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## Popular Degradations

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POPULAR DEGRADATIONS

A Thesis Presented to  
The Graduate Faculty of  
The College of Arts and Sciences  
Department of English  
Georgia College & State University

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

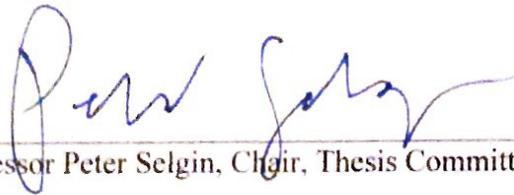
Andrew Schofield  
April 2019

POPULAR DEGRADATIONS

by

Andrew Schofield

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Professor Peter Selgin, Chair, Thesis Committee

4.12.19

Date



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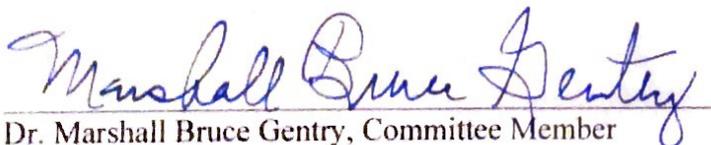
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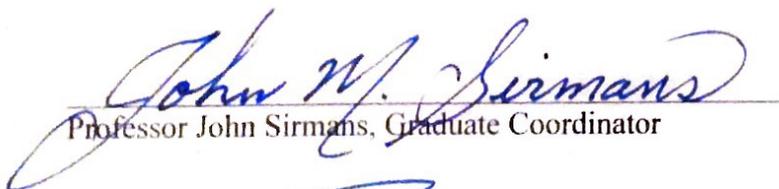
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## Apologia

Much of my writing, I think, is a response to what I find difficult in life and in my attempt to represent it. And there is little more difficult than the communication of emotion. The reason for this, I believe, is not entirely one of my own creation. On one hand, the inherent failure of language underscores the futility of such an act. Words like “happy” and “sad,” “euphoric” and “depressed” are ultimately empty. And the attempt of a writer to employ such terms feels like an equally Sisyphean task. Feelings are slippery. Like sand, when we try to grab hold of them, they slip through our fingers. And the more we try to attempt to isolate them, to nail them down, to pin them against some signifier or another, the more they lose their vitality, the further they drift away. It is for this reason that when I tell someone I love that I am feeling sad and that someone asks me why, I cannot tell them. It is not a lack of honesty. It is a lack of language.

In the beginning of my time here at Georgia College, it was in response to this insufficiency of language that I first attempted to write. Confronted with my inability to imbue my narratives with the pathos that I wanted them to have, I turned my back on writing towards that end altogether. It seemed fruitless. My early work here devoted itself, more often than not, towards humor and absurdism. I was trying, I told myself, to encapsulate the sort of surreal forms that our twenty-first-century existence can take. But the issue in what I was trying to accomplish was the very *trying* itself. It was all strained towards effect. I wanted to be funny and absurd. I wanted to be clever. I wanted to be like the writers whom I had admired in my early twenties -- writers like George Saunders and David Foster Wallace.

The issue was not so much the writers that I sought to emulate, but rather the emulation itself. I adopted their style as my own without considering what informed that style. I saw their

writing, and indeed all writing at the time, as composed solely of one's style. And thus, this was what consumed me as writer when I began here. I wanted, as Peter has been fond of telling me throughout my three years here (and rightfully so), to be *literary*. I wanted to be a Writer without understanding what that entailed. And as a result, my work was posturing and false.

My fiction felt distant and detached. In trying to write "absurdly" or "humorously," I felt I had fallen in this sort of ironic trap. In disregarding the pathos of my characters, in using them for my own gain, my fiction, I felt, became a sort of "sneer." Everything they did had no meaning. Everything they did were actions played out in this ironic echo chamber in which any attempt to take their story seriously was met, by my narrator, with a sort of eye-roll. And as Lewis Hyde claims in "Alcohol and Poetry: John Berryman and The Booze Talking," "irony has only emergency use. Carried over time it is the voice of the trapped who have come to enjoy their cage" (17).

In taking a few nonfiction courses my second year, I realized that my work there was, in my opinion, more effective than my fiction had been. And I felt that much of that had to do with honesty. I realized that the shaping and crafting of certain moments of pathos didn't constitute "melodrama" in and itself, which I was greatly concerned with in my fiction. But rather, as with anything in life, it was about doing it well. In this regard, my journey as a writer over the past three years has been a journey of becoming more vulnerable and more honest. It has been a journey of taking more risks -- risks not of an aesthetic, experimental nature, but risks of an emotional nature. This is not to say, my work is a finished product in this regard. I am still working to coax my narrators out of their shells, to force them to put more of themselves on the line, to not hide behind style or voice or form.

In a sense, my avoidance of pathos has coincided with a preoccupation with my voice or style. When I first began writing and reading seriously, it was to the authors who were most outwardly and obviously stylized that I was attracted. To me, becoming a writer felt like the process of putting your personality on the page. The crafting of my voice came to displace all the other responsibilities I had as a writer. And as a result, my voice was hollow and affected. It could never aspire to anything more than being termed “clever” because there was no honesty about the words it spoke. My obsession with voice became like a sort of defense mechanism. If my voice was “smart” enough or “witty” enough or “engaging” enough, I would never have to confront the fact that my narratives contained nothing of value.

In confronting my lack of honesty, my refusal to engage my narrator on my narrator’s own terms, I first had to strip away my voice. My writing, as it is now, is likely the least stylized it has ever been. And it is, I think, stronger as a result. As a writer, I will always have a certain affinity for language above all else. In this regard, I owe a great debt to writers like Donald Barthelme, whose stories, I feel, begin with this same preoccupation. But in my early attempts at writing, I failed to see how voice and style were married to content. The achievement of the former was not responsible for the achievement of the latter. Rather they co-existed, they informed the other. In fact, if anything, content informs the style. For instance, in “The Balloon,” Barthelme’s first person narrator, who does not announce his presence until the story’s final paragraphs, does not disappear into the story for the sake of being clever. Rather, it characterizes the narrator and emboldens the story. The narrator disappears because the narrator is repressing his own story, his own desire, his own reason for producing the balloon. As he tells his unnamed partner, “the balloon ... is a spontaneous autobiographical disclosure, having to do with the unease I felt at your departure” (51). The voice is detached from his own emotional experience

because that detachment, that estrangement, was the very condition that necessitated the creation of the balloon. So in coming to terms with my own voice and style, I have tried to strip away at what is empty, at what is needless posturing, and attempt to isolate what informs and broadens my stories.

It is through writers like Barthelme that I learned how exactly I could become a writer who was both honest and stylistically engaging. For Barthelme and others, style is a byproduct of what occurs when the narrator comes to take control of the narrative. When it is from the narrator that the story organically develops, features like “style” and “voice” are no longer a choice of the author, but rather a reality already determined by the identity of the narrator and their location within time and place. Honesty, then, in fiction becomes a willingness to engage with a human being one has created on the page and an allowance for them to exist in their complexities. The adoption of style, in that sense, was no adoption at all. It was forced upon me by the narrators I created.

In attempting to find that fashion through which I can marry an engaging style with an earned pathos, I have looked mostly to the writers I have grown to love over the past three years. I think many will see the influence of German novelist and poet W.G. Sebald. Our protagonists share much in common. They are lonely people in a lonely world “who never got used to being on this earth” and for whom “life is just one great, ongoing, incomprehensible blunder” (*Rings of Saturn* 220). Their interaction with the world around is not social as much as it is historical and physical. The protagonists do not interact with each other as much as they come to share a physical space before consuming and transmitting their narrative. Their favorite activities are to walk, to embody the old Flaubertian spirit of the *flâneur*, and to be alone as an observer, not as a participant, with the historical and physical interconnectivity of the world around them.

Their concerns, I feel, are similar to those of my characters. In Sebald's work, the protagonists' desires are submerged. In their place is the search for some truth, some value that is often no less obscured. Sometimes its very presence, its very existence is unknown to the protagonist as it is with Jacques Austerlitz throughout much of his life. There is something about that facet of his work that feels very true to our existence today. We have lost something, but we don't know where to find it let alone what exactly it was in the first place. In "Screen Memories," my narrator searches his past for the existence of something he begins to feel has never existed. And in the end, he never gets answers. The truth eludes him throughout. In "Fire," the cause of the flames that slowly burn the protagonist's apartment are unknown and even scarcely investigated. It comes, as do most things of meaning in our life, to compose the background of our life -- a fact we realize only when it is too late. In "Acquired Characteristics," Roland is convinced there is some truth to be found in his past. And yet it, too, serves him no value. In the end, there is only the hunt.

What I have taken most from Sebald is his talent for representing the concerns of his characters *in absentia*. Sebald is, in many regards, a writer of the Holocaust. But the experience itself is always avoided. It is that which cannot be named. In *Austerlitz*, the reader finds the eponymous protagonist estranged from his own history, from his own exile, from the suffering of his parents whom he did not remember. But as it always does, the repressed returns. He stands in the Liverpool Street Station and feels that that space contains "all the hours of my past life, all the suppressed and extinguished fears and wishes I had ever entertained." But as of yet, the meaning and content of those fears and wishes remain a mystery to him. Slowly, he rescues his past from obscurity. He finds the apartment in which he was born. He meets his old neighbor and from her his history is revealed. But even then, there's a certain detachment. There's little

consideration of the end we all know his parents would eventually meet. Even when Austerlitz visits the ghetto in which his mother lived before the concentration camps, there's little reflection of its horror. Instead, he describes the world he sees before him -- a small museum, a disinterested clerk, abandoned storefronts in an abandoned town.

The power of this aesthetic, for me, is the power of things left unsaid. Meaning and emotion and truth are like the acorns the squirrels have buried in the ground after the snow has fallen. As Sebald writes, "how indeed do the squirrels know, what do we know ourselves, how do we remember, and what is it we find in the end?" (*Austerlitz* 204). This, for me, is not just the fate of Jacques Austerlitz, but also the fate of the modern man. Truth and emotion have been stripped away from us and we no longer know where to find it. And it is this aesthetic that drives my work. I do not want to create an equivalency between the Holocaust and between contemporary American culture. But both share a certain elusiveness, a certain incompatibility with straightforward representation.

In my own work, it is then the emotional twenty-first century experience that I attempt to represent *in absentia*. It is my hope that it appears in fleeting, passing moments through the physical world, through the world of action and tangibility. This, I must admit, did not begin as a sort of aesthetic conceit, but rather more as a "feeling." I would read through drafts of mine and I would cut the moments of reflection I found too indulgent or too "on the nose." When I read the draft a second time, I knew it had become better; by standing apart from the rest of the text, the surviving moments of reflection gained authority .

This is in no way a novel approach to writing. Of my other literary inspirations, many choose to remain on the linguistic surface of reality. This is how Flannery O'Connor saw the act of writing. She claimed it was an "incarnational art." Thus, the soul of her work concerns a

piercing of the physical realm through which we can experience all that is non-physical. Her aesthetics were defined through what she termed an “anagogical vision” through which one “is able to see different levels of reality in one image” (72). And so it is always through the physical realm through which fiction is written. It is the burning flames that engulf her forest that surrounds Mrs. Cope in “A Circle in the Fire” -- not some sort of metaphysical terror. In “The Enduring Chill,” it is an undulant fever -- not some existential crisis -- that pushes Asbury to the brink. And yet, there is a sense that the fever comes to contain within Asbury all that is metaphysical and, indeed, religious. And through this illness, O’Connor is able to communicate more about Asbury than she would have been able with the metaphysical alone.

In this regard, the work of Joan Didion has been equally as inspiring for me. In the title essay of *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, a nearly-forty page treatise on San Francisco subculture in the summer of 1967, Didion provides only three paragraphs of the sort of interior reflection we come to associate with nonfiction. After her opening paragraph that details the way in which “the center is not holding,” her only moment of reflection comes in the middle of an essay with a description of the way in which what she calls “the children” are “less in rebellion against society, than ignorant of it, able only to feed back certain of its most publicized self-doubts, *Vietnam, Saran-Wrap, diet pills, the Bomb*” (123).

The rest consists solely of description of the physical world. Her gaze is projected outward. In the absence of interiority, she makes use of juxtaposition and specificity to devastating effect. In her closing paragraphs -- when one might expect her to make her reflective, lyrical call to arms -- Didion, the narrator, is conspicuously absent. Instead, she gives an almost laconic description of a young girl on LSD before jumping to the description of a young boy chewing through a wire, nearly electrocuting himself in the process, while the commune’s adult

residents ignore him as they search for hash that had fallen between the floorboards. The attention to detail and the decision to remain at the level of the external more effectively creates pathos than any interior reflection could. Didion writes:

Sue Ann's three-year-old Michael started a fire this morning before anyone was up, but Don got it out before much damage was done. Michael burned his arm though, which is probably why Sue Ann was so jumpy when she happened to see him chewing on an electric cord. "You'll fry like rice," she screamed. The only people around were Don and one of Sue Ann's macrobiotic friends and somebody was on his way to a commune in the Santa Lucias, and they didn't notice Sue Ann screaming at Michael because they were in the kitchen trying to retrieve some very good Moroccan hash which had dropped down through a floorboard damaged in the fire. (128)

Even in her most personal essay -- the title essay of *The White Album* -- it is telling that she describes her mental state not through an attempt at emotionality, but through a reprinting of the psychiatric assessment performed on her. Even at her most personal, she finds a way to distance herself from interiority.

Anton Chekhov shares a similar aesthetic. In one of his letters, he wrote that a writer must "shun all description of a character's spiritual state." He adds that "you must try to have that state emerge from their actions ... The artist must be only an impartial witness of his characters and what they said, not their judge." The result is a collection of work much more effective and truer of our existence even today than the most emotion-laden work penned by contemporary writers. In "The Man in a Shell," Belikov is a character for whom rules must be

followed. He is a constant nuisance to his co-workers and colleagues and so they do the only thing they can do: try to marry him off. But it fails in hilarious fashion. Belikov can't bring himself to ask the woman he has been courting to marry him because marriage, he claims, is a "serious step" ("Man in a Shell" 362). Eventually, he sees her and her brother riding a bicycle and is scandalized. And when he visits her brother to confront them, her brother pushes him out their apartment and down a staircase as his lover watches from below. As the narrator informs us, Belikov "would rather have broken his neck or both legs than have been an object of ridicule" (367). And so after the event, he stays in bed -- eating nothing and speaking to no one.

A month later, he dies. And yet the sort of emotional response we would expect from such a narrator is entirely subverted. He confesses "it is a great pleasure to bury people like Belikov" (368). The pathos is, instead, buried in the most unlikely place. It takes an entirely unexpected form. It is Ivan Ivanych, the man who listened to the narrator tell the story, who is most bothered, for whom the pathos is bestowed upon. He identifies with Belikov. "Isn't our living in the airless, crowded town, our writing useless papers, our playing vint -- isn't all that a sort of shell for us," he asks (370). He wants to tell a story to the narrator, Burkin. But Burkin is tired. He wants to sleep. And so Ivan was left to keep "sighing and turning from one side to the other," unable to sleep, unable to forget Belikov and the shells they both inhabit (371). The ability of Chekhov to transform the expected pathos of a story -- the tragedy of a man's death -- into an entirely unfamiliar and unexpected (and much more honest) form is precisely what makes his work enduring, and for me, is what makes his work a much more compelling template for my own. The interiority is displaced into another element, into something perhaps less *outwardly* pathetic, but in reality, something more deeply, *inwardly* pathetic.

The danger of writing about banal characters and situations is of course that my writing itself could be said to be “banal.” It is not my aim to bore anyone, or to create a kind of writing that is solely for academic intellectualization, that fails to produce any sort of experience for the reader. But I want to create something that is a response to the time and place that I live. I do not want to skirt the reality of twenty-first-century America. In crafting my stories with these intentions in mind, I am, as of yet, unsure of overall effectiveness. They are all, I feel, works in progress of varying degrees. But it is work that I am, without exception, proud to call my own. They are all, I feel, indelibly “me.” In this sense, I am no different from my protagonists. I too am searching for a sort of truth whose existence is hidden from my view. Like Jacques Austerlitz, I’m left to wander in search of it, hopeful that I will recognize it when I find it.

## Acknowledgements

*“Things Noticed While Saying Goodbye to a Woman I Would Never See Again” was first published in New South.*

“There is indeed the inexpressible. This *shows* itself; it is the mystical.”

Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*

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## Fire

The fire came one morning in early March. Andrew and the other tenants of 311 St. Nicholas Avenue spilled out onto the sidewalks banked with the previous weekend's snowfall. There was Mrs. Stankewitz from 1A. There was the woman from 3B whom Andrew rarely saw in the narrow hallways or the cramped lobby without the big black case that held her standing bass. There was the Liu family, their five kids still wearing their matching pajamas and their two dogs running to the edge of their leashes' respective slack. There was the subletter from 2C whom Andrew had met in the lobby the week before but whose name he'd forgotten. There was Mrs. Steinfeld, her two calico cats wrapped under each arm. And there was, of course, Andrew, standing beside the woman with whom he shared an apartment but with whom he had broken up two months earlier on a park bench on a January afternoon so uncharacteristically warm it had taken the city by surprise so that the sidewalks became long processions of men and women with coats over their arms and hats in their hands.

There had been no theatrics that day in January. Andrew told her he loved her, but not in that way anymore. She said she understood. They ate dinner at the new kebab place on Knickerbocker. They drank beer and laughed. Somewhere along the way home, they agreed to see the lease out to the end. Neither could afford the rent on their own. And neither were willing to pay the penalty to break it. They walked along Wyckoff that night, a bit drunk, a bit euphoric because a great fear had finally been realized, because both had little left to be lost. They agreed this arrangement was very mature of them.

When it was late, they said goodnight. They shared a hug Andrew considered to be not at all performative. She took the bedroom and he took the couch. When he lay down, perhaps still a bit drunk, he listened to the train cars grinding into the tracks at the Myrtle-Wyckoff stop, to the

men chatting and laughing outside the corner bodega that sold loosies and cigarette packs with Virginia tax stamps, and to a stranger passing below their living room window, singing a song into the night, a song Andrew didn't know. He heard it all and listened and though he didn't fall asleep for quite some time, he felt satisfied.

The next morning, however, it was different. Perhaps it was their sobriety. Perhaps their situation didn't look as attractive in the light of day. Or perhaps it was simply that their minds had caught up with their new reality. Regardless of the cause, the result was the same. Andrew avoided the apartment. In the morning, he left as soon as he heard the sound of her shower sputtering into start. In the evening, after work, he walked without destination. First it was down the streets of the neighborhood he already knew, down Myrtle under the elevated tracks of the M where he listened to the train cars above rumble closer to the East River where it'd cross into the Lower East Side, veer south into the Financial District before pivoting and turning uptown. He'd walk past all the places they used to share: the Puerto Rican restaurant on the corner of Knickerbocker, the dive bar with the picnic tables on Wyckoff, the five and dime where they bought mouse traps.

He pushed further and further out into Brooklyn. He'd get off the subway long before his stop on the L. Sometimes it was Morgan Ave. where in the winter months, he could turn down the dark and quiet industrial streets of Bushwick and find himself alone. At others, it was the Bedford stop where he could walk to the edge of McCarren Park and buy a Styrofoam cup of cheap beer from the dive on the corner. He'd take it to-go. He'd sit on a bench under a tall street lamp. He'd watch people pass by on the path circling the baseball fields and the tennis courts. Sometimes, he wouldn't get on the train back to Brooklyn. Instead, he'd wander Union Square Park. When strangers sat beside him and asked him of his life, he'd tell them lies. He'd say he

wasn't from here. He'd say he was in town on business from Minneapolis or Tulsa or El Paso. And at others, he'd take the train down to Coney Island and walk down the empty winter boardwalk. He'd listen to waves he couldn't see beat against the beach in the darkness. When it was late, not too late, but late enough that she'd be in her room, he'd get on the Brooklyn-bound L train that had by then emptied itself of the rush hour commuters. He'd count the stops until Myrtle-Wyckoff -- passing Lormier and Grand and Jefferson and DeKalb. He'd stand, never sit. Instead, he'd sway to the movement of the train car bumping against the tracks. When he reached his stop, he'd get off and walk the two blocks down Gates Avenue to St. Nicholas where he'd climb the staircase to the fourth-floor apartment. He'd put the key in as quietly as he could manage. He'd shut the door slowly until it closed with a soft click. He'd hear the garbling of the television from her bedroom or see the light that slipped under the door into the dark hallway. He'd lie down on the couch. He'd try to sleep, but often he couldn't. Instead, he'd listen to all the sounds he no longer found satisfying -- the subway cars pulling into the station, the men chattering outside the bodega, strangers singing strange songs.

On the morning the fire came, he woke up early as he did every morning that winter. He walked down the staircase. By the third floor, he could hear Mrs. Stankewitz's high-pitched shouts. By the second, he could hear the words themselves: fire, fire, there's a fire, someone call 911. Her neighbor, an old man whose wife had died the year before, stepped out into the hallway as Andrew came down the staircase. Andrew told the man to call 911. Andrew walked back up the four flights of stairs, unlocked the front door, walked down the bedroom hallway, and paused before her bedroom, hesitating for a moment before knocking. Yes, she said. He cleared his throat.

“There's a fire,” he said.

“A fire?”

“Yeah.”

“Do we need to leave?”

Sirens sounded in the distance.

“It’d probably be best,” he said.

“Ok.”

He walked back down and stood on the sidewalk. He watched the firetruck maneuver through the intersection. She joined him a few minutes later. Mrs. Stankewitz floated through the crowd and told, and re-told, of how she found the fire in her hallway closet between stacks of board games and boxes of old VHS tapes. She didn’t know what started it or how it got there. She was concerned, above all else, with the coat of Bactrian camel hair that her mother had given her. It was, she told us, of the same make and model as the one worn by Marilyn Monroe on the set of *Some Like It Hot*.

It was cold, but not too cold. She turned to him and asked him how he’d been. He lied and said he was good, that he’d been seeing apartments. One in Queens, another in Crown Heights. Even at a place in Roosevelt Island, he added.

When the fireman exited the building and huddled around their trucks down the street, the fire marshal lingered before the crowd that had spilled out onto the sidewalk. The fire is contained, he said. It was small, he said, nothing anyone needs to worry about. But unfortunately, it couldn’t be put out entirely at this time. He referred, in a vague manner, to underground fuel sources. Like a coal mine fire, but on a much smaller scale. He’d speak with their landlord, but he didn’t anticipate it presenting any problems to their day-to-day activities. He passed out business cards and left.

In April, the fire spread. It crept out from Mrs. Stankewitz's closet, climbed up her ceiling, and unhinged the front door from its frame. It was warmer. But it often rained so that Andrew spent his evenings in a cheap four-theatre cinema that sold tickets to movies that had long stopped playing elsewhere. He'd walk from his office on 34th and Fifth down to the little theatre that sat between the shoe repair shop and the gold reseller on a sleepy side street on the Lower East Side. He'd sit in one of the small showing rooms until the credits ran to the end and the theatre employees began to squeeze down the tight aisles sweeping up kernels of popcorn and torn cellophane wrappers. He'd wander down the short hallway to theatre one or theatre three or whichever theatre happened to be playing something, anything at all. He'd find a seat near the exit and watch. He'd wait until it was late enough to go home, leaving, perhaps, at the movie's climatic revelation: the villain's unmasking as the hero's closest friend, the romantic betrayal of the one she trusted most, the dramatic comeback against all odds.

He came home one night to see Mrs. Stankewitz's sons maneuvering a long mirror though the double doors of the vestibule and down the building's concrete steps. Weeks later, the Liu family -- their five kids and two dogs -- did the same. Holes had begun to appear in the hardwood of their second-floor apartment. The fire had even begun to spill out in the building hallways -- creeping up the stairs, snaking along its wooden bannisters, appearing in isolated patches along the pre-war crown molding of the third and fourth floors.

One hot and humid night in May, when Andrew had grown tired of walking, he came home earlier than usual. She was sitting in the living room. An opened envelope sat on the table,

an unfolded letter beside it. She gestured towards it. The property developer, she said, is releasing us all from the lease.

“Ok,” he said.

“That’s a good thing, isn’t it?”

He walked into the kitchen. He opened the fridge. He turned his back towards her as he rummaged through the deli drawer.

“Yeah, of course,” he said.

That week, he made appointments with real estate agents. He was, for the first time in quite some time, he thought, happy. He went to Crown Heights and saw a pre-war one bedroom with a washer and a dryer. As you probably already know, the agent said, the combination is something of a rarity. He saw a loft in Bushwick with high ceilings and big windows and natural light, the agent said, that you just can’t get elsewhere. And there was the condo in Williamsburg and the place on the Upper East Side, and he even considered for a time, a two-bedroom out in the South Bronx, which the agent assured him was the next big thing in New York real estate.

But none felt right. They were too expensive or too small or too far away from the subway or too close to the L that would be closing the following spring for post-Hurricane Sandy maintenance. Or the neighborhood was too young or too old or had too many strollers or was just a bit too hip for his liking and he saw a place in Astoria one day with big bay windows that looked onto a park and beyond the park, above the trees, the pale green spires of the Triborough Bridge that cut against the pale grey of the cloudy sky. He couldn’t find a reason to dislike it so he just told the agent who stood beside him that it didn’t feel right. The agent smiled. I think I

understand, he said. But perhaps, he said, try to imagine it full, try to imagine not as it is now, but as it could be, and Andrew tried to do so, he really did, but it didn't change anything.

He walked to the G stop at Court Street and stood along an empty platform. A homeless man shuffled and pushed a shopping cart along. The rolling of its wheels echoed against the rounded ceilings. The line's not running through here, he said. Why's that, Andrew asked. Don't know, just know it's not running, he said. Andrew took the bus instead. It was early, earlier than he often went home, but it was raining and he didn't want to get wet. When he walked through the front door, she was in the kitchen washing dishes. She grabbed a towel from the counter beside the sink and wiped her hands dry. She pointed to a sheet of notebook paper left on the dining room table. Its edges were frayed.

"I left you a note," she said. "I found a place."

"That's great," he said.

The sun was setting, but the lights were off. The two were caught in a vague darkness.

"I could stay until you've figured out --"

"No, that's fine."

He looked out the living room window. She picked at fibers on the towel.

"Where is it?"

"Park Slope. This girl has an open bedroom."

"That's great," he said. "That's really great. Right by the park, too."

That night, the building was quiet, but the fire was harder to ignore. The first three floors were engulfed. Almost all the tenants had left -- the subletter who filled the halls with the smell of weed and Mrs. Steinfeld and her two cats and the woman who played the standing bass in the two-man band with her boyfriend. Only their neighbor from across the hall remained. The fire

was harder to ignore. The green checkers of the staircase carpeting had been replaced with black scorch marks. From the sidewalk on both Gates and St. Nicholas, one could see the flames lipping out from underneath the windows.

That night, he couldn't sleep. He walked down to Mrs. Stankewitz's apartment. He stood at the door. He wanted to find the closet. He wanted to find the source. He wanted to know what was feeding it. But the flames, by now, were too thick and the wave of heat rippling off them too hot. He watched them flicker, turning one way and then the other, moving according to something unseen.

She moved out on a Tuesday. He left work early and did not walk down the streets of Bushwick or Ridgewood and did not sit in the cheap movie theatre on the Lower East Side, but instead, rode the L back to their apartment on the fourth floor of 311 St. Nicholas Avenue. He would, he thought, be back before she left. He wanted to see her but didn't know why. There should, he thought, be some sort of ending. But by the time he arrived, she was gone. Dust sat in empty places left by furniture he'd long forgotten was hers. An end table here. An armchair there. A note was left on the counter. It read: all the best, no hard feelings, etc., etc. He thought of his real estate agent in Astoria. *Try to imagine it full, try not to imagine it as it is now.*

That night, he slept on the couch and for the first time in months he was glad that he didn't live on a quiet street, glad that in the absence of everything else, he had the men who chattered and laughed outside the bodega and the trains that grinded into the M station and the strangers who walked under his window and sang those songs, songs he still didn't know the words to, but songs that, as they cut into the night, now sounded so sad and so lonely, so sad and so lonely he didn't know how he had not heard them before.

## Winter, 2009

It was my first winter in Boston, the winter we drank cheap vodka poured into water bottles and shoved into our waistbands until they reached the double or triple—or, if lucky—the quad where it was served warm, a Diet Coke as a chaser because everything else was out of stock in the downstairs vending machine, the winter the cheap booze stung our young throats and we sat on each other's beds in dorm rooms far too small for the occasion because we had nowhere better to go—but we had seen the movies, we had internalized the dream and so we sipped from plastic bottles gone warm from body heat and talked about how cool it was to finally be *here*, to finally be *free* all the while not fully comprehending—or perhaps beginning to and refusing to acknowledge its presence—the tremendous terror of such freedom, the horrible weight of one's self in one's own hands, the winter when, as we sat on the edge of a basketball court that had long gone unused for the winter, I lamented to a girl I'd always liked from afar, the campus' collective lack of taste in music, the winter she asked me what music I liked, and my mind—drunk—went blank, and I slunk, embarrassed, back to Cheverus, and threw up in the private bathroom in the second-floor lounge where no one would hear me, the winter that Pete down the hall told me that once you lose it, the pussy starts lining up, because they can sense it, they can smell it on you, it all comes in waves, the winter I met Tory and she took me to that party at Northeastern and we poured drinks into red solo cups from the handle itself, the winter we hailed a taxi as flurries fell from the sky because we had just missed the last train on the Green Line back to Brighton, the winter she brought me to her dorm room, the winter I put my coat on her Epson printer and got the loaded paper all wet with melted snow before we sat on the floor because her roommates were asleep in the bedroom, the winter I fiddled with the strap of her navy blue bra, trying to get it loose with one hand because it wasn't cool to use two, the

winter I sat on my knees with her long bare legs beside me, the winter I pulled out the condom I had long ago put in my wallet (because to carry a condom in your wallet, to always be prepared for such occasions, was what it meant to be a man at eighteen in the winter of 2009), the winter I ripped the wrapper with my teeth because that's what you did when you had sex, the winter the condom had gone dry with age, the lubricant flaky like dandruff, the winter she, laughing, grabbed one of her own from her desk drawer, the winter she told me, as she played with my hair, that I was cute, the winter I said I know and she laughed and said you're not supposed to say that, the winter she said you don't really want to do this, do you, in the morning you'll wish you hadn't, because she'd seen right through me, through my casual confidence, had seen it for what it really was: affected and false, the winter she was kind enough to ignore it all though, the winter she pulled her red hair into a bun and grabbed my hips and told me to relax, the winter the carpet burned my knees, the winter when I didn't know what to do with hands or with my eyes or with much of anything, the winter Tory, mercifully, said I think we're finished, the winter I tried to play it cool, the winter I walked down empty hallways into an empty dorm room, the winter I woke up to a long thread of texts, an explanation, a clarification, she doesn't usually do that type of thing, she really likes me, we should hang out later, the winter I replied, but only to say I wasn't looking for anything serious, the winter I ignored her in the dining hall and at parties and in the library when she asked if I wanted to sit with her, the winter I lied and said I was meeting a friend on the third floor, the winter the snow banks were packed onto the campus lawns and grew taller with each passing week, their color not the pristine white it was as it fell to the ground but a dingy gray full of dirt and grime, the winter that—somewhere in those snow banks—I lost the comfort that came with the assumption that I was a good person who did good things, the winter that ended, the winter that turned into a spring when even though not all that

had died came back to life, the grass was green and the flowers were in bloom and the trees, at the very least, had leaves again.

### Strange Desire

You ask what I want. I say, right now? You say no. You mean in a general sense. I'm not sure, I tell you. I stare out the window behind you. Only the ticking of the clock on the wall above the window breaks the silence of the room. Have you ever thought about getting a pet, you ask. I shake my head. No, never, I say.

When I was young, I had a dog. His name was Buddy. He was a Dalmatian. After school when my parents were not yet home, we'd play in the backyard until it got dark. I'd throw the frisbee across the yard and he'd chase it. No matter how high I lofted it in the air, he never caught it. As soon it fell to the ground, he'd snatch at it with his thin snout. At night, after my mother went to bed, I'd tiptoe across the hardwood floor of my living room and unlatch the lock on the outside of Bud's black metal crate. In the dark, he'd follow me into my bedroom. I pressed my soles into the hardwood. I hoped the creak of the old home squeezed against its foundation would muffle the sharper clack of Buddy's untrimmed nails clattering against floor. It often didn't work. My mother would open her door and whisper my name in such a tone that she didn't need to say more.

I adopt a cat from the animal shelter. You say it is good for me to take care of something. I drive out to the one off highway 71. The dogs bay at me from their cages until the attendant and I turn down a long dark corridor. I stop at a cage that seems empty and linger before it. What little light that comes through the small windows catches the cat's coat. Yellow eyes appear in the darkness. I put my hand between the chain-link and rub my fingers against my thumb together as if to say: come. The cat slithers out of the darkness, takes—in the stronger light—its own form,

and nips at my outstretched fingers once and then again at my outstretched fingers. I turn and tell the attendant I'll take him. I name him Gonzo. At home, I pour him milk. He laps it up in large licks.

I see you under the order of the Taney County Judicial System. A month ago, I drove into the concrete median along highway 71, between the old Shell at the top of the hill and the empty building that used to be an IHOP. I woke up in a hospital where a social worker, a fat woman whose bracelet cut into her wrist, asked me, among other things, if my family had a history of mental illness. I told her the truth. In the evening, on the second or third or fourth night, the night-shift nurse asked if I knew about crystals. I know what you're thinking, she said, smiling. It sounds crazy. She said she thought so too, at first. From underneath her pale green smock she pulled an amethyst. I got one last May, she explained. I've never felt better. I said, yeah? She smiled and said yeah. She adjusted the blinds. The lights from the cars passing on the interstate shrank and disappeared -- and with them, the empty playground it they'd illuminated. The metal chains of the swing-set clanked in the wind.

When I was a boy, my father would take me to Edgevale Park and push me on the swings. He wasn't around much. He'd sit at a picnic table and smoke Pall Malls until he'd pull his coat sleeve up, look at his wrist watch, grind the butt of his cigarette into the pavement, and say it was time to go.

I lied when you asked what I wanted. I want to be desired sexually. At night, in the break room at work, when no one's around, I go on OkCupid and scroll the profiles in my area. I find a few I

like. I message one: hi maybe we could go out sometime. I have done this many times. On blogs for dating advice, I have read that I'm supposed to be funny. But I think: humor is largely contextual. I'm not supposed to be too nice. I am supposed to start a conversation. But I think: conversation is largely contextual. After work, after I have fed Gonzo, I lie in bed and masturbate to the photos of the women I don't know. One is tall with brown hair and a birthmark under her jaw. I imagine her smiling warmly at me from across my trailer. I imagine her head tilting backwards. I imagine her warm eyes glowing in the night. After I finish, I don't think of it as sad. I roll over onto my side and listen to the window AC unit masking the sounds of the night: dogs barking, screen doors slamming, tires spinning on wet pavement.

I can't afford Gonzo's cat food. After my shift at Wal-Mart ends, I grab a cart. It is late. Few are here. I go down the cereal aisle. I put a box of bran flakes in the cart. I do the same with ground beef, microwavable popcorn and a two-liter of Great Value-brand cola. It is easier to steal something if one has bought something else. In the pet care aisle, I grab a bag of cat food. I choose neither the most expensive nor the least expensive brand. At the self-check-out kiosk, I unhook the scanner from its stand and hold its red light over the bar code. I don't scan it. I pay for the ground beef, the cereal, the popcorn, and the soda. I roll the cart past the greeter who has replaced me. He tells me to have a good one. I drive home through empty streets. When I pour the cat food from the large bag into the small bowl, Gonzo sniffs at it. He looks up at me. He stares, waiting for me to go away.

When I was a boy, we had a cat. Her name was Linda. She was all-white. My mother loved her. One day, when I was in high school, we woke up to find the back door open. Linda was gone.

My mother made flyers on Microsoft Paint. They read: Missing -- All-white cat, Answers to Linda, very friendly but susceptible to bouts of social anxiety/ / If Found Please Call 816-728-5727. She photocopied them at work. That night she gave me half a stack. She told me to put them up at school, at the break room of the grocery store where I worked, around the neighborhood on telephone poles and street lights. I didn't. It was too embarrassing. I left them in the glove box of my car. A month later I threw them away in the school dumpster. Linda never turned up.

In the strip mall across the parking lot from Walmart, a store selling crystals has opened in what used to be the donut shop. A forest green banner that hangs over the previous sign reads: *Have You Discovered the Transformative Power of the Crystal?* On my lunch break, I walk over. The door opens with the ding of a bell and a middle-aged woman walks around her desk to greet me. Blond highlights mask the grey in her hair. She smiles and asks how she can help me today. I tell her I'm just browsing. Cardboard boxes of crystals sit on wire racks lining the walls. The space is ill-suited for the enterprise. It feels cavernous and dark. In each box, a different crystal: Smoky Citrine, Sunstone, Smoky Quartz, Angel Aura. I pick one up one called Carnelian. It is a waxy-red -- not quite transparent, but not entirely opaque either. The middle-aged woman clears her throat. That one's a great anxiety-reducer, she says. I look back, smile, then turn back towards the crystals. If you tell me a bit about what you're looking for, I can help you find something a bit more suited towards your needs, she tells me. She takes a step closer, blocking out the little sunlight that filters through the window. Are you familiar with the chakras, she asks. I pick up a purple one with jagged edges. It reminds me of a geode I had when I was younger. That's an amethyst, she says, taking another step closer. It's a rescue stone. It clears away emotional

wounds. It activates the heart. I run it against my fingers. I tell her I'll take it. At the register, she gives me a pamphlet titled *How to Activate Your Chakras for a More Fulfilling Life*.

No one answers my messages on OkCupid. I can no longer masturbate to their photos. They feel too distant, too imaginary. I think of the woman at the crystal store. I name her Beth. In the dark, her gut slaps against mine. Night becomes day. We're at the strip mall, in the back room of the crystal store, on top of a long table. Her shoes squeak against its varnish. When the doorbell rings, she tells me not to stop. When I finish, I don't think of this as sad. I listen to the couple from the trailer opposite mine. I ain't believe in no ghosts, he tells her.

You notice the amethyst beneath my t-shirt. Is it working, you ask. I'm not sure, I tell you. I don't think so. At least not yet. I think it takes some time to kick in, I tell you. You nod and smile. You are always nodding and smiling. What do you hope to achieve by wearing it, you ask. Above your head there is a picture of a glacial lake reflecting a snow-capped mountain. Where is that a picture of, I ask. You turn in your chair, look up, turn back. I'm not sure, you say.

Gonzo doesn't like the cat food. I pour it into his bowl, but he only nibbles at a piece or two before returning to the top of the couch where he looks out the living room window. After an hour or two, I open a can of tuna and call his name. He stares at me until I walk away. When I return, he has slid the can -- half uneaten -- under the table. The following morning, I call the center where I adopted him. I ask the receptionist what they feed the cats. Just the cheap Purina stuff, he says.

One Sunday, I sit on my couch and look through the OkCupid accounts of the women who didn't answer me. I delete my account. I register for a new one. It asks me what I am and what I am looking for. I say: I am woman. I am seeking a man. I google "cute women." I download the first photo that looks vaguely authentic: a short woman in jean shorts and a white lace crop top at the edge of a pool with her feet crossed and her eyes hidden behind round sunglasses, looking off, perhaps, into the distance or down at her feet that kick in the water. I upload it to my profile. I name her "Angela." I describe her as a fun-loving girl looking for someone to share her life with. I answer a few questions. Do you think most people would prefer to be a lot more like you? Yes. If a clone was made of you, would you sleep with it? Yes. How long do you want your next relationship to last? The rest of my life. I log off. I watch TV. I jack off to Katherine Heigl in *Knocked-Up*. I fall asleep to the rain pattering against the corrugated steel roof of my trailer.

During my break at work the following day, I walk to the crystal store again. It smells like donuts and mildew. The middle-aged woman with blond highlights smiles as she catches my eyes. I look toward the back room. I blush. I was here last week, I tell her. Yes, she says, I remember. How are you feeling, she asks. Ok, I tell her. I walk to the wire rack and scan the names of crystals. I'm not sure I'm doing it right though, I say. She asks how I am doing it. I pull the necklace from underneath my shirt and show it to her. She smiles. She says it seems like you're doing it just fine. But perhaps we should find a different stone, she says. She walks up beside me in front of the rack. I think an Amazonite might suit you more. It responds more to the heart chakra. It eats away at toxic emotions. It is the hope stone. I nod. I say ok. I say that sounds good. I watch her scan the shallow boxes of crystals. But I think we've run out of them up front, she says, let me check in the back. I watch her walk to the storage room. I think of the long

table. I think of her shoes squeaking against its varnish. I look away. I turn towards the window. A man struggles to shove a bag of clothes through the Salvation Army donation bin. I hear her footsteps approach from behind. She holds a speckled green stone in her hand. She thrusts it towards me. Feel it, she directs me. I hold it. I close it around my fist. It feels nice, I say.

At work a man tries to steal Cheetos (Flaming Hot), but the security guard tackles him to the curb outside the store. Once on the ground, he clubs him with a night stick and zipties his hands behind his back while they wait for the cops. I planned on stealing more cat food -- a bag of Purina. Instead, I feed Gonzo another tin of tuna.

You ask me to describe the day I ran my car into a concrete median. I tell you it was a Tuesday. The sky was grey. It'd rained that morning and the asphalt was still wet. Who Loves the Sun came on the radio. You say you don't know that one. Who loves the sun, who cares that it makes plants grow, who cares what it does, since you broke my heart. Did someone break your heart, you ask. I laugh. No, I say. Through the window, I watch the wind inflate a plastic bag and toss it into the air.

When my father left, he took Bud with him. He told me my mother never liked him much, that she didn't have time to take care of him. With him, he'd have a big backyard to play in. Dogs weren't meant to be cooped up like this, he said. I was six years old. I cried. He said I could see him when I visited. The next summer, I stayed with my father. Buddy was gone. He fell in love with a lady dog, my dad told me. They had puppies and ran away together, he said. To where, I asked. On a great big farm, he said. They run around and play all day.

In the break room at work I log on to Angela's OkCupid account. She has twelve new messages. One reads: hey cutie, wanna bang? Another: I wanna tear that ass up. Another: what pool do you go to? maybe you could teach me how to swim sometime. Another: there's something about you that I can't stop thinking about -- do you believe in soulmates? Another: I just moved here recently. I don't know anyone in town. To be honest, I could just use a friend. Another: nice tits.

When my mother died, she left me a collection of Norman Rockwell plates. There were three. One was of a girl in a white dress with a pink ribbon around her waist kissing a man in a dark room as her siblings peeked in through the door. Another found a couple -- a woman in a pink dress, her husband in a black suit -- looking over a catalogue in their hands. A shaggy black dog sat at their feet. The last one was the only one I knew by name: Dreaming in The Attic. A woman sat on top of a chest. Paintings, rugs, and vases in storage formed the background. She looked into the distance. I take them off the shelf I'd kept them on. I wrap them in newspaper. I place them in a cardboard box. I put the box in the backseat of my car and drive to the pawn shop on 71 by the Little Caesar's and the Subway. The man at the counter offers me forty-five dollars for them. I take it. I go to Walmart and buy a big bag of Purina. I dump some into Gonzo's bowl and he eats it in hurried chews.

I don't think the crystal is working. Before work, I lie on my couch and place it on my forehead. This, the pamphlet says, activates the crown chakra. During my lunch break, I walk back to the crystal store. The middle-aged woman with blond highlights is not there. Instead, a thin young

man with brown hair asks if he can help me with anything. I say no, I'm just browsing. I look through the boxes of crystals. After a few minutes, I leave.

I ignore most of Angela's messages. After work, I sit on the couch and type out a response to the man who is new in town. His name is Kyle. He likes to fish. He enjoys craft beer. I tell him I could use a friend too. I ask him what he does for a living. I ask where he fishes. I ask him what his favorite craft beer is. I apologize for asking so many questions. I log out. I google MILF with blond highlights. I jack off to the first one who looks vaguely like the woman at the crystal store.

After work, I don't want to go home. I take highway 45 out of town. I pass the organic grocery store. I pass the Mexican restaurant. I pass the lake that reflects what little light still shines in the quiet evening. I pass the abandoned strip mall that used to house, among other things, the karate school, the tanning salon, and the thrift store. I drive until the small town is replaced by tall clusters of pine trees whose tops move in the wind. It is dark. All I can see -- aside from the ambiguous black of the trees -- is the lights of houses that sit alone on the top of country hills. I drive until I reach the next town, the next Walmart, the next respite from the darkness. I turn around. I drive home. I think, as I pass the banks of the tall trees again, how close I am to death, how quickly the car would careen off the side of the road if I just pulled my hands off the wheel. I wouldn't have to do a thing.

You ask me about Gonzo. I tell you about the difficulty of finding a brand of cat food he likes. I omit the part about stealing the first bag. Is it nice taking care of something, you ask. I suppose, I tell you. Sometimes, I miss my cats, you tell me. You have three of your own, you say. Do you

ever miss Gonzo, you ask. No, I say, not really. Maybe I will someday, I say. What kind of cat is it again, you ask. I'm not sure, I tell you. I say, it's black. You smile. I look out the window. A car tries to back into a space between an SUV and a pick-up. Do you still think about killing yourself, you ask. No, I tell you.

Kyle responds on OkCupid. I read his messages in the break room. It's really great to hear from you, he says. And it's great to know that someone else is sorta lonely too. Sometimes, he says, I feel a bit ashamed, like I'm the only one, like I'm defective or something. He says his favorite place to fish is White Bear Lake. That's back home in Minnesota though. He used to go out in the early morning with his father when the fog hadn't quite lifted. He hasn't been fishing here yet. Maybe, he says, you'd like to go with me sometime. He likes IPAs mostly. His favorite is Dogfish Head. I start to respond but a co-worker comes into the break room and starts using the microwave behind me. I log out instead.

I haven't worn the crystal in three days -- neither the amethyst nor the amazonite. At my dining room table, I rub the amazonite between my fingers. It is smooth. I stare out the window at the rain dripping off my gutter onto the wooden railing of my staircase. Gonzo rubs against my legs.

I work the night shift. Before it begins, I walk past the crystal store. I look through the corner of my eye to see if the woman with the blond highlights is working. I can't tell. I turn around and walk by it again but I can't see past the reflection of the parking lot, the sun setting below the hill, the tall sign of Captain D's advertising the Cod Combo Special at 4.99.

At home, in bed, with the lights off, I log on to Angela's account. More messages inform me that she is, among other things, attractive and in need of a dick. I tell Kyle that White Bear Lake sounds nice. I've never been fishing before, but I'd love to learn. I tell him I'll bring the IPAs. I add a winking emoji. The wind knocks a branch against my window. Its leaves scrape against the screen.

I eat tuna the next day. Gonzo paws at my legs. He can smell it. He hops on the counter. I shove him off. When I am done eating, I place the can -- with specks of tuna stuck to the rim -- on the floor beside his bowl. He licks it. When he is finished, he leaps onto the dining room table and watches the cars go by on the highway.

You ask how I am sleeping. Not great, I tell you, my neighbor watches reruns of *The Bachelor*. She has the volume very high. You ask why I don't ask them to turn the volume down. It's not worth it, I tell you. Why is that, you ask. Because they won't turn it down anyway, I say. Do you often feel as though people are not listening to you, you ask. I look at the painting above her head. A distant stream trickles down a mountain into a green valley and races over large stones. Have you ever seen *The Bachelor*, I ask you. You say maybe once or twice. But not for a long time. It doesn't sound horrible, I tell you. You don't respond. Do they really give the contestants roses, I ask. Yes, you say. They really do.

At lunch, I go out to my car and eat potato chips from the bag. Before my break is finished, I walk to the crystal store. I open the door. The young man with the long hair walks around the counter towards me. Can I help you with anything, he asks. There was a woman who worked

here, I say. I can't remember her name. She had blond highlights. Tina, he says. She quit. Ok, I tell him. Is there anything I can do for you, he asks. No, I say. She'd told me about this gem, but I don't remember the name, I tell him. Maybe if you described it, he begins. No, that's ok, I say. I really should be going. Outside, the heat bakes the asphalt and a white poodle barks from an open car window.

It is late and Walmart is quiet. I go to the bathroom. I close the stall door behind me and log on to Angela's account. Kyle says that he'd love to take me out fishing. He went out on Taneycomo just this past week. The weather was great. It was sunny, but not too hot. He caught two large mouth bass and fried them for dinner. There was too much for one person. He could have used my help. What are you doing this weekend, he asks. He signs off with a sunglasses emoji. I'd love to, I tell him. I add a winky face. I'm so excited to meet you, I say. Are you free this coming Saturday, I ask.

It is Sunday afternoon. Gonzo is out of cat food again. I have little else to pawn. I go to Walmart. In my cart, I put a frozen pie, a frozen pizza, and a jar of peanut butter. I add the cat food last. In the self-checkout line, I don't pay for the cat food. I hover the scanner gun over its barcode. I avoid looking at the video security monitor. Jerry smiles at me on the way out. Jerry is another greeter. He fought in Vietnam. He tells me stories about the DMZ. He fell in love with a woman in Da Nang. He hasn't seen her since. At home, I feed Gonzo his food. I fall asleep on the couch and wake up in the middle of the night with the lights on and the TV blaring. *The Bachelor* is on.

You tell me our time is running out. You ask me what I hope to gain from these last few sessions. I remind you I'm required to be there. You say you realize that. I pick lint off the cushion of my chair. I met someone online, I tell you. Oh, you say. You lift yourself up in your chair. Your face brightens. That's great news, you say in earnest. What's their name, you ask. I pause. Kendra, I say. Have you gone out on any dates, you ask. No, I say, but we talk a lot. What do you talk about, you ask. All kinds of stuff, I say. She's really nice, I say. We're going fishing this weekend. Outside, a woman walks along the sidewalk holding more bags than she can manage. She stops. She sets them down. She looks at her hands. She looks up at the sky. She picks them up and continues.

When I was young, my grandfather took me fishing. He bought us a Styrofoam cup full of earthworms and together we sat at the end of a wide public dock. He showed me how to put the worms on the hook. He coiled it so it wouldn't fly off before it hit the water. He punctured it, slipped it out the other side of the worm, and then punctured it again -- doing so from top to bottom until there was no worm left. It was a hot day. It was already late morning when we got there. So the fish weren't biting. I asked him if I was doing something wrong. No, he said, that's just how it is sometimes. I felt a tug at my line. I reeled it in to find nothing but an empty hook., the worm picked clean, only a piece of its skin remaining.

I lose my job at Walmart. Before I finish my shift, my manager calls me into his office. He turns his computer monitor towards me. He presses play. In the video, I am pretending to scan the bag of cat food. I tell him it was an accident. He forces a smile. He apologizes. He says he's afraid that doesn't matter. He takes a blank piece of paper from the printer tray and pushes it towards

me. He watches me write the address I want my final paycheck sent to. He walks me out to the parking lot and shakes my hand. Outside, Gary is shagging carts. He waves to me. Have a good weekend, he says. I'll see you Monday, he says. I wave back. Yes, you too, I say, see you Monday.

It is dark outside, but my neighbor's porch light shines through the blinds of my bedroom window. I lie in bed and listen to the ceiling fan. It is on high. It sounds as though it is on the verge of falling through the ceiling plaster. The chain knocks against the light fixture. I log on to Angela's account. Kyle has sent me a new message. He asks if Saturday would work. He suggests eleven a.m. He hopes that's not too early. We could meet at the park just off highway 67, he says. The one with the gazebo and the rusty grills. Do I know that where that is, he says. Yes, I write back. That sounds great. 11 a.m. isn't too early at all. I sign off with a wide-smile emoji. He writes back soon after: great, I can't wait.

The crystal store is gone. The temporary banner advertising the healing power of the crystals is taken down. I walk up to the front door. It is dark inside. I cup my hands and put my face to the window. The space is empty. At home, I place the amazonite along my seven chakras. I feel nothing. I feel anxious that I feel nothing. I think of the woman with blond highlights. I put my lips to the amazonite. It is green and smooth. I swallow it. The first few times, it makes me gag, but I get it down eventually. I lie down to sleep. When I wake in the early morning, it is dark outside. Gonzo looks at me from the couch arm rest. He moves his tail to some unheard rhythm.

It is my last session with you. You remind me of this halfway through. You ask about Kendra. I'm not so sure about her anymore, I say. You ask why. I look at the photo beside your window. I notice a man in the lower corner, looking off into the distance from the top of a hill. I don't know how I never noticed him before. I tell you I think Kendra just wants me for the wrong reasons. Susan asks what reasons are those. I tell you I think she just wants me for the sake of being wanted. Why do you say that, you ask. I tell you I don't know. And you ask what's so wrong about that anyway? I shrug. On the way out, you hug me. You search for my eyes and tell me to take care of myself.

It is Saturday morning. I message Kyle. I tell him I am sick. I tell him I'm afraid I won't be able to make it. I tell him I really am sorry. I was excited to meet him. Gonzo rubs his head against my leg. I watch my neighbor take his trash to the dumpster. The Joker is tattooed to his calf. I go into Settings. I scroll down to Deactivate Account. When it asks if am I sure, I respond, yes, I am sure. The one for you could be just one-click away, it reminds me. It asks me to cite a reason for my departure. A dropdown list is included. I select: I have met someone and am no longer seeking a relationship. I take a can of tuna from the cupboard and open it for Gonzo. From the couch, I watch him lick the edges. Outside, the branches beat against the window.

I cannot afford Gonzo anymore. I herd him into the travel carrier he came in. I put the carrier on the passenger seat beside me. I drive. Halfway down highway 71, Gonzo begins to meow. I pull off at a picnic area next to Lambert Creek. It is a cool, sunny day, but the park is empty. I let Gonzo out. I assume he needs to go to the bathroom. Go on, I tell him. I push his butt off the bench we sit on. Leaves fall from the trees. Their tops move in the wind. Gonzo slides through

the tall grass by the creek. Every few feet, he stops and looks behind his shoulder. On the way back from the shelter, through a gap in the trees, I can see the creek and the tall grass and the leaves falling beside it. I think of Gonzo. I think I miss him. For a moment, it feels nice, but just for a moment.

## Coprophagia

I live with a dog named Bear. She has golden hair. When her digestive system fails her and she defecates onto the worn hardwood of my cheap apartment, she does her best to hide her mistake by consuming it in two or three bites.

She does a very good job, it must be said. Only a thin layer, the part that made contact with the floor, remains. One would scarcely know a defecation had occurred were it not for the angle at which the afternoon sunlight slips through the white dust-lined blinds and bathes the aforementioned hardwood in a glow that I can only describe as ethereal. This light, this ethereal light, betrays her. It frames the trace amount of fecal matter that remains, rescuing it from the ranks of the virtually non-existent. It no longer had to keep company with the falling tree in the woods that no one hears, or the Tupperware of molding corn beneath the couch, whose presence will shock me when I discover it later this month, or even the flowers that just bloomed across the street, whose beauty I won't appreciate until one of us (either the flowers or myself) begins to die.

When Bear was young, she'd be kept inside until her owner came back at night. He'd scold her for the inevitable defecation that took place on the carpet during his absence. And then, at a point indeterminate, the daily defecation stopped. The owner would arrive home to find that Bear had, by all ostensible accounts, learned the error of her ways, finally accumulated the necessary digestive strength and resilience to fight off incipient bowel movements in the daylight hours.

But the fecal matter doesn't go unnoticed today. I walk through the front door and there it is, in the sunlight, to greet me. She sits on the floor on the other side of the living room and looks at me with eyes that more or less communicate a deep source of shame.

I stand in the living room - looking at her then looking at the dark stain on the floor, back to her then back to the stain. I know how to reinforce positive behavior with a high-pitched *good job* and how to discourage transgressions with a low-pitched *bad girl*, but, as Bear avoids eye contact, pretending her attention was caught across the room, I don't know to communicate what I want to say, namely: *I'm sorry* and *please stop eating your own shit*.

Over beers later that night, my friend tells me this is projection. He says I am the one who feels guilty and ashamed. I laugh. He asks how I knew she felt guilty. I say you know, she had, like, the big, sad eyes. He smiles at my stumbling attempts and says exactly.

The next day, when I walk through the front door, the sun isn't quite shining the way it was before, the hardwood more of a sullen gray. Bear sits undisturbed in the blue and white overstuffed armchair that we both love but never share. I scoot up beside her and pet her behind the ears and I think to myself, maybe it's better this way, maybe it's better in the dark.

## Screen Memories

When I was young, I was afraid of the television. I don't remember when my fear ended. I can only recall the day I sat on the gymnasium floor in the fourth grade,<sup>1</sup> my class spread out across the green shamrock painted onto the center court, as our gym teacher wheeled a television before us as the cart squeaked across the parquet. He slid a VHS out of a paperboard sleeve worn along the spine and the corners. He thrust the tape into the VCR and as we watched the promotional video on the benefits of flossing, I thought of how old and mature I'd become to watch television without a trace of anxiety.

I can, however, remember when my fear began. I was five, maybe six at the time, and in Mrs. Bledsoe's homeroom<sup>2</sup>. My mother picked me up from school early. She drove me to the private practice pediatricians' office housed at the St. Joseph Medical Complex on 103rd in between Wornall and State Line Rd. I remember nothing of the nature of our visit -- whether it was a routine check-up or a follow-up to some previous condition. I remember only that I felt fine. And I remember the waiting room. Chairs formed an unbroken line along three of the room's four walls. Along the fourth was the wide glass pane that opened up to the receptionist's desk, and behind it, the interior of the office, the nurses and doctors and patients passing along a short stretch of hallway, and behind them, a large window that looked out onto the parking lot filled with columns upon columns of cars whose windshields reflected the bright sun. As a pediatrician's office, the floor of the waiting room was littered with dolls and action figures and

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<sup>1</sup> I knew it was the fourth grade because I sat beside Robert Gillis, who started at St. Elizabeth at the end of the third grade and was expelled at the beginning of the fifth after it was judged that the nudity to be found in the comics he kept in his school locker constituted pornography.

<sup>2</sup> Definitely the less-desirable of the two homeroom teachers who taught kindergarten at St. Elizabeth School in the late seventies to early eighties. Mrs. Bledsoe was kind, but ran a much more "no-frills" type of experience in sharp contrast to Mrs. Ball who led her class in sing-a-longs that we could hear through the wall we shared and brought cookies and other baked goods at her expense -- the smell of which followed us in the hallway as we ran out for recess.

those wooden connectable train tracks and their wooden train cars and those bead mazes -- those wire structures along which you could ferry assorted colored beads through the loops and swirls of the maze from one end of the wire to the other. Underneath the assorted toys were interlocking foam puzzle pieces in various shades of pastel.

Beside the receptionist's desk, the wall was recessed, creating just enough space for a large fish tank that fit snugly from the end of the receptionist's desk to the edge of the opposite wall. I remember one fish above all others, one with scales of deep greenish-gray across which ran orange stripes. The others I remember less. They were lethargic and lay at the bottom of the tank just above the pebbles while the orange-striped fish drifted between faux-rock archways and faux-rock abandoned castles and imitation seagrass that swayed to the current of the filtration system. Above the fish tank, in the corner where one wall met the other, a black television of moderate size sat atop a small platform connected to the wall.

My mother leafed through a magazine<sup>3</sup> she'd picked up off one of the coffee tables. The receptionist chatted with a co-worker, the conversation muddled through the glass pane that separated the interior from the waiting room. On the television, a cartoon played. Its style was classic late seventies or early eighties -- hand-drawn and rich in both detail and color with little of the vector-influenced fluidity that would accompany the nineties. I couldn't remember the title of the cartoon or the names of the characters or, for that matter, the plot.

All I remember is that I was sitting in one of the chairs beside my mother. We sat along the wall farthest from the front entrance. The orange-striped fish bobbed through the archway. On past visits, the receptionist had let me feed them, shaking the canister of orange flakes and then watching as the more lethargic ones unrooted themselves, floated closer to the surface, and

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<sup>3</sup> An issue of Time with a photo of a Marine wearing his dress blues and his bleached white cap with the title, underneath, that read "THE WAR COMES HOME."

gobbled them up as they began to sink. I interrupted the receptionist and her co-worker. I asked if I could feed the fish. She informed me they'd already been fed. I watched the television. A woodland creature -- I think a badger, but perhaps a mole or a hedgehog<sup>4</sup> -- walks through a green forest with a bird by his side. He takes a drink from a stream that ripples across smooth rocks. The bird, evidently a traveling partner and friend of the badger, invites him into his home for supper. In the morning, the bird asks the badger to stay. But the badger has to go home. He hasn't seen his family for a very long time, he tells the bird. So the badger continues. He sleeps by a fire. He stands on a bluff and looks out onto a river valley. He picks berries. It rains then the sun comes out and then it rains again. It is day then it is night then it is day again. The sun and the moon replace each other in quick succession. He sees a rock formation. It looks like a snowman. His dirty, travel-worn face brightens. He quickens his pace. He scurries up the face of a tall hill. When he reaches the top, however, the forest he expects to see is empty. All that remains is a lone tree. Its importance isn't obvious, but it seems to hold some sentimental importance. It was at this point an indescribable anxiety took hold of me. The music became more violent. The sky blackened. He runs to the base of the tree, a short stout tree with a wide trunk and branches that broke off to form a top of perfect circular symmetry. He calls out to his parents, his friends, his sister. No one is there. His calls echo across the empty field as the frame pans to the yellowing, glowing eyes of a pack of dogs hidden in a distant darkness.

It was then I turned my eyes away. I focused instead on the fish tank. I watched the orange-striped fish float to the edge of the glass, butting its lips against it. The door that fed into the interior hallways flung open. A nurse called out a name not my own. A girl who sat with her mother on the opposite end of the room got up from her seat. My fear at this moment went

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<sup>4</sup> For ease of reference, the character will henceforth be referred to as "the badger"

something like this: the television was a danger not only to myself, but everyone in the room. This didn't express itself in any sort of rationality. I didn't, for instance, think that the pack of dogs would break through the television screen. I didn't think they'd tear through the waiting room. It simply constituted an existential threat that I couldn't communicate.

I stared with great effort and concentration at the fish tank. From the speakers of the television, I could hear the barking of the dogs and the panting breath of the badger. I tried to count the fish, but often lost track of which I'd counted and which I had not, forcing me to start from the beginning. I listened to the labored breaths of the badger and the barks of the dogs. In hindsight, my imagination converted what I couldn't see into something far worse, far more terrifying and the fish, it seemed, were aware of it themselves, their movements becoming sharp and hurried and some hid in the archways and in the imitation seagrass and behind the abandoned castle and the orange-striped fish was no longer just butting its lips against the glass, but rather ramming its head against it, begging for some escape.

I looked back up at the television to find that the badger had been surrounded. The dogs came closer. Drool dripped from their clenched jaws. I stood up and yelled, yelled loudly enough that the receptionist and the passing doctors and nurses in the hallway all snapped their heads in my direction. We have to get out of here, I said. We have to get out of here now.

My mother tugged at my arm to pull me closer, no doubt concerned for my well-being but also embarrassed by my public outburst and about how such an outburst reflected upon her. I pulled away from her, toward the door, grabbing the arm she used to tug at me to tug her in the direction of the room's only exit. My screams continued. I told all of them that we were all in danger. I began to cry. I asked why they were not listening to me. The dogs got closer and closer and at a certain point, my mother scooped me up and carried me to the front door and called out

to the receptionist and nurses behind her, who had, by this point, gathered in the doorway to the examination rooms. she was sorry, very sorry, she told them, but we'd have to reschedule, she'd call in soon, and again, she was very sorry.

In the weeks that followed, my mother removed the television from my daily routine. Ours was a large Toshiba my mother got for Christmas from her father. It fit snugly into the square opening of a tall wooden wardrobe<sup>5</sup> with a light brown stain, a wardrobe so tall that when my mother stood on the step ladder to drape white tinsel around its upper edges for Christmas, the tinsel's white fibers nearly touched the ceiling. On the wardrobe, doors that slid into the space left between the television and the outer walls of the furniture piece could be pulled out and folded over the opening that housed the television. When I woke up the morning after that day in the doctor's office, those doors were shut. In place of the blank grey of the television screen, I could see only the ornate woodwork of the wardrobe doors -- sprigs holding berries at their edges and a pineapple with long leaves curling around it. Nothing was said of it. Not that morning or any other morning. My mother avoided any reference to that day. If she was forced, she would bring it up in conversation only obliquely and with as little specificity as she could, calling it the "thing with the television" or "that day" or "what happened in the office."

My mother rarely watched television herself. Friday evenings were the only exception. *Dallas*<sup>6</sup> was on. Her brother, my uncle Clark, would arrive between eight and eight-thirty. The

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<sup>5</sup> I call it a wardrobe because, to me, that is what it most resembles. But it is perhaps more aptly categorized as an "entertainment center," a variety of furniture that began to appear in the eighties and nineties with the expressed purpose of holding one's television, VCR, and stereo (and later, DVD players and video game consoles). Ours featured a large square opening atop a cabinet on the left-hand side for the stereo and VCR and a bank of three drawers on the right-hand side for our VHS and cassette collections.

<sup>6</sup> What I did not know then, but what I later learned was that my outburst at the doctor's office and my fear of television coincided with the season four premiere of *Dallas* during which it was expected, after a wait of nearly eight months, that the killer of J.R. would at last be revealed to be Kristin Shepard, J.R.'s mistress. The episode in question, titled "Who Done It?," was, at the time, the most-watched episode in American television history and, to this day (after the finales of *M\*A\*S\*H* and *Cheers*), remains the third-most-watched episode of all time.

headlights of his beat-up Chevy Silverado would flash through our living room window as he pulled up the driveway. When he arrived, my mother would wash the dishes from that night's dinner and put the week's load of laundry into the washing machine. Between eight-forty and eight-forty-five, I was sent to brush my teeth. At eight-fifty, I was tucked into bed, my forehead kissed goodnight, and the bedroom door closed. By then, the washing machine switched into its spin cycle. Its sound rumbled into my room so that I could hear the scraping of the wooden doors folding back into place only if I listened for it.

I remember I'd lie in bed and watch the headlights of the passing traffic slip through the slits in my closed blinds and listen to the vague garble of the television. Once or twice, I'd tiptoe out into the hallway towards the living room. I'd listen to the bits of conversation I could snatch in passing until my mother or my uncle would see me from the couch and turn the volume down as quickly as possible. I'd lie. I'd say I needed a glass of water from the kitchen. My mother would shoo me back to my room. Minutes later during a commercial break, my uncle would come in with a glass in hand and place it on my bedside table. He'd tell me there was nothing I was missing, nothing at all. But most often, I'd lie in bed and wait until I heard my uncle's car door slam behind him and the footsteps of my mother as she walked to the washer to change the clothes. The light from the living room, the light that traveled down the hallway and slipped underneath my bedroom door, would disappear with a click and it was then and only then that I turned over and allowed myself to sleep.

This would have been the end of my story<sup>7</sup> if it weren't for the day a few months ago that I drove out to see my mother at Green Acres<sup>8</sup>, the assisted-living facility she has lived in for the

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<sup>7</sup> In reality, it never would have been a story at all.

<sup>8</sup>The facility is the most expensive in Kansas City Metro area, a fact I often try to remind myself of for reasons that I think are obvious.

past three years. The facility sits on some hundred-forty-five acres to the south of the city. A brook cuts across a green field on the building's north-side. Forested hills that turn red and yellow in the fall make up its eastern edge while the west snakes down into the river valley and along one of the Missouri's tributaries. It is a forty-five minute drive from my office in midtown. On the way, as the subdivisions of the southern half of the city give way to the open pastures and farm land that border it, the highway cuts through a patch of woods before it opens up onto a hill-dotted river valley. Behind those hills sits the facility. One summer day, as the highway turned through the woods, the green trees shaking in the wind, blue police lights flashed from the right shoulder. Two cars were sandwiched by a police car on each end, the lights turning and bouncing through the trees, the sirens off so that, in the soundlessness, there was something. An older tan sedan had taken the bumper off a blue sedan. It hung just inches above the black asphalt. Two men leaned against the tan sedan and talked to an officer who wrote notes onto a notepad. I slowed, then passed them, drifting across into the opposite lane of traffic. As I turned back into my lane and passed the scene of the accident, I saw a tree in a clearing that seemed emptier in the summer light. Its trunk was wide and the tree itself more squat and stout than thin and tall. Its branches broke off from the trunk to form a nearly symmetrical semi-circle.

Something about it reminded me of something I knew, but what exactly I couldn't remember. At Green Acres, I played checkers with my mother. I tidied her room. I asked her of her week.

"Clark came to visit me," she said.

I looked over to her. She sat at the table beside her window looking out across the field. It was summer and the sun was still bright. Clark was dead. He pulled into a blind driveway off

highway forty-four on a rainy night and a pick-up truck that never saw him came up over a hill and smashed into his hood.

“Have you gone outside much?”

“Clark and I walked along the trail out there.”

“The trail out where?”

“The one down to the river.”

I rearranged books on her end table.

“We should get you to dinner.”

“He seemed well. Happy.”

On the way back, I looked for the tree, but the sun had begun to fall and it was too dark. At home, I sat at the table and leafed through promotional flyers for a local cable company that was offering a internet bundle for this month only and coupons from a pizza joint in the strip mall down the street. I listened to the hum of the microwave heating my dinner and it was then that I remembered the tree as it was that day on the television screen above the fish tank in the doctor’s office, that badger along its roots, calling into a dark hole at the trunk’s base, the eyes of the feral dogs yellowing, and the sky darkening, and the music becoming sharper, more violent. And I remembered the forest laid bare and the orange-striped fish and the panting of the badger as it ran.

It wasn’t as though I’d forgotten I’d been afraid of the television. I could recall it as one can recall anything of one’s early childhood. But still, there was something distant about the way I thought of myself and of that fear and of that afternoon in the doctor’s office. I’d thought of it as though I were thinking of someone else.

Over the weeks that followed, the thought of it all returned to me -- the badger, the pack of dogs, the low murmur of *Dallas*, the headlights that flashed through the blinds in my bedroom window. It all returned and it all bothered me in a way I couldn't locate and the fact that I couldn't locate its significance only served to bother me more. I began to think of it at work, at home, at the grocery store, in the produce section, kneading avocados in my hands, picking apples. Watching television, again, became impossible. Not because it began to frighten me, but because I could focus on nothing of the storyline before me -- only, instead, on that day in the doctor's office.

I told all of this to a colleague over coffee one afternoon in the windowless break room on the third-floor of our three-story office. He heard me out, said he thought he knew where I was coming from. He took a business card out of his wallet and handed it to me. It was for a therapist he and his wife used when they were going through a "rough patch."

I called the therapist on Tuesday and made an appointment for the following Thursday. The day of the appointment, it rained all day. The radio said Brush Creek swelled over its banks. A semi-truck slid off Bruce R. Watkins into a ditch. The resulting traffic made me fifteen minutes late.

The doctor was a nice man. But I think we were after different things. I wanted answers he couldn't give me. Around the fourth session of the five we'd eventually have, I asked him why he thought the cartoon scared me.

"Why do you think it scared you?" he asked.

"I'm interested in what you think."

"I'm not so sure my opinion matters."

"Humor me."

He smiled a wry smile, looked away, out the window, before turning back towards me.

“Why have you never thought to look for the cartoon again? To find it?”

I didn't answer. I'd never considered it. Such a possibility never occurred to me.

“Do you think perhaps it is because it is immaterial? Arbitrary? Because the answer is not out there,” gesturing towards the window, “but rather someplace else.”

The night before what was due to be our sixth session, I called and cancelled. I lied and told him there was an issue with my insurance. I think he knew, but he was nice enough not to call me out on it. That night, instead, I drove out to Green Acres. It was cloudy and rainy and I could not find the tree as I drove past. I found my mother in her room with her back to the door, staring out the window that overlooked the wide green field that stretched and stretched until it reached the tree-covered hills in the distance. I sat beside her, said hello.

“There are so many birds,” she said.

“Have you eaten?”

“I don't know where they all came from.”

There were indeed many birds outside the window that evening. We watched them peck at the grass in the drizzling rain. When it got dark, they flew away. She turned to me and gave me the expression she gives when she doesn't recognize me but feels as though she should. We talked about her day. She had soup for lunch. A jazz band came and played for them in the afternoon. They were called the Quinten Quartet and the drummer was very handsome.

“Have you heard of them,” my mother asked.

“No,” I told her.

That night, I sat at my kitchen table and searched various combinations involving “cartoon,” “badger,” and “pack of dogs” on AskJeeves. The top hits were for links to news

stories detailing the breeding of “bull-lurchers”<sup>9</sup> by farmers in the English countryside. They use them to root out badgers. I swapped out “badger” for various woodland creatures: wood mice, moles, possums, hedgehogs, red foxes, squirrels, even barn owls. But nothing came back. It didn’t seem to exist as I remembered it.

There were forty-three movie rental stores in the Kansas City metro area. In the weeks that followed, I visited every one of them: Blockbusters, Hollywood Video, a local chain called SRO, a few mom and pops that specialized in indie and arthouse films. My method of investigation varied with my mood. Sometimes, I’d approach the clerk and describe the scene: the badger and the tree and the pack of dogs. At others, I was too embarrassed or too tired, or the vibe I got from clerk at the front desk was one of strong disinterest and so I’d walk down the cartoon aisle banked by the wire racks of VHSes, searching for a cover that looked familiar.

I first went to the Blockbuster down the street on 63rd, between the Priscilla’s Lingerie and the Waldo Pet Shop where they kept a small shark in a big pool in the back. The front desk clerk nodded along to my description.

“That sounds like *The Secret of NIMH*,” he said.

He led me to the cartoon section, scanning the covers until he spotted it on the bottom rack. He handed it to me. On the front cover was a mouse in a red coat with a black bird behind him. Behind the mouse, a bright light illuminated dark trees.

I told him I’d take it. But from the first scene, I was sure it wasn’t it. The aesthetics were different. The colors were sharper, darker, less of the softer, dream-like palette of the badger and the tree I remember. But I watched it anyway, carefully, for fear of missing the scene in question.

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<sup>9</sup> A blend of pitbull terriers and lurchers.

I returned it the next day. I visited the other forty-two. First the ones closest to me and then like a widening circle, the ones in the far off strip malls of the far off suburbs that sat on the edge of the plains where the wind whipped in and the stars just began to take shape and the whistle of the train could be heard just a bit louder as it passed through town on its way to some place far from there. I'd pull into the empty parking lots of those empty strip malls and I'd describe the badger and the tree and the pack of dogs over and over again and something about them felt more real than they ever had.

And yet I began to lose hope I'd ever find it. I made an appointment with my general practitioner's office. I asked the receptionist when I could see him next. They were booked straight through November, she said. I told her it was urgent. My memory was failing me. My family has a history with such things. She told me she'd see what she could do. Half an hour later, she called back and said she could fit me in tomorrow. I thanked her.

Dr. Feinstein is a good man. He expedited the necessary tests. But the results came back clean. He assured me I was alright. He told me I was perfectly healthy, perfectly ok. What I was experiencing was "within the range of normal human behavior." He showed me a CT scan of my brain. This is your brain, he said. There's nothing here to worry about. I pointed to a white spot in a cloud of black.

"What's that," I asked.

"Nothing," he said.

"Are you sure?"

He said he was.

I continued the search, but the results were the same. The last store I visited was an old mom and pop place in a stand-alone storefront out in Leavenworth, not too far from the military

prison. Across the street was a Popeye's and an Army Surplus from whose window was draped a Don't Tread on Me flag. The front door opened with a ding. The store was empty. I walked through the aisles, through Drama, through Action, through Foreign Language, until I reached Cartoons. I stood on my toes and looked over the wire racks for an employee.

"Hello," I said.

No one answered. I looked up and down the small cartoon collection. I combed over it twice and left when I found nothing.

I drove the long way home for no good reason. Before I reached my exit, I saw the signs for seventy-one south and decided to see my mother. I drove through the woods. As I thought I'd passed the stout tree and its wide trunk, I caught it in the corner of my eye. I was glad to know it was still there. I told myself I'd ask my mother. She'd know truth, I thought.

When I arrived at Green Acres, my mother wasn't in her room. She sat in the cafeteria, eating dinner -- roast beef, gravy, mashed potatoes, and a lime green jello. Afterwards, I walked her back to her room. The hallway smelled of bleach. It was no longer summer. The sun didn't shine late into the evening. Instead, the room was dark. Through the window, all detail was erased. All that one could see was the field and the sky: two shades of black, one darker than the other.

When I turned the lights on, the field and the sky disappeared and the window became a mirror. We stood before it, staring at ourselves and at each other. She told me it was nice of me to come. But she wished I had come sooner. Her brother, she told me, had been there last week. And the two watched the birds outside the window. There were, she said, so many, all pecking at something in the grass.

"What is it they peck at," she asked.

“Worms,” I said.

“Yes, worms,” she said, “that must be it.”

I sat at the edge of the bed.

“It really was something,” she said. “I wish you’d seen it. You’d have loved it. You really would have.”

We watched our reflections in the window, watched our eyes drift towards the other and then back to ourselves before they settled on some point out there in the darkness, past our reflected forms, where the trees and the fields and the birds lost their shape.

### In the Summer

In the summer, pink geraniums, unplanted, rest by the garden. Ivy creeps across the top soil, up the stucco wall, and twists around a copper bird bath gone green with age and chipped cement statuettes of dwarves and winged children. My mother sits on her knees on the concrete pathway that snakes between the lawn and the garden. Go get the hand spade from the garage, she tells me, and I do as she says. When I come back, her hands hover over a clearing in the ivy patch. Here, she says. I say here, and she says, yes here and I ask why here and why not there and why anywhere and she just says to trust her and so I do as she says. We scoop out some soil from the ground, place a geranium into the shallow hole, and pat the soil around it hard, hard as we can, because we don't want it going anywhere—at least not now, not in the summer when the sun hangs high in the sky and the neighborhood buzzes with lawnmowers and cicadas.

In the summer, I turn eight. At my party, before cake and ice cream, we sit outside as the sun falls out of sight and the sky turns a pale pink in the half-light. Pink balloons of Dubble Bubble escape from my classmates' lips. It is a bubble-blowing contest. But balloons do not escape from my own lips. I cannot blow bubbles. I tell my mother this and she tells me to stop being silly. She gives me careful instructions: flatten the sugary pink across my teeth, puncture the film with my tongue, and then blow, not too hard, but not too light. But I can't. And I tell her this. And I tell her she's stupid. And the contest is stupid. And I spit the gum out onto the dry summer grass and later that night, after my classmates have left, I'll pack clothes and a toothbrush into my backpack before stopping by her bedroom door to tell her I'm leaving, I'm really leaving this time and there's nothing she can do about it. And she says she's sorry to hear that, but that she

understands. And I walk down the hall and say well, goodbye then and she says goodbye and I say I'm really doing it this time, I *really* am doing it this time.

In the summer, my mother goes pink with sunburn as she walks down the deserted beach alone. She picks up sea shells washed ashore. She holds them in the sunlight, inspecting them for flaws. Some she casts back into the sand. Others are placed with a gentleness into the pink plastic bucket we were meant to use to make sand castles. But the tide is too high, our ramparts under constant siege. Instead, my brother and I dive for sand dollars where the saltwater comes up well above our eyes. We take turns with the snorkeling mask and carry them up to the surface by the handful. We bob in the wake as we yell to Mom, waving them above our head as best we can. But she can't hear us, can't see the sand dollars in our hand. She just waves back, smiling as she squints in the sun.

## Still Life

In the house where I grew up, an elm tree sat in our backyard. It had a thin trunk, oval leaves, and sandy brown bark with deep thick grooves. Its branches stretched over my mother's vegetable garden. The dining room window framed it. From my second floor bedroom window I could almost touch its leaves.

From where my mother and father sat at the dining room table, only the tree's bushy top was out of view. I sat with my back to the window. If the squirrels ran into my mother's garden, or swung from her birdfeeder as they raided its contents, if the kids that lived in the house behind us threw their ball over the chain link fence and trundled over the dirt patches that checkered the yard to recover it (drawing a sigh or a muttered comment from my father who had just laid grass seed, who had tried, without success, on many occasions to get the grass to grow throughout my childhood, giving up at that ambiguous age when progress begins to feel futile and pointless), I'd turn in my chair and twist my neck until I was told not to stare, or that my dinner was getting cold.

One night, the tree was struck by lightning. Its largest branch was severed from its trunk. Until that night, the tree was something that, for me, hardly existed. It was just a tree -- nice and beautiful in the vague way we often use those words. Even more so because I was a child and I'd known no other home and no other backyard. It wasn't a tree in a world of many trees. It wasn't set off in all its particularities. It was rather *the* tree. Its solitary nature crushed any appreciation of its unique qualities. Instead, it melded into a generalized landscape. It disappeared into the wild saplings at the back corner of our of yard, into the garage with the roof that sagged under the weight of wet leaves and the robin egg blue paint that broke off in large flakes.

That morning, I woke up to find my mother in the backyard. From my bedroom window, I watched her twist the severed branch off the tree. The edge of her robe was stained with mud. I put my clothes on and walked outside. I looked at her but didn't say anything.

On the tree, there had been three branches. Two smaller ones grew from the right while a larger one snaked away to the left. It was the larger one my mother, her slippers digging into the mud, tried to pull away from the trunk. Most of it'd been ripped loose, but a thin piece of the trunk remained attached. I watched from the kitchen window as she carried it to the back corner of the yard and threw it amongst the wild saplings. When she came back in, she said little of it or the tree or the storm the night before.

In the absence of its largest branch, the tree looked strange. With its only branches growing to the right, the tree seemed to lean, as though it'd caught itself in falling. The severed branch didn't detach cleanly. So in its place wasn't a blank space, but rather a gnarled U-shaped hole where it'd been severed.

For dinner that night, we had spaghetti. I asked my mother if the tree would be ok. She said she thought it'd be. In the spring, the branches would grow back again, she assured me. In the absence of the tree's largest branch, the sun shined through the dining room window a bit brighter than it had.

When my father came home the following weekend, he asked what happened to the tree. He went outside to examine it for himself. He ran his hand over it. My father wasn't an angry man. But his presence carried, for me, and I think for my mother, a sense of unease. I could, for instance, predict the pattern of my mother's moods. Of my father, however, I couldn't say the same.

For dinner we had meatloaf. My father said the tree was “dead.” It wasn’t “dying”—it was “dead.” It’d need to be cut down, he said. Healthy trees were falling everywhere last winter. There was no point in risking it with an unhealthy one. My mother pushed chunks of meat floating in gravy from one side of her plate to the other. If you think we can afford it she said.

At night, from my bed, I could hear them arguing in the living room below. It wasn’t so much the volume or the words themselves that clued me to such a fact, but rather a certain tone that pierced the hardened plaster of the floors and walls and the way in which the responses weren’t buffeted by airy pauses but rather stacked upon each other, even melding together, as though it were one speaker of two minds. Often, I tiptoed down the hall, avoiding the planks in the hardwood that creaked, to the second-floor bathroom, where the tiled floor wouldn’t betray my presence. With the door open, I could snatch bits of the conversation below. That night, however, I did not.

The weather got colder. The few leaves remained on the tree turned a bruised yellow and fell to the ground. My father and I swept them into piles. I held big thick brown paper bags open as he grabbed the leaves—some wet with rain—and stuffed them full.

In the winter, the branches were bare. The absence of the leaves anywhere made me forget the tree was dead. It was as though it were dormant like all else: the brown grass, the thin, leafless saplings, the empty vegetable garden. But in the spring, when all else returned to a full green, when the sycamores in our front yard waved their full branches in the wind, the black elm in the backyard sprouted only a few. My father mentioned it in passing, as a simple observation, but the suggestion was clear. My mother said nothing. My father grinned at me. A few more leaves sprouted at the tips of its branches that caught the most sun, but the rest remained bare. At the table, as lightning bugs floated in the dining room window and my father looked out at it, he

asked how much more time we needed to give it. My mother parted her lips to speak but said nothing.

One hot summer day, I returned home from day camp to find wood chips covering the muddy yard. A short stump and a pile of logs sat at the center. I stood on the stump and then jumped off. I poked a log with my toe. Come on, my father said. Quit fooling around. It was getting dark. He got an axe from the garage. I watched him place the wood on the stump. He lifted and dropped the steel head until the log was split into four smaller pieces. He tossed them into the pile at my feet. He pointed with the head of the axe at the back of the yard where the fence cast a shadow over the saplings. Stack them over there, he said. I did as I was told. I carried two or three at a time and piled them up in rows of six or seven, one after the other, until the thud of the axe stopped without warning. In its absence, the sound of that summer night was eerie—a dog barked, a lawnmower buzzed, a child laughed.

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I noticed the dead cat first in passing. It was after work. The sun had already set; the street lights overhead flicked on for the night. It sat between their cones of lights in a gutter on Strathmore Road. The Jewish elementary school on the top of the hill was out of session for the summer. If it hadn't been, someone would have found it long before me. If its coat wasn't entirely white, I might have walked past it down the block, crossing Chestnut Hill Ave to my apartment on Cheswick. It might have been, in other words, a winter night like many others—nights full of hours that have fallen from my mind and disappeared.

I walked back. Her coat did not shine as it I'd seen before. Instead, it was dirtied by mud and dried blood that had turned a dark brown. It blended in with the winter asphalt that had gone grey with salt. Much of the hair on the right side of her head was missing. A wound on the side of her chest opened to an ambiguous pink. A scab ran in a long oval from her mouth down to her neck.

Her name was Priscilla. She had belonged to my neighbors in the small brick apartment complex that I'd moved into the year before. They were deaf, and, on that account, very shy. Three days before I found her cat in the gutter on Strathmore Road, the wife knocked on my door. Prissy had gotten away, she said. She knew I worked at the convenience store on Comm Ave. She asked if I could hang up a flyer at work. I smiled and took the flier and said I would. I turned to close the door as her lips parted. She hesitated. I took my hand off the door. Could you keep your ears open, she asked. We set her litter box outside our door. It helps them find their way home. If you hear her outside, could you—she trailed off. I said I'd let her know.

That night, as I lay in bed, I heard the wife in the courtyard. I believe her name is Susan. Prissy, she called. Prissy. Her voice was monotone and throaty. She was ashamed of it, it'd always seemed to me. She spoke to me, when we passed each other in the hallway or outside on the sidewalk or even at the Star Market down the street, as little as possible. She preferred instead to smile and nod.

The following day, I put the fliers in the bag. But I didn't put them up—not even on the corkboard in the staff room. I'm not sure why. I think I didn't want the attention. When I arrived home that evening, I saw Susan watching from her living room window. She noticed me and waved. That night, she didn't walk out in the courtyard and yell for Prissy.

It was cold and few were walking the streets that night. One man walked past on Beacon Street. He had on a large puffy black coat. A scarf covered his chin and mouth. No one turned down the hill onto Strathmore. Piles of snow banked the edges of the sidewalk. They'd melted in the afternoon sun only to freeze again. So their surface was harder, smoother than it'd been. I looked down the hill towards Chestnut Hill Ave. The train of the B line squeaked to a stop. The yellow windows of their train cars cut into the blue of the twilight. I walked down the hill towards them. I crossed over the now empty tracks. The train rounded the corner onto Comm Ave. Its round red lights were all that remained in view. When I walked up the short cement staircase to the front door of my apartment building, I couldn't see Susan. In her windows were beige cotton curtains.

At night, I couldn't sleep. I heard Susan's calls to Prissy. They were cut only by the sound of the rubber tires against the wet asphalt of the street outside and the hum of engines driving into the city, by the thud of the car door shut in place. After a time, the repetition of her name seemed to collapse upon itself and erode its meaning. It no longer sounded like a word. It became nothing more than a sound.

The calling stopped. I heard their apartment door close. I dressed and went into my kitchen. I grabbed an empty plastic bag from my closet and a small white trash bag from under the sink. I walked into the night. The sky was no longer blue in its twilight but rather a black cut into segments by the city lights. I crossed Chestnut Hill Ave. A few stood beside the tracks in wait of the next inbound train. It was too late to go outbound. I walked up the hill. I found Prissy where I'd left her. I put my hand in the plastic bag like a glove and slid the cat into the open trash bag with it. I pulled the plastic bag inside out and dropped it into the trash bag. The train pulled up to the hooded figures on the asphalt platform. They disappeared with the train. I walked up to

the restaurant on Beacon. It'd long been closed for the evening. The parking lot sat empty. I found the dumpster, lifted its grooved lid, and laid the bag down on the rusting metal floor.

The following night, I heard Susan's calls. I heard them again later in the week. But soon, they stopped and the litter box on the doormat disappeared and the only thing left to cut the silence of the cold winter evenings was the train starting and stopping, bumping along its tracks, always bumping.

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The first house I bought was a small two-bedroom. It had a high-pitched roof and big windows on the second-floor that opened up onto the small town below. From the guest bedroom, one could see the university where I worked a few blocks away. The master bedroom, however, was at the back of the house. It looked out onto a large green backyard. The property was at the edge of a subdivision. Its yard was bound not by a fence line but rather a big green field owned by the city. It was rumored to be the site of power lines the state utility company had planned to install but never did.

The month after I moved in, I held a housewarming party. It was a warm Saturday afternoon. I invited the block and the members of my department. It was there, on my back patio, I first met my neighbor Sandra. And it was there she told me of the previous owner, of his dead wife, and of the day she found, there, on the second-floor of the home I'd just purchased, something she couldn't quite put into words. She called it a "shrine," but admitted that was perhaps not the right word.

The previous owner had had colon cancer. His condition had been terminal. He'd been sent to live in a hospice. The owner's only son gave her a spare key. Could she stop by a few times a week to water the plants, he asked. It'd make his father feel more at ease.

And when she did as she was instructed, she couldn't, she admitted, resist walking through the empty house and opening all the closed doors—closets, the attic, a large pantry in the kitchen. It was there on the second floor, she said. A room caked in thick dust. An old AM/FM radio sat on the bedside table. There was a tall vanity lined with make-up in yellowing labels and a comb with long strands of light brown hair twisted around its plastic teeth. And there was a silk bathrobe hanging on the chair by the window and an empty pair of house slippers by the bed. I asked her which bedroom it was. It felt important to know. When one moves into a house, it comes into being in that moment. It has no past. And when such a past is exposed, it's disturbing. She didn't know, she said, but if she saw it again, she'd recognize it. The light, she said, came in through the window in a very particular way.

We walked back into the living room. She told me, as we climbed the staircase, that the wife had died at a young age, had swerved to avoid a car that crept into her lane and drove head-on into a concrete median. At first, she thought he'd simply kept her belongings beside his own. But she later found he'd moved out entirely, sealed the bedroom off, and lived out of a smaller bedroom with little but a mattress on the floor and a desk in the corner.

I took her first to the guest bedroom, which at the time, sat empty save a few pieces of furniture. She stepped in, spun around in place. No, this wasn't the one, she said. We walked out. I took her into my study. She didn't enter the room. She stared at my desk from the doorway and shook her head.

I took her to the master bedroom. It felt perfunctory—there were no other rooms on the second floor—but necessary all the same. She stepped in. She dragged her hand across my comforter. She touched the curtains and sunlight poured in through the window in thin bars. She looked back out at the yard, at the trees, at the big green field behind it. She turned around, looked at my dresser and at my half-opened closet. She held a drink that sweated in her hand. She raised her eyes to mine and said she thought this was the one. She waved her hand towards my desk. The vanity was here, she said, there was a jewelry box in front of the mirror. And a large pearl brooch had rested on top, she added. She walked beside the bed. She chose her spot with care. The slippers were here, she said, and here, the old radio. She walked back to the curtains. She felt its thick fabric in her hands. Did I tell you about the curtains, she asked. I shook my head. They were a transparent white, she said, so that everything beyond it—the trees, the field, the sun—were all blurred and nothing kept its shape.

She looked up and smiled. She guessed “shrine” wasn’t quite the right word. What would one call such a thing, she asked. I shook my head. She guessed there wasn’t a word for it.

## Ghost Stories

The park sat at the edge of the city. Its ninety-seven acres were once pastures for cattle to graze on at a time when the property's edges had been bound not by residential streets (fifty-ninth to the north, fifty-fourth to the south; Wornall to the east, Ward Parkway to the west) and subdivisions (most notably: Armour Hills, Morningside Heights, Rockhill Gardens) but by more pastures, more farmland, more hills that gleamed green in the summer—an expanse broken only by the dense copses not yet cut down, the barn and its high ceilings not yet crowded out, the sun not yet set. That was a long time ago. An owner long-dead had left the land to a son who saw no one use for it and sold it to a local property developer. What little cattle remained were gathered up and sold. Some, perhaps, were ferried down to the stockyards of the West Bottoms and herded onto train cars whose whistles one heard even now—in the silence of the night—in the center of the park, a dull yet unmistakable report, a reminder of a world gone by leaving once more (or else, just passing through, a sort of a specter who haunts you by showing you no regard, by reminding you of your lost importance). Not as many trains left the West Bottoms as they used to. And the fields of the park had long ago been spared the cattle's trampling hooves and masticating teeth. But the rolling hills and the copses and the fields of green that reappeared each summer still remained.

One winter afternoon, Julius and his father went to the park. Their diamond blue kite and its yellow tail sat in the backseat of their car. In the cold, it was not a popular destination. A few children, too young for school, bumbled across the playground in their puffy winter coats. But it was far from the place it was in the spring, when boys in their tuxedos and girls in their silk gowns poured out of the minivans they had borrowed from their parents for the night and into the Rose Garden where their tearful mothers huddled them in frame and implored them to smile. Nor

was it at all close to the place it was in the summer when families gathered under gazebos to grill hot dogs and burgers on hot and humid afternoons, waving flies away from potato salads and coleslaws with paper plates while those teenagers untethered from familial obligations for the day sat in tight circles under the shade of distant trees and smoked weed and drank beer stolen from their parents or bought from the convenience store on Linwood—the one that never ID’d—drinking it quickly because it warmed in the summer air. Or even still the place it was in the fall, when, although the morning frost had begun to coat the blades of grass in a pale fuzz, stripping it of its vernal vitality, and the leaves on the branches above had begun to turn red and yellow, lovers came to walk around a pond not yet frozen, gripping each other’s hands between gloves and mittens while parents brought their children to feed the geese who had not yet flown away for the winter, crumbs of bread held tightly in their hands, as though if they were not dropped with precision and exactitude, the geese would show little interest.

It seemed a good day to fly a kite. The wind had buffeted the panes of the living room window all morning. Aside from the white SUV of the security guard, the parking lot was empty. The engine was running and would continue to do so. It was too cold for him, Julius’ father assumed, to bother himself with anything beyond his view, with anything whose awareness he couldn’t write off with plausible deniability. Julius’s father told him to button his coat. He did so before grabbing the kite from the back seat with one hand and turning to open the door with the other. The asphalt of the parking lot had gone white with the salt of winter. The kite was blue—not a cerulean but rather more of a marine. The yellow tail attached to the bottom of the diamond was frayed at the edges and stained with the splatter of mud that would never—at least not entirely—be washed away.

It had not snowed for several weeks. The pale yellow of the dead grass, with no snow banks to cover them, was laid bare under the afternoon sun. The leaves of the oaks and elms and the sycamores had long ago fallen and been swept away—blown across the park's fields onto the lawns of suburban homeowners who raked them into big piles before shoving them into tall paper bags and set on the curb. Their branches, instead, were bare, appearing even more so as they stood next to the pockets of conifers—the pines and the firs—that popped up atop the slope of the hill by the Rose Garden and a patch of field that would have, in the trees' absence, looked out onto the dark pond.

Julius and his father set out down the hill. They moved towards a long narrow field banked on both sides by tall trees. In the absence of snow, the grass, spiky, crunched underfoot. His father unspooled the kite, the white thread falling onto the hard ground below. He handed Julius the kite. Julius ran down the slight slope at the edge of the field, his quickening breath and the pulse in his ears the only sound on the quiet winter day. He sent the kite into the air with a soft throw. The kite fell to the ground. The wind that had blown all morning had vanished, fallen silent.

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Pierce Ward arrived at Fort Laramie on a hot September day in 1852. Summer had stayed late that year. The hills that rose behind the fort's wooden palisades and then flattened into the horizon were covered not in the reds and browns of autumn, as they normally were by this time of year, but remained in its healthy and vibrant green.

But on that day—and on days long after he had come and gone from that place—he thought little of the color of the hills or the unusually long stay of summer or even of his first

sight of the western trading outpost, its high walls perched on the edge of a bluff that overlooked a Laramie River that shined in the sunlight. No, what Pierce Ward would forever remember of that day—for better or for worse—was the moment in time and place in which he met the woman he would marry not more than two months later, a woman named Wasna, the daughter of a French trapper she had never known and a mother who had been kidnapped from her Blackfoot tribe by a band of Teton Sioux.

Ward was a trapper turned merchant. The demand for beaver pelts had collapsed and given way to buffalo robes. But the buffalo hunt did not interest him. He instead founded a trading outpost in what is now northwestern Colorado, providing food and provisions for frontiersmen. The business was lucrative. He was soon offered the position of sutler of the U.S. Army's garrison at Fort Laramie, granting him a monopoly on all goods traded in the distant trading outpost. He was housed in a small one-bedroom house across the street from the post office just aside the fort's walls. The front porch was bisected into four equal parts by four wooden posts, covered by a roof that ran flat until it pitched at the front wall. There, Ward sat and watched the sun begin to set behind the fort, falling out of view. Its light, however, remained. In a gap between the fort and an outbuilding used for munitions storage, he saw the Laramie River as it bent around the fort's bluff, flowed under the wooden suspension bridge, and followed the North Platte until the two rivers reached the Nebraska Territory, until they decided it was time to go their separate ways—the former heading north towards the Dakotas, the latter twisting south towards Kansas. The unseen sun at this particular hour drenched the water not in the bright yellows of the early afternoon, but in the softer pinks and reds of the evening. Behind it, tents and teepees of settlers and Indians passing through billowed in the wind. At the moment he began to wonder where they had come from and where they were going, Wasna walked past

his porch—blocking the river and the opposite bank and the whites of the tents and teepees, her long black hair falling almost to her waist, a pile of laundry straddled between her hips and her outstretched arms.

The next evening, when the sun began to fall once again, he waited for her to walk by his porch. But she didn't that day. Nor the next. He became impatient and asked the officers of her. One said she worked with her mother—laundering the battalions' uniforms and linens. He closed shop early that day, put on his finest suit, and set out for the laundress' quarters at the edge of town. But before he could lift his freshly shined boots off the wooden planks of his porch onto the dry autumnal dirt, there she was—her black hair swaying from light to right, her arms stretched around a white sack of clothes.

He introduced himself. On that evening, and many evenings to follow, he accompanied her to the officer quarters at Old Bedlam where she delivered the clean linens and uniforms before. They would then walk to the edge of town—past the hospital and the post office, past the bakery and stables, even past the hay yard—until they reached a quiet spot on the banks of the Laramie. They would sit and watch not the sun falling even further below the fort—for that was out of sight—but the fading light around them, the changing colors of the water, the branches of the trees that grew black and opaque, almost two-dimensional against the sky's twilight. There, at that quiet spot, Pierce would point out to the east and tell her stories of his home, of the thirty-acre plot of land he was raised on where his family grew corn and raised pigs, of his mother whom he had not seen since the day of his father's funeral.

While the summer had stayed late that year, it did not remain much longer after Ward's arrival. The days grew shorter and the hillside behind his home darkened. And just before the leaves started to fall from the trees, with the sun once again falling behind the fort and casting

the rippling water in a pale pink, with the whites of the tents and teepees on the opposite bluff breathing in the prairie wind whipping in off the plains, Wasna was baptized on the river bank, her wet black hair clinging to her back, by a preacher who had come west to convert Indians, but had failed, founding the First Pentecostal Church on a high hill above the hay yard instead, its small white cross visible from the settlement below.

The following week, the two were married. And although the winter months brought little more than cold winds and snow piled up high against the fort walls, although they could no longer walk through town, past the bakery and post office—stopping for a moment at the hay yard to admire the dark red that the hills had turned to in the autumn months—to that quiet spot on the bluff's edge, although the shade of the Laramie river no longer ran from yellow to orange to pink, and instead, against the bright snow that lined its banks, stayed a bright gold in the daylight hours and a deep black in the evening, although they found themselves living a life they had never known, or perhaps even expected, they were, without condition, happy.

Soon the winter became spring. With it came more than just the greening of the hills, more than the swelling of the river, more than the melting of the snow—first a trickle, a slow bleed underneath the banks that were shoveled up high along the streets, hardly perceptible if it had not been for the muddying of the dead grass it sat upon; and then, melting of an altogether different variant of imperceptibility, for at a point no one would be able to agree upon, the snow banks were there one day and gone the next.

Wasna became pregnant, but the warm weather unclogged the east-west passages and sent Ward back east, to Kansas City, where he was to arrange the shipment of supplies depleted during the long winter.

Ward left in April on a day not altogether different from the day he arrived. The sky was cloudless, a bright blue. The air hot and humid. He promised to be back by August. From atop his wagon, he told Wasna he would write. He told he loved her. He said he would miss her dearly. And although what transpired over the next year would seem to contradict such a sentiment, in that moment, many believed he had meant it fully.

In the months that intervened, Wasna would walk to that same quiet spot along the bluffs where the Laramie rejoined the North Platte. She would imagine where Ward was that day, recalling the journey, in reverse, that he had described to her months before. She reminded herself of how he followed the North Platte into the Nebraska Territory, of how he passed the sandstone rock that rose from the ground like a chimney, of how he stopped, for an hour or two perhaps, at Ash Hollow and drank from the cool springs and watched the wild roses move in the wind. She thought of how he couldn't stay too long because Windlass Hill stood before him and he needed to reach its high plateau before nightfall, of how he reached the point where the North Platte met the South Platte, of how he crossed its shallow mud flats at the Old California Crossing into Kansas where the wild prairie grass grew so tall that all but his hat disappeared from view.

It was perhaps telling that when the sixty-day journey had ended, when Ward and his wagon team plodded into Westport and brushed up against the edge of the world he had come from, when he reached a world Wasna was incapable of describing, her nightly journeys to the bank of the Laramie ended. Instead of filling Ward's void with an imagining of his journey, she sat in a wooden chair behind their home and listened to the wind rustling the trees and the distant shouts of the army battalion in the distance.

Ward, however, had no silence to fill. The quiet, contemplative Laramie had vanished from his mind, had ceased to exist as a reality. It was now just a memory and as such it was difficult to enter. In its place was the comparative bustle of Westport, where the river did not change color with the movement of the sun, but stayed a muddy brown; where one could not hear the rippling of the Missouri along its high riverbanks over the whistle of the steamboats docking from St. Louis or Louisville, bringing tobacco from the Carolinas, wagons from Pittsburgh, and garments from New England, where one could not look up from the riverport, beyond the buildings that housed the hotels and the outfitter's, to hills that flattened against the horizon—green in the summer, a rusted brown in fall—because little rose above those two- and three-story buildings.

Ward took residence at a local hotel no more than a few blocks from the riverport. It was a three-story Queen Anne, painted a robin egg blue with white trim. A conical spire stood at the upper-most corners—cutting into the Missouri sky that would move from blue to grey back to blue within the course of a few hours. A porch wrapped around from the front to both the left and right side. It was here many of the guests would gather for a glass of iced tea and watch the sun fall below the bluffs on the opposite side of river. It was here travelers, settlers, and traders—outbound from the east, inbound from the west—would swap stories, trade advice, and share news, for this was the last stop, the furthest point west that one could still sit on a porch and drink iced teas without concerning themselves with a river that rose too high. And it was here Ward met Mary Anderson, the widowed daughter of the hotel's owner and proprietor and the woman he would marry little more than two years later.

There is much of the relationship between Mary Anderson and Pierce Ward that will remain unknowable to us. But we do know that the two took almost an immediate liking to each

other, that Mary, who rarely sat on the porch with the guests, began doing so shortly after Ward's arrival—the two isolating themselves in conversation in such a way that it is perhaps not altogether surprising that rumors of infidelity spread. We know that Ward was fond of Mary. We know they strolled together through the city, to the edge of the town, where Mary's father owned a large plot of land—rolling green fields speckled with copses of oaks and pines where cows hid from the midday heat in the cool shade. We know that Mary, her gingham dress buttoned tightly against her pale neck, her dark hair assembled underneath her lace-lined bonnet, accompanied him to the trailhead upon the day of his departure back to Fort Laramie, watching the dust rise as his wagon train disappeared from view. And we know that after Ward crossed the mudflats and climbed Windlass Hill and emerged from the tall prairie grass of Nebraska, Wasna, by then less than a month from giving birth to their son, James, discovered a letter from Mary of particular intimacy that, when confronted with the accusation of infidelity, Ward did little to deny.

Autumn at Fort Laramie was, in appearance, not altogether different from the autumn before. Wasna gave birth to her son and for a time, in the Ward household, there seemed to be a return to normalcy. The hills turned the same rusted brown. The leaves became red and orange and yellow and eventually, dropped to the ground and died. And the sun set earlier and earlier each day, the twilight hour at which the bare tree branches grew black and opaque becoming more noticeable. And yet, for as little attention and concern the world demonstrates, as much as it seemed life would continue along the track that it had always followed, slow signs of degradation were evident. Because the rain fell hard that year and the river rose and the bluffs along which they sat were eaten away ever so slightly, almost imperceptibly. And although no one in town would know it then—not Ward nor Wasna nor even the battalions that drilled in the hills—the bluffs would cease to be, would someday collapse, slide into the river, and flow east—

first to the North Platte, and then perhaps to the Kansas and the Missouri and maybe even the Mississippi before venturing out to the great expanse of the sea, passing fields of wild roses and tall prairie grass.

That winter, Wasna died of tuberculosis. Ward buried her under an elm tree in the small church yard cemetery on the hill atop the hay yard. In the spring, when the snows melted once more, Ward packed his possessions, placed his son on his lap, and went east. By June, their wagons pulled into Westport once more—the whistle of the steamboats pulling up to shore echoing against the limestone bluffs that lined the riverbanks.

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No one remembers when the geese came. No one knows if they were here before the park was founded, before the pond at the southeast corner of the ninety-seven acres was lined with brick and encircled in a cement walking path. Perhaps they were. Perhaps their gaggles and gang broods canvassed the meadows for grain and berries when Pierce Ward's cattle still grazed on that very site—stopping only to bath in ponds muddied by the steer, left placid and cool in the shade of the tall elms and oaks. Perhaps they had always been here, leaving only to migrate for the winter to warmer locales like Texas and New Mexico, their cries no longer audible from the house on the hill or the dense copse by the road.

But the question is largely academic. The geese are here. From the early spring months—usually March, but sometimes later on the years when the freezing temperatures stay too late (geese advance northward to their warmer breeding and nesting grounds along a line of thirty-five degrees Fahrenheit) to the months of October and November—the geese populate the grounds of the park. They search for food in the open fields and demonstrate little concern for

the frisbee players or the leashless dogs and their owners or the rising smoke of the barbeques. They nest not far from Haley Pond and totter along its edge as children dole out breadcrumbs in carefully measured quantities. But otherwise, they display not the faintest concern for the lives that are lived around them.

In place of its involvement in the world beyond those ninety-seven acres, they forage, mate, and nest. They leave when it gets too cold and return to repeat the cycle until the goose in question is consumed by a predator, run over by a car, shot by a sportsman, or overcome by the failure of a vital organ. The only variance within their life cycle occurs in their third year. It is then the goslings reach physical maturity and the hormonal change within their nervous system impels them to search for a mate. When the males find a match from among their gaggle, they swim to them from across the pond. They bob their head up and down until the female mirrors their movement. The male turns and swims off. If the female turns and follows, the two have paired.

The process is simple and the criteria even simpler. Geese mate assortatively. The smaller males search for smaller females; the larger males do the same with their larger counterparts. This characteristic of the Canadian Geese seems to serve to make the mundane repetition of their life cycle all the more joyless. To the human eye, this arrangement is precisely that: an arrangement—loveless, arbitrary, a life event as meaningless as any other.

But consider the following: on a cold November morning, the geese of the park began their journey south for the winter. They assembled in their iconic V and flew over the cul-de-sacs of the city's southern suburbs, the flat expanses of corn and wheat fields, and past the rocky hills of the Ozarks.

However, in the bushes by the pond, two geese remained. An adult male sat beside his female partner. In the spring, their nest was well-covered, shrouded by a dense thicket of dark green leaves. By that morning, the leaves of the bushes had begun to separate themselves from their thin branches. As a result, the pair lay naked and exposed. While the male sat alert, its eyes following the rustle of the leaves against the ground and throb of the car engines on the adjacent street, the female positioned herself on her side, her wing not tucked into her body, but rather thrust away from her, as though it did not belong. In some sense, in its present state, it did not. It had been clipped by the hood of a Ford Explorer on an early autumn morning when the black of the asphalt, wet from rain that had just passed, shined under the glare of the car's headlights. Her gosling had wandered from their nest and into the oncoming traffic of the road that bounded the park's most eastern edge. She saw what her gosling did not: the two beams of light that widened as they approached. She flew out into the road and herded her gosling out of the street, but she could not spare herself harm. She had not flown since. When the sun rose behind the gray sky of the cold November morning in question, a sort of amorphous gray, a gray in which one cannot discern where the clouds begin or end, a gray that seems to fuse with the earth below, a gray in which the sun seems drained of color, becoming a sort of dull white—there was no question that she would not be able to fly south with the others.

But equally out of the question was the possibility that her male partner would not remain at her side. Geese have one of the lowest divorce rates in the animal kingdom. How this commitment manifests itself in the mind of the goose itself—whether conscious thought drives them or, instead, a basic instinct that can conceive of no other choice, or, rather, no choice at all—we cannot know. What we do know is that, on this day, the goose has remained with her in the nest by the pond in the bare bushes. He will gather food while she rests. He will sit by her

side as she sleeps. And when she is fit to fly, they will join the others for whatever of winter remains. If, however, she should die—the infected wound on her growing worse—then, and only then, will he leave her; then, and only then, will he unfurl his wings and take flight, a black mark against a grey sky.

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James did not remember his mother. He did not remember the way the sunlight gleamed on the Laramie River. Nor did he remember that quiet spot along the bluff where she sat as she imagined his father's journey eastward or the golden hayfields she passed on the walk home, the harvested stacks casting long shadows that distended as the sun fell. What he remembered of his early childhood, instead, was the smell of tobacco on his father's hands as he fitted the tie around his young son's neck on the day of his marriage to Mary Anderson. He remembered the Queen-Anne they moved into in the days that followed and how the sunlight streamed through his bedroom. And he remembered the pasture at the edge of their property; how his father stood him on a fence post and pointed out the steers drinking from the edge of a distant pond; how their brown hides seemed to glow orange in the light that reflected off the pond's surface.

Every evening after his father returned from his office down the street from the river landing—the headquarters of a trading company established after his return from Fort Laramie—his father would sit in the burgundy armchair of their living room and drink a cup of tea with a dash of milk brought to him by their servant, Rose. He would bring the cup to his lips and stare out the window at the steady foot traffic that the hotel next door always seemed to provide. He would stare at the laundromat across the street, at the woman in the adjacent alley who scrubbed clothes rendered dark and formless by the moisture they held against the metal washboard. Then,

his father, having unbuckled his pant button, would stand up, button it once more, grab his jacket from the hook by the front door, take two steps to the bottom of the staircase (James could hear his father's boots creak against the hardwood) and call out his son's name.

At a certain point in his childhood, James did not need to be informed as to what this call signified. And after his father's death, after James sold the pasture to the local property developer to be made into a country club golf course, he could not remember how such a ritual began, how or in what fashion it came to be that they would walk to the pastures, that they would check on the livestock, that they would sit on the hill on the southeast corner above the pond and watch the cattle graze and wander between patches of trees in search of shade or a patch of grass to chew on.

His father spoke little of his mother. It was not as though he went out of his way to avoid speaking of her and of his time at Fort Laramie. But he did not feel an urge to invoke her memory of his own accord. Mary, it must be said, did not appreciate any mention of her husband's deceased wife. But, in a polite restraint that mirrored that of her husband, she did not explicitly forbid her presence. She even went to the trouble of having the only photograph of Wasna framed and hung over the cherry-stained buffet in the dining room—her dark hair pulled back from her forehead, the two-month old James in her arms, her gaze, quiet yet intense, staring straight ahead as Pierce stood at her side with his hand on her shoulder. So it was that James grew up; his mother not a presence enlivened by his father's memory of her and yet not entirely forgotten—instead, a sort of specter, frozen in the smokiness of the daguerreotype, always present but underneath a fog James could not perceive let alone penetrate.

With time, the presence of the specter became less obvious, forgotten amidst the bankruptcy of his father's trading company following the interruption of the civil war and the

construction of the transcontinental railroad that ended the need for axes, planting seeds, and salted meats to be shipped through dangerous overland routes. Windlass Hill no longer needed to be climbed. The Platte River no longer needed to be forded. Pierce, who had already sunk into a deep depression following Mary's miscarriage years before, retreated entirely from the public sphere despite, or perhaps as the result of the continuation of the comfortable lifestyle the family still led due to the sizeable inheritance left to Mary following the death of her father. He continued to take his afternoon tea by the sitting room window, but he did little else that tethered him to his family. He instead spent much of his time harvesting honey from his colony of bees in the family's backyard next to the outbuilding that housed Rose's living quarters. And so the memory of Wasna grew more distant. Dust settled on the frame of her photo that had been forgotten so that when the rare visitor noticed it, inquired of the woman and her black hair, Rose or James or whoever present could not help but feel a surge of guilt as they had realized what little care they had taken with it.

But the past always returns. Wasna's occurred on a damp spring day in 1890 at the table of James' study. Rain had just come and gone and the street below his window shined as it always did when the clouds first gave way to sunlight and bounced off the coat of moisture. The roofs on the houses opposite his own, the window of the storefront near the corner of the street, the ring on a pedestrian's finger all shined a bit brighter. Rainwater from the gutter beside his window dripped onto the leaves of the elm tree in his front yard. James opened the paper as he always did in the afternoon upon returning home for lunch from his father's office along the river landing. He had repurposed it to house the family's remaining commercial holdings (namely, the cattle company and a few other small real estate endeavours) he had taken control of after Mary's death. His father had long ago ceased to take any interest in the family's financial affairs,

sequestering himself in the servant's quarters, displacing Rose into Mary's old bedroom, filling his time with little more than the maintenance and upkeep on the bee colony and the small vegetable and fruit garden that yielded little beyond watermelons that he always harvested before they were ripe enough to eat. They, instead, sat on the table in the kitchen, its edge cut off, half-eaten and abandoned—beside it, the knife still glinting in the sunlight that slipped through the leaves of the large sycamore outside the kitchen window.

Amidst this, James lived in quiet solitude, disinterested and withdrawn from the concerns of most bachelors his age: the pursuit of a wife, the solidification of his professional and financial future, or even the enjoyment of the company of others outside of Rose. Nor did he display any concern for the gradual but increasingly apparent state of decay that the two-story Queen Anne had fallen into. Paint flaked from the walls. Mold covered the trim and baseboards. Entire rooms abandoned, sealed, covered in dust. He instead spent much of his time in the cow pastures where he once walked with his father. He would carry his easel out there in the late afternoon and paint until sundown. He was particularly fond of the sunlight that fell on the pond and the way it seemed to absorb whatever it reflected, the way it changed, at that early evening hour, from moment to moment.

But on the spring afternoon, as the drops of rain hit the green leaves that, much like the window in the storefront across the street, seemed brighter, the contact forming a melodic thud-thud-thud until it slowed and then disappeared, this quiet solitude was disrupted by a headline on page two of the newspaper unfurled across his lap, a headline that read: "Harrison Administration Orders Closure of Fort Laramie."

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And what of the dying goose's gosling? Does it make its long flight from its wintering home that has grown too hot in the spring, passing once again but in reverse, like the scene through the lens of a Daguerre-Era camera, the floodplains of the Mississippi, the tree-speckled hills of the Ozarks, the fields not yet covered in the wheat and corn and soy that will come in the summer, and the southern suburbs of the city that are carved with the shape of subdivision cul-de-sacs that dead end in circles to return to a home that it remembers? Does it wince at the sight of the hood of a dark SUV or the tunnels of light, cutting through the morning fog, that precede it? Does it find the nest by the pond where it was born? Or does the nest remain hidden behind the cover of bushes and trees whose leaves have returned once more, filling the blank spaces and bare branches of autumn?

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James Ward arrived at Fort Laramie with two pictures. The first was the photo of his mother. He took it down from the wall of the dining room that had long been abandoned, poking the photo out of the dust-covered frame. The second was one of Fort Laramie he had cut from the newspaper article he read of its decommissioning two years earlier that he had carried in his coat pocket since. In the photo, its walls and ramparts were little more than black smudges against the thin grey paper—the American flag perched above the right-hand side watchtower and, behind it, the hills that stretched along the horizon. The photo, in itself, held little aesthetic or even historic value. But for James, it took on a mythical quality. As his journals reveal, he dreamt of the fort, of the hills in the photo, of the hills that hid behind those hills—turning red and orange in the

autumn. He had begun to manufacture himself memories. He remembered, he thought, walking along the fort's walls with his mother. He remembered, he thought, his mother carrying him into the hills at sunset. He remembered, he thought, sitting outside in the grass, at the back of their home as he heard the buzz of the cicadas and the hiss of his mother's corn cakes in the kitchen.

He took the train to Cheyenne and from there hired a wagon team, crossing the Laramie River on a day not entirely unlike the day his father did the same—hot and humid, the sun hanging high above the river bank's bluffs. By then, it had been long after the twenty-fourth regiment had decommissioned the fort—tearing down the walls and watchtowers that stretched high above the river it stood. The lumber that remained was sold as scrap to the surrounding communities that had grown at a slow yet steady pace since the railway's extension into the Wyoming territory. What few outbuildings were left were sold to the residents that saw no reason to leave. The munitions building now housed cattle feed. The barracks, a house occupied by a newly-arrived family of four from Massachusetts. The house his father once called home, now a general store.

The town's hotel was housed in the old officer's quarters. White Victorian trim hung from the flat roof that ran across the front porch until it met the pale blue of the exterior walls. As his wagon made its way across the Laramie River bridge and past the post office and bakery, he saw no one. He heard little beside the sound of a saw cutting lumber in the distance. The hotel's lobby was split into two—the reception desk to the right behind which a man in a black vest looked up in surprise at James' entrance; and to the left, a bar and a dining room, entirely empty save the bartender who dried a glass with a dull white rag. The receptionist carried his bags up to his room on the second floor and closed the door upon his exit without a word. James looked out the window. He looked at the blank space where the fort's walls once were,

imagining how close to the edge of the bluff they came. He could not hear the river rippling over its shallow bed of rocks, but he could see, as it turned eastward, the way it glinted in the sun. He could not know it, but the absence of the fort changed something in the town, something in its atmosphere. The sun beat down on it a bit more intently, piercing their curtains a bit more forcefully, illuminating dust that had accumulated in corners long forgotten. And in the winter, the wind whipped in off the plains a bit more violently.

James learned where the cemetery was from the bartender. It was at the edge of the town, past the stables and the hay yard. As he walked, he placed his mother into what he passed, inscribing her into the bakery where she bought a loaf of bread or outside the hospital where he must have been born, or at the post office, where his mother must have ripped open envelopes in expectation of a letter from his father, unable to wait before her return home. Or perhaps, he thought, the waiting was what she savored. Perhaps she clenched the envelope in her hand and listened to the sound of her footsteps as she walked home, as her soles knocked against the hardwood of the porch and then the sitting room, as she closed the door behind her until the moment came when she could not wait any longer.

He saw the white cross that sat on the church's modest steeple before all else. But after ascending the tall hill it sat on, he saw that the church grounds—the cemetery included—were overgrown with weeds and grass that came up to his hip. The black iron fence that lined the yard had, in places, rusted, fallen over, and disappeared into the tall foliage. Many of the headstones leaned to one side or the other. Rain and wind had worn off much of what was once engraved.

His father once told him that she was buried under a tall elm. But there wasn't a tree left standing in the churchyard. He walked through row by row, reading what names he could: Robert Cunningham, 1823-1856; Rebecca O'Malley, 1845-1848; Abe Goodman, 1838-1867.

None had been buried within the past few years. Death, or at least its measurement, had ceased to exist here.

The sun had begun to fall behind the western hills that were just turning green for the spring when he found his mother's grave, in the fading light, he had to strain to read the date of birth—1836. He felt that something was required of him—a gesture to her memory. But nothing came to mind. As the trees at the bottom of the hill grew blacker, he walked back through the tall grass, down the hill, and through the town that seemed all the more silent.

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Nothing we ever call silent is fully soundless. It is, instead, characterized by the hum of a car engine as it labors up a hill on a distant road or the thud of a wooden door meeting its frame or the chirp of a bird that balances on the thin branch of a tree—asking someone of something. It is in this silence Julius and his father stood in the frost-eaten grass as the blue diamond of the kite rested between them. Julius picked it up from the ground, holding its plastic frame in his hands. He walked it back to his father who wound the thread back into its spool. The sun began to peak through the clouds. The conifers that looked black in the shade turned a dark shade of green. A bird bounced on a limb of the pine tree closest to them. It turned its head towards them but looking past them as though it had spotted something far off in the distance. In their stillness, the two began to feel the cold stretching from their extremities—as though their goal had, up to that point, distracted them, as though they were just now coming to, just now facing the reality of what stood before them: the dead grass, the blue sky, the branches that sat still in the windless air (like a somnambulist that awakens to a familiar scene rendered unfamiliar to the context, a

sleepwalker whose connection to the clothes they wear and the quotidian objects they catch in their gaze—a bowl of fruit, the edge of a curtain, the legs of a coffee table whose dark stain was gnawed by a teething puppy—is the victim of a rupture, however temporary, that leaves them, for a moment at least, quietly disturbed).

They walked to the fountain that sat at the center of the Rose Garden. The bushes had been pruned. Their stems sat bare and their edges hardened and paled in the cold. They walked past the empty playground, a bank of dirty snow—unmelted in the winter cold—lining its edge near the swing set. They walked past the pond where the geese bathed in the summer. The water, placid and dark, was not far from frozen. And not once did the wind pick itself up, gathering its energy from the peak of a distant mountain or the shores of a great ocean, not once did the leaves on the conifers rustle against one another, whispering to them a truth much older than themselves.

### A Heavenly Way to Die

One might think that a day in which you see a man's skull crushed under the weight of a truck would start unlike any other. It might, perhaps, announce its intentions as best it could, with a sunrise that bleeds the sky red above my rooftop as I peel my clothes from the clothesline, with a rat that nibbles on discarded bread and stares, but not does rustle, when I pass him, with a scowl from the Coffee Lady at the end of my alleyway, with a xe om driver on the corner who does not understand my atonal Vietnamese.

That day offered no such foreshadowing. The sunrise was coy and muted. It bathed my rooftop in a soft pink light. The alleyway was clear of rats, even freshly swept by the neighbor whose name I never learned, the one who watched TV with his wife outside, at night, when it was cool and not so humid. The Coffee Lady smiled, put my cafe sua da in a plastic bag so that my xe om driver could hook it onto his bike. The xe om driver on the corner, who lay across the back of his motorbike with a outstretched newspaper, already knew me, knew my route and destination, knew my price. The day, in short, began like most others.

It was humid, more so than usual because it was spring and getting warmer but the rainy season had not yet come so the moisture had nowhere to go and hung thick in the air with the smog. My dress shirt stuck to my back and chest. The xe om drove the streets of district one, old Saigon, its streets narrow and its sidewalks either non-existent or packed with little plastic chairs next to street food vendors hawking bun bo hue and bun thit nuong, down streets where men on motorbikes offered me drugs and women under fluorescent lighting said hello handsome man, where a little boy dropped his pants and pissed into oncoming traffic, where a rat scurried in front of us and we jumped into the street to avoid it and were almost hit by a bus and we walked home, through that tree-lined park along Pham Ngo Lao, the one designed by the French, singing

a Smiths song about the double-decker bus, where I stood on the edge of the sidewalk on my first day, the sun overhead but unseen in the smog, waiting for a lull in the traffic of the motorbikes and taxis, arranged by some unknown force into six or seven makeshift lanes, waiting for a lull that never came, waiting until I put one hesitant foot in front of another, waded into the middle, the motorbikes, their drivers covered from head to toe, darting around me as I continued at a steady pace until I reached the other side.

It was on the entrance ramp of the bridge from District One to District Four that the man's skull was crushed. I had seen him at the previous stoplight. His white dress shirt, pressed and clean, did not cling to him with sweat as mine did. He scrolled through his phone, his legs spread out wide for balance, his grey socks peeking out from underneath his black pant legs. His helmet, too, was black, well-made, with a visor over the front, a casual sign of affluence.

He would not need it. The traffic light turned green and he raced ahead of us, just in front of a large truck with large wheels carrying unseen cargo underneath army green canvas tied down at the edges. Cigarette smoke drifted from a gap in the driver-side window. And then, without warning, without the clouds darkening the sky, one motorbike swerved in front of the other. The man turned to avoid him, lost his balance, tumbled to the ground where the dirty black of the truck tires rolled over his head.

I arrived at work on time, drank coffee with my colleagues in the staff room before singing songs and teaching five year-olds the words for farm animals. Pig, this is a pig; what sound does a pig make? Oink. Cow, this is a cow; what sound does a cow make? Moo. Chicken, this is a chicken; what sound does a chicken make? Bwakk Bwakk Bwakk.

I taught all day. I met Wendy and our friends on Bui Vien. We sat in plastic chairs around a plastic table. We drank beer, smoked cigarettes, and made fun of backpackers who did not know the cheap beer they were drinking was still far too expensive. We got drunk, as we always did, on the noise of the city -- the shouts of women selling dried squid skin or photocopied books, the incessant pleas of the motorbike's horn, the rattle of drunken laughter, drunken shouts, drunken sobs -- all of it playing amongst each other so that nothing could be distinguished, so that nothing held its own essence. Instead, one rubbed against the other and formed a dull hum like something that you have heard for so long that its very existence has been forgotten, taken for granted -- the leaky faucet, the spinning ceiling fan, the buzz of the morning traffic that sweeps you up and carries you, day after day, morning after morning, in a fashion so nondescript, so utterly unremarkable that when it comes to an end on, say, a hot, humid spring morning, and that buzz is the last thing you hear, you will be able to do nothing more but shake your head and smile and listen to the words it had been whispering all this time.

## Natural Disasters

What we do know is that on the night the wave that spawned Hurricane Beatrice moved off the west coast of Africa, somewhere between Senegal and Sierra Leone, the sky over Corpus Christi, Texas was cloudless. What stars they could always see, they saw. They shined bright in the night sky.

Terrance sat on the corner of the mattress in the bedroom they shared and watched Jose struggle to tighten the strap of his black leather puppy mask around the back of his head. The black leather snout hung loose over his nose. The black leather ears slumped to the side. Terrance stood up and pulled the strap tight.

“Too tight,” Jose said.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“Last time it came loose.”

Terrance unhooked it, loosened it, and pushed the metal stake through the next notch in the leather. Outside, it was not quite dark. The remaining light of the summer evening seeped through the bottom edges of their bedroom curtains. In the street below, Terrance could hear the pneumatic sigh of the bus tilting to sidewalk for disembarking passengers. Their air conditioner had been broken for four days. Their landlord assured him it would be fixed by Tuesday. It was now Thursday. Outside, it was hot the way August in the city is always hot. Inside, it was warm. Sweat stuck to his bare skin. Jose’s collar was already around his neck, all black without any of the faux silver studs they both found garish. A thick metal ring stood perpendicular from the back of his neck, just above his spine. On the far wall was their bed. On the opposite, a dog crate

-- large enough for a German Shepherd or a Labrador Retriever. By the door was a long vanity of blond wood. Coaster stains dotted its surface. On the corner closest to the door sat the black leather leash. Terrance turned to grab it. Jose said something muffled by the mask, by the snout that now sat snug against his nose and mouth. Terrance looked to him.

“Turn on the fan,” Jose said.

Terrance walked to the standing fan and turned it on to High. He pulled the plug to let it oscillate. The curtains rippled as it swept across the room. Jose was on all fours now. Terrance walked back and petted the back of his head, his hair damp with sweat.

“Good boy,” he said.

He hooked the leash to the ring at the back of Jose’s collar. Jose looked up. Terrance could only ever see his brown eyes. Jose let out two soft growls in quick succession. Terrance walked him around the bedroom. When Jose sniffed at the curtains, Terrance yanked at the leash and dragged him away, pulling him onto his side.

“What have I told you about those curtains,” Terrance asked.

Jose whimpered. Terrance walked him out of the bedroom. Terrance shoved his face into a bowl of water and told him to drink like a good boy. He took him to the couch. He undid his leash. He took a ball from a basket on the coffee table and threw it across the room. Jose ran after it. He carried it back in his mouth. When Terrance pulled the ball from his jaws, Jose bit him on the wrist.

“Bad dog,” Terrance said.

He took him by the collar and dragged him to their bedroom. He pushed him into the crate. He turned out the lights. He left the room. In the living room, he watched an episode of *The Bachelor*. Hannah G was up to her antics again. He heated up a frozen burrito in the

microwave and ate it over a paper towel. Halfway through the episode, he heard whimpering from behind the bedroom door. He turned the lights on. He let him out. Jose climbed up on the couch with him. He nuzzled his snout into his lap as Terrance pet his back. Hannah G, Chad asked, will you accept this rose?

What's interesting to note about Hurricane Beatrice, a category five that would take over sixty-eight lives in the greater Corpus Christi over the course four days in August of 2019 is that it almost never was. After it spun off the coast of Africa, it moved westward, riding just south of a Western Atlantic ridge. Its center passed over Barbados at 10:00 UTC and over St. Vincent five hours later. Most of the strong winds, it is worth noting, occurred away from those islands to the north of the center. But northern wind shear and two landfalls within five hours caused Beatrice to weaken. Early on August 19th, it weakened to a depression. By nightfall, as it pushed across the Central Caribbean Sea, it degenerated into a tropical wave. It could be said that it was spinning to nowhere.

Terrance was dispatched by his editors to the city of Corpus Christi on a Monday morning. He was to document the advance and subsequent aftermath of a category five named Beatrice. They wanted the human story. By the time his flight touched down, the hurricane was, in the words of the local and national weather reporters, "gaining steam" in the warm August waters of the Gulf. Its movements were said to be "barreling." It was, they said, "unprecedented." The airport was too small for the occasion. The front hall was banked entirely in a tinted glass so that the mess of personnel from national news agencies pouring in and families from the surrounding areas trying to pour out were cast in an eerily bright light. It did not, Terrance thought, fit the mood.

During Harvey and Ike and Rita, the residents of Corpus took shelter in the W.B. Ray High School gymnasium. But it had lost its accreditation the prior academic year and then its funding was slashed and so it closed its doors and the school board started bussing the kids into the next district over. The city decided upon the Adlai E. Stevenson Elementary School Gymnasium instead. It sat on a quiet city street blocks away from the downtown seawall. Across its parking lot was a hardware store. On the day before landfall, Terrance watched customers stream in and out of its doors with boards of plywood in their hands.

Inside, a green shamrock marked the center of the parquet. The lacquered bleachers had been folded into themselves and pushed against the wall. Forest green cushions ran underneath the basketball hoops that had been raised towards the ceiling. On the gym's north side, the words GO IRISH were painted in thick green letters. On the south side, an empty scoreboard's unlit bulbs formed eights under Home and Away, Fouls and Timeouts. The ceiling was high. Near its top, a series of wired windows ran around its walls. They looked out into the internal hallways of the school's second story. They were empty. No one passed through them. They made, Terrance thought, the gym smaller. And yet somehow more expansive. From the center of a ceiling hung a long American flag with bright white stars.

By the next morning, when it became clear Beatrice was not deviating from her expected path, the gym floor was covered with navy blue cots all lined in rows and sleeping bags and books and battery-powered radios and battery-powered flashlights and coolers of food and trash bags full of the things people could not -- for one reason or another -- leave behind all filled in the space between. And in the hallway adjacent to the gym floor, next to the bathrooms and the water fountains, thick black wire crates held dogs that cowered in the corners.

We cannot say for certain why some things are the way they are. For instance, we cannot speak to why, as the remnants of Beatrice, then just a tropical wave, limped into the Bay of Campeche, a low pressure front swooped down against it and a deep warming convection stirred the sea. We can only say that it did. We can only say that the heat gave Beatrice new life, that it regenerated into a tropical depression about 150 miles west of Progreso, Mexico, and that from there, it took on an air of inevitability. The wind shear died down and the water became warmer and the air thick with moisture. It turned northward towards the coast of Texas. A day later, it was a category five.

A week before Terrance left for Texas as Beatrice was on the verge of breaking apart over the Central Caribbean Sea, Jose was late to come home. Terrance passed the time by cleaning the leash and the collar and the snout and ears of the puppy mask. He filled a small bucket with warm water. He squeezed a bit of soap from the bottle and watched the bubbles swirl to the water's surface. He dipped a rag into the solution and squeezed it of its excess water. He then ran it up and down the black leather, rubbing off the salt marks left by Jose's sweat.

When Jose arrived, they were sitting on the vanity, already dry. Jose was not drunk, nor was he sober. Terrance walked into the bedroom behind him and told him to get on his knees. Jose smiled and laughed, said ok. Terrance grabbed the mask, the leash, and the collar from the vanity. He strapped the mask around his skull and the collar around his neck. He hooked the leash into place. He tugged at it. And when Jose growled at him, Terrance gave a hard tug and pulled Jose onto the floor, his back squeaking against the hardwood.

“Red, red, red,” Jose said.

“Sorry,” Terrance said.

They played fetch. He put him in the crate. When he let him out, Jose began to crawl towards the living room.

“Stay,” Terrance said.

He took the paddle from the closet and beat his ass cheeks until they were bright, until above the night traffic streaming outside their window, Jose once again yelled the safety word. Terrance apologized. They made love and watched TV. Outside, cars honked and strangers sang.

Beatrice’s center made landfall at 1200 UTC on the northern end of Padre Island. Sustained winds reached 115 knots. A minimum central pressure of 937 millibars was recorded. Beatrice spun back out to sea and made a second landfall just up the coast from Corpus approximately three hours later. It was then that Terrance met Richard Grassley.

The rain began to pelt the steel roof above. Terrance wound his way through the cots that lined the gymnasium floor. The windows, that morning, that lined the second-floor hallway above, had let in some light that drifted in from the unseen sun. Now they were dark. All that shined down on them was the bright fluorescence of the overhead light fixtures. Terrance interviewed, in no particular order, the shelter’s volunteer coordinator, various members of the Red Cross, and a World War II veteran who said he served in Guadalcanal, who claimed they faced much worse weather at sea. He spoke with a family of undocumented immigrants from Honduras -- a husband, a wife, three young kids who sat in the corner where the bleachers met the wall. He spoke to a middle-aged woman who said this was all the result of climate change, a product of the warming of the seas, who said this was the only the beginning, that the worst was yet to

come. And he spoke to an old pastor from a local church who said this had nothing to do with the warming of anything. It was only the mark of a God who had been thrown into despair over the faithlessness of his creations.

They were all different. Yet they all had a certain performative aspect about them. They were actors in a grand panopticon. And they seemed, Terrance thought, to realize this, intuitively or otherwise, as the day wore on and the rains and winds got a bit louder. They missed their privacy. They felt the gazes they attracted from each other so that they all retreated within themselves. By the time Beatrice made its second landfall, this time closer to the Corpus city limits, it seemed to Terrance that no one was much in the mood for talking.

Corpus Christi is latin for “Body of Christ.” It was given that name by Alonso Alvarez de Pineda when his ships rode into the bay on which the city sits on the Feast Day of Corpus Christi in 1519, sixty days after Easter. The day is a celebration of the transubstantiation of Christ. It is a monument to the Word made Flesh. The naming of the city, it has been commented upon by some historians, was itself a transubstantiation. The Word made into an entirely new form of Flesh. Less than a year later, after sailing up the Rio Panucho, Pineda would be killed by a tribe of Huastec Indians. His ships would be burned. His skin would be flayed, sent to the capital to be hung in an Aztec temple. His map, which gave Corpus Christi its name, made its way back to Spain by some unknown mechanism.

Today, the city is known as the Sparkling City by the Sea. Its median income is \$41,672. It is the original home of Whataburger. On a day when it is not so hot, when, say, a cool wind ripples off the sea, locals recommend a walk down the Corpus Christi Beachwalk, a ten-foot-wide path that runs parallel down the city’s famed North Beach.

It was not so much the winds or the storm surge that made Beatrice as damaging as it was (over seventy dead, over two hundred million dollars in damage by the most recent estimate). Rather, it was the rain. The northwestward motion of its cyclone was stopped shortly after landfall. It fell from a category five to a tropical storm within hours. But it became trapped in the light steering currents, sandwiched between one mid-tropospheric high over the Four Corners region and another high over the northern Gulf of Mexico. So it spun in place. It retraced the same shape again and again as the convection offered from the warm Gulf waters continued to feed it. The rain fell and the water rose and the world outside Adlai E. Stevenson Elementary School gymnasium became, to most, unrecognizable.

Richard Grassley was different. As the rains fell harder, he invited the attention. He sought Terrance out. He found him outside the bathroom in the hallway between the water fountains and the crates of dogs who had begun to bark in what Terrance assumed to be confusion or fear or some combination of the two. Richard was homeless. The navy blue hoodie he wore smelled of body odor. His thick canvas camo pants sagged against his thin frame. His long hair was pulled tight into a ponytail at the back of his neck. The entire afternoon, people had told Terrance someone was looking for him, so that when Richard finally appeared, setting his long black duffel bag between at his feet, Terrance was fearful in a strange sort of way. Richard asked if he was Terrance. Terrance said he was. He asked who he worked for and Terrance told him and then Richard showed him a picture of a woman -- a photo printed onto copy paper and folded into fours. He said her name was Charlene Rodgers and he wanted to know if he had seen her.

Terrance stared at him blankly. He asked Richard why he asked and it was there, between the fountain and the dogs, that Richard told him.

It was a Thursday if Terrance remembered correctly. A Thursday in September. He had returned from Texas earlier that week. There was a fire on the Brooklyn-bound L track, so he had taken an Uber home. Terrance got the leash, the collar, and the mask from the closet while Jose washed the dishes. He set them on the vanity and walked to the window to close the curtains. He watched an old woman carry a plastic bag of groceries. Green onions poked out from the top. It split and onions rolled along the sidewalk and down the gutters. When he heard Jose walk in behind him, he closed the curtains. Terrance strapped the mask to Jose's head and the collar to his neck.

When Jose complained it was too tight, Terrance ignored him. He hooked the leash and gave it a quick tug. He walked him through the living room. They played fetch. And when he put him in the crate and turned off the lights and left the room, he ignored Jose's whimpering for an hour and a half. When Jose called out Terrance's name, Terrance ignored him. When he began to curse and scream, he turned the volume on the television louder until a commercial break came.

He walked into the bedroom and without turning on the light, the room lit only by what slipped in from the overhead fixtures of the living room, he opened the crate.

"I thought you were going to leave me in there all night," Jose said.

Terrance slapped him across the cheek.

"Bad dog," he said.

Jose pushed him onto the bed. Terrance stared and began to laugh.

"Come on you animal. Shouldn't I be punished?"

Jose left the room. He unhooked the mask from his face and the collar from his neck and threw them across the hallway floor as he locked himself in the bathroom. Terrance lay in the half-lit room. He fell asleep before Jose came out.

The meteorological conditions that produced such extreme rains deserves, perhaps, additional explanation. While Beatrice was slow-moving and pinned, in a sense, between two steering currents, it is important to note that not all drifting cyclones produce such torrential rain. The historic rate of rainfall, in this case, was compounded by the cooler and drier air that moved over the southern United States behind a weak stationary front. Sometimes, it's not the thing itself.

The day after Beatrice had pulled away from the coast and into the American interior, Terrance rode with Red Cross volunteers through the city streets. What he found most disturbing was the incomplete nature of its damage. One block was lined with houses whose roofs remained, whose windows stayed unbroken, whose yards were not covered in chunks of dry wall and black roof tiles. Other blocks were dotted with houses and apartments and schools stripped of one necessary element or another. A house was missing a roof. A school had a roof, but its interior had been hollowed out. An apartment building, from a certain angle, looked to be intact until one continued down the street to see that its twin spires on either edge hiding the building's empty center. Outside a lingerie store, beheaded bodies of mannequins floated in puddles left by the storm surge or the flood waters or both, the lace garters they had worn now dirty and soaked.

Richard Grassely met Charlene Rodgers on an internet forum devoted to anime. He was living in a men's shelter in Houston. She was living in rural Nebraska with her father. Everyday, Richard

would wake up early enough to arrive outside the Alice McKean Young Neighborhood Library at least fifteen minutes before it opened. This assured him a place at the bank of computers that lined the windows at the far end of the first floor. The windows looked out onto a large sculpture of what Richard always thought to be a robin or a sparrow. It was covered in bright mosaic tiles of blue, red, and orange. Richard would log on and send messages to Charlene throughout most of the morning until Charlene had to start her shift at a local grocery store or until the Jason or Sandy or another member of the library staff would come by and tell him his time had elapsed, that it was time to let someone else use the computer -- whichever came first.

Charlene's father was abusive. He come home in the evenings, drank in the basement of the one-story house they shared until it got dark, until Charlene came home and began to cook dinner, and her father would climb the stairs and ask her where all their money had gone and, in so many words, why wasn't she more like her dead mother. Sometimes, he would throw her against the wall and storm out and sometimes he would sit in the bathroom and lock the door and let the faucet run and if Charlene stood close, just down the hallway, she could hear this low-pitched sobbing, like he was trying to suck the tears back inside himself. After a few months, Richard asked Charlene to come live with him. He would get a job, he said. He knew a man in Corpus Christi who ran an auction house. He needed someone to help with logistics, mostly loading and unloading furniture that came in and out. He told her they could rent an apartment and that he loved her and that living with her father was no way to live. But Charlene told him no, day after day, until a morning came when Richard logged on to the computer and Charlene was not there to answer. An hour later, she trundled off a city bus with a small suitcase at her hip, carrying nothing but two pairs of jeans, two blouses, a dress, and a photo album that had

belonged to her mother, and stood under the big bird sculpture and waited, waited for Richard to notice.

The day after the winds died and the rains stopped, Richard took Terrance to the library. They stood beneath the bird he had spoken of. Richard said it was a robin, wasn't it. Terrance said maybe. He wasn't sure. Though the bank of windows that lined the library had been shattered in places, the sculpture itself was undamaged. Only its legs and the underside of breast were stained by the flood waters so that the mosaic of blue, orange, and red did not quite gleam in the sun but rather sat opaque.

There were sixty-eight deaths attributed to Beatrice. Sixty-three were the result of freshwater flooding. The streams and the rivers and the lakes and the creeks broke their banks. It is said that when you are thrown underwater, you often lose sense of which way is up and which is down. Others died of electrocution from fallen power lines. One was the result of an allergic attack after fire ants climbed her legs and bit her hips. One was the result of a man in his late fifties whose dialysis machine lost power. When he died, his wife said, the sun was out and the sky was clear.

Charlene and Richard moved into a small apartment in the basement of an old woman whose husband died the year before. Sometimes, the woman had told them when they moved in, you can hear him, late at night, shuffling through the hallways. The apartment was dark. There was only one window -- a short rectangle poking out of a basement well cut into their bedroom wall. The carpet smelled of mildew. Their apartment shared the basement with the old woman's

laundry room and the dryer's dull hum seemed to sound throughout the evening hours night after night.

They were happy, Richard said, but Charlene had trouble sleeping. She said she could hear the old woman's husband. He was rifling through their closet and drawers. She could not believe that he couldn't hear it himself. She would rip a pillow from the bed, take it to the living room, and fall asleep on the couch. In the morning, when Richard left for work, he would find the TV still on from the night before. He would walk down Commerce and then cut across Franklin and, in the day, he would ride around in a van with a man named Larry and they would deliver antique furniture across town to rich clients who had purchased them in auction the week before. When he got home, he and Charlene would walk to the park down the street. It was a wide field with hills that rolled and copses that sprung from the ground in a way that perhaps felt too arranged, too organized. On the park's south side, there was a duck pond. And they would sit on the bench under a great oak tree and watch the ducks glide across the water and the children throw bits of white bread on the ground before them. They would walk back when it began to get dark and he would promise her they would move soon. He would save his money and they would move.

On August 30th, Beatrice spun out to sea again. It made its final landfall in southwestern Louisiana near Cameron with forty mile per hour winds. Thereafter, the cyclone weakened over land, becoming a tropical depression. It then moved northward over the southern United States, transforming into an extratropical cyclone by 600 UTC in the Tennessee River Valley.

Somewhere over northern Kentucky, the cyclone fell apart. Its pieces floated here and there until nothing about its form was recognizable to what it once was.

When the gym emptied, when the residents of Corpus filed out of the gym's double-doors and the Red Cross volunteers stacked the cots in the corner and swept the floors with wide brooms and the light streamed in from an open doorway down the hall, the place looked strange to Terrance. He found something anti-climatic about it all.

On the shores of Corpus sits the USS Lexington. It is now a naval museum. But in World War II, the Japanese named it the "Blue Ghost" for the way in which it would reappear after reportedly being sunk. Admiral Marc Mitscher guided it to climatic victories at the Battle of the Philippine Sea and the Battle of the Leyte Gulf. When Beatrice struck, the winds and the waves shook the carrier loose from its moorings and its stern drifted ever so slightly to sea.

On a day that started like all the others, Richard found Charlene asleep on the couch. He took the remote and turned the volume down on the TV. He walked down Commerce as he always did, but when he came to its intersection with Franklin and walked through the crosswalk, a red sedan that was never identified struck his torso and broke his hip.

His boss, Richard said, did right by him. He helped with the operation and with the cost of his pain medication. Charlene took care of him. She seemed, he thought, to be doing better until he realized she was just taking his pain pills. But he did not worry then. Because she no longer heard the sound of the old man rifling through their room. She slept with ease. And so Richard thought everything would be alright, everything would be just fine.

But when Richard's prescription ended, Charlene began to hear the old man in their bedroom again. He's right there, she shouted at times, sometimes sobbing, sometimes grabbing

the sheets in tight fists. She would disappear for days and nights at a time. She would come home, apologize, claim she was better, claim they could go back to how it was. And for a time it did. But when Richard went back to work and left her at home all day, he would return to find her pupils as round as saucers and her body slumped over on the couch while Tom and Jerry reruns flashed light across the otherwise dark room.

No one could agree if it was looting or survival. What FEMA brought didn't last long and so the ones who stayed behind in Corpus started throwing bricks and cinder blocks through windows of grocery stores and bodegas. They walked through the city that seemed even more broken in the bright sun -- its damage now illuminated -- as they carried bread and gallon jugs of water. But somewhere in Flour Bluff a owner who stayed with his store put a bullet into the chest of a seventeen year-old black boy and so as the flood waters began to recede, parts of the city caught fire.

The day after Terrance locked Jose in the crate for an hour and a half, Terrance woke up to find a note from Jose. We really needed to talk about last night re: what is and what is not acceptable, it read. Terrance texted him at lunch: leaving tonight for Philly on assignment, sorry, we can talk when I'm back. After work, Terrance took the commuter train out to Jersey and rented a hotel room for the night outside the Newark Airport.

The night after, he took his phone and downloaded Grindr. He said he was a male seeking a male. He did not bother to describe himself in two-hundred words or less. He uploaded the first photo of himself that he could find. He set his search radius to five miles. He swiped right on every profile he came across. It did not take him long to find a match. He messaged him. He

asked him how long it would take him to reach the Hampton Inn & Suites in Newark. His name was Charles. He likes dogs. His blond hair parted on the left and was combed over to the right.

The way Richard saw it, he had two choices. He could kick her out -- maybe buy her a bus ticket back to Nebraska -- or he could lock her in their bedroom until she kicked the habit. On Sunday, they went to the park and watched the children feed the ducks. That night, she heard the old man again. She told Richard she had to go. Richard begged her not to, but she said she would be right back. In the morning, he found her on the couch. On the television was an infomercial for a variant of the Roomba. He picked her up and carried her into the bedroom. As he laid her down, she thrashed against his arms. Richard said he was sorry but it was for her own good. He took old shirts from his closet and tied them around the bedposts. Then he twisted them at their edges and tied them around her wrists. He closed the door and locked it behind him and the all way up the staircase, he could hear her yells, her cries: you can't do this to me.

When he returned in the evening, she was calm. He thought she was doing better. He fed her soup from a bowl and she smiled at him. In the morning, as he tied her wrists to the bedposts, she looked at him and said he didn't have to do this. She said she loved him. But as he closed the door and locked it behind him, she began to cry and scream and beg him not to leave her there. That night, she was quiet. She ate the soup in silence. On Wednesday morning, she watched him tie her wrists to the bedposts in silence. And when he left, she did not cry or scream and Richard left with the thought that this was progress. But when he returned that night, the small window that peered out into the basement well was broken through, the old shirts he used to bind her at the side of the bed, the broken glass across the floor.

In the midst of the chaos, in the midst of the actions the authorities had now taken to calling “rioting” and “looting,” which they assured the public, would not be tolerated, mayor Robert Santiago held a press conference outside the red-brick of City Hall. He spoke into a bouquet of microphones and praised the resilience of the community, the bravery of its first-responders, and the immutability of the human spirit. He said he would not let the actions of a few define the character of their city. He called upon their better angels to rally, to unite, and to not allow the human cost of this great tragedy be something forgotten and overshadowed by the violence and selfishness of the few.

But the speech did not reach much of the city. It still sat, for the most part, powerless. Its televisions and radios broadcasted only silence. The mayor was heard by himself alone.

Terrance met Charles in the hotel bar. Charles was late so Terrance sat at the end of the near-empty bar and ordered a vodka-soda. When Charles arrived, they ordered another round and spoke of work. Charles worked finance in the city. He hates it but loves the money, he said with a laugh. They ordered another. Terrance told him he was in town for business. Terrance touched Charles’ elbow and asked him if he wanted to come up to his room. In the elevator, he got a text from Jose that read, *thinking of you*, followed by three kissing emojis.

Richard thought he might find her in the park. That night and many nights after, he sat on the bench by the duck pond under the oak tree and waited for her to appear. When it got dark, he would walk the long way home, sometimes down Hammond and then back up Lake, and sometimes down De Oso Boulevard. The longer he stayed out in the glow of the streetlights, he thought, the more likely he was to find her. Sometimes, he would see a woman on the other side

of the street and convince himself that it was her, following her until he got close to see that he was mistaken. One night, he thought he saw her boarding a bus on 33rd. He ran after it, block after block, until it turned off on Meyer and sped out of view.

He started drinking again. He stopped going into work. The old woman let him stay for a few weeks without rent, but one night, he heard her slippers padding down the staircase and her knuckle tapping at the door, and he answered it to find her explaining that he needed to be out by the end of the month. And soon, it was like Charlene never arrived. It was like she never existed. Soon, he was living in the same men's shelter and using the same computer in the same library and at some point he could not remember, he stopped walking out to the park or taking circuitous routes around the city.

FEMA returned with fresh supplies a few days after the rioting had begun. They gave out blankets and water and the mayor stood on the back of a pick-up and told everyone they would be fine. For some, FEMA cut checks. But other were told no checks were coming. They lived in a flood plain, they told them. And they had no flood insurance. They did not protect their own liability and so the government couldn't be held responsible. They would have to make do with what they had. They would have to put buckets under their roofs and put plastic over their windows and shove three or four or five to a room. Others were sent into temporary housing and scattered to Amarillo or Houston or Fort Worth. Some never bothered coming back, but some did. They walked down streets they recognized all too well and thought, if nothing else, at least some things don't change.

Terrance and Charles exited the elevator on the fourth floor. The hallway was quiet and the light artificial. They walked until they reached room 4021. Terrance slid the key card in and out and the handle flashed green. Inside, they took off each other's clothes. Charles stood up from the bed and walked to the light switch on the wall. Terrance shook his head and said no. He reached over towards the bedside table and turned on the lamp. Charles walked back to bed. As he started, Terrance turned to him. He asked Charles to hit him. Charles laughed. Terrance said he was serious. Charles said he could be a bit rough, don't worry. Charles continued. Terrance turned and slapped him across the cheek. Charles laughed.

"Ok, ok," he said, "I get it."

Terrance slapped again and again, harder each time. Charles grabbed his hands.

"Stop," Charles said.

Terrance shook loose from his grip. He slapped Charles across the head and then across the cheek.

"Fuck this," Charles said. He shook his head as he picked up his clothes. As he put one leg through his pants, Terrance shoved him against the wall. Charles got up and Terrance shoved him again, this time pushing him into what little space remained between the edge of the bed and corner of the wall. Charles popped up off the ground and tackled Terrance. Terrance tried pushing him off, but Charles pinned his hands to the green carpet.

"Stop," Charles said.

But when Charles let his hands free, Terrance slapped him again. Charles responded with a succession of three quick punches to his nose. Terrance started to laugh. Charles buckled his pants and buttoned his shirt and as he walked to the door, Terrance lay there and felt the blood flow from his nose and drip down his throat.

It is difficult to give an accurate estimate of how many dogs perished in the flood waters and storm surges. As many as one hundred thousand feral dogs had been estimated to have been roaming the streets of Corpus prior to the hurricane's landfall. But no official survey has been conducted since. There is nothing to tell us how many may have been caught in the rising flood waters or the advancing storm surges, or left behind on the empty rooftops of empty homes, nothing to say how many have perished in ways we will never know.

The day after Beatrice pivoted and turned up the Tennessee River Valley and away from Corpus, Richard took Terrance to the park with the duck pond. They walked through the copses and down the hills. Fallen branches were scattered across the fields, their edges gnarled and torn. The pond was empty. Terrance wondered aloud where the ducks had gone and Richard tried to answer him in earnest. He couldn't say for sure. He guessed somewhere safe. They sat there in silence and after a time, Richard said the pond felt different. There were fewer branches and more light. All of it was the brighter. And so the pond reflected the sun. And its surface glowed as though it were in flames.

### Things Noticed When Saying Goodbye to a Woman I Would Never See Again

There was, of course, the white tile of the departures lobby, the one side that glimmered in its fresh wax and the other, waiting its turn, dulled by dirt tracked in on the soles of travelers' shoes and by haphazard turns of wheeled suitcases and by the coffee that had just been spilled by the old woman who was more concerned with preventing the small dog she had on a leash from lapping it up in excited licks than she was with cleaning the mess itself, the cup and its plastic lid still lying on the floor, and the coffee running away from them both, down the grouted grooves, and the waxer on his wax machine now, none the wiser, inching along in straight lines and there we stood, between the two of them, and you had your big green backpack on already because we had already said goodbye several times over and I said *look at us caught in the crossfire* and you had the decency to force a laugh and a smile which I still appreciate now because you had long since known that I'm not great at goodbyes and there was also, of course, the family of four that maneuvered around us because we had not exactly chosen the best spot to stand and their two kids asking when they could go to the bathroom and us standing there and our gazes drifting elsewhere for a moment before returning with a smile that tried and failed to communicate what was not being said and there was, of course, the American Airlines employee in his pressed navy blue suit and their logo pinned to his lapel telling travelers *yes, sir, right this way*, or *no, mam, this is for Sky Priority members only*, or *the bathroom? down the hall to the right* and there was also, of course, the silence, not an absolute silence that one finds on the tops of mountains or in the hearts of forests unexplored but a louder silence, a silence that drowned out the mechanical groan of the waxer and the yips of the dog and the pleas of her owner to *please, be quiet* and the assurances of the parents that the kids could go to the bathroom very soon, just after they

checked their luggage, and the measured responses of the airport attendant and even the thud-thud of the suitcase wheels hitting the grooves of the tiled floor one after the other.

### Acquired Characteristics

I have started cheating on my wife with the real estate agent who sold us our house -- a nice three-bedroom not far from the Plaza. When I leave her apartment, I drive south down Grand or Rockhill and I think of Roland St. Clair, a boy I knew when I was much younger than I am now.

Roland St. Clair's greatest fear in life was to be like his father whom he loved dearly. He never admitted it in such terms, but it was true. When he was eight or nine, he'd wake in the middle of the night and hear his mother crying in her bedroom and he'd push her door open and he'd ask her what was wrong. She'd say nothing was wrong, nothing serious, just a headache. She'd go into the bathroom and turn on the shower and if Roland tiptoed down the hallway and cupped his ear to the door, he could hear what it was she was trying to hide. After a time, he stopped. There was no use. He let her cry and instead stared at the glow-in-the-dark stars on his bedroom ceiling. This was all, of course, after his father, whom, again I assure you, he loved dearly and held in the highest of esteem, slept with the woman who worked the cigarette and lottery ticket counter at the local Price Chopper that sat between Meyer and 63rd until it caught fire one Sunday morning when the neighborhood was all at church, all after his father left and moved to Arizona where Roland and his brother Roger would spend their summers hunting lizards in the backyard of his modest two-bedroom in suburban Tucson and riding shotgun in his pick-up as he made the rounds for a mid-sized landscaping company.

This is not to say Roland didn't admire his father greatly. He had masculine traits that Roland would always envy. He was physically imposing. He had broad shoulders and thick arms. And he carried himself with a quiet confidence that Roland always tried to teach himself but always failed in doing. It always came off as an affectation more discomfiting to those

around him than his typical self-effacement, which, I had always felt, had something more confident about it. But that is neither here nor there. Perhaps it is more apt to say that his greatest fear was to be a cheater, an adulterer, a philanderer, a man of infidelity, a man like his father who still lives in Arizona to this day in that very modest two-bedroom he has owned since his divorce from Roland's mother.

For much of his childhood, Roland assumed what many contemporary Americans assume of infidelity. His father and mother assured him, of course, that it was not his fault and it was not Roger's fault and that they were two delightful children whom they both loved very much. It just "didn't work out," they said. Sometimes two people get married when they should not have gotten married. And sometimes two people who once loved each other reach a point in their life when they no longer love each other in the requisite way for a happy continuation of said marriage. Roland consumed this all in its entirety. It gave him all he needed in his childhood -- the belief that his parents were perfectly good people who happened to not be able to coexist. And anyway, as Roland often told me, his parents were on good terms. His mother, at a point he could not remember, stopped crying. There was none of that quintessential Hollywood Divorced Parents Dynamic in which Parent A is forever angry with Parent B. And Parent B remarries with a spouse who is perhaps younger or who is perhaps wealthier or who is perhaps some combination of the two and the result is a dynamic in which Parent A is even angrier at Parent B. This did not go on between Roland's parents. And so Roland was generally upbeat at all that adulthood promised vis-a-vis love and matrimony and monogamy. In the seventh grade, he developed a crush on Sarah Stevens who, while not the prettiest girl in our class, was comfortably in the top five percentile and was widely considered one of the smarter and funnier of our classmates and was, as the rumors went, one of the top ballerinas of her age group in the

greater Kansas City metro area. And he would talk to me after basketball practice as we walked home down Main Street to our respective homes in the Armour Hills subdivision of Brookside-Waldo area. We would pick up crabapples we found in the grass and throw them at passing cars. He would tell me how much he liked Sarah and how it was too early to say, but maybe they could be boyfriend and girlfriend at some point, and who knows, maybe he would get into Rockhurst and maybe she would get into St. Teresa's and they could go to each other's co-ed mixers and dances, at which point the sky really would be the limit. At the graduation party the Wentworth twins held in their backyard, while everyone was in the basement singing along to Lil Jon and taking advantage of the diverse chip selection, he and Sarah sat alone on the trampoline and though I gave the two a wide berth, I heard quite a bit of laughter and afterwards, when I asked what that was all about, Roland just smiled.

High school changed things. His brother Roger, three years his elder, was seeing Laura Watson. She lived down the street on 70th just across from our mutual friend of ours, Matt Baker. It was almost universally agreed that not only was Laura both smart and attractive, the proverbial Complete Package, but that she and Roger had that elusive quality of being a "great match," of having a certain chemistry that was both undeniable and enviable. When they, for example, walked down into the St. Clair Family basement and interrupted our game of Super Smash Bros or NFL BLITZ 2000, there was none of that awkward unease you meet when you talk with a couple that so clearly operates only in isolation. There was, I suppose, an easiness between them. Everything felt natural. And so it was all the more surprising when Roland's mom came home one evening and found Roger in bed not with Laura, which would have been grounds for some sort of discipline in and of itself, but rather with, as Roger later admitted to Roland, Stephanie Miles whom none of us knew too well, only that she went to co-ed Bishop Miege

instead of one of the local all-girls schools. The infidelity came as a shock for Roland and obviously opened some old wounds vis-a-vis his father whom he now was seeing less and less of given his summer-long commitments to the junior-varsity football team, a commitment which was pretty much required if he had any hopes of catching on at the varsity level. But what was most shocking for Roland was, in fact, Roger's sort of blase reaction to the entire episode coupled with the nature of his explanation and rationale of the event. As Roland relayed to me at the cafeteria table before Ted or Jim or Alex or any other member of the friend group we ran with in those days arrived, Roger felt no remorse. Nor did he consider his infidelity to be any great transgression. But what most disturbed Roland was Roger's belief that love played no part in any of his actions. Roland had assumed what transpired between Roger and Laura was what had transpired between his father and his mother: Roger and Laura no longer loved each other, they had grown apart, they had to leave the relationship in order to fulfill their own potential happiness. Or at the least, Roland thought, Roger was caught between two loves. he cared greatly for them both and his attraction to Stephanie led him to into bed with her, and yes, Laura was hurt, but passion is passion and love is love. But as Roger made clear during his indefinite grounding, during which the two brothers spent a considerable amount of time together, he had considered none of what Roland had assumed. Of his affair with Stephanie, he said he did it only because he "felt like it." When pressed on this, he shrugged. He said it made him feel good. He told Roland that one day he would understand. When Roland asked if he'd be going out with Stephanie now, Roger laughed, and when he asked if he'd be sticking at it with Laura, he became sullen and serious and said Jesus, man, just drop it.

In a vacuum, Roland would have been able to ignore the ethos espoused by his older brother. His worldview vis-a-vis monogamy and romance would have remained in tact. He'd

have gone on as before. Perhaps he would have asked Sarah Stevens to the annual Blue-White mixer that year, the one that followed the fall scrimmage between the varsity and junior varsity teams—the one at which, soon after the doors opened, Veronica Livingstone, whom we both knew from middle school, puked across the gymnasium floor.

Roger's extrarelational affair with Stephanie did not occur in a vacuum. That fall, in freshman history, our teacher Mr. Bern assigned what he termed a Personal Genealogical History Analysis, soon thereafter abbreviated to "the PGHA." It required us, in the broadest terms, to not only create a family tree detailing all generations back to the start of the previous century, but to provide a ten-page written account of their lives, detailing all that we could discover, all their triumphs and all their tribulations. As Roland and I sat in the back row, the map of the world pinned to the corkboard next to us, Mr. Bern explained that we are products of history and was there no surer way to understand this than to study our own histories, to learn where we had come from and what constituted our "heritage." As he spoke, Mr. Bern's voice took on a vaguely lofty quality that, had he not been among the more disinterested teachers at our school, might have been inspiring. It didn't help that, as outlined on our assignment sheet, the project would have us spending the next three weeks in the school library conducting so-called "independent research" on the school's computers.

Most of us, knowing Mr. Bern and knowing the lax standards to which he held us and our classwork and knowing that he sent us to the library without any supervision -- himself staying in the classroom and telling us to let him know if we needed anything, invested what amounted to the bare minimum of time and effort into the project. For most of us, this amounted to entering essential biographical information (date of birth, place of birth, year of death, etc.) concerning our parents, grandparents, and when possible, great-grandparents, into Ancestry.com, which was,

in fact, that year, running a month-long free trial for its Premium Package. In my case, it so happened my father took a great interest in the entire endeavour. At my brief mention of the project at the dinner table one evening, he took control of the project, spending long hours into the night poring over a collection of birth certificates and death certificates and records written in cursive on the front page of a family Bible passed down from his great-great grandmother. The whole affair, in fact, sparked something of a lifelong interest for him to the point that he claimed, at the Thanksgiving dinner table this past winter, that we are, in fact, descendants of one Dr. Samuel Fuller, a passenger of the Mayflower, and, as it were, the first certified physician of the New World. The end result of all of this being that what little work I was expected to devote towards the project was completed by my father. So I spent, like most of the students of Hour 5 Introduction to World Civilizations, the class period engaged in what was very nearly a class-wide competition across the suite of pre-installed games that accompanied the Microsoft XP operating system used throughout the school -- from 3D Pinball Space Cadet to Minesweeper. New high scores were being posted daily, sometimes hourly. The whole of the computer room was characterized by this rowdy, almost raucous atmosphere to the point that we drew looks from Ms. Metz, the librarian. And when we became excessively loud to the point our voices carried out of the enclosed computer room, she would walk around the long front desk and warn us that if our behavior did not change, Mr. Bern would be notified. But all of this is to say that as our respective familial histories felt furthest from most of our minds, it was Roland who ignored it all, who sat at his computer and dutifully pored over family trees and newspaper archives and court records.

While the family tree was a relatively straightforward endeavor, the ten-page account of our family history was something more demanding. I do not remember who first raised the

unlikelihood that Mr. Bern would be fact-checking, across his three sections of Intro to World Civ, the papers of nearly seventy-five students (totaling in the neighborhood of 750 pages). But once the point was raised, it was widely accepted across our section at least that no research was required and that the details could be fabricated as long as they abided by a sort of mundane reality, which is to say that provided we did not invent a history too spectacular or dramatic so as to call unwanted attention to our family background (and thus, warrant further investigation), there was little risk involved. Roland wanted no part in the class-wide scheme and although I would not come to learn about it until later, his interest in his family history became something of an obsession. Most of us filled in the gaps that surrounded our family tree with the most inoffensive of details. My grandmother, for instance, met my grandfather as students at the same high school; my great-grandfather on my father's side, of whom I knew nothing, worked in a shoe factory in Worcester, Massachusetts; my great-uncle, who I later learned died in a car accident at the age of eighteen, served in Vietnam with the First Cavalry Division. Roland, however, filled his with the unvarnished truth.

I knew nothing of this at the time. But I should have had some awareness of the thread of logic at which Roland had begun to pick. The signs were there. There was, of course, the somewhat bizarre questioning of Mr. O'Leary during science class concerning Jean-Baptiste Lamarck's theory of acquired characteristics. To my understanding, the theory more or less states that an organism passes on characteristics acquired through use or disuse during one's lifetime to its offspring -- the most notable example raised by Lamarck being that of the giraffe and its long neck, a feature that had been acquired over generations because of the extensive and continuous stretching and straining it had been required to do over the course of its lifetime in order to reach the leaves of the tallest trees of the African Serengeti. Though the theory in the

conventional scientific community had obviously been debunked with the ascension of Darwinism, Roland wanted to know if it was possible for behavioral traits acquired in one's lifetime to be passed down from one generation to the next. He cited a study conducted by Israeli scientist Eva Jablonka and British geneticist Marion J. Lamb into the burgeoning field of epigenetics in which, as Jablonka and Lamb advocated, the inheritance of certain characteristics were not the result of the genetic coding in our DNA but rather through methylation patterns and chromatin marks on histone proteins, all which were, Roland said, adaptive and responsive to environmental stimuli. Mr. O'Leary stood at the front of the room blank-faced. He shuffled papers on his desk. He said that the science behind epigenetics was, he thought, in its infancy and as of yet unproven. But inheritance of behavioral characteristics, studies have shown, are too encoded into our DNA so a theory of epigenetics was hardly necessary to explain such a phenomenon. And I did not know it then, but this was all that Roland needed to hear because, as he would describe to me on the bus during a field trip to Benedictine Abbey out in rural Kansas, he had become convinced that he was born to be an adulterer, that it was in his blood, that he couldn't outrun his history.

As I have mentioned, Roland went about the completion of the PGHA with the utmost seriousness, taking the bus downtown to the Central Library branch to comb through archives of local newspapers and court records on microfilm and visiting distant relatives in nursing homes and farm houses and cramped city apartments to ask of their lives and the lives of their parents and the lives of their parents' parents. As the suburban streets of southern Kansas City fell away into the blank Kansas plains and as Ms. Davis, our freshman theology teacher, led us in song, Roland laid out what he believed to be compelling evidence for his conclusions. He did not speak of the infidelity of his father. But there was, he said, his father's father who drove trucks

for Old Dominion. He drove the same route from Springfield to Sacramento and on every trip, he would stop in Seminole, Oklahoma, where he had married a woman under an assumed name. He had two kids, and even a dog. And there was his father's father's mother who married a Marine in Basic. He was shipped off to the South Pacific with the 4th Division and served at Guadalcanal and Okinawa. All the while, they wrote letters. They spoke of their life after the war. He had met a guy in the service whose father owned an insurance company in Louisville. When he got out, they'd move there. He'd work and they'd have a big family and grow fat and old. And all the while his father's father's mother, Charlene, never once let on that her love had wavered. So she told him that sounded grand, that she had never seen Louisville but she had always wanted to go, and that she wanted nothing more in life than for him to return so that they could continue what they had started. And so not once did she tell him, for instance, that she was pregnant or that she had married a cars salesman who had been exempt from service with an arthritic back. She said none of this until he was standing on her front lawn not two months after the bombs had been dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. And there was his father's father's mother's father, who, at the height of the Great Depression, joined the Royal Brothers Traveling Circus. He was a member of the band's brass section. He traveled around southern Missouri and northern Arkansas playing the trumpet, sending money home, and sleeping with women in small lonely towns like Shell Knob and Gainesville and Mountain Home and Bakersfield. And there were more, Roland assured me. There were uncles and cousins and aunts and half-sisters. And so this was the life that awaited him, Roland told himself. It would find him. He was sure of it and would it not be unfair of him, he asked aloud, to continue his interactions with Sarah knowing full well he was, it seemed, genetically predisposed to break her heart someday? I replied that I was not so sure that was the case. He didn't want to hear it though. Just last week, he said, an

Australian geneticist released a study that suggested those with the 7R+ variation of the DRD4 gene, located on the short arm of the eleventh chromosome, a variation that induces an increased dopamine response from certain “high-risk” activity, are fifty percent more likely than those without the variation to commit acts of adultery. I didn’t have a lot to say in response. We sat in relative silence for the remainder of the trip to the Benedictine Abbey where we listened to Gregorian chants and Chad Yelich got shoved into a pond during our scheduled free time.

And it was indeed ironic and perhaps a bit sad what transpired when our assignments were turned in to Mr. Bern. It was not our projects he questioned, but rather Roland’s, whom Mr. Bern reported to the Student Government Association. He cited egregious Honor Code violations relating to Article 6 Section 5 which outlines, among other things, the school’s policy on academic dishonesty. Weeks later, Roland appeared before the Honor Board, which consisted of the aforementioned Chad Yelich, the Massimo Twins, Barry Hernandez. It was chaired by the Dean of Student Affairs, Timothy O’Malley, a Jesuit priest who was almost universally reviled for that peculiar brand of faux-nicety that is endemic to many high school administrators. To these five, Roland presented evidence for the claims outlined in the ten-page document turned in to Mr. Bern. There was a substantial amount, much of which was so convincing that while many of the Honor Board’s prior proceedings, due to the loose lips of the Massimo Twins and their placement within the Kansas City parochial high school social circles, became common knowledge to most quickly after the fact, that which was revealed during Roland’s hearing was hardly ever spoken of -- its content too convincing and perhaps too sad.

I didn’t see Roland much after that. We drifted apart. We began running in different circles. I would see, from time to time, Sarah Stevens at, say, one of Tom Clark’s parties or at the

St. Teresa's Christmas Dance or, later, at the Senior Prom, and I would watch her dance with men who were not Roland.

For a long time, I forgot about him. It was not until years later, at the Rockhurst High School Class of 2009 pre-Ten-Year-Reunion Meet and Drink at Waldo's Premier Bar and Grill, The Well, owned by class of 2004 graduate Thomas McVay, that I was reminded of him. As I worked my way through the complimentary buffet replete with jalapeno poppers and boneless wings that had long gone cold, I came to the end and saw, there by the napkins and the plastic forks, a tall glass jar that read: Donations for Roland St. Clair, Class of 2009. And there, below the jar, a laminated sheet of copy paper with his senior photo and a short description of his pancreatic cancer diagnosis. And that night, as I backed out of the parking lot, I clipped someone's side-view mirror -- I had too many vodka-sodas, not enough poppers -- and I didn't bother to stop or to write my name and insurance information on the back of a business card to slip between the windshield wiper. Instead, I drove those wide suburban streets through the Armour Hills subdivision I had always called home and when I pulled into the driveway that night, I sat in my car a bit longer than I usually did.

There was some consideration on my part to visit Roland. I called the Alumni Foundation. They told me he was at St. Joseph's. I had always planned on it. But one day, he died. I saw on the notice on Facebook. Maybe deep down I preferred it that way. And on the day of his funeral, I gave no thought of going.

I think of him sometimes. I sit at my dining room table, across from my wonderful wife whom I assure you I love dearly and I watch my two children (Michael, aged 5, and Madeline, aged 3) eat their spaghetti, their silverware scraping the bottoms of their plates, and I think of him. Sometimes, I think this is the best I can do.

## Summer, 2010

We drove around because we had nowhere else to go. We'd drive to Migliazzo and crawl into the opening at the center of the dense overgrowth to hide from the cops. We'd smoke weed and listen to the voices of kids we did not know echo across the surface of the pond. We'd drive to Loose and park on a side street and slip across Wornall in a gap of traffic. We'd pass the pond where I used to feed the geese and the garden where we took prom photos. We'd keep walking until we had decided we were far enough away from the light of the street lamps to spark up and then we'd walk a little further for good measure. We'd drive to Hal Cook Elementary as it sat empty for the summer and climb onto the roof and sit on the couch someone had left there. We'd cut donuts in the parking lot with our heads hanging out the car windows until we heard cop sirens in the distance. We'd drive north into the city and, stoned, find ourselves trapped in one-way streets and an orgy of city lights. From open windows, we'd sing to the passersby on the busy sidewalks and laugh when they stared back blankly. We'd pull off into the east, into the hood, for no other reason than we could. We'd play our music just a bit quieter. We'd stick the weed in the glove compartment because cops shuffled up and down those streets. Sometimes, we'd drive out south, past the city, past the suburbs, past the train tracks and down the stretch of highway where the hills started to roll and the lights disappeared and static replaced our radio stations. We'd keep driving until someone would ask where it was that we were going. We'd turn around on some country road that cut through darkness so thick it was like you could reach your hands out of the windows and touch it. Then, we'd all agree, almost at once, that it had been a while since we had been to Migliazzo or Loose Park or Hal Cook -- even though it was almost invariably never true. The name of the game that summer was to keep driving, keep moving. What it meant to be free at the age of eighteen was that choices had to be made. Destinations had

to be reached. To not move was to not live, was to waste what we alone had, and it would be a while longer indeed until we understood that the wasting of it was inevitable, unavoidable.

Perhaps that did come to mind as we drove down one dark suburban street or another and, for that reason alone, we turned away from it, suggested we keep moving, keep driving, because you can roll down the window to reach out and touch the darkness if you want, but it's preferable not to. Maybe that's why what I remember above all else was the first night of the summer of 2010.

We spilled out of my Oldsmobile onto the picnic tables at Migliazzo and we got far too drunk and far too high for our own good. We dropped the Nalgene of 151 into the lake. Jim and Bob fell asleep in the back of the Cutlass. I was too drunk to drive so Alex wound through all the suburban side streets we would wind through that summer until he found a church parking lot out past 130th. We sat there, in the quiet and the dark, and watched as deer crept into the beam of the headlights and nibbled at grass at the edge of the woods. We whispered to each other to make certain what it was we saw, but only a whisper because I guess that was the least it deserved.

And maybe that's why what I remember above all else was the last night of the summer of 2010 when Alex and Jim had left for school and Bob and I sat in the clearing at the center of the dense overgrowth by the lake alone and how the silence felt different that night, how it no longer felt like a pause, a break between one destination and the next, but rather like a gasp for air, but rather like an absence, an end, the sound of two people searching for what words to say, when there's nothing really left to say at all.

## Room 106

In room 106 of the Little England Motel and RV Park, Amelia sits by the window and watches the snow fall. There are two beds. They are lined with comforters of pastel flowers that wound around their thorned vines, that had gone dull with age. On the bed closest to Amelia rests their luggage. On the other rests her finance, Cal. His back is to her, his ankles are together, his knees are tucked towards his chest.

Two days prior, Amelia did not want to talk about what happened at the clinic. She wanted only to leave the city. They left one morning when the street lamps were still on and by the time the sun came up, they were halfway to Kansas. Cal drove and Amelia slept in the passenger's seat and they would have made it to Gunnison well before sundown if the snow hadn't begun to fall in the mid-afternoon.

They had been there before. Three years, two months, and eighteen days before. They had, since then, remembered the small town nestled in the Rockies from time to time. They would speak of the way the sun rose in the morning, the way, from the window of their camper, they could see the edge of its light push first across the snowless mountain side dotted with aspens that were turning red, orange, and yellow, and then, minutes later, as it peeled off of the distant peaks and pushed into the city streets below that would, as though the city was waiting for such a moment, spring into life. They would talk about this in, say, the quiet corners of parties they found boring or on the couch, at home, when a mountain, any mountain, flashed across the television screen, and they would both know the reason they spoke of it and they would both know it had little to do with the sun or the aspens or the drowsy mountain town that would spring into life. They both knew, in other words, that to speak of Gunnison was to utter something like an incantation, a prayer.

At first, the snow was a novelty.

“Is it snowing,” she asked.

“Yes, I think it is,” he said.

They smiled and laughed. The flakes landed on the asphalt and melted almost at once. But at a certain point neither noticed, the snow began to stick and form fat clumps -- first along the shoulder where the asphalt was cooler, but then along the white dotted lines between lanes. They both agreed there was no use in going any further and turned off exit 67 into a small Colorado town bound by train tracks on one side and the interstate on the other.

They pulled into the parking lot of the Little England Motel and RV Park. It sat on High Street, banked on one side by Carmichael Auto, an authorized NAPA auto parts reseller housed in a windowless store front of beige corrugated steel, and, on the other, the Loaf ‘N Jug, a convenience store cum gas station cum Subway whose bathrooms were open to paying customers only. Beyond the Loaf ‘N Jug ran County Road Five. On the corner, a sign read: Welcome to Flagler, A Friendly, Caring, SAFE Community! Facing it was an unnamed liquor store.

When Amelia walked into the front office, it was dark. Some light filtered in from the grey sky through the half-closed blinds that hung from the window frames. But most of the room was brightened only by the lights that drifted down a staircase behind the front desk. Hello, Amelia called out. A middle-aged woman with her hair pulled off her neck into a tight bun came out to meet her.

“What can I do you for?” she asked.

“We’d like a room.”

She craned her neck to see out the window behind Amelia.

“For the night or for the hour?”

“For the night, I guess. Is it supposed to snow all day?”

“Don’t know.”

She asked for Amelia’s name and Amelia gave it to her. She asked Amelia to pay the \$39.99 plus tax up front and Amelia did so. She slid the key across the counter and pointed towards room 106 through the window, said it shouldn’t be too hard to find.

The one floor of the Little England folded itself into a shallow “U.” At the tip of the right edge, an apartment was perched atop the front office. From there, the motel’s ten rooms snaked around to the side that ran along the edge of the Loaf ‘N Jug parking lot. Room 106 was at its center. The room’s only window looked out onto the parking lot, onto the sedan they had parked in front of the front office, a pick-up whose undersides were flaking with rust next to it, the tire tracks leading out into High Street not yet filled in by the falling snow. A half-dead tree stood next to the parked cars. It was leafless. Its branches had been cut just above the trunk. Beyond the parking lot were the six lanes of I-70, and beyond I-70 were flat plains broken only by silos and grain bins that Amelia had to squint to see.

That was hours ago. Now everything is covered in a thick layer of white. The cars and the plains and the sky have all folded into each other. Only the grey bark of the half-dead tree stands apart from the rest. It has no branches to collect snow. Amelia sits at the table by the window and uses a cheap pair of clear plastic tongs to rummage through the ice bucket. She fishes the largest cubes out of the watery mixture that is forming at the bottom of the bucket and places them, not dropping them, into the bottom of her glass. She unscrews the cap of the bottle of vodka she purchased an hour earlier across the street. She asked Cal if he wanted anything. We might as well just get drunk and have sex, she said. He frowned. I might lie down, he said.

The day before, they had agreed to take the trip as they had three years ago. They would pull off in Victoria, Kansas. They would steer their car to the St. Fidelis Basilica that sat on the northern edge of the city, almost apart from the city, and they would pass underneath the shadow of its twin limestone spires and underneath the glow of the stained glass portrait of St. Fidelis at work, sitting at a desk, pen in hand, halo over his head, and they would find the deacon who led them up the easternmost spire to the belfry and they would see, as they had three years ago, the plains stretching out on the horizon, plains broken only by a creek that cut across the edge of town and the six lanes of I-70 that trundled towards the Colorado border. And at lunch, they would pull off a little further down the highway to a roadside diner that was all aluminum and neon and they would sit at the counter, as they had three years ago, and eat pie and drink coffee the waitress refilled without asking and then would arrive in Gunnison and in the morning the sun would throw light upon the aspens that dotted the mountain side.

She pours the glass a third full of vodka, raises it to eye level, sets it down and then adds another splash. She tops it with club soda. She mixes it with her finger. She wishes she had a lemon. The middle-aged woman is shoveling the sidewalk. She can't see her -- her view is blocked by the half-drawn curtains -- but she can hear her, she can hear the metal head of the shovel scraping against the cement. She looks over at Cal. She watches his chest heave up and down. The room is dark, but as with the front office hours earlier, there is just enough light slipping through the curtains to illuminate the room, to separate one object from another -- the comforter from Cal's pant leg, the end table from the ceramic base of the lamp, the dark-stained table from their black suitcase.

The television was on when she got back from the liquor store, the volume turned down to little more than a murmur. On the screen played *The Treasures of Sierra Madre*. Humphrey

Bogart's Dobbs is being held up. Gold Hat and his men say not to worry. They're *Federales*. But Dobbs is unconvinced. He asks to see some badges. Gold Hat says they don't have no badges and they don't need no stinking badges. Dobbs sends a warning shot above Gold Hat's head. *Vamos pa' atras*, he says. Amelia looks over to Cal, to the heave of his chest that spreads through his shoulders. Dobbs is all eyes now, the lens in tight, his unkept beard cut from view. Gold Hat says there's a been a misunderstanding -- he just wants to purchase their guns. He means no harm. He dangles a pocket watch in front of him. It's gold, American-made, he says. But Dobbs' man Howard sends a bullet through its clock face. The gears spill out. The innards dangle and spin around and around, twisting its chain into tight coils.

It cuts to commercial. New from Pringles are the Napkin Free Nachos. Now getting the perfect game day meal is easier than ever with flavors like Jalapeno, Sour Cream, Cheddar and Original. Amelia could hear the methodical thump thump thump of shoveled snow being piled atop the makeshift banks the woman had begun to form along the edge of the parking lot and has the strange sensation she is being buried.

In the past hour, Amelia did the following in no particular order: filled the bottom right third of the crossword puzzle in the *Topeka Capital Journal* she had bought in a gas station outside Leavenworth; flipped through the entertainment section and read the following headlines *ABC's 'Roseanne' premiere earns huge ratings and a congratulatory call from Trump* and *Harley Quinn will meet the New Gods in comic books this summer* and *'As if': 40 comedies from the past 40 years that changed the way we talk*; took a shower until the water ran cold; masturbated on the toilet seat; played solitaire; read the following horoscope from the aforementioned newspaper: *even if you're just running out for coffee or a quick grab-and-go at the farmer's market, spruce yourself up a little. With the moon in aesthetic Scorpio and your*

*amorous, glamorous fifth house, you could be in for a weekend of surprises. You never know who you might run into at the beekeeper's honey stall—or where a random conversation might lead. And if you do pop out, be prepared to stay out. Brunch could evolve into drinks or a flirty hangout. Attached? Invite your S.O. along for your exploratory jaunts. You may feel like dressing up and doing something glamorously high-brow: Pick up some matinee tickets to the theater or the symphony. On Sunday, bringing someone in on a project could yield a breakthrough. You don't have to give up all creative control; just be open to seeing it from someone else's POV;* watched the woman shoveling snow outside, inching from one end of the motel sidewalk to the other until she reached the door to the front office -- there, she would leave the shovel leaning against the wall only to come out thirty, maybe forty minutes later to shovel away all the fresh snow that had fallen and not once did Amelia think of Gunnison or if it were snowing there or if, when the sun rose the following morning, the sun would push light across red and orange and yellow aspens, or if the snow had long buried them all, or if, perhaps, it would be too cloudy for the day to break in such a way, if, perhaps, it would break imperceptibly and all at once, the day not shining but more glowing than anything else as it does when the sun remains hidden behind banks of clouds.

Outside, it is beginning to get dark. The bushes by the front office and the branchless tree cut at the trunk lose their dimension and go a dark opaque. Amelia swirls the ice cubes against the edge of the glass. She finishes the drink and then sets it down on the table with a thud. The woman is edging closer to their window now, halfway between the far edge of the u-shaped sidewalk and the door of the front office. Amelia lifts herself from her chair. She walks towards Cal, but stops in the narrow alleyway left between the two mattresses. Above, on the wall, she looks at her reflection in a mirror she had not noticed. She finds she does not recognize herself.

She moves first her left arm and then her right, watching the movement in the reflected image. She looks to him, to his chest that rises and falls in rhythm, to his white socks that meets the cuff of his blue jeans. She coughs into her fist once then twice and when he does not turn towards her, she lies beside him. She prepares his name in the tendons and ligaments of her vocal cords, her lips opening to form a flat oval that would deliver the first syllable. When nothing comes and the *scrap thud scrap thud scrap thud* is all that broke the silence, she rolls away from him, onto her feet, and back to the table by the window.

Gold Hat meets Dobbs again. He recognizes him. But he does not remember from where. They are on the ridge of a mountain in Mexico and it is getting dark. Amelia looks over at Cal. She grabs the remote and turns the volume up high. She looks over again, but his chest still heaves in that methodical rhythm.

Dobbs is alone, his beard a bit more unkempt, his eyes a bit more tired. His friends, he says, are on their way. They're just behind him on horseback. But Gold Hat can't see his friends. Gold Hat can't understand why the man with the burros would lead the pack while his friends on horseback would tail behind him. Such an arrangement doesn't make sense. He thinks Dobbs is lying and Dobbs is lying and so Gold Hat leaves him to die on that darkening ridge and his men mistake his sack of gold dust for a sack of sand -- scattering it into the wind and taking the burros into town instead.

Amelia puts her shoes on and walks outside. She stands by the door and watches the woman shovel. It is dark enough now that the falling snow can be seen only in the cones of light that stretch from the fixtures outside the front office door and on the corners of the Loaf 'N Jug and the liquor store. She moves to where the sidewalk meets the banks of snow. She tries to make eye contact with the woman. She wants to talk to her, but she doesn't know what to say.

The woman stops, looks up, and asks her if she needs anything. Amelia says no. The woman keeps shoveling.

Earlier that day, they pulled up to St. Fidelis only to see its limestone spires covered in scaffolding and a message below their sign that read: CLOSED FOR RENOVATIONS -- GOD BLESS, OPEN FALL 2020. They drove down Main Street and parked under a sign that read Historic Downtown Victoria. The sidewalks were empty. The one-room post office and the American Legion and the general store that sold saltwater taffy were closed, their windows boarded, their doors affixed with the bright smile of a real estate agent named Laura Krzyzanowski, her phone number below, the white FOR SALE in big bold caps along the top.

At lunch, they could not find the diner. They did not know if they stopped at the wrong exit or if it had been sold and torn down. Cal thought that perhaps it had been replaced by an Olive Garden, a CVS, or a parking lot that served them both. They ate at a Golden Corral. The dining room was almost empty. They were joined only by an older couple that sat in an enclosed room that used to house the smoking section. They found their meal unsatisfactory. The breading of her fried chicken had gone soggy. They ate in a thick silence that was heightened, not broken, by the local country station playing over the loudspeaker and drifting across the empty booths and table tops. She told him a story. She was eight, maybe nine. Her grandmother took her to a buffet, maybe a Golden Corral, maybe an Old Country Buffet. She wasn't sure. When she was scooping green beans onto her plate, she saw a young boy, younger than herself, maybe four or five, run from his father and stick his hands into the buffet's tray of mashed potatoes. When she told Cal of how her grandmother came back with a big plate of mashed potatoes, he stopped her. He had, he told her, already heard this story. An hour down the road, the snow began to fall in fat flakes.

Amelia walks out of the parking lot, up High Street, and then down towards the train tracks on County Road Five. A blue sign in white lettering advertised a “Business District” up the road. She follows its arrow down past old empty houses that stand tall against the flat plains but had begun to sag into itself with age, the sharp detail of its lattice trim and its hand-craved soffits dulling with decay, its porch steps askew, its gutter hanging across the length of the porch.

The business district is a one-block stretch of storefronts -- a beauty shop, a grocery store, a hardware store, a community bank, a tow service, a windshield repair shop, and a post-office. All are dark and empty. Only the light that flicks on when she walks past the front door of Otteman Meat’s Processing bounces off the layer of snow that had covered the town. She turns around and walks back past the dark storefronts and the empty houses. Outside the Little England, only the occasional cones of passing headlights cut the darkness. The woman is inside, her shovel beside the door.

In room 106, the television throws shadows against the wall. It is the end. The brand on the burros is recognized and Gold Hat is arrested by the authorities. Curtin and Howard find the sacks of gold cut and empty. Cal had, in her absence, turned the volume down. The remote sits on the bedside table. But it is still loud enough to hear Curtin and Howard’s disappointment fall away. In its place comes their laughter, a thick, almost hysterical laughter. They walk away laughing. They double over around the corner, slump against a wall, laughing and laughing. And the wind is ripping off the plains and as she sits by the window and watches the snowfall, Amelia laughs with them. First, a soft chuckle, but then louder, thicker, and soon, it is she that can’t control herself, soon, it is her laughter that is hysterical, that is something she can no longer control, something that bounces off the walls and out the door and across dark flat plains covered in snow and cut only by silos and grain bins.

### Monsoon Season

It was early spring in Saigon when I flushed the last of the xanny bars I had been buying from one of the bartenders at Apocalypse Dreams. I spent my nights watching television in the one bedroom apartment I rented at the end of an alleyway off Ham Nghi. And when I had become sick of watching television and unable to fall asleep, instead, listening to the shouts of my neighbors in the alleyway or the calls of the old women on old motorbikes selling loaves of bread or canisters of rat poison, I spent my nights walking the city's streets. I wandered down the quiet residential ones until, with time and distance, the stream of the motorbike traffic beside me became thicker and the hum of their engines a bit louder and the calls from the women selling bracelets and shiny postcards and dried squid skin hanging from hooks filled my ears until, without quite realizing it, I stood at the center of Bui Vien. The fluorescent lighting of the neon signs that hung from the bars and restaurants cast us all in pinks and blues. Women in short jean cut-offs and high heels thrust menus under my nose. They told me of buy one, get one and of special happy hour tonight only as they stood on cramped sidewalks that bulged with parked motorbikes and plastic chairs and plastic tables that spilled out from the open entrances of the restaurants, for this was how one dealt with the heat in Vietnam, by refusing to hide from it, and the traffic of motorbikes would weave around the backpackers that shuffled from one bar to the next. I would walk from one end of Bui Vien and then back down to the other before looping around to the next block over where I tried but often failed to find an open bench in the long, slender tree-lined park, a relic of the French occupation. I would keep walking. I would walk down the park and then back down Bui Vien and pass the bodega around which the expats crowded in plastic chairs atop sheets of dirty cardboard. A fat woman brought them warm Bia Hoi in chubby glass mugs while a man with a bucket and a pair of tongs drifted between them

and placed a chunk of ice in each glass. I'd pass all the ladybars where the prostitutes would sit at high tables on the sidewalk's edge and call to me. *Buy me drink*, they would say. I'd pass it all until the early morning arrived and all that was left were the men on motorbikes who would pull up beside me and offer me drugs or women or both and I'd go home and I would know it was a good night if I fell asleep before I heard the bread woman making her rounds in the morning. I began to tire of walking. A prostitute outside a ladybar called out to me. Where is it that you walk, she asked. The men on the motorbikes no longer offered me drugs or women. They knew better. They would follow me, waddling forward from foot to foot as their motorbike idled, and ask what it was I wanted and part of me wished I had an answer.

So on a very hot and humid night, when the rainy season had not yet arrived and the moisture instead hung in the air, I turned down one of the narrow side streets that ran between Bui Vien and the edge of the tree-lined park. I walked into a bar with a pink neon sign above its closed double doors that read TNR. I pulled open the doors and slipped into a booth in the corner closest to the door, seeking the first open seat that I could see. It was not a bad spot. I was left alone apart from the occasional prostitute who would come over and ask me if I wanted some company or if I wanted to buy her a drink. I sipped on a Saigon Green and watched prostitutes drink with old expats. I finished my beer. I could only afford one. I walked home and tried to sleep and the next night I came back, a bit earlier in the evening, and I sat in the same booth and watched the same prostitutes tease and laugh and flirt with the old men at the bar. One prostitute who was not there the evening before walked over and asked me if I wanted to buy her a drink. I smiled and said no. I continued to watch the old men and the young Vietnamese women, their eyelashes long and their heels high and their dresses short and tight, and there was something about them that reminded me how unhappy I was.

I left and I took the long way home that night, down the river. The lights had been turned off for the night so the dark of the sky seemed to collapse on the dark of the dirty river. Below the concrete embankments on the shallow mud flats, I listened to two homeless men argue about something. I walked home. I tried to sleep. I wished the rain would come, but it didn't. The next night I walked down Bui Vien. It was Friday and busier. The next morning there was to be a parade for the death of Vo Nguyen Giap, who had expelled the American imperialists. From the windows hung red flags with yellow stars and in the kiosks of street-side vendors, alongside the cheap cigarettes and packets of gum, stood cups full of mini-flags attached to wooden sticks. The TNR seemed busier. The booth in the corner was taken. I ordered a Saigon Green. I sat at one of the high tables in the back, closer to the bar, and closer to the old expats and young prostitutes that sat together in a loud circle. It was then I first noticed the short young woman with long black hair who wore tall black heels with unease. I could not tell you what drew me to her more so than the others who were not entirely unlike her -- young women who wore the same black dresses. I suppose there was something about her that felt different. For the others, their lines and movements and mannerisms seemed rehearsed. With her, her awkwardness felt vaguely authentic. Perhaps I just needed to see what I wanted to see, perhaps I just needed something out of the ordinary to pass the time. That night, I couldn't fall asleep any easier. I turned the TV on in my room and watched Vietnamese soap operas that I couldn't understand until I turned over on my side and let the light from the TV play with the shadows on the wall. I went back the next night and the night after and watched her often. Sometimes she was wearing a red dress and at others a blue dress, but always a dress, and I would watch her. I would watch the way she would look at the old men and watched the way they would touch her elbow or the way she would grab one of their shoulders. I would stay later and later. But I would run out of money and grow

awkward and walk home. My neighbor would yell something at me from her window that I never understood. When I smiled at her in response, she would smile back.

One evening she was not there. I drank a warm Saigon Green and hoped I was early but she never came. I paid and left. It was hot, hotter than it had been for months. The rainy season was overdue now and there was no rain to cool us. I walked home and sat outside and smoked cigarettes and played solitaire until it was light out. The next night I didn't bother returning to the TNR. I stayed home, watching action films from the early 90s dubbed over in Vietnamese, but the evening after, I went down to Bui Vien early and sat in the restaurant across the street. I ate a banh mi and watched as the young woman in the dress tottered through the doors in the heels she had not learned to wear. I paid and crossed the street and walked in behind her and sat at the high table in the back. That night, I picked the label off my beer bottle in small scratches and my warm beer went even warmer and she mouthed along to songs sung out of tune by the old expats that joined her. She danced in short, unrehearsed moves.

It was that evening that I looked around the room and saw the stares of the bartender cleaning the glass and the old expat taking a swig and the booth full of backpackers and I saw what they saw -- a lonely man who had nothing at all beside the beer bottle before him that had long been empty. At once I left. There is something about the idea of being known in such a way that transforms it into something hard and real. I returned to the streets and circled around the end of Bui Vien, which at this late hour wasn't any less busy than it had been hours earlier, to the park on Pham Ngo Lao and I found a bench and watched street hawkers send plastic trinkets into the air that spun and flashed in changing lights, from red to blue to green and back to red, before they fell to the ground and the vendors picked them up with a smile and offered them to a passing tourist to try for themselves. I watched them until the park began to empty and the buzz

of the motorbikes began to die and the house music from the bars still open into the early morning could finally be heard. Rats began to crawl from their hiding places and snatch bits of food left across a lawn that looked black in the darkness. I walked home and I didn't go back to the TNR the next night or the night after. Instead, I would walk and hope life would bring me something and it was, by that point, more hot and humid than it had been all year. The rainy season was well overdue now, weeks late. Some blamed it on the smog and others on climate change and others said it was always this way, always irregular, always arriving when we did not expect it. We were fools for pretending to know something we could never understand and what I knew was only that my shirt stuck to my chest a bit more than it used to and it became more difficult to sleep and the covers were thrown to the floor and the ceiling fan overhead flipped onto its highest setting so that it seemed to be shaking itself loose from the plaster of the ceiling, bit by bit, rotation by rotation. I spent more time walking, more of my evenings retracing the streets I already had walked down. It was as though something kept me from, say, crossing the long bridge across the river over into district four or continuing down that long boulevard into district five, and it was at its hottest when I saw her, late at night, walking down Ham Nghi with an old man with a large gut. Her legs balanced awkwardly atop her long heels. I was a block away, on the opposite end, by the elementary school where, in the afternoon, the kids leaned out of the windows and shouted down to the sidewalk below. I quickened my pace. I didn't even know what exactly it was I was chasing but I crossed the street. At the corner of the next block they stopped and turned. His hand was on the small of her back. As they turned, she looked back at me and smiled and even though by the time I turned down the side street, the trees shaking in the wind, and I saw that they were gone, nowhere to be seen, it was ok and, that night, I went home and I lay in bed and soon, over the sound of the soap opera that garbled away on my

television, I heard the rain pelleting the corrugated steel of my neighbor's roof, first, just a tap, and then another, a pause long enough between the two that you could be forgiven for waving them off as the errant sounds of the night. But before long, the pace of it ran away with itself. When it comes down hard enough like it did that night, it doesn't sound quite like rain anymore. Instead, it becomes the engine of a train rushing towards you, searching for you, trying to lift you up and carry you away.