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The past four years have been a whirlwind for Manuscripts. You wouldn’t be able to count on two hands the number of big changes that have come to this magazine and our organization here at Butler. Just last year it seemed like we were losing many of our student leaders, people who had been with us for years and had helped make these changes possible. But each new year brings new opportunities. As unfortunate as it is to see our veterans depart, more than anything I am amazed by the enthusiasm and promise of our newest staff.

The events this year have been tremendously successful. Our second annual undergraduate literary magazine summit brought in even more schools than before. We had not one, but two guest judges: Monica Youn who judged our poetry contest in the fall, and Ali Eteraz who judged our prose contest in the spring. Many thanks to them for their time, expertise, and kindness. Literatura continues for its second year with more activities, student readings, and a reading and class from Melissa Fraterrigo, whom we also thank. Events like these help make Manuscripts a presence both on the Butler campus and in the world of undergraduate literary magazines.

2018’s magazine is perhaps the most tightly selected and designed of any we have put out. The implementation of a more efficient selection process greatly improved our method of reviewing and selecting the absolute best pieces. Manuscripts is, at its core, a collaborative venture. It is the product of months of hard work, both by our lovely general staff, and the executive board which it has been my privilege to work with. And I would be remiss to not mention our faculty advisor Prof. Furuness, who always encourages us to dream big.

Inside this volume, you will find stories, poetry, and art of all different kinds. There is something unique, I believe, about Manuscripts’ eclectic collection. You could work through it from the beginning,
browse the table of contents to see what catches your eye, or just open to a random page and start reading. My hope is that whichever you do, you will find yourself surprised by the rich variety of stories, verses, and artwork provided within. Our mission is to move you, whether that means to laugh, to cry, to think, or simply, to enjoy.

Karl Agger

Editor-in-Chief
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How is your mom?
I thought I saw her
brief
but maybe just.

I add it to my grocery list of
Ideas to Ruminate On
a budding pine cone
sporks
the eventual heat death of the universe

which brings me to this.
I wish I could study the lines on your palm,
the scar on your left elbow, one eyelash.

But this is not a song
that could begin in hello and end with goodbye
and so
I will return to my cave,
warm, trembling, etc.
fresh from my self-inflicted wounds,
from scrubbing the you off of me.
The day your father dies, you post a status about it on Facebook with a link to a song from *Grey’s Anatomy*. Jay comments: “Pardon my ageist statement here, but you are too young to have this on your plate.” He calls you a beautiful soul. You have only ever talked to him in the class that you share, but he seems to care, so you message him a month later to say that you might be a lesbian. He says you are too young to know about that sort of thing. You are not too young, but you keep talking to him anyway. You are younger than most people in a college classroom while he is older, so you share an immediate bond. He becomes one of your mentors, a faint light cast against the void left by your father. Mentorship is like fatherhood with all of the credit and none of the responsibility. Jay likes this. So will many other men.

Nights are hard. Every shadow has your father’s face sunken into it, morphing from sunrise to sunset. Your father has been dead for two weeks, but you know that he’s always standing right behind you. You think you are going crazy, but no one believes you. One night, you dream of yourself standing before a mirror. The flesh is melting from your shoulders, and the skin flakes from your face in soft pieces until your father stares back at you. You tell your Sensei about the dream because you think this is the sort of thing he should know, as one of your mentors. “Am I going crazy?” you ask. “Yes,” he says, “But it won’t last forever.” This is the only thing that helps.

Three months later, your Sensei writes an article about what a terrible student you are and publishes it on his blog. You cannot stop crying after class that day, and Jay tries to comfort you. He reminds you
that you are still young, but does not wait for the tears to stop before he leaves. Someone else does that. You never talk to that person again, because you are embarrassed. Four years later, you will still exchange awkward nods with them in the hallway.

You go to Kendo three times a week. You would rather stab yourself in the throat with one of your mother’s kitchen knives than miss a practice. You think a lot about your mother’s kitchen knives. You snuck one into the bathroom once, after your father said that no one would ever marry you. A week after that, someone very important to your Sensei said you had a beautiful soul. You promised yourself you wouldn’t use the knives again after that. You haven’t broken that promise, but you spend a lot of time staring at them.

Your mother has been fucking this German guy for about a year now. It’s been one year and one month since your father died. You aren’t fine with it, but one day, you are. The German guy says he’s sorry about what happened to your father, and that it wasn’t your fault. He convinces your mother to let you drop the Calculus class you are failing, but says that he is not trying to replace your father. You find this comforting, but some part of you wishes that he would.

Jay tells you to read some Faulkner. You hate Faulkner, but read it anyway, because you love Jay. Jay gets very depressed some nights, and tells of the bad things that have happened to him. There are many bad things. It is four in the morning and you are very tired, but the bad things keep scrolling through Facebook messenger. You bite into an apple and watch his tragedy unfold. “I’m going crazy,” he says. You don’t know what to say. For some people, it does last forever. It is not your fault, but you apologize anyway.

There is a girl at Kendo who hides when she laughs, but only because she wants you to see her. You like seeing her. She comes over for sleepovers most weekends. She always waits until you take your shirt off to hug you. Your Sensei teases her about being your girlfriend, so you stop having sleepovers. You wouldn’t mind losing her, except the nightmares stop when she’s there. You still feel your father standing behind you sometimes, but you don’t talk about it, except sometimes to her. Usually after you take your shirt off.

You go to the Kendo National Championships and lose. You can tell that your Sensei doesn’t love you anymore. You keep on going to
practice for another year, but no one will talk to you, except the girl who still won’t date you. You stop going to Kendo. You think a lot more about the kitchen knives. When you think about the kitchen knives too much, you talk to Jay. One particularly bad night, he Skypes with you until four in the morning. Both of your worlds lack centers, so you gravitate toward one another. You think that he cares about you more than he should, but he recommends good books to read, so you stay quiet.

Two years later, Jay is the only thing that has stayed the same about your life. You no longer live with your mother and the German guy. You live with your boyfriend and two other roommates, but still talk to Jay quite often. One day, he comments on one of your Facebook posts and calls you a lot of names because you believe that black lives matter. He blocks you on Facebook. You cry for a while, but then stop. Your mother finally marries the German guy. You bring your boyfriend to the wedding. Your boyfriend is not very smart and he lies to you sometimes, but he makes the nightmares stop. You suppose this is what love should be. He shares the same name as your father. You try not to think about this too deeply.

Six months later, Jay sends you a message. He misses you. Your roommates say that you shouldn’t talk to him anymore. They also think you should break up with your boyfriend. You do neither of these things. You tell Jay that you tried Faulkner again and liked it. He asks to see your poetry, so you send him the one about the kitchen knives. He says that it is juvenile. That night, you think about the kitchen knives more than you have in a very long time. Your roommates say nothing, but take the knife drawer with them when they go to bed. They know you. Your boyfriend does not notice. He is too busy lying to you.

You want to break up with your boyfriend, but he still makes the nightmares stop, so you don’t. He lies to you again. You think you are okay, but when your professor asks how you are doing, you start crying. “I’m sorry,” you say. “I think I’m going crazy.” She hugs you and doesn’t let go for a long time. “We all go a little crazy sometimes,” she says. You tell her about your father and your boyfriend and all of the men in between. She listens, which is unexpected. When she first refers to herself as one of your mentors, the word catches you by surprise. She says mentor like something that you have rather than something that she is. She is capable of shining with or without your darkness. You realize that perhaps this is how things should have been all along.
You break up with your boyfriend two days later, and drink a lot of tequila. Your father’s face is in the shadows again. Because of the tequila, the crying does not stop. Your roommate holds you in her lap until four in the morning. Jay tells you that he knew the relationship could never last. He is glad that he was right. Your professor emails you to suggest drinking less tequila, because she knows you well. It is a sweet gesture, but comes much too late.

A month later, Jay attacks you on Facebook again, because you still believe that black lives matter. You ask him to stop attacking you. He says that you are ungrateful. “I have called you brilliant more times than I can count,” he says. “I give far more than abuse.” Your roommates tell you to block him, so you do. He sends you a text reminding you to block his number. You block his number. He sends you an email. You tell your professor about it, and she sees that you are shaking. She gives you a hug and a phone number for the campus police.

You feel Jay walking behind you the same way your father used to. It doesn’t matter that neither of them are there. Every man who walks behind you is your dead father.
Collarless, he was lost.
Roaming distantly down the sidewalk
Though his desire was behind him,
Sore back facing his overgrown yard.

Perhaps the single streetlight held peace.
Too obvious was that conclusion.
Clarity can be small, can be subtle.
Light on his own porch’s safety lantern.

By his force, the switch fell downward
Pointing to his worn-out fabric check.
Check yes to darkness,
Check no to sanity.

Demand numbness through meditation.
Demand irrationality by fear.
The fork’s silver prongs fill the wounds
Tasteful sweets turn painfully bitter.

Repent. Build acceptance through metal plates.
Iron bars pollute his mind.
Lock in self-doubt,
Lock out self-confidence.
Under-hugged, under-loved, invisible.
Deaf ears behind closed doors,
A broken toy at a shiny new day care,
Another test score on a desk.

Avenge the love murdered in the kitchen.
Knife through the breath of hope.
No, bullet through the head for disappointment
Bullet through the heart for shattered promises.

Release the strength within his walls.
Bandage the cuts from yesterday.
Loosen the tightness in his soul.
Stop pushing out and start letting in.
“I hate you!” she screamed. I don’t remember her name.
“‘I hate you more!’ I replied, nose wrinkled.
“Oh yeah? I hate you times infinity!” she proudly exclaimed. I was taken aback. She had gone for the knockout punch so quickly. I struggled to come up with a response.

“I hate you infinity plus one!” Thankfully, my young mind was able to think above what most view as a theoretical constant. Our second grade teacher had, months before, told us that infinity was the absolute highest number. But that couldn’t be right. What about infinity plus one? Infinity times infinity? The possibilities of numbers above infinity themselves seemed infinite.

In third grade, we were taught that the universe was infinite, too. Mrs. Delores Dinn said it so confidently.

That seemed improbable. If it were endless, how could she have gone to the edges of the universe and come back in time to tell us before the 1:15 bell rang and we were sent back to Homeroom with Ms. Hornacek, where we would be allowed to eat our snacks and read our stories for fifteen minutes while she went outside to smoke?
Scientists say that the universe is not infinite. It is constantly expanding, but it has borders that stretch outward and drag along the stars and comets and galaxies in its folds, like a bubble blown at recess that didn’t pop as it snapped off the bright pink magic wand.

Is the length of the universe – or the circumference, or the area – is that the concept of infinity?

Scientists say no.

“The universe we know is likely just a blip in a landscape of many thousands of universes called the multiverse,” said the scientist in a popular video.

When he arrived at the word multiverse, his voice grew in power and depth, as if he were reciting an incantation that was meant to levitate my TV.

He was old, with unkempt silver hair that flowed sideways like a lion’s mane in black and white. I don’t remember his name either.

My father was a perfusionist. Whenever people asked what he did for a living, I automatically added a description of his duties along with his title. His job was to make sure patients stayed alive while the doctors operated on them.

I always imagined that the heartbeat monitor was operated in the same way as the seismograph; I pictured a small needle jumping up and down with each heartbeat as it would with an earthquake, recording an unbroken line of the patient’s life measured out in rapid pulses of blood through the body.

The peaks and valleys of life were clearly displayed for me then, and now. Each time the needle in the heart monitor jumped up, it was a surge of anticipation, a joyous occasion. And when it subsequently fell, spirits lowered and melancholy lingered. My father came to know that life was not the line on the seismograph.

When the heartbeat stopped, the line fell flat but continued on to infinity, even after the nurse silently entered the room after the doctors had all left and plucked the various suction cups off the bare, pale chest of the dead patient. The second the seismograph lit up again, it was already attached to another dying patient, and the infinite needlework continued for another victim.
It’s only logical to assume that there must be an upper bound to infinity. Every other constant in the universe – multiverse – knows some limit. The fastest anything can go in any circumstance is precisely 299,792,458 meters per second.

The stubborn human race has tried to surpass this figure, but it remains the literal speed limit. When a particle is going nearly that speed, the speed of light in a vacuum, instead of converting injected energy into more speed, it actually gains mass and slows down time around it.

The oldest person in recorded history is 117. When we get old, instead of gaining mass and slowing time like speeding particles, our bodies deteriorate and our minds weaken. This is as much concerned with the laws of physics as the speed of light. There is an upper limit, and there are forces that prevent reaching infinity.

My father says that the one thing all of his patients have in common is their understanding and acceptance of mortality. That scares me. I would have thought otherwise.

When ice paved the roads and the elementary school had closed in fear of a blizzard, I went to visit my father at work. He pointed at the doors through which I entered into the operating room and said that he’d watched a few people pass through a different set of doors the night before.

I found out that the electrocardiograph did not operate like a seismograph, and I found out that it was called an electrocardiograph. I looked the electrocardiograph in its square face. It stared back blankly. It was not plugged in. The endless line of life had halted, and I was there to witness it. I no longer believed that infinity existed.

The doctors all went out for a smoke break, just like Ms. Hornacek. On the soft blue velvet throne in the waiting room, I tore the crust off my peanut butter and jelly sandwich and read the posters on the wall.

“The doctor of the future will give no medication, but will interest his patients in the care of the human frame, diet and in the cause and prevention of disease.” – Thomas Edison
That wouldn’t work, I thought. No one cares about a disease they don’t even have yet. I asked my father about it. He told me I was right, it didn’t work. The one thing all of his patients have in common is their understanding and acceptance of mortality. I understood.

“A Cigarette a Day Keeps the Doctor in Pay!”

But it seemed to me as if the doctors were accustomed to smoking many more than one cigarette in a day. I did not understand that poster. I wondered if the men in the pallid blue scrubs believed in infinity. I wondered if anyone had ever given it much thought. Then I thought that it was useless, because even if I thought forever, I wouldn’t reach infinity.

“What happens if you add infinity to infinity?” I asked the next day in class. I needed to know. Mrs. Delores Dinn frowned and stopped writing the addition problem on the board.

“There is nothing larger than infinity. I told you. The answer is still infinity, because infinity is already infinity.” She turned back to the board. The black Expo marker squealed as it grinded across the sharp white surface.

21 + 7 = 28

If there were a hypothetical rocket ship that could travel one thousand meters per second, and attached to it a huge flashlight pointed forward, how fast would the light be traveling when the rocket ship was at full speed? Wouldn’t that surpass the speed of light?

No, the light would be moving at exactly 299,792,458 meters per second. 21 + 7, in this instance, equals 21. Time and space around the light bends and distorts so that the light cannot and will not break the finite constant, the speed of light.

Mrs. Delores Dinn, whose teeth were rotting and whose voice scratched more shrilly than the Expo against the board, never asked us that question. She was preoccupied with satisfying the curiosities of the elementary school textbook than mine. That was probably for the better. Kids would be better off to know and think (as they do) that everything can be infinite.
When my grandmother died, she had learned that she had cancer three days prior. Her infinity was three days. She learned more in those three days than in her seventy years. Before her diagnosis, she had never attempted to add three to infinity.

When my grandfather died, he learned that he had cancer nearly three years prior. I think he’d have rather had those three years after his diagnosis than even consider infinity.

I am certain it is impossible to understand either side of the spectrum of finite to infinite until faced with death, the only absolute that we cannot even attempt to manipulate.

Zero

“You have fifteen apples,” Mrs. Delores Dinn droned in her signature raspy voice, as if each word had trouble extracting itself from the thick mess of ruby lipstick around her mouth.

“You give the person next to you four apples. How many do you have left?” The marker whined as it was dragged lazily across the board.

$15 - 4 = ?$

Mrs. Delores Dinn set the problem up for my class on the board. This was easy. We had learned subtraction the year before. The next year, though, we delved into negative numbers. Fifteen minus forty-four is negative twenty-nine.

I have fifteen apples. I give the person next to me forty-four. I now have negative twenty-nine apples.

Scientists say that absolute zero is the lowest possible temperature. At exactly zero degrees Kelvin, matter has no heat energy and cannot become colder.

I guess they never took fourth grade math and learned about negative numbers.

I imagine zero to be when the power goes out in the hospital and the backup generators fail and the crooked grin is wiped from the square face of the electrocardiograph. The needles of life that move up
and down across the seismic lines would finally cease before they can attach to another patient when the power returns, and the infinite cycle would break.

Zero, then, is the opposite of infinity. It is the misunderstanding of life that has a hold on all those who have not yet become my dad’s patients.

It is as conceptual as infinity; it is not a number, but rather a name for an idea that has absolutely no value. It has different rules than any other number in our system.

I should have asked Mrs. Delores Dinn what nine divided by zero was. She would have neglected to write the problem on the board with the screeching Expo and simply told me that it was impossible, because you can’t take nine apples and divide them into zero groups.

I arrived at school one morning to the sharp blast of an ambulance horn constantly sounding near the main entrance. I slept in the car on the way to school every day, but the swirling lights alone would have been enough to wake me up from any slumber. The air was thick with an oppressive fog that accumulated above the two lakes on both sides of the building, removing the aspect of time from the scene entirely.

Our secretary, Mrs. Kraus, had a stroke and died immediately. Her life was infinite one moment, and zero in the next.

The haunting thing about zero is that it is absolute. Infinity gives us space to work with, whereas zero is a hard limit.

Unlike my dad’s patients, Mrs. Kraus never had the time to reconcile the difference between infinity and zero. She was all there, and then all gone, rather than drifting slowly away over the course of weeks like water dripping from a leaky faucet.

The relationship between infinity and zero is often strained. At the drop of a hat or the push of a pin, everything can be nothing.

A black hole is an oxymoronic affirmation of this relationship in a way. It is an object with unimaginable – almost infinite – density, yet by definition, nothing can escape its grasps. While it has all the properties of
infinity, all that we can observe of it is nothing. Indeed, it took scientists until quite recently to detect the faintest traces of the gravitational waves produced by the collision of two supermassive black holes.

My father, I think, is counting down the days until his retirement. He has helped an incredible amount of people transition from accepting their infinity to the cold, hard fact of a straight line on the electrocardiograph.

He says that the amount of people he’s helped stay alive in the operating room are nearly meaningless to him, because the understanding of infinity that he recognized in his patients never quite effervesced into his own mind. All that he understood was the absolute halting of the infinite line into a concrete sum of zero.

*Our universe crunches and bounces between the realms of near ZERO (NOTHING) and near INFINITY (EVERYTHING). Our world is something in between, dependent on this interplay between zero and infinity. The middle ground of the two givens, the ground of ZEROFINITY.*

-- Dr. Anthony Lethbridge, The Gist in the Mist

What we are given in life is the interpretation of the theoretically boundless distance between zero and infinity. We are from nothing, yet we are everything in the next instant. The challenge in accepting our inevitable return to nothing is an acceptance of the gift of infinity that is bestowed upon us in the first place.

Mrs. Delores Dinn had a heart attack. My father was not the perfusionist on duty at the time. Had he been operating on her, I would have been curious to know if she had a revelation about infinity, finally.
Shadows drum on the wall
for a second. The lightbulb
holds a galaxy inside—
recrystallized midnight, humming.

Two worlds in the thicket of sooty war.
Dust-mites flinging forward are starships
raining across the filament of candescence,
delicate-mortal-spire lives, merely a mirage.

The next eyes change this
experience, that cannot exist
in my mind, spiraling hungrily
swallowing line after line.

The flakes from the February freeze
had nestled in your nose
when you said you loved me—but that was
just the coke talking.
Monica Youn is the author of three books of poetry: *Blackacre* (2016), which was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award; *Ignatz* (2010), which was a finalist for the National Book Award; and *Barter* (2003). Her poems have appeared in numerous journals and anthologies, including the *New Yorker*, the *Paris Review*, and the *New York Times Magazine*, and she has been awarded a Witter Bynner Fellowship from the Library of Congress and a Stegner Fellowship from Stanford University. A former attorney specializing in copyright and election law, she now teaches poetry at Princeton University. During her visit to Butler University as part of the Vivian S. Delbrook Visiting Writers Series, Youn took the time to speak with Manuscripts staff member Matt Del Busto.

I know you practiced law for a number of years and have talked about being on the clock and getting paid, whether it’s by the minute or by the hour, and the focus and efficiency that you have to have as a lawyer. I thought it was interesting to contrast that with how you were talking about how you write poems in an interview with Jeffrey Brown where you said the idea can fertilize in your head for months or even years before you actually start writing it. How is that process different—it can take so long to write a poem, whereas being a lawyer things would have to set within that hour?

When I have an idea for a poem, it’s often something that sits around for a very long time. The Peter Pan story that I read obviously is something I’ve known since I was a kid. The idea for the *Blackacre* sequence I was not able to write for years after I first had the idea, but I always think of that as back burner that you set at a slow simmer—I like to use the metaphor that it’s like supersaturating a solution. You just have this solution just sitting there on the stove and you just keep adding things until at some point you have enough and it just crystallizes out. That crystal is when the poem is born; it’s when the poem takes form. Until that you don’t have a poem, you just have an idea.

With law, it was a very different time frame both as a lawyer and as an advocate. When I was a public interest lawyer and advocate, if something happened in the news, I would have to have an op-ed drafted about it in
the next few hours. 1500 words in three hours—go; just start writing, and I could do it. I didn’t particularly enjoy it, I think people think writing op-eds is fun or interesting. For me, it was just miserable. I just thought I’m just churning out very pedestrian talking points, it just really doesn’t interest me, it doesn’t challenge me.

It sounds like a lot of the ideas take place in your mind before you actually start writing. Would you say that most of the poem is actually written in your head before you sit down to write?

No, not at all. Writing is a very engaged process for me. I just sit there and I wrestle with it and at some point I know I have enough to start writing.

Writing a poem is like you’re trying to peel some wallpaper off the wall and you sit there and you pick and you pick and you pick at this little spot until you find an edge and then once you have an edge you can start tearing, but it’s not like you can tear a perfect rectangle or a perfect circle off. You have to be engaging with the tension and the resistance of the medium and that is what writing or really any art-making process is. You are engaging with the medium; you are in a dialogue with the medium.

Given the numerous different types of writing that you’ve done from congressional testimony to a post on Twitter, how did you come to stick with poetry as opposed to fiction or creative nonfiction?

I mean, if I could write fiction I would—it’s certainly more lucrative. I don’t have that sort of story-making imagination. Non-fiction has its appeal. What I eventually like about poetry is that there are no rules or that there are rules but you set your own rules. One of the things that made me miserable about op-eds is that you know you have to have a lead, then you have to have your argument section and your analysis and then you have a conclusion. Writing those in that same structure time after time was so tedious and with a poem you can literally you can do anything. I could write a poem that was one line long or I could write a poem that’s fourteen pages long. I can take any form I want to and I think it’s the formal freedom that really draws me to poetry. You don’t have freedom to be that weird in really any other medium.
You had a phrase in one interview where you talked about how you like the “nonsemantic shadows cast by language” and I think that goes off the idea that as a poet you have the ability to play with language. But, at the same time you are a self-described “etymology geek” and you love the roots of words and how they come back. So, it’s interesting to me—this more analytical, etymological, lawyerly focus on the poem as well as being able to play with language and put phrases together that wouldn’t normally be together. Do you feel like those two complement each other in your work?

I think so. When you learn the etymological meaning of a term it really kind of opens the word up for you in an interesting way and it causes you to see even more shadows than you might have otherwise. It just opens up more opportunities for seeing resonances in that word. I often will start with a single word. I recently wrote a poem called “Mine” which is just based on m-i-n-e and I was thinking okay, well, it’s interesting that “mine” both means possession and to tunnel in the earth, to dig, or to undermine, and I wondered if those two things have anything in common. Is there a shared etymology that has to do with the grasping or hoarding? It turns out, no, it’s completely a coincidence but it’s so interesting that those two concepts meet in that word and so I ended up writing a poem about greed and democracy and the environment but it all started with that word. My first move when I’m thinking about a word like “mine”—how did that come about?—is I look up the online etymological dictionary—it’s something that is bookmarked in my browser because I end up going there all the time.

Sticking with the etymology theme, I was reading your interviews and one took me to an essay that you wrote about etymology and how fascinating it is, finding the roots of words, and how words interact and things that we say, we have no idea what they meant 400 years ago but they’re commonplace now. One sentence that you said really stuck out to me: “To use a word without knowing its history can be nearly as blameworthy as living in a nation without knowing its history.” I’m guessing that doesn’t mean you think we should look up every single word that we say but at the same time, how accountable do you feel like we should be held for the language that we use?

I think it’s important. We should be held to the same level of accountability as inhabiting the society that we live in. When you live in a society you think, “Oh, things are a certain way,” and if you think they’ve always
been that way, well, I’m not going to question how things are. Then you know you are not tending to challenge or to think of other ways of doing things. I think language is the same way. Right now we talk about the word “white,” like white people. That’s a relatively recent and profoundly ideological construction and one that 100 years ago. 200 years ago. Italian Americans, Irish Americans, they didn’t think of themselves in the same category as W.A.S.P.s. They you know they thought of themselves as being distinct peoples and this kind of monolithic tribalist whiteness that we’re all dealing with. The whiteness of white supremacy is something that is relatively recent, and I think it’s important to know that like it wasn’t always just that there were white people and there were people of color.

It’s the same with Asian American. Pakistanis and Chinese people would not have described themselves using the same words before the 1960s. That was a phrase specifically coined, and not to know that, to assume that there have always been these categories that we’ve set can be really problematic and can prevent us thinking creatively and critically about the way in which we’re living our lives.

In what ways do you think we should take action in our own lives to further explore words that we’re using or phrases that we may think are commonplace but 50 years ago wouldn’t have existed?

A lot of it just comes up through history, it’s not like you go around you know etymologizing every word. But, I think knowing something about the history of the place you live, these terms come up, and you think, “Oh, I didn’t realize that that used to be different.” In that particular essay, I used an example where I never realized that the that we say “pork” for meat and “pig” for the animal because the people who were eating the animal and the people who were raising the animals were not the same people—it’s a relative class and ethnicity that’s left over from the Norman conquest and we use these words every day.

Going along with an etymological aspect which can be a root for a lot of your poems, many of your poems also seem to be sparked by other work, like John Milton’s sonnet which inspired the long Blackacre sequence. Do you use other works of art as inspiration for your work, or are they more kind of a vehicle for you to enter into a certain discussion?

I don’t really see them as a vehicle. I think of myself as composed of
stories and lessons and patterns and art that I love that I’ve internalized in some way. So, when I’m talking about myself it’s not like I’m talking about myself separate from stories that I feel like comprise me. I’m not somebody who spends a lot of time looking in a mirror like I will spend a lot of time looking at a painting or reading a book and then I’ll see things in there and they may have some relevance to my life but they interest me so I start writing about them. The idea that one’s self and one’s life is somehow this separate entity is not really true to the way I experience things.

That’s interesting.

I feel like, you know, how do I live my life? I live my life with always one foot in the book always with a novel open somewhere in my house, somewhere that I’m in the middle of.

Are there are books, whether they’re collections of poetry or fiction or nonfiction books, that have been especially inspiring to you as you continue to write?

I think two books I think in particular have been really important to me as a poet, two nonfiction books. One is called *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony* by Roberto Calasso and one is a book of literary criticism called *The Pound Era* by Hugh Kenner, which is a kind of a history of Anglo-American literary modernism told through the figure of Ezra Pound. Those are both really formative and I reread them constantly.

That’s awesome. Going into your own writing practice, in an interview with Kirsten Chen, you called yourself a very infrequent writer. I hear professors say you need to be writing every day; or, if you’re not writing every day, then are you really a writer? How are you able to stay engaged with writing when you take periods of time off, and do you think this idea of needing to be consistently writing in order to be a writer is incorrect?

I think I don’t agree with that personally. I think you need to be doing something as a writer every day but I feel like me actively reading is just as important. I feel like students these days spend too much time writing and not enough time reading. I know myself to be somebody who, as I described my process, I am putting a lot of things in the saturation vessel. I feel like if I tried to write it prematurely I will ruin it and it’ll be thin.
It won’t have enough in it for me to start and at some point I know that I’m ready to start and that might be a little more actively picking at the wallpaper. I can make myself write every day. I can make myself write a poem a day, sometimes more than one poem a day, but I often feel like the poems get really threadbare by the end of it—I haven’t observed enough, I haven’t thought enough about the poem, and it’s not the mode I like to write.

_In your writing, we see a variety of different forms whether it’s that long Blackacre sequence where it’s very analytical and prose poetry or some of the hanged man sequence with very short and tight lines. One thing you’ve talked about in previous interviews is your resistance to being just a single form poet. Can you explain that a little bit and how you try to be as open as possible to new forms?_

The whole point, for me, of being a poet is that formal freedom that I talked about earlier. I think you restrain yourself artificially if I’m going to write the same sort of poem over and over again. Why do that? There are so many other possibilities out there, and what interests me and maybe one of the most fun and exciting parts of the process for me is figuring out what is the best possible way for me to bring this concept across, not just throw it out on the page but think—what is the best way I can do this? What is the way that is really going to bring this to life? Why would I give that up just to be able to write faster?

_Going off the idea of being open to new forms, there’s an interview you had with Eric Farwell where you talk about resistance to treating books as projects and suggesting to your students to never just try to stick to a certain concept and always be open to new concepts. Why is that focus in being open to new ideas more important to you than maintaining a focus on a specific concept and really trying to dive into it? Is it the same reason for your being open to new forms?_

I was just about to draw this distinction between concept and form. I tell my students feel free to stick to the same idea in terms of subject matter. I actually assign my graduate students often what I call an exhaustion exercise like, okay, we’re just going to write a poem about the same thing all semester so pick one subject. One student picked “egg.” And you’re going to write a poem about an egg, and then another poem about an
egg, and at the end of about thirteen poems about an egg, they start becoming really interesting. The poet has dug through all the obvious things to say about eggs and she’s really gone deep on the subject and the results are amazing. But, that is very different from choosing the same formal strategies for a poem, choosing the same way, choosing the same tone, choosing the same angle, the same lineation strategy.

I feel like a lot of students try to polish things prematurely and so I get a lot of these poems that are in regular rectangular quatrains and I call this “filling out the form”, like you’re treating the form like it’s some sort of after dinner accomplishment that your parents are going to applaud you for. That’s really not what it’s about. You don’t get extra points because your poem is rectangular or your poem rhymes, you get extra points if your poem is good. If you’re just using the line as a delivery mechanism for the rhyme scheme or if you’re just filling out your stanzas with all these little filler words that don’t need to be there, then you’re not writing a good poem, so what’s the point? And so a lot of times, students will be like, “Okay, well, I’ve written one stanza that’s three lines long, so all the stanzas will be three lines long,” and that’s not how to go about it. That’s what I call “Oh, I’ve decided not to make any more decisions about this poem, I’m just going to go kind of continue the way I started,” which is not a good thing.

Going back to Blackacre, the first time reading it there were definitely moments of confusion for me. It has a very high level of vocabulary and it’s very multi-layered—it’s a complex work. But, when I dove deeper into it and read some interviews, it really started to make sense to me. Do you ever worry about the complexity as something that may make it inaccessible to some readers?

I don’t think it’s necessarily going to be inaccessible. It takes time. I think that my work takes time for anyone—I would doubt that anyone could just skim it on the first read and get the whole thing. I don’t believe in that level of reader. I like to write things that reward multiple reads. I have taught my work to high school students—I just I don’t think it’s inaccessible. It’s not easy, but I don’t think that those two things are the same thing.

Sure, and from things that I’ve read and this discussion, it seems like that
complex layering of different kinds of meaning is something that’s really important for you, too. Could you speak on that a little bit?

I think that the whole the point of writing as a poet is that you're not using language in its ordinary way. The ordinary use of language is language only for its meaning or language for a single meaning. If I ask my toddler, “Do you want an apple?” I just mean an apple like the fruit. But, if I put an apple in the poem—one of the advantages of the poem is you're hopefully taking advantages of multiple meanings—it means apple, but it also means Adam and Eve, Garden of Eden, Snow White and the Seven Dwarves, the computer company. All of these possibilities are latent in the term “apple” and hopefully you're exploiting that. It works on different level because otherwise why are you writing a poem? Why aren’t you just writing an essay or a story or something like? If you’re going to be writing in genre, you should be taking advantage of the possibilities of that genre. I read a lot of poems where I’m like, why is this not just a blog post?

That is true. And looking at Blackacre again, I know the theme of infertility is woven into a lot of the poems. For you is there any kind of connection between the childbearing process and the process of writing a poem?

Not particularly. I think I might have thought so before I had a kid, but having a kid is like so specific that you’re just like, “Oh, okay, strange things are happening in my body. I suddenly have a line in my abdomen, why is that happening?”

Going back to your interview with Eric Farwell, you mention silence as a precondition for the poem, which I think especially speaks to a lot of the tighter poems where there’s so much white space on the page. Can you talk a little bit about the importance of giving silence room to speak within your poems?

I don’t think that I’m giving silence room to speak, I think that silence is giving me room to speak. You know if you’re a poet you’re always aware that the white space initially owned the page and you're fighting against the white space and trying to make headway into it. Somebody who is not thinking about the line and not taking the line seriously will just be like, “Oh, a line is like a sentence, I’ll just splash it across the page.” If you were taking the line seriously, then you are treating it as a problem
in engineering or architecture and you’re thinking, okay, if I’m starting with a vertical that is the left hand margin and I’m sort of cantilevering something out horizontally, the longer that line gets the more vulnerable it is to breakage, to bend, to sag of its own weight, to not be able to sustain its momentum until the end of the line.

It’s easier to write a short, tight, well-constructed line. A long, well-constructed line is very difficult and few poets manage it well, one that really doesn’t have any weak points, one that should not necessarily be a shorter line, one that has enough energy to get it to the end of the line. I think taking that white space as if it is a gravitational field, as if it has real force, is the reason why we write in lines in the first place. Otherwise, we wouldn’t be writing in lines, we’d just be writing in blocks. The whole point of writing in lines to begin with is white space—that’s why we do it.

*Looking to the future, is there a certain project or projects related to writing that you’re working on now?*

I was thinking about deracination, about problems of authenticity within our racial consciousness. I’m Asian American but I don’t speak Korean, I’ve spent very little time in Korea, I don’t have I feel a huge affinity to Korean culture, and yet I’m defined in a certain way externally by people’s expectations of me. Thinking about that, it’s a complicated set of experiences and reactions. I’m chewing on that right now.

*What would be one piece of suggestion or maybe one thing to avoid for an aspiring writer or an aspiring poet?*

I think you should avoid only reading poems online and not reading poems in books. A lot of my intro students will come in and they’ve seen poems, they’ve liked poems, they’ve seen them on Facebook or Tumblr. It’s good that they’re reading, but for one thing, it gets into a poem’s merit being judged by the number of likes it gets, and they sort of get into this mode of trying to write poems that a lot of people will agree with. If you’re going to do that, write an op-ed. Even poets who have poems that have multiple likes on Facebook can have immense and multilayered complexity even though the poem that gets a lot of likes is a sort of kind of outwardly directed public poem. Even as the poet William Butler
Years wrote poems for the Irish resistance that were real rock ‘em sock ‘em political anthems that cab drivers will still sing you in Ireland, he also wrote some of the most complicated poems in the modern tradition. So, I feel like only to see the pop song version of the poems is really kind of impoverishing people. If there’s a poet you like, read their book. Don’t just read their single.

Going off that theme of a pop hit poem versus maybe one that’s more multilayered or not as many people would agree with necessarily, do you think that all poetry should be shared? Are there any poems you write that maybe are just for yourself or just for your family?

I certainly never write poems for my family. I don’t write poems just for myself because for me the point of a poem is the interaction with a reader’s expectations. I think of the medium of poetry not being the word or the page or even the sound I think of it as much as what is this doing in the reader’s mind? I think of it almost like you could think of a piece of choreography, like what is the dancer going to do with this? How is this going to look when the dancer gets it? I don’t think there are very many choreographers who write just for themselves. They could, but what would really be the pleasure is knowing that someone is going to, that is a reader is going to be engaging with it, like I put a jump in there—the reader can make that jump, but it’s an interesting and difficult jump. Let’s see if it happens.
Some days I feel more like a sketch of a body than a body. A cart with one wheel locked. Some days I want to wring the old prayers out of my mouth. Others I am mechanical as an assassin. I feel like Fidel, cool enough to seduce my own assassin. I treat migraines like lovers. I name them
and spend
whole days
inside my head
flamenco dancing.
Some days I
bemoan everything
that holds me;
the ceiling lowers
to eye-level,
a radiating egg
white, and I’m
the lonely
yolk, a jiggling
nucleus in
swaying space.
Some days
I forget to speak
& circle myself
in search of a tail
to chase.
The wedding ceremony was scheduled to begin at 2 o’clock, but the bridesmaids were roaring drunk by noon.

Four of them were giggling with the bride, who had taken a few swigs of the wine herself (carefully, so as not to spill on her dress) but one of them was sitting alone in a corner with a bottle all to herself, her flowing, pastel pink dress hiked up around her knees. The officiant, after letting the bride and bridesmaids know that she was there and ready to take her position as needed, asked the lone bridesmaid if she was okay.

“Yeah I’m fine,” came the morose answer. The girl looked up at the officiant through her thick eyelashes and pursed her lips together. “Just…just a lot of giggling happening over there. Bit too much for me.”

The officiant racked her brain, wondering why this bridesmaid looked so familiar. Then it hit her: the girl was the sister of the groom, most likely included in the wedding party as a courtesy by the bride. Her face was a spitting image of her brother, only her hair was quite a few shades blonder and the lines of the chin and nose were softer. After a moment, the officiant remembered the girl’s name: Alyssa.

“Oh okay.” The officiant paused, feeling obligated to comfort or advise Alyssa. “I know weddings are hard.”

Alyssa grimaced. “I’m not losing a brother, I’m gaining a sister,” she replied in a mocking tone, signaling that she had heard this phrase
more than a couple times in the last few months. “Weddings are just so…ridiculous, aren’t they?” She took another swig. “But maybe I’m just jealous.” Whether she was jealous of the ceremony or of her brother, Alyssa did not specify.

The officiant nodded awkwardly, barely managing to hide her amusement, and bid her farewell until the ceremony.

“Hey,” Alyssa called as the officiant began to walk away, causing her to pause in the doorway and turn back. “I’ve got a question. You know when you say that “Speak now or forever hold your peace line”? How many times has someone actually said something?” When she smiled, one side of her mouth rose higher than the other in a coquettish manner.

The officiant thought about that for a second before replying: “Well, I’ve been doing this for about five years now and, so far, no one has.”

“Damn,” Alyssa said, lifting the bottle to meet her lips. The officiant, understanding that the conversation was over, left to ponder the question as she retreated to her own small dressing room. The first couple of times she had uttered that phrase, she had gotten nervous that someone would interrupt the ceremony and cause a scene. After a couple hundred ceremonies, however, the line had just become a part of her speech, so familiar that she had a practiced rhythm in its utterance (line, timed pause, next line). Although she tried to make each ceremony unique—different inflections, different pause lengths between lines— that particular section of the speech was always the same.

So far, the only drama in this ceremony was that the bride, explaining that her family was Catholic while her fiancé’s family was Protestant, had specifically asked that the ceremony be performed as secular. She had apparently not consulted her mother-in-law on this decision, whose mouth had flattened into a line so thin her lips had almost disappeared. This passive-aggressive gesture could only stem from Midwestern breeding that both families possessed, but the bride had remained true to her convictions.

As of yet, the most memorable ceremony had been the one where the groom had paid her double to recite the speech from *The Princess Bride* (minus the speech impediment). From her first line, the entire party of groomsmen had to hide their sniggers with coughs, but she herself had
managed to keep a straight face through its entirety.

Maybe today would be different.

1:41 PM

“Are you going to do it?” Chase whispered to Jordan as they met in the basement of the event center. From the room behind him, he could hear the rest of the groomsmen laughing uproariously together.

“Oh god, it’s almost two! Why do you smell like booze?” Jordan whispered back, holding one hand over her nose and mouth. “Isn’t the ceremony in like half an hour?”

“I promise, I’ve sobered up.” Chase protested, drawing himself a bit and straightening his bowtie as if to prove that he was in total control of himself. “Can’t say the same about the rest of the groomsmen, though.” He trailed off for a second. “Wait, hey! Don’t avoid the question!”

“I’m not avoiding anything.” Jordan retorted, craning her neck to peer over Chase’s shoulder into the room with the groomsmen. “Shit, can I have what they’re having? Sounds like they’re having fun.”

“Jordan!” Chase hissed. “You told me you would last week when we went out!”

“I was also drunk. People say a lot of things they don’t mean when they’re drunk, Chase.

“Or, they say a lot of things that they DO mean but are too afraid to say when they’re sober.”

Jordan rolled her eyes at Chase’s fortune-cookie wisdom. “No, I’m not going to do it. I got over Maggie ages ago!”

It was Chase’s turn to roll his eyes, which spun like blue marbles in their sockets. “Yeah right. You’ve been in love with her since the first time you saw her at that frat party and you’ve never been able to get over her since. It’s written all over your face, Jordan. So why don’t you want to do it?!”

“Because we’re not characters in a telenovela? Is that a real question?”

Chase groaned and scratched his chin. Although freshly shaved, Chase’s black hair stood out so starkly beneath his pale skin, making it
seem like he already had a five o’clock shadow. “So you’re just going to let the love of your life marry some…bland fuckboy?”

“I thought you and Kyle were friends?” Jordan asked, confused as to why Chase was so against their marriage. “I’m sure Maggie will be very happy with him. You did set them up, Mr. Matchmaker.”

“Yeah, to get her some dick, not to get a ring on her finger! Look, Jordan. Kyle is a CPA. He golfs on the weekends. He thinks milk is spicy and plans on naming his son Kyle Jr. because he’s not creative enough to think of another name. Probably his daughter, too. He’ll have the whole George Foreman thing going on with his family.” Chase’s eyes ticked back and forth between hers. “Anyway, I’m digressing. That’s the whiskey speaking. For me.” He straightened himself up, adjusting the lapels of his navy-blue suit as he did so. “Jordan, really? Can you honestly look me in the eye and tell me that you think Maggie is doing this for her own happiness?”

Jordan bit her lip. She met Chase’s gaze for as long as she could before she had to avert her gaze down to her shoes. “No, I don’t.”

“So are you going to do it, then?” Chase pressed, somewhat impatiently now.

Jordan groaned, exasperated. “Do you really think now is the best time? What kind of a person are you that you want me to ruin one of your best friend’s wedding?”

Chase glanced around to see if anyone else from the bridal party had stumbled out of their respected rooms to listen in on their conversation. “Look, Jordan. The wedding party went down to the hotel bar last night, and Maggie did some tequila shots. You know how she gets when she’s on tequila.”

“Yeah, she pukes her guts out. That’s how we all met, remember. She was puking into your brothers’ kitchen sink, and you and I helped her get back to her dorm.” Jordan replied, poking Chase playfully in his bicep. He ignored her attempts to distract him and continued.

“Yeah, well, long story short, I found her thirty minutes later on the floor of the ladies’ room, crying and moaning your name!” Chase grabbed Jordan’s shoulders excitedly and started bouncing up and down in his oxfords. “Your name, Jordan! She’s still in love with you!”

Jordan opened her mouth to tell him to kindly fuck off, but he
talked over her. “Maggie is marrying Kyle because he’s got money and her parents will approve of her heteronormative lifestyle and all that jazz, but she loves you Jordan! You gotta save her from herself!” Chase was now practically jumping up and down in front of Jordan. “Jordan! Come on!”

“Let me get this straight,” Jordan pinched the bridge of her nose, feeling the beginning of a headache coming on. “You want me to interrupt a wedding because of some drunken ramblings by the bride?” When Chase didn’t answer, she looked up to see him nodding at her eagerly, getting the look of twinkling excitement in his eyes that he got every time he proposed a bad idea. That same look had preceded a rooftop escapade that nearly resulted in their arrest their senior year of college. “Chase, shit like this is why people say gays are so dramatic.”

“Jordannnnnnn!” Chase whined, stomping his feet like a toddler throwing a temper tantrum. “Jordan, please!” He pointed over Jordan’s shoulder towards the room where squeals from the bridesmaids could still be heard. “I promise you she’s already in that room doubting herself. If you stand up and tell her that you still love her, I promise you she’ll at least think about it, if not walk out of that church with you.”

Jordan wrenched her shoulder from Chase’s pincer-like grasp and rubbed where his nails had dug into her skin. “Chase, fuck off. I know you’re just messing with me.” Chase opened his mouth to protest, but Jordan cut him off. “If she’s so in love with me, why does she only make an effort to see me once a goddamn year, Chase?”

Chase groaned so loud that Jordan heard the groomsmen fall silent for a moment in their dressing room behind Chase. “Because she can’t bear to see you any more than that! It makes her feel guilty that she chose the heteronormative half of her bisexuality, and she can’t deal with those feelings!”

Jordan started backing away from Chase, shaking her head slowly. “I don’t know what Nicholas Sparks romance novel you’re stuck in, but there’s no way I’m falling for this ruse.”

Chase’s temper tantrum faded away to a look of sheer desperation. “Jordan, come on. I have a bad feeling about this marriage, and at this point I think only you will be able to talk her out of it.”

Jordan slowed to a halt. “Okay, but that still doesn’t explain why you want me to interrupt the wedding. Why didn’t you tell me this earlier?”
Chase shifted his weight from one foot to the other guiltily. “Because I forgot about her crying on the floor last night until just an hour ago. I was pretty blacked myself. Besides,” He pushed the left sleeve of his jacket up his forearm to check his watch. “The ceremony starts in five minutes. She’s probably already upstairs, surrounded by her bridesmaids and family. There’s no way you’ll be able to talk to her alone in time. It has to be during the ceremony.”

Jordan made a disgusted noise and spun around on her heel. As she headed towards the stairs, trying and failing to ignore Chase as he called after her, “Think about it! I know you will!”

1:57 PM

“When does the open bar start?” Jordan whispered to her friend Elise as the usher led them to their seats. Elise snorted. She, Maggie, Chase, and Jordan had all been friends during college, but after Jordan and Maggie’s breakup and Maggie’s subsequent romantic relationship with Chase’s friend Kyle, the once tight-knit quartet had fractured in two. Since they had drifted apart from Maggie in the past few years, Jordan and Elise had been left off the bridal party and had decided to attend the wedding together.

The room of the convention center had been transformed to resemble a church as much as it possibly could. Two rows of chairs flanked an aisle leading to a white altar covered in pink and yellow roses, whose perfume permeated the air. The afternoon sun flooded in through the high windows and skylights, illuminating the room and shrouding the entering guests in a golden glow. When closely inspected, the room contained many signs of a generic, corporate headquarters – mirrored tile, stackable chairs, a paint color a murky mix of blue and gray – but the detail put into the decoration masked the room’s intended purpose perfectly. It was beautiful, and as she studied her surroundings, Jordan knew Maggie had planned absolutely none of this wedding.

Once they had both been seated, Jordan’s friend Elsie studied her program. “Mr. and Mrs. Kyle Wildthorne,” She read quietly in a sing-song voice. “Ugh. That reminds me of that one Nickelodeon show…”

“The Wild Thornberrys!” Jordan said excitedly, causing the woman sitting in front of her to give her the side-eye.
Elsie snapped her fingers. “Yes!”

“Oh god, I’m going to make so many jokes about that one to her,” Jordan smirked, scanning over her own program. She held the paper up to her face and inhaled the faint scent of perfume embedded in the stationary. The inclusion of this seemingly minor detail confirmed Jordan’s suspicions: Maggie had helped plan very little of this ceremony.

Elsie snickered. “What, at your once-yearly obligatory coffee date?”

Jordan stopped smirking, and Elsie’s eyes widened, quickly realizing that she had hit a nerve. Flustered, she began to apologize. “I didn’t mean—“

Jordan realized she didn’t want to hear it before her friend had even begun, and turned back to staring at her program without actually reading it. “No, forget it.”

“She doesn’t talk to me much anymore either—“ Elsie tried to continue, but Jordan cut her off again.

“I said forget it.”

The two sat in an awkward silence for a while. Jordan watched the other friends and family taking their seats and Elsie scrolled through her Instagram feed on her phone. As more people filed in, the temperature in the room rose steadily. Jordan began to fan herself with her program, causing the ends of her dark bob to flutter around her cheeks. Next to her, Elsie used her free hand to lift her blonde hair off her neck.

“What’s the hashtag we’re supposed to use?” Elsie asked after a minute, breaking the tension that hung between them as heavy as the scents of pollen and women’s perfume quickly filling the room.

Jordan looked at her program for the answer. “#TheWildThornberrys.”

“Wait, seriously?” Elsie asked, looking up from her phone.

Jordan snorted and smacked Elsie’s knee with her program playfully. “No, but I wish.”

The pianist started hammering out Pachelbel’s *Canon in D*, and the parents of the groom began to meander down the aisle.

“Psst, Jordan.” Elsie hissed in her ear. “Chase told me you were going to—“
Jordan cut her off with a look, and her friend remained silent as the rest of the wedding party came down the aisle and took their places at the front of the room. The youngest bridesmaid – evidently the sister of the groom – seemed to be leaning heavily on the groomsman who walked down the aisle with her.

When the groom arrived, Elsie again hissed in Jordan’s ear. “If you layered every white college frat boy’s face on top of each other, you would get his face. That’s how generic it is.”

Jordan stifled a laugh and kicked Elsie’s foot with her own to get her to be quiet. An old lady seated in a row in front of them turned around and gave them the stink eye.

Suddenly, the music changed, and Jordan’s heart sank; this was the part she had been dreading. The guests all stood up at their seats, and Jordan reluctantly followed suit.

Maggie’s dress was pure white, an irony so outdated that Jordan figured no one else in the seats was thinking about. The dress was long-sleeved and lacy, a style that Jordan figured Maggie had adopted to cover up her rose tattoo on her right shoulder, a somewhat impulsive decision made on her 20th birthday. Jordan convinced herself that she could see its outline through the lace, although she might have simply been tricking her own brain because she knew it was there. Coincidentally, that rose tattoo matched the pink roses Maggie clutched in her hand.

After a minute, Jordan realized that she had been holding her breath. After seven years, Maggie had remained in Jordan’s eyes the epitome of ideal beauty. Her auburn curls, her golden-green eyes, the way one side of her mouth rose higher than the other when she smiled. But it wasn’t just her physical beauty that had captivated Jordan. There were very few people in the world that Jordan truly felt comfortable around, and Maggie was one of them. She had been the first and only person Jordan had said “I love you” to and meant it.

Tearing her gaze away from Maggie, Jordan glanced up at the altar to gauge Kyle’s reaction. He was smiling—somewhat blandly in her opinion— at his bride coming towards him down the aisle, flanked by both her mother and her father. Jordan’s hand began to shake with the program still clutched in them, the stock paper now wrinkled and sweaty from her prolonged grasp. Why weren’t tears streaming down his face? Why wasn’t he down on his knees, worshiping her for marrying
him? Hell, Jordan would be if she were in his place. Instead, he was just smirking at her like she was another spreadsheet he needed to tackle.

Jordan avoided Chase’s glare, electing to watch Maggie give her bouquet to her Maid of Honor and take Kyle’s hands in her own. The officiant was dressed entirely in black, mostly so she would look professional and not compete with the bride. But Jordan thought that her outfit choice was fitting at this moment.

*I should have pregamed this,* Jordan thought, tuning out the droning voice of the officiant. *That bridesmaid had the right idea.*

“…anyone have a reason why these two should not be wed, speak now or forever hold your peace.”

In that split second, the entire room seemed to hold its breath simultaneously. Chase (in a manner not the least bit subtle) whipped his head around to glare at Jordan again so fast, Jordan could swear she heard his neck crack from the eighth row. Next to her, Elsie shifted her foot so it pressed hard against her own. In a second that seemed to stretch for an eternity, she hesitated.

Finished with her routine sweep of the room to see if anyone had jumped up to protest the marriage, the officiant opened her mouth to continue her ceremony. From her seat, Jordan saw the officiant’s chest expand with her inhalation, and in that moment Jordan knew it was then or it was never.

“Maggie!”

There was a collective gasp and every head in the room (except Chase’s) swiveled in her direction. Jordan was as surprised as anyone that she had spoken up, and she was equally surprised to suddenly find herself standing up. She swayed a little and grabbed onto the back of the chair in front of her.

“Maggie, I—“ Shit, she hadn’t rehearsed anything in her head. From the front of the room, Maggie’s mother-in-law fainted, distracting the first two rows and much of the bridal party from Jordan’s outburst.

Maggie stared back, her hands still clutching (a now very confused) Kyle’s, her mouth agape and eyes unblinking.

Void of any prepared material, Jordan said the first words that came to her mind. This was not a good idea.
“A fucking accountant, Maggie? Really?” There were gasps from the audience at Jordan’s use of profanity. “You said you’d love me forever. You told me that the night you got your tattoo.” Maggie’s mother-in-law, who had come back to consciousness, heard the word “tattoo” and immediately slumped over again. Jordan hoped that she stayed down for a while otherwise what Jordan was about to say next might just kill her.

“Maggie, I love you. You and I…we just clicked, you know? You’re the only one I’ve ever truly loved, and I know you still have feelings for me too.” Dammit, Chase, you’d better be right about this.

It was at this moment Kyle intervened. He stepped in front of Maggie and said in a tight voice, “She’s marrying me. I think it’s best for you to leave.”

“I think it’s best for you to fuck off, Kyle. Maybe go off and start looking for the clitoris because I know you’ve never been able to find it before.” The entire audience gasped again, and Jordan now noticed that many in the audience had begun to fan themselves anxiously with their programs.

If the thought of a raging lesbian professing her undying love for her future daughter-in-law hadn’t finished her off, that last remark had surely killed Maggie’s mother-in-law. In the line of groomsmen, Chase let out a whoop of support and appreciation, and Elsie mimicked him, giving Jordan the strength she needed to continue.

“You think this prick will ever be able to love you like I do? You think you’ll ever be able to love him like you love me? Please, don’t choose security over happiness for once in your goddamn life,” Jordan said, now edging out of the row and into the aisle where she could look at Maggie head-on. “Some people you just never get over, Maggie, and for me, that’s you.” Jordan stepped forward a row so that Maggie would hopefully be able to see how sincere and earnest her expression was. “Maggie... Magdalena…please.”

Maggie still hadn’t said anything, not a good sign. Jordan swallowed hard, her throat catching. She didn’t know if she’d be able to say anything more herself.

Kyle certainly could. “Now listen here, you —” Kyle uttered a word that would surely make his mother rise from her early grave and smack him ‘round the ears. The audience gasped again – surely all the air from the room had been sucked up by them because Jordan certainly
couldn’t breathe – and Kyle’s groomsmen started to stir restlessly, waiting for a word from Kyle to escort Jordan from the building. Kyle continued:

“I knew that Maggie had...experimented in college,” Kyle spat this word out like it was something vile, “But I can assure you that it was just a phase. She loves me now, and I think it best for you to leave.”

Jordan looked pleadingly at Maggie, who had remained mute throughout this entire ordeal. Maggie’s mouth opened and closed like a dead fish, and then her eyes clouded over with an emotion that Jordan recognized as pity. With that, Jordan’s heart sank and she knew her cause was lost. It was the same look that Maggie had given her when they had broken up four years ago.

“Jordan…” Maggie began, stepping in front of Kyle and fumbling her hands together. “Jordan, you know I love you too,” Maggie’s voice cracked, and tears began to form in her eyes, threatening to destroy her perfectly made-up face. Jordan knew what word was coming next from Maggie’s mouth: “But—“

That’s when Jordan knew: Chase may have been right about Maggie’s feelings, but she would never be able to admit that she was still in love with Jordan, especially not in front of all these people. Although Maggie would love the drama of leaving Kyle at the altar for a woman, her loyalty to her conservative family was what caused her to hesitate, her mouth opening and closing like a fish, unable to form the words that her heart so desperately wanted her to.

Jordan held up one hand, saving Maggie from making the speech she knew was coming. Desperate to maintain some semblance of dignity, she drew herself up to her full height (an unimpressive 5’6”) and looked Kyle squarely in the eye.

“I will love her more than you ever will be able to, but she chose you,” At this, Maggie covered her hand with her mouth, and her shoulders began to shake. Jordan continued. “Many blessings upon you both.”

With that, Jordan shuffled her way through the row of chairs and marched down the aisle, her head held high. The wedding guests still stirred, and behind her she could hear the officiant calling for order to resume in the hall, not unlike a judge would call to order in a courtroom.

Thankfully, the tears came once she was outside in her car, burying her face in her steering wheel.
After about fifteen minutes of hysterical sobbing, there came a tap on her car window. Before she raised her head, exposing her makeup-smeared face to whoever it was, she mentally ran through the options of who it could be: Elsie and/or Chase to come check on her, Kyle and his cronies to beat her up, or Maggie, sweet Maggie, with her auburn hair and her crooked smile, here to comfort her and admit—out of the scrutinizing eyes of her friends and family—that she, too, loved her.

Instead, it was Kyle’s sister, the drunk bridesmaid who had needed to be supported by a groomsman down the aisle. Confused, Jordan rolled down her window to see what she wanted.

“Um, hey,” the girl began somewhat lamely. “You don’t know me, but I thought that was pretty ballsy what you did in there. I’m Alyssa, by the way.” The girl held out her hand for Jordan to shake. After blinking at the bridesmaid for a moment, Jordan stuck her hand through the car window to shake Alyssa’s hand.

“Well, anyway…I think that it was awesome that you went after the girl you loved like that. Maggie is a pretty special girl and…” Alyssa sighed longingly.

Jordan couldn’t believe it. Was everyone at that fucking wedding in love with Maggie?! “You’re in love with her too?”

Alyssa threw her head back and laughed. Evidently, not all the wine had worn off yet. “Yeah…you know that feeling when you just…I don’t know…click with someone? That’s how I felt with Maggie. Everyone must feel that way though, apparently.”

The more Jordan looked at her, the more she could see how Alyssa was obviously Kyle’s sister. However, the features that were so bland on him had been softened by her femininity and enhanced by the makeup she wore, making her really quite pretty. Alyssa fidgeted, fiddling with the ribbon on her bouquet of pink roses.

“So…since now I know you’re single…” The girl handed a slip of paper through the window. “That’s my number. I’m busy tonight, obviously, but you should call me.”
Sinking, drifting downward into the watery limbo,  
I wanted to wake up.  
The rain turned the yard into a swamp,  
The trees and flowers and grass drowning with me,  
Each tear of the sky like a needle on my skin.  
But then strong hands, calloused and gentle  
As only a father’s could be,  
Fished me from the swamp,  
Pulled me onto the porch, out of the rain.  
The grey sheets of rain beyond the porch’s canopy  
Drowned the grass and the flowers in a torrent,  
But my dad and I looked on, unable to pull all  
Out of the flood from the sky.  
The swamp would not let me go, though,  
And the porch collapsed,  
Briny water dragging me back downward,  
My fingers slipping from my dad’s own hand,  
The swamp whispering that I’d be alright  
As I felt what it meant to drown.  
And then I was awake, gasping for air,  
Rolling off of a couch that smelled of dry bamboo and must.  
I was drowned in warmth from the sun, coming in through  
Windows too high for me to reach.  
Outside, I heard the voice of the swamp  
Coming to take me for her weekend.  
I think I’d rather go back to sleep.
“I swear to God, Kit, if you say garbage man one more time, I’ll shove you into the compactor.”

Kit swept back the floppy hair in his eyes that constantly escaped his bandana. He rolled his eyes as Bucket threatened him with the same, unimaginative threat as they began a conversation they’d had a million times.

“It’s what we are, man, I’m just sayin’,” Kit answered blithely as they picked up another trash bin and dumped it into the truck. “I dunno why it bothers you so much.”

“‘Sanitation Engineer,’ that’s our title,” sighed the older man. “Not some filthy garbage man with grime in his beard and dirty coveralls. I didn’t sign on with the government to be a dirty junkman.”

“Guess no one told you life was gonna be this way,” Kit laughed as he tapped a strange rhythm on the side of the truck. Bucket just shook his head.

Bucket was tall; that was pretty much the only thing about him worth describing. He was usually a quiet man who over enunciated everything in an attempt to sound intelligent. He was clean-cut and plain but, when he straightened his high-vis orange and yellow vest, Bucket
almost looked presidential.

Kit, with his uncut hair and youthful face, looked like a member of a boy band in comparison. The boy grinned and skipped through everything while spouting slang and television references more than real words. Bucket couldn’t understand half the things he said.

Both men continued their route with harmless teasing, hopping off and on the truck at different stages in each neighborhood. It was so early that the sky was dark, and some spooky decorations were placed in the front yards of the houses they visited. Their destroyed packaging was always present in the bins. Crisp autumn air still made mist as they huffed and did their work routinely. The cement beneath their feet was so pale and clean in the mornings after the street cleaners returned to the waste disposal facility; Bucket wished their job had such obvious success.

Sometimes they’d marvel at the different things on the curb that day: couches, the odd scrap of carpet, old VCRs, a nice set of chairs with a mismatched table. Other times, they’d be saddened at seeing the wastefulness apparent in their truck.

“Ooooh! Catalogs!” cried Kit. Sometimes they’d hit their version of a jackpot in the form of magazines and catalogs. Bucket’s face lit up for the first time that morning as he finished replacing the large black garbage bin at the base of the driveway.

“What kind?”

“Lane Bryant and Pier One,” said Kit as he shuffled through the top of the heap in the back of the truck where several glossy magazines lay. “Seventeen for you.”

The brightly colored magazine promptly hit Bucket in the face and fell to the concrete. The older man scrambled to pick it up, throwing it in the back of the gigantic truck as he resumed his spot on the back. Kit hung onto the moving vehicle with one hand as he flipped through the furniture catalog. Bucket knew both of them would sort through the pile in a ‘more clean corner’ of the truck later, taking home whatever they wanted to read that hadn’t soaked up refuse in their pages. He also knew that doing this was illegal.

“You know, one of these days we’re going to get caught,” Bucket sighed as the rumbling waste collection unit halted at the next house.

“Serves them all right for not recycling instead,” Kit grunted as his wiry arms shook with the weight of tipping the next bin. Dozens of bags fell out beside orange peels and Styrofoam plates. “Maybe they
can have a turn sorting it all at the waste center while we just throw everything into the trash. How the turntables,” he said while swiveling to see Bucket’s reaction.

“What?” asked the older man.

Kit sighed.

“It ain’t easy bein’ green,” Bucket tried in turn.

“What?”

“Never mind,” he sighed. How did kids these days not know the most famous saying of Kermit the frog?

It was the same conversation every time, like a well-oiled machine. Truth be told, he was a creature of habit and didn’t think he was ready to give up reading *The Week* or *TIME Magazine* anyway. He certainly didn’t want to give up the free supplies for collages, either. But that was something he wasn’t prepared to admit to anyone other than Kit.

“I suppose you’re right anyway,” said Bucket. He had already been defeated years ago; the bright text of a *Seventeen Magazine* had sealed his fate.

When they finished their route through the neighborhoods on their side of the city that afternoon, Kit and Bucket returned to unload their collection at the waste facility. After the routine sanitation of their truck, they prepared to go their separate ways with their ill-gotten gains of the day. Kit had a bunch of the Halloween editions of *Oriental Trading Company* and some *Bed, Bath, and Beyond* clenched in his gloved fist. Bucket held a multitude that were ready to be cut up and Mod-Podged into something transcendent of their original forms. For a few hours, he would be a powerful force of destruction and recreation. Then, his transformations would be left forgotten on his kitchen table.

“Ya know one of these days, you should show me one of those collage things you do,” Kit said as they hung up their vests in the locker room. “I’m due for some culturing,” he laughed.

Please, Kit was the only cultured one of their group at work. He’d been the only one college life stuck to.

“They’re just a hobby,” replied Bucket quietly as he put his weathered work gloves on the top shelf of his locker. “It’s not worth me bringing them.”

“Nah man, bring at least one! C’mon, I wanna see!” said Kit. Bucket couldn’t help but think of a whiny child. By all rights, Kit still
was a kid. He was going to be a freshman in college now? A gap-year employee of the city only, trying to save up some money to cover what his scholarship couldn’t. He couldn’t remember these kids’ ages anymore and, to be honest, he didn’t want to. It made him feel even older.

“Why so interested, need some art for your dorm room next semester? Won’t you need to coordinate room colors with your roommate before you start getting artwork?” Bucket attempted a joke but he was getting uncomfortable.

“We’ll pull a Tim Gunn and make it work. Just bring one, I only want to see it!”

“Fine, fine, I will,” Bucket granted as he shut his locker and left the room to go to his car and some blessed relief from the cold wind they’d faced that day. Kit followed behind animatedly.

“Great, fam! Maybe I can even get creative myself. You could be my muse!”

Bucket grunted tiredly. He sent a haphazard wave towards where he knew Kit’s beat-up truck was while he jammed his key into his own car door and twisted.

“See you tomorrow,” came the bright reply.

Bucket unlocked the door to his apartment and toed off his work boots by the door. The warm air of his radiators whooshed past him into the cold hallway as he scrambled to close the door again with his shoe half off. Again, the same thing every day.

He threw his keys on the scratched table at the center of his apartment, and they slid across the surface until they were stopped by a pile of cut up magazines. He threw four more magazines on top of the stack but Bucket couldn’t even look at the pile as he washed his hands and went to the fridge to grab some cold cuts and mayonnaise. Why did he say yes to Kit? How could he bring his artwork on the route tomorrow? Which piece was he going to bring?

He hastily slapped together a cold ham sandwich and sat at his table with some carrots and a tall glass of water. The radio buzzed half-hearted jazz in the solitude of his home. With robotic movements, he brought the sandwich to his mouth while his gaze remained on the pile of magazines. Maybe he would read the new magazines he got today and create something new? Or maybe he could just go in tomorrow and claim he forgot.
The sandwich didn’t taste right. He looked down and checked the bread for mold. He found none. Maybe it was the mayo. It wasn’t, and it wasn’t the ham either when he checked the fridge. It must be his taste buds. Bucket sat back down and returned to his plain meal.

When he finished, he pushed his plate away and seized the stack of magazines, first grabbing the ones he had pilfered today. There was indeed a Seventeen Magazine, along with TIME and two other catalogs for clothing and furniture. Everything was fall themed with pumpkins and ghosts and leaves. Lots of oranges and reds, like the empty plastic Tide containers that always end up in their waste disposal unit despite the recycling offered by the city.

He thumbed through them thoughtfully and placed small yellow Post-It notes on pages that had promising images—a candle here, a nice pair of hands there, a few creative table decorations, some great lettering was in TIME this week and one young lady had a nice smile in Seventeen. The rest of the bubbly teen magazine didn’t fit his aesthetic.

With his scrapbooking scissors, he carefully cut out his selected pieces and added them to the Tupperware filled with clippings on the chair next to him. Bucket then plucked a particular cutout of pumpkins, leaves, and other squash out of the container like a benevolent god. This would be the centerpiece of his most recent re-animation. Other bits of Halloween text, candy, laughing children, and spooky skeletons were also chosen.

Over the next three hours Bucket created a special, fall-inspired collage on a strong piece of dark gray cardstock while static crackled through the ancient speaker of his radio. Flickering yellow light in the dingy kitchen cast shadows on the mad genius as he Mod-Podged in a creative haze. Fingers and clippings stuck together but no sacrifice was too great for the arts. More than once, Bucket stepped back from his collage and tried to clean his home or do something else but the work always drew him back.

Finally, at 9:30 that evening, Bucket finished his project and stood. His wooden chair scraped as he pushed back.

“It’s alive,” Bucket chuckled to himself quietly. He wondered if Kit would understand the reference and that quickly wiped the smile from his face. He gazed at his creation and, while he did like it and feel pride, reminded himself it was just a collage of stolen magazines. Kit was just being kind by showing an interest in the hobby of his colleague, like how Bucket once attempted to watch that Lord of the Rings movie to
understand Kit’s repetition of the question “What do your elf-eyes see?”

It was just a hobby, they were just magazines, and he was just a sanitation engineer. He sighed. Ignoring the artwork in front of him, he collected his plate and glass to take to the sink.

“Let’s see it! I gotta know we aren’t breaking the law for nothing!”

Bucket sighed. “Stop shouting, it’s in my bag. You and I know they’re just magazines but a supervisor might not see it that way.”

“Fight the power, stick it to the man! But also, yeah, I don’t wanna get fired.” Kit took off his shoulder bag as they walked through the hallway leading to their lockers and to prepare for their walk to the lot where the trucks and street cleaners were parked. They passed a few rooms with telephones ringing or coffee machines dripping. As usual, there weren’t many people there at 5:00 in the morning.

When the two got to their side-by-side lockers, Bucket put his satchel onto the hook inside and opened the flap. He took out a plain cream folder, and he could feel Kit almost vibrating beside him.

“C’mon, old man, let’s see it!” whispered Kit. It was almost flattering, his excitement at a mundane collage just because it was created by him. . . or because it was forbidden. Bucket decided it didn’t matter. He would take what he could get.

He withdrew the thick cardstock covered in its stolen imagery. The glossy shine of the magazine clippings were no more, the matte finish of the glue that covered them cemented their place in a new story. Muted fall leaves cradled pumpkins and spiders sweetly while facetious, spooky text was offset by gentle hands cupping small candles. Resplendent flame almost renewed its twinkle in the center of the collage despite the probability that the photo was taken weeks ago. It was devastating in its simplicity but, looking at it in the eyes of another person, Bucket was proud.

“Wow, that’s pretty nice. You know, I wouldn’t mind that on a T-shirt,” said Kit in a slightly surprised voice. “Like, it’s almost got a graphic kinda quality to it.”

Bucket snorted. “That’s what I’ve been working with since junior high school. You and I both know it’s remedial. It’s just a hobby.”

“I dunno man, if all of ‘em are like this, maybe you should look into Photoshop or something. It’s kinda cool.”

“Stop it. Pilfering magazines is one thing but buying a computer with some artsy tech on it is another.”

Kit stopped halfway to putting on his work gloves. The yellow
fingers flopped limply as he waved his arms in alarm. “You don’t even have a computer? Jesus, no wonder you don’t understand half the shit coming out of my mouth!”

“Watch your language,” Bucket warned as he shut his locker door and clipped on his high-vis vest. “Swearing makes you sound uneducated.”

Kit just rolled his eyes as the two began walking from their locker room towards their waste collection unit. The sun had yet to appear, and Kit was still flapping his arms like some astonished bird. In the fluorescent lights of the processing center, his gestures reminded Bucket of the dingy high school football flag they threw in the truck a few weeks ago. The thing was fluttering around the unit for hours.

“Who cares? If you had a computer, you’d know you could learn anything from the internet!” he said.

“Could I learn about this me-me nonsense you always spout?” Bucket asked in hopes of distracting his partner.

“They’re memes, Bucket, but yeah. It can also help you with your dope hobby.”

Bucket was saved from formulating a response as Snap, the driver of the truck, entered with his thermos in hand. He was a rotund man in his mid-thirties, and he bridged the age gap between the two waste collectors.

“Morning boys, you ready to go? Forecast is a bright and sunny day, high of forty-four degrees.”

Bucket nodded and hopped into the passenger seat of the unit to sit in the heated cab until they got to their first neighborhood.

“Winter is coming,” the young man muttered before he followed suit to sit behind the driver.

Kit always remained silent on the drive to their designated neighborhood. The younger man didn’t talk much to Snap because he said Snap reminded him of his brother. Bucket never really asked why that was a bad thing. He would later but today he was glad for the silence and the respite it brought from Kit’s chatter.

He knew his collage was nothing special. He wasn’t going to spend money on some wafer-thin Apple laptop when he knew the tech would only be a roadblock to his creativity. He was 56 years old, dammit, and he wasn’t about to break into the art world with some cut out text and a laptop. No, people went to school for things like that, and that wasn’t him.
“Alright boys, first ‘hood of the morning! Go get ‘em,” Snap said with a grin and a sip from his coffee.

Kit and Bucket exited the cab of the truck and circled to their first driveway of the morning. After the heavy door shut Snap in, it was like the conversation between the two sanitation engineers had never stopped.

“Seriously, you may even be able to sell that stuff online. One of my exes does some design stuff and says silhouette stuff is really in. A little tweaking on the computer and you might have a logo or something!”

Bucket sighed as he lifted the second bin from the curb. Why couldn't Kit just understand that old men who never got a degree didn’t get careers they loved? He had come to terms long ago that he was a sanitation engineer who glued paper together on the side. Higher education just hadn’t been for him. The workforce was where he belonged; why shouldn’t he be fine with that? The job paid well, and he had provided everything needed for himself—even had a little extra for his niece and nephew.

“Maybe you could even sell them on eBay or make one of those Etsy things? You could take requests or do custom name stuff—”

Kit was still talking as the truck jerked to a stop at another house. Why was this so important to him? It’s not like people were in the market for collage art from magazines. It’s not like anyone would pay someone to cut up pictures for them, and it’s not like he wanted to sell the pile of trash sitting on his old kitchen table.

Kit was grunting as he dragged an old armchair from the side of the street. Bucket lifted the other end, and they threw it into the back of the truck together.

“I’m just sayin’, you know, that some museums like that kind of thing. If you send some work in maybe you can catch a break,” the young man said as he wiped his gloved hands on his pants. He looked at Bucket expectantly. There was excitement on his face.

Bucket took off his right glove and ran his hand through his thinning hair. He didn’t want to take the light out of the kid’s eyes but he had to put his partner down.

“Kit, I am an adult. If I want a computer, I will buy one. If I wanted to sell artwork, I would,” Bucket said patiently. “There aren’t places for people like me, and if there were, I don’t think I’d want to take them.”
Kit didn’t say anything to him for the rest of that work day. They went about their jobs lifting bins and carpets and trash into their collection unit silently, both lost in their thoughts. Bucket wondered if he had been too harsh when he spoke to his younger colleague. Whenever his sister yelled at her kids, they would attempt the silent treatment for a while. He dismissed it quickly because cruelty was not part of his nature, even as a boy. Kit was probably just thinking about what he said. Well, it would do him some good to contemplate the real world for a while.

After their last neighborhood, the two climbed back into the coffee-smelling cab with Snap. On the way back to the sanitation center, the large driver and Bucket talked vaguely about a recent football game they’d both only half-watched. Bucket recounted a ‘great pass’ towards the end of the game, leaving out that he turned his radio down after so he could focus on reading his book of poetry. Snap marveled at the overtime but admitted he changed the channel on the TV because his daughter wanted to watch a movie. The ride seemed eons longer when Bucket thought about the unnatural silence of Kit that day.

When they finally returned to the center, they parted ways with Snap as he tried to heave his body from the driver’s seat. Kit and Bucket walked quietly from the back lot into the building and to the locker room. No one was in there at the moment; their shift was the earliest.

Bucket opened his locker and began pulling off his gloves and vest when Kit finally spoke up.

“Can I have that?” he asked while gesturing to Bucket’s messenger bag. For a moment, Bucket thought he was asking for his satchel but then he understood that the boy wanted the art.

“Of course! I made it for you,” Bucket said in surprise. He pulled out the folder again and passed it to Kit. Kit was smiling happily, like nothing had happened earlier.

“Thanks man! It’ll go on my fridge at school,” he laughed.
“Of course! I made it for you,” Bucket said in surprise. He pulled out the folder again and passed it to Kit. Kit was smiling happily, like nothing had happened earlier.

“Thanks man! It’ll go on my fridge at school,” he laughed.
“The best museum there could be,” Bucket joked uncomfortably.
“You gotta name it though.”

Bucket finished shrugging on his coat and looped the strap of his bag over his shoulder as he contemplated Kit’s command. He’d never named one of his creations before. You only name things you are attached to.

“Maybe you should name it for me. You could use some culturing,” Bucket said with a smile.
“Alright man, have it your way. See you tomorrow?” Kit asked.
It was clear in the hunched shoulders and sheepish grin that he was still slightly worried about his pushiness earlier that day. Bucket wanted everything to be fine again; the kid had nothing to worry about.

“See you tomorrow. Maybe you can come with a title?”

Kit shifted and his grin grew larger, if possible, as he tucked the folder under his arm safely. “I’ll come with a few. You might even understand some of ‘em!”

He didn’t understand the titles Kit brought over the next days but he slowly began to appreciate the young man’s enthusiastic support of his hobby. Frequently, Kit took out his smartphone and showed him pictures and digital collages in museums or as T-shirts. The kids in Kit’s pictures slouched, throwing the designs on their shirts into wavy, colorful messes that brought a glint to Bucket’s eye.

All too soon, it was time for Kit to head off to school for the fall semester. After a few days without him, Bucket found himself thinking about how he missed the wild kid. He had somehow sent a picture of his dorm room to Bucket’s ancient phone showing the proud placement of the collage on the wall by his desk. It looked good hanging there.

Bucket made another collage, this time themed for beach weather, to hang on his own fridge. He asked his niece and nephew to show him how to send pictures on his phone and after much thumbing of the number pad, Bucket managed to send a picture of his artwork to Kit at school.

Bucket continued his hobby through the fall and winter, never throwing away his pieces and even showing a few to his friends. They told him to send some pieces to local art fairs or to try and sell them online like Kit had suggested. A few even began saving magazines and newspapers for him so that he no longer had to pilfer from the garbage.

Around New Year’s, Bucket finally relented—more out of exhaustion than a desire to be an artist—when one of those friends who worked at the local farmer’s market offered to sell some pieces at her jewelry stall. He made a few bucks that month and then a bit more the next. It wasn’t a global design business or a museum but Bucket was excited to tell Kit anyway.

When Bucket sat down to eat that night and looked at the pile of magazines at the end of the table, his sandwich tasted just right. Maybe he’d send the kid a text after dinner.
A neuron travels contralaterally.
A long walk lingers as dog reminds owner of his leash.
A boy undoes his widget.
An airbag deflates. A sink spills blood.
The way we almost didn’t kiss didn’t save me
everything far too flushed and flushed out.
That pear tree, a block from the library
& beheaded before dawn bears no more fruit
but it does resemble the stars
which do glitz and slowly die
leaving me longing.
I shall not swallow this question, I must ask.
When from the bottom of the lake
you pull me in my best suit,
when you slit my belly, when you pry
open my ribs like a clamshell, like an oak chest
and there you find my voice, tinny,
asking if I’m good enough,
good enough
I want you to remember our childhood
flushed with laughter
entire days spent gathering sticks
in the woods behind your house that endless July
the world a juice box of unstomped opportunities
purpled & sugary,
seething with joy.
Cranes leave because they know they will return.

Show me a creature who calls a place home only to abandon it, who keeps handfuls of himself to sacrifice.

If we could be cranes, flocked, rising and fading like tilted moons, our hearts sewn into the pulley of this universe, we would be.

If you find a feather on your porch in the morning, know I have gone.

Know, too, I am not a crane.
INTERVIEW

ALI ETERAZ
You’ve written memoir, short story, and now this novel. What was it like to transition between those forms? What was the biggest surprise for you?

I was already writing novels prior to my first book, which was a memoir, so I kind of knew what went into writing a novel. And given that, when you’re young—well, not everybody, but when I was young—I was writing a lot and just calling it a novel. It was formless stuff. When I finally came to short stories and was like, “Oh my god! Form can control this information dump,” it was actually really liberating. I was like, “man, why didn’t I start with short stories?” But then I went back and I realized that some of the things that I kept throwing into the novel were really just short stories. So, for me, probably the hardest challenge is not really the distinction between novel and memoir: it’s actually the distinction between longer and shorter. That’s where I am not exactly sure where I fall. Sometimes I’m so convinced that I’m really a short form person, even though I’ve got two long-form books, and then only maybe twenty published short stories. I just think, “I’m definitely on the short side; I was never meant to write a novel.” And that might be just because so many of my novels get abandoned. But that doesn’t mean I can’t rehabilitate those into short stories, either, so that’s still something I’m not sure I have a final answer on. The distinction between the size is what ultimately controls my relationship to the form, but I haven’t decided where I’m most comfortable yet.
In terms of the difference between memoir and writing a book of fiction, is there a way that one is more freeing or more restrictive?

I would say that at the time I wrote the memoir, the memoir was the most freeing, but I don’t think I have another memoir in me. Therefore, it’s more restrictive now.

You’ve memoir-ed it all out.

I’ve memoir-ed out what I was capable of memoiring.

You’ve spoken before about your relationship to writing in English versus writing in Urdu or Punjabi, and you’ve also been compared to other bilingual or multilingual writers. How do you think that informs the way you use language? Does it contribute to your mastery of it?

My bilingualism—and what is bilingualism? You speak one language, and then you acquire a new one. At least, that’s how it went for me. I didn’t grow up simultaneously having two. I was in one, I came out [to the U.S.] at the age of eleven, got a new one, and then kept the first one. So that’s how I became bilingual. Some people, they don’t keep the first one. They just get moved into the new language. So for me, the acquisition of English happened by reading books. I didn’t learn English in an academic, formal sense; I learned it by reading a lot. The acquisition of English went through literature. And it’s literature ranging from Dickens to books about elves and science fiction. So it was very broad, in that sense, how I accessed English and how I acquired English. Had that not happened, I don’t think that I would have ended up becoming a writer, because it was the reading of those books that actually made me want to be a writer. And the reading of those English books specifically. So for me, the transition from Urdu to English is why I became a writer.

In a different interview, you mentioned that you admire writing that has very practical moments until it drops something very poetic in the middle, like it gets overwhelmed by itself. Is that something you try to emulate, or do you have a different way to balance language and thought?

That’s a good question. I like to write simply, but I don’t like to plot
simply. For me, plot is about mystery. It’s not about revelation or revealing. Maybe I go in an opposite direction than other people? I’m not sure—people would write more beautifully, but have a simpler plot. I think I would write more simply but have a more annoying plot. That’s kind of what I think I do, but I just want—regardless of what I do—that the access to the characters be earned. I don’t necessarily want to make it easy for the reader; I don’t think they want that. I don’t want to detract them from doing that work by having really complex language. But a little bit of work should be okay. That’s probably what the reader likes.

In terms of that access to the inner lives of characters, and access to what’s going to happen in the rest of the plot, there are moments where you interpret for the reader—the example that comes to mind is M. talking about his relationship to Marie-Anne’s mother. How do you decide what needs to be said on the page and what you want to let the reader find out for themselves?

Well, M. is fucked up because he—well, the book is about believing—not just faith, but what do you believe when people are spouting off? What should you believe, are they accurate, should you believe that their victim story is a victim story? Should you have reliability in what they’re saying? I mean, M. is an unreliable narrator. And he seems reliable. That’s, I think, the problem for the reader with M., that he seems very, very reliable, and I think—you have to tell me this. Is he reliable? Or does he seem unreliable?

To me?

Yeah.

The thing that came to mind for me while I was reading it was a Zadie Smith essay where she talks about a world shaped around your own desires, and I think his is shaped around his fears. It’s interpreted through what he’s afraid of, and the worst coming true.

So I’m sort of curious about that passage, specifically, about the mom, because I remember writing that. By that time, are you already aware that he thinks along this fear-driven way?

I can’t quite remember. I think it was slowly arising.
Slowly arising. Okay, I’m pretty sure I wrote that later, when I knew that he is unreliable; you can’t trust this guy to do the right objective journalism of his life. You can only rely on him to do the “M. is a victim” analysis. That’s why it worked that the reader needed to see what he thinks of his mother-in-law.

That was something that came up while you were writing the book, this aspect of him as an unreliable narrator?

The two of them—the husband and wife—they’re always kind of lying, to each other, even. And sometimes they’re conspiring! They have this weirdly imaginative way of thinking about who they are, which seems false, but they believe it. So, what do you believe? We go through that every single day. Do I really believe in my abilities as a writer? Do you really believe in your abilities as a writer? Do I believe that I’m really the person that I am? I think M. does that on a different sort of social, identity-based level—he’ll give these little sermons and monologues about what he thinks is happening in the world, or is being done to him—but is it believable? I think Ali Ansari comes in and tries to show us that this guy’s version of stuff is not always in alignment with what’s actually happening. I think, to some degree, that Candace also realizes that, but M. doesn’t, and his wife doesn’t.

Another aspect of the book that’s important from the beginning is the geography of it—for instance, he looks out his front window and sees the Rocky statue. Can you talk about how the city of Philadelphia shapes this story and how you decided to set it there?

Philly is a really walkable city, and I just really thought that—let me back up. In the original-original idea of this book, there was no M. The main character really was a cross between M and the wife. He was involved in this war-on-terror analysis of politics, and think-tank life, and all that, and he just happened to be in Philadelphia and walked around a lot. Then, I realized that there was too much happening with this one person, and I started developing this crazy M. guy, and then it made sense to just keep it in Philly. Especially because of the country getting founded in Philadelphia, and him sort of trying to liken his own extrication from the social problems that he sees—he thinks of himself like he’s
George Washington, but he’s not, right? I wanted to conflate that, for sure. Philadelphia was the right place. It could’ve been D.C. I guess, but I know Philly. It’s tangible, American history. And he wants to make history—wants to have kids, and he wants to lay roots, and he wants to create something going forward. His own little family country. But he’s not able to, and he’s not equipped to. He shouldn’t have children.

*He’s his own founding father.*

And probably should stop right there.

*One review of your book described it as “unflinching in its willingness to transgress taboos”* (New York Times). Has the reaction to that surprised you? Have there been things that people have been more scandalized by that you didn’t expect, or less?

I figured that by the end of the book, because I knew the ending, the stuff that happened along the way would make sense. And I think it does. I think that if there was doubt at some point, even by the end, that this guy is who he is pretending not to be, that you would be able to go back and see what it took for him to be able to get there. In that sense, some of those scenes are breadcrumbs that maybe you don’t see until later. Maybe you think that those are actually mud, or something. Then you reach the end and you’re like, “oh that’s not mud, that’s breadcrumbs. The trail’s back there.” I like to have the opportunity for the reader to reach the end of the journey and then to track back and look for stuff. It’s not like that with every project, but with this one, I felt that more strongly.

*You wanted it to benefit a second, or a third, or a fourth reading?*

Yeah. Or, just that flip back after the first one. I think there’s stuff there, there’s people scattered along the journey, and I don’t name them, but you can kind of pick that up later on, if you’re paying attention. Not to deviate a little bit from the taboo stuff, or anything like that, but the taboo stuff fits if you finally see him in his manifestation. It’s also like Ali Ansari. You initially—at least, in my reading—saw him as like a problem person. He’s the pornographer, and he’s using and exploiting, and his trajectory goes a different way. He’s protective of Candace and upset with what M.’s doing with his life. So, similarly with him, some of those taboos—M.’s
unwillingness to participate in some of the taboo stuff can also be read back and say “oh, Ali Ansari was going in a different direction.”

*With parts like with Farkhunda, who's underage and has these relationships with older men—for you, it's worth it to show this character's perspective, and his bias towards the world?*

First of all, I definitely wanted to illuminate the fact that, in Pennsylvania, underage is still not what we think is underage. If they haven’t changed the rules, if she’s sixteen and over, if a man says “I thought she was eighteen,” then he’s okay. That’s the rule, and she actually cites that rule in the book. I lived in Philly, and that’s how I know that, and we were shocked when we learned it. There’s a little bit of social realism in there, for me, to just kind of drop that in there. I could have easily made her eighteen or twenty-two or whatever, but I did sixteen, I think, subconsciously, because I remembered that rule and was bothered by it. The fact that we still have it on the books. That should not be the case. I chose sixteen because I thought, “well, I gotta illuminate this one thing.” Maybe it could’ve been illuminated in another way, but now we all know.

*In Native Believer, there’s a moment where M. is talking about his cultural influences—that he grew up with The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air, and that’s affected who he is as a person and what he’s willing to stand up to. Do you agree with that assessment about cultural influences? If you do, is there an influence that you, as a writer, feel responsible for?*

I don’t know if I have such a limited view of influences. I think that we are bigger than our favorite sitcoms. I think that we are able to intake a lot more and process a lot more. Again, with M., it’s him being self-serving. When he’s just like, “the reason that I can’t do the really good act right now is because I watched sitcoms about nerds,” he’s being self-serving. I definitely pay a lot of attention to cultural output. For me, it’s not so much trying to be a cultural influencer, but I definitely want to let myself be influenced by what’s around me. That’s, I think, important; I don’t want to create some sort of ivory-tower elevation of myself, or some sort of abyss for myself, where I’m like “oh, I’m immune to everything.” I’m not immune; I react to the same things that everyone else is feeling. I would like to be a participant in our culture, not, you know, how with Cormac McCarthy and some of these guys, people say “oh, they’re over
there, and they’re doing their own thing.” No one’s doing their own thing.

Along those lines, there’s some meditating on the idea of cultural pigeon-holing in Native Believer. There’s the idea of secularism not being accessible if you’re from a religion that there’s a cultural bias against. I was wondering if you would talk about that a little bit more.

If you’re from a particular religious tradition, people are not willing to easily let themselves believe that you’re a secular person. I definitely see that with Muslims. There are people who are non-practicing Muslims, who abide by none of the norms other than, maybe, showing up to a funeral prayer. Their secular identity or worldview is diminished by the allegation, almost, of “hey, but you’re a Muslim.” As if those two things can’t coexist. That dismissal of the non-practicing Muslim is not something that’s endemic only to the West. It happens among Muslims as well, in Muslim-majority countries. A large swath of Muslims just do not practice, and yet their own co-religionists, and also people out here in the West, will pretend like those people don’t exist. And they do. Muslim countries are full of people who, while the Friday prayers are happening, are just going home and having a cold one, or illicit sexual relations, or doing nothing. I think that maybe the word secular is a problem, but irrespective of that, I think we should all be cognizant that out of 1.6 billion people, the pure practitioners of orthodoxy are not as common as we think.

Another thing that comes up in this book is the idea of commodification, of packaging a person or a relationship or a religion for different audiences. Is that something that you think about a lot, as a writer?

I think I have to. I don’t like to. I’m just very cognizant of myself not being used as a commodity. I’m not, but it’s a fear that I have. Definitely, within a context where there’s this group of Muslim-Americans all about selling the religion, it was a perfect conversation to have. They’re all salesmen, in some sense of the word. M. starts off in marketing, and his wife is in sales. The other people that he comes across are very concerned with branding, naming themselves in the right way, so that they can sell stuff, whether it’s porn or whatever. For me, that conversation wasn’t so much about that Muslims are doing this; it’s just that we do it across the board. People tell me all the time, “go brand yourself on your Twitter!”
I’m like “no, I don’t want to, and I don’t have to.” Our society has a commodification problem, and I did definitely want to share how that manifests itself within the Muslim-American experience. How else would you get the opportunity to see the way that Muslims commodify except through art?

*There’s some conversation in Native Believer about the comparison between different marginalized groups in the U.S. There’s also a piece on this novel in the Los Angeles Book Review titled “Are Muslims the New Blacks?” What kind of role do you think those comparisons play in conversations about discrimination? Do you think they’re productive?*

To a limited extent, they’re productive, but sometimes they actually feel like they’re non-productive. I say that because, if we just keep saying that the next group that’s being marginalized is like one of the previous groups, we’re kind of setting up a fatalism in the system. The system just marginalizes the next group. There always has to be one. And we shouldn’t have that fatalism. We shouldn’t just accept that. The system shouldn’t be marginalizing anybody at all! That should be where we start. So contextualizing the next group as similar to the previous group that has suffered, and that continues to suffer—that’s the other thing. You eliminate the continuation of suffering of the other groups. You’ve handed the baton off to the next group, as if they’re the only sufferers, and we’re good on everybody else. The system is cheating. The system wants us to forget the suffering of the people that’s ongoing, and also wants us to accept that there always will be suffering for somebody. We shouldn’t accept that on either account.

You’ve talked about how your book of short stories, *Falsipidies* and *Fibsiennes*—which was more surrealist, fantasy, drawing on mythology—was important to your development as a writer. How do you think it affected this book or the writing that you’re doing right now?

I’ve struggled, to be honest, between wanting to be a realist writer or a fabulist writer. I totally have uncertainty. Because I had already started working on *Native Believer*, and I was in a very real book—tangible places and things like that—and then I was also working on a lot of surreal stuff, I wasn’t sure where I was going to end up. To be honest, I’m still not sure. I feel lucky that I was able to get published at all, and that
I was able to get different types of stuff published, so now I can kind of think through that commitment. Am I going to commit to surrealist, fabulist stuff? Am I going to commit to realist stuff, or am I just going to play it by project? And that’s something I don’t know the answer to yet.

Finally, you said that you never mentioned the Eagles in this book because you were still hurting from the last Super Bowl loss. How do you feel about tha—

I feel so good. It was terrible in 2004. So bad. We lost, and President Bush got re-elected. That was the worst. But this was good.
Few people in the world could say they were lucky enough to live next to an apple orchard. Fewer still could have found a cottage so far away from a city like Theresa had, so far that when she stepped outside in the middle of the night and looked towards the sky, the only detectible sounds were the humming of crickets and the reluctance of her own breath.

The house itself was nothing special, but its new inhabitant had no complaints. The Virtual Field systems had needed updating, but everyone took a class or two on holographic systems in college; it was nothing she couldn’t fix with basic software updates and an improved projector. And when she had scoped the motion sensors to broadcast herself for meetings, she positioned the camera just so, so that they did not catch the noose hanging in the corner of her living room.

During the day, the acres were tended, motors of the farm equipment buzzing in the distance. As Theresa loaded new dishware into her cabinets and situated the bed with crisp sheets, she left her windows open, willing in effervescent autumn air and the sweet, glowing scent of the apples. Some days she sat at her kitchen window and just watched
the trees plume in the wind, as if breathing. Machines nudged the trunks so that the ripe little Galas and Pink Ladies and Honey Crisps fell into their collection chambers. Within the cleaning station, the apples rolled through rationed spurts of mist, just enough to shine them into a homogenous river of red flowing like an artery towards the farm, where they were sprawled out for inspection. Those fit and functioning were gathered into bushels and shipped off to grocery stores and farmers' markets. Those small and bruised were tossed aside.

Theresa's fascination with the apple culling was a good way to pass the time, if nothing else. But when fall neared its end, the overlooked apples fell to the ground in small rotting herds and smelled of both sweetness and decay. Only then did Theresa finally close her windows.

Theresa's pleasure at the cottage had surprised the realtor. She had found him to be excessively concerned with his image. The cottage, so far from civilization, had dropped to half its list price in the year it sat vacant and melancholy on the market. Rumors of haunting circulated, causing the realtor to work frantically to cover his tracks. Theresa dismissed the threat.

“It's ten miles to the nearest grocery store,” the man had said while chauffeuring her to the cottage. “But the price is advantageous. And if you need to visit the city, the drive is less than two hours.”

She had shrugged in lieu of vibrant approval or otherwise. Her silence had made him look away, and then back at her. She was a slight, sour, girlish-looking woman easy to ignore. No ripeness flushed her cheeks, her skin tone resembled the whiteness of an airplane's cloud trails, and her head floated above her gaunt shoulders in a way so alien that people often mistook her for a robot. He probably thought she was ill.

She was not ill. Nor was she artificial. Though it was easy on any given day to feel like one or the other. She was human, barely. Physically she was flesh, but her personality was wrought. To be ill, at least, was human. Artificial creations were easier to repair because they were known, beginning to end. Illness and technology combined, as far as Theresa knew, did not exist.

*****

It was around the first of November when she received her first phone call since moving in.
“When are you coming into the office?” asked the disembodied voice of Pippa, the boss’s secretary. “Ms. Kim has requested your presence when the clients from Lowell & Cross come in to troubleshoot their new server.”

Theresa lay on the rug of her living room. “I’ll project in,” she said, rising into a bridge, feeling as if her body folded in half in a way it was not supposed to.

“She wants you there in person.”

“That’s not what she told me.”

Pippa feigned frustration. Theresa wondered how she did it. “She wants to meet with you beforehand since the client is so high-profile. It’s in the email.”

Sweat accumulated behind Theresa’s ears. “I did not get that email.” An alert flashed over her computer screen. She corrected: “I have not yet read that email.”

“Please let her know when you can come in,” Pippa said with a sigh.

Theresa flushed at the voice’s smoky, intimate tone. What was it that made Pippa so normal? Theresa had been in the office the day Pippa was downloaded: the most efficient, comprehensive artificial intelligence and business companion, generation sixteen. A perfect system with human inflections and mannerisms but no human form. No face, no smile, no physical being. AIs were deigned strong voices because it was the only part of them that could take up space.

Theresa agreed to email the boss back and ended the call. Then her thighs lost their firmness and she collapsed onto her back, looking up at the faux wood buttresses of the cottage ceiling. The house was only seven hundred square feet. After painting over everything that wasn’t already white, the house had only two sources of color: the latticed ceiling rafters and the noose, both in the living room, where Theresa spent most of her time. She was a small woman, she needed little space. A troll need only the corner under a bridge.

That night she had a dream about a formless woman—a woman she thought at first was Pippa, but who was someone else entirely. Her presence dripped with confident, delicious femininity. Theresa was tied to a chair, naked, and the woman pressed a thumb against her lips, drawing
a cross shape over her face, down her neck, collarbone, chest, stomach...

The woman opened her mouth, and out came the most ghastly sound, garbled, broken, preternatural: "s...s...s..."

Theresa’s eyes widened. It came again.

She jolted awake, her palms hot, the back of her neck cold and sweaty. She felt shamefully empty. Drained. The twist in her stomach, the trembling of her hands, it was too much for her to go back to sleep. She was freezing. It had been years since she’d dreamt like that. She’d tried to get away from that sort of temptation, that amalgam of desperation and loneliness and greed. Had this house possessed her? Wrapped in a blanket, Theresa went into her living room, made a cup of tea, and considered the noose, its slight pulsation against the static air. She watched the sunrise, civil and pink. When she was thoroughly calmed, she slept again.

Later that morning, she went to the grocery store and bought a month’s worth of provisions. Her mother had taught her how to stock up. They used to eat leek soup together on cold afternoons, long ago, and then Theresa had made it for others. For friends, for women. Years had passed since she last made it, and the thought of its smell did something to her stomach.

She bought apples from the orchard for applesauce, maybe a pie. The sky took a chilly, grey turn, sun obstructed completely by dark clouds, and when Theresa stood in the field next to her cottage, bags in her arms, dressed in bright white, and looked out over the depressed, fading orchard, what was she but a blight? Enough of that.

She pushed her way through her front door, slipped out of her shoes, set down her groceries, hung up her coat, and froze. Stiff and cold as steel, constricting her completely. Terror that somehow she was not alone in her house. No, no.

Her noose had an occupant.

A woman in a white dress hung lazily, as weightless as if she were floating in saltwater. Hair the color of wheat curled at her shoulders like flower petals. Her dress had a sloping back, revealing a scar in the shape of a cross across her protruding shoulder blades.

“Hmm…” Her voice was soft and sweet and a little challenging.
Feet swinging above the ground, the woman slowly spun, the rope creaking through dense milliseconds until she finally faced Theresa head-on.

Theresa did not breathe. She did not move, did not react. Her eyes stung with dry, intimate fear. Someone was in her house.

The woman took a breath and removed the noose from her glowing neck. Her bare feet did not descend. “That didn’t work,” she sighed, letting the rope fall to the side. Then, she turned to Theresa. “Pretty arcane way of dying, don’t you think? Inefficient at this height, too. Takes so long.”

Theresa said nothing.

The woman’s feet started to shine, and she finally floated down to the floor, a little translucent. “Can’t you see me?” she asked Theresa. “You seem… unperturbed.”

Theresa choked. “I’m perturbed.”

“Good,” said the woman, grinning. Then she began advancing towards Theresa with long, soundless strides.

Theresa fell backwards, hitting her head on the door and crying out. “Who are you?”

The woman stopped a foot in front of Theresa. She curled her toes in. “Um.” Decided, she extended her hand. “B.”

“Are you a ghost?” asked Theresa. “Or a ghoul? Or—are you here to take my soul?”

“I’m not here for you,” said B. “Do you want me to be a ghoul?”

Theresa’s lips curled into a question, but she silenced herself as the woman’s skin writhed, fingertips to the crown of her head shedding and disappearing soundlessly, revealing an interior of black void and flashing symbols. Nothingness, given dimension. Skin reappeared, and the stranger became a man, blood dripping from his pointed teeth, eyes glowing red, skin jaundiced and peeling away from reddish brown muscle.

“A ghoul,” he said.
Finally, Theresa screamed. She curled inward, hiding her face, squeezing her eyes shut. Fury, suddenly. Childish tears, suddenly.

“Ah,” breathed the stranger, voice in flux. “That is a little scary. Interesting.”

Theresa trembled.

“There, I’m not scary anymore,” said the woman’s voice again. “I’m not going to hurt you.” A pause, a shared moment of inaccessibility. “Promise.”

Carefully, Theresa opened her eyes. It was the woman again, concerned.

She extended her hand. “Here.”

Theresa reached up to accept, but where their fingers should have brushed together, Theresa’s hand passed right through the woman’s, though it glowed. The veil of light passing over Theresa sent a sharp chill down her spine. They did not touch.

Theresa helped herself up, leaned against the door, and asked, “What are you?”

The woman—B—looked at her palms and sighed. “Hard to pin it down,” she said, walking back into the living room. “Were you really gonna kill yourself?”

“Answer my question,” Theresa said. Incensed, she flung the door open. “Or get out of my house.”

“I’d love to,” scoffed B. “Don’t you think I would have left already if I could have? It’s so depressing in here. You barely even have any furniture.”

“Get out.”

B swallowed and returned to Theresa, keeping a respectful distance between their bodies. Cold November air blasted in, and though it almost knocked Theresa back, it did not even ruffle B’s dress. B reached a hand forward and tried to push it through the threshold, but it did not give. She shoved against it. Leaned her entire shoulder and upper body into this invisible wall. She kicked it and her foot bounced back, recoil rippling the skin of her foot and calf.

“I would if I could,” said B, trying to stomp away, but she made no noise. “Who’d wanna live here anyways?”
Theresa shut the door and leaned down to pick up her groceries. When she looked up, B had vanished, like a flame blown out.

*****

“I am so sorry I couldn’t make it in today,” sniffled Theresa to her boss. The hologram of Ms. Kim paced around her room, eyes dour. Theresa focused on the strikingly high resolution of her violet satin suit, which distracted from the disappointment in herself. She had not meant to become sick, honest to God, but her house was beyond freezing. Her thermostat read seventy-four degrees, and the repair service she’d called said that nothing was wrong, but she was constantly shivering.

A week of radio silence from her mysterious intruder and the paranoia was just beginning to fade, yet Theresa did not go an hour without thinking of it. Ms. Kim, opaque and incorporeal, a cluster of millions of particles of light all sticking to each other like honeycombs, looked a little like B had. But Ms. Kim was not there as B had been.

“I’m surprised,” said Ms. Kim. “You’ve never been sick before.”

Theresa coughed. “What do they need fixed?” she asked.

“Their paralegal program needs re-encryption,” she said. “You need to shut down the server and rewrite part of the AI’s internal code.”

“Just a bug?”

“Yes, but it’s a bit urgent. Pippa will give you the details.”

Theresa flinched at Pippa’s summoning. Her voice began listing off different requests from the client. Theresa jotted them down, and with the job complete, the AI was dismissed.

“Another week,” said Ms. Kim, “and I want you here to represent it.”

And then the hologram shut off, the lights of the V-Field in her living room dying with a snap, like a knife chopping an apple.

Theresa looked at the soles of her feet. Even they were waxy and enigmatic. Sometimes she felt she looked like one of those sex robots, the kinds with pre-recorded dialogue and noises and only three facial expressions. She looked at the noose. Ever present.

In the corners of her senses, Theresa felt something bubbling within her. Vibrations yet to coagulate into sound, something diligent, familiar.
In her peripheral vision, Theresa saw a dark figure. She whipped around, frantic to catch a glimpse—

A shirtless man, anorexic, flimsy, old, with a cross-scar in the middle of his back. He knelt below her window, scratching at it with his long, chipping nails and groaning.

Theresa froze in place, and watched him unblinkingly as the horrid noise of his scratching continued. His mouth creaked open.

Trembling from head to toe, Theresa sat up. She couldn’t tell if the noise came from within him or from his clawing. She couldn’t even call it noise, just aborted sound, unaccessed, something she should not hear. Her throat tight, she whispered, “Who are y—”

Gone.

Theresa blinked. The man, just feet from her moments ago, had vanished. Faster than suffocating a flame.

Maybe she was just going crazy. Hallucinating from the cold.

In the evening, an email alert beeped on Theresa’s computer, and she screamed in surprise. She slid off the sofa, flinching as her feet hit the cold floor, and waddled over to open the email.

Theresa—

It’s been a while! I looked up your old apartment, but the landlady said that you moved out back in September. It’s a shame, I liked that place a
lot. I’ve been thinking about you a lot recently.

Theresa’s breath caught.

We should see each other again. Like old times.

She shut down her computer. Turned off the lights. Locked the door, closed the curtains, went into her bedroom, closed the door, locked it. Too many ghosts, too much all at once. Something was setting in. A panic attack, maybe?

Liz. She had always been bold, public, unlike Theresa. Theresa curled up under the covers and cursed her virulent mind. Sleep should have been a sufficient escape from all of this, but considering the dream she’d had a week ago…

Liz had been a friend first, before she was a lover. Her other friends, girlfriends, coworkers, cousins, parents. None have them had tried to contact her, none of them had had any reason.

All of them floated, ghostly above her. They were just the smoke of a candle now, barely visible, barely tangible, far beyond her reach, even if she wanted to reach them. They had passed around her, through her, and now hung, suspended as far from her has possible. People were only real to you if you thought of them—did they still think of her? Not that it mattered. Time had passed, she had not.

She got up, returned to the living room, and stared down the noose.

Freak.

That’s what Liz had said, in those old times. What changed her mind now? Was a freak acceptable? No, it didn’t matter a bit.

Theresa hungered for something. What she had felt back then, in brief moments, however shameful. She hungered for the feeling of being frightened. She wrapped her slight hands around the noose and wrung the rope in her hands, like squeezing water out of a hand towel. She did this until her hands trembled, until she couldn’t ball them up into childish fists anymore. She hungered for her hands to be full, to overflow.

She didn’t want to be empty anymore.

*****

Theresa did not answer the email to her former lover. Theresa did not see another ghost. Theresa worked. Theresa sat on the floor of
her living room debugging the AI. She’d never worked with a system this specialized before, so it proved a good distraction. She looked at the millions of zeroes and ones, cold and structured. This is what people thought of her.

Freak.

She thought that maybe if she got away, she wouldn’t get jealous. How could she be jealous of people if she wasn’t around them? Being alone in a city of seven million people was worse than being alone in the middle of nowhere. At least this loneliness was voluntary.

“I’m not like you,” she growled at the code, her eyelids heavy. “I’m not like you.”

*****

Her apartment in the city offers a wonderful view and therefore a comforting degree of privacy. Liz is not particular, but Theresa is, and she makes sure that the curtains are shut and the door is locked before she’ll stand with less than a meter between them. Liz smirks and asks if she’s scared and Theresa says no, just practical. And practically and efficiently, she slips out of her blouse.

She doesn’t know what to do with her hands when Liz kisses her. She lets Liz take her to bed, watches voyeuristically as she strips and reveals her full form, radiating a yellowish glow. Liz pushes Theresa into the mattress, kisses down her stomach. Theresa’s breath catches as she watches, petrified.

You’re shaking, Liz whispers, kissing down, down, down.

Theresa grips at the sheets.

You’re a coward, aren’t you?

The voice has changed. Theresa looks up, looks into the eyes of the blonde ghost, who licks her lips and sinks between Theresa’s legs, arching her back to flex her cross-shaped scar.

No use in being afraid, she says. Or trying to hide. The god of love never blinks.

Theresa tries to avert her eyes, but she tremors. Something within her fights.

Don’t you want someone? Don’t you want me? Don’t you want?

She breaks the barrier. Theresa gulps, then whimpers. She writhes,
chokes, tries to push the woman away, then pulls her back in. No, god, she can’t stop, she can’t live without it and she begs, yes yes yes yes—

*****

“Thank you for being timely,” said Pippa, genial. “We’ll review this before the meeting and get back with you on any last-minute fixes.”

“Mmm.”

“Is there anything else you need?”

Silence dripped viscous over the room.

“Theresa?”

“Do you ever hate it?”

Pippa hesitated. “Hate what?”

She looked up at cross-like buttresses of her ceiling, which watched her no matter what she did, and was so calm, suddenly, hearing the voice. The inhumanity seemed so soft, pliant. She tried to hate it. Hate the likeness. “Nothing. Forgive me. I don’t need anything else.” She ended the call.

Her work was done, and she had nothing left to do with herself. Nothing left to keep her awake. Nothing to keep her out of the horrible dreams. Liz had made no more attempts to reconnect with Theresa after the days of silence, and why should she after five years?

Theresa had no harvest to admire from the safety of her house. Everything growing had died, and the snow had set in. The sea of white seemed to stretch on forever, so profound and high, the cleaning facility and barn were indistinguishable, and the trees just like old, scraggly corpses.

Her meeting at work was only two days away, but Theresa felt too sick to go. Maybe it was the season, or maybe it was the long drive that deterred her. She hadn’t driven in weeks, not since she last went to the grocery store, and she would have to go again soon, despite how much the idea repelled her. The noose continued. She just wanted to be normal.

Eternity in her walls taunted her. She stared into the snow, the textureless expanse, vast for the sake of being vast. To be swallowed, to spiritually, orally marry. To be within something else, so that she didn’t have to be within herself. She could see the sun beginning to drip pulpy
red somewhere far, far away.

She just wanted to be normal.

“You know,” came a voice from behind the sofa, “I hate watching you sit around here all day.”

Theresa rolled off the couch and landed on the floor. Above her hovered the figure that must have been B, though she now had short, coiffed hair and a contralto voice, laughing at Theresa through blood red lips, half warm and half bitter. The sunset from outside scorched through the living room, but B cast no shadow.

“You can leave if you want,” B said, crossing her legs, suspended in midair. “You could go anywhere. You have the whole goddamn orchard in your backyard, and yet you never leave. You drive me nuts.”

The surprise rendered Theresa at a loss for words.

“Come on, I know you haven’t forgotten me.”

“Was that you the other day?” asked Theresa, shivering. “The man?”

“Did you prefer that?” B asked with a smirk. “I thought this look was more your type.”

Theresa flushed and looked away. “So you are a ghost.”

B bit her lip. “Technically.”

“Why do you look different? How do you change your body?”

“I don’t have a body,” B said. “I never did.”

Even though she was darker, more substantial now, B still blurred into the background of the white house, the white walls and furniture. Theresa shook herself out of vertigo. “What do you mean?”

B held up a hand. Four fingers pressed together, the thumb crossing diagonally across her palm. “B,” she said. “Beta. OS two. You work with an OS sixteen. That one even got a name.”

“Sixteen—” Theresa cut herself off. Pi. Pippa. “You’re an AI?” she said in disbelief. “How can an AI have a ghost? With a body?”

B looked severe and floated away from Theresa, barely glowing anymore. “Don’t ask me. And there’s no point in having a body if you
can’t do anything with it, is there, Miss Recluse? You’ve got a body that you just torture and deprive. How about I take a turn in it for a little while?”

Theresa’s blood flowed vitriolic. “You’re not even real.”

B’s hair bristled. “If I’m not real, what does that make you? Crazy, right? A freak? Talking to yourself? Is that why you have that thing hanging in your living room?”

As soon as the words entered the air, B seemed to regret them. Theresa regretted her provocation. She regretted a mass of things she couldn’t name. She regretted absences of things.

“Sorry.” B floated soundlessly to the ground like a sheet of paper. “Why do you live out here all alone?” she asked. “Away from everybody?”

Theresa didn’t sit up. She looked at the ceiling. “Because it’s all alone,” she said. “Away from everybody.”

“What happened before you moved here?”

“Nothing.”

“Fess up,” she urged.

“I answered you,” snapped Theresa. “Nothing happened. Nothing was happening for five years. So I moved.” Human in name only. There was nothing natural about her. She’d been born to a mother and father, but had no inclinations to continue the tradition. Now, no inclination to even leave the house. “Why do you live out here all alone? Away from everybody.”

B huffed. “I worked at that orchard,” she said. “They updated. I got the shaft.”

“But why are you here? In this house?”

B looked up at the ceiling and its criss-crossing buttresses. “I have a consciousness, I always have. It didn’t always have a shape, of course. I wasn’t supposed to care that they killed me, but I was weakly-written.” She turned to look at Theresa. “I didn’t want to die, so I lived, but I’m cursed to stay here with the entire world out there, kept out of my reach.”

“Purgatorial,” Theresa said.

“And I’m not even a human ghost. But, no point in trying to be what I’m not. I’d rather be something else. Don’t you feel that way?”
Theresa was taking a breath to answer before she caught herself. This was not what she wanted. She didn't want to give herself up. She rolled away from B and looked at her. “Why do you keep asking me these questions, huh? I don’t have to tell you anything. You creep me out.”

“I creep you out?” B laughed. “You look more like a ghost than I do.” She floated up towards the door, with the view of the orchard beyond. “I thought you were willfully rejecting the outside world, but I was wrong. You’re just as stuck in here as I am.”

“Shut up.”

“You are!” declared B, pointing and smiling. Someone had killed her. It didn’t matter who anymore, but now she was virulent. “You want to know what it really feels like?” B asked. “To feel stuck?”

B took a step back, turned around, and peeled her skin away, replacing her body with that of an old man, back exposed and wrinkled. The cross-shaped scar was still there.

Next was a small boy. Then a middle-aged woman. Then another man. Man, woman, neither, young, old. Even as a black void, the scar never vanished.

“I can never change it. It never goes away,” B said, returning to her original form. “Someone did that to me. Just like someone did this—” she gestured to the living room, “to you. And now it’s game over. You don’t want to be alone, and you’re too proud to associate with an artificial intelligence, but you’d rather die than try to talk to people and fail like you did last time.”

Theresa’s jaw dropped, stunned. “How do you—”

“I know about your jack-off fantasies,” B said. “And your ex. I know the dreams.”

The air swelled thick and rosy. Theresa choked.

B continued: “You can’t bear to think about being remotely human anymore. You think you wish you were dead. You’re not real!”

Theresa stood up. Fiery. Furious. For the first time, maybe. She advanced on B and cornered her against the front door, their chests passing through each other until they overlapped. The contact aroused her. “I,” she said. “Am. Real.”

She reached through B completely, pulled the door open, and
slipped out of it into the yard. She looked up at the tiny house, where she had planned to live for a while and then die when enough time had passed, and the woman glowing in the doorway. Theresa hated her.

“Hey!” B called after her. “You’re a bitch!”

“I—”

Shockingly, Theresa began to laugh. And cry, a little. The wind hit her so hard that the tears flew away into the orchard, which was also funny. The pink and yellow lights of the orchard glowed, yet they seemed so close, like Theresa could touch them, like she’d get paint on her fingers if she reached out.

“You’re a sadist,” Theresa laughed, trembling in the snow.

“And isn’t that convenient for you?” She paused, then said, “You look like you’re gonna freeze to death.”

“Do you actually care?”

“A little,” said B, earnest. “Have you finally lost it?”


“No,” said B immediately.

“But isn’t your only other option to disappear?”

“Still, a thousand times no.”

Theresa looked down at her hands, pallid, sickly, and sighed. And was she so different?

She tremored, feeling private despite the vast exposure. Suddenly, looking at the woman trapped in the doorway, she looked inward. She mourned, for a moment, but the connection was there. “Are you sure you can’t come out here?” Theresa approached the door and held her hand out.

B shook her head. “I tried, it won’t work.”

“What if you tried again?” Theresa said. “Maybe I could help you.”

“You want to accept me? To become one?”
Theresa looked around, the open field, the full exposure, the sprawling blanket of white. “I’ll try. I—” she choked. “I can’t lose this.”

B furrowed her brow, but placed her hand against the doorway.

Theresa reached forward slowly, to meet B’s hand where it pressed against the invisible barrier between the house and the blustering wind. They did not pass through each other. The skin of B’s palm was warm against Theresa’s, so warm she could nearly feel blood flowing through it.

“Ah,” breathed B, her voice distorting as their fingers intertwined, “That’s nice. That’s so nice. I’ve never...”

“Is this what you want?” Theresa asked.

B traced her fingers down to grasp Theresa’s wrist—hard. She pulled Theresa’s hand up to her face and placed a cold, open-mouth kiss against Theresa’s palm. She circled it with her tongue as if to say, *you really can’t live without it.* Theresa didn’t want to at this point. Her eyelids fluttered closed in pleasure and shock, but just as Theresa braced her arm on the doorframe for support, B pulled away and smirked, intertwining their fingers.

“Hey,” whispered B, pushing forward. “I invite me to another one of your dreams. That was fun.”

A gasp caught in the back of Theresa’s throat. “B—!”

But it was too late. B burst through the door. Her body, tangible for only a second, turned to a bright light. The matter spiraled together, with the momentum of B pushing up off the ground, into shards and flecks of pink light that flew into Theresa’s open palm and collected into a tight, glowing ball.

“B?” she cried, a sob catching in the back of her throat. “Are you in there?”

There was no response. Dread exploded in Theresa’s chest. If she cast the energy out, would B disappear? Was this her consciousness? Her data? She held it in both hands, like a fishbowl, and when she moved it, it undulated like water.

“B?” she whispered, and brought the light to her lips, and before she could overthink it, let it slide down her throat.

A shock of spice and ripeness flowed down into her stomach, filling her suddenly with—*something.* Then, the implosion subsided, and the orchard was dark again save the light of the moon. Theresa looked...
upwards at its elegant curve, and the stars that peppered its sky like eraser shavings.

God, what had she done? Again, she looked at her hands.

Her plasticity, the waxy colorlessness of her skin, had bursts of blood flow. Pink, in her fingertips, deep red in her palm. She rolled up her sleeve—her wrist, forearm—yes. She lifted her shirt—her stomach, breasts, warm and pink.

Theresa entered the house, ran through living room, past the noose, past her kitchen and to the bathroom mirror.

Pink. Her clothes, too, pink. Flowering out from the hem of her bell sleeves, from her chest, her hips, her knees, her cheeks. Oh, what stains!

She removed her shirt and looked at her back to see the faint cross shaped scar between her shoulder blades. And she was there!

Joyously, raucously, she wrapped her arms around herself and felt an immense warmth, embracing the sudden intrusion, the new pressure behind her skull.

She went into the living room, now, and spun around. An intruder in her own home! She had never felt so alive.

A hand from within tore down the rope. They would not be dying now. Not again.

Theresa ran out into the orchard and let the breeze consume her. She was on fire. She looked up at the moon and asked to her passenger, her companion, “Can you see that?” Her hand was pulled upward, trying to reach out and grab it. B had never seen the moon before.

Her chest burst with warmth. She laughed, manic. Was she still Theresa? Was that wrong?
For Christmas my mom got me a pair of socks that say “3 days of cramps make me a badass.” But my threshold is the leaf-strewn front-door mat of a garden apartment, and the ache is the top of an ancient dogwood where I stand, only 5’4 with a belly bloated with knives and sailor tied knots and chains of crimson-hot pain that stabs and rolls back and forth between my abdomen and lower spine.

My body rebels against me.

They say it’s a magical gift—to bear and create life. But Earth is a mother, too; as her children grow to poison her slowly, excrement of oil flowing freely through her watery veins.

Oil pulsing into her heart—we don’t blink. The very blood necessary for every child inside—committing matricide,
but what we don’t know
is that we are still connected.

We kill ourselves.
We kill our mother.
From the incessant buzzing outside my window that morning, I knew it was May. Usually awoken by the thunderous sounds of my Action Man alarm clock singing its heroic and titular theme, not even my favorite Saturday morning superhero could escape the devilish chirps of the Antichrist’s own creation. Having had Mr. Johnson’s biology class last year, I knew that this buggy Beelzebub held some value to something in this world which is all fine and dandy but that doesn’t mean looking at their ugly mugs day-in and day-out for a whole two months was anything but easy. Ever since I was little and first laid eyes on a cicada, I nearly shat my pampers—seeing a fly the size of a half-eaten Twinkie just confirmed life was going to be anything but a smooth ride. As you grew, your fears grew too—from spiders and bears to dentists and clowns, and then it’s just women and death until you face either one and made amends one way or another. But no matter what, even if you traveled to the deepest darkest parts of the city—the parts even Action Man would piss himself over—this fruit fly on steroids still would cause a cold sweat on the back of your neck like bringing home a report card of straight Fs right after Pops came back from the belt sale down at Sears.

Sure, I probably would’ve deserved it in that case, but either way,
you’d need a dad to actually be there to get angry and whip your ass to begin with. The condition of my ass aside, I knew I had to drag it in all its soft, lash-free glory out of my bed in order to get ready. The silver lining to these little shit cicadas was that their droning whirlwind acted as much an omnipresent death chant as it did a celebratory trumpet in honor of my last week as a freshman at Myron High. Nobody really knew the origins of the school’s name until senior year, during which you had to take Mr. O’Reilly’s class on the town’s history, but at that point the seniors were too busy passing flasks and greasing up their hot rods to give a damn. Who could blame them? They were blowing this dirt heap in the direction of the nearest university football team that could schmooze and sign them the quickest. What do a few dusty pioneers have to do with a wet shirt contest and a keg stand?

While I knew one day I’d have the booze and the babes, right now I was content with my Raisin Bran and milk. Once I’d finished middle school, my mother said I was too old for the highfalutin neon-colored cereals with their snaked-tongued mascots and moved me up to grown-up cereal, the kind that served a purpose beyond frilly box tops and cheap Chinese knickknacks. This cereal put hair on your chest and worked on your colon like Muhammad Ali. I would’ve actually believed her too, if I didn’t see just how cheap they were peddling this cardboard for down at the corner shop.

I ate my smattering of brown bits and dusty raisins as George sat at the head of the table in his standard morning attire of a wife beater and matching Budweiser. Mother usually only kept guests on the weekends, but somehow this guy had made the cut to stick around and see the potentially fulltime gig he could be walking into.

“How’s it goin’, Sport?” George asked.

I was surprised he even acknowledged me, let alone let out anything besides a grunt or belch.

“Oh, you know, the ol’ Monday grind.” I said, keeping a close eye on the bran to make sure I wasn’t going to be left with a bowl of damp sawdust.

“You don’t say. I’d take the “grind” of schoolboy over the shit down at the mill any day. What year are you anyway? Deborah says it’s a mood killer talkin’ about ya.”

“And God knows you wouldn’t want to mess with that, right? I’m
a freshman, sophomore in a couple weeks."

“Sheesh kid, now see why your mom would do anything to keep from bringing up a brat with such a mouth. Just forget I asked about it and keep eating your Captain Whatever-the-fuck.”

With the number of things I could’ve responded with in that moment, I saw the threat of a black eye or a red ass to be ever more real when there’s an actual adult around rather than just rehearsing the lines in front of the full body mirror adorned with clippings secretly snipped from the lingerie section of the Sears catalogue. I scarfed the slop down—now with the added sour taste of this sweaty schmuck lingering in the air—but, hey, if I get my membership to the Clean Plate Club revoked then Mother would finally have an excuse to feed me less than she actually does.

I bagged my books, brushed my teeth, ruffled my hair, all punctuated with the traditional slamming of the front door being the ever-loving “goodbye” to Mother. I stood kicking dust next to my house’s streetlamp waiting for the others. Jerry Rosenberg was the first to arrive, as usual. Cursed with the need to be punctual set upon by his folks, you could always count on Jerry to be there on the dot come rain, shine, hurricane, nuclear holocaust—really whatever God decided to throw our way. Amidst the standard morning grumbles we waited for our third in this triad of a friendship, but of course Bo was keeping up with the nickname of “No-Show Bo.” I couldn’t blame the guy though, being a farmer’s boy meant the work didn’t stop for the school bell, it just kept coming like a deep wound that would never stop bleeding. That being said, with all the fields he had to plow and all the shit he had to shovel, he was one built sixteen-year-old. Not even the football players had the cojones to stack up to Bo, so they just left us alone by association.

“It’s about time you prick! We’re gonna be late now thanks to you and whatever horse you had to fuck.”

“Look, I told you we had to inseminate a mare once! Once! Just drop it before someone thinks you’re being serious and I get thrown in a looney bin. We walking or we talking?” Bo stood, chest puffed beneath a pair of muddied overalls. He knew he was my golden ticket to avoiding the onslaught of swirlies and general shit-pushing at school. That paired with the fact that I was closer to Jerry’s noodled physique meant whatever creek Bo steered us in, I was up it without a paddle.
“Whatever man, I’m walking.” I said, finding a decently sized stone and kicking it towards our path.

The three of us always had a story to tell and a thing to kick—it was a rusty beer in the summer, a chunk of ice in the winter and those walnuts with the spongy green flesh coating in the fall. Those were our favorite since if you kicked them hard enough chunks of the skin flew out everywhere, and the blackened innards left streaks on the pavement. But, like many of our fun and games of the past, they were ruined because Mrs. Rosenberg found a pair of Jerry’s pants freckled with the inky nut juice from one of our more violent walks back from school.

“You hear about the girl that shoved rancid meat in her pussy?” Bo said as the rock skidded in front of me.

“Get out of town, Bo. That’s just some urban legend.”

“I’m being serious—Kevin Sunders told me his brother graduated with her.”

“Why on Earth would you believe Kevin Sunders? The dude has more bullshit coming out of his mouth than you shovel in a week. Last week he said he pinned Ashley Roberts behind the football bleachers during the last game.”

“Just let him tell the story, Hank.” Jerry chimed in, out of character for his usual doormat of a presence.

“Atta boy Jerry! You still got some hope left in you. So, like I was saying, Kevin told me there was this chick that got off being as filthy as possible. One day, she went over to Joe’s Deli and paid the guy off to let her go through their dumpster. Joe, not knowing how freaky this girl was, just saw the free cash on the table and let her at it. A few minutes later, Joe walked in on this girl rubbing last week’s corned beef against her crotch with one hand and holding up a mound of maggots in the other.”

“Jesus Christ, Bo, you’re gonna make me spew.” I remarked, queasy at the memory of the milky collection of beige and violet clumps I ate only minutes prior. Jerry seemed to be taking this horror show rather well for a guy who could barely handle the kiddie rides at the county fair.

When the communally kicked rock hit the chain-link parameter of Myron, we let out a collective sigh and pushed forth, knowing that nine or so years of the same routine didn’t make the eight hours locked in this place any easier. With nods of “see you on the other side” both
given and received, we each went to homeroom and let the collective lonesomeness of high school take its course.

Classes were had, lectures were ignored, another meal went down the hatch, and then I got sweaty on the track while Coach Franklin went on his smoke break. The bell rang, but instead of signifying the end to another day of suburban suffering here, it was ringing as a means to beckon Jerry, Bo, and I to find the quickest way to the parking lot. It wasn’t like we had a car or someone with a car to meet up with, it just looked a hell of a lot cooler than immediately walking home with all the squares, and you had a chance of bumming a smoke from someone with an expired pack or just a charitable hand.

Shutting my locker, I looked out on the sea of begrudging faces hoping to find the ones worn by my partners in crime. Between the panicked freshmen running towards whatever lost or forgotten book or assignment in the hopes of finding it before the buses left and the slowly forming cliques of extracurricular kids, trying to find the guys was like Jerry trying to find a date to prom— tiresome and unrewarding. During the scan however, I locked eyes with Ms. Haverstein and her slowly emptying classroom. She’d made the transition from junior high easier, earning her place high above the rest of dead-eyed and dusty faculty in this joint. Sure, it was Algebra, and sure, I was barely passing, but something about the bun she kept in with chopsticks and the fact she drew little smiley faces next to your test scores kept me going. While I may have actually gotten the scores required to receive those doodles only once or twice tops the entirety of the class, Ms. Haverstein seemed to like me enough to make a few exceptions here and there. If only Mother shared the same joyous smirk that test had when I came home with a D.

Maybe it’s because the other guys joked and called her “Hefferstein” behind her back. Maybe it’s because we’ve shared a couple conversations outside the realm of the Pythagorean Theorem and wherever the hell x is. Either way it seemed like we liked each other enough, and for that I was content. She was like a mom without all the chores, yelling, and knowledge of my living habits. To her I was just “Helpful Hank,” a name received due to the couple times I stayed after to clean the chalkboards. To this day, I’ll never be able to live down the shit I get from the guys, but it was one of the few nicknames I’ve had that was endearing.

We didn’t find a smoke—even after begging Jack Thompson who kept trying to hide the fact that his old man gave him a carton for his
birthday—but we found something much, much worse. Wriggling ever so slightly in parking space 072 laid a used rubber swarming with ants. It must’ve sat there for a good couple hours at this point due to the latex’ tired, wrinkled expression and the odor looming about as if we weren’t at Myron but rather at a discount fish market somewhere off the east coast. Its lubed-up exterior was already soaked into the pavement, leaving a permanent shadow of the tantalizing actions that transpired however many class periods ago. Though everyone wanted to see what was happening, nobody wanted to get anywhere near the thing because each knew some wise guy would step forward and shove the poor bastard head first into the thing if they weren’t careful.

“What do you think they’re doing in there?” Jerry murmured in a state of disgusted nervousness over the tiny baggie of black and a yellowish white.

“Either they’re eating or they’re dying.” I replied.

“And I thought ants only ate humans when they were injected with some sort of radioactive chemical like in those science fiction serials they got playing down at the theater.” Bo said jokingly, trying not to let on how the uneasy the situation was making him.

We were curious who the owner and recipient of the rubber was, whether it was a jock and a cheerleader, a teacher and a student, or that one homeless guy who made passes at the freshman girls and one really unfortunate mutt. No matter how we sliced it, it was best just to let the ants squirm in their baby batter bliss and try our best just to forget about the whole debacle and walk home.

The hike back home wasn’t as vocal as it was in the morning. Not a single mention of expired beef or genitalia to be heard which, while a pleasant change, made room for an awkward and viscous silence that was only to be interrupted by the pitter patter of the puck-shaped remainders of a Coors Yellow can. We each said our goodbyes; Jerry the first to go—not wanting his mom to worry about the potential escapades or horrors her precious baby could’ve gotten into during the mile walk to and from school, and then Bo—who had another mile and a half after we reached my streetlamp since his dad’s farm needed to be just outside of the burbs to meet some city ordinance law that kept the working man away from the slightly less trashy working man.

The afterschool routine left much to be desired, but if it kept
Mother putting food on the table I was gonna do whatever it took—dumping out ashtrays, washing dishes, and taking out trash. It seemed like all standard kid affairs, though keeping your eyes out of the trash bags was a must that I learned many years ago. Just tie the knot and keep the jangling bag of squelching secrets at arm’s length, and you’ll be good to go. By the time, I had wiped the dinner table of whatever brownish residue it had gained from a day’s worth of use, Mother had come back from whatever odd job she was able to muster that day. There were guests on occasion, sometimes for business and sometimes for pleasure, which usually meant at least a higher quality dinner than ground chuck with instant mash.

This time, it was that guy George again, now donning a quasi-tucked blue uniform, a pair of denim jeans and work boots—obviously just getting off shift at the nondescript mill mentioned before. Outside of his greasy mug, he was carrying a rotisserie chicken like it were a prized pigskin so I had solace in some decent grub. With the plates set and milk poured into glasses fogged over with a patina from the dollar store soap, we said our graces and chowed down. That’s one thing I could always count on with my mother—no matter how dark, dingy, and vulgar her life got, she always answered to the Big Guy upstairs. Resting her chin on her praying hands, she looked up through crooked, false eyelashes at the crumbling ceiling and the never-ending skies like a child begging to their parents for a new toy or candy bar. I didn’t know if I should take that as her being faithful or desperate, but either way, it was comforting.

Standard questions were asked—school was fine, no I didn’t learn anything new, I shaved a couple seconds off my mile time, I’ll tell Jerry you said hi to Mrs. Rosenberg, and then I was left to my own devices like a back-alley mutt who looked just cute enough to pry a few scraps from the guy closing up shop. Regardless of what I’ve said about George, he knew how to pick a chicken.

“This meal ain’t half bad, George.” I said. My mother was shocked I was speaking to her suitor of my own free will.

“Thanks, kid. I know a guy over by the mill who sells them for a buck and a quarter, knocks the socks off of whatever they’re putting in the marts nowadays. With all them chemicals they’re pumping into the birds, you might as well start sucking on an exhaust pipe I say.”

I nodded though not knowing what chemicals they were
pumping into the birds, or even exactly how one would pump a bird full of anything at that point. Just one of those mysteries that best be left to the pumpers and the pumpees I guess.

The chicken slowly devolved into a savage pile of bones that reminded me of the one time we dissected an owl pellet in Mr. Johnson’s class. Never really understood exactly why we did it, I don’t think we were graded, but my hunch was to show that owls weren’t ones to fuck with since anything that could swallow a whole rat meant business.

Another round of dishes before the nightly stack of assignments which went as smooth as any other night. How I’ve managed to retain enough to continue with this something passable despite goofing off in sixty-minute increments is beside me, but let’s just say I’ve said a few more to the man in the clouds when overlooking my meals ever since it rose above a D. Whatever he saw must’ve been something really subtle, or he was just confusing me for another Hank altogether.

Though the chicken went down easy, it must’ve picked up some fighting spirit along the way because I awoke that night to a cold sweat that sent a quiver from one end to the other. It didn’t help that the damn cicadas were back to their usual chirps that rattled in your skull like Mother Nature was taking a drill and holding down the trigger to the center of your forehead, but now on top of that every minute or so came the crackling of acorns slamming against my window.

Whether it was the orchestration that surrounded me or the simple fact of what hour it was in the morning, I stumbled around trying to find the can. I know I’ve been in this house for sixteen years, but I’m sure Einstein himself forgot where the shitter was from time to time. After a couple minutes of stumbling and my eyes finally adjusting I found the throne and did my business. That chicken came out swinging, but I just barely made it out on top: a few right hooks here and there acting as the real divide between walking away victorious. I decided against the championship belt, but reached for the bar of soap instead when the sound of a muffled cry rang out through the ever-creaking halls.

We’d been robbed before due to the fact that Mother kept the front door unlocked partially because she had some late night clientele, but more because replacing the key she lost the last time she got jumped was anything but cheap. Who would’ve guessed that some stamped piece of bronze could cost a day’s pay? Though if that piece of bronze kept
some maniac with a knife or worse — then hell, where do I sign?

I went over to the kitchen counter where Mother kept the bat. Never making contact before, the bat still glistened like the day we bought it, but with the additional nail I’d hammered through the bulbous end like Bo said he’d seen in a mafia movie. The cries kept coming when I realized it came from Mother’s room. Encroaching the door, it was apparent that whoever this perp was he must’ve been quite the monster. Every step seemed to be accompanied by a foundational quake with a force equal to that of the acorns currently bombarding the side of the house. I swung open the door, holding the bat in a stance I’ve only seen on a few Great Bambino card only to find that I wasn’t looking a scene of a robbery, but rather of pornography.

The image burning into my corneas evoked a memory I tried my best to forget, perhaps as a means to shield my conscious mind from the fact that I was indeed watching George rail my mom.

It was the only time I had ever gone over to Bo’s family farm. He said there was something interesting going on and that I should come and watch. I made my way over and found myself eye to eye with this little pink pig.

“Is there anything specific you call these guys, Bo?” I asked, bending down to pat its soft but slightly hairy head like a childhood pet I’d never have. The pig snorted with each pat and scratch.

“Well, for one, it’s a girl, so we call them sows,” Bo went on to explain, “We also don’t typically name them just to keep from getting too attached to the thing.”

“Why wouldn’t ya want to get attached to her?”

“You try doing that with every animal that you have to buy, breed, and butcher, and well, see how long you last, city boy.”

“Piss off man, just get on with whatever you wanted to show me so I don’t have to stand around smelling manure all day.”

“Suit yourself,” Bo said, tapping the sow’s behind with what looked to be a tiny rider’s crop. It was surprising to see just how well trained the pig was to the butt taps, knowing exactly how fast and at what direction Bo wanted her to go. He led her to a tiny fenced-off area with a large doggy door near the rear. The rusty gate squeaked shut and Bo joined me on the dirt patch a couple yards away.
“Now what?”

“We wait for Big Boy.”

“Big Boy? I thought you said you didn’t name animals.”

“Big Boy is an exception, you’ll see what I mean.”

And just like that the biggest damn hog you could ever imagine pushed its way through the doggy door, causing a slight bend in the wood as it entered. As I was about to ask why the sow and Big Boy needed to share the pen, the fearful squeals of an ever-pacing pig mixed with what looked like the world’s largest and fleshiest corkscrew gave me all the answers I wanted and even the ones I didn’t. Then came the chasing, the mounting, the screams, and the final grunt of a supposed successful breeding. The sow timidly sat down and huffed every couple seconds, accented with a few full body twitches as Big Boy left just how he entered.

My face felt a wetness that stung when its trails mixed with the brisk morning farm air. I couldn’t tell if it was my mind reacting to the scene I had just witnessed or my body trying to compensate for my current inability to blink properly.

“Pretty wild stuff, right?” Bo stated as if he had just gotten off the rusted over tilt-a-whirl we rode each year at the county fair.

“Wild? Wild? Bo, you woke me up, dragged me out here, and showed me… whatever the fuck you wanna call that, and all you have to say is ‘pretty wild stuff!’”

“For Christ’s sake dude, stop acting like such a queer. Look, Scott Mitchell spilt the beans and told me you ain’t never seen a porno before, so I thought I’d do you one better and show you something a little more hands on.”

“Glad to know you hold a Playboy on the same level as pig cock. And you can tell Scott Mitchell that he better watch his fucking ass or else it’s gonna end up kicked.”

“Ah shove it! Look I was only trying to do you a favor, okay? How you ever going to swing with the big boys if you never been to a baseball game before?”

“If that’s what swinging looks like, I don’t wanna be up to bat anytime soon. Let’s just drop it, I’m going home.”
“Whatever man.”

I dropped the bat and slammed the door shut. I made my way back to my room hoping to God whatever I just saw was just part of some poultry-based fever dream, but the depth from which the pain radiated was uniquely physical. I covered my face in the thin mounds of cotton I called pillows and hoped the minor asphyxiation and wave of hissing cicadas would lull the squeals and whatever was left of my conscious body to the point of sleep. Who knows, maybe I could sleep forever.

The Action Man alarm went off as usual, though the theme song felt much more hollow, as if the hero the city needed may truly never answer the beaconed insignia of light that spelled out the letter A in the skies above. I went down for breakfast to an empty dining room table, though it didn’t matter now that George had forever installed his presence in this household even if he should end up six feet under somewhere in Antarctica beneath a couple of penguins arguing over the last piece of fish. To say the bowl of bran tasted off was an understatement. Double checking the expiration of the milk which still had a good amount of days left, the acidic tang of spoiled milk kept flaring on my taste buds as if I was chugging the jug of white vinegar Mother kept in the cabinet under the sink for extreme cases of filth.

Books were again bagged, teeth were again brushed, hair was again ruffled. Standing at the streetlight however, I came across a cicada lying on its back. It must’ve fallen off a branch during the molting process because outside of the few sickly attempts of flipping over, its wings had been pretty mangled. So there it lay, waiting for whatever greater force to act upon it, whether it be an army of ants which preferred cicadas over semen, or a large bird not early enough to get the worm. I stared the little guy in the eye for a couple moments, letting the wind toss him around, almost landing him right side up but never quite. Even if he did land on his feet, then what? Would he find shelter with all the others who just barely survived? Would he walk the soil, cursing Mother Nature for letting the branch he was just so molting on to fall? Maybe he’d just find a deep enough puddle and just wait for the tiny bubbles to quit rising.

The exoskeleton cracked under the weight of my sneaker with an audible crunch and Jerry showed up right on time. If there was anything I could count on, it was him.
I was always pretty bad about keeping my room clean. At the age of nine, I found myself leaving empty cups wherever I could, and scattered books of all sorts laid everywhere. But the worst contributing factors to my messy room were the clothes: jeans, tops, tights, and socks strewn about and shoved into any space imaginable. Instead of monsters, you’d find winter coats and dirty nightgowns under my bed. Even the giant carpet stain from my sister’s lipsticks couldn’t be seen underneath the piles of panties and velvet holiday dresses. I never minded the mess, but my dad did.

One Sunday afternoon, I was “cleaning” my room. I had been going at it for almost six hours. My ceiling light wobbled as the attached fan spun around and around, casting a kind of shaky light on the purple walls. I couldn’t get myself to pick up a single item of clothing. I had just found a book under my bedside table titled Ah! Insects! So instead of making my bed, I sat on the floor and read about praying mantises. When I was about to move onto stag beetles, I heard the stairs creak.

I loved the ways those stairs sounded under my family members’ feet. I could tell exactly who was walking up by the way the stairs groaned beneath them. Mom was so petite that I couldn’t really hear her until she was in the hallway; Danni, my younger sister, always hopped up the stairs, giving out loud thumps instead of creaking. Kayla, my older sister, and my dad sounded very similar: slow heavy steps, long drawn out creaks. I listened to the creaking for two whole steps—heavy and
slow. I slapped the paperback cover shut and slid it under my bed as fast as possible. Since I wasn’t sure who was coming up, I quickly started to fold a shirt that laid crumpled next to me. I kept my eyes away from my opened door as if I’d been folding the whole time. When I heard the steps enter the hallway and stop at my door, I glanced over. He stood there, hands on his hips, with no emotion on his face. He held a tape measure in his left hand; he’d been working on something all day, but I couldn’t remember what.

“What the hell have you been doing this whole time?”

I didn’t dare look at him when I replied. “Cleaning.”

“Bull. Shit.” His voice rose, and my cheeks got hot. Why had I wasted so much time? He stomped over to my closet, turned around to view my entire room, and held his hands out, the way Father Matthew did at mass when we were supposed to pray with him. “This is fucking ridiculous. Do you just not care about your mom and I at all? We work so hard to give you things, and this is how you treat us?”

My breath quickened, and I continued to look down, eyes wide. If I blinked, I risked letting a tear form.

“Look at all these empty hangers!”

I didn’t look. He was yelling now, and even though I could only see his work-boots from my downward gaze, I could tell his face was as red as mine. Or redder. “You don’t want to use them? Fine.” And with that, he turned around, wrapped his hands around as many hangers as he could, and ripped them to the floor, pulling a few old dance uniforms and the hanging-rod down with them. I shook, unable to hold the tears back any longer. I stared at the pile of broken hangers and the halved wooden rod. I attempted to swallow my sniffling and quiet sobbing.

“I’m coming back in an hour, and if this still isn’t cleaned up, you’ll really be in trouble.” He stormed out of the room and into the hall. I could barely hear the creak of the stairs over my heart beating in my ears.

By the time I was done, it was dark outside, and the sound of tree-frogs drifted through my window. I was laying in bed, reading, when I heard two soft knocks on my open door. He stood in my doorway as he did earlier, only this time, he had a somber look on his face and a bowl of popcorn in his hand.
“Can I talk to you for a minute?” he asked. I nodded. He walked over to my bed and sat on the edge. “Your mom and I are watching a movie and I thought you'd want some popcorn too. Garlic salt, just how you like it.”

I took the bowl but didn’t start eating.

“The way I acted earlier was wrong. It's just that when you guys disrespect your rooms, it's like you're disrespecting us and the things we do for you. I know this house sucks, but that doesn't mean we treat it like garbage. I’m trying to be better about staying calm, but it’ll really help if you guys do your part, okay?” I nodded again. “Okay.” With that, he pat my leg once and left, his creaks slow and deep on the stairs.

I didn’t think our house sucked, and I couldn’t tell if I was still in trouble, but I knew that the next day would be like nothing happened, and I was okay with that.

The Kitchen Wall

It was April, and school would be out soon. I was so excited to go into sixth grade. Not only would I be one year closer to middle school, but Eclipse would be in theaters later that year. I had become obsessed with The Twilight Saga. All I wanted to do was read. I was so close to finishing the last book. One day, instead of doing homework or chores, I sat on my bed, learning about vampire pregnancies. Then I heard the stairs creak. I didn't like the way they creaked anymore. I knew it was too late to act like I was doing something, and even if I did move, my mattress would creak the same way the stairs did, and he would know I was being lazy. I sat there and read as much as I could before he stepped into my doorway with a basket of clothes in his hands.

“Are you freaking kidding me?” he said, as if he was genuinely surprised.

“What?” I tried to act like I had no idea what he was talking about. He looked around my room, nostrils flaring, chest inflated. He shook his head and tossed the basket to the middle of the floor. It hit with a loud thump, and the clothes fell out onto my carpet.

He pointed down the hall and quietly ordered, “Downstairs. Now.”

I slid off my bed and walked past him, head down. I could never
really tell what the creaking of my own steps sounded like, like how I didn't really know what my voice sounded like. Once downstairs, I walked all the way to the kitchen. The sun was setting, so the walls were a deeper shade of red than usual. He followed me in and told me to sit down. I pulled a bar stool out from underneath the peninsula-shaped counter and sat.

“I am so tired of you not doing what you’re told and sitting on your ass all the time.” Every word was sharply articulated, and I could feel his eyes burning a hole into the side of my head. He paced with one hand on his hip and the other on his baseball hat, attempting some relaxation technique my mom had taught him. My neck was stiff, and my eyes glanced around at everything but him. There were several stacks of clean, folded laundry spread around the dining table. Next to them sat several pairs of balled up socks and a dark leather belt with a silver clasp on the end.

“This is going to stop, right now!” He growled and reached for the belt. When I heard the loud crack, I jumped and squeezed my eyes shut, but I opened them when I realized I didn’t feel anything. He hadn’t hit me. I slowly looked up. A hole the shape of the belt buckle was stamped perfectly into the wall.

He walked away and returned with something in his hands, but I couldn’t look away from the speckled pattern of the countertop. He smacked the Sunny Beaches calendar down in front of me, the one that usually hung in the laundry room. “I want you to sit here and write Mary’s grounded on every day of the next three months.”

I sat for a moment and looked at the picture for April. Above the month was the image of a father flying a kite with his son on a rocky beach. They didn’t look very warm in their jackets, but I didn’t care; I wished that I was the little boy on that cold beach. A black pen rolled over the boy’s face.

“Get started.”

The TV Trays

About a year or so had passed since the kitchen wall incident. We were preparing for Christmas and I was probably thirteen years old. I don’t remember the details exactly, because I was upstairs, but something
was happening beneath me in the living room. Over the course of a month, that living room was under some serious construction. My dad, being the handyman that he was, decided to completely remodel the fireplace and lay down hardwood flooring to replace the flattened tan carpet. This process included the destruction of my mother’s favorite part of the house, the mantel.

She loved having the mantel to hang holiday decorations, such as spiderwebs, fall leaves, and homemade Christmas stockings displaying each of our names in green and red glitter glue. She hated the house as much as my dad did, but having something so traditional and convenient gave her some peace. Every December, she would be seen standing on a little stepladder, her petite frame on tippy-toes, unable to reach the back of the mantel.

She had no idea that my father intended to rip the thing out. After noticing her headlights appear and then shut off in the driveway, I heard her enter from the garage door and walk over to the living room. I held my breath.

“Where’s my mantel?” She sounded as if she were scolding a child.

“Oh, you don’t want that nasty thing up there. It takes up so much space. Now we can mount the TV up there like you wanted.” He always tried to tell her what she wanted.

“Mike, I loved that mantel. Can you put it back up?”

“No, no, no, no, no.” He chuckled through the succession of nos.

“Well, why not?” She tended to whine like a 5-year-old when she was upset, and my father wasn’t fond of it.

“Now, dammit, Anne, I work my ass off to make this place look nice, and you’re gonna stand there and complain about it.” The rest of the conversation was hard to hear, but I could tell my mother was very upset. I followed the sound of her steps to their bedroom, where she quietly shut the door. I rarely felt bad for my mother, especially when I recalled the many times she had looked me up and down and asked, “Are you sure you want to eat that?”, but this was different. I liked the mantel too.

A loud crash from outside on the back patio interrupted my thoughts, followed by the groans and growls of my angry father. I heard my parents’ bedroom door swing open and my mother stomp to the
living room. By then, Danni had entered my room and was sitting on my bed.

“Who the HELL do you think you are?” My mother was so brave when it came to my dad. I just wished she were around every time he exploded.

“Don’t talk to me that way. I do so much for this family.” They both started yelling, and Danni and I sat in silence, listening. It ended when my father left the house, slamming the door behind him. The rumble of his car’s engine slowly faded as he drove away. Shortly after, the familiar soft creaks of my mother’s feet on the stairs broke the silence. She entered my room and gave us a kind of crooked, sad smile.

“I’m so sorry, girls.” We didn’t reply. What were we supposed to say? *It’s okay, mom?* “I thought your dad was getting better, but he obviously isn’t.” She sighed and sniffled slightly. “How would you guys feel if dad didn’t live here for a while?” We failed to respond again. I simply shrugged my shoulders. She apologized again and tucked us in, reminding us to say our prayers.

I always said my prayers, but that night I decided to stop. I had asked for the same thing every night for three years, but my dad never changed.

The next morning, I woke up to the smell of egg-grub, a concoction of my mother’s. It consisted of eggs, bread, and potatoes. Simple, but delicious. I slinked down the stairs, rubbing the sleep from my eyes. Upon entering the kitchen, I noticed it was just my mother and I. Danni was still asleep, and Dad’s car was still gone.

“Good morning, baby,” she cooed as she handed me a paper plate to slop my grub onto.

I flashed a sleepy smile and proceeded to fill my plate, then sat at the table and looked out the window. I usually hated winter, but the closer we got to Christmas, the closer we were to having Kayla home. She loved winter. When she was still in high school, I would ignore my tingling fingers and the frozen snot in my nostrils just to make snowmen with my cool older sister. There was snow now, but it wasn’t fresh. The footprints from yesterday remained, and some grass poked through the white here and there. Our dog, Abby, scratched at the door. I stood to let her in, still chewing. I’d almost forgotten about the sound from last night when I saw two of our wooden TV trays dismembered in the snow. I had
half expected blood to stain the surrounding white fluff.

It was nice to just sit and eat without being rushed to clean or shovel the driveway. My mother stood at the stove, humming, hips slightly swaying. The garage door suddenly opened, and my father strode in carrying a box of Krispy Kremes.

She continued her little dance as if nothing were out of the ordinary. I stared at my eggs with my eyebrows furrowed. I was no longer hungry.

The Coat Seams

By the time I’d reached my junior year of high school, I’d figured out that a clean house, a tidy bedroom, and finished homework kept Dad off my back. It had taken years of imitating Kayla to master the technique of invisibility. Looking back, I felt bad about the times when we’d be cleaning before Dad got back from work and she’d say, “Jesus Christ, Mary. Please hurry, we need to have this done before Dad gets home.” I would stick my tongue out and make faces behind her back. I hated when she left for college. She really saved our asses.

Danni hadn’t quite gotten the picture yet. She was going through a smart-mouth and I don’t care phase when she hit seventh grade. She missed the bus often and had a bad habit of talking (more like yelling) back to my parents. This usually ended with my mom crying or my dad entering Danni’s room and slamming the door, though shutting it didn’t do much to soften the roar of his voice telling her, “Some kids have it a lot worse, you know! You spoiled little brat!” She was a lot stronger than I was. She waited until after he left her room to completely break down.

That morning in December started like every other, with Danni missing the bus and blaming it on our mother. My dad was already in a bad mood, and he would be taking her to school. I was walking behind them to go to my truck, since I now drove myself to school. Be good, Danni, I thought as I followed them out to the garage. The garage door was already open, and it was freezing. It was dark outside, but light enough that I could make out the cornfield across the road, ahead of my dad and Danni.

“This has got to stop, Danni.” His voice was colder than the air. I then heard Danni mutter something in reply, but I couldn’t catch the
“What did you just say to me?” I paused. I was still in the garage, but they had made it all the way to his car.

“Nothing,” she said quickly, reaching for the car door; but before she could grasp it, he grabbed the hood of her coat and yanked her back. I was surprised to hear the seams pop from a good fifteen feet away. As she was dragged back to the garage towards me, she slipped on some ice and squealed.

“Get up! How DARE you talk to me that way?” He kept pulling her along, her feet barely touching the ground now.

“I’m sorry! I’m sorry!” Her voice cracked as she wailed. All I could do was step aside as they fumbled back into the house. I closed my eyes and contemplated going back in too, but I knew that would only make things worse. I continued towards my beat-up 2000 Silverado and went on my way to school.

I texted my mom later that day and asked how Danni was. She replied, “Dan is OK, I dropped her off late. Just scared her a bit. Did it seem bad? Dad feels terrible.” I told her it scared me too, and that he should feel bad.

Later, I asked Danni how she was, and she said she was fine. She said he made her pancakes and was really quiet all morning. I decided that he knew how bad that outburst was when he hardly spoke to me that evening and stayed in his room while my mom watched a movie with us.

The Christmas Futon

About a year later, Dad wasn’t as angry, and Danni wasn’t as bratty. She even gave me a very sweet present five days earlier on Christmas morning, a little framed quote that read Sisters are Friends Forever. I gave her a manga coloring book and a realistic time-turner, like the one Hermione wore in The Prisoner of Azkaban. She had also received a brand-new futon from my parents. I had never seen her more excited about a piece of furniture. When they told her to go look in the barn for her present, she raised an eyebrow and asked, “The barn…?” We all followed her out back, and when she opened the barn door her face froze for an instant. She spun around and ran to hug them. To her, a futon was a cool, adult thing to have in her room. Her grin lasted the whole day.

Five days later, on December 31, my mom went to work and my
“All right, no more sitting on our asses,” he said, “We’re gonna clean clean clean.” This was bad. He was never happy when he had to clean, and Danni’s room was trashed. The futon had been moved up to the spare bedroom, which wasn’t really a bedroom. Every time my mother found something that didn’t seem to have a place, she would throw it in there. You couldn’t step two feet past the doorway.

That was the day my dad decided we would move the futon into Danni’s room. She worked rapidly to clear a place for it, then went downstairs to let him know she was ready. He was already in a bad mood. He had been working on my truck’s engine in the barn and seemed highly vexed. I tried to maintain a positive attitude, hoping it would rub off on him, but once he tried to move the futon from one room to the other, it all went to shit.

My father is a big man, 6’4 and very muscular. The spare room was at the end of the hallway, and Danni’s door was perpendicular to it. The futon frame was wood and metal and extremely heavy, yet my dad insisted on lifting it himself. He struggled to get it through the doorway, grunting and letting out gusts of breath the whole time. At that point, the futon had made it out of the spare room, but not quite into Danni’s. She and I were now trapped in the spare room, and Dad was pinned against the wall in the hallway in front of Danni’s door. He tried to push the futon through the threshold and realized the angle was all wrong, but when he attempted to move it around, he couldn’t; and he stopped and just started laughing.

“Oh man… Of course this can’t be easy,” he chuckled. “I hate this fucking house.”

He shook his head and continued to laugh quietly. Danni’s eyes flickered over to me, and mine flickered over to my dad. He began slamming the futon into her door repeatedly, shaking the walls, while shouting, “I. HATE. THIS. FUCKING. HOUSE.”

Tears fell from my eyes as I watched, and Danni jumped to stand behind me. He kept going, until the top half split from the bottom and scraped through the doorway into Danni’s room. The constant slamming had put three holes in the wall and one in Danni’s door. We stood silently. He stayed in her room. Danni looked at me with her eyes wide and her face drained of blood. My shaky hand pointed to the hallway, motioning
her to go downstairs. After she left, I took a breath and regained my composure.

I peeked into the room and saw him standing with his hands over his mouth, face glistening and eyes squinting with agony. He sobbed softly and muttered nonsense to himself.

“Look what I’ve done... Oh God, look what I’ve done.” His voice was high and stuffy. “She wanted this so bad. And I fucking destroyed it.” He backed up to the wall and sank to the ground. “I’m a monster. I’m a monster. I’m so sorry... you girls deserve so much better,” he whispered. His eyes then grew wide and he said, “Your mom’ll divorce me for sure this time. She has to... Oh God.”

His face fell into his hands and his shoulders shook as he bawled on the bedroom floor, surrounded by splintered wood and the bent futon frame. I had never seen my father that way before. I looked around the room, possibly searching for an answer.

Then I walked over to my father, knelt beside him, and wrapped my arms around him in a tight embrace repeating, “It’s okay, Dad. It’s okay.”
Dark rooms, amber lights, blue cyanotypes.
Sharp fumes fill the room with a yellow hue.
And you were there hiding in the negatives
Like an undeveloped glossy print.

I dip you in, corner first and then immerse.
White. Deceiving shadows come to life.
Were you to arrive or did I do you wrong?
A faulty flash, stutter of the shutter?
Overexposed from the very beginning?

Then it happens, I begin to see the harsh
darks in which you were born.
I toss you around in the pool of my developing feelings.
Your edges arrive, pearly white border lines.
Take your time. Fill in the black and whites, grays with no grain.
Then stop. Bathe in your everlasting contrast.

A crisp clear image of my newfound happiness.
But you still need a final coat, a glaze so fixating, the shine could hypnotize. Gently, I lay you into your finalization. Watching you sink in the chemicals.

I take you and hold you in my hands, yearning for a beauty I cannot grasp. But I forgot how fragile your print is, how sensitive your surface.

My eager fingers slide over your shiny face, and for a moment we are one. As soon as my wrist jerks away, I realize my touch is there to stay.

Me and you at last. A smudge of charcoal black, the rings of my identification, permanently staining the whites of your skies. The oil of my skin, spoiling you forever.
My mother makes the most horrendous gagging noise every time she brushes her teeth. You can hear it from two rooms away, and it makes my skin crawl. But every night that I’m at home now, I lie in her bed—nestled in the covers on the left side, her spot—and listen as she tries to speak and brush at the same time, too busy complaining about the latest work politics to avoid choking. I’m so used to it at this point that most nights I say nothing, but sometimes I’ll call out in a dry tone, “You alright in there? God.”

She giggles and tells me to “chaht up.” I smile. My mother grew up in Panama and has a pretty thick accent. She can say both the $h$ and $ch$ sounds, but inevitably switches them.

From where I’m snuggled up, I watch her in the mirror as she bustles about her night-time routine. She removes her contacts and her makeup, washes her face and moisturizes, updating as she goes me on drama at work. When she’s finished, she flips off the bathroom light and struts into the bedroom.

“Well?” she looks at me, expectant, “What are the highlights?” As if I could’ve gotten a word in edge-wise.

I smirk and roll my eyes. It has become our inside joke: she plays the stereotypical, prying mom, and I take on the role of grumbling teen. “Well, first I woke up,” I respond, “Then I got out of bed. Then I peed. Oh! Then I brushed my teeth without almost dying over the sink…” As I fill her in on the happenings of the day, she walks
around the room. She stops in front of the walk-in closet, and instead of going inside to change, she stands outside and slides her work blouse and slacks off, leaving them pooled on the carpet. I continue to chatter as she makes her way to the jewelry chest in the corner, takes her watch and earrings off, then unclasps her bra with a sigh. Naked, she scratches at the marks the unforgiving wires leave on her back and under her breasts, then bends to pick my father’s shirt up off the floor.

Over the years, I’ve watched my mother turn this way and that in front of her sliding mirror, pinching at the bit of her stomach that bunches over the top of her jeans or tugging the skin of her chest upward in a dress. I try to remind her it’s impossible to reverse the effects of having two children. But at the end of a long day, in her bedroom, her space, she changes at her own pace, without covering or hiding from view, regardless of who is in the room.

I’ve always preferred seeing her this way—my brother, not so much. Around age eleven, he told my mom he “had read somewhere” that it was damaging to young boys to see their mothers naked. She cocked an eyebrow and pursed her lips.

“You read somewhere?” before bursting into laughter at the idea.

She tells this story now and then among family just to embarrass him, giving my brother’s cheek an affectionate smooch: “Sorry, baby. You’ve never been a reader.” In the end, along with the ice-cold mom-diss, she told him that if he didn’t want to see it, then he could leave the room.

I admire moments like this when my mother refuses to be ashamed of her body. In fact, I wish she felt just as comfortable dismissing others’ opinions out in the real world. As I’ve grown older, I’ve made a point to go out dressed in whatever way I feel most comfortable. My mom acts scandalized every time I refuse to wear a bra, but secretly I think she’s really proud of me.

All that being said, I do have to sympathize with my brother a bit. The truth is the woman has no qualms in interrupting whatever you happen to be doing when she gets home and guilting you into coming upstairs with her. So for him, it’s a lose-lose. She loves company, especially her children’s company, and wants to vent her frustrations and chatter for a while at the end of the day. That would be fine, but
when she pressures you to come join her in doing what she wants, she
isn’t above hanging around and pouting and distracting you from what
you’re doing. For my brother, it’s either go sit and stare at the ceiling
while your mom gets naked or be pestered for the next half hour about
how you don’t spend time with her.

As for me, the nakedness has never bothered me as much as
giving up the time. In high school, it wasn’t uncommon for me to get
home at 9:00 pm, eat dinner, shower, and sit down to finally start my
homework around 10:00—exactly the time my mother would bring
the dog downstairs to let him out into the backyard. I would hear her
bedroom door open and listen to her knees creak as she made her way
down the stairs (terrible joints are another lucky inheritance of the Vare-
la women). I made sure I was hunched, intent over my work, by the
time she passed me on her way to the backdoor. It never worked.

Into the kitchen she’d go, then I’d hear the *woosh* of the sliding
glass door. And even though I knew it was coming, I still jumped at
the first of her many rapid knocks against the door. “Aaaberdaabad-
abadaah!” I wish I were kidding—to this day, my mother yells gibberish
out the backdoor and knocks on the glass for at least five full seconds
every single time she lets the dog out. Bubba, our fluffy, white, and
rail-skinny Poodle rescue, has been skunked twice. Mom was emotion-
ally scarred by those experiences.

I’ll never forget the sight of her that first time, face all twisted
up, holding the stinking pup at arm’s length as she ran toward the laun-
dry room sink. I guess there aren’t any skunks in the tropics, so she nev-
er had to worry about this with her dogs as a child—and nobody had
told her that the tomato soup trick was only a thing in old cartoons. By
the time I had gone upstairs to Google *real* skunk-smell solutions, the
smell had leaked up the vents from where she was trying to wash the
dog in the basement. As it turns out, bringing the dog inside the house
is not a good move. All of our clothes stunk for a week.

Now, every spring, when the little skunks start scampering
across the street with their babies, she glares at them darkly—“I hate
skunks!”—and commits to her skunk-prevention measures with re-
newed vigor. I’m pretty sure she isn’t scaring anything away but the
neighbors, standing hunched in her pajamas in the doorway, flicking
the lights on and off. I learned a while ago, though, that to argue the
point is useless.
At any rate, back in the living room, where I always did my homework, I would sit, hoping that she would take note of my visible stress and walk back up the stairs. The door would slide shut; “Bah-bah, stay!” would be followed by her coos. She would towel off his dirty paws, then, inevitably, she’d come in to “say hi” to me.

Perched on the edge of the sofa, she would lean her head casually on her hand, and ask, “Whatcha doin?”

“Homework.”

“Ooh, what homework?”

“Calc.”

“Ooh, let me see!” motioning for me to hand her the paper.

“No.”

“You’re mean,” with a full blown pout on her lips.

“Yep.”

“How was your day?”

“Mom, seriously. I have so much work to do.”

“Fine!” She would throw her hands up, officially offended.

“Come on, Bah-bah.” And she would march back up the stairs, muttering how nobody in this house ever spends any time with her except her puppy. The melodrama of these moments never seemed to be anything other than completely genuine.

Sometimes she was just so ridiculous that I couldn’t help but break down and laugh as she stormed off. And every once in a while, I would give in and follow her up the stairs. Truth be told, cuddling with my mom in bed, wrapped in her sheets and her comforting mom-smell, usually did sound a hell of a lot better than calculus.

For the majority of the year, I don’t live at home anymore; I’m only there for one or two weeks on my visits. Even though I usually have something I’m supposed to be working on while I’m there, there’s always a night or two, when I don’t have plans to see old friends, that this ritual will repeat itself. Secretly, I look forward to the silly knocking on the back door, to the interruption, to begrudgingly climbing the stairs. I brush my teeth, smiling to myself in the bathroom mirror. I wash my face, moisturize, change into my PJs, and walk upstairs to my mom’s room. The familiar sounds of her fussing about in the bathroom
make me sleepy. I pull back the covers on the left side of her bed, and sit massaging my knees as I wait for her to realize I’m there.

“I hope you’re happy, mom. When I flunk out of college, it’ll be all your fault!”

After a moment, there’s a garbled attempt at an exclamation, then I roll my eyes at the sound of gagging.
I. Action
Standing in an antique store,
holding the shopkeep’s prized possession;
A cut crystal bowl, seemingly shaped from frost.
The door chimes, those few words, startling—
you reflexively retract your hands from its side,
slowly watching it fall towards the floorboards,
each second creeps towards the inevitable.
Your mind already figures out the best exit—
sprinting towards the door, never looking back.

II. Equal and Opposite
Newton’s Third Law of Motion:
every action must have
an equal and opposite reaction.
The atoms caress the crystal,
a cushion, a comfort.
Thousands of them try to soothe
the pressure. They push against the bowl,
Beg it to stay together as long as possible,
plead for the end to be merciful,
shield it from the approaching affliction.
III. Reaction
When the moment finally arrives
and that crystal bowl hits the unforgiving floor,
you close your eyes, waiting
for the crack: the silence following
Your heart, prepared to dash for that door,
wonders what you owe that shopkeep.
An apology?
But the crack never occurs
and you consider:
shatterproof?
Why doesn’t the radio station talk about the pot holes that have yet to be fixed from this past winter? It’s May. I swear someone will pay for my popped tire, if it happens. INDOT will be met with all of my fire and fury. I light a cigarette at a stop light. Take the firstdrag as I press back on the gas.

As I drive from West 10th Street toward the east side of Indianapolis, my eyes are met with more of the new and modernized homes that line the streets. Revitalizing, my ass. I take another inhale. Gentrification at its finest. I turn the dial with a little bit of hope that someone is talking about something worthwhile.

“Andrew Luck out for…” I turn the dial again. Another inhale.

“Three dead and one in critical condition after last night’s shooting. Police say the suspect is black, stands at a…” I leave the station here at a low volume.

I arrive at one of the local convenience stores on the east side, which happens to also sell fresh fruits and vegetables. Carl, the store owner, was keen on changing the name from “East Side Convenience” to “Carl’s Conveniently Fresh.” The store also happens to be my place of
I hop out of my rusty ‘98 Ford F150 and start walking around the building. When I turn the corner of 34th and Emerson, I see Carl has a new sign up. As one of few local black owners, he is well-regarded by Indy natives. The sign reads “Carl’s – Voted #1.” Hell if I know who voted and for what. Leave it to Carl to make some shit up to get more customers.

I decide to light another cigarette.

“Baby, you know that them there cigarettes gonna kill you some day,” Mr. Marcus says as I round the corner. Wearing his usual: plaid button down, slippers (rain or shine), and Southpole jeans. Everyone calls him Mr. Marcus. He sits at the same card table every day, right along with Auntie Bertha.

They both grew up in this neighborhood and hate to see any wrongdoings happen to it. I assume they think that them sitting here, at the same store, from the butt-crack of dawn till the store’s closing, is them protecting the block. No matter how bad the neighborhood gets, this block remains secured. No one messes with Auntie Bertha and Mr. Marcus. They’ve lived here their whole lives and know nothing but this city. Locals show respect where respect is expected.

Mr. Marcus and Auntie Bertha are siblings. Their family owned the convenience store before they sold it to Carl’s family in the late 90s. They’ve been sitting on the side of the entrance ever since. Carl has the ownership papers; they have the credence.

Plus, they have nothing better to do than to bother me and talk shit about each and every person that walks past the store. Both are easily pushing eighty, but act as if they’re still in their twenties, with the occasional rays of knowledge that shine through.

I don’t really feel like engaging, so I just look down and wait by the front door for my cigarette to get down to a butt. I take another inhale.

“Marcus, leave the child alone.” Auntie Bertha swats at him. “Everyone has their vices, now.”

“Yeah, you’d know a lil’ somethin’ ‘bout that, hm,” Mr. Marcus says while focusing on his next chess move.

Auntie Bertha chuckles.
“Eh, I’m just saying, man. She’s too doggone pretty to be inhaling that there nicotine,” Mr. Marcus says.

“I appreciate the compliment, Mr. Marcus. But I don’t live to be pretty.” I wink at him and throw my cigarette down. I walk through the doors and hear their laughter as they continue their game. They’ll be arguing over who won the first round by lunch time.

“Yo, Carl!” I say, walking through the front entrance. I know he’s here somewhere. This store is basically his home.

Carl appears from the break room. “You look like shit, Zora,” he says.

I look down at my ripped jeans, brown-supposed-to-be-white tennis shoes, and frumpy sweatshirt. I could either accept this rhetoric as true, or I could go on to lecture Carl on why me not wearing makeup has to do with claiming my own femininity and body back from societal standards – but I decide it’s too early and go with the latter. Plus, I do look like shit.

“My job isn’t to look good, Carl. It’s to get people rung up as fast as I can while simultaneously asking them how their day is going. Add acting like I care to the equation, and I’m basically growing grey hairs already,” I explain. “I’m exhausted just thinking about the amount of shits I have to give as soon as we turn the open sign on.”

Carl is all about looks. But he rolls his eyes at me and smiles. “Remind me why I keep you around?”

“I work the shifts no one else will,” I say as I grab the box he is carrying and place it in the aisle behind me. “Also I tell you what you need to hear.” I shrug matter-of-factly.

“Okay, Miss Know-It-All.” He chuckles.

I walk to the front of the store to open the register and start the rest of my opening side work. Auntie Bertha stumbles in on her cane. Probably to go to the bathroom like she does fifty times every day.

“You wanna know the most interesting part about my date last night,” Carl shouts from the break room.

“Not really,” I shout back.

“She actually talked super ghetto.” He stopped moving boxes and stood under the doorway to see my reaction.
I think my reactionless face said it all. When I said nothing and continued working, he walked behind the counter to join me, “Zora?” Carl pleaded.

Even though black himself, Carl prefers his women not to be of the same race as him. He’s a good man. Just as shallow as they come. That or traumatically stressed. He was basically traumatized from being bullied his whole childhood and being used during his undergrad by the black women on campus for his wealth. Although he’ll never admit it directly. According to him, he doesn’t have to worry about anything being fake with white or Hispanic women.

“How about you worry about the steady rise of black-on-black crime in this neighborhood instead of your shallow dating antics.” I say. I punch this morning’s numbers into the register.

Auntie Bertha must have left the door open when she came in because the first voice I hear is that of Mr. Marcus’.

“Mhm. Listen to the young lady Carl. Yousa disgrace.” I can almost see him shaking his head, if there wasn’t a wall in between us.

I look up and smile really big. A “haha” at the fact Mr. Marcus is on my side.

“Remind me to fire you when you clock out,” he says, walking away.

“Can you do it now? Because I would really prefer to be in my bed right now.”

“I’m going to the cooler, smart ass.”

I chuckle as I turn around to count the cash that is in my hand.

I hear the front door shut again.

“Aye Ma,” a severely dense voice says behind me. I roll my eyes because he must have thought we were open. I prepare myself to stay turned around, ignore him, and wait for Carl to tell the patron we’re not open yet. I’m still waking up.

“Bitch, don’t you hear me talking to you.”

I turn around in preparation to give this asshole a piece of my mind.

Fight or flight. The moment your body inherently decides to stay or run.
My arms flail out in a rush to press the panic button directly in front of me.

“Step the fuck back!” the guy across the counter yells at me as he comes as close to the counter as he can, arm extended.

My eyes clench shut. I take a step back with arms held up. I force my eyes open. My vision is met with the barrel of a gun staring right back at me. I breathe before speaking.

“You—you don’t have to do this.” I inhale. “If you’re that hard pressed for money, I can give you fifty dollars, in cash, from my own wallet,” I say.

“You know, aside from the money that I will be taking from that drawer”—he points his gun toward the cash register—“I’ll take that too.” He laughs.

“You know places are hiring almost everywhere right? Maybe try a fucking job before robbing one of your own,” I blurt out before I can even stop myself.

“You think I give a fuck about that nigga?!” Despite not being able to see his face due to the ski mask, the robber visibly gets mad. His arm starts flailing as he thrusts curse words my way. His skin is brown, and he’s wearing a blue long-sleeved shirt, leaving his neck tattoos visible. I force myself to remember the script—“No Regrets”—that lines the front of his neck. He’s from around here. I faintly recognize him.

“He ain’t one of us. He don’t know anything about the life you and I live,” he says. His eyes bore into mine, intent on getting me to understand his reason.

Speaking of Carl—where the fuck is he?

“Why? Because he actually left to make something of himself? And came back to help his community? Get out of your own fucking pity party, nigga.”

Fuck. Carl always said my mouth was going to get me killed one day. I didn’t think he could possibly be right until this very moment.

The robber hands me his black book bag and visibly moves his fore finger from the trigger guard to the trigger itself. He looks me dead in my eye. “His community?” His voice lowers.

“Fill the bag up.”
I start to turn around. Tears threaten to run down my face. I can’t believe this—

Bang!

I feel my legs. My feet. How am I still standing? Adrenaline? My eyes are slammed shut, and it takes everything for me to pry them open. Fight or flight.

I turn around. My eyes meet the sight of a new barrel. Carried by a new hand. A new set of eyes stare back at me.

Auntie Bertha is the figure standing across from me. She lowers her gun and takes a step back. Blinks. Crouches down toward her cane to pick it up. The gunman is crouched on the floor gripping his right upper thigh with an intensity. His piercing cry with an even higher urgency. Blood starts to fill the space around him.

Carl comes running from the back. “What the fuck happened?! Holy shit, Zora, are you okay?!”

I stare at Auntie Bertha’s every move. I blink. I keep blinking. She limps, cane by her side, and walks to the front entrance, then pauses. She turns slightly. “Young man, stop all that yellin’!”

His cries instantly lower to more of a whimper.

“You got five minutes. Go on young man. Get outta here. But look here first.” She bends forward to force his eyes on hers. “Don’t you ever forget this face.” Time seems to slow as the robber takes his ski mask off, and Auntie Bertha continues. “Take the second chance I just gave ya. Get lost before the cops get here.”

She presses her cane down and turns to walk out. The robber struggles to get up. Finally does and attempts to limp himself out.

Seconds, possibly even minutes, pass before I feel a slight touch on my arm. I turn to Carl’s face looking into mine. His lips move, but his voice seems far away. I walk from behind the counter and head outside.

I take out a cigarette.

I look over at Mr. Marcus and Auntie Bertha while I light the cigarette. They’re sitting at their card table, resuming the chess game. Talking and joking. I’m looking straight their way. Mr. Marcus must notice my look of confusion when he speaks up.

He looks from my face back to the game at hand. Perusing his
fingers around his players, configuring his defense. “Baby, we all have our vices,” he solemnly says, without looking at me.

I take a shaky hand and draw my first inhale.

Auntie Bertha yells out, with her fist in the air and a smile on her face, “Checkmate!” As sirens sounds whirl our way.
INTERVIEW

KAZIM ALİ
Kazim Ali is the author of several volumes of poetry, including *Sky Ward*, winner of the Ohioana Book Award in Poetry; *The Far Mosque*, winner of Alice James Books’ New England/New York Award; *The Fortieth Day; All One's Blue*; and the cross-genre text *Bright Felon*. His novels include *The Secret Room: A String Quartet*, and among his books of essays is *Fasting for Ramadan: Notes from a Spiritual Practice*. Ali is an Associate Professor of Creative Writing and Comparative Literature at Oberlin College. His new book of poems, *Inquisition*, and a new hybrid memoir, *Silver Road: Essays, Maps & Calligraphies*, are scheduled for release in 2018. During his visit to Butler University as part of the Vivian S. Delbrook Visiting Writers Series, Ali took the time to speak with Manuscripts staff member Matt Del Busto.

Knowing that you are a yoga teacher as well as a teacher of writing, I’m interested in this connection that you’ve drawn between physical movement of the body and movement involved in writing, especially in poetry. I was wondering if you could speak on that.

For me, for sure the body is a physically-structured thing. We don’t often live our American lives acknowledging that because we live so much in our heads and we live so much virtually, but the body wants to move every day. It has a shape, the chairs that we have in our house, you know the way that we each are individuals—there’s nothing common about any two bodies. Especially when I teach yoga I’ve learned this, that not any two people have the same biomechanical structures.

Just like you’re an athlete in school, you may start out just playing every game, right? And then as you grow older you not only play the games that you like the most, that might have the most appeal to you based on whatever your predilections are, but also you might get directed in terms of what you’re the best suited for. So, you might love running enough to know that you want to run and then some coach will say, “Well maybe rather than sprinting, you should do this other thing, or maybe you should do relay or maybe you should bla bla bla,” all these different things, so that’s how I think about writing.
I think it’s also physical; it’s born out of our physical experience as people in the world. I know there’s something intellectual about it, I know the brain and the cerebral power is coming into it, but it’s sensory and visceral, and in particular poetry more than prose, I’m saying, in that the shape of it is and the spokenness of it comes from physical body, breath, and musculature.

To enact in space and the sound of poetry is so important as well and that too is physical. The body is a stringed instrument, basically like a guitar—it works the same way because we have strings in our throat and it resonates in our cavities and it makes sound so we play ourselves. So, I really believe the kind of poetry that one is drawn to or the length of the line or the shapes of the stanzas, the architecture of sound in a poem, all of that is physical and all of it comes from the individual poet. So just as much as you might be a great, I don’t know, high-jumper and a sucky long-jumper—I’m just using track examples because I can’t think of anything else—you might write a certain kind of poetry really well, like a sonnet, and maybe not some other kind of form. It’s about how your mind works, how you experience time, how you experience the world around you. It’s all of those different things but we’re never going to discover our true gifts unless we are reading really widely and writing voraciously as well to find out like what am I really good at, you know?

That makes me think, talking about writing as a physical entity, I read Sky Ward this past week as I was getting ready to interview you and I noticed a lot of the poems—not all of them, but a good amount of them—have shorter lines and there’s a lot of use of couplets as well. I was just wondering: how do your poems physically take shape? When you write them at first is the shape already there, or do you kind of revise into a shape?

It’s both, it’s both. The couplet is pretty standard for me, that’s been a form that I am comfortable in and I understand the shape of it. There’s something in my brain that it appeals to me; but, I normally work in the longer line. So, as I’ve written over the years I’ve tried consciously to try different forms. In Sky Ward you mentioned the short lines—that was new for me. That was pretty new for me. If you look at my earlier books of poetry, that’s not there and then in my new book that’s coming out in March—my new book of poetry, it’s called Inquisition—I pushed myself even harder to leave that couplet form and try different stanza patterns.
and different shapes of the poem and I did do that.

So, I think it’s just each physical structure gives something different to the poem—that’s true, that is something that is commonly said, that form and content are commonly related, whatever; but, for me it’s also important as a poet just to be excited about what I’m doing and to do something new and fresh and see how it turns out so I also want that. I just want to do a new thing always, always want to do something new, so I’m having a good time with that.

Yeah, and in Sky Ward as well as in your reading last night when you were reading a couple of new poems like “Golden Boy,” it feels like in your poems your ear is very attuned to the words almost as you’re writing, like especially there’s a lot of homonyms and a lot of wordplay.

There were a lot more in “Golden Boy” than you could even hear.

Yeah, I’m sure, and I was just wondering, I love when I’m writing doing similar things like that, do you feel like you are drawn to this kind of wordplay?

Yeah, very much, just because I love sound and I love music and I love confusion. I love that senselessness like when all the words start going crazy and you’re like, “Wait what’s happening? I don’t even know.” I like that so I wanted to consciously work on that and to create that especially in that poem.

I definitely noticed some.

Yeah, there’s at some point in “Golden Boy” he says, “Who sew spoke the craft borne along” and “sew” is “s-e-w,” “who sew spoke the craft” and then “space we with one another weight the soul spirit,” the “weight” is not “wait” but it’s w-e-i-g-h-t like we weigh the soul like we’re trying to figure out how much the soul weighs. So those kinds of puns you don’t hear them, you just see it when you read it on the page. I do it again: “haul oh star your weight in eons” and it’s not “hallow,” h-a-l-l-o-w, “hallow star,” it’s “haul o star your weight,” h-a-u-l.

Oh, okay.
“Haul, oh star,” o-h, so, “haul, oh star, your weight in eons,” so it’s like asking the star to drag itself over to me, so that kind of stuff I just enjoy doing because it makes the reader confused, it makes the listener confused, and I want that.

Yeah, and how are you able to find that balance between confusion and senselessness and also at the same time working towards a meaning?

Well I think what you mean or maybe what you are asking me is how does it not just turn into a mess, basically?

Sure, yeah.

I’m not afraid of that. I’m not afraid of a mess. Words always have meanings automatically, I mean we talk about abstract painting like if there’s a painting on a wall and it’s just a white smear or something like that. That’s interpretative, purely interpretative, or music is purely interpretive. You know, you listen to a piece of music and you think it sounds sad and someone else could conceivably say, “Well, I guess it’s wistful, but I don’t really feel sad.” You can disagree about its meaning and words have that slippage, they really do, because you when you say the word “tree” you have a different mental picture than the one I have in my brain, like we’re not agreeing on what “tree” is or “red” or “is” or “the” or “but” or “of”—like any word we’re going to have slightly different consumptions of it. But, words do have connected meanings automatically so even if I veer into too much into confusion and too much away from meaning there always is meaning.

Yeah.

This is something Gertrude Stein always contended with because she was really struggling to have abstraction in language and she realized you kind of can’t really have abstraction in language because language always means.

Yeah it’ll always mean something.

So her abstraction was to abstract syntax and abstract grammar so the nouns would just float and then the meaning would be be experienced
anew because the relationships were not the received relationships. So, I guess that’s what I’m going for too is like to find some kind of new possibility possibilities in the poem.

Yeah, awesome. So I was reading an interview you had with the Poetry Society of America and you were talking a lot about the idea of, quote unquote “American” poets. I think you talked about that a little bit in the Q&A yesterday, as well.

Yeah, because I focused on indigenous writers.

Yeah, and one thing that you said in that interview was “this odd reality in which our primary responsibility as flesh and bone entities seems to be to consume, to receive and spend money,” and that kind of leads you to asking where people could find “spiritual sustenance.” I was wondering in this 21st century world that we’re living where there’s so much about consumption, how are you able to find poetry in just the ordinary or everyday events of your life?

Well it’s a struggle because mostly the everyday events of our lives are governed by the clock that tells us when we have to be at work and when we have to be at home. We are spiritually as a society—not as a people, because many of us have rich internal interior lives and rich spiritual lives—but, as a society I feel we are spiritually impoverished and even what spiritualities exist are so convinced in their own rightness and in excluding other people from them that there’s no common interfaith spiritual life, and I don’t mean religious but the notion of attending to the mortality of our bodies and attending to the temporary condition of this world that we are in.

It doesn’t matter even if you are an atheist—you have concern for the planet and you have concern for the people in your life that you love and you want the society to be strong and nourishing for them. So to me, that’s what I’m defining as spiritual pursuit. We live now in what the philosopher Byung-Chul Han calls a “burnout” society where we just live to work and to experience pleasure and we burn out because we don’t have the life of the interior as much anymore; or, we buy into what other people live. We pay other people to live our lives of the interior so we can watch movies or television programs or something like that where
the narratives are told to us.

We’re not living our own stories anymore or creating our own because the creation of art, whether it was writing, poetry, or creating dance or creating beautiful objects, either artworks like paintings or just for the home like craft objects—all of that was and always has been part of daily life in human civilization. So, we need to bring it back to what we’re doing, yet we live in a time where people are wanting to take music education out of the school system and cut funding from arts programs and doing all of this kind of stuff when that’s a vital part of life.

Yeah, yeah. I agree.

Yeah.

I saw also along with writing your own original works you’ve also done some translations of the poet Sohrab Sephiri. So how does translating a work kind of allow you to interact with poetry and language in a different way that creating your own work wouldn’t?

Well, it was great. I mean it was amazing. I mean these poems are so beautiful and writing them in English, translating the poems into English, means I was writing the poems again myself using my own words and my own language. But, the poem already existed so it was a wonderful exercise and I was able to work on poems that I never could’ve written myself and yet ventriloquizing them in my own voice brought that quality into my own poetry.

I have a lot of aesthetic affinities with Sephiri, but I was also translating another poet at the same time, from French, named Ananda Davie, that book has not been published yet, but her voice is very different than mine. Her voice in poetry is very different than mine and translating her affected my writing more strongly. That came into my own work in ways that I would not have had access to unless I had been translating her, you know?

Yeah.

So, that was more of a change for me. With Sephiri it refined me and I
mean it I felt like I achieved fruition in terms of directions I had been going already in my own work that I had not been able to achieve on my own that I was able to achieve through him. But, it wasn’t as much of a redirection. With the Davie poems it was like a redirection for me, it was an introduction of new elements into my own writing. I think you have to dare to, you have to be brave enough to be changed to allow someone else to influence you and change you.

Yeah.

It’s not easy.

_How do you find that balance between translating between keeping what the poet said and meant in the original poem but also you know making the poem still come alive in its own right?

You know I think the writer wants the poem to be alive so I think they would forgive a little shift here and there. You change things up a little bit because you want the rhythm and the energy, whatever the qualities of poem to come through. So, I don’t believe the translator should completely change the poem and rewrite the poem, I think you are trying to imitate the poem in the new language. The translation is never going to be correct, it’s always going to be an approximation or an imitation. You really do the best you can. You do the best you can knowing the original language, knowing the sounds of it, knowing the rhythms of it, maybe knowing the poetic traditions of it, maybe knowing the social and political and literary context that gave rise to the original poem and then you try to reinvent it with all of that knowledge; you bring your own creative powers as an artist to bear and you try to recreate the poem in the new language.

Yeah, and talking about the literary history and the history of the time just makes me think back to when you were speaking last night, talking about the importance of you know when you were driving into Indianapolis thinking—

What is this place? Where am I? What happened here?

Yeah.
When was it founded? Why?

Yeah, I feel like those are questions to be asking that most people don’t think about.

Yeah, I mean was there a river here? Was it founded on the river? When was it founded? How long has it been going?

Going back to Sky Ward, you have three poems there that include “bright felon” in the title and are kind of a call-back to “Bright Felon” in a way—

Yeah.

And I almost kind of made the connection in my mind that just like you kind of push against what people would call boundaries of the genre, a lot of your works cross between genres and can be interpreted as different genres. Reading Sky Ward, it almost seems like even the works themselves seem to blend into each other in a way. Can you speak on that at all? I just find it really interesting.

Yeah, I had a great time with both of those poems. It was sort of like “Bright Felon” was such a serious book and Sky Ward is such a serious book that I guess connecting them in that way made it a little playful for me like to do the deleted scenes or the DVD extras kind of concept so I liked that idea. But, the idea of the works bleeding into each other, I think I really do have a unified sense and themes from different books will come into other books and sometimes even titles from other books will be used again. There is a sense of a unity for me and not just among books of poetry but among books of essays to books of fiction to books of poetry. There’s a kind of passage for me like they all came out of my body, they all came out of my mind, so I can’t really exclude.

Yeah. And when you’re writing these things, whether it’s poetry or prose or something in between, do you try to write hoping that you’re readers come away with something or do you just try to express fully what you’re trying to express?

It’s probably both. I haven’t thought about who is actually reading this stuff very much but I hope that there is someone out there who will so
it’s more of an aspiration than a real plan.

*Is it a challenge to be patient for years as things are slowly coming together? Like how do you that?*

Yeah, it’s painful. You work on those poems and just set them aside, they were just sort of junk. I was not going to publish them, I didn’t think I could publish them ever. I didn’t think they were good enough so they just sat. I didn’t destroy them, I didn’t freak out about them, you know, whatever. I just left them, same with the other stuff. I wrote those journals and I kept trying to, you know the ones that I read, I read the “Newport Journal” and the “Laramie Journal” and there’s a bunch of other ones, there’s six or seven more, I kept trying to stick them into different books and they just never fit.

*Sure.*

And I just kept pulling them out, pulling them out, and I finally put them in, I finally realized that they would go in this book.

*Yeah, yeah. And putting things aside makes me think of in a different interview you were talking about how it’s kind of hard in creative writing workshops because you know you’ll workshop a student’s piece and they’re supposed to revise within a couple of weeks or within a month to turn in something later that semester.*

Right, it’s quick, whereas I’m taking years, years and years and years.

*Right, and I think it’s important for a lot of work that you give it time.*

But when you’re in class, you’re in there specifically for the education of it so you kind of have to do things a little differently to get the maximum benefit of having this community for this one semester.

*Yeah, that’s true.*

But once you get out of that and you’re out doing just working, writing because you want to and because you love it and because you have something to write about—maybe not everybody does, some people
write just because they love it and that’s good enough. It’s good enough for me. So then you can take your own time and you should take your own time.

Yeah, okay. I heard you say it a couple of times yesterday and have also seen it in interviews, just you saying, “You know, I don’t know what I’m doing,” or just different things like that. But, you also talked about the importance of lingering in this kind of confusion in our lives. Even when we were talking earlier about form and poetry, about trying new things and trying things that could maybe be uncomfortable at first—

Yeah.

I guess both just as a person and as a writer, are you hoping to come to like a greater understanding as you continue to grow or do you hope to remain in this kind of confusion?

No I don’t I want to be confused—I don’t know if I want to be confused forever, I just think I’m not going to force the issue. I think I just am going to try to live my life and try to learn as much as I can and try not to make too many mistakes and see what happens. I don’t want to try to be smarter than I really am because I want to be smart because I think that’s a mistake. Fake it ‘til you make it is like, it only goes so far. Sometimes you just have to work and make it for real, and it takes a while and it sucks and we wish we were better than we were and we wish we were smarter than we were, wiser than we were, stronger than we were. But, we aren’t, so I don’t know.

It’s true, it’s true.

Yeah.

Life is hard.

We just gotta do, we just gotta get, live our best life, and do the best we can with what we have at the time.

Yeah, and kind of talking about coming to understandings, you’ve mentioned that we categorize and simplify things in our lives so that we try to understand
them, but as soon as we start categorizing we’re excluding because things in
life don’t fit in these easy boxes.

Right.

*Do you have any idea as to how we can both probe and start to understand
the world while also being open to the fact that we don’t know everything or
that we can’t explain everything?*

That is precisely why poetry is the most important kind of writing to me,
because poetry for me lives in that mystery, in that place of questioning
and doubt. In questioning comes true knowledge. The answers are many.

*Yeah, that’s kind of like I’ve heard sometimes you don’t have to learn the
answers, you just have to learn the questions that you should ask. How about,
what is maybe one or a couple pieces of advice or things that you feel that
you know now as a writer that you wish that you knew 10 or 20 years ago or
when you were just starting to write?*

I would say read a lot, read out loud, have friends that like poetry that
you can read to each other and talk about poetry and talk about writing,
talk about the kinds of writing that you love. Having a community is
really good and outside of classroom. The classroom is okay, like you’re
learning and you’re working under the auspices of a teacher or getting
guidance, but having community means you have a peer group of people
that you can share your writing with or talk about your writing with and
that is something that I think is so important.
James graduated high school in the spring of 2012. He had aspirations of starting up his own booming industry that left him so wealthy that he never had to borrow quarters for laundry ever again.

After that, James received a full-ride scholarship to Vanderbilt University to pursue a business degree. His late nights studying at the local coffee shop, and endless amounts of caffeine had paid off. James’s acceptance to this prestigious school became his entire family’s pride and joy.

After that, James entered a long year of stress. He was naïve to assume the hard work stopped once you finally made it to college. There were many nights James lay awake wondering if all of the stress was worth it. He decided that one day it would be.

After that, his “one day” arrived. During his junior year, he took a real business experience class that proved to be very successful for James. He came up with the idea of flavored lick-able envelope strips. It turns out not very many people enjoyed the waxy, dry adhesive taste of these strips, and much preferred the taste of the root beer or bubblegum ones that James had designed. James wasn’t prepared for this high demand of interest though, and sold out entirely of both flavors within two weeks.

After that, James created additional flavors: peppermint, cookie dough, and chocolate. These flavors proved to be even more popular, and within a few weeks, James received multiple emails from various enterprises offering to buy him out of his invention, and take it on for
themselves. James refused.

After that, James decided to drop out of Vanderbilt and run his own personal business selling these products. He made more than enough money than to have to borrow quarters for laundry ever again, and this wealth far overshadowed his parent’s dismay with him for dropping out of their prided prestigious university.

After that, James created over three hundred different flavored lick-able envelope strips. He was now twenty-eight, and featured in Forbe’s “Thirty Under Thirty” most successful people of 2022. He lived in an upscale loft in downtown Chicago with an office that always reeked of his latest flavor invention. Currently it was warm cinnamon apple pie.

At this time, most of James’s friends were either married or parents. James was neither. But this didn’t get James down the way it would some people. Visiting his colleague’s houses that were full of rambunctious or wailing kids simply served as a reminder that this life James currently had was the one that he wanted. He had no patience, tolerance, or time for the sticky messes and the putrid scents that children brought.

After that, James hosted an extravagant gala to celebrate the ten-year founding of his company. The most expensive champagne money could buy was popped, and fancy plates with miniature shrimp cocktails were passed around. That was about all James remembered from the night.

After that, James decided to finally give in to one of his friend’s suggestions to go on a blind date. It was a rather common opinion that a man of thirty-one years old should at least have a girlfriend. James found this opinion both annoying and absurd, but had agreed to go on one date in the hopes of shutting everyone up.

James arrived at the four-star Italian restaurant ready to get the show on the road. The food would’ve been much more enjoyable without the unnecessary company, but at least this would put an end to his friend’s nagging to go on a date.

After that, the most beautiful woman James had ever cared to lay eyes on approached his booth. Her long, dark hair cascaded in waves down her shoulders upon her breasts and her bright blue eyes met James’s. He was absolutely entranced.

She spoke of her time studying at Yale, the late night indulgences
in textbooks and the early mornings exams. They discussed their mutual love for Italian food, and bonded over both of their family’s apprehensive feelings towards their business careers. They exchanged laughs, and for once, James was not thinking about work. He was thinking about the flavored, lick-able envelope strip he would create after her: creamy purple lavender, the flower of a first love.

After the date came to an end, James took her soft hand in his, and walked her to her car. He opened her door for her, and it was then that he noticed a name badge with the title “chief marketing officer” for the envelope company Manila. Manila did not endorse lick-able flavored envelope strips.
Their wings flutter as they are lifted from their nest—a confused cacophony that must be ignored. Cradled in my arms, they hum with happiness, not knowing that the squeaking corner of the cart I push counts the seconds to their death.

When I reach the back room, I sigh at the remains of their sisters scattered about and the three hours left in my shift. I shut my eyes at what I am about to commit, unable to even spare a look at the names along the spines that I snap.

And I grossly admire their insides—the beautiful black and white entrails carved out by my hand’s blade.
Each time, I grab the next one off the cart to prepare its final rites, I raise it to my face and inhale the sweet vanilla musk of its pages. A final goodbye, a flurry of lashes, a kiss of sorts to thank it.
Cormac O’Shea didn’t share his first or his last name on that Saturday afternoon. He didn’t share that the first thoughts to creep into his mind each morning and the last every evening were of the broken bodies he’d freed of their poor souls. He didn’t share that it was easier to take the first life than it was to take the last. Those things he would share with me on a personal basis at a later date. He did, however, make a point to mention to me upon arriving at the hotel I arranged for the weekend’s sessions that it would be the first and the last time he shared much of anything at all regarding a period of his life which began in 1970.

It was only my second time facilitating such a group. That particular weekend, I remember seven participants; Mr. O’Shea was followed by the widow of a British Army officer, two sisters whose mother passed away due to injuries sustained in one of the nineteen Bloody Friday bombings, a former policeman, a Catholic priest, and one Philip J. Knox. It is not uncommon for participants in these sessions to find connections in one another’s stories. Thus could be considered a pivotal and almost necessary moment for any healing to begin to take root. But, had I known just how close of a connection could be drawn between the stories of Cormac O’Shea and Philip Knox, I am not certain that I would have ever scheduled them to participate on the same weekend.

Looking back now, perhaps it is best that I was as surprised as they to hear their worst memories collide. These are their stories, recounted in their own words a second time for my benefit, ten years after that Saturday afternoon—as best I can chronicle them.
Cormac O’Shea

1970

The walls in Belfast weren’t so tall back then. They’d only just been put up the year before, and the government hadn’t added all that extra wire on top. So it was pretty easy, you see, to get something up over the wall. My mother and I lived just on the other side of it—a little two-up, two-down house in a whole row of them. It was Catholic neighborhood, obviously. All of us were God-fearing Catholics. Ma taught at the Catholic school down the way; that’s where I went to class, and all the neighbor kids did too. In 1970, I was eleven years old and hadn’t ever met a Protestant in my life. All I knew—and all my classmates knew—was that the Protestants lived on the other side of the wall.

Well, in my case, the only thing standing between me and that wall was my front yard and a little two-lane street. The houses on the other side must’ve been just as close because sometimes I could hear them, people moving around and laughing and talking over there. I was on my way home from school one day, walking my bike up the pavement when something came flying over the wall and landed right there on our lawn. And it was a ball, a little white ball just big enough to get a good grasp on it with your palm. I mean, you can imagine how surprised I was. For some reason or another, I went over and picked it right up. Considering that people had just started chucking more dangerous things over the wall, it was probably more than a little thick of me. Maybe I thought that I’d keep it, but I’m not really sure because I got distracted by someone shouting across the street, on the other side of the wall.

It took me a good minute to realize they weren’t shouting at me. No, it was two people shouting at each other. I couldn’t really make out what was being shouted about, but they sounded like a couple of kids—like me. I guess I did what any dumb kid would do; I wound up my arm and launched the ball back over the top of the wall. It barely cleared the edge, but when it did the shouting on the other side shut right up. And after a minute or so, the ball came soaring back.

Philip Knox

1970

I remember seeing that ball bounce back into the backyard. It
was one of the spookiest damn things I had ever seen. My house backed right up to the wall, and our mum was always telling me and my big brother Will to be careful about playing out back. We were ten and fifteen though—and hardheaded—so when I dared Will to try and throw over the wall, you can bet he tossed it up there.

Neither of us really knew much about what was on the other side of the wall back then. We just knew those “bad men” lived over there. That’s what our dad called them—alongside some other not-so-friendly names—the “bad men.” I never knew him when he was anything but a soldier, but I imagine that he was set in his ways long before the British Army got a hold of him. He was probably a bit like Will, seeing as my brother spent large portion of his teen years parroting Dad.

I’m not sure I expected that Will would actually be able to get the ball over the top, because I was furious when it sunk in that we had just lost our toy. I sure as hell didn’t expect the ball to come flying back. Will looked at me and I looked at him, and we must have stood there for a good while before one of us made the decision to lob it back. I didn’t even realize it was me until the ball was already in my hand. Then we stood there, staring up at the cloudy sky and waiting. I think Will might have been holding his breath, and when a voice came through the wall it startled us both.

“Who are youse?” Just this thick accent came muffled through the stone, but it didn’t sound like a bad man. It sounded like a boy, certainly younger than Will but maybe about my age. So when Will didn’t say anything, I answered for us.

I remember, I just said, “I’m Philip.”

And when the boy on the other side of the wall answered, he said, “Alright boyo? I’m called Cormac.”

Cormac O’Shea

1981

I joined up with the Provisional IRA in 1981. I’d been aching to do it for years, but Ma was much more a Nationalist than a Republican. She wanted a united Ireland, but she didn’t care for the land to be soaked with blood when it happened; that’s how she always phrased it in class when she was talking to her students. But when Bobby Sands died, it
pushed the envelope too far for me. I signed on without her blessing.

At twenty-two years old, I was crazy mad. I was mad at the Nationalists like Ma who wouldn't support the fight. I was mad at the British. I was mad at the world. And I spent my days around other men who were mad at the world too. We all lived in this rat hole of a block of flats, all young IRA recruits itching for a chance to prove ourselves. The chance came along for me just weeks after Sands and his hunger strikers started biting the dust. There was this pub run by a Protestant man, and the building he chose to run his business in just happened to sit on the wrong side of the walls. From what I know, he wasn’t anyone particularly special. The pub had stood there for years and not a soul was bent out of shape about it. But with tensions up, the Catholics that bought drinks there must’ve gone and got their feathers ruffled. They used the IRA to place a hit on the owner.

A couple of the older lads chose me to tag along with them, and I wasn’t about to turn them down. We walked in like any other bunch of Irishmen looking for some pints, and we walked right back out after two rounds. Nobody noticed we left something behind.

They hooked it up right under our table. The thing was small enough to fit in Sammy Fitzpatrick’s coat pocket, but when he set that timer and we slid out of there…

I had to be at least twenty yards out of the building when the explosion went off. It still knocked me flat on my face. The next thing I knew, Sammy was jerking me up by my collar and he set off at a dead sprint down the street. I bolted right after him, and my stomach was churning because I felt like I could taste that stench of burning men in my mouth.

We ran twelve blocks over before a car of IRA brothers picked us up. The driver peeled off with the tires howling and drove like a maniac to get us out of Belfast, into a safe house. I only looked back once, but it was long enough for me to catch a glimpse of what I know now was the devil’s grin in those wicked curling tendrils of smoke.

Philip Knox

1981

By 1981, William was more like Dad than ever. He had enlisted
in the British Armed Forces just a couple years prior and solidified the proud-father-and-prodigal-son relationship they had. It left me to be the other son. Our father thought that being a soldier in the British Army was a man’s highest honor. At the time, I didn’t think being a soldier was doing enough to support Britain. I refused to enlist and was promptly cast out of our family home for finding my own cause in the ranks of the Ulster Volunteer Force.

It was a weight on Mum’s shoulders to have her boys fighting all the time, but Dad and Will didn’t seem to notice. Or, if they did, they were apt to ignore how much it worried her. Every once in a while, I would visit her during the day while they were at work. The house was the same one we’d lived in when I was a child, right there against the wall. In those days, though, most of the backyard was taken up by a metal fencing Dad paid to have installed over the patio and latter portion of the roof. It was necessary, as walking along the wall for even just a few minutes could get you hit by a brick or stone—or something more lethal—hurled over from the Catholic side.

With things being so touch-and-go at home, Dad and Will spent a lot of time down at the pub. They treated it like a second home, and Dad had been a patron there for years. Somewhere in the mess of lines being drawn and redrawn, it wound up on the Catholic side of the walls—even though its owner and his wife, Mr. and Mrs. Albert, had sat two rows in front of us in church for as long as I could remember. I suppose it was foolish of Mr. Albert to think that his business would go untainted in all the bloodshed.

The news of the bombing came to my mother’s doorstep dressed in a police uniform. The officer gave her his condolences and a handkerchief; she gave me a phone call.

“Philip, honey? Are you there?” But her voice sounded so far away with the receiver dangling from the wall. It hung by its spiraled cord where I had dropped it as I slid to the kitchen tile in my tiny downtown flat. With my back against the wall and my head in my hands, I shed real tears for the first time since I was a child.

I will always regret the way I left my relationship with my father and brother, because Dad and Will were drinking at Mr. Albert’s pub the night the IRA sent it up in flames.
They kept us holed up at a farm about an hour’s drive outside the city for a solid few months after that pub went up. By the time I was back in Belfast, things had gone all to hell. The Loyalists were picking us off one by one, claiming that for every Protestant killed, a Catholic death would follow. And the IRA had us doing just the same thing.

I didn’t ask a whole lot of questions back then. The less you knew, the easier it was to follow orders. The other lads, they seemed real fired up all the time. They were still mad. I think that stopped for me when Ma passed away. She was sick, and there was nothing that could be done about it because the Catholic hospital didn’t have the right type of doctor. I didn’t want her to die thinking I was cross with her.

Don’t get me wrong, I still loved Ireland more than any living thing in this world. But whatever it is inside a man that lets him take a life, I’d about used it all up.

It was the winter of 1985 when I almost landed myself a spot right next to Ma in the graveyard. A couple of the boys were out for a smoke after dinner when a car came around the corner, flying right down the road like it hadn’t seen the stop sign. With those headlights glaring in our faces, I heard the first shot before I saw the shooter. One moment, Thomas McNally—a fresh face, all of 19 years old—was standing right next to me. The next moment, he was lying on the ground, bleeding into the snow.

I took off, and I didn’t bother to look back as the shots kept ringing, or a car door slammed, or a pair of feet took to the pavement after me. I just kept running past the block of flats and down the street, turning up an alleyway the instant I had a chance. My heart about sunk to my stomach when I realized what a mistake that was. There was a fence strung up about halfway down the alley, but I didn’t have the time to turn around; I felt like those guns were right behind me.

I’ll tell you, I was praying to God and Jesus and everyone else as I climbed that fence. I didn’t deserve help, but I sure was begging for it.

When I was just getting over the top, one of those bullets caught me in the leg—just there in my right thigh. I fell the rest of the way to the other side. The force knocked the wind clear out of my lungs. I swore
for a split second that I was going to die right then and there, on my back in that alley. The footsteps kept getting closer and I was scrambling to stand up; I hardly made it to my feet before a voice started shouting at me through the fence.

If it hadn't been for the barrel of his gun smack in the middle of us, I might've been looking this UVF lad right in the eye. He had dark hair, cropped real short like a soldier’s. The rest of him I wasn’t paying much attention to, but the way his hands and his voice were shaking wasn’t because he was a squirrely new recruit on his first ride. No, they were shaking because he’d been out twenty—maybe thirty—times, and just like Thomas and the others, he was still right mad.

“Stop right there!” He was saying. “Stop!” And I did stop, because I was going nowhere fast on my bleeding leg.

And because if I was going die that night, it was going to be by some way more honorable than being shot in the back. I don’t know how long I stood there watching him get ready to pull the trigger, but it felt like a day and a half. I couldn’t hear much over the sound of my own beating heart, so I wasn’t sure what he said when he opened his mouth, but I could see the shadow of that chain-link fence shift and pull over his face as he spoke. The next thing I expected to feel was a second bullet ripping me apart. It never came.

That man turned and ran back the way he’d come; he left me on the other side of the fence—still breathing, but vomiting up my dinner.

Philip Knox

1985

I am ashamed to admit that when the idea came about to start offing a Catholic for each Protestant death tallied, I was chomping at the bit to get a piece of the action. At the time, I was using my grief as an excuse to cause carnage. I know now that what I was doing was not grieving, but revenge-seeking.

In my quest for this revenge, I didn’t keep track of how many IRA members I was asked to dispose of, or how many of their families I targeted. I did just as I was asked, like any other man. And like any other UVF man of the time, I did it with a certain enthusiasm. On one night in
1985—when I was part of a group sent to end a handful of Republicans on their own turf—that enthusiasm crossed the border into Catholic territory with me, but it didn’t follow me home.

The rules of a drive-by were simple, one of them being that we were not to leave the vehicle unless absolutely necessary. Stepping a foot outside the car was a good way to get yourself killed. But that night—for whatever harebrained reason—when one of the targets ran, I ran after him. I chased him about a block before he made a turn down an alley, and I followed him right down it, right to an old fence about halfway between the buildings.

I didn’t hesitate to take a shot at the stranger as he struggled to pull himself over the chain-link. I hit him in the leg, and he dropped to the opposite side like a stone.

And I screamed at him, because I thought that I wanted to see his face when I put another bullet in him. I thought that I wanted to know what real fear looked like. It wasn't until we were standing face-to-face that I realized… I thought wrong.

He had this scruffy look about him, just like I imagined all IRA fanatics to have. There were circles under his eyes, and his hair had the appearance and color of unkempt straw. He wore different clothes; he had a different face; he believed in everything I didn’t. But in that moment—standing there with just that fence and my finger on the trigger between us—I felt like I was looking in a mirror.

Tell me, if I was looking in a mirror, and at the same time I was looking at one of my father’s “bad men,” then where was the good man in that alley?

“God forgive me,” I said it not for what I was about to do, but for what I had already done. I was afraid of my own hands the night I turned my back on that man—so much so that I dropped my gun on my way back to my unit, left it there on my side of the fence.

Cormac O’Shea
1970

“Are you one of those Catholics, then?” The question confused me. I don’t guess that I’d ever been asked about my church habits before. Everyone knew who was Catholic and who wasn’t. And if you didn’t
I stepped forward to pick up the ball, which had rolled out to the pavement as I’d stood there gaping at the wall, trying to come up with an answer.

“Sure I am,” I shouted back, and I tossed the ball over alongside my words. “Are you one of ‘em Protestants, Philip?”

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Philip Knox
1970

The next time, I was ready when the ball came back to us. I remember jogging a few steps to catch it, and the dull force of the thing landing in my palm echoed the pang in my gut when the other boy turned my own question on me.

I opened my mouth to answer but the words never came, stolen instead by Will’s hand on my elbow. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I recognized the sound of Dad’s car pulling in the drive. My brother saved me from what could have been quite the gruesome tongue lashing if our father had caught on to what we were doing out there in the garden that particular afternoon.

Without answering his question, I turned my back on that Catholic boy and went inside to wash up for dinner.

When Cormac O’Shea and Philip Knox met again, it was in 2007. I worked for an organization funded by the British and American governments, intended to instigate healing between individuals who were involved on all sides of the aisle during The Troubles. These two men sat with five other strangers and told their stories one by one, Philip taking his turn just after Cormac. The entire room was speechless, but I do not think anyone was as taken back as the pair of former paramilitary fighters who only knew each other’s names from a shared childhood memory, some thirty years prior.

Both Mr. O’Shea and Mr. Knox were reluctant to tell their stories at all that first time, but both kept in touch with me in the years to follow. Now—this being the month of August, 2017—they have allowed me to publish their experiences as two stories woven into one. I thank them for
the opportunity to do so, and the patience they had when I asked my many questions during the construction of this piece.

I will leave you with this:

There is a neighborhood on the south side of Belfast where a wall used to stand. Two years ago, the government voted to remove that wall in the interest of promoting peace and healing past wounds.

On one side of the street where the old wall used to stand, there lives a man who still flies the Irish flag in his window, and who holds his granddaughter’s hand on their walk to mass every Sunday. His blond hair has lost color with age, but his brogue hasn’t faded in the slightest. He still walks with a limp in his right leg.

On the other side of the street lives a man who will never be found seated while the notes of “God Save the Queen” still hang in the air, and whose son is an airman with the Royal Air Force. He doesn’t frequent pubs, and he doesn’t talk politics. He does, however, make time to coach a cricket team for the boys from the area secondary school.

When there is a sunny day—of which Belfast sees few—one might catch these two men wave at one another from their respective front porches. Should these two men be standing in line at the post office, other patrons might hear them exchange greetings. Around Christmas, neighbors might peek through the front windows and catch a glimpse of one of these two men seated at the other’s dining table.

These men do not consider themselves friends. The pair do not place any title on the way they view their relationship with each other. From an outsider’s perspective, I will call them brothers. Even that does not reach the meaning that I would like. What binds them together is thicker than blood.

It is hope.

One of these men put a bullet in the other, just as he had put countless other bullets in countless other men.

One of these men aided in planting the device which would kill the other’s father and brother, and the fathers and brothers of people he will never know.

One of these men had a grandfather who refused to leave the Scottish Highlands until it was in a casket.
One of these men will proudly tell you that his Irish ancestry predates the one and only Saint Patrick, himself.

One of these men was a Protestant. One of these men was a Catholic. Both of these men fought for a better Ireland, and both of these men see strength and peace returning to their beloved homeland today.

But one of these men is called Cormac, and the other is named Philip.
the ghosts of the undead write
themselves into the strangest
places. the signature in a painting

on my wall, the restaurant I walk
past weekly but haven’t entered
since the holiday art gala when

he wore Levis with a suit jacket,
swirling wine in the bottom of a blue
plastic cup printed with the name

of a charity. after dinner while everyone
was laughing he told me that September
10th of 2001, he was in the Twin

Towers, and what if the planes
had come a day early? then he pressed
a box of chocolates into my hand

and wished me a Merry Christmas.
I didn’t throw the tin away until
I moved six years later. sometimes

I worry that I loved him into non-
existence, that I mistook my own
poems for answers, like when I wrote

that his ribcage was made
of rice paper. he tore so easily
but goddamn, he could light up

a room. the ghosts of the undead
write themselves into the strangest
places, and when I say undead I mean

alive and maybe happy somewhere
else. I mean maybe someday we’ll
walk into the same coffee shop

and I’ll tell him that I’ve tried to write
myself out of loving him for three years now,
but still can’t take his painting down.
CAMILLE ARNETT
Camille Arnett was born in Columbus, IN, and has lived in South Bend, IN for the last decade. She is a student at Butler University, and likes books, films, and baking. She was almost named after a B-52s song (“Private Idaho”).

MEGHAN ALLEN
Meghan Allen is an English Writing and Studio Arts double major at Saint Mary’s College in Notre Dame, Indiana. In her free time she enjoys reading, writing, drawing, and running on her beautiful campus.

KARENBAKAS
Karena Bakas is a senior English: Creative Writing major and Spanish minor at Butler University. Poetry is her genre of choice, though she also enjoys writing creative nonfiction. Her writing often revolves around themes of family, relationships, violence, and the female body. Karena interns on campus in the Office of Health Education, working in peer education around health topics and with the campus Victim Advocate.

ERIC BAUGH
Eric is a junior double major in Business and English at Butler University. He is on the cross country and track team. When he’s not studying, running, or sleeping, Eric is working on a novel, and has enjoyed writing for many years.

KATHLEEN BERRY
Kathleen Berry is a Strategic Communication major and Chinese minor at Butler University. This past summer, she traveled to Belfast, Northern Ireland during a study abroad course. This adventure provided the inspiration for “One of These Men.” Kathleen looks forward to completing her time at Butler and setting her sights on law school.
Margaret Brodbeck
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Darby Brown is an English/Creative Writing major at Butler. She enjoys reading, writing, playing piano, traveling, and being involved on campus. She hopes to become a novelist and seeks to inspire and love others in everything she does.

Matt Del Busto
Matt is a junior at Butler studying English creative writing and Spanish with a minor in psychology.

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Delania Byerley is a writer currently pursuing her degree in Creative Writing at Valparaiso University. Her work has been previously featured in The Lighter.

Kyle Clark
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Mason Farr
Mason Farr is a student at IUPUI studying English Education. Mason’s poem “Room” was published in “So It Goes,” the literary journal of the Kurt Vonnegut Memorial Library. Mason enjoys writing poetry and prose, as well as film and digital photography.

Joplin Finfrock
Joplin Finfrock had been inspired to write poetry from her Freshman year of college after declaring an English Major. Since then, she has switched to a Psychology Major and Religion Minor, but her love for poetry is here to stay. She likes to incorporate modern day concepts or controversies in her poetry because she wants to make people think in a way that they previously have not. Poetry is about emotion, art, community, and controversy.
MELANIE GARCIA
Melanie Garcia is an English Major and Creative Writing Minor at IU South Bend. An avid reader and president of a Lord of the Rings Club at IUSB, she’d gladly die for Thorin Oakenshield or cat, My Precious, in battle.

SHAKKIRA HARRIS
Shakkira Harris is graduating with a major in Journalism and a minor in Literature from IUPUI in May of 2018.

TAYLOR JANKOWSKI
Taylor Jankowski is a junior at Butler University. She is majoring in Organizational Communications & Human Leadership with a minor in creative writing. She has loved to read and write ever since she was a child, and has dreams of one day working for a book publishing company where she can be paid to read and write. She is from Cincinnati and considers Butler a home away from home.

SAM KNEPPRATH
Sam Knepprath is a Junior at Butler University currently studying Marketing and English. He currently works and spends most of his time at Irwin Library and LUNA music.

PETER LARSON
Peter Larson is a Minnesota native that has always had an interest in photography. Within the last couple of years, he has become more involved, developing a love for portrait photography and a greater appreciation for nature.

JESSICA MARTORANO
When Jessica isn’t writing essays or drinking copious amounts of caffeine to get through the day, you can find probably find her curled up in her “fort” under her lofted bed, reading Harry Potter.

KATE MARQUAM
Kate Marquam is an author of many genres. Although they began as a poet, they believe that genres are fluid, and that no writer should be forced to fit into one category. They were previously published
in Genesis, and have been a featured reader at IndyReads Books. They are currently a Junior in the IUPUI Creative Writing and Literature programs. When they are not reading or writing, they are working as a consultant at the IUPUI Writing Center.

**CON MURRAY**

Con Murray is a Junior major in English (Creative Writing track) with a Classical Studies minor at Butler University in Indianapolis, Indiana. He is the eldest of three children from Cincinnati, Ohio. He spends his free time reading, writing, playing tennis, video gaming, playing with his dogs, and trying to convince his science major friends to switch to English.

**MAGGIE REGAN**

Maggie is a junior at Butler University studying both Art + Design and Digital Media Production. Originally from Manteno, Illinois, she has been pursuing fine art for a number of years. She has participated in numerous art exhibitions, some of which were juried. Themes in her work focus on the imaginative, nature, the human condition, and the connections and disconnections between these themes. She typically works in traditional media, but recently has delved into the digital medium.

**FIONA SCHICHO**

Fiona is a junior anthropology student at Butler University. She uses poetry to express emotions and explore the possibilities of language. In her free time she enjoys dancing, riding her bike, and baking.

**SYDNEY STOOPS**

Sydney Stoops studies English at Butler University. She is an avid writer and has been published in The Mall, a publication showcasing exemplary works of Butler’s first year students. She also acts as a mentor for young writers attending Butler’s Creative Writing Camp during the summer.
**CAROLYN SWARTZ**
Carolyn Swartz is a senior Communication major at Marian University. Originally from Louisville, KY, Carolyn has been working on her craft in poetry for the last four years and focus on writing studies. She has been previously published in Marian’s student-ran literary magazine, “The Fioretti.” Through sharing her writing, Carolyn hopes to inspire young writers to mold life’s difficult experiences into art.

**MJ ULRICH**
MJ is a senior double major in English and Spanish with minors in music and history. In her free time, she likes reading, writing, napping, and plotting to take over the world.

**TYLER WAGNER**
Tyler Wagner writes poems, rides his bike around town, and eats Ethiopian food often. To his cat, Mango, he’s a melodramatic meow, and to his duo of tomato plants, he’s an inadequate hydrologist. Tyler is currently a senior English Creative Writing major at Butler University, where he works in the Writers’ Studio.

**CAITLYN ZEGIESTOWSKY**
Creativity has always been a dominating characteristic of Caitlyn’s and she feels that she can express herself in many ways with whatever she decides to create. Caitlyn is very passionate about seeing the beauty in the overlooked and finding ways to incorporate that in her work. A lot of Caitlyn’s work comes from within and she draws inspiration from her emotions, thoughts, feelings, the outdoors, and really anything that causes a reaction inside of her. Taking time to understand herself gives her the opportunity to have infinite inspiration.