. I remove my Stetson, use the napkin to sop it up. I take a deep breath. My stomach tightens. *Ok, no time like the present.* I prop my hand on the table, prepare to get up, prepare to make my move. With everyone seemingly enjoying their breakfast, it’s a perfect time. But just as I start to get out of the booth, I’m interrupted.

TING!

The bell above the door screams out yet again. It stops me in my tracks, impedes my progress, my momentum. I look over. Under the bell, a filthy-looking older man is standing at

the threshold, dressed in a dirty T-shirt with holes in it like Swiss cheese, cut-off denim shorts, and black and white Chuck Taylor's that have been through hell and back. He stops and stands at the door for a few seconds then steps inside. For some reason, he has an old, bald car tire propped up with his right hand, and a few books pinned at his hip with his left. The book in the middle is thick, like a dictionary.

I sit back down, trying to look as calm as possible, only to find myself wondering what these locals must be thinking: First, a cowboy walks in dressed in black, then a gorgeous blonde strolls in who's more suited for a runway than a pancake house in the Midwest, and now this homeless man? They can't be accustomed to this.

But then...

"Hey! Walter!" Everyone erupts, in unison, welcoming in the homeless man.

Incredulous, I look over. *What the hell?* And before he even replies to the crowd, Walter immediately spots me. He cocks his head with a slight tilt, lifts it back up, then smirks at me. He then nods to the peanut gallery, which draws some smiles in return, and starts directly toward me. My eyes shoot to the top of the table. *I don't need this shit. Just keep moving, old man.* But the sound of rubber rolling over linoleum gets closer and closer, louder and louder. I throw my hat back on, try to hide my eyes under it. But as soon as I do, Walter's tire hits my right boot, jarring my leg. Walter quickly retrieves it and places it back at his side.

"Well, hiya there, partner," Walter starts. His accent is thicker than mud. "Sorry 'bout that. So, what do ya know?"

"It's fine. What's with the tire, old man?" I ask.

Walter looks down, examines the bald piece of rubber, then looks back up. He stares directly into my eyes. "Well, that depends, Cowboy. How's your head today?" I start to respond,

but before a single syllable even leaves my lips, he rolls his tire and himself three booths behind me, where he sits with his back to everyone. I start to say something but think better of it — best to let the crazies be crazy.

I look back over to the woman. She's still as majestic as ever. And still sweating. Walter then pivots in his seat, props his elbow on the back of his booth, and again, looks me dead in the eyes. He looks tired, his eyes almost black. He jerks his head in the direction of the woman, and says, "Well, what are ya waiting for, Cowboy, go talk to her."

I stare at him, blankly, reply with an inquisitive, "OK?" then, without thinking, prop my hand back on the table, and again, prepare to make my move. *Fuck it. He's right.* "Wait, how did you know what I was thin—" I start, but once again get interrupted. It's the waitress. Again. Didn't even see her walk over.

"These are my first blueberry pancakes of the day, Cowboy," her voice cheery again, "Lucky you!" She places her hand back on my shoulder and guides me back into the booth.

Fuck! I was supposed to have this done before the food came out. "Thank you." I try to sound polite.

"Have you ever seen a human heart?" the waitress asks.

"Oh. Um, yes?" I reply.

"Well, it has a purpose to me, ya know? It's a lifestyle, it's beautiful, all the time, both inside and out. But ya know, when it's outside the body, it's like a fist wrapped in blood. It's compromised. It's weak. Which is why you should always examine it from the inside. To keep it strong. Like a marble. Durable enough that it can get squeezed without breaking."

I look up at her. "So that's what all the fuss is about? Someone squeezed you too hard?"

"Whatever. Would you like some syrup?" She replies.

“No. Thank you,” I answer.

The waitress then looks down at her well-worn Keds, then slowly walks back to her crying spot. She stands there for a second then bursts through the double doors into the kitchen, where faint weeping continues on the other side. *What in the living fuck, why is she always cry— Fuck! Liquid. Sweat. The woman!* I shake my head. *Focus! It's time to move! Now! No more excuses.* I make a note to kill the waitress, too. I look around for the woman, the one with the beautiful mind, the one whose blood-red lips are like the opening to her beautiful soul. But she's gone. I reach for my Marakov. But *she's* gone. Panic stampedes through my legs. I launch out of the booth, sprint to the front door, look outside. Nothing. I open the door. The bell cries out, tickles my eardrums. *Jesus Christ, that fucking bell.* I walk outside, the dirt under my boots soft and fragile. Still nothing. When I don't hear the door close, I turn back to the pancake house. And when I do, Walter is standing in front of me. This time, he doesn't have his tire. Just a book. The big one. The dictionary. The continuing *TINGS* of the bell fade as the door behind him finally comes to a close.

“What are you doing, Walter?” I ask.

He takes a step forward. The dirt under his filthy Chuck Taylors kicks up and swirls around his ankles. All he says is, “Quiet,” his voice gentle and soft. He then brings the dictionary up from his side and, with both hands, holds it out in front of him. He opens it, slowly. The inside of the book is hollow, and empty, except for my persuader. He pulls it out and points it directly at me.

A hesitant smile builds on my face. I feel it reach my ears. I lower my head and start to laugh. I can't help it. I then look back to Walter. Somehow, his eyes look even more tired, older. “How?” I ask.

“Just turn around,” he says, his voice now direct and firm.

I comply. And that’s when I see her: sweat-drenched blonde, white tank top peppered with dirt, ripped blue jeans, lips the color of blood; my target — my beautiful target. I focus on her face for a few seconds then look beyond her, across the street, to the smoke from the flue gas stacks. It has now completely engulfed the entire pale blue sky, turning it into a sad gray mess. I look back to the woman. She hits me with a sly smile, a shoulder shrug, then a conquering head tilt. *Fucking awesome*. I smirk back then close my eyes. My heart weakens, falls to my stomach. Behind me, I hear one final *TING!*

A SEGREGATED SKY

You tell me you don't like storm clouds, especially the ones that hang over the horizon like they're about to collapse on whatever city or town they're hovering over, like grabbing hands, the ones that turn day into night. You tell me this because patches of them are forming in front of us, crawling into the frame of our windshield as we drive east into the city. Behind us, in our small town, everything is still clear. I check the review mirror, adjust it, and catch the sun dipping into the earth. You harshly slap your visor up and curve your head under it, propping yourself up on the dash in front of you. You stare up. Before a drop of rain even spills, you tell me you hate them – a strong word for anything, let alone clouds – and that you don't know why, but you just do. Probably because they're filled with thunder and lightning and violent currents of energy, you say, though there's no evidence to support these particular clouds hold such power. It's funny, I say, when we were kids, you loved clouds, could even name 'em. Hell, you were so obsessed with the weather you'd tell anyone who'd listen you wanted to be a weatherman. What the hell happened? You shoot more daggers through the windshield, eyeballing the formation as it gets lower, darker. I ask if you're okay. Just assessing the threat level, you say. It's starting to look pretty bad, actually, maybe we should turn back where it's still clear.

IN THE BELLY OF A TRAIN STATION

Melodious whirs of orchestrated machinery roar through the burrows of Union Station and muffle the harsh voices targeted at a young Palestinian woman trapped in its belly. The small group of men, all middle-aged, all dressed in black tactical gear, stand in a half-circle around the woman and force her to the platform's threshold — where train meets person — and push, and push, and push. But the woman, despite feeling the wind of the train against her back, remains steadfast. Controlled. As if she is used to this treatment. Even as the wind loosens her hijab and splashes it around her face like a wind-whipped flag, she doesn't budge. Doesn't let the men win. She just stands there while they yell nonsense like *Go back to your country* and *This is a Christian nation* and grab at her clothes and attack everything that makes her... *her*. She takes a tiny step back, the last few inches she has left, and it prompts a unified gasp from the lookers-on — around people twenty or so — all of whom either look away or stare at their phones when the woman starts scanning the room. Despite knowing better, and despite knowing this woman is clearly no danger to anyone, I follow suit, remain uniformly statuesque. But why? I could easily cause a scene, get the police involved, do *anything*. But I don't. Because I am a coward. Because I am afraid. Afraid that if I yell *This is bullshit!* or *This is social injustice!* or even a simple *STOP!*, the assailants will turn on me too, try to bait me into joining their little circle of discrimination. So, I do nothing. I wait it out. I wait for the train to pass. Just like everyone else.

A SCIENTIST FINDS PEACE IN A GREENHOUSE

Shards of broken glass, odd-shaped and unpredictable, fall slowly from the freshly shattered ceiling, each piece painted with the promise of abuse, and slide past the scientist's arms, stomach, down to his feet. Oddly, he begins to spin, welcoming the storm. And as he does, he realizes something: while human bodies are meant to sustain injury and distress, even in the most rigorous and physical of times, even in the most emotional of situations, and even in the most funereal of instances, they are *not* meant to be used as umbrellas in a glass storm. But this does not deter him. Not even when the bigger pieces slice fresh slips of flesh from his bone and transform his arms into blood-spewing sprinklers; in fact, it only makes him spin faster; a smile even breaks out across his face, one so wide and freeing that the wrinkles under his eyes crash into each other and fold over themselves. Small spots of crimson begin to build around his body as he continues to spin, freckling the floor, forming a Pollockian mosaic of layered circles around him until, eventually, *tings* from the final pieces of broken glass die out with a gentle ease on the gravel floor and everything stops. The smell of burnt copper follows, followed by a blast of clean air, by a hard breath, by a starlit sky — the goal; *his* goal. The scientist melts to his knees, looks around. The greenhouse is different now. The greens are still green — perhaps greener than ever — the boxes of doctored soil remain symmetrical and unmoved, and the foggy walls have retained their status as guardians of this inside world, but the ceiling is tattered, polka-dotted by the scientist's stones. The opening has laid the earth bare again, made it accessible. The scientist's eyes grow wide as the moon as he looks up and watches the open sky with a faithful awe. He doesn't turn away — *can't* turn away — and only allows himself to blink when the stars do.

FATAL//BEEPS

Moonlight streams in the window and his face goes white like the face of the moon. Across his stomach, skinny rectangular beams of light bleed through the blinds and run ribs over his blanket, sectioning off his body. I get up and put my head on his chest. It welcomes me, sucks me in, teases me to jump. I make legs out of my fingers and walk them up, skipping over each rib on my way to his chest, then use my fingernails to find a small crack just below his throat — one long enough to fill with a few coins — and pick at it, piece by piece, until it's wide enough for me to slide in. I start slow. A hand, an arm. Then jump in headfirst, like diving into a swimming pool, wiggling my way down until every part of me is inside. I'm welcomed by the shallow beat of his heart. It echoes from cavity to cavity — his chest, his tired brain, down to his lungs, his abdomen, even his pelvis, back up to his chest — and each new thump knocks a memory into my head: the first time I breathed the air in front of his door, the hidden kisses at the zoo, the first time we undressed each other and traced each other's freckles with our fingers. The memories hang in my mind like a mobile, spinning and swinging, right in front of me but just out of reach. I extend my arms to sift through the network of images, hoping to pull one down — just one — to lock it away forever, but just as I'm about to grab one, the entire room gets washed black, cleaned of light. The air thickens and traps the moonlight on the other side of the wall. When everything finally comes back, all that's left is a penetrating beep on a machine and a collection of clipped strings hanging from the ceiling.

PINK

NOAH – PART THREE

Her pink scrubs. Her pink skin. Her pink lipstick. The way they all blend together to form an actual person. It's all Noah can think about. At least until she utters the words, "What you have here is an elephant problem," her face lighting up as if she's come up with some genius analogy, the pink blush on her proud cheeks matching her pink fingernails. "You know, like, an elephant in the room?" Noah's brother side-eyes him, cocks his head to the side. Noah doesn't respond, *can't* respond, can't even bring himself to acknowledge the words coming out of this woman's mouth — not immediately, anyway. In his brother's retelling of the conversation, he says that the woman kept going, that she went on to say it's going to feel like the elephant's presence will only get stronger, that their mother's lack of auditory response – a fancy way to say someone's going deaf – will eventually cause them to raise their voices and might even feel like they're herding cattle, and that their mother's eventual lack of hygiene may lead to a certain kind of olfactory response, which might cause a sort of "ghost presence" when the elephant isn't around. Noah's brother tries to snap him out of it, waving his hands in front of him and clicking his fingers. But nothing works. Finally, a rush of blood brings him back. Still fixated on the woman's first few words, Noah sits up and slaps his hand on the table in front of him. He stands up, points to the woman, and yells, "You know what, I seriously doubt my mother would like being referred to as an elephant, you pink asshole!"

WAIF IN THE WOODS

THE WAIF – PART ONE

The cold is a murderer. It devours the feeble and rides the strong — the bears, the deer, the red foxes, the snakes, even the wolves with their bulky coats and keen ears — late into the season, sometimes dragging them across the borders of mortality. For years now, the waif has walked these well-worn paths, searching for these decaying carcasses beaten down by the wintry wilderness, yet still finds herself shaking shivers from her spine and blanketed in a costume of horripilation at the sight of a fawn and its mother overtaken by fate — it's the part of life that is harsh and crushing and catches her off guard, that throws her perfect vision of the wild into a distorted blur. It changes her every time. But she knows these woods. She knows they will prevail. She knows that each winter the trees will change from green to yellow to brown matrixes, intricate labyrinthine systems spanning from one end to the other — an unforeseen attractiveness so sweet and generous that, below it, to an untrained eye, would seem bleak, seem purposeless, unrefined, as though it were a plot of enshrouded soil rife with inimitable potential and promise — and each time she looks up through the foliage and sees their might, sees what the inexperienced eye cannot, she's overtaken, refreshingly shaken; she's renewed every year she walks these well-worn paths; every year she is hopeful again, engaged, in charge, colored in with an unobtainable happiness so rich and pure she can only beg for the next new minute of cold, breathy air. It's what she lives for. It's why she left. It's why she never went back home.

BON CHAT, BON RAT

THE WAIF – PART TWO

A paradoxical sleep hits during an otherwise restless night. The Waif's eyes become blanketed under a set of indolent lids, her muscles go slothful and lethargic, and she is transported to a different world. A wonderland. Suddenly, she finds herself walking through a space where all living things are behaving like proper beings, where there is no cheating, no stealing, no depression of spirits; it's a starlit jungle, an empyrean landscape, overrun with forests of oak trees and gangs of roses, overpopulated with a willingness to prosper and a desire to live freely in jubilation and intoxication. The people here are *alive*, the animals steady. Fawns fumble freely around their mother's sturdy legs, bounties of blissful dancing tickle the airy dirt, and a spine-tingling clearness exhales throughout the salt-filled sky so sweet and cool that it shocks toes and sweeps foreheads in gooseflesh. It's where the procreation of happiness is being built. The waif wanders up to a tree and snaps a branch from its trunk. The limb slides off like butter, and the cavity left in the bark immediately fills itself in. She removes her shirt, ties it to the top of the branch, and waves it around. Shavings of bark jump around in the crisp air, like glitter, then float into the brightness of the succulent sky. Overwhelmed, the waif raises her arms in victory, and proclaims, loudly, over and over again, *Enfin, je suis à la maison. Enfin, je suis à la maison*. Finally, I am home. Finally, I am home.

ALIVE

NOAH – PART FOUR

I prefer to shoot on digital, Noah says, adjusting his camera. You know, as opposed to film. But I suppose I could be persuaded. He waits for a response but doesn't get one. Digital is just cleaner, he continues. Easier to store, the raw images easier to manipulate, the colors more vibrant, more alive.

Alive.

The word hangs on Noah's tongue. He swishes it around, allows it to fill his mouth. The room stays silent, still, his attempt to capture his subject's attention an obvious failure. But it gives him an excuse to keep working, to push forward. He shuffles over to the woman, stands in front of her — his large frame towering over her shrunken body — and adjusts her hands, tilts her chin, makes sure the light is catching her wrinkles just right. As he fiddles, she quickly gets frustrated and shoos him away, waving her hands at him like she's trying to get rid of a fly, only to call him right back to tell him why film is better. Because it's all we had, she says. That's just the way it was.

Noah doesn't respond. He just peels away, slowly, hanging back a few seconds to see if she has anything else to add. When she doesn't, he continues walking. His mind goes into overdrive. In particular, he can't help but think about love, about how on the one hand it can feel so complete, so absolute, so unconditional, so sweet and easy, so clean and pure, but then, at the flip of a switch, can transform into such an uneasy, even burdensome, proposition. He then wanders away completely and starts toward the back of the studio. On the way over, he hears, I— I don't even know who you are. The words are soft but fill every inch of the room. He turns around. The woman's face is blank, her eyes adrift in the distance.

And she's mumbling to herself, saying that she doesn't care what Noah thinks — surely a residual response — then tucks her chin into her neck, brings her fingers to her lips, and falls silent. Silent and still. When she finally starts up again, she yells, And I damn sure don't need you touching my face. Just take the damn pictures, cameraboy.

A million thoughts jump into Noah's mind, most of them stemming from an impatient frustration that comes with being the sole caretaker of a person in this condition, but he manages to suppress any immediate outbursts and reduces it down to a single, two-word sentence: OK, Ma.

Noah calmly retakes his place in the back of the room and puts his camera down. The thoughts continue to flood his mind. Most immediately, he can't help but think about the fight ahead, about what his life is going to look like. It freezes him. He slumps his shoulders, lowers his head, sighs. But knowing that that doesn't do anyone any good, he takes some time to consider life itself, its brevity. That even here, even as this inevitable march toward total darkness thrusts forward, even as the word *alive* is still dancing on his tongue like oil in a hot pan, and even as he watches through the tiny screen of his camera as the woman who put a camera in his hand in the first place phases in and out of reality, there is still something beautiful about this moment. There *has* to be. And not just because it's what he was taught to believe, but because *she's* the one who taught him so. She would always say, Everything is more beautiful behind a camera, Noah. *Everything*. No exceptions. Noah lifts his head up, grabs his camera, and looks back to his mother. As he does, he thinks that, if she could, if she was still capable of being that everlasting stalwart he's become so accustomed to, she would tell him that *this* moment is beautiful too. It's beautiful because I'm still alive, she would say. Because *you're* still alive. Regardless of how cruel that is.

60.1 – SIKI SIKI BABA

In the middle of a dark club in Paris, surrounded by the Kocani Orkestar, Zach, crowned by a hundred faceless strangers, shoots his voice into the sky. It blasts into the air like an exclamation point and flutters down like a feather. He repeats this several times. He likes the way it feels, the way he can single out his voice from all the others, watch it float, how he can lift his hands into the air, as if trying to touch them to the ceiling, and let the words rocket to the soffits then sink back into his throat like a drink of water. He can feel it. Something *new*. For the first time in forever, he doesn't feel alone; in fact, he and the crowd feel connected, like a collection of found wanderers, a single unit, captured by the night the way people ought to — the way *friends* ought to: drunk, united, and loud. He sways like a wave to the music, lets the horns and harmonies take over his soul, his body, and spills sweat like rain. But then, in a matter of seconds, everything shifts. Because out of nowhere, just between blasts of brass, Zack hears a woman's voice, singled out in the same way he was able to single out his own. It yells at him, the words in French: *Sommes-nous dans un putain de rêve?* Are we in a fucking dream? The words ring in his ears, play on an endless loop, cloud his mind, to the point where he can't help but ask himself: *Are we in a dream? Is this all just imagined?* He rubs his eyes, looks over the crowd — at all of the blank faces — and, involuntarily, stands there as his brain runs through the possibilities. If this really is some elaborate vision being playing behind his eyelids, it means that he's actually sleeping on his sofa back in Texas, filling his unimpressive square footage with thunderous snores and brushing away his cat as she licks his earlobes. It means that tomorrow is actually Monday, that his alarm is set for 7 a.m., and soon he'll be going through his tedious morning ritual of brushing his teeth while staring at himself in the mirror and wondering if he'll ever lose the fat around his face or regain the hair on his head. It means that soon he'll be wondering, like always, if he'll

ever wake up to another person in his apartment. He rattles his head, tries to shake the thoughts, tries to tell his brain to let it go, to get back to the music. But he can't. He starts to disconnect, completely, and drift away. Away from the club. Away from the people. Out of desperation, he tries to latch on to the girl next to him, tries to loop his arm into hers to somehow anchor him to this world, to Paris. But she pulls away. And as she does, she hammers him with a toothy smile, looks directly into his eyes, and yells over and over again: *Ouvre tes yeux. Ouvre tes yeux.* Open your eyes. Open your eyes.

COLD FEET

ADY + KASSIE – PART THREE

Mimi doesn't make it till Christmas. The incurable nastiness in her lungs, the inevitable killer of millions, escalates quickly, spreading faster than anyone could have imagined. As to be expected, Kassie is inconsolable. The mountain of tears she so bravely held back only months ago, just at the mere mentioning of her name, come pouring out, like a broken dam. Ady tries to catch them with open arms, but fails. It's something everyone was prepared for but not prepared for at the same time. Nothing is the same without her. Christmas is composed of aunts and uncles, cousins, people Kassie knows, others she doesn't, but still no mother or father. She's not sure if they know. Or if they even care. It's the first Christmas Kassie spends without her grandmother, and the first Christmas she won't get to don a fresh pair of Mimi's hand-knitted wool socks. She refuses to wear or even pick up a pair of the old ones, not out of hate or despair, but because they're covered in miles of unconditional love and dripping with an uncontrollable sadness. She falls. Deep. Deep into a place that Ady is not welcomed. A place where she, and only she, can grieve and be alone. Ady wants nothing more than to be there with her, but he is shunned, seen as an outsider, not worthy of joining in on her pain and suffering. He falls, too. Out of the picture. The picture they so beautifully painted of their lives together. It takes him months, but Ady finally gives up. The rings they promised each other become a distant memory, and the purple notebook filled with their plans gets stuffed into an old sock drawer, buried under a sea of wool, kept warm, and never spoken of again.

MANCHESTER GORILLA

A set of gold teeth called out to Perry, a middle-aged stiff in a suit. They belonged to a woman sitting at the bar, covered in tattoos, wearing a sparkly red dress, one better suited for a fancy dinner party than a night out at Gorilla, Manchester's hippest new venue. But she pulled it off just fine. Her long legs were tied in knots around her barstool, and her hands danced when she talked. She was pretty and stylish and cool. Everything Perry wasn't.

The teeth whispered out: *Perrrrryyyy. Perrrrryyyy.*

It didn't start this way, though.

No, it all started with Perry simply mesmerized by the teeth. He couldn't pull his eyes away from them, the way they shined so brightly under the dim glow of the overhead lamps, like tiny suns coming up at midnight, and how they reflected off every surface in the room. He watched from a distance, of course, nestled in his booth, a mint-colored number furthest from the bar where he sat alone, drinking a drink he didn't like, a green one that made his lips pucker, too afraid to get up and talk to the woman. Instead, he doodled on his drink napkin, nursed his cocktail, and pretended like he was having a good time.

As he sat there, Perry didn't see anything else. *Couldn't* see anything else. Not the dozen or so people eating and drinking at other tables, not the waitstaff feigning polite platitudes, not even the attractive bartender flashing his dimples and whipping his shaggy blonde hair at anyone who walked by. Just the woman. That was it. The doodle on Perry's napkin was even devoid of his surroundings. Nothing of the industrial workings that ran through the venue's soffits. Nothing of the elevated tracks above the railway arches just outside the window. Not even a hint of the artisanal tile work between him and the bar. It was *solely* of the woman. Just her and the napkin.

But the drawing was *good*. Really good, actually. In fact, if Perry hadn't been so concerned with choosing a "stable career" in his younger years, he might have had a vibrant career as an artist.

Now, while the drawing on the napkin was good, it did — perhaps unfairly — overemphasize the woman's features: her big blue eyes were huge and jumped from her face, her wild red hair splashed all over the napkin, and Perry even plumped up her breasts to make them larger, though this was hardly necessary — she was already quite *zaftig*. Of course, the drawing also included the woman's teeth, which he highlighted by adding little stars at the tips to emphasize their sparkle.

To get the details just right, Perry would look up, study her face, draw a few lines, take a sip of his drink — pucker his lips — then slink back into his booth and close his eyes. And that's when it would happen. Every time. Each time Perry would shut his eyes, he would hear it: *Perrrrryyy. Perrrrryyy*. It was like a fog rolling over the tables, and each time it reached him, it would jerk him back to reality.

The last time it happened, Perry sat up straight. He glanced over at the woman. He then looked back to the napkin. Ready to put the finishing touches on the doodle, he took a huge gulp of his drink, slouched into his booth, and closed his eyes. He waited for the call. He felt he needed to hear it one more time, that sweet wafting sound, felt that it was necessary for him to finish, to get the drawing just right. But it didn't come. He closed his eyes again, this time tighter, and waited some more. But still, nothing. No call. No wafting fog.

After a few minutes, he tried putting his head down and closing his eyes super tight against the folds of his crossed arms. He waited and waited, closed his eyes tighter and tighter. And this time, though he still wasn't greeted by the desired whisper of his name, he was greeted by a voice, a real one, one so soft and delicate it quite literally tickled his eardrums.

“So, you like to party, huh?” it said.

Perry’s entire body jolted to life. It was like he had received an electric shock. He lifted his head. He sat up. His eyes grew wide as planets. He couldn’t believe what he was seeing: it was the woman! He sat up even higher. He then darted his eyes toward his drawing, quickly tried to cover it with his hand. “I– I don’t know,” he stumbled. “I mean, I guess so,”

The woman leaned over Perry’s table. For every inch she moved in, Perry slipped backward. It was like the air between them was pushing him back. The woman lifted a huge smile, flashing her gold teeth at Perry. They shined like tiny strobe lights. She then propped herself up on her elbows, and continued, “Well, you’ve been drinking this absinthe all night, haven’t you? I just assumed you like to party.”

Perry awkwardly lifted his glass, unaware of its contents, and raised it toward the woman. He leaned in, took a deep breath. The woman’s scent rushed into his nose. She smelled the way angels ought to smell — like vanilla and apricots. “Oh, well, um, yes. I do– I mean, yes ma’am. I do like to party.”

The woman slammed her palms on the table, making Perry jump back. “You see, now that’s why I love this place! You never know what you’re gonna come across. One night it’s a threesome with a married couple, the next it’s a stiff in a suit looking for some magic. Here,” the woman reached into her bra and pulled out a small white pill. She swirled it around in her hand then placed it on the table. A red smiley face with stars for eyes stared up at Perry. “Take this, Little Man,” she said.

“Wha– What is it?” Perry inquired.

“Heaven,” the woman replied.

Perry picked up the pill, examined it, and let it roll around on his palm.

“Trust me,” the woman continued. “Take it, then come find me in twenty minutes. Set a timer on that fancy little phone of yours.”

Perry didn’t hesitate. He pulled a small gulp from his glass — the last few sips he had left — and threw the pill down his throat. It went down with ease. He watched as the woman, without saying a word, retreated back to her seat at the bar, mesmerized by the sway of her walk, the way her hips dipped and spun. He then looked around to try to figure out what the hell just happened. He looked down at his hands, like somehow they might have the answer. He tried to take another sip of his drink. But it was empty. Only melted ice cubes. He set the glass down and grabbed his phone. As directed, he set a timer for twenty minutes then shut it off. In the screen’s reflection, he caught a glimpse of himself, and it made him smirk. Because for the first time in forever, he felt important.

The pill hit quick. First, it just flushed Perry’s face. He could feel it redden. But after only a few minutes, it kicked in. Everything went fuzzy: his brain, his thoughts, his vision. He couldn’t believe it. He couldn’t believe he let some stranger, regardless of how beautiful, lure him into something so uncharacteristic, so reckless. He’s an accountant for god’s sake. And a cautious one. One who doesn’t go out, who rarely drinks — and therefore doesn’t know *what* to drink — and who didn’t even want to come out tonight and only did so on a whim. He buried his face in his hands, embarrassed.

And that’s when he heard it. Not the whisper — something he was still craving — but, yet again, something new. Another voice. A *different* voice. A familiar voice? It came from the top of his table.

“Psst. Hey. Perry. Perry! Psst, down here,” it said.

Perry looked around, confused. He thought it might be a waiter, maybe someone from the management team, someone trying to get his attention to tell him he needs to leave. The gig was up, he thought. He had been outed for being the least cool person in the place and it was time for him to go. But no one was there.

“No, I said down here, Shitbird!” The voice was louder this time, more assertive.

Perry looked down. And when he did, right there on the table, he saw himself. But it wasn't like looking in a mirror, and this wasn't like looking in some reflection in a pool. Not even close. Instead, it was a cartoon version of himself right there in his napkin, the same one he used to doodle the woman with the gold teeth. And it was staring up at him. And talking to him! Perry rubbed his eyes, hoping to wish it away, thinking he must be going crazy. He then looked back down. His cartoon self was still staring up at him, only now he had his hands propped on his hips and a time-is-wasting look on his face. Perry took a closer look. Just like the drawing of the woman, the features on the cartoon version of himself were also exaggerated: his hooked nose was big and looked like a shark fin, his unkempt eyebrows were like two Brillo pads, and his curly brown hair was like a million tiny bed springs. He was positive he was going insane. He looked around to see if anyone else was seeing what he was seeing, to see if anyone was seeing the literal CARTOON-COME-TO-LIFE in his napkin, but no one was around. No one was even paying him an ounce of attention. Perry tried to gesture with his hands, discreetly, hoping to make eye contact with someone, to draw attention to the situation without making a scene, but no one was biting. So he focused back on the cartoon. He replied, “How— I mean, why is this happening? And where is the woman? Where did she go?”

“I don't have time to explain,” Cartoon Perry started, his voice deeper than Real Perry's. “Yes, she's gone. And we need to find her. And I'm going to need your help with that.” His little

body was splashing all over the place. It walked back and forth in the small confines of the napkin, hands waving wildly. “But first,” he continued. He then stopped in his tracks. He motioned for Perry to come closer, waving him toward the napkin. “Come down here, Big Guy.”

Reluctant, Perry leaned in, placing his face as close to the napkin as possible without looking suspicious. “Yeah, what?”

“Ok, here’s what I need you to do. Are you listening?”

“Yes, I’m listening.” Real Perry’s eyes scanned the room again.

“No! Hey! Eyes right here, Pumpkin.”

Perry looked back down. “S– Sorry. Ok, I’m here.”

“Good. Now look, here’s what I need you to do. I need you to get in here with me. That’s the only way this is going to work.”

“But how do– ”

Cartoon Perry jumped in. “You’re gonna have to stand up on this banquette, position yourself carefully, and dive headfirst into the napkin.”

“What the fu– !” Real Perry started to yell but caught himself. A few people glanced his way but quickly returned to what they were doing. Real Perry brought his voice back down to a whisper and honed in once again on the napkin. “Are you fucking crazy? No. Absolutely not. That’s insane. I’ll break my neck. This is crazy, I can’t– ” He started to get up.

“Hey!” Cartoon Perry again waved his arms wildly. “Listen to me. You need to pull it together, Pussy Boy! I need you to trust me on this. Everything you ever wanted is inside this napkin: the power, the assertiveness, the autonomy, the confidence. Everything you need to get with the woman from the bar is right in here.” Cartoon Perry’s voice was stern, nothing like Real Perry’s. “Are you with me?”

Surprisingly, this lit a fire in Real Perry's eyes and ignited a real *fuck it* mentality. He shook himself loose, gave himself a little pep talk, then lifted his leg to stand on the booth. At first, he was wobbly, like a drunk flamingo, and it made him immediately put his foot down and steady himself back on the ground. But then he took a deep breath, shook his hands out, and tried again. This time, he was less wobbly, more steady. He took it slow. By the time he made it to the top of the banquette, his fear completely subsided. Being there made him feel like a pro wrestler or an Olympic swimmer, and suddenly, he had... *confidence*.

"There you go, Big Guy!" Cartoon Perry cheered. "You got this. Now, one nice little dive and you're in!"

Real Perry, not caring anymore who was watching, looked down the bridge of his nose at the small napkin. It made him think of the circus he went to when he was a little kid where a tiny woman climbed up a tall ladder and jumped into a small pool of water. He thought about how easy she made it look. He then thought about how much smaller the napkin looked on the table than the pool did, which made him nervous all over again. But he was determined. He took another deep breath, then a few more, then shuffled his feet like a penguin and readied himself to jump. From inside the napkin, Cartoon Perry egged him on, standing in the middle of it, his arms wide open, welcoming him.

"Oh, what the fuck," Real Perry muttered under his breath. "Here goes nothing." Without thinking, he sprang from the banquette, jumping as high as he could, and barreled toward the napkin. It felt good. So good that, instead of diving headfirst, he snapped his eyes shut and formed a tight cannonball.

Then, everything went completely still.

There was no crash, as Real Perry had expected, and no outbursts of laughter from onlookers, something Perry was accustomed to anytime he tried anything remotely athletic. Nothing. In fact, it felt like he was floating. Like he was weightless. A tingle took over his entire body. He felt... *free*.

When he finally opened his eyes, he wasn't on top of the banquette anymore. And wasn't on the table. He wasn't even in Gorilla. No, he was IN! He was with Cartoon Perry inside the napkin! The space was completely empty, just as he had drawn it, and dark, save for one glaring exception: a cracked door with a bright white light pouring from it.

"Yes! 'Atta boy!" Cartoon Perry yelled. He hugged Real Perry tightly around his neck. "You're in, Muthafucka!" Cartoon Perry raised an arm in victory and kept the other around Real Perry. He continued, "Ya know, I gotta be honest, I didn't think you had it in you. Especially that cannonball. That was a nice touch."

Real Perry peeled away from Cartoon Perry's grip and once again looked around at the empty space. At his creation. He looked over his new body, which was now identical to Cartoon Perry's. Naturally, he started to freak out. He examined every inch of it, from the hair on his head to the shoes on his feet. He pulled on the skin on his face, on his arms, even pulled out the front of his pants to check on his goods. "Oh, thank god," he cried. "Looks weird as shit, but it's still there." He turned and faced Cartoon Perry. "So, I'm, like- inside the- "

"Yes," Cartoon Perry interrupted. "But don't worry, you'll be fine. Look, we don't have much time. We need to get to work." Cartoon Perry steadied Real Perry by grabbing his shoulders and squaring him up. He then grabbed Real Perry's chin and held his head still so he could look him directly in his eyes. "I really need you to focus. The woman from the bar is right through that shining door, and she needs our help. You want to be the hero, right?"

Real Perry's face lit up at the word *hero*, a word he's always held in great reverence. His entire body stiffened like a soldier. He was ready for battle. "Yes. Hell yeah. I'm in!"

"Good, then follow me."

Together, the Perrys walked to the shining door and pulled the handle. When it swung open, they were greeted by a burst of heat. The intense dryness burned Real Perry's eyes. Beyond the door, there were miles and miles of cartoon desert, followed by nothingness, followed by a cartoon version of the Great Pyramids in Egypt. Cartoon Perry, strangely, expressed little surprise at the new surroundings, as if it were somehow normal, while Real Perry, in utter disbelief, stood with his hands over his face, peeking through his fingers every few seconds to see if what he was witnessing was actually real. Cartoon Perry reached over to Real Perry's arms and swatted them away from his face. "C'mon, man. We gotta go! Quit touching your stupid face."

"Are we in fucking Egypt?" Real Perry asked, incredulously.

"Yes, now quit your gawking. We need to ride. Like, yesterday. We don't have any time to waste."

"Seriously? Fucking Egy- Wait, did you say ride?"

"Yes," Cartoon Perry said. He pointed to two camels directly in front of him, both in the seated position ready to be mounted. "And it's gonna be a long one, so the sooner we get started the better."

"Jesus Christ," Real Perry replied. "What- Whatever you say, I guess."

"Atta boy."

After what felt like an eternity, the Perrys found themselves at the foot of one of the pyramids. Real Perry looked up at it. It was nighttime and he could barely see anything. The

deep black sky crowned the point of the pyramid and was littered with stars that looked close enough to pull down. Cartoon Perry nudged Real Perry with his elbow, a gesture of encouragement, and guided his eyes to the top of the pyramid directly in front of them. “There she is, Cowgirl. Time to bring ‘er down.”

A bright gold light appeared from the point, like a light coming from a lighthouse. Real Perry’s eyes beamed with excitement; his heart pattered with nervousness. He pointed up. “She’s all the way up there?”

“That’s right,” Cartoon Perry said. “And she’s waiting for you, Pal.”

Real Perry closed his eyes. When he did, a familiar voice called out: *Perrrrryyyy.*
Perrrrryyyy.

Real Perry burst into life. Suddenly, he was no longer worried about the woes and characteristics that would normally hold him back. He didn’t think about the shyness, the self-doubt, the fear of talking to a woman. He didn’t even worry about the fact that he was currently a cartoon in some bizarro napkin world. He just sprang into action. He geared up to start the climb, lifting his foot onto the side of the pyramid, ready to scale the entire thing. But just as he was about to take his second step, he was interrupted by the ringing of a bell, a boom that resounded throughout the entire desert. The sound pinballed through the pyramids, bounced through the night sky, and shook the ground, tickling the spines of both Perrys. It prompted Real Perry to look over to Cartoon Perry, who just shrugged his shoulders. The sound then became isolated, quieter, rattling only in one general spot. And the more it rang, the more isolated it became, until eventually, it became so isolated that the sound only rang in Real Perry’s pocket. Real Perry stopped in his tracks. He lowered his leg and settled his foot back on the ground. It

was coming from his phone. He reached in his pocket and pulled it out. On the screen, the words TWENTY MINUTES IS UP lit up his face.

LITTLE LION

Strides are made along parallel lines, revolutions in a single direction, set at a single speed, the powerlines guiding us to the horizon. Or maybe to the moon and back. Or maybe New York. Doesn't really matter. Your little fingers, so soft and delicate, the smallness of them never as apparent as they are in this moment, along your wiry arms, your tiny feet, your magic toes, your pacific heart, everything that makes you who you are, are the only things that matter. You stare up at me, with every pinch of blue in your eyes — the exact same blue as mine — and dig into me, secretly scooping out tiny excavations for eternal keepsakes. Like I could ever let you forget. Trust me, I'll *never* let you forget this. Because this is the moment you truly became mine, when it became my sole duty to guide you, to show you the world as it is meant to be seen. But also, to listen. I mean *really* listen. Always. When you're hurt, when you're sad, when you're happy. It is my job now to protect you, to make you confident, to make you hopeful. But most of all, to make you strong. You know that little roar in your belly, the one that builds up in your chest and feels like it's gonna blast out like a bullet? Well, that's you becoming strong. Because you are strong, Little Lion.

WORLD ISSUES FROM THE HIGH SCHOOL DROPOFF LINE

Kids get warped, become unclear as forest fires, and I'm left wondering if you'll make it out alive. Because no one knows. Not anymore. I mean, one bullet and *POOF* — gone. But it doesn't stop there. Let's also consider that storms are throwing violent shade over otherwise quiet oceans, that slabs of frosty diamonds are being licked clean at cartoonish speeds, and that entire groups of wildlife — caribou, arctic foxes, toads, painted turtles, tree swallows — are now left incessantly checking their watches. And we *know* these things yet we refuse to find a unified solution. But why? I mean, the answer is simple: Act! Follow the science! Read the data! Reject corporate interests! See? Simple. *HOOOONK!* The car behind me blasts its horn. I don't move. Instead, I roll my window down, curl my neck through, and yell, *Can't you see I'm fixing the world here?* then tuck my head back in. I look over. I get serious. I tell you that I need you to come back out today, that you have to make it out alive. Not in the Elbert Hubbard sense of the saying, but *physically* alive. Because there are things you simply cannot miss. Like tea parties becoming slumber parties, summer dresses becoming wedding dresses, and maybe one day even fretting over your own child's future in *her* dropoff line. Finally, I inch forward, even though I'm scared shitless to do so. To let you out. To let you walk in. I try to hide it by lowering the bill of my cap over my eyes, but I give up the game the second you open the door by flinching and yelling *WAIT!* When you dip your head back in, I continue. Eventually. For whatever reason, I start spitting out phrases like *Just give it your best shot* and *Your best shot is good enough, honey*, along with a handful of other cliched nonsense. But it all feels like an out-of-body experience, like total nonsense — because all I really want to say is: I just hope you don't get shot *at*.

MA

NOAH – PART FIVE

Her room at the facility is a caricature of her old living room — stacks of religious texts on a knockoff coffee table, a TV in the corner much smaller than the one she’s used to — all meant to make her feel at home, meant to make her feel safe, though the resemblance is essentially nonexistent. Not that she knows the difference anymore.

She sits in the corner, smiling, her tiny body nestled in her favorite recliner. Her legs, now skinny as a flamingo’s, hang weightless over the edge, and her bony ankles peek from the bottom of her pants as she gently rocks back and forth. Out of habit, she starts to hum her favorite songs.

As always, Noah sits and listens, reading a book. A hard copy of *Still Alice*.

The tune is slightly off-key, but the melody is undeniable. *Peace in the Valley*. A song her mom’s mom sang to her as a little girl, and one that Noah has now heard a million times himself. It quietly fills the room. At this point, though, the humming has become such a constant in Noah’s life that he usually doesn’t even notice it.

Noah flips a page.

Peace in the Valley turns into a mumbling of *How Great Thou Art* then awkwardly shapes into a slurring of *I’ll Fly Away*, the next track in the endless number of gospel songs she knows by heart.

This one is different. For Noah, *I’ll Fly Away* is one of those songs that, no matter how many times he hears it, *always* takes him back to a specific memory: Thanksgiving. Every single time. Back when there used to be family gatherings. He thinks about his aunt Mary playing the piano in the living room, her fingers dancing over the keys, and Ma sitting on the edge of the

coffee table, the center of attention, her body swaying to the music as she places her voice perfectly into the pockets of the song. In the background, there's also the kids and grandkids running back and forth between the living room and the room in the back with all the books and porcelain piggy banks. Sometimes, the smell of pecan pie even sneaks into the memory as well, which was *always* a highlight of Thanksgiving, though this detail usually gets drowned by all the music and singing and running.

I'll Fly Away then turns into *Amazing Grace*, which allows Noah to get back to his book. Though only briefly. Because, for some reason, he can't get the memory of Thanksgiving out of his head. Usually, it pops up, he reflects on it, and is able to move on. But not today. He tries to refocus. He reads a few more sentences, tries to *really* key in on the words, but his brain just scans over the page and doesn't allow for anything to sink in. He tries again. Then again. He ends up rereading the same sentence four or five times before realizing that something feels off.

He looks to the corner. The gentle rocking of the recliner stops, as does the humming. Noah starts to get up, to see if she needs something, but instead sits back down and observes. He watches as she closes her eyes, settles her head into the back of the chair. The pointer finger and thumb on her right hand start to rub together, a telltale sign that she's about to fall into some deep memories of her own. Is she thinking about his father? Does she *ever* think about his father? Is she thinking about her own father, Papa Joe? About his time in the military? Maybe when they lived in Japan? Or the time she won senior beauty in high school? Her first real boyfriend, the drummer? Noah starts to open his mouth, to see if he can lure it out of her, but pulls back when she suddenly stops rubbing her fingers. Noah scoots up in his chair. His mother lifts her head, opens her eyes, and gently pushes her foot back into the floor to start rocking again. And humming, though it doesn't sound like anything in particular, just humming for the sake of

humming. When that song ends, she latches onto another one, one more familiar from her endless Rolodex of gospel songs: *I Saw the Light*.

Noah falls back into his chair, finds the spot where he left off in his book, and continues reading.

NOAH'S POEM

NOAH'S CONCLUSION

A thin layer of blankets, peek-a-boos of warm toes, tiny fingers, bright eyes, the comfort of knowing that more time sits on the horizon, that a fully awakened dream has yet to expire and is still within a whisper's reach. Until an *I don't feel so well* knocks on the door and turns into an *I'm fuzzy, really. Like my head is the static on a tv, like millions of tiny ants marching through a maze of madness.*

A grip full of cold follows, followed by shrinking bones and lost memories, by melancholic tones — by an *I'm scared*. I fold her favorite rose-colored blanket over her tiny body and place my hand in her palm — now a tiny ice rink — and let the cold shock my system. It flashes me to her childhood, to her bundled up in some handspun blanket marveling at the snowcaps of Mount Fuji as a Japanese maid tickles her ear to calm her nerves. I watch as pink and lilac clouds reflect in the browns of her eyes and crawl over the mountains. Then I wake up in a frozen tundra, the room a shell of its former self. What was once a haven for passion and warmth now an empty burn. I sit on the floor and pull blankets from her old chair, wrap the thinnest around my shoulders, and stack the rest up like mountains at my knees. I stare at them for what feels like an hour then put all of them away in the hallway closet.

TALL – FROM ADY TO KASSIE

Maybe I lost count of the rooms you're tall in, of the way the tiny hairs on your arms, like magnets, would stand at attention and tease mine as we navigated the corners of your old bed. But I guess I lost the ability to talk about those things, about that life. Even so, I'm glad you've learned to lean into yourself again, to show the world those sharp teeth. Because everyone should know how tall you've become.

VITA

Adam Ramsey received his bachelor's degree in creative writing from Texas Christian University in the spring of 2011 and is expected to complete his Master of Fine Arts degree in creative writing from the University of Texas at El Paso in the spring of 2022. He can be contacted at alamsey@miners.utep.edu.