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Fire Farm
Kyle Harbinger

Virus fiends were clutching at their stomachs like stocked hawks in an ice age.

The battery powered bottle rocket had never lost its inferno.
But that night, it stopped, knelt in the fern, and exhaled.

It was time for fireworks.

Weren’t the ice clouds gorgeous?
And the rhythmic explosions of sky candy?

There were twelve of us left and we knew we were done.

The rocket’s silver spine shivered and shook.
A spotted sparrow was eaten as we all slowly went deaf,

*The bottle rocket exploded.*

The world froze over.

Plastic Guns
Christopher Leonard

Halloween was months away but I was dressed in full cowboy attire. My brown, fake leather boots were a couple sizes too big so that I could “grow into them”, but my belt, which was adorned with an Indianhead buckle, fit perfectly. My father made it for me during a brief stint in Attica and although being full-blooded Oneida Indian, he didn’t mind me doing a daily impression of a cowboy. To wit: Iroquois never engaged in the romanticized conflict between Cowboy and Indian but the stigma still lingers.

The vest was dull-red like dried blood on cotton that hadn’t been washed into an orange stain yet. My holster housed a plastic replica of a .357 magnum and my hat was snug, brown and never out of reach. The hat was ordered from Gospel Bill’s catalogue. He was a Christian cowboy with VHS propaganda which my mother made me watch in an attempt to follow her into religious mediocrity and complacency, but who really inspired me were John Wayne and Doc Holliday. While my brother break danced and watched Bruce Lee flicks and my father drank and fought everyone, I watched John Wayne kick ass.

I was either five or six during my cowboy fanatic phase since we lived in Casual Estates, a trailer park on Route 57 near the Seneca River, in a dilapidated snot-green trailer from the early 70’s. My mother moved us there to distance ourselves from the riffraff of the city and shenanigans of fellow family members.

Before my mother surprised the family by pulling up in her part blue paint, part red rust Chevy Cavalier from work, we rode the bus everywhere beyond walking distance. My admiration for public transportation can most likely be attributed from the early memories of everyone
that I knew riding the bus—I liked the bus.

"Hello there peanut," the bus driver said greeting me while I struggled behind my father to walk the treacherous steps of the bus. I stood in front of him and pulled my gun from the holster. My mother always threatened to take the gun away because I would draw it on people, point and shoot. She was probably worried someone was going to mistake me for a real cowboy and pull a real gun and shoot me with real bullets, but I was with my father who thought it amusing and who would dare anyone to actually do it. "I ain't no peanut," I replied with the driver in my sights. My father laughed historically in his deep growl of a chuckle. "He didn't mean it, Christopher," my father said or something like it and then explained to the driver that "peanut" was the name for my penis. The driver apologized to me and shook my hand.

My father and I got off at Seneca River Mall that morning while my mother was at work busy typing up calendars or something of the sort at the Syracuse City School District. She was a compositor and my father at the time was unemployed. Even at an early age I could understand monetary situations. Our meager rations and humble wages allowed for reality to set in early, so I knew it was odd when my father told me that I could get anything that I wanted from any store. "Where did you get the money?" I asked and he told me to mind my own business. We were there for hours trying on clothes and playing with toys at K-Mart and J C Penney. Hand-me-downs and clothes from second hand stores with patches and sewn up scars were normal. I had so many brand new clothes from the shopping spree at J C Penney, the clerk at the service desk had to hold onto bags so we could make a second trip to bring them home. We had pizza at Avicoli's, slushies at K-Mart and popcorn in front of Price Chopper. I was overwhelmed with the abundance of gifts, but none of the things impressed me like the army green tank gun at K-Mart. It was a video game inside of a machine gun that shot down tanks on the screen; when the gun turned on its base, the screen moved with it accordingly. I decided that all I wanted was the tank gun and a new pair of boots. I heard my father on the pay phone with someone telling them to pick the merchandise up and drop it off to my mother. My father was sipping on a small liquor bottle, probably vodka, and it was time to go home. I could always tell when he was almost drunk—he would have a kool-aid smile from ear to ear.

As soon as I got home, I locked myself in my bedroom and played the tank game until the batteries ran out of sustenance. I knew my mother was home from work because I could hear yelling through the paper-thin wood paneling walls of the trailer. Cupboards slammed one after another and I could hear my mother yell like a savage hyena at my father for what I thought was his drunken condition. I peeled back the plastic on the window and peeked out as I heard the rumbling of a large engine. My father slammed the front screen door and it sounded as if he crashed it off the hinges. He slipped down the few stairs to the sidewalk, picked himself up and got into the sliding door of the oversized cargo van that I recognized to be my uncle's. I was relieved that my father left. Things could get nasty when my father was drunk—Dr. Jekyll and Hyde in the flesh.
My mother knocked on the door and I let her in. She was crying and her mascara ran down her cheeks like war paint. We sat down on my bed that consisted of three old single mattresses and I anticipated a trip to my grandmother’s house like so many times before. Instead, my mother explained that detectives were on their way and warned me that they were going to search my room. The room was small and my brother, eleven years my senior, shared it with me when he would visit. Two single beds were separated by a sheet and an end table. Buffalo Bills posters lined the walls on my side of the hippie tapestry. My mother fumbled around with my new game/toy and asked me where I got it from, she noticed the new boots too. I told her I borrowed the tank gun from a friend a couple trailers away and didn’t mention the boots. She knew I was lying.

My father robbed a few banks, my mother explained to me, and the police were going to send him back to prison. I’m sure I was shocked or afraid of the uncertainty of events to unfold but I do know that I was angry at the police. Some of my earliest memories are of police brutality practiced on my father and other family members which lead to my animosity and mistrust towards the badge. I was proud of my father. He was a real cowboy, a real badass. I was a cowboy and I wasn’t going to let the police take my father away again.

Lights danced red and blue through my window and tangoed on the wall. My mother and I peered through the glass and plastic where two cars were pulled over in the circle in front of the trailer—silent but bright. They were little and black and I didn’t recognize them as police cars. Two very tall and strong men in suits exited the cars when the lights stopped and approached the porch where I had a turtle sand box. Sometimes I would hide my father’s booze in the sand so he couldn’t find them but this time I wished I could hide my father.

I ran out of my room through the long narrow hallway toward the door. I passed through the tiny kitchen with its linoleum floor where I almost tripped over a cupboard door half off its braces. My mother was quick behind me and I felt her fingertips graze my artificial Stetson as she demanded me to go back to my room. I slammed the wooden door in their smirk glazed faces as they stood with the screen door open. “Christopher!” my mother said with the passive-aggressive tone she always used when scolding me. I hopped back and perched myself on the coffee table with my gun drawn and ready for a shootout. I knew the gun wasn’t real and that it wouldn’t fire any bullets but I had drawn anyway. “Make my day fuckin pigs,” I threatened. My heart thumped through my vest and my wind pipe was tight. The cops entered laughing but I could sense they were uncomfortable. They had thick mustaches that must have taken time to groom. Their shiny shoes reflected the light on the ceiling fan and their badges were clipped on their belts. My mother stomped towards me with a look of fury I never saw before and have yet to this day. “You’re not a damn cowboy, just a boy,” she said and she snatched my gun from me. I retreated behind the couch where our dinner table was and sat and observed the conversation between the detectives and my mother but I couldn’t make any sense of it. They interrogated my mother for about an hour probably asking if she had
anything to do with it and then came to the table where I was sitting and asked me a few questions. They asked me if my father had money that I knew of and if I knew where it was. I ignored them and I sure didn’t tell them about the Seneca Mall adventure and my new gifts. Although I was unaware of the 5th Amendment at the time, I fully exercised it that day. The cops walked around the trailer for a few minutes not really looking through things as I thought they would. Police raided a house we were living in before and as I hid behind the couch, they tore the entire place up. After they walked around whispering to each other, they headed straight for a heater vent on the ceiling and pulled out a stack of money wrapped in a rubber band. They reached in every vent and pulled out stacks from each one.

My mother took me to the neighbor’s house where I supposedly borrowed the tank gun from, but they weren’t home. She escorted me to my room and told me not to leave; I didn’t want to leave anyway. I lay in my bed staring at my new boots that weren’t two sizes too big and thanked my dad. I took off my cowboy garb and threw them on the floor thinking about what my mother told me about not being a cowboy. I definitely wasn’t a badass and as I searched through my brothers belongings for batteries so I could play the tank gun, I thought: “Fuck John Wayne.” I wore the boots until I grew out of them but that was the last time I wore the outfit. I wasn’t a cowboy, I was just a boy.

He appears, taller in the distance one foot forward, he swaggers
one foot forward, he sways
I see him first
Against a blur of cement and trees; he could never blend.

It will take him a few more minutes to look straight
to notice me, i cringe
to notice me, i hope
He looks good dressed up
I touch my hair

The idle sun watches in disbelief
to shine brighter, i am covered
to shine brighter, i am in disguise
I can be what he wants
I blush against my fair skin

Surveying my surroundings, i am in the clear
i look up, his eyes on mine
i look up, his legs pass by
My breath is faint and my head is heavy
as i turn

He appears taller, in the distance
Do you remember our walk that fall, when the leaves had all turned and burned in the afternoon light? We began holding hands, silent except for the crunch of fallen leaves; new, and years-old, walking through forests and swamps that had begun to grow since the farms that once emptied the land had fallen away, leaving the land to begin again.

The quest was for the Old Oak, middle aged when the land was cleared for farming so long ago. The branches could be seen from far away, rising and clawing for the sky, higher than any that dared to challenge her authority.

Through fields abandoned to the cold fall winds, past posted signs, following trails older than our parents, we climbed down a hill buried in decades of fallen leaves. As we descended, the clink of glass-on-glass chimed in the air. We looked at one another, slightly worried for exposed hands, but curious beyond concern.

Digging through the layers, we found hundreds of bottles, cups, jars, and canisters, some broken, others still whole and useful, from the days when our grandparents were still children and kept everything with any possible future use. Cobalt, emerald, and ivory glittered in the fading light, peeking at us, calling our attention. We began a collection, holding tight to those we thought worth saving, admiring the durability of glass, planning their future purposes.

Our quest for the Old Oak had opened us to that world of decades and centuries past.
Crossing dried muck fields and ditches, through chest-high weeds and grasses, following more trails older than anyone still living, we came upon a stone wall. It was hand-built when the land was newly cleared and the Oak too large to up-root, crumbled by our side as we walked along it. If untouched, the stones would remain, slowly withering with the weight of too much time and too many memories.

We came to an opening in the score-old forest where the Oak's trunk could be seen through the screen of younger, near yearling in comparison, trees, many small children of this ancient mother. She stood, her bark different than the rest, as if calling to us: the few and far between of this time that still understood and appreciated the wise and knowing natural world. Her base was wider than your full-sized pickup truck is tall; her arm closest to the ground was still higher than the roof of your family's 19th century farmhouse, even with its two stories with ten-foot ceilings. We walked around her girth, caressing her undulating and cracking skin, looking high above to see the top, hidden in the autumnal flames.

I stepped closer to her and hugged as much of her as I could, whispering to her, knowing it had been a long time since she had felt the warm touch of a human heart. The stillness of that moment settled around us as the steady wind died, silencing the rattle of the Oak’s leaves, so far above. You looked at me, and then touched her bark with a careful hand. I knew you understood my reverence to the Old Oak, but could never take the flying leap to becoming a literal tree-hugger.

The same hand you touched the Oak with reached for me. I took it, letting you pull me close to you in a gentle embrace. We leaned into one of the natural troughs in the Oak’s side, letting her cradle us, as a giant-mother would, her ancient warmth relaxing around us and the expanse of decade-young trees that surrounded this quiet queen.

We walked back to your home following a slightly different trail, still ancient by our youthful standards. This time, we broke the silence with words, with discussion on how old, how regal, and how amazing the Oak was. We tried to find words for the experience, for the quiet contemplation. We attempted to define her age, her history, to understand this primeval creature through cold facts, but no human construction could describe the stillness that enveloped my soul as we stood by her side, know the lives of human-kind cannot compare to the resilience of untampered nature.
Panorama
Tanya Pratt

Strands of flaxen hair, having escaped her braids, flirt tendernly across her freckled, blushed cheeks.

Behind her, fields of wheat salsa to the melody of the breeze, shades of light and dark mimicking the movements of her hair.

Leaves of burnt reds and yellows tango with gallant greens at the tips of the trees, swinging and swaying to the rhythm of the wind.

Bright orange pumpkins, unaffected by the harmony of the day, sit in clusters in anticipation of the thunderous beat of children’s footsteps to stir them.

Static Mind
Angelia Bingham

To make a long story short, my boyfriend of six long years took the shady rear exit out of our relationship by inflicting his farewells in a very impersonal email. Minutes after reading Josh’s generic good-bye, I had to give an important speech in front of my public speaking class that would determine a very large portion of my final grade. I swallowed my heart as it made a pretty strong attempt at regurgitation, and delivered my speech in the best emotionless voice I could muster. Thankful for having gone first, I staggered away from the podium and left. I walked home slowly. Pieces of composure began to break away from me. Nearly a year later, I have yet to trace my steps to retrieve those bread crumbs of sanity that have been scattered along the way.

It’s a funny thing to separate from someone. One day you’re planning your lives together around the other’s wants and needs, and the next day you’re voluntarily divided. Suddenly the last six years of your life are void. Was it real? You overanalyze the entire relationship in your head, and you try to find that one moment where the plot reached its climax and began an immediate descent to a very unhappy ending. Self-doubt is inevitable, and nothing, it seems, will ever seem genuine again.

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I work in the emergency department of a hospital every weekend. I began working there shortly after Josh was gone. There’s a small section made up of a short hallway located in the rear of the regular emergency room where there are four holding rooms for pre-admitted psychiatric patients. “The P-Rooms,” they’re called. If you’ve worked there long enough, you can distinguish
the difference between the screams caused by physical pain and the screams caused by mental anguish.

As part of my job, when the receptionist calls "code 25" along with a specific department location over the loud speaker, it means that all available personnel are to report to that area and assist in the physical restraint of an unruly patient. In other words, you hold some crazy person down as they try to bite, punch, kick, or spit on you so that the doctor can stick an alarmingly large needle in their ass that will keep them out of commission until the date on the calendar has changed.

I'm not cut out for this job.

My first ever code 25 came shortly after I started working there. This old man in his late seventies, named Arthur, was picked up at his home by the police after his wife called them to have him removed. Apparently he had been experiencing the harsh stages of dementia for quite some time, and his wife could no longer cope with caring for him. She was mentally and physically exhausted. For Arthur, though, the year was still 1968. He was 36 and he needed to get home to take care of his family.

"I have to go. I can't stay!" Arthur said, pushing open the door from inside P-Room 4. "My wife's at home and she's sick. I'm the only one that knows what pills to give her and how much. She won't get better without me. You gotta let me go. I can't stay!"

"As soon as the doctor says you can go, Arthur, you'll be on your way," she said, completely annoyed that she even had to get out of her chair. It would be hours before the doctor could see him. What's worse is that she knew that his return home would never come to fruition, as the doctor had already said that Arthur would most likely be admitted.

Sitting still in that room, for Arthur, must have seemed like years, even when only a few moments had passed. He emerged from the room again, only to repeat the same sentences, word for word. Eventually, he grew hostile, unable to comprehend what was happening. He began to flail his arms in an attempt to get out of the emergency room and passed the staff. He nearly hit the young security aid with his reckless left fist. When they called the code on him, I could only bring myself to hold his feet down and look away. I was afraid that I might make eye contact with him, that I would see the fearful look on his face as the last worrisome thoughts of his needful wife raced through his 36-year-old mind before they sedated his 86-year-old body.

In that moment, I thought of Josh. I thought...
of all the promises we had made to each other. Those lazy Sunday afternoons in our first apartment where we lounged around in our bed. I remember one of those days in particular. The sun cascaded into the room, putting a golden glow on everything it touched. He was lying next to me on his side with his head resting on one hand, with the other hand twirling the strands of my blonde hair.

“What do you think we’ll look like when we’re old?” Josh asked.

“Gross,” I said, laughing a little at the thought of it.

“No, I bet you’ll be beautiful then, too.”

“I’ll be beating the other old ladies in the home off with a stick for trying to steal my man at the senior’s dances.” I had to turn it into a joke to draw his attention away from flattery. It was impossible for me to accept a compliment.

“I’m glad we’ll be together,” he said, “from now until then.” We were young. I hadn’t given “forever” much thought, but after that day, it just seemed like a given that we would be together until the end of our days.

I wondered if 36-year-old Arthur would have ever guessed that after five decades of marriage to his wife, she would have him committed to a mental home in order for herself to get a good night’s sleep. I’m not chastising the woman, but rather trying to prove a point that love does not always conquer all. In Arthur and his wife’s case, sensibility seemed to be the conqueror. My measly six years with Josh seem only like the quick blink of an eye compared to Arthur’s astounding fifty with his sweetheart. I never stood a chance.

The second winter into our relationship, Josh was in a car accident at a busy intersection. The roads were icy. The speeding car coming up behind him as he was stopped at the red light skidded on the ice in a last minute attempt to stop. Josh’s truck was pushed out into the middle of the intersection in the route of oncoming traffic. As a sitting duck, he had no time to avoid the inevitable. A UPS truck, unable to stop, crashed into his driver side door. It could have been bad. It could have been really bad.

“You know what the only thing I could think about was?” I was holding his hand as he gave his account of what had happened. “Not seeing you again... I saw that truck coming, and it was so fast. I smiled and closed my eyes. You were all I could think of. And I was ok.”

It is memories of him like this that nearly drive me over the edge. Simultaneous emotions of rage, sadness, and hysterical laughter can rush through me at once, making me feel as though I’ve gone mad. The redness will crawl its way from my neck to my face. The rage tears a burning hole through me, but then it is gone as quick as it came, replaced by the most hollowing sense of loss.

It was hard to avoid that memory the night two separate transport teams arrived in the ambulance bay after coming from the same single-car accident site. A young married couple coming home from Thanksgiving dinner had skidded off the road and hit a tree. There wasn’t a scratch on the wife, but her husband died on impact. I
watched her through the window of P-Room 2 for a few minutes. They had to use the ankle and wrist restraints to strap her to the bed to keep her from hurting herself. No one could make out her words. Her screams shrilled like sirens from the time she arrived until they finally put her under. She didn’t fight it. She only screamed. The way I wanted to scream for months. I found myself feeling guilty for having the audacity to compare my loss with hers, but her screams of heartbroken agony were the very outlet I could only dream of expressing. I didn’t have to assist in holding her down, and I was thankful. It would have seemed like the greatest display of hypocrisy on my part. The only difference between her and me at that moment seemed to be my phony composure and which sides of the glass wall of P-Room 2 we were on.

Did I ever want to just end it? That's a difficult question, because the correct answer should be: “No. I value life too much to end it over the loss of some guy. Suicide is selfish, and the only people left to suffer after the fact are the undeserving people who love you and care about you.” It all sounded really good coming out of my mouth as I convinced my family and friends that I was fine. I wasn’t fine, though.

A young girl in her twenties, named Sara, came into the ER one night and muttered the five magic words to the clerk in registration that are considered the “get-into-mental-health-free” card.

“I want to hurt myself,” she said flatly. There was no somber tone in Sara’s voice. From an outsider’s point of view, she seemed absolutely fine. She was oddly determined. They took her through the usual procedure of collecting all the personal items and clothing that she entered with and they instructed her to don a standard hospital gown, pajama pants, and those furry socks with the rubber stoppers on the bottom. They don’t even allow females to keep their bra on because the fabric is so durable that it can be used as a noose.

It turned out that Sara had been dating Mike, an x-ray technician at the hospital for nearly two years. He had broken up with her that same day after experiencing months of unhappiness. To show how strong of a fight she was willing to put up in order to keep him from leaving her, she claimed to be suicidal and had herself admitted to, where else? The very hospital where he worked. She put on her sad face when Mike was allowed in to see her, and from what I understand they’re still together today.

I remember thinking, as I watched Sara holding Mike’s head in her lap while he begged with his tears for forgiveness, of how much of a scumbag I thought Sara was. Any person, who would exploit the guilt of a person they loved just to keep them, was pathetic to me. It nearly killed me to lose Josh but I would never have allowed him to stay with me out of guilt. That’s not love. It’s blackmail.

Josh started seeing her around Christmas time. It had been about six months since we’d broken up. He chose an older woman who works at his office. She wears designer shoes. I hear she’s really nice. I can’t hate her.
Angelia Bingham

She had nothing to do with our breaking up. I hadn’t counted on being replaced so soon, and it was a serious blow to my already faltering grasp on self-control. It was our first Christmas apart, and for me it was a solitary hell. For him, it was a beginning with a new partner in his new life. I signed up to work the night shift that no one wanted, on account of the holiday. I figured being there at the hospital would occupy my mind until the day had passed. It didn’t.

I’m my own worst enemy. I wanted to know if he missed me the way I missed him. Six years had to mean something. I wanted to know if he had thought about me at all. We did the same thing every Christmas. We stayed the night at his parent’s house, and woke up to the smell of turkey roasting in the oven early in the morning. We loved it. We loved being with each other. My shift got off at 3 AM. I drove by his parent’s house to see if Josh had carried on with our tradition, as if the fact that he had would be some sort of lingering connection between us. I wasn’t thinking rationally.

His truck wasn’t there. It wasn’t at his house either, and that’s when it hit me like a single bullet to the chest. He had spent our first Christmas apart, with her. I couldn’t breath. My hands were shaky on my cell phone. I dialed his number. No answer. I called again. No answer. I called a third and final time, and the call went straight to voicemail, the way it does when someone shuts off their phone.

I don’t remember all that I said, but any voicemail left when a person is in that state of mind is not going to be sensible or pleasant. I’ve always been a sensible person. I’ve never been one to lose sight of what’s right and acceptable. I drove around aimlessly for a few hours. The streets were deserted and I could see the Christmas lights flickering in the windows of houses as I drove by. I figured most people were probably sleeping soundly with that sense of contentment and ease that only Christmas Eve can offer. Josh was probably sleeping like that too, next to her and without any real worry for me. Christmas carols played on every radio station like salt in my already torn open wound.

I wanted to talk to someone. I wasn’t too ashamed to admit that I needed help. I searched through my cell phone list and dialed the important numbers of the people that always claimed to care about me the most. No one answered. So I started calling anyone on the list that might listen; whether we were close or not. Not one person answered. Not one. I was defeated; a depressed person trying to convince herself that her life has meaning and value is difficult, when the proof that it really doesn’t is reinforced with all those unanswered phone calls.

The drive home seemed endless. My thoughts were sporadic and crazy. I thought about how the roads were kind of icy, and the quick jerk of the wheel at a high speed could be fatal. It was ludicrous. I thought of Sara faking suicidal thoughts to keep her x-ray tech boyfriend. Was I any better at this point? Our motives were different. I wasn’t trying to get Josh back, but I still wasn’t thinking about anyone else but myself.

I finally ended up at my parent’s house. I had to write something down in order to clear my mind. I just felt that everything I had been harboring for months was trapped inside my head like a poison seeping out slowly. I needed
to get it all out quickly. So I sat there and wrote what eventually turned out to be everything I would want to say to those closest to me if I were to never experience another day of living. I wanted to make them understand the battle that was raging inside of me with such intensity; a battle in which I was very badly losing. It was not a suicide note, I told myself, just one big love letter to a handful of people. An excerpt:

I used to know exactly who I was, you know, without hesitation. I seized everything in life with a fiery burst of raw optimism. I feel like one of those hollowed out sea shells washed up on the beach. I'm no longer usefully filled with some life form, and not very pretty to look at. People just throw me back to rid the beautiful shoreline of my gaudy appearance. So I wash over the jagged rocks of some other shoreline, breaking apart with every blow. Eventually, only shards of the worn-down shell of what I used to be will wash ashore again, seemingly uglier than before. It's painful even now to read that and revisit the horridly dark place I was in when I wrote it. Hope was lost, I thought. I came to see, though, that even a light so faint, is able to shine luminously in a pitch-black world.

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There are those that are dragged, kicking and screaming to the emergency psych department in desperate need of an intervention in their dangerously chaotic lives. Then there are those that come because they're confused and they have simply lost their way. Bonnie is the latter of the two. She's 86-years-old now, and her Alzheimer's is progressively getting worse. Sometimes she sneaks away from her caretakers and finds her way to us. Most recently, she walked into the ER in her cotton dress, her favorite shoes with the bows on the toes, and her wicker purse clutched tightly to her side.

"Hi, Bonnie," I say casually with a smile.

"Good afternoon, Angie." My smile widens since the time is now 2:15 AM.

She sat down in the chair in front of the registration clerk's window as if she were joining an old friend for afternoon tea.

"What's the problem, Bonnie?" Sally, the clerk, asked. Sally's worked at the hospital for twenty years, and she says she'll never assume that she's seen it all.

"Well, you're going to think I'm craaaazy." "No, Bonnie. I'll believe you," Sally assured her.

"Well, two years ago, on June 6th of 2006," she leans in a little closer, "you know, on 666?" She leans back again in her chair. "They put the micro-chip in my right temple, and now I've got some pain in my left temple. And since I've been experiencing a little static with my TV, I figured I should come in and get it checked out." Bonnie said this so seriously, it was nearly impossible for Sally and me to keep a straight face. It was Sally who spoke first.

"Well, Bonnie, we're going to get this paperwork filled out together and then we'll get you all set up in the back. How's that sound?" Sally is a saint.

"Oh, swell!" Bonnie smiled. She clapped both hands together tightly and walked with Sally through the double doors to her safe haven. Sally affectionately put one arm around Bonnie's shoulders as they walked.

"We all experience a little static sometimes, Bonnie."
Tonight the wind is biting and I am nothing more than a starving man taking shelter in his home. Layers of ice keep car doors closed and the roads are unplowed but clear of converging traffic. The artificial reflection of street lights look like the burning glare of sunrise, orange and warm, leaving everything but shadows uncovered. My past footsteps are documented well on the ground outside my front door, now beginning to refill with the falling, unpredicted moisture that will last until morning. The trees sway sickly in whatever direction they are lead, surviving in the absence of sunlight and each branch encased in a thickness of frozen fluid. Glass windows are all that separates me from the natural life of nomads. Heating ducts pump warm, dry dusty air into rooms that stay abandoned, keeping the wooden panels warm for my unexpected trips up the stairs. I left the porch light on, waiting for a subtle knock on the door to gently lift me from sleep.
Awake
Christopher Leonard

The carnival has been going on non stop for 63 hours
and 24 minutes,
Or somewhere near there but who’s counting?
I am awake.
Am I?
The difference between waking life and lucid dream
can no longer be differentiated.
I am awake, but empty.
Empty stomach, empty mind.

Beethoven’s sixth symphony, Storm and Tempest, is on
a constant loop
While the bitter melody of a hundred crows scream like
back up singers in my mind.
Oh Ludwig please put me to sleep.
I’ve been in every position on my couch.
The carnival in my head continues.

Should I open it?
The manila envelope left in my mailbox
With just my name written in a somewhat familiar
handwriting?
“Yes, open it,” Ludwig told me.
Inside were ideas written on a perforated sheet of paper
With a portrait of a family of skeletons.
The patriarch sat stoically in his chair
The three others were gathered around him.

Consume, consume, consume,
Until what you consume consumes you.
The anxiety of the trip that awaits creates a wild animal
trapped in my burlap sack torso.
The event horizon seems ever so near; I can feel it with
every sense, yet it never appears.
Mocking me, it cowardly refuses to rear its ugly phan­
tom face.
Shadows creep around every corner. No sense of time
and space.

Beethoven pulls his strings and the dance continues,
Tangoing away until the sink in my mind overflows
with ideas. Drip, Drip Drip.
Oh Ludwig’s advice I head outside
Where packs of mangy feral dogs snarl and spit at one
another
Intent on the destruction of their livers— and I am among
them.
It’s every beast for themselves, so get your fill while the
carcass is still warm.
Like a cricket escaping a Red Haired Tarantula’s lair
Or a mouse escaping a Ball Python’s,
My Houdini act allowed me to reach home with out be­
ing devoured.

Water drops light gently shower me as I lay fetal in my
bed.
The subtle warmth comforts me.
Drops are unique. Some are dim; others are bright in all
spectrums of light.

My blanket surrounds me in my womb as I am reborn.
Breastfed with spite,
Awake

I am asleep.

Control S
Jamie Riggs
The Language of Strings
Melissa Bamerick

I was created in the year of 1906. I do not know
the name of my maker, for we were all produced with
the same name. I will not trouble you with my existence
leading up to this point; accept to say that I have spent
most of it in one room. Of course there are windows,
but I am not allowed outside. Cooling air ruins members
of my kind, and water does not fair me well either. The
walls are covered with scores of books, volumes of
what the inhabitants of this place call classic literature,
or philosophy. These things I never knew existed until
someone took the time to read to me. The fireplace only
laughs in the winter, but I never hear a whisper out of her
all summer long. The Oriental rug has been doused so
many times with hibiscus tea that it’s a wonder that it still
maintains the bloom of its colours. I still love to watch
the sun stretch its fingers across the yarn fibers through
the French doors in the morning.

Life essentially began for me when I met Wren.
She was just an infant then, just stable enough in her
strengths to run. She never lost her thick curls even with
age; her hair always looked as if a thousand sunsets had
been painted by the wind in every twist. Her light eyes
always carried an incredulous look of wonderment,
whenever something was ailing her; those orbs became
oddly silver as if she had no iris to hold the color.

Wren spoke my language before she was able to
speak her own. Her first word was, “Boo,” a nickname
that she still affectionately has branded me with since.

Her favorite animal was an elephant because of the ivory.
Ivory is one of my most vital ingredients for existence.
She often wondered aloud how many elephants it took
to make me and she would count my keys one at a time.
Initially she had trouble manipulating my language to
perfection, but surpassed any real player that had been her
senior. She knew me before I had a chance to formally
introduce myself, but I learned quickly that she needed
no introduction at all. I didn’t know what music was until
Wren touched my keys, unlike most children that would
playfully pound, Wren always braced her hands over my
board as if she was holding onto something precious, as
if there was a space of comfort between her and I, as it
should be. No one specifically taught Wren how to do
this. I think she started counting notes when she was still
in the womb, when she and Astrid were still one.

Astrid was an artist herself, a painter by instinct
and a musician for pleasure. She encouraged Wren to play
me whenever she liked, which Wren graciously took to
heart. By the time she was three years old she was listening
to Joni Mitchell mimicking this woman’s voice with a
steady hum that held a perfect pitch. She would replay
songs over and over on the old record player and she would
imprint them in me like the intricate lines of the map that
hung above the door. Astrid believed that Wren was a
prodigy. She wanted desperately for her daughter to have a
teacher to break her ear and refine her classically. Yet she
was met with an immense amount of resistance by all the
calls she sent out over the telephone which only resided
across the hall. Each rejection represented a tightness in
Astrid’s voice, all organizations insisted, in order to be
taught, Wren would have to enter school first.

But even when Wren first began her education she never forgot about me. Everyday she would return leaving her things in a slump in the door frame and take her rightful place on the bench. Her mother hired a private instructor who visited us at the house twice a week. His name was Cornelius Benton and his hands told me that he had been practicing for twenty-six years. It was the calluses on his finger tips and the theatrical way in which he laid them over me that left me feeling daft and queer.

He at first seemed initially very pleased to be working with Wren; he was patient as she grew as both a musician and a person. He never seemed to mind when her foot slipped off my pedal because her legs weren't quite long enough, or the fact that she always wore crumpled petticoats that took up the entire bench, which left him no where to sit— or that when she was at her highest point of concentration the green ribbon that she always tied around her neck came undone and fell to the floor. I always thought that time had punished Wren in the garments that she was limited to choose, but I grew to realize that Wren punished time. She proclaimed the past as her own, regardless of the century in which she lived.

When the ribbon drifted to the hard wood he was too deaf to hear my laughter under her kinetic touch. He couldn't hear me anymore; He could only see Wren. He would lose all of his language; attempt to correct her with his blind fingers making his pitch lilt. It always sounded like a promise at first. Methinks it was this gift that gave him the ability to fool opera houses full of souls for years, his sound having a knack for instantaneous recovery his only savor.

I could feel his mistakes as Wren and I drove on together, he would stand over my opened case beside her while she and I embodied Chopin's Sonata in b flat minor. His fingers tickling the edge of my case in his mimic. It was through this method of teaching that I began to recognize the trickery of his art, he never reached for my strings—but his hands were distracting as they wandered over me. I was always glad when he departed so that I wouldn't have to feel the cooling of his finger tips dancing over me.

The years slipped by like sheet music left by an opened window, Wren tumbled up like Pip's Great Expectations, looking more like Astrid with each passing day. She didn't have trouble reaching my pedals anymore, her wiry frame had manifested into delightful curves. Over her knees all scars of play had been stretched to almost a vanishing point. She, however, never retired her antique clothes, she still wore petticoats, and still tied the same tattered silk green ribbon around her neck, and the years had wrinkled it permanently where she had always knotted it. I am certain that Benton had noticed it too, her newly lit structure with a taste of rock and roll stuck in between her throat and the roof of her mouth. What he hadn't known was that it had always been there.

One curious morning while Wren was still upstairs the telephone machine said that it was Astrid and that Wren should call and cancel her lesson for the day. It continued on to say that Astrid would not be home in time to let Benton in the house. I was puzzled by this new machine that both Wren and I rarely paid attention to, it
The Language of Strings

always claimed to be a specific person, but as far as I could tell they were not in the house. Moments later Wren ascended the stairs. I don’t think she ever heard the voice that claimed to be her mother, or perhaps she thought it as farce as I no matter how much it sounded like Astrid.

She proceeded to lop herself into the ancient, crimson wing backed chair and read me several poems of one of the Bronte’s. I’m not sure how much time had passed, but there was a rap at the door. Wren tripped over her great floor length skirt to answer it, curls billowing behind her as she disappeared through the door frame. I could hear the muffle of Benton’s familiar voice, but it was unintelligible, as was hers. I was not surprised to see her return with him by her side, even less when she took her seat and he stood next to me and rested his hands atop my case that was always left ajar.

She and I featured a piece that we had been working on together for quite sometime, when we were spinning down the bridge he moved toward her and slid his chilled fingers in her curls. She looked surprised but played on; unaware that he was wrapping the length of it around his fist. Abrasively he pulled her back; Her eyes grew wide and turned to snow. He pressed his lips against hers and there was no song. Just the smash of her hand on my keys to which I powerlessly replied incoherently, her fingers trembled hopelessly over my face. Her nails drew hard over my full exonerated name, making a pop as they pulled over the golden font.

When he finally had pulled all of the air out of her mouth, he took her voice with it; His kiss astounded her so much it left her mute. Still she struggled against the lock of his hand, sliding off the opposite end of the bench to create more distance between the two. He instructed her not to make such a fuss, that everything was alright, that she was beautiful, that she must have known that all along. But when she pleaded him to take his leave he became enraged, his hand would not forsake her hair, as if he was claiming what was rightfully his. I couldn’t see her face then, her skirt acted like a stage curtain, the trumpet sweep had left her shivering in its own kind of Parisian darkness. The only thing I could see were her hands stretching relentlessly for me. If I could have I would have reached for her.

When I saw her eyes next they were clouds growing with silver, pouring water like argent fish. He had pressed her face down against her bench. When she reached for me I heard something tear and saw the tangerine thread of lace spin away from the stitch that used to be her underclothes. He was disrobing and thrusting himself into her from behind. Feeding off of her ambrosial artistry and what used to be immortal innocence. She never uttered a sound, her arms like two cadaverous hooks dying under the weight of him.

Wren had read me so many stories about the concept of pain. Yet if this was what pain looked like I never wanted it to varnish her face again. When he had his fill of her he let out an erratic groan. It wasn’t until then that I heard her speak, barely audible, my name, the word sightless in her sob. He gently pulled away from her then, but panic struck Wren who writhed her body foreword struggling against his hands still latched in her hair as she reached for me again. It wasn’t until then that
she let out the most startling vociferous sound that I had ever heard in my life. I dare say Wren had even frightened Benton because there was finally a space between them. She had pulled her skirt back down over her legs as she crawled beneath me, her cheek squealing against the hard wood. And just when I thought that she would lay there quiet for a moment shivering and stunned, she proved me wrong.

Tout de suite she occupied the space that he had spent the last eight years fumbling over, before I even realized that she had removed my branch. My ebony lid had already slammed shut making my innards tremble so ferociously that I thought for a moment that I was deaf. He rushed her again but she drew back the branch and smashed him in the shoulder, it wasn’t until the second time that he was able to take advantage of her swing. He took hold of the opposite end, seizing the piece of me away from her, and using it against her, pressed it against her throat. With haste he pulled the green ribbon from his pocket and bound her hands with it, spinning its length over her wrists and securing the knot with his teeth. He pulled her by the collar back toward me and made her stand where he always stood. As he propped me back opened he wedged the branch between her wrists and securing the knot with his teeth. He calmly explained to her if she made any sudden movements while placed in this stress position that my case would slam shut on her hands. It was certain to break them, he assured her. Certain to destroy her possible career of being a composer, he continued curtly.

He also mentioned at great length that if she told anyone of this incident that he would come for her. He promised to abolish those uncanny hands of hers, by laying the key top over them and layering volume after volume of Encyclopedias atop them. He claimed that if she spoke anything ill of his name to anyone that he would come for Astrid too, but he would kill her so that Wren would have nothing to love anymore. Then he dared her to move. She stood stagnant as a photograph dated in the Victorian era.

Eternity passed. All I could think of was Yeats’ “Leda and the Swan,” but I scorned myself for the comparison because Benton had never left an impression of beauty on me. He had degraded my language, not only because I couldn’t strike either image away from my thoughts. He had enslaved my anthem, he had imprisoned Wren. Finally he unbound her and sent her to her room. He commanded that when her mother arrived she was to lie to Astrid and tell her that she hadn’t been feeling well. Seconds later I heard the key in the lock and I heard Astrid shout Wren’s name. She murmured apologies up the stairs but jumped when she saw Benton in the door frame of the library. He articulated with what seemed like rehearsed words that he had not gotten any messages, but upon his arrival Wren did not appear well. He also expressed that he felt it best that he await Astrid’s return in case Wren needed anything. Astrid foolishly believed every lie that seethed off of his tongue, and he smugly took his leave.

That following week Wren didn’t even enter the
The Language of Strings

library except to pull books from the shelves and then still retreated again. He had tainted our dialect, and I’m still not sure if I would have been able to find the strength to make music with her right then. Astrid allowed Wren to stay home all week because Wren had never mentioned before staying home from school on account of an illness. I, however, was still alone most of the day, save for the brief intervals that I have just spoken of. Six days passed until she spent any real ample time with me, and even then I couldn’t for the life of me figure out her intentions. She possessed this clear fine thread, which seemed extremely strong. She tied it to my branch and fed it around the curve of my case, she snipped the length of it so that it matched up with the very edge of the keyboard. She recited numbers like a chant beneath her breath, mathematical equations of distance multiplied by rate and time. Her brow rose and fell with half articulated questions regarding length. A tape measurer lay slack round the back of her neck, but I knew that it was not made for dress making. But she was not measuring lyrics to meter so I was rendered ignorant once more.

She then proceeded to fasten it to a small black circle that stuck to my cobalt boot on my left leg that stood closest to her while she resided at my keys. She brought in a plastic box with a handle on it and took a few empty spools and stuck a small dowel through the inside. In the fold between where the book case and floor met one another, she used an item whose purpose not only made the floor grumble but shift slightly under the pressure, but it secured her odd invention to its boards. She fed more of this invisible string behind the empty spools to me, which ended with another snip of sheers. The finish was when she fed the length of string all the way to the top of the book shelf for measurement, then tossing an old crocheted blanket over her creation and vanishing once more.

The following morning she was awake with a steaming tea cup and loops that she had tied in her hand, she stood on the old priggish chair to finish her project, securing each knot around eight thick books. Lining this curious string between the crevices of books so that they disappeared even where a sketch artist would scribble shadows. The finishing touch was when she moved me with an immense amount of effort closer to the book shelf. She waited for Astrid to awake.

She waited for him to call after her again; she did not dress or keep her hair. She just laid curled in the chair, silently pouring over the words that I wanted to hear in her mouth again. I was afraid that if she didn’t speak, I would never speak again. The silence was becoming bright, and I damned myself a thousand times over for not being able to tell Astrid why Wren had been acting so inscrutable lately. She hadn’t refused her lesson this morning, which in retrospect fooled Astrid as well as myself. I was uncertain if she would ever play me again, yet it still disgusted me that he was allowed into our house once more.

He arrived at his usual time, a sickly smile leathered to his features. Astrid greeted him and retreated out to the garden. The sunshine poured listlessly through the opened French doors, and the veranda was unusually
The Language of Strings

incandescent this day. Wren was already at the bench, balling her fists in the pearl linen of her night gown. Not long after Astrid took leave, he was already sliding his hands around Wren’s neck and down beneath her garment toward her chest. Her neck bore not the familiar sight of the ribbon that I had watched her tie round her neck every morning before school; but a chain of silver, fed through the strand a key far more ancient than 1.

Wren evaded his advances by telling him that if she didn’t start playing Astrid would come inside wondering what was wrong. And if she had promised to keep her secret it would soon be foretold by his actions. He surprisingly obeyed, taking his usual stance with his hands laid over my case. She played the first three chords of The Beatles’ “Let It Be,” a song in the past that he made sure he found rather despicable. As soon as he paused, recognizing the music, the circle stuck to my boot was pulled loose. The invisible string was around Wren’s ankle now, my lid slammed shut atop of his hands and the books fell from the shelf simultaneously piling atop of my lid over his hands. I felt the innards of his hands erupt and retract under the weight of all of our matter; he howled, his eyes lit up with pain. Astrid shouted their names from outside, but Wren was already making her exit. Slamming the library door I heard the skeleton key in the lock. I was stripped of my sense of time again.

Under the weight of me and the volumes, Benton had all he could do to pull his hands out of my jaw. I didn’t want to let him go, it gave me satisfaction to know that I was Wren’s accomplice once again. Once he wrenched free, still roaring, he attempted the door. Yet his hands failed him, their movements were somehow disengaged and for this I was proud. His struggle made a dark part of me feel joyous, and his face when the lights of red and blue poured through the windows was the most fantastic expression I had ever seen. He had been nearly reduced to the fright that he had inflicted on Wren. Men in blue uniforms unlocked the door and bound his wrists in metal and in chain. I hoped that they would take him away forever.

Astrid and Wren hadn’t been home in days. I had worried after them very much so. When they returned I was glad to see them both. After being photographed by strangers with their box of light and strange yellow tape, the house stood like a home should—yet different. Astrid told Wren that she didn’t have to play music anymore, yet Wren argued that she did not want to completely retire. She said that she would take a sabbatical, and allow the fireplace to devour the bench that she had devoted so many hours to resting on. She also politely asked for a new bench after that. I could feel the knot tightening in Astrid’s throat right before she cried and grabbed Wren and told her that she was sorry. She promised that we would never see Benton again and that she would find Wren a new Bosendorfer to play. Wren shook her head and smiled, and told her mother that she would never let Benton come between her and I. She did not want another piano. She wanted me.
Rebirth of the Cool
Jordan E. Franklin

Beat the drum
And let its raucous laughter
Precipitate into rolls
That carry the wind instruments
Safely along their journey to freedom
Like Harriet Tubman on the Underground Railroad

Let the brass horn sound
Like the rallying cry that takes the form of,
"We Shall Overcome"
"We Shall Overcome"
No, stop
Take that horn and let it resound
Loud as the rolling sea
And let the waves break
Into lofty scat singing
From ladies with blue flowers in their hair
Who cushion your bottoms
With blue notes so low
You're not afraid to fly or jump off
That ledge...

This is beauty
Is more than a beat
Or a horn
Or a piano coming through
Like ongoing traffic
To those who need a way to wind down.
It is a language
Taken straight from the cotton fields
To tense eardrums.
Rebirth of the Cool

This music
Is my people-
Is a movement,
That has been here
Since the rising of slavery
To the setting of Jim Crow.

This music-
This movement that creates
And is created
Is the black spirit
Forged in the mountains of Africa
And housed in every ebony temple
That was oppressed
And dared to dream...

The beat may stop
And the brass may lose its shine
But the black heart won't stop beating.
Let my blue lady scat loudly into the night
Until her throat grows hoarse.

Time erodes everything
But it won't erode the movement,
Or the music...

Running in Place
William O’Brien

We imagined it like this. When someone finally broke the door down they would have noticed the soldier on the screen, clutching his M-16 and running against a wall. Then they would turn to see John with white eyes, sitting silent on his musty, brown couch. His X-Box controller would be on his lap with a stiff, grey hand settled on the joystick. The soldier's feet would just slide against the ground and every few seconds his head would disappear into the brick. They would probably just shut off the television and avoid touching him. He'd stink like shit and piss.

It's two thirty Saturday afternoon and I'm pulling over in front of Kyle's house when the phone rings.

"Have you heard from John?" It's Irene.
"No. I haven't talked to him all day," I say.
"What's up?"
"We were supposed to go to the flea market at noon. He wanted to buy a new sword from the Chinese guy, but he hasn't picked up his phone all day. I even went and knocked on his door. He is next on the list, you know."

The grim reaper's death list, and John's been working his way up it since before I knew him. His mother left when he was a baby, but his father still took him to see his grandmother. When he was about a year
old, his grandmother’s dog bit off a chunk of his ear. His dad didn’t get much out of the court case, but it sat in a CDL account until Shawn was eighteen and grew to something close to a million.

When he was about thirteen he was hit by an SUV while riding his bike to Carmine’s house. John never saw the money his dad got from that lawsuit. Carmine fell asleep waiting for him and his parents came home to find him passed out with a packed bowl on the coffee table in front of him.

I was a sophomore when we met. It was Halloween. His dad dropped him off at my school after work. I had popped my first E pill ever about forty-five minutes earlier and a wave of warmth was rising up my gut. My pupils were pushing hard outwards to eclipse the irises.

“Hey!” I said through a clenched, toothy smile. “What’s up?” That’s all I remember him saying all night. He scratched his reddish-brown prickly chin hair. His eyes stood still as he swung his hand around to slap mine. Me and a crowd of others spent the night on our bellies, rubbing our faces into the lines on the football field, savoring the spray paint smell and rubbing our faces into the cool, soft dirt. And John, John stood at midfield, looking down at the amateurs as he sniffed the extra pill.

It’s almost three o’clock. I’m sitting in my car. Erin is still talking.

“Allen was the last person to see him.”
“Well, was John fucked up?” I say.
“They were doing base all night,” she says. I take my phone off speaker and hold it tight to my ear.

“Well, what did Allen say?”
“He left John’s apartment at like two last night. They were playing Gears of War until the bag ran out. This sucks. I need to get high.”
“Well, don’t worry,” I say. “He’s probably fine. Come to Kyle’s. We’ll smoke a bowl or something.”
“No thanks,” she says. “I need something better than that. I’m probably just going to call my guy in Patchogue.”

The end of the night is the hardest thing for a cocaine user to get through. That’s why we were so worried. It isn’t that John was doing base. He cooks it himself to avoid all of the impurities and toxins that come as a byproduct of letting your dealer do the cutting. However, the second you run out you’re looking for your dealer. You know that you only have about ten minutes before you can feel your nose and mouth again. Even if you decide to call it a night you’ve got at least four hours of anxious tooth clenching before you can even lie down. Then you most likely stare at the ceiling for another two. Most people will smoke weed and cigarettes and drink liquor to counteract it. Shawn figured out that the only way to
Running in Place

avoid watching the sunrise is to sniff heroine. He says he never shot himself up, but who really cares. Dope is dope.

It’s about three fifteen.
“...I really don’t think this will happen again.” My gut tightens as I finish the sentence.
“Joe was my best friend,” she says through a sniffle. “Listen, I need to call somebody and get something. You need anything?”
“No, I’m okay. Just let me know if you hear anything.”
“Yeah, you too.”

Two Fridays earlier I pulled into Jerry David’s driveway, two houses away from the police tape and herd of patrol cars. Someone had already come to take Joe’s body away. Jerry’s front yard was crowded with slouching old friends and red eyed strangers, wiping their noses and staring blankly at the flashing lights and the upstairs window.
Jerry’s had his speech impediment since infancy. He blames it on all the drugs he’s done since adolescence. His R’s and L’s always came out like W’s.
“I can’t beweeye this!” He screamed it. I couldn’t fight the giggle. He was sitting on the curb with his knees curled under his chin. “I just saw him two days ago.” His voice softened and he leaned over to me. “On Tuesday night John helped us get like an ounce of yayos. We did so much. It was so good. I can’t beweeye this is happening! It was so great. We were just sitting there from like 2 A.M. Tuesday until yesterday morning doing yayos and playing Dreamcast and then he left and... I can’t beweeye this is happening!” He kept repeating it in between sniffles. I wanted to make him say purple turtle.
Irene was leaning against her car. John stood next to her stone faced staring at the blacktop.

He looked up at me and said “What’s up?” His Billy goat beard pointed to the center of his chest. He sniffled. I sat on the trunk between them.
“His father broke in the door and found him lying on top of his AK. Nobody knows how it happened.” She dropped her forehead on my shoulder. “They think it might be a suicide. I guess he was next on the list.”
Maybe he came home from Jerry’s and all that nose candy just got to his head and he decided to end it. Maybe he had been convinced that he was invincible and wanted to prove it by shooting himself in the stomach with an assault rifle. Maybe someone snuck in and killed him. Maybe it was a poltergeist. Probably not. Joe kept his AK locked up and had weapons hidden all over his apartment in case of a break in. Most likely it was either a drug induced suicide or when he walked into his upstairs apartment he decided that the old rifle needed a cleaning. In his state, it isn’t too far fetched to think that he might have overlooked the bullet in the chamber. Evidence supports something
like this. If it were a suicide he would have been smart enough put the barrel in his mouth instead of his gut. It’s much less painful to paint your brain matter on the wall behind you than it is to let a bullet slide through your organs and then wait a few hours to bleed to death. Hell, you might even survive that. To be honest, I think he was stuck in some kind of glitch, running against the wall. His gun would have misfired when his head disappeared behind the brick.

It’s four fifteen. Kyle’s den reeks of old smoke. The white painted walls are stained a dim yellow. I sit next to him on the ashy, grey couch and begin packing a bowl. Tommy is playing Poker Stars at the computer desk.

“Ahh Bullshit!” The Playstation controller in Joe’s hand shoots downward and smacks against the base of the TV stand. “I hit the button, but the fucking guy won’t shoot. I mean, what’s the point of even playing if your guy just sits there like a retard while you try to shoot.” Joe stomps to his bedroom. Tommy picks up the controller and gunshots blast from the speakers.

“Working fine.” He sits back down at the computer and folds. I can hear snorts across the house. Joe comes back in pulling on his nostrils.

“You hear about John?” I say.

“Yeah, Irene is coming here in a little bit. You guys are making way too big a deal out of this.”

“I don’t know man. He is next on the list.”
Running in Place

That kid from the mall
Rob’s Dad
Zack

When Zack jumped off the roof of the Ramada Inn John was the first person I called.
“What’s up?” he answered after one ring.
“Nothing. Let’s get a few balls. We can see if Carmine wants some too,” I said.

Later that night we went to Carmine’s. He sat on the torn, black leather couch that faced his television. John was sitting on the bed near the humming window fan, breaking lines on the tray table that I hovered above. The walls were slanted. They seemed to loom over us.

“Here,” John said, trying to talk over the whirr of the fan. “Take this one.” I leaned over and sucked powder through a rolled up dollar bill.

“You know,” I said, lighting a cigarette. “I was thinking about him the other day. It had been a while since we talked. I was going to call him to see how he was doing.” I snorted.

“Yeah, you can’t blame yourself for that.” He was portioning off another line. “Carmine, this is you.” Carmine paused his X-Box and walked over to the tray table. The powder disappeared as he passed the bill across the table.

“I just wish I had told him I was there for him,” I said.

“Listen, I know this sucks. I didn’t even really know the kid and I still know it sucks. The thing is you’re never going to be able to save anybody. No matter what you say to them they’ll do what they’re going to do.” He broke out another line. “People waste all their time getting all huffy over other people’s problems. They end up ignoring all of their own and then when they find out their words are worthless they start kicking themselves for not being more coercive. The fact is that nobody has the power to control anybody else.” He blew through the line and tilted his head back. “The only way to save someone who’s falling is to hope they don’t splat when they hit bottom.”

“Yeah,” I said. I was staring at the smoke from my Marlboro. It was coming off the cherry and drifting toward the sucking fan. It moved like waves, separating and collapsing on itself. I put my hand in its path, trying to catch it before it shot through the window and took to the sky, but the smoke kept on moving. The stream collided with my hand and just bounced off. It squeezed through the cracks in my fingers and continued onward, seemingly unaffected, toward the spinning blades.

It’s about six. I’m sitting in the middle of Kyle’s couch. He is sitting to my left, half asleep. Tommy lights the head of my pipe, blows thin smoke, and passes it to me with his left hand. Then he picks up the controller and continues Kyle’s game.

“Dude, you have a problem with that shit too.” I say. “How many oxy’s are you doing a day?” It takes
Kyle a second to realize I’m talking to him.

“Huh? What? Ahh, shut the fuck up. I really don’t care.” He puts his head down.

“Listen, you’re on a bad path. I thought you quit that shit.”

“I did. I had no problem with it either. So, I’m not addicted.”

“Not addicted? Dude, every time I come over here you get bitchier and bitchier. The only time you aren’t bitching about something is when you’re so fucked up you pass out in your chair, and you know what?”

“What?” Kyle rolls his eyes.

“You’re next after John. Right, Tommy?” Tommy jerks his head up.

“You’re absolutely right,” he says. “Level four does suck.” On screen, the soldier is blasted limply against a wall by a frag grenade. “Fuck!”

Doing coke is like running on a treadmill. All your muscles are working overtime. Your legs are tense. Your arms feel like jelly. Even your face is tight until the numbness kicks in and you start to feel like you can run forever. Heroine is basically the same, without all the movement. The first day you’re satisfied after a few hundred feet. A few weeks later you can stay on it for a full mile. The only problem is you never go anywhere. After five miles you get off the treadmill and you’re still in your parents’ basement.

It’s just like a drug habit. I remember the last time I ever did coke. We were low on funds so me, Kyle, and John bought a gram and split it. Within twenty minutes of opening the bag, I was coming down and looking for another.

“I need to get out of here.” I was shaking, looking around. My heart felt like it was going to stall. John was sucking down a cigarette. He seemed to kill it in one drag. Then he lit another with the cherry and started rocking his head to an absent beat. Kyle was lying on his back, staring at the ceiling and slapping his thigh erratically. I stood up and started toward the front door.

“I need to get out of here.” I grabbed my coat and carried it out on my shoulder. I sprinted the fifteen feet from the front door to my car. I probably sped the whole way home. I shouldn’t have been driving, but I needed to get out of there. If I stayed I’d have been on the phone with my dealer in five minutes. I’d have been over-drafting from an ATM within twenty. Three hours later I’d be repeating that process. Instead, I went home and laid in bed. I promised myself I’d clean up, at least quit the hard shit. I’ve never slept more silently than I did that night.

Now it’s seven thirty and I hear the front door open. I get up and walk into the kitchen. Irene moves right past me, staring at the floor.

“Hey.”

“Hey.”

Behind her I hear boots scrape against the wood floor. John strolls into the kitchen. His cheeks are
bloated. His eyes look like they are resting on top of his Grizzly Adams beard. He raises his bony hand to slap mine.

"What, a guy can’t sleep in ‘til sunset?" he says.

"See? What did I say?" Kyle says from the den. I look at John. I want to shake his emaciated torso until the addiction drips out of his nose. I want to tell him he’s killing himself. I want to tell him to stay at my house and I’ll take care of him until he cleans up. I want to tell him to check himself into a rehab and then go find a job. I want to tell him that he can take the money he still has left from that lawsuit and invest it so he never has to work again if he would just stop spending it on drugs and places to do them. I want to believe it would have some effect on him.

"Dude, I thought you were dead." The words crack me up. The two of us break into a maniacal chuckle. We start falling over ourselves, leaning on the table for support as we fight to breathe in between outbursts.

"Ha! Me dead? What a joke," he says.

I pause for a second when I feel the cold kitchen table on my palm. He stops laughing and looks at me, still smiling loosely.

"You know what I want to say to you, right?" I say.

"Yeah," he says, "I know."

We break out again, exaggerating our strained giggles. I slap the kitchen table and start rolling on the floor. John does a Hollywood cowboy death scene,
Kicks
Kyle Dzintars

Hey yo. Where’d you get those kicks, they’re Hot!?

I know, right. I copped’em from that store in the city, you know the one on...

No, man. I mean WHERE did you get those kicks? India, China, Indonesia, Malaysia?
And by hot, I mean still warm from the children’s hands who made them in un-air-conditioned factories with twenty-year-old sewing machines and the risk of a disease-causing puncture of the skin.

And by JUST DO IT, do they mean, “Just buy, don’t think” and by “don’t think” do they mean about the ten-year-old earning dimes a day to pay for some rotten fruit at the local market that can’t even provide clean drinking water or proper medical care for elderly, sick or dying residents.

Do they mean JUST FORGET, JUST IGNORE, or JUST KEEP BUYING?

Whoa, chill man. They were on sale.

So you pay eighty instead of one-twenty and a full day’s work...
The Birds
Allison Thayer

Invasion

She followed his WFH 003 60 miles up the coast.

She followed him in high heels and a mink coat.

Life at Bodega Bay stopped to look. Life at Bodega Bay...

She brought him lovebirds for his sister. She brought him lovebirds from across the water.

She returned across the water to greet him and was greeted by a gull.

*The first.*

Her long red nails shaped like talons hung from her naive fingers.

The flock from the telephone wire can see them, even from up there.
Red means stop.
Destruction.
Blood red.

There is a full moon settling in the sky over Bodega Bay.
A full moon never makes things okay.
**CRASH!**
*The second.*

slams into the door.
She wasn’t welcome there.
Outsiders are not welcome there.

Sounds of children laughing can be heard from the telephone wires. No one gets to have fun.

A third attack.

All *bad things* come in threes...
It *must* be okay to go outside.

**Invasion.**

They file in through the soot coated entrance to their house
his mother tries to pick up the pieces.
His mother can’t fix anything anymore.

*Mankind makes it difficult for life to exist on this planet.*

We share our world with 8,650 kinds of them, flocking together.

An alcohol induced end of the world speech might ring true...

She wouldn’t leave.
They don’t like when we don’t listen. She shouldn’t have stayed.
She should’ve left Bodega Bay.

They gather to plan their attack. Beaks fly back in laughter evil laughter.

**Chaos.**

Don’t light that cigar!
Don’t light that cigar!
The Birds

Trapped.

The invasion continues.

Trapped
in a cage. They got to
stare her in the eyes.

They got to poke and
prod.

Get out!
Get out!
Get out!

Nails in.

Invasion.

"Let us in!" they screamed.
Break and enter.

Her flesh
torn away like
bits of bread
from the pavement.

A blank stare.

Natural confines.

no thanks superman
Kimberly Saunders

you want me to sacrifice
my self-sufficiency,
eradicate these fragile wings
forged from a broken hope.
and you admit
you didn’t know
I’d been so bruised,
so used
by the male monstrosity.
well good riddance
to your wasted sympathy.
I won’t be another victim of the
“oh please,
I need
you
to save
me.”

I’ll save my damn self.
Every spring new leaves sprout from the swollen buds of naked trees. They grow, unaware of their photosynthetic duties or of the chlorophyll saturating their flesh in a temporary coat of waxy green, tirelessly combining carbon dioxide and sunlight into glucose, expelling oxygen for the rest of the world to breathe. As the leaves turn the waste of our lungs into something sweet, a yellow presence flickers beneath the cool hue of their veined skins.

For now the sun-drenched season nurtures the chlorophyll. The naïve leaves sway in summer’s solstice, and the brazen colors of autumn lie hidden. But cold winds will come, carrying heavy air and darkness. The oaks will draw themselves inward, taking with them the life thriving within their leaves. Youth’s temporary façade will slip away, and summer’s tired children will wait for their colors to awaken.

I hold him, but it’s strange in my father’s arms. So close to him. I push myself away and run. I think I hear him crying in the darkness.

When I rise from the pile I don’t notice the tiny brown slugs clinging to my sweatshirt and jeans. I pull sticks from my hair and trudge from the mountain of oak leaves, deafened by the sound of tearing paper. My sister squeals from the front porch and leaps. My chest throbs as I stumble up the concrete steps, damp and hot beneath my cotton clothes.

I am standing at the edge of the porch looking out over the gardenia bushes. Marie is laughing and my mother swings her through the air. She splashes into the pile and I dive head first into the yellow heap, holding my breath as if I am leaping into water. Together we rise breathless, leaves dripping from our tangled heads and drifting onto the empty grass. The air is ice. My fingers are numb. The fiery smell of autumn presses closer to my lungs.

My mother falls backwards, pulling us with her as she sinks into the yellow, papery sea. I curl against her body. Marie reaches for my hand and laces her cold, red fingers with mine, pressing our joined fists tight against my mother’s warm belly. Evening stains the grey sky. I cannot speak through my frozen lips, but I am safe in my mother’s arms. I close my eyes and listen to the racing drum of her heart.

This mountain of leaves is my entire world. Tomorrow is too far away to be something real. And my mother is tossing slugs into the bushes before Marie and I know what is slithering up our backs.

After my parents separated, my mother met another man and gave birth to my sister. We spent months shuffling around Virginia, unsure of where to settle, but eventually found a small house on Hilltop Road and called it home. Three years later their marriage ended.
My mother took me and Marie to live with our grandmother on Sedgewick Drive, a cul-de-sac walled in by an unbroken line of yellow condominiums and saw grass. The three of us shared the downstairs bedroom, and at night we lay together and listened to sounds creeping from the swamp below the stilted deck.

During this time the memories of my father are few. He seemed distant, like a mirage flickering over desert sands, and I didn’t care to know him. I was busy with friends and make believe. The ice cream man in his white truck and the abandoned shack nestled in the woods were more important than my father. I knew that sometimes he looked at me with damp eyes when I didn’t speak to him. And I knew that his body crumbled as I ran to my hiding place in the bathroom when he came to visit.

I shoved something sharp inside of my father. I stabbed him every time I fled. I didn’t understand why, but I knew that I’d do it again.

My breath startles the still, icy air as I crunch through a new layer of snow towards the small sapling. The slender oak is crouched between clusters of thick, ancient trees. A meager covering of dry, brown leaves quivers from its pointed branches, and they shudder like shriveled hands when the wind rushes past them. It is strange to see a deciduous tree still clinging to its lifeless crown in mid-winter. I touch the leaves and study the curled flesh sticking to my wool mittens. The sapling is a pin oak, and when it’s grown its branches will shed their leaves before the ice sets in. But this young oak is not yet ready to let go.

VI

I reach for the clusters of bright red berries blooming between the holly bush leaves. I must touch them carefully. I might slice the skin and bleed.

VII

My legs are too short to touch the floor of my father’s black Monte Carlo. I’m sitting in the middle of the back seat, watching the rain slicked world rush in at us through the windshield.

My father picks me up every evening after work and brings me to his apartment by the corn field. Now he is driving me home to my mother and sister and grandmother. The drops of rain on the windows are yellow pearls in the light of the street lamps. They race down the fingerprinted windows and disappear. I watch as the tiny drops merge together, form larger beads of illuminated water, and rush down towards the hissing road. It must hurt to hit the ground after falling so fast.

I talk to my father about the rain. He clutches the steering wheel with white knuckled hands. The scattered hair bursting from his frizzy head shines in the headlights flashing towards us. He slows down and turns into my grandmother’s neighborhood. I see our home with the sharp-leaved holly bushes glaring with red berry eyes.
see where they sprout from white stones. But I don’t see my mother’s car.

My mind is spinning and it’s hard to breathe. I clutch my seatbelt. “Where’s Mommy? Daddy where’s Mommy?”

“I don’t know. She said she would be here,” my father says. His voice is sharp and loud. He curses and pounds on the steering wheel with his fists.

I cry. I don’t fight the ache boiling in my stomach, and the mayonnaise sandwich I ate for dinner splatters across the shiny leather seats and onto the floor. I beg for my mother.

“I don’t know where the hell she is. I have to work in the morning,” my father says. He gets out of the car and slams the door. For a moment I’m alone.

I can barely see through blurry eyes. My father grabs me under the arms as he lifts me from the back seat. I want to hold him. I want to press my cold, shivering body against his warm chest but he won’t let me lean against him. He carries me across the street and his voice is bitter. The rain is cold against my skin.

My grandmother is at the front door waiting with wide eyes. She tells my father that my mother will be home soon. She’s only a few minutes late. But my father tears past the holly bushes and their needle-sharp leaves. I’m wet and numb as I forget my father and reach away. His voice fades into the rain. I can’t touch the holly bushes. The leaves will cut my hands. My skin will split. I’ll have scars.

My mother was never fond of the dining room table’s mahogany glaze, its mass produced aura infesting our home with dull conformity.

“Let’s paint it,” she says. “Let’s paint it, and make it something beautiful.”

She gives me and Marie wide paint brushes and pries open a can of primer. We dip the tips of our brushes into the liquid and spread white over the swirling wood grains. We leave the table to dry, and in the morning the brush strokes are still visible. We draw the shapes of oak leaves on thick pieces of paper, cut out the best ones for stencils, and press them against the ridged surface to trace. By mid afternoon a labyrinth of fine grey lines blooms across the table.

My mother gathers glasses of water and brushes and small bowls of acrylic paint. For days we pour over the table’s surface, painting green and brown and black into the empty shapes of leaves. Staining our hands the color of the earth. Before breakfast we inhale the smell of paint, and in the evenings when the sun is swollen in the sky and sinking towards the horizon like a heavy rag, Marie and I are beneath the artificial lights of the chandelier breathing life into the leaves with our mother. At night I dream that I’ll wake and find them startled by the wind and scattered over the floor boards.

I don’t yet know that soon we will move miles from our home, and my mother will sell our table to a stranger for twenty five dollars. I’ll watch foreign hands press it into the unbroken shadows of a van. What my
family built together will slip through my fingers like water.

IX

A fungus blisters the oak leaves. It is called *Taphrina deformans*, and the scaly brown welts and sores are as vicious as its twisted name. The spores are spread the previous spring after wind and rain drench the oak's branches with disease. The ravenous fungi cling to the icy boughs, and when the next spring's fragile leaves emerge, it'll devour their tender flesh with infection. While the brutality of these pale-faced, scabby tumors is strong enough to scrape the oaks bare by midsummer, rarely do the trees suffer death. But there's no cure. The pock-marked wounds are permanent scars, and every year the debilitating plague grows stronger.

X

My sister and I flee with our mother from the sweltering heat of Virginia and leave my father boiling beneath the oppressive sun. This new place in Indiana is cold and flat. My mother has found a man who hovers over her shoulders and tells her that she is fat and worthless. He wants her to change her hair. He doesn't love her body.

I'm lost in the middle of this vast country and my mother has grown bitter. She stands on the scale and dyes the silver strands of her hair. She drags me towards the open throat of the stairs and cries at night when she thinks her daughters are sleeping. Sometimes she won't let us touch her. I don't blame her for this, but I need to leave.

XI

Red and yellow leaves flood the trail. My father and I kick through them, exhaling white clouds into the air and breathing in the dry, rusty smell of autumn. Our heads bow forward as we rush along the path. I can barely hear his voice as I stride ahead, hands stuffed deep in my coat pockets, legs tearing through the high tide of leaves.

He tells me something about the coniferous trees on Medusa Pine Trail. How he loves their bitter aroma, their deep blue shadows, the winding path beneath them softened by years of falling needles. How the fir trees are always green. And when the ground rises after a heavy snow, the drooped branches embrace us and we are not alone.

"I can barely hear you," I say. My gaze holds steady on the trail ahead of me.

"Slow down kid. You're walking too fast. Enjoy the woods for a moment."

I sigh and turn around. Chewing on my bottom lip, I reluctantly stand still next to my father. He is beaming beneath his wool beanie, long hair moving in the breeze, face bright red and eyes shining from the cold. He grips the end of his crooked walking stick and looks up at a thin spread of leaves rustling from the tips of the grey trees. Pine and maple bend together in the wind. Red and yellow and green blend against a cloudy sky.

"When you were a little girl," he says, "I used to
Loose Connections

Emily Engelhard

carry you on the top of my shoulders and we would take off in the woods together. I taught you to love the woods. From the day you were born I knew that I would teach you to love the woods. Those were the days, huh kid?"

I don't remember, but I smile up at him and imagine myself sitting on his broad shoulders. My tiny hands tap on his head. He grips my ankles, keeps me steady.

"I'm so glad you decided to move here," he says. He rests his chin on top of his folded hands and looks at his boots buried in the leaves.

"Me too, Dad." I wonder if it is really what I mean to say.

He touches my shoulder and a smile forms beneath his graying mustache. His eyes are wet. They're deep and warm and looking inside of me, seeing the little girl I don't remember. That little round-faced girl perched on her father's shoulders. The one teetering far above the ground and smiling. The daughter who knew her father could stop her from falling.

XII

I'm sitting at my father's dining room table, phone pressed against my ear. The wind wails against the creaking windows. It's warm and damp inside this dusty house where everyone is afraid to touch each other. Last summer I left Marie and my mother in Indiana for this place, hoping to find something that I thought I'd lost. But now I'm drowning somewhere in the corner of my mind with too much light rushing in and the air smelling stale.

"Why did I come here," I say. "Why did I leave you?"

My mother is silent when she cries. I remember the sound in her chest when I pressed my body close to hers.

"Look at the leaves on the trees," my mother says. "See how pretty they are? See how they move in the wind? They're dancing."

I glance through the sliding glass door. Outside the trees are blushing red after a long season of sun and warm rain. The leaves are moving in their burgundy gowns one last time before they must fall. Winter is coming to tear them from their branches and expose them to the bitter sky, but they have made it this far.

XIII

My father grabs me. I stiffen, arms tight against my side. The brown, canvas-like cloth of his coat is cold and rough. It smells like gasoline and sawdust.

I slowly lift my arms and rest them on his back. I'm not used to the strength of his arms. The warmth of his body. The way he reaches for me first.

XIV

I want to collect the colors of autumn and scatter them over my bedroom floor. Strapping on a pair of heavy boots, I rush out the back door and climb the steep hill leading into the woods. I stroll along the trails, collecting the
Loose Connections

brightest leaves. Blinding yellows. Blood reds. Greens that should've never fallen from the trees. When my hands are full and my finger tips can't clutch another slender stem, I return home. I rush to my bedroom without taking off my boots and toss the leaves into the air, flinging my arms in every direction as I spin, allowing the leaves to settle where they need to fall. Sometimes I'll find a leaf whose flesh is slashed with every color and I can't bear to see it shriveled and brown. I remember what they taught me. Wrap the leaf in cellophane. Press it between the pages of a heavy book. Save the colors before winter takes them.
His first mistake was going all in. If there is one place; one god forsaken, lamentable place on earth you never bet all of your chips at, it's this table I'm sitting behind. People have lost money and jewelry at this table, and all of the true players, they lost something worse. Well, wait, possibly two things: Pride, and dignity. This is the place we all come for release after classes at the end of the week. Before we go out, or do whatever it is we have planned for that Friday, we always can be found here, at the pool table in the basement of our dormitory.

So, as I was saying, he went all in. Loaf was a friend of mine, but he sure couldn't play poker. I don't blame him because he lives in Note Hall, the dorm next to ours, and he hadn't learned the true shame in losing at this table. The four of us; Pike, Loaf, Artemis, and moi play poker most every Friday night. On the days where we have no money, or need it desperately for a beer later, we play for pride. As you get knocked out of the game on the felt (we had to use the pool table because the tables in the rec room where missing), you have to sit at the table and play the verbal game. See, as long as you're playing, you just torment the others who lost already, and at the end of the game, he who wins gets to deduce something for the first one out to do. There's only one rule: The thing the loser does has to ruin his pride in some way. Basically you want to embarrass the hell out of them.

Naturally, since college kids have such active imaginations, this rule is very entertaining. I've seen my share of some nasty, degrading things happen to these animals I call friends, and if I was all seeing like Thoreau, I'd be witness to my own despicable acts of deterioration to my pride. And don't get me wrong, I'm not proud of this, but shit, it's too much fun when you win to stop playing. Oh, like this one time, Loaf won I think, which is a surprise in itself, but he made Pike do something I never thought of before. Actually, I was rather impressed with the idea. He made Pike carry around dog shit in his back pockets all day, even at class. Pike told us his teachers made him sit, and he was too embarrassed to say why he didn't want to. I can only imagine what his classmates thought when he finally did sit and then the room started to smell like shit. Anyway, I don't have time to tell you all the nasty things people were made to do, because that's not the story here.

Where the fuck was I? Weren't you paying attenti-
Oh shit, that's right. Ahem. So Loaf goes all in, and everyone else folds except for me. I make the call just to see what this kid's got, plus I have some chips to spare. We flip up our cards since no one can do any more betting, and we ask for the flop. I happen to have Ace Nine off suit and Loaf, that little prick, has got pocket twos. What could we say?

Artemis says, in between fits of laughter, “I can’t believe this retard went all in on this shit! Two fucking Two’s! All he needs is an ace or a nine and, to-da-fucking-loo, you’re out!”

Henry says, “Now, now, Art, chill. It wasn’t a bad call, I mean he pushed you and your vagina off the table, didn’t he?”

Artemis again says, “Har-har, asshole, but you folded too, which means you have a vagina.”
Henry says, “I’m gonn-”

Pike says, “Will you two ladies shut up? I want to see the flop.”

So the flop is revealed and low and behold it’s six, ace, and a three. I’m going to skip over the ridiculing of Loaf, for right now he’s just leaning back in his chair looking like someone rubbed cherry juice on his cheeks. The next card comes up and it’s a king, no help for Loaf, and lastly, on the river, is another six. So now Loaf is fucked. And the fun ensues for the rest of us. Now everyone wants to win so they get the chance to make Loaf do something awful. God, you’re a sweet and merciful being if you’re there; I won. And, yes, I know I couldn’t win a buy in poker match in one hand after this one, but I’m telling the story, so shut the fuck up.

Deciding what to make one of your friend’s do, which has to ruin their pride and dignity, is a fine art. There are many factors to think about in the process of choosing, and here are a few guidelines I try and go by. One is to never decide what they have to do without listening to suggestions from your other friends ‘cause, believe me, there will be some suggestions. Second, you don’t have to decide at the poker table, because you never know what opportunities will pop up, especially on the walk off campus or to a friend’s house. And lastly, always, always, ask the person if what you’ve chosen is too degrading for them to do. When they say yes it is, which they should if you’re any good at embarrassing people, you say wrong answer, and make them do it anyway.

Loaf was born and raised in the town of the college, so we leave my dorm and head to his house off campus on foot. He still lives with parents. A senior in college and he’s living at home, yes I know, it’s funny, don’t worry, we banged out those insults well before this story takes place.

“It’s a house, there’s got to be some hose and shit.”

And Artemis says, “Pike, what the fuck can we make him do with a hose that hasn’t been done to your mom already?”

“Stop with the God damn mom jokes. I don’t know, we could cook something up for him to do with something, I’m sure,” Pike says.

It’s around 6:30 as we get to the cusp of campus, and it’s late November and it’s getting dark already. It’s about a 20 minute walk to Loaf’s house.

So remember back when I was thanking God and calling him nice flattering names for letting me win the game. Well I’d fucking give Him a blowjob for what he had in waiting for me to capitalize upon. My friends don’t see what I see, but I conduct a little research before I show my hand.

So I say, “Hey Loaf, what was that shit you told us the other day? About your neighbor’s cat or whatever?”

“No dude, it was that I only like my cat, for some reason all other cats have a vendetta against me. My cat’s the shit, though.”

Artemis says, “Only you and your vag would ever think something that retarded, Loaf.”

“We’ve been referencing vaginas a lot today, did anyone else notice that?”

I said, “Shut up Pike. Do you even touch other cats
What?

than Loaf? Like, would you pet my family’s cat?”
“I would love to pet your mom’s pussy.”
“Oh shit! Are you gonna tak-”
“Well Loaf,” I then said, “I’m very glad you’re open to other cats.”

On our walk we’ve reached the bottom of a hill. At a T in the road there’s this telephone pole with a streetlight on it. The light on the pole is illuminating the road, so the shadow of the pole is cascading over the sidewalk. On the other side of the sidewalk, hidden mostly under the shadow is a dead cat. You can’t see any part of it except one of its hind legs. It’s frozen in death and the movies don’t lie, the legs pointed straight up in the air, poking out into the light. This is why I’m thanking god.

“Loaf, since you’re so welcoming to cats, I’ve decided what you have to do.”

Silence from the group. I stop walking for added effect. And, shit, I won’t lie, we’re standing next to the cat so I had to stop the group.

“I don’t know if you can contract diseases from dead cats, buddy, but you got to lick that cat from his ass up to his paw that’s in the light.”

Loaf, whose face at this moment can only be described as when a priest realizes there is no God, is dumbfounded,
“What?” is all he manages to mutter.
“I said, I want you to lick that dead cat hiding under the shadow.”
“No fucking way, man.”
Pike says, “Hah, it’s not like you even have a choice. You lost the poker game. Now comes that special time when you get to lose all your dignity. To us!”

Pike sounds like Ralphie when he finally gets that Red Ryder BB gun for Christmas, too happy to contain himself. This is also my favorite part of the story.

Artemis says, “Hey, listen Loaf, there is no getting around it. These are the rules of the game, and I’ve never seen anyone who fights the rules of this game come out on top.”

I say, “Yeah, so just do us a favor and get down on all fours like you’re used to, and get to licking.”

Loaf says, “But, but-”
Artemis, “Look, he can’t even speak. This is a great dare, I got to hand it to you.”

“What,” I said, “A dare is a dare, this is no dare, it’s a god damn necessity.”

Loaf says, “What the fuck man. A necessity to what?”
Pike says, “A fucking necessity to us laughing at your ass for licking a dead cat. I thought that part was obvious.” While he says that he’s looking at us with that, ‘how couldn’t he get that?’ face, you know, with the arms out at a ninety degree angle for effect.

Artemis grabs Loaf’s shoulders and gently pushes him to the ground, sweet-talking him to his knees before the cat.

“Come on, just get that shit over with Loaf, dragging it out’s much worse.”

So we keep on piling on peer pressure in the best ways we know how. Loaf is on his hands and knees looking from us back to the cat leg in disgust. I might
What?

actually be feeling a little bad for him, but honestly, I
don’t give a shit, he’s going to lick that goddamn cat leg.
You’ll see.

The final straw was rather simple actually, ‘cause
Loaf’s got that Back to the Future weakness. We just
called him a pussy and a coward; I think I even threw in
a yellow reference but who’s keeping track?

Ever, ever so slowly, Loaf leans down to the cat.
We all slowly reach for our pockets, so as not to grab his
attention from his task at hand. His tongue comes out to
test the air like a snake, and then goes back in, then back
out, then in. Our phones are all silently flipped open and
we scroll evenly to our video selection.

The moment of truth is upon us. His tongue
touches the cat and he slides that puppy up that cat’s leg.
I don’t know if that cat drowned or what, but it looked
wet, and I can’t imagine what that texture must’ve been
like. His face, as soon as his tongue touched the cat,
clenched into a tight ball like a woman in labor. As his
head ascends the leg and he is done, a thin strand of slime
remains connected to his mouth and the cat paw.

“Oh my fucking God! That was the most
repulsive thing I’ve ever seen! Thank God we all got it
on camera.”

“What!”

“Loaf, don’t freak out, it’s no worse than that tape
of Artemis and your mom.”

“You guys are such assholes, you fucking taped
me? That’s lower than low.”

We all laugh rather heartily. Ooohhh Loaf. How
naïve you are.

“Duh, you retard, did you just notice that about
us?” Artemis says.

Oh shit, my train’s here, but uh, hold on, there’s
more. I’m sure your imaginations can fill in the blank for
the time between that moment and us getting to Loaf’s
house. Just add in a shit load of insults and degrading
remarks.

So we waltz into Loaf’s house like kings. Well,
Loaf doesn’t, but the rest of us do. And I wish I had my
camera phone ready this time, ‘cause God keeps throwing
me treats today. Loaf’s mom walks in and says,

“Hey boys, how are you? Oh, by the way Loaf,
have you seen the cat? He hasn’t been in the house all
day.”
One Man Band
Cara Livermore

It's Not Loaded
William O'Brien

I'm Satisfied
with the
wet
yellow stain on the
crotch of his pants, and
the puddle
that formed at his feet
when he heard that

Ca-Clink.

The hammerour inches from his temple, so
I kept my other hand out
of his back pocket.
Psychosis
Viktoria Valenzuela

the delusions
held intact by we the patient patients

*We the people of the United States...*

*hold these random truths to be self-evident*

The Patriot Act conspires against me and we propose
grandiose prayers are to be chanted:

*Shave* the bush off America
*Shave* the bush off America
*Shave* the bush off America

So says we and the drink of somatic delusions

We hear CNN and Fox News speak in tongues
declaring truth
Freedom is the religion of mental illness
We have visions that find religious revelation
in the gas tank of an SUV.

*That among these are*

*Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.*

Paid for by bible black oil of the good book.

They've
leaked pesticides into my drink and foodstuffs
I have proof

*That all men are created equal*
Excuse me Father, but my Flesh is Stale.

William O’Brien

I wait
in a quiet, impatient
line of believers
whose eyes
The power of Christ compels
to roll.
One by one
we drone the song of our lord.

“The body of Christ.”

Amen.

I approach father Frank with
my tongue hanging out.
His right hand draws the
ashy instrument
of the torture
and the murder
of our messiah on my forehead.

“The body of Christ.”

Amen.

He places
the bread...the meat
in my open mouth.
Jesus dissolves in my saliva
And I feel the warmth
Of papally sanctioned cannibalism
Excuse me Father, but my Flesh is Stale.

slide down my throat.

"The body of Christ."

Toss the Coin
Matthew Falicchio

A red ball bounced across the street, appearing from the front of an SUV parked on the side of the road, a few feet ahead of my vehicle. I’d had the car for about a week, a 2000 Mazda 626, and was pacing thirty miles an hour down a familiar street. The car required manual shifting, and after a week I’d finally seemed to get the hang of it. My foot slid over the brake, not yet pressing down, but prepared, in case something followed the red ball, which appeared so innocently from the one spot out of my view. Visions went through my head of a dog chasing after the bright colored ball, perhaps even a child, and I focused my attention sharply behind it.

My friend Scott was in the passenger seat. It was mid afternoon on a hot August Saturday, and I’d just refilled the gas tank for a long trip. The humidity was suffocating, and no clouds could be found in the sky. It was a summer weekend; the type that tempts parents to frolic their kids in the yard, while they lounge under the canopy of their front porches. Across the city, children could be seen spraying each other with hoses and sitting under sprinklers, trying desperately to beat the heat.

Scott and I, along with a few of our very best friends, were getting ready for an overnight camping trip along the shore of Lake Ontario. George, a best and longtime friend, had family with a large stretch of beach property. On the private beach, the only signs of civilization were an occasional passing boat, and the ominous outline of a nuclear power plant across the vast body of water. For years it’d been a favorite getaway for all of us. We typically brought up jet skis and fishing poles, enough beer for a platoon, and various other objects
of satisfaction. We’d create towering bonfires, and cook hot dogs on the end of carefully chosen, perfect sticks. Our hidden beach served as an escape from summer jobs, along with the tediousness that came with being home from college. Every few weeks, we’d all save a night or two for the shore.

As we cruised back to my house, the rest of our friends were loading cars for the two hour trip upstate. We’d planned on leaving three hours earlier, but various hold-ups had set us back. The delays were nothing serious, just issues such as gathering beer and packing food and ice. In our group, things that normally required no effort at all tend to get put off until the last moment, causing frustration when it is finally time to hit the road.

Scott and I were speaking about our annoyances with those who’d kept us waiting, when the red ball ominously rolled past. It was mindless chatter, amounting to nothing. I had made a habit of not looking away from the road while having such conversations. I picked up this skill after recognizing my mother’s mistakes. Whenever I’d ride in the passenger seat with my mother she would constantly look away from the road when speaking to me, unable to avoid attempting eye contact during the conversation. This is something countless people must do, and is more instinctual than anything, looking at someone when speaking to them. I’d notice my mother doing this, and whenever she spoke I made an attempt to keep my eyes on the road for her. On more than one occasion, I’d likely prevented us from rear-ending someone who’d slammed the brakes ahead. Having seen countless instances of her potentially reckless habit, I made a conscious effort not to duplicate my mother’s actions when it was me driving.

The red ball bounced slowly across the street, about a dozen feet ahead, and if it had been going any slower I certainly would have crushed it. The SUV, and three other cars parked behind it, made seeing where on the sidewalk the ball had appeared from impossible. Scott was still yapping, but I kept my eyes focused toward the front of me. As the red ball traveled a few feet ahead of my left tire, I caught a glimpse of something following it, approaching from the right. Blond hair. Blond hair, running after the ball. A second of denial ensued, not believing the circumstance was presenting itself, hoping deeply it was a mistake of my imagination. It wasn’t. The blond locks shining beautifully in the hot August sun belonged to a little girl no older than five. She’d been dressed in tiny boyish shorts and a bright pink shirt bordered by hearts. Her hair was long, wavy, and unattended to, like most little kids. She was chasing the ball, but only followed it partway across the street. In films, when characters are struck with anything large and threatening— a truck, bus, train, anything, they always stop at the last second and watch as the object proceeds to kill them. This used to bother me when I’d see it.

"Why didn’t you just keep on running! It would have missed you!” I’d shout, and proceed to damn the film as unrealistic.

The five-year old blond child, came to a dead stop in the middle of the street. Frozen, staring at my car, just like in a movie. Here, however, there would be nobody
to scream, “CUT!”.

I was accelerating past thirty when the ball rolled past, and half as close when the bombshell advancement of a small child appeared. I knew her fate the instant those tiny white sneakers touched the hot concrete. All my newly discovered knowledge of shifting the car flew out the open window next to me, and I simply went for the brake. She only stood five or so inches above the front bumper of the Mazda. It was a small, low car, and would hold no sympathy for such a petite specimen.

The moment she froze on that street, I pictured her scraping, screaming as she dragged underneath the jagged metal, and could almost feel the car jerk upward from the body now below my feet. In the next five seconds, I, like a soldier fighting some distant war, would gain an intimate relationship with human carnage. I could already see her neck bend against the hood, a pale face splatter blood onto the green paint, her bones twist and bend in ways never intended for a man, much less a child. The unedited destruction of a human figure had already begun to play out in my mind.

In an instant, I would hear the desperate screams of neighbors, and witness once happy parents curse their God for letting it happen.

I slammed the brake harder and faster than I ever had, or will. In the chaos I heard Scott and I yell “SHIT!” in perfect unison. The tires screeched something awful as the brake slammed into the floor. Our heads hit the windshield. Scott’s bounced off the glass, cursing still, but terror kept my forehead glued against it. My open eyes touched the windshield, feeling the heat absorbed in the glass. I would view the disaster from the best possible vantage point. My eyes, my foot on the brake, and every cell in my body willed hopelessly as one for the car to stop. She watched me as I watched her, the vehicle a mere four feet away, braking as hard as the car could take, but I knew it would not be enough. I only hoped to be able to pry her loose from under the bumper.

My mother grabs me hard around the wrist and drags me inside. I’m six years old, and pouting.

“I told you never to cross the street without me watching!” she screams. “You could have gotten killed!”

It’s ridiculous, even as a six-year-old, I know it. She’s an elementary school teacher, and is treating me like a misbehaving pupil. Her tone, which typically is soft and comforting, has transformed into a deep, demanding voice.

“I looked both ways!” I plead. “There was no cars anywhere! I got the football so me and George could play Dallas Cowboys.”

George is my first and best friend. Next door neighbors since birth, we are more like brothers than buddies. George and I love the Dallas Cowboys; he pretends to be the quarterback, Troy Aikman, and I the receiver, Mike Irving. I have a large side yard, a bit smaller than a football field, and we do this every day the weather, and our parents allow it. The football goes across the
street on an incomplete pass, and after carefully looking both ways I cross. My mother unnoticeably has come out to pick weeds in the front yard, and catches me red handed. She pulls me back into the house, embarrassing me in front of my young friend.

"I don’t care if there were no cars!" she counters, attempting to imprint the demand into my developing brain. "You’re six years old, Matt, and you know never to cross the street without your father or me around. You’re not going back outside until after dinner! Get upstairs!"

I run to my room, pouting. It’s so unfair. I’m not stupid, and will never get hit by anything crossing the street in front of our house. Even at six this is an insult to my intelligence. My mother’s a bully, and receives joy from exhibiting her authority over me. Regardless, in the future I will holler for her before crossing, just in case she’s watching, waiting, to punish me for anything she can. The Mazda was about to claim a victim, I was certain. Scott was certain, and I know this because I wasn’t the only one screaming. They always say people see a white light before they die, or that their whole life flashes before their eyes. It happened as my eyes locked with the small blond girl. It wasn’t my past I was seeing, however, it was the future. Everything I would ever take part in after this moment would be overshadowed by guilt caused by my universal misfortune. I’d become a zombie, living dead, consumed by deep, unwavering misery. This face, that I was looking at so intently, would be the defining memory of my life. It would haunt my dreams, torture me every time I was alone with my thoughts. When my friends, parents, or anyone at all would look into my eyes, they’d just see a haunting anomaly of the little girl. Every time I looked in a mirror, I’d only see that beautiful, blond hair reflecting in the sunlight. She would die and be done with it, but every waking second I’d carry a truckload of despair on my back.

She was feet away, and the car was not stopping fast enough. Smoke rose as the screech of burning rubber broke the peace in the neighborhood. Her stare as I careened closer, completely expressionless, peaceful, appearing as if she knew her whole life had led up to the moment, is an image that has carved itself permanently into both my memory and nightmares. She gazed upon me as if she was a ghost, her soul and body not one in the same, separated, if only for that moment. I prayed that her mother, who was probably nearby, did not have to witness the impeding scene. Three feet away. Two feet. One.

I’m nine and I dare George I’ll ride down the steep hill on the street parallel to my own, with a rusty old bicycle in the garage that has broken brakes. The inclined street leads to our elementary school, and the playground that occupies much of our childhood. At the bottom of the hill, in front of the playground, is a rarely used perpendicular road, leading the opposite direction. We frequently ride fast down the hill, notice there are no cars, and beam across without giving it a second thought. To go down on a bike with no brakes is a bit risky- there could be a vehicle, but George, a year younger than I, is excited by the dare. I feel like an older brother to him, trying be the tough one, the risky one, as I should.
We both start down the hill toward the playground, his bike with brakes. We’re riding fast, picking up speed on the way down. In the distance, through the whooshing sound of wind passing through my vented purple helmet, I hear a siren. *It’s nothing*, I tell myself, preparing for the graceful two-second cross of the bottom road. Racing down the hill, a sense of freedom comes over me. The siren gets closer. George falls behind, braking for some reason, but I’m well beyond the point of no return. I simply lock my eyes across the bottom road, waiting to be safely across. I hit the bottom of the hill, and notice the siren is very, very loud. Out of the corner of my eye I see an ambulance racing toward me. I whip across the street and the ambulance misses by a mere second. A sickening calm consumes me as the wind of the passing vehicle hits and yet I still find myself in one piece. The ambulance brakes after passing, the driver shocked that I’ve crossed so close to him. I see two frozen figures behind the front windows. The man in the passenger seat looks sharply at me. He mutters something to the driver, and the ambulance speeds toward whatever emergency awaits them. George crosses the street quickly after it’s safe.

“You almost got hit!” He yells, excited.

“Yea,” I reply, concealing my exasperation, perhaps just not understanding the consequences I’d avoided. “Don’t say anything to your mom about it.”

My head was pressed against the glass. I roared a scream but could only faintly hear my voice over the chaos in my conscience. The blond five-year-old stood frozen, a foot away, staring still with the haunting, ghostly expression. I’d been coming to a screeching halt, but it was not going to be enough. The last foot was like a dream, as it was impossible for me to imagine how such a beautiful day had led me here.

The Mazda finally made contact with her boney upper thigh. My eyes closed. I needed to see, but something inside wouldn’t allow it. We’d finally stopped going forward. I heard no scream or thud, but had certainly seen the vehicle make contact. A second of eerie silence passed, and my eyes opened slowly, reluctant to view the first glimpse of my new, tainted life. My jaw unconsciously dropped when the eyelids fully opened, and Scott sat silent in awe.

Standing there, hair reflecting in the sun, staring at me still, was the child. Her thighs against my bumper, frozen in time. The car had stopped the instant it felt her. I could hear deep, terrified breaths—my own. My heart jerked my body forward with each beat. The three of us stayed frozen for fifteen seconds or so, not moving or saying a word. She didn’t appear scared or in pain, completely expressionless, still. She was like a statue, standing firm, with her thighs planted against the bumper. I expected her to run in terror, but she could not, or would not move. No matter how young, something inside her knew that death had been cheated. Like a dream, my mind could not believe what was in front of my eyes.

“Oh my fucking God,” I faintly heard Scott mutter, relief and shock in his voice.

His statement brought me out of the dream state.
I opened the door and stepped outside, unconcerned with the line of cars behind. The little girl looked up at me and immediately began to wail. The same way Scott’s voice had revitalized me, she came back from her blank gaze the instant my figure emerged. I wanted to walk over and pick her up, but my extremities were barely functioning. She cried loudly and ran back toward the parked SUV, unconcerned with the red ball that so nearly cost her her life. Her mother picked her up before she even made it to the sidewalk. The little girl pointed her hand to the leg which was struck by my car.

“She ok?” I asked, immediately noticing my voice cracked with terror, and tears clouded my vision.

The woman was dressed in shorts and yellow tank top, casually summer attire. She had a confused, almost angry expression on her face, knowing not the extent of what had just occurred. The woman lifted up the bottom of her daughter’s shorts, revealing two, small red spots on her thighs.

“She’s fine,” the woman stated with concern, looking at me for first time. “What the hell just happened?” She noticed the smoke trail and line of cars behind me, and looked timidly at the surroundings.

I had no immediate answer for what occurred, as I was asking myself the same question. A half inch further and the Mazda would have at the very least snapped her legs like fragile twigs. A half inch further and the carnage my mind had pictured moments ago would’ve certainly caused us all to wake up at night drenched in cold sweat. A half inch and this woman never again would hold and comfort her daughter when she wept. A half inch and this would not be a story, but an obituary, or police report. A half inch, and they may as well have dug two graves.

“Thought I…I killed her,” was the only thing I could say, as I tried to keep my eighteen-year-old self from bursting into a sob.

The mother heard my tone, realized that even a teenage boy had been shook to tears, and began to cry herself. She caressed her daughter and held onto her in a way similar to how she must have done it that first time in the delivery room of the hospital. I walked to the nearby grass and sat down, holding my hands over my head in disbelief. In the background I heard a neighbor who’d witnessed the event scolding the mother for allowing the girl to run into the road. I poked my head up and saw Scott emerge from the Mazda, his hands folded around the back of his head, as if he was being placed under arrest. His cheeks puffed in and out as he tried to manage his shocked breathing. The neighbor walked over, noticing me upset. She said something like “It’s ok, it wasn’t your fault,” but it didn’t sink in. To place any blame meant this event had an explanation, but I knew there was none. In such a big world, our paths had simply crossed, and we’d both lived to tell the story. Our fates had boiled down to inches, and we’d gotten lucky.

It was over, and after I controlled my shaking, and watched the girl walk away on both feet without any trace of a limp, my friend and I got back into the Mazda. I needed out of there, not wanting to speak, hear, or know any one of them any further. Scott looks at me as the engine turns and the car starts forward. He has no words, but stares, knowing that
miraculously, a half dozen people, including the two of us, have been spared the very worst moment of all of our lives. As he contemplates it, I acknowledge whatever God may be out there watching, sincerely, for the only time in my life.

I sit by the water in a lawn chair, a cold, half full beer in my hand. The sun has just set over the lake and the sky is a dark blue that will momentarily become black. A fire is roaring next to me, and my eyes become lost in the flames. Scott gathers firewood, and my other buddies, including George, are swimming in the calm, still water. The mile long beach is empty, except for us and our tents. Earlier that day, for ten brief seconds or so, I thought I'd never again know such peace. I stand up and walk barefoot in the sand toward Scott. I trot alongside him, gathering fuel for the fire.

"I hope I see her again in ten years or something," I say to him. "Just to see what she's doing."

He shakes his head instinctively, and looks at me as if we both were the only ones who knew some great secret. We'd explained the incident to the others, but quickly found doing it justice was impossible.

"She won't even remember today in a week, I bet," Scott replies.

I nod my head, and pick up a large dry piece of wood. Even if she didn't, the two of us would never forget the day. In my thoughts, I pictured a fifteen-year-old, blond girl, walking timidly into her first day of high school. Shuffling a schedule nervously in her hands, glancing at each face passing by, hoping to recognize one of them. Looking for her class in the big, new, foreign place, she is overwhelmed. She's nervous, but walking, and for that simple fact, in the darkest of times, I always will have a reason to smile.

Scott and I bring the thick pieces of wood back to the fire and toss them in. The fire is boiling, and the wood ignites instantly, illuminating the dark beach. There's a loud roar from the water, and Scott and I turn to see. We watch my first and best friend, George, race recklessly onto the black, intimidating lake with his jet ski. His uncle, who lives nearby, warned him not to drive the lightless vehicle after sunset, and we both chuckle at his lack of concern. George speeds across the shoreline and then turns sharply, causing the vehicle to spin out. Half drunk, the others in shallow water cheer as he is able to stay on during the spin. George stops, adjusts his life jacket, and with a pull on the gas steers full speed straight out in the water, appearing smaller and further away with every passing second. An instant later, the jet ski disappears within the darkness; our fire, the beacon to guide him back.
Red Leaves
Kris Tabor

"concerning happiness and the discovery of beautiful things"
Kevin Leonard

dingbat flew three times a day
when i lost you in feinting sleet
in River Born in Field of May

over orchard under cow
i couldn't stand in chills of if
i let myself swim down what's cliff

he crashed headlong into a plow
and in the lovely ornament of compost he sat,
he fancied a light wafer of roses
dancing somewhere on the left
"Todd? You asleep?"

He didn’t open his eyes. Slumped against the window with his headphones on, he was just a shoulder, just black cloth, just a tangle of hair. He probably hadn’t washed in days.

"Todd?"

In the white glare of oncoming headlights, his face seemed paler than she remembered, leaner, but it was the same old clothes and cigarette smell. After seven years of running, stalling, standing still, all he got was thinner.

She took a hand from the wheel and nudged him.

"Wake up. We’re almost there."

He sat up and tugged the headphones down, cursing softly and squinting at the dark woods outside. It was still raining and fog drifted in the low places, but the roads were familiar now. The signposts and trees were shadows from long-ago bike rides, caught for an instant in the headlights like photographs, then gone again. Todd sat back and pressed his eyes closed.

"Hey," she said, "remember when the creek flooded and we made those fishing poles?" That was the first summer they stayed here, when Todd was twelve and she was nine, before they heard about the accident. They spent two months wandering the fields and playing in the streams, conspiring to stay and never dreaming they’d have to.

"No," he said. He turned on the radio and swore at the static, punched the scan a few times, turned it off. He pulled the headphones back up.

Had he forgotten all of it, the four raging, sighing years he spent here? He stayed just long enough to get the shadow of a beard, and then he was gone. After that, it was seven years of Christmases waiting, of unreturned letters and dead-end phone calls, of looking for him everywhere. Seven years, and the only way she could finally bring him back home was another funeral.

They came to the turn and she brought them down the long driveway, a tunnel of branches and gravel winding to the old house. It was strange to see it dark, as if she’d thought somehow Grandpa would still be there with the porch light on, waiting. He always kept it on for Todd.

Out of the car the wind was cold, and late autumn rain hissed on the remnants of the leaves. Todd pulled his hood up and stuck his hands in his pockets.

"Couldn’t we have stopped or something? Like a motel?"

"I just wanted to get here, okay?" She popped the trunk and walked back to him.

"Yeah, well, I’m gonna stay in the car." He looked down and for a moment his eyes were empty.
Returning

Whatever fury drove him out at sixteen had since dripped out of him, and now he didn’t even look at her.

“No, come on, let’s go in.”

“I’m okay out here, all right?”

Sleeping in the car was nothing new for him. In the city she’d leave campus to walk down near the bars and closed-up arcades, looking for his car. If she didn’t find it, he could have been anywhere, and sometimes months passed without any word. Grandpa called and always asked, “have you seen him? Do you know where he is?” She almost never did.

“You have to come in,” she said. “I’m not going in there by myself.”

“Christ, you’re like what, twenty?” He opened the back door of the car. “You still afraid of the fairies?”

“Cut it out.”

“The old man finally talk you crazy? You didn’t believe all that stuff, did you?”

“Shut up,” she said. “Don’t be a jerk, okay? I just don’t want to be alone right now. And, you know, after all this time the least you could do is come inside.”

“What good does that do?” He sat on the edge of the back seat and looked into the trees. “He’s gone.”

“Yeah, well, I guess it doesn’t.” She felt her throat tightening. “Not any more.”

“What the hell do you want from me?” He got up and slammed the door. Pushing past her, he grabbed all his things from the trunk, just a wad of torn jeans and t-shirts all tangled up in a paper bag.

“You’re so fucking selfish!” She was yelling and knew it was pointless to yell at Todd, but now she was shaking and it didn’t matter. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

He stood there and just stared through her. She wanted to shake him, hit him, just choke him until something fell out.

“I mean, Jesus, Todd, do you even care about anything?”

“No. No, okay?” His voice was low and flat under the sound of the rain. “Leave me alone.”

He turned away and that was it. He’d walk away like there was nothing to say, like they were strangers and he never pulled her by the hand through the park or put a Band-Aid on her knee. He’d shrug and just like that it was gone.

“Todd, wait!”

Of course he wouldn’t wait, but this time her head was pounding and the empty house stared down with accusing eyes. This time it wouldn’t be that easy.

She lunged forward and grabbed him, yanked him back. They yelled clouds in the cold air and slid, pulling not anymore with words and eyes but with fingernails and jacket sleeves, heels digging in.

Rosemary Marcy
And then it fell. The bag ripped open and everything spilled out, every sorry rag and cigarette box, and something hard and heavy that hit the gravel between them. She stopped and stared at it, feeling him pull out of her numb hands.

A gun. He had a gun. She looked up and saw his eyes colorless in the dark, his face expressionless. He picked it up.

“Just leave me alone,” he said, and walked away.

She watched him go but couldn’t move, just stood there in the muddy tangle of his clothes. He had a gun. For a crazy moment, she thought of secret enemies and threatening men, tattoos and cash, Todd in deep with something sinister, but no. That wasn’t Todd. Todd was sudden screaming and long silences, mild dark eyes and his soft, collapsing face. The gun had to be for him.

A gentle nausea slid through her as she bent to pick up the clothes. It couldn’t really have come to that, not that, not Todd. He used to laugh out loud at cartoons and put fake spiders in her hair. He loved jazz and martini olives. Girls loved him. He had friends in the city, and didn’t she give him money, cigarettes, her phone number? But he had a gun.

She closed the trunk and started toward the house with slow steps, looking up at the dark windows. Once, she would stand on the balcony and look at the stars, Grandpa making popcorn in the kitchen and Todd on his belly by the fire. In the spring, the yard was covered in clover and they let their rabbits free, playing Frisbee in the cold wind while the dog slept on the porch.

In those days, Todd was explosive. Every word in Grandpa’s mouth was a detonator, and there were afternoons of slammed doors and bitter accusations. He hid in the cellar and brooded, or took long walks back toward town. The porch railing had hatchet scars from the autumn he was fifteen.

She went inside and turned on the lights. Every photograph, every quilt was still just so, as if Grandpa had only stepped out for the afternoon and would soon be home to wrap her in his wool and wood-smoke arms, tell her it would be all right. She had last semester’s grades and his favorite licorice in her purse, and now it seemed impossibly stupid.

She sat down by the cold hearth and listened. The only sound was wind and rain, no sound of Todd. On nights like this, Grandpa used to say the hobgoblins were out to dance on the roof. He’d smile sideways at her and whisper the names of the ones he knew, counting them off on his rough fingers. For every little thing, he had a story like that.
Returning

Each summer he cut roses to put by the stream for the sylphs, and every night filled a porcelain dish with milk for the cellar brownies. Todd swore at him and called him crazy, threw rocks in the stream and smashed the dish. Grandpa only shook his head and picked up the pieces.

“He’s a sensitive boy,” he said. “Everything touches him deeply.” She sat with him all that night, helping him glue each shard back in place.

Grandpa believed in wicked spirits, too, the kind that crawled inside your skin and stung you, poisoned you until you changed. Letting them get you was easy, he said, but getting rid of them was hard. Todd believed nothing, but he changed before her eyes. The boy who loved salamanders and hayrides, with his shy smile and wavy hair, dried up and disappeared, overtaken by a stranger with shadows under his eyes.

She stood up and went to the kitchen, took the old dish from the cabinet shelf and ran her fingers over the cracks. Every night while Todd lit the fire, Grandpa poured a little milk in the bottom of the dish and, winking at her, went down the basement stairs without a sound. In the morning, the dish was always empty and clean. Todd, of course, said it was rats.

A floorboard creaked somewhere and she stopped. Had he come inside? She closed her eyes and listened, but it was so quiet even the ticking of the clock seemed loud. He wouldn’t use it tonight, she told herself, not here with her. Even he couldn’t be that selfish.

She took a deep breath and set the dish on the table. After Todd left for good to the city, she and Grandpa sat here every night to read the news. Never saying so, they looked for him on every page, his face caught in a photograph, his name in a police blotter, a message hidden in the classifieds just for them. Whenever the phone rang, it might have been Todd.

Going to college was her chance. If she could find him, talk to him, bring him back home, something could change. She waited and planned for the day she’d find him, but it happened one day by chance. Glancing up from the street she caught him at a bus stop leaning out of the snow, strung out or exhausted or both. He blinked at her in mute surprise and asked her for a smoke.

But he wouldn’t come home. Every time she found him, she lost him again. The city kept swallowing him whole, and every time she saw him something else seemed missing.

“It’s the vampire,” Grandpa said, “the one in his skin. He’s too afraid to force it out, too afraid to let anyone in.” He said such things aren’t that rare.
Returning

Tragedy lets them in, and people don’t know it until it’s far too late.

And now Todd had a gun. He wouldn’t use it tonight, not tonight, but after the funeral he might do anything. She could take it while he slept, talk to him later, tell him what? There was nothing she could say he wouldn’t ignore. She couldn’t even bring him home until it was too late.

She swallowed back tears and ran her finger over the scalloped edge of the dish. Grandpa had been gone for more than a week, and the brownies were probably hungry. The thought was ridiculous, but it was something, at least, she could do. Like a tribute, she thought, and took the bottle of milk from the fridge. He would have wanted this done.

Carefully she took the dish of milk and walked as he had, slow steps without a sound to open the cellar door, but it was already open. She hesitated, looking into the dark. If it was open, it had to be Todd. Grandpa hated it open and they always used to fight about it.

She turned around. If he was there, the brownies could wait. He was sitting down in the dark with the gun, and whatever he was thinking, she had no answers for it. She didn’t have any words left, any tactics yet to try. He had the gun and his silence, and anything she had was useless.

Rosemary Marcy

She leaned against the wall and just tried to breathe. They’d all be in the ground together, and there’d be no more chasing him, no more begging and yelling, no more explaining. Just like that, it would all be over, and every year she’d put flowers on their graves.

Todd would never smile again, never laugh again, never fall in love. He’d never sing out loud with his headphones on, or walk down by the river in the snow. No one would remember the house, the stream, the fairies. How could she tell a photograph she was sorry, or tell a grave stone that she’d tried?

Slowly, she turned back to the door.

With the dish in one hand, she lit the waiting candle and picked it up. Every step she took one by one, breathing slowly the damp cellar smell of earth and rust. A strange draft came from somewhere, cold and gusting, pulling at the flame.

Below, the silence was deeper. The trembling golden light reached down, brushing the edges of the room. At the bottom, the light spread out across the packed dirt floor, and there in the edge of it was Todd.

She stopped. He sat very still with his back to her, surrounded by the strange, moving shadows of the cobwebs.

“Diane?” he whispered.

“It’s me,” she said.
Setting the candle and dish by the stairs, she came to his side and knelt. His face was in his hands and the gun was in his lap, gleaming black and heavy in the dim light. If only she knew the right thing, the thing that would reach him, the magic words to dissolve the wall of silence. Words wouldn’t come.

Slowly, she touched his shoulder, feeling his bones as if they were bare.

The cold wind fought with the candle flame, pulsing from the open window in wet gusts. The light flashed brighter, stammered, and died. She clutched his shoulder in the sudden dark, imagining soft noises in the corners of the room.

They didn’t move. For a long time, she just held on and listened to him breathe. She closed her eyes against the dark like children do and thought of a lullaby their mother once sang. She could almost hear it, blowing through the room on the autumn night wind, wisps of something almost forgotten. He would remember it, too.

Quietly, she started to sing. At first she could only breathe it, hesitating over the words, the faded sound, but then something in her chest let go, something tight and aching held so long she’d forgotten that, too. The song flowed out like water, warm as blood, and filled the air around them. When she felt him shaking, she held him in her arms.

At last they were quiet, and even the wind stilled. His face was buried in her shoulder.

“I miss them,” he said. She heard the cracks in his voice.

“I know.” She held him tighter. “God, I know.”

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“Me, too.” She brushed her fingers through his hair. “Please, come up.”

She took his hand and they stood, leaving the gun behind on the cold ground. By touch she found the candle and the dish, then led him up.

In the electric glare of the hallway, his face was stark and smudged with dust, but his eyes were green and clear. She set the candle on the stand and looked up at him, feeling the tears drying on her cheeks. He turned toward the rest of the house and took a deep breath.

She looked down at the cracked and mended dish, clean and dry as when she’d first picked it up. Slowly, she closed the basement door. There was no need to ask and no reason to tell him. This was enough.

“Come on, Diane. Let’s go sit.”

For the first time in seven years, Todd went to light the hearth.
The moon shown brightly down like a guiding light to those that still walked the night streets. Wind roared loudly in the night, sending the last of fall’s leaves into a dance. Dim lit street lamps were positioned on every road. Two stray cats began to fight over food near an alleyway. One of the cats jumped on to a garbage can, not realizing the empty bottles lying on top. The noise of glass breaking sent the cats running off in to the night. A man appeared from the dark alleyway. Tall and lanky, the man walked humming a tune. The moonlight revealed his dark hair and pale face. He began walking down the street still humming to himself. He reached into his pockets for warmth. In his right pocket, he felt his lighter and box of Marlboros along with a piece of paper. He pulled out the paper, which was his business card. Max Johnson. Attorney. He said since the first day he got a case that he sold his soul to the devil. Brought up in a very Christian home, Max changed once he became an attorney. Every day was a new sin for him. Whether it was proving a guilty man innocent or putting an innocent life behind bars. His boss told him if he wanted to be the best he had to make sacrifices. Max was able to lie and protect his clients. Sometimes, he even fooled himself into believing the shit that came out of his mouth. Max laughed to himself, crumpled it up and threw it behind him. He reached for his lighter and cigarette as he turned right down the street.

Three months ago, he had one of the biggest cases he had ever faced. It was a rape-murder where he
was defending a loss cause. Unfortunately it was his boss’ only nephew. No pressure there, Max had thought when he was assigned the case. He was promised a raise if he could pull it off. He had a feeling what would happen if he could not do it. Max thought he could convince the jury with his persuasive words, but he was wrong. His guy was sent to jail for life with possibility of parole. Max was sent packing up his desk because he could not save his boss’ only nephew from the slammer. Max’s wife, a homemaker, was not too happy about his newly unemployment state.

“How are we supposed to pay for food, clothes, even this house?” She always yelled.

“I’m going to start my own law firm,” He responded confidently. He knew this would take some time and patience from both of them. She was not happy with his idea. His wife got a job at the local pharmacy as a cashier. She was at the pharmacy more hours than she was home. And when she was home, she hardly said anything to Max. He knew this would all change once everything was ready. Max knew he could save the day.

Max’s walk was very peaceful for him and he enjoyed the solitude of it. As he made his way down the street, he noticed a man up ahead swaying back and forth like following a zigzag line. The man was obviously enjoying his night by the loud, unrecognizable song he was bellowing. A rush of wind blew hard. The man, unable to balance, was knocked off his feet. Max smiled at the drunk’s helplessness.

“Need some help there, buddy?” Max said to the man. The man laughed out loud.

“Max, is that yer? Geez, what a state to see me in, right?” The jolly man said.

It was one of Max’s newest clients. Even though there were still some screws loose with his firm office being official, people still found him for legal advice. This new client was Henry Norman, a large man with rosy cheeks. Max had met him a month ago and helped Henry with a car accident.

Max was surprised that even though Henry was obviously drunk, he was able to see him in the lowly lit street. He stuck out his hand. Max, knowing the size of the man was double his, knew he could not possibly lift him to his feet.

“I am gonna need your help with this,” Max said politely.

“I wuz gonna help yer. I ain’t an asshole, yer know that,” The fat man said with a tone. Though Henry said he was helping, it sure did not feel that way to Max. He used all his strength to bring this man to his feet.

“Thank yer,” Henry mumbled.

Out of breath, Max whispered, “Your welcome.” The dim lights revealed a smile from Henry’s large face. Both men began to walk down the street.

“I didn’t know you lived around here.” Max said as a question. Usually they would meet in diners, or at Henry’s office downtown.

“Oh ye-yes, I live down the next block, I think,” Henry began to laugh. Max smirked.
“So are you celebrating or something?” Max asked.

“Yu-Yup sir, indeed I am. I got a nice raise and I’m in love with the prettiest girl I’ve ever seen,” Henry said cheerfully. Max remembered that during one of the first meetings with Henry, they began to talk on a personal level. In their discussion, Henry brought up his new stricken love.

“So you’re going to marry her for sure?” Max said smirking in the night. He only heard that this woman was beautiful, sharp, and most importantly seemed very interested in Henry. Max thought she was only into his money. He was sure of it, but did not want to ruin his new friend’s mission of marriage. Like it was possible, Max thought to himself.

The two men kept talking as they walked down to the end of the street. The air was getting colder and the wind was, at this point, unbearable.

“Would yer like to come in fer a drink?” Henry asked. Max agreed, happy to hide from the night’s weather. He had never been into Henry’s house before.

“Are you always this trusting or is it the alcohol?” Max said jokingly. Henry laughed loudly which echoed through the empty street.

“I’ve known this area my whole life and have yet to come face to face with harm. Plus, yer my lawyer, why shouldn’t I trust the man that got me out of my fender bender,” Henry said confidently. Max smiled to himself. He thought Henry was brave and also thought, given Henry’s size no one would want to try anything.

Henry’s house was the second house, as they turned left down his street. Even in the dark, Max could make out the giant silhouette of Henry’s colonial home. Max was in amazement at the size of the house. Henry, noticing Max’s reaction, grinned.

“It’s three floors. Five bedrooms and three bathrooms. Ha, and its been all for me fer I can’t recall. It was my grandpa’s. He was a good man. Once I get my gal in here it won’t be too lonely anymore.” Max smirked again and walked down the path to his front door.

The inside of Henry’s house was just as impressive as its size. He had dark wooden floors and paintings on every inch of the wall. Everything was neat. Max found it strange that Henry was not already married. Most women would crawl to his feet knowing the amount of money he had. Max followed Henry, who now was walking almost perfect, but not quite, down a hallway.

“You like brandy? I got the best brandy in the whole county. We’ll drink some,” Henry insisted without question. Henry opened the door and switched on the lights. Max rubbed his eyes trying to adjust to the light. The room held a nice wooden bar with stools all around it. Like the rest of the house it had paintings everywhere. There was also a table with chairs to sit on, obviously a card table, Max thought. Henry walked behind the bar to retrieve two glasses and the bottle of brandy. He brought it over to the table and sat down.

“I hope you can hold your liquor,” Henry

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laughed. Max smiled and sat down next to him. Henry’s red face blended well with his ginger hair. Henry poured both glasses to the top and pushed Max’s to him.

“Cheers!” Henry said. They tapped glasses and both took a sip of the brandy. The liquor burned down Max’s throat causing him to cough. Henry laughed.

“I’ll get you some water.” Max was relieved when Henry brought him the water. He drank the full glass and set it down on the table.

“Yup, the strongest brandy I’ve ever tasted,” Henry bellowed as he took another gulp of it. Max stared at Henry, studying him. Max knew a bit about Henry, but as they sat and drank their brandy, Henry began his lifetime story. His grandfather had been his guardian since he was five after his parents died in a car accident. Henry was a college graduate of Columbia University with a degree in finance. After college he went on to work as a financial analysis for Morgan Stanley in Manhattan. His grandfather knew people within the company to help him get the job. When his grandfather became ill, he was able to transfer to Boston to take care of him. Five years ago, his grandfather passed away after battling lung cancer. Because he was the only grandchild, he received most of his grandfather’s possessions.

Everything was basically handed to him. He was probably the type that argued he worked hard for where he was.

“So, I bet you’re all married with kids, right?” Henry asked taking another sip of his brandy. This was one of the questions never discussed during their meetings.

“I have a wife and no kids,” He said flatly. He picked up his glass and swirled around the brandy. Henry appeared to notice the tone in his voice.

“You don’t seem to happy about your situation.”

“No, well, my wife is never around anymore. I believe she’s having an affair,” Max said truthfully. At first, Max was apprehensive about saying what he had said, but he had intended too. He knew Henry would continue the conversation since they were new friends, or so Henry thought.

“So I guess your life isn’t perfect. And by the sounds of it, not everything is going in your favor, my friend,” Henry stated.

“It will eventually,” Max responded with a smile.

He could not remember the last time his wife and him made love, or even kissed for that matter. He noticed after two weeks after he was let go, his wife began to wear more makeup. She told him that since she had to be out in front of people, she wanted to look presentable. Max did not buy it. He loved her, but knew when someone was not being truthful. He knew the nights she snuck out of bed in the middle of the night, and the conversations that had her giggle like a schoolgirl. He even suspected his wife had the man over in his bed. There was a time he wanted to confront her, but he was not the type of person. Though Max had thought that
not saying anything made him look like an idiot, he believed in punishment. If he left, that would be what his wife wanted. Max was conniving and did not want his wife to be happy.

"You don’t seem too upset," Henry said. "Well of course I am, but what can I do?" Max said with a smirk.

"You should kill her. I know people who..."

Henry made a gesture with his right pointer finger sliding across his neck. Max laughed at the idea. Killing his wife, like many of his clients had done after they found out about an affair, was pointless. Max was cunning enough to realize that if he wanted revenge, killing his wife would not be the answer.

"I don’t think so my friend," Max said.

"Yeah, cops would be all over you in a heart beat," Henry responded. Max smiled at his new friend and shook his head.

"No, that’s not it. Some people I have represented have killed their wife after finding out of an affair, which never works out in their favor. If I wanted revenge, killing my wife would not give me justice. Killing her lover, on the other hand, would. Having him out of the picture would basically make her left with nothing," Max said. Henry’s face was still burning red. Max had thought he would eventually sober up, but it seemed like Henry was taking steps backward.

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Henry’s eyes grew big and he leaned over the table toward Max.

"Now that’s a smart idea Max! Wow, that’s revenge," Henry said, awestruck. Max was flattered. "Of course killing the poor bastard would need some planning," Max thought. Henry went to pour another glass of brandy, but quickly stopped to speak.

"I’ve heard of some ruthless killings from the guys I work with. We all have someone in our thoughts about killing. I mean actually hearing that person is dead, it’s like a weight lifted off your chest. When my grandpa was on his deathbed, he was telling me stories of his youth. Apparently, and I don’t know if he was making it up because he was drugged up, but his best friend killed a man. Turns out the guy was stealing money from the company that led to the company’s bankruptcy. So instead of turning the guy to the feds, he beat him to death.

"Very interesting. Now Henry, what would you do if you were in my shoes?" Max asked. Henry looked up at the ceiling and seemed to go off in a daze. Max wanted to laugh at the expression on Henry’s face. It looked like a face of a chubby little boy admiring how donuts were made. Max thought Henry was envisioning a killing.

Henry smiled with excitement and said, "I think I would go after the asshole too. I mean, at first I would just walk away from the situation, but you have a way with words Max. No wonder you’re a lawyer. I think I would use poison, or strangle him, or even shoot him," Henry’s voice was loud as he responded. Max gave Henry credit for being a bit creative. He had known that Henry would most likely say to shoot something, but did not expect the poison.
One Dark Night

“Well I would need to know who the guy is before I did any of those things, right?” Max’s eyes were firm on Henry, waiting for his response.

“Well I guess you would have to pretend to leave your house one day, but hide somewhere to see the bastard then follow him to where he lives,” Henry clapped his hands together. Max could tell Henry was very impressed with himself. Henry grabbed the bottle of brandy, but was having trouble opening it. Max grabbed Henry’s glass and the bottle. He opened it with no trouble and poured Henry another. Henry was staring at one of the many paintings in the room.

“Yeah I guess I would have to do that. Maybe watch him leave my house, follow him to work, then see where he goes next...maybe he gets into a problem as he is on his way to work where he needs a lawyer and I could be the Good Samaritan,” Max said carefully. Henry slammed his right hand hard on the table and laughed.

“Ha! Hey that sounds exactly how we just met!” Henry snorted. He looked at Max who held no expression in his face.

A month ago, after Max had pretended to go work on some business with his office, he waited to see who his wife was sleeping with. From his front door, a large man with curly red hair came out with a smile, and walked to his car. Max had wanted to just confront him then, but he wanted sweet revenge. Max had gotten into his car and began to follow Henry’s black BMW to downtown. As fate would have it, Henry had ignored a red light causing a car making a right turn to crash into his. This was his perfect chance, Max had thought. He quickly got out of his car and ran to Henry’s. He had remembered that Henry’s face was like a bright apple.

“Sir, are you okay? I am a lawyer. My name is Max Johnson. I can help you get out of this,” He had said to him in the most sincere tone. Henry had been in shock and to Max, Henry had seemed in need of him. Max had handed him his number for him to call. Max had been worried Henry would not call. He had thought a man like Henry driving in a nice BMW would already have a lawyer. But, the next day, Henry had called.

Because Max knew he was a great lawyer, he had been able to persuade Henry’s advisors from work to allow him to take the case. Max had put all of his effort into the case, meeting with Henry several times a week. The court hearing had been a few days ago where Max used his conniving ways to make Henry innocent. Max, also being a witness, he had stated that the light has always had many problems where the traffic light was dim lighted and hard to read during the day.

It was all perfect for Max. He had Henry where he wanted him. Henry was staring blankly at him, scared and confused.

“I think yer got the wrong guy,” Henry pleaded. He looked around the room. Max knew he was thinking of a way out, but Henry’s weight would prevent that. Max’s eyes glared at him.

“No, I am pretty sure that you’re the fat bastard
sleeping with my wife in my bed,” Max said coolly. Henry’s eyes grew wide.

“It’s funny that you mentioned poison…” Max began. The words slithered out of his mouth.

Sweat began to slide down from Henry’s forehead. Max could tell Henry was trying to process the last few minutes. It probably was hard for Henry to do so at this point. Max noticed that Henry was staring at his hands. He probably felt a tingling feeling in his hands already, Max thought to himself. Henry grabbed at his head. Both hands pulling back his face to keep his eyes opened. “You’re probably feeling a bit nauseous,” Max said as he got up from the chair.

Max witnessed Henry trying to move, but his body was not on the same page as his mind. He fell to the ground. Max thought that Henry looked like a fish out of water, squirming around, helpless. Max crept toward Henry and stood over him, staring at him. Henry lay on his back not moving. His eyes were wide looking everywhere but at Max.

“Please!” Henry whispered through the pain. Max laughed menacningly.

“I’m going to watch the poison go through your entire body until you’re dead. More than likely you’ll vomit and possibly choke. Like I said before, everything usually goes in my favor. I’m always in control. You’ll be dead by morning. Someone will find you, thinking you drank yourself into an endless sleep. My wife will be devastated by the news and thus, she will suffer a broken heart, and I will have my revenge,” The last words lingered in the air. Max reached in
Late classes were killing Kane, but he needed them to graduate. He sat on the bus stop bench with his backpack between his feet, reading about Anaximander’s theory of the apeiron. How things emerged in pairs of opposites. The teacher explained it as a mixing bowl. Turn the electric mixer on high and things flick out. If you turned the mixer in the apeiron on high and hot flicked out that means cold stayed in the bowl. If noise flicked out then silence stayed in. Simplistic idea when you thought about it. It can’t be both noisy and quiet at the same time right?

Only minutes had passed but the sky was growing increasingly dark with dusk and an oncoming thunderstorm. Kane looked up as the street lamp blinked on and glowed orange. He put his book in his pack and waited as the late spring rain started.

It was only spitting when the city bus pulled to a stop, but by the time Kane sat down in the second to last seat, it had begun to pour. He removed his glasses and wiped the forming fog from the lens. His brown hair, that was too long to be preppie but too short to be hippie, was damp from his brief stay in the rain. Kane put his backpack under the seat, pulled his philosophy book out again and surveyed the other passengers. There were five joining him for the bus ride home tonight. Two old ladies near the driver were bickering over price hikes at the local hang out for deal seeking seniors. One, stoically for the increase, was justifying the business’s actions to her friend, who was
adamantly against it. Two rows behind them was a mother humming softly to a little boy near sleep. The final fellow traveler was a man who sat behind Kane looking months from a shower and days from a fix. Making a small noise of disgust, Kane opened his textbook. A forty-five minute ride home and philosophy reading to finish, he figured he would be out in no time.

He had been staring at the left margin of the apieron theory page for maybe eight minutes when the man behind him coughed and moved forward a seat, bringing a gym bag with him. Kane smirked and thought, a scum bag flicks out and a clean man stays in. He heard a zipper to his left and lost the feeble fight to not look at the guy. He stared at Kane with his hand in the bag and raised a finger to his chapped lips in a shushing gesture. His bloodshot eyes fixed on Kane's and refused to let go. Slowly, like a junkie magician without a rabbit or a hat, the man produced a handgun from the bag and smiled. The twenty-year-old college student stiffened and started to stand, his hands gripping the top of the seat. His blue eyes fixed on the gun.

"Sit boy" the man ordered in a low voice.

Kane's eyes went to the front of the bus for a moment before he obediently lowered himself back into the seat. The other passengers were oblivious.

"Good dog. Gimme your bag and whatevah is in your pockets."

Sliding the backpack across the aisle, Kane started to stand to get into his pockets when he heard the bus driver yell. "Listen kid, you wanna stop bouncing up and down and stay in your friggin seat?"

"You tell him anything and I shoot you now!" The man hissed as he quickly sank towards the window, the gun still on Kane. He closed his eyes. If the man killed him, he would definitely kill the others. Kane knew he had to try and disarm him, but how?

Abel stopped typing to savor a stretch. The large red numbers on the stereo's digital face told of a long night that had just begun. It was 10:43 and he was only one scene into the assignment. He usually put more time into these things, but he had had to put it off until the last minute and now was in a hurry to get a rough draft done before his 11:05 class tomorrow. He could always start the story over if he didn't like it before the final deadline in two weeks. He leaned over and poked his fingers through the slats of Tip's hamster cage. Tip was curled in a ball, unaware and uninterested in Abel. Abel drew his hand back and rested his chin on it.

"Now comes the hard part. Should I have the other passengers step in or should I leave all the attention on Kane and the grungy guy?" He hit the enter key, and sat
back, watching the cursor blink. He heard “Brown Eyed Girl” playing from the apartment above him and hummed along trying to think of the band’s name. With a sudden feeling of dry mouth, he reached for his plastic red cup only to find after he gulped air that it was empty. Abel hit the save key and made his way to the kitchen. “Do you remember when we used to sing, Sha la la la la la la la la ti da...” He opened the fridge and got the milk out then poked around through leftovers and lunchmeat looking for a snack. He pulled a plate of meatloaf from behind old spaghetti sauce and sniffed it before putting it in the microwave.

Abel watched the plate revolve and let himself zone. In vain he found his face in the reflective glass of the microwave. He needed a haircut. His dad was always telling him it was too long for a preppie but too short for a hippie. His blue eyes were still his best feature, even if he wore glasses. He thought of his character Kane. The way Abel wrote him he was his literal twin; the hair, the eyes, the glasses, the age, all of it the same.

“Lookin’ good for twenty!” he said and did a double point, wink and click at his reflection as the timer went off. He picked up the milk jug and looked to the counter for his cup then remembered he left it on the desk. Abel grabbed a small handful of baby carrots for Tip, found a clean enough fork and balanced the milk on the side of the plate as he went back to his room.

Humming the chorus to “Brown Eyed Girl”, he stepped in the room. He had barely crossed the doorjamb when he stopped in mid sha la la. There was a man in his chair reading his computer screen. He looked somewhat familiar.

“HEY! What the hell...”

“This is me, isn’t it?” the intruder asked uneasily, sounding like he might blow chunks at any minute.

“Who are you?” Abel quietly questioned, unsure if he wanted an answer.

The man turned the office chair smoothly around and glared at Abel, his tone shifting quickly to anger.

“I’m Kane.”

Abel dropped everything in his hands. The milk jug bounced and started to leak. Meatloaf and ketchup slopped against the bed frame, and baby carrots rolled across the floor.

“You can’t be Kane. Kane is fictional. Made-up. He’s not real.” Abel hands flew to his head where they gripped fistfuls of hair.

“Hey! Are you seeing me? Do I look fictional to you?” Kane rose from the chair and grabbed Abel’s hand, “Do I feel ‘fake’ to you?”

Abel drew back from his touch and felt his sneaker slide in the forming puddle of milk. “No, but, how... why... oh my God, I don’t understand this!”
"Oh, you don’t understand this? You don’t understand this? One minute I’m about to be shot for a pack of juicy fruit, a used philosophy book and a pizza club card and the next thing I know I’m sitting here reading about it. So, tell me again, who the fucking hell do you think is more confused about this?!?"

Abel fell onto the bed and held his head between his knees. "Oh my God! I don’t know what to ... how the... maybe I’m dreaming."

"I think this is more like a nightmare genius! And by the way, why do you look like me?"

"Dude, listen, I don’t look like you, you look like me. You are a fictional character. I created you solely for this stupid English assignment. You are not real. You need to go back into the story. Right now! I don’t care how you got here just go back in!"

"How can I go back in if I don’t know how I got here to begin with? Why did you have to make us look the same? Is that guy really going to fucking shoot me?"

"The rough draft is due tomorrow; I was running out of time and needed a quick character. Just seemed easier to use my own description, just change the name."

Abel looked up with a hint of hatred and an overload of confusion. "Why am I even discussing this with you?"

Abel sighed and tried to crack his neck, "Who gives a shit man, you’re not real anyways. Where’s the proof that I am talking to you right now? I probably fell asleep at the keyboard. You could be a nightmare or whatever Dickens described it as, what was it a glob of mustard or some shit." Abel stopped talking and moved to the computer chair as he took in the look of shock on
Kane’s face. “Really when you think about it, I created you; somehow I brought you into this world.” He rolled the chair closer to the desk, never looking away from Kane. “That means I can also take you out of it.”

Before Kane could absorb what was said, Abel turned to the keyboard, his index finger hovering over the backspace key.

“I wonder if I could just delete you and start over.”

Looking at Kane with a sudden curiosity, Abel started to tap the key.

With only the sound of having the wind knocked from him, Kane dropped like dead weight to the floor, digging his disappearing fingers into his skull. His whole body seemed to surge with electricity that shocked him in time to the tapping. He arched his back, twisted his neck, and clawed at his head all without a sound. As the tapping continued, he seemed to grow transparent. Abel could see that he had fallen on a combination of meatloaf and ketchup and was grinding it into the floorboards. Kane’s eyes bugged and rolled looking at everything and nothing. Abel slowed the tapping and noticed Kane’s jerky movements slowed, but still in a sick rhythm with the key.

From somewhere outside, a car horn blared. Abel looked to his digital clock. It read 11:26. The tapping stopped.

“But if I were to delete you now,” Abel said to the ghost-like mess writhing silently on the floor with an amused and interested smile, “I would have to turn in a considerably worse piece tomorrow. So…” he grabbed the mouse and clicked edit, undo typing, spinning the chair around quickly so as not to miss seeing if Kane regained his solid state. Sputtering as he was once again allowed to breathe, Kane stiffly pulled himself to kneel beside the bed, rumpling the comforter in his fists as the room continued to slowly pulsate.

Abel’s grin got wider as he stared transfixed at Kane’s pain.

“That was awesome! How did it feel? Did you feel like you were dying? I didn’t know that would work like that. I wonder how long it would take to…” He turned the chair towards the desk again and eagerly sought the backspace. Kane lunged from his knees and wrapped his hands around Abel’s throat, tipping the chair over as he dragged him to the bed. However, that was as far as his strength would take him. He was drained, still too weak to do any harm. Kane slackened his nonexistent grip and stepped back. Pacing in front of Abel, his eyes skimmed the immediate area, looking for a weapon, and on a shelf above the bed, he saw it, a first place lacrosse trophy. He looked at Abel, still on the bed, rubbing his throat in annoyance.

Abel glanced impatiently at the digital clock, “Will you please just get out of here or stand in the other room.
so I can finish this and get some sleep?"

Kane stopped thinking as he gripped the trophy and swung it at Abel’s head. The base connected just as Abel was picking his head up to speak. The look of panic that came over his face as he realized too late what was happening was comical to Kane. He started to laugh as the adrenaline surged and he brought the imitation marble down on Abel’s head six more times, stopping only when he saw a spot of blood on the bedspread. With pins and needles all over, breathing hard, he swayed and stared.

It was minutes until a wave of nausea washed through his body, breaking his one-sided staring contest with the blood. He felt the weight of the trophy slip from his hand to the floor and nudged it under the bed with the toe of his sneaker. They were wearing the same sneakers, right down to the tear on the side of the left shoe.

As he let his breathing return to normal, he turned his hands in front of his face, examining every inch of them for wounds or burns. His head still thumped but it wasn’t all from the business on the floor. It was from swinging the trophy, his club, down on Abel. From hearing it making contact, feeling the impacts, and knowing it was doing real damage. It was the rush he got that made his head pound and his stomach sick. Passing his hands down over his chest, he made sure he was in fact all there. He swept bits of meatloaf from his pant legs then leaned in towards Abel and listened. He was still breathing. That was good. He didn’t know why he had attacked him, but now that Abel was unconscious he felt better. He slid to the floor near where Abel was on the bed and brushed his hair aside.

“How,” Kane whispered into Abel’s ear, still a little out of breath, “did you do that?” He stared at his closed eyes and hoped that Abel had created them enough alike that he could read his mind in some way. No such luck. With a sigh, Kane looked down and noticed a bit of blood on his hands. “More importantly,” he said, wiping his hands on his jeans, “can I do it too?”

Although his only source of answers was unable and unwilling to help him, he was starting to feel calmer. In a déjà vu moment he reached over and picked up the red plastic cup on the computer desk, only to find after he gulped air that it was empty. The milk jug had slid to the bookcase when Kane had hit the floor. It was about three quarters full and slowly leaking, creating a water way under the shelves. He retrieved it and drank, not bothering to pour any into the cup. While he sat with his back to the bed and drank from the jug, he looked for the first time at his surroundings. There were posters of Abel’s (Kane’s) favorite bands on each wall. Abel’s (no, Kane’s) lacrosse uniform was living in the far corner with the other inmates of the overflowing hamper. “I gotta do laundry
tomorrow.” He said to himself and took another swig.

There were pictures of Abel (of Kane) smiling with friends at beaches, at concerts, on boats, and at fireworks stuck to a bulletin board. On the same board were letters from Abel’s (they were Kane’s!) family, each one ending with a loving sentiment or something hinting at how proud they were of Abel (Kane). There were shelves with certificates from boy scouts, awards from school science fairs and sports events. Kane smiled (I won those). He stood up and brought down a good citizenship plaque. He ran his fingers down the engraved letters that spelled out how good a person he was then remembered as he traced the name at the bottom that it wasn’t presented to him.

Tossing it back onto the shelf, he picked up a picture of a birthday party. A young boy sits at a picnic table, grinning from ear to ear. He’s wearing a yellow and red striped cone shaped party hat, one of the cheap kinds with elastic string that usually snap eleven minutes after putting them on. He’s eating chocolate cake with white frosting; the evidence is all over his shirt and face. On either side of him are smiling children who are also gorging themselves with cake and soda. The brutalized remains of a race car pinata lie in the background. A table of presents sits to the side. They seem to have escaped the pinata’s beating, but only for the time it took to take the picture. It looks like the best day of the boy’s life.

“Me.” Kane thinks then notices something. The front of the picture, down in the right hand corner; there’s writing. Abel’s tenth birthday. With shaking hands, he hurled the frame to the floor and ground pieces of glass into the area rug.

“If they think he’s perfect, they’re wrong.” Kane said as he glanced over the evidence of Abel’s seemingly perfect life. Five hours ago, Kane wasn’t even an idea in Abel’s brain. Kane was created to be a sacrifice to the faculty in exchange for a passing grade. Why did Abel get to play God? They looked exactly alike. Kane wiped tears from the corners of his eyes, his anger towards Abel inflating.

Abel was still unconscious on the bed. His legs splayed over the edge, his head just shy of the pillow. Kane went to him and hovered over his face, staring, wondering why he got to be the real one. If it was because Abel was a good person, it wasn’t a good enough reason. Abel had a whole twenty years to be good and perfect; Kane hadn’t had that chance. Granted, his actions so far had been less than note worthy but he knew he could be better if he had been given the chance.

“How good can you be if you were going to kill me anyways?” Kane asked. “I wish we could switch places, and then I would kill you like you planned to kill me.” He smiled. “I bet I could send you into the story. You didn’t think twice about almost deleting me and now
I see how easy it is to just not care when you assume you are in charge. Well I’m not assuming; I know for a fact that I’m in charge now and I am not going to hesitate. While I try and decide if I want to kill you in the story, I’ll stay here and have a crack at your life, see if I can’t make it any better.” He looked to the computer; the 3D pipes screensaver was active.

“I’m more than adjectives and descriptors,” Kane whispered as he knelt closer to Abel’s left ear, “and I think I know how to correct my situation.”

The digital clock read 11:53. He stood up and went to the desk. Tip was on his wheel, mindlessly running nowhere. With curiosity, Kane unhooked the cage’s top and took Tip out. The hamster sniffed and waddled across the desk as Kane watched with amusement. He put his hand palm up on the desk top and scooped Tip in with his other one. Kane liked how soft the hamster’s fur was. Without thinking, he closed his hands around the small animal. He could feel Tip’s feet padding around in circles, his nose trying to poke through the gaps between Kane’s fingers. Kane smiled and opened his hands. “Peek-a-boo” he told Tip as he started to take the top of the fish tank off with his free hand. Holding the hamster again in both hands he lowered it into the water. He didn’t know why, but as Tip started to frantically nip at his fingers and palms, he found himself humming “Brown Eyed Girl”. Even though the hamster had stopped moving, Kane didn’t open his hands until the song had left his head. Then he loosened his fingers and let Tip sink to the bottom of the tank.

Kane wiped his hands on his jeans leaving wet streaks behind. He wiggled the mouse to wake the computer up, glanced at Abel, and got to work.

Insert, auto text, replace word ‘Kane’ with word ‘Abel’. Kane clicked the OK button and turned in the chair. Abel was still on the bed, but he was starting to move. Kane went back to the screen and started clicking around. There was nothing under tools or format that seemed to do anything but change the alignment of the text. Edit? No, he wanted to keep what he had not delete it. Keep, stay, remain, save... SAVE... that’s what he wanted. He clicked file, save as, renamed the story ‘unabel’ and hit OK. Hoping that would do it he slowly turned again only to find Abel half sitting on the bed. But he could see the headboard through him and it looked like the more he stared the less of Abel he saw until he wasn’t there at all.

“Who’s the glob of mustard now?” Kane said and went back to typing. “I better get revising this if I want to hand in a semi decent piece tomorrow.”

Late classes were killing Abel, but the sickness was killing him faster. The sickness of living in this hell. There was no name for it, people just called it ‘Life’. He sat at the bus stop with his backpack between his feet,
watching crows hover around a very bloated dead deer across the street. Abel’s mind produced a mental video of a crow poking the carcass to explosion, its intestines splattering across a nearby storefront from the sudden release of pressure. He scrunched his face up and tried to shake the images from his head. “Entrails away.” he muttered as he picked a scab on his arm until it bled. The sky, that was so full with pollution that the blue was now stained gray, let loose a shower that wasn’t in the least refreshing. He pulled his glasses off and wiped them on his shirt, attempting to dry them off but only managing to smear the lenses into a greasy haze. As the lame excuse for a city bus rounded the corner, Abel stood and grabbed his backpack. With his hair damp and glasses starting to fog up again, Abel waited as the driver pounded the door open, then cautiously stepped aboard.

As he made his way down the aisle, he took note of two ancient crones cawing back and forth about some dire situation down at the body farm. Two rows behind them, a young woman sat softly humming a lullaby while staring out the dirty window. In her arms, she cradled the gray stiff corpse of a child. Ignoring her, he stepped over a scattered pile of rodent crap and took the second to last seat. As he cast his backpack to the floor, after deciding not to bother reading his philosophy homework, he took notice of the final passenger. A man dressed to the nines in a black suit, holding an attaché case on his lap was sitting in the last seat. The man looked very clean and out of place. Abel scratched his lice infested scalp and turned towards the front. The driver was negotiating a right turn when Abel heard a click. and from the corner of his eye, he saw the suit move to the seat next to him. Abel shifted to face the suit and watched as he pulled a gun from the case and put his left index finger to his mouth in a shushing gesture. The woman’s humming and the crone’s bickering seemed to mute as Abel’s blue eyes fixed on the gun.
Sidewalks and Alleyways
Allison Thayer

The night
brings out their cries.
They never sleep.

Hyped on meth resin
from the bottom of a light bulb.
They never sleep.

Their cardboard signs offer sex
for food to hide their ribs.
They never sleep.

A baby’s white-blue corpse lodged
in between the bricks and a broken chair.
His mother will never sleep.

Just because it’s nighttime
doesn’t mean they’ll sleep.
Empty Promises
Meg Ross

To his mother, Benjamin Brighton is a smart boy. A good boy. A healthy, loving, good son but despite it all, he's shy. He doesn't have many friends at school and he gets good grades but unfortunately he occasionally gets picked on by bullies. She says things like “You're a good, smart boy, Benjamin, maybe a little shy, but you'll grow out of it. Just like the bullies will grow out of picking on you.”

To his father, Benjamin's too soft, and too quiet. He's not like his big brother: football star and track captain for his last two years at school. Benjamin's smart, yeah, but he's a pansy. To his father, things like sports and sweating are far more important than grades. You don't sweat while you're doing algebra homework, and you certainly don't get by in this life with just brains alone - you need brawn. And his brother, Adam, just doesn't talk about him. He's got a little brother, sure, but they never see each other anymore. End of story.

Aside from everything his parents think, Benjamin is made fun of every day at school for being a “fag” and a “sissy.” So maybe his mother isn’t completely off base with her assumptions. He does have one friend; a small, slightly chubby girl who's smart and sweet and probably has a crush on him if her fluttering lashes are anything to go by. Benjamin is smart, near the top of his class; but that's mostly just because he has nothing better to do than his homework or study. He never goes to any dances or school events unless he's forced to because it's just not his scene.

He's an outcast. A “freak.” He's different. Benjamin has known this from a very, very young age. By the time he was five, his father had explained to him very carefully why Benjamin wasn't allowed to act or dress the way he wanted to, or play with the toys he wanted to. It wasn't right for a boy to want to put a frilly dress on with a princess tiara and it certainly wasn't right to play with a long, blond haired Barbie in place of a G.I. Joe like his brother Adam had when he was little.

Benjamin pulls himself out of his reverie, and blinks down at the picture clutched in his long, thin fingers: himself at eight, dressed up in his aunt's clothes, makeup garish and messy with a huge, lipstick-toothed smile on. He's happy in that picture, which, compared to the other pictures his mother has hung up around the house, is an anomaly. Benjamin smiles a little sadly as he brushes his fingers gently over the glossy photo and puts the picture back on his desk then places his schoolbooks in front of it. His parents wouldn't be happy if they saw it, so he keeps it hidden, just like everything else in his personal thoughts.

Then he sits there for a long moment, feeling lost. It's something that's been happening a lot lately so this feeling isn't new. It's been very prevalent for years, if he's going to be honest with himself, and he doesn't really know any other feeling. Then again, it isn't very often that he is honest with himself at all. Benjamin's never completely truthful with anyone, least of all himself. He can't be. He has enough trouble fitting in as it is.

With a sigh, Benjamin pushes all those maudlin feelings away and gets up. He has better things to do than sitting around and feeling sorry for himself for being different.
“Benjy!”

The shrill call makes Benjamin jump and drop his books on the floor. He hears people laugh and his cheeks heat.

It’s Angela of course. His best friend. Only friend. He smiles at her before picking up his books. “Hey, Angie.” He turns to his locker and switches his books out for his history binder.

“You’re coming over tonight, right? We’re going to watch The Notebook!” Angie bounces on her heels.

“Sure,” Benjamin says as he shrugs. They start towards class together as Angela starts singing praises for Ryan Gosling. Benjamin personally likes Rachel McAdams best. She’s amazing and beautiful in the movie. He’s seen pictures, heard all about her. But he doesn’t want her like all the other boys his age. Instead, he appreciates her acting and her looks.

And more than all of that, he wants to be her. He doesn’t belong in his body. He knows that he’s a girl. Apparently, something just got mixed up when he was created.

It doesn’t matter to the jocks at Benjamin’s school that his best friend is Angela, it doesn’t matter that he doesn’t talk to any guys, or that he doesn’t even look at guys. It doesn’t matter that Angela’s always flirting with him and hanging off him because they still think he’s gay.

But what they don’t understand is that Benjamin... isn’t. He’s not gay. But then, he doesn’t know if he’s straight either. He’s having a hard enough time realizing he’s in the wrong sort of body to figure out his sexual orientation.

“Fag,” some guy sneers as he walks past. Benjamin’s cheeks flush in anger and embarrassment, and Angela glares and hooks her arm through Benjamin’s.

“Ignore them. They’re just jerks.” She pulls him away while he stares at the floor, hair falling into his eyes.

He doesn’t see the guy before his shoulder crashes into Benjamin’s chest and knocks him to the floor. Benjamin lands right on his tailbone and he can’t help the yelp of pain he lets out. Everyone laughs except for Angela. Instead, she helps him up and dusts him off and Benjamin’s sure her hands are lingering more than they need to. Feeling her hands on him makes him feel like he wants to squirm out of his skin.

But he’s used to it, and he doesn’t wiggle as much as he used to.

“Way to go, fag boy!”

Then they walk on, just like always. Benjamin’s still blushing though and it feels like his face is about to burst into flames. He hates those idiots. He’s terrified that they’re going to corner him when he’s all alone and beat the piss out of him. He’d be left there all alone, for hours, bleeding and broken because no one would think to look for him. Except maybe Angela.

“Ignore them,” she says. That’s what she always says. Benjamin just shrugs it off and they walk out to Angela’s car together. It’s a small, black crappy car, but it doesn’t break down and the radio works. Benjamin’s parents won’t buy him a car, and all the money he ever earns goes into his savings account.

He ignores Angela babbling as she drives. Instead, he stares out the window, watching the trees blur as they...
pass them, morphing into lines of orange and gold and brown and green.

"Benjy, are you listening to me?" Angela says, snapping him out of his daze.

"Yeah," he answers absentmindedly. "I’m listening, Angie."

_The Notebook_ isn’t that great at all. Benjamin doesn’t understand it, really, because he knows real life will never work like that. Angela’s crying, her face half-buried against Benjamin’s chest, forcing him to wrap an arm around her back so it doesn’t fall asleep, trapped between their bodies. Angela doesn’t seem to mind.

“Oh, I love this movie,” Angela sighs when the credits start to roll. She pulls away and snatches a tissue from the handy box on the coffee table. “Wasn’t it beautiful, Benjy? It’s so romantic.”

Benjamin bites at his lip, then decides it’s easiest just to agree. “Yeah, real romantic,” he says. There’s no feeling behind the words, but Angela doesn’t notice because she’s still caught up in the aftermath of her emotional moment. Benjamin stands and heads to the bathroom to avoid any more tears or snot.

He closes the door and looks at himself in the mirror. His blonde hair is thick and messy, falling down across his forehead and past his ears. Pale blue eyes, almost invisible eyelashes, thin lips and a permanent pinkness to his cheeks. Pointed Adams apple that leads into a flat chest, and a scrawny body with too many angles and not enough soft curves. Ugly bump between his thighs. So obviously male.

Benjamin wishes more than anything that he’d been born in the right body because this one is all wrong. He tears his eyes away from the hair starting to grow on his chin and walks back out into the living room.

“Benjy! Hey, I have a question!”

With a sigh, Benjamin sits next to Angela and lets her lean against his side. “Yeah?”

“What do you want to be for the Halloween Dance? We should totally go as a pair!”

“I... guess.” He thinks, then shrugs. “I don’t know. Do you have anything in mind?”

“I have a great idea!”

Benjamin should have known.

It’s not too many days after that when Benjamin gets in huge trouble with his parents. His mom, a nosy and extremely strict Catholic, goes into his room while he’s in the shower. When he goes into his room, towel wrapped tight around his waist, she’s on his computer, staring in horror at the images of naked women splashed across his screen.

Benjamin cringes. His mom’s going to think he’s been looking at porn, but that’s not was he was doing. He was longing, wanting, but not in a sexual way. He’s not attracted to women.

“Mom,” he says nervously. She spins around and narrows her eyes at him.

“Benjamin James Brighton, what is this?”

“Nothing?” Benjamin tries. She scoffs.

“I’m putting locks on all these dirty sites. You’re a good boy, Benjy, sweetheart.” She looks at him again, eyes sad. “Why would you do such a thing?”
Benjamin wants to tell her that he wasn’t doing anything at all, but he doubts she’d believe him. Instead he just shrugs. “I was curious?”

With a shake of her head, she stands up. “Get dressed, then come out to the living room. We’re having a chat with your father about this curiosity of yours.”

The chat doesn’t go well.

“Naked women?” His father isn’t happy. “Benjamin James. You are a church-going young man. You know how wrong the objectification of women is. What’s worse is masturbation. We taught you that touching yourself like that is wrong, Benjamin. The only time you may participate in any kind of sexual gratification is when you’re married and trying to conceive a child.”

“Yes, sir,” Benjamin replies, staring at the floor. He wants to shout back that he doesn’t want to masturbate. That those women don’t turn him on, that the thought of touch himself for pleasure sickens him. This isn’t the body he belongs in. Getting off is the last thing he wants to do.

“Now, your mother is going to put blocks on those sites. You can go do the dishes.”

“Yes, sir.” Benjamin waits until his back is turned to his father and rolls his eyes, then sighs heavily when he gets into the kitchen. His mother is going to tell everyone her son is a sexual deviant. He supposes it’s better than everyone assuming he’s gay.

“Look at the fag boy,” someone sneers. It’s about a half hour into the dance, and Benjamin’s been called a fag eight times. It’s probably the eyeliner and lipstick Angela made him wear. He’s supposed to be a vampire, but instead he looks like a punk.


“What’s wrong, fag, your jaw too sore to talk? Or are you just too scared?”

“Shut up,” Benjamin snaps, turning around to face the jerk that’s been picking on him since he was in seventh grade. Justin Hart.

“Well, well. The fag boy is finally sticking up for himself.” Then Justin blinks and his smirk turns into a wicked, horrible grin. “Are you wearing lipstick?”

Benjamin licks his lips unconsciously. Angela scowls. “Leave him alone.”

“I don’t think so,” Justin says, and he sounds almost gleeful. He gestures and the next thing Benjamin knows, both his arms are being grabbed and he’s dragged outside. No one says anything.

No one cares.

He tries to fight, he struggles as hard as he can, but they’re not letting him go. He tries to shout, but someone covers his mouth, nails digging into his cheek. Benjamin doesn’t know if Angela’s telling someone. He hopes she is, but at the same time, he doubts it. She’s not that brave. And these guys aren’t above beating a girl.

Benjamin shuts his eyes tight as Justin throws him up against the hard brick of the school. “What’re you going to do now, fag boy?” he says, voice low and menacing. “Not a boy,” Benjamin chokes out, his breath knocked out.
of him as Justin slams him against the wall again.
“What was that?” Justin asks.
“I’m not a boy, let me go.”
Of course they don’t. Justin makes a disgusted noise, and then Benjamin’s thrown on the ground. He curls up instinctively, but that doesn’t protect him at all. The spit on him as they kick him. He can’t hear what they say, can’t move, can’t make a sound as they just keep kicking him.

Finally, thank god, someone kicks his head and he can’t feel anymore.

He wakes up and it’s dark. It’s cold. Benjamin looks around. He’s still outside. Then he lets out a shout. All he can feel is pain, everywhere. He can’t do anything but curl back up and wait for it to pass. He blacks out again before it does.

The next time he wakes up, he’s warm, but that’s the only improvement. He lets out a short whimper and tries to curl up, but his joints are too stiff and he just stays on his back instead. Slowly, Benjamin opens his eyes. It’s bright, wherever he is, and it smells sterile. Hospital.
He closes his eyes and wills himself to pass out again, but it doesn’t happen.
“Benjy?” a voice says timidly. He opens his eyes again. “Hey, mom,” he says. His voice is hoarse and raw.

His mother tears up. “My poor boy,” she whispers. Her voice shakes. Benjamin makes a soft sound and shakes his head, even though it hurts. He already told the people who hated him. He might as well tell the person who loves him the most.
“I’m not a boy, mom.” His lets his eyes fall shut. He doesn’t want to see her face.
“Wh-what?” There’s just confusion in his mom’s voice. “I’m not a boy. I’m a girl. I...I was put in the wrong body, or something, I’m just. I’m not a boy.”
There’s only silence. When Benjamin opens his eyes, his mom’s gone.
He squeezes his eyes closed. He’s not going to cry. Benjamin may be a girl, but he’s strong. A tear leaks from the corner of his eye and he feels it slide down his temple. He doesn’t know what to do anymore. Benjamin wants to become who he was always meant to be.
And she’s going to make it happen. She swallows and opens her eyes. “Adrienne,” she says out loud. “My name is Adrienne.”
Her Humming Came First
Mallory Wilder

I sit impeccably still with the slightest hint of a smile. Centered on the round glass kitchen table, red wax droplets slink down the curves of the white candlestick holders. The shimmering flames of the two slender candles cast their charm on me when the overhead light is dimmed. After my first few bites of breaded chicken, half a hot buttered roll, and a couple freshly cooked green beans, I leave the active world of the family dinner and become a passive observer. With my eyes transfixed on the flames and a tranquil state of being, I can still hear the words of conversation being tossed by and around me. The prongs of my fork are half rested gently on the edge of the plate and my elbow floats up in the air, as if I had forgotten the intention there. Without looking I can picture my Dad's handsome face and the twinkle in his eyes as he imparts his brilliant and slightly dorky knowledge on us all. Tonight I hear references to the Free Masons, pyramids with an eye on top, presidents and secrets, all weaved together in relation to the movie National Treasure. My daze is interrupted when I feel the stare of my mother. Knowing full well what it's for, I look across the table and silently mouth a 'sorry.' She's always the first to say something when I begin to hum. It happens every time I am overcome by a feeling of pure happiness, but I never notice it. I think I am too busy enjoying the moment.

*Just the other day I asked my Dad if he ever noticed my humming at dinner time. He said he's always noticed but it has never bothered him. I can't help but notice how my expression of happiness has become bothersome to my mother. I'm sorry my happiness is a nuisance to you.*
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I sit Indian-style on the speckled blue carpet of Mrs. Hart’s kindergarten class and smile. Tightly packed together on the floor, my knees touch all my neighbors and it’s hard to find a place to rest my hands on the rug. As I glance around at my classmates’ most coveted possessions, I look down at the item in my lap and grip it tight. One boy, Ryan, comes in late with his father, who’s carrying a curiously large cardboard box. The longer the box sits unopened, the farther we all creep onto our knees to peer over the pigtails and cowlicks blocking our views. “Shh... settle down,” Mrs. Hart attempts to calm our excitement in vain - we distinctly heard the whimper of a puppy. Ryan’s box contains an entire litter of yellow Labrador puppies but, as adorable as they are, they don’t make me wish I brought something else to share. Although I think it would be fun to have the one that just licked me to play with everyday.

A few kids brought in their favorite older brothers or sisters from classrooms way down the hall, but the only cool thing about them was how old they were. The majority of others boasted about the coolest new toy they had, but not everyone was willing to pass their toy around to share. I couldn’t wait to share mine. I imagine I was humming as I sat there, in awe of how perfect my item was every time Mom made it. Just the right amount of milk made for the cheesiest taste. Looking down at my coveted blue box of Kraft Macaroni-N-Cheese in my lap, I’m happy I didn’t choose my pet, older sister or a toy.

A shelf in my cupboard is stocked with those coveted blue boxes. Lately that simple joy is not always found inside. Am I happy enough today to not care about the calories? I could always eat the whole box and then, bloated and immobile, regret my decision. Most days I am lucky enough to just not have the cash to spend on the necessary butter and milk.

7:30 a.m. I gaze down out of my apartment’s frosted window. A story below, the snow rests over every outdoor contour in a blanket of pristine white. From above, the trees, cars, bushes, mailboxes and porch overhangs look like round lumps in the soft blanket of snow that connects everything. The charming snow portrait I looked down upon from a cozy situation above is abruptly whisked away when the bracing wind delivers me a cold, hard, slap to the face after one step out the front door. On a typical Oswego, New York winter morning, taking the second step is the hardest part of my day.

Standing on the front wooden stoop of the house, the cold wind’s slap forces my attention to the left. The brass mailboxes for apartments three, four, and five hang on the wall, and the wind creates a chorus of their lids flapping up and clanging back down one after another. Their constant clanging is the only noise that reaches me. Flashing yellow lights scurry along the wall and make the presence of a snow plow known. Its solo march down the street, grinding its metal against the road, is silenced by the wind. Without the courage to look straight out yet, my eyes focus on my next challenge: the stairs. The snow covered wooden steps do not fool my trained eyes; hidden below is a treacherous layer of ice sloping down
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from one step to the next. Its cascading beauty will not be appreciated anymore if it chooses to make me ride down its icy waves. I take on the stair obstacle with caution, especially when the narrowing posts of the railing do not deem it trustworthy.

There is a feeling of complete desolation as the heaping piles of snow have become barricades between driveways. As neighbors sporadically pop up like gophers and begin to burrow out their vehicles, it is their heaving of additional snow onto the barricades from undisclosed places that is the only sign of coexistence.

A light brown snow and slush mixture, with the texture and appearance of a root beer float, has devoured my car's front left mud flap. It has begun the same consumption of the back of the tire, extending from the side paneling of the car down to the paved parking lot. Anticipating what is to happen next, I begin to hum. The globular slush is issued a massive blow near its center, where I imagine the mud flap is suffocating underneath, from the solid front of my winter boot, worn with this purpose in mind. This has the same effect as when skyscrapers are demolished from dynamite and watched from a safe distance. Its base collapses in an explosive fashion, but ends with a mere plop and squish on the pavement. Its top half for a split second is placid, oblivious to its missing foundation. Inevitably though, it is dragged down by an invisible hold from its counterpart, and is forced to follow the same doomed path.

This kicking of the mud flaps is a necessity during the winters of Oswego. It has, for lack of any sensible reasoning, however, become an enjoyable daily ritual for me during the bleak months when all we know is lake effect snow. In months like these, when the sun has gone on sabbatical, it is imperative to find things to brighten up the day. A good accumulation of slush on my mud flaps is something to look forward to when I have to travel out in the dreary and freezing weather.

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I would not terribly miss kicking mudflaps. The strange pleasure I get from being responsible for the mixture falling is too short-lived; forgotten by the time I slam the car door. Truth be told, sometimes mudflaps are all I have to look forward to on a winter day. The snow barricades didn't have to be there to make a third year transfer student who lives alone feel desolation. If mudflaps are all I have that day though, I'll be damned if I'm not wearing my boots.

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If it was any other day I would roll back over and continue to indulge in my insatiable slumbering. Today, however, I choose to slip down off the bed, and my toes are slightly nostalgic as they grip the friendly carpet. Instead of rummaging through the bags of clothes, the warm rays of sun that stream through the window guide me to a pair of wrinkled soccer shorts and a worn t-shirt. Sliding on the flip-flops that were kicked off by the back door, the perfectly laid back attire for the perfectly laid back day is now complete. As my body adjusts to the morning, my arms stretch as wide as they can toward opposite ends of the wooden deck, with my fingers extending until I can feel the space between the digits being pulled. Reacting to the light my eyes open only a slit above the lashes and my
Jaw and cheek bones tense as my neck attempts to elongate itself simultaneously as my arms do. The tensing of the body is fleeting, and relaxation quickly resumes itself.

My first deep inhale of fresh summer air is invigorating. I walk down the steps to the most unnatural of sanctuaries. Almost at the edge, so I can rest my feet on the cool grass if I choose, I lay down with my face toward the sun. The transfer of heat from the black pavement to the skin is comforting. This is no road or parking lot, it is my own driveway and so despite its municipal exposure, it is my personal retreat. Like an old habit I block out the traffic noises from the front of the house, as well as for the thoughts of how exposed I am on the smooth black pavement to any nosy neighbor. With my eyes shut softly, I feel the warmth of the sun first on my face. In my head float glimpses of taunting computer screens, cram sessions, all-nighters to make deadlines, final exams placed on my desk, and the despair as more dons are vacated around me day after day. I exhale out all those grim notions. Breathing in more of the summer air, I remember the placing down of my pencil after the very last question of a final exam, the slipping of crisp stapled papers into professors’ mailboxes, and the last glance at my empty dorm room as I shut the door behind me.

As my entire backside absorbs the pavement’s warmth, all thoughts of the past fade away. With a newly cleansed mind, I feel safely grounded but able to let my mind drift away with the possibilities of summer. In the warm limbo of the first day of summer, my stillness is only interrupted by my hum of happiness and the occasional singe of an elbow from the hot black asphalt.

I know I’ll be back lying on that hot driveway again soon, but I’m not so certain the same feeling of homecoming will be welcoming me. Two years of college at about three driving hours distance away had given me a buffer zone. Coming home became rare and a pleasure. Now it is just rarely a pleasure. Thirty minutes of driving is apparently not a sufficient buffer zone. I don’t feel like I’m home but I don’t feel like I’ve left home either. Convincing myself I didn’t want to belong to another university might have only jinxed me into feeling I don’t belong anywhere. Summer is just around the corner and going home doesn’t have the same appeal that it used to.

Crossing into the living room from the kitchen I throw down my weekend suitcase in the nick of time. An already full-grown but just over a year old chocolate Lab and pit bull mix comes bounding down the spiraled wooden stairs and charges straight for me. Tail wagging so uncontrollably that his entire hind body sways back and forth with it, he lovingly grips onto the end of my sleeve and won’t let go. His teeth might tear occasional clothing, but his embracing nibbles are the warmest welcome he knows to give. Since it’s early afternoon and all other family members are still finishing their work day, my dog, Cal, and I find ourselves with the house to ourselves. After our hello, short play time and the rewarding oftreats for a successful shaking of the paws, we begin to settle down.

Visiting home for the weekend and having nowhere to be until nightfall, I have some time for myself.
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A Friday afternoon with no worries, I sit on the hardwood floor directly in front of the fire. Cal stares blankly into the flames right beside me. The heat from the fire and the hustle of the week begin to take their toll and I begin to rest my eyes. I am the first to make the move and Cal loyally follows. I tug his cozy dog bed closer to the fire and make myself comfortable. We become each other’s pillows as Cal cozies up next to me with his head resting on my legs, and I lay down resting my head on his back. He is always the first to close his eyes for good under the spell of the flames. Too tired to continue petting his shiny caramel coat, I lull him to sleep with my humming. His round hazel eyes will open once when I begin to hum, and then close again as he falls fast asleep.

Cal has recently been enrolled in doggy day care. Non-stop playtime leaves him exhausted. The last time I came home, Cal meandered down the stairs to say hello. After a couple wags of the tail, he was on his way back up the stairs to put himself to bed.

Almost dozing off to sleep as I sit on Grandma’s couch, I get a tiny surge of excitement minutes before she puts me to bed. Although I look forward to the cinnamon sugar toast and banana slices in my cereal that will undoubtedly be waiting for me at the kitchen table the next morning, I always want just a little more of Grandma time before bed. I know that she will gladly escort me to my guest room that no one else has ever slept in, and will pull down the sheets just enough for me to scurry into after I wash up. She will even tuck the blankets and sheets around me tightly so I feel secure and warm. Her gentle freckled hands will brush the brown hair away from my face and kiss me on the forehead, which signals my eyes and the rest of me to shut down peacefully for the night. But before I let her bring me to my room and put me to sleep, I’ll ask her a favor that she never refuses. “Grandma, will you tickle my back?” I’d lay flat on my stomach across the sofa with my head resting on her lap as she skimmed her nails tenderly about my exposed back. Every movement of her fingers sent chills down to my tippy-toes and goose bumps sprouted up everywhere. My eyelids flitted with sleep, as I stayed just awake enough to enjoy the sensations but could only entertain the happy thoughts that Grandma’s touch gave me. Those nights before bedtime on the sofa, I’d fall asleep for mere minutes and awake to the absence of Grandma’s humming. I knew it was the silent precursor to her persuading my tired eyes to stay open long enough to make it under my bed sheets.

Grandma was never down and out, not that I can remember anyways. Of course there were days her eyes looked tired and her shoulders showed some sadness despite her usual strength. Those days were warranted though, cancer doesn’t take a moment’s rest. But before her cancer days she always looked happy. Until now I never stopped to wonder if Grandma had ever been feeling low.

Was she really as perfect as I pegged her? Her husband died when I was still in diapers and she’s been living alone my whole life. She must have been lonely or sad
or pessimistic at some point. Grandma kept on living, though, and happily at that. I think I got my happiness from her. No one else in our family hums quite like us. I wish I knew her secret to living every day, though. I still hum but not as often as I'd like to. Grandma must have known the secret for humming.

Dear Girl From Last Summer,

William O’Brien

Just so you know,
you left your beer can
half full on
my T.V. stand.

I threw it out
but the ring it left
still sticks
to the tips
of my fingers when I touch it.
It still glows at about
1:30 every day when the sun
stares at it through my window. (The one that faces north)

You also left
that cd. You know the one.
I drew on it.
The stick man
overlapping the stick woman.
A wavy line
across the middle of the disc.
I colored the clear center
orange. It was supposed to be
the sun setting at Nissequogue.
He was supposed to have his arms around her waist.

You also left
a few bobby pins in my sheets.
I used them to fasten
the disc to my doorframe
up and to the left from
the T.V. stand.
with the mirror side out.
I angled the disc down
and to its left so that
every day at 3:30
the sun can view an encore.