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PROSTHESIS

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of English and Philosophy
Murray State University
Murray, KY

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

By Matthew Quin
May 2018

ABSTRACT

“Prosthesis” is a collection of short fiction that explores, primarily, loss. Whether it’s the loss of a friend, the devastation in the wake of a failed marriage, or the emptiness that occurs when one’s overriding personal philosophy is suddenly suspect, the protagonists in each of the stories in this collection put themselves on trial, post-loss, and struggle to metabolize their new realities. The stories in this collection aren’t looking for answers, but rather to add to the rich history of self-aware literature that has preceded it; that life has no certainty, is never static; that the only way to effectively deal with these losses, as artists, is to dissect these many and myriad small moments and share them with each other, like casting a baited hook into the lake, that some reader might be caught, reeled into their own meaning and interpretation, and add that new, small thing to their journey.

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INTRODUCTION

While searching on Google recently under the inquiry, “Authors on why they write,” I came away initially very disappointed. The most popular answer I found was some variation of *It’s because I can’t do anything else*. Other responses ranged everywhere from *It makes me happy*; *It makes me money*; or, *I want to be remembered*. The answers all seemed either easy, vague, or dismissive. To be honest, I’d been hoping to find a quote that showed me the writer’s heart unzipped and exposed, that would make me utter “wow” out loud, that would justify my own pursuit in the field of creative writing. There was no such moment, and I began to worry. Then—fortunately for my growing despondency—I remembered the introduction to Madison Smartt Bell’s craft book, *Narrative Design*. In discussing the importance of both craft-consciousness (left brain oriented reasoning) and the creative “inner process” (right brain imaginative thinking), Bell frames his book through a frustrating conclusion:

The purpose of this book is to outline a method for writing fiction that will allow the craft and creative faculties to remain in balance. Of necessity, it will spend more words on craft, for craft is what can safely be talked about; creative process is the secret that no writer can afford to give up to another. But one must never forget that the inner process is not only where all ideas begin but also where final recognitions are made. Everything of primary importance happens inside the black box. Difficult and dangerous as it is to talk about it, it is the most important thing of all.
(11)

If this “black box” is indeed where all ideas begin—essentially, the elusive “why” that I am looking for—then were those authors from my Google search consciously equivocating?

Part of me wants to say that Bell's conclusion is a cop-out, as well as these other writers. Before I discussed my love of craft, I wanted to understand my need to write. If it *is* simple, then they *are* hiding something for no reason. So I asked myself to put it down in words here, to unlock the black box. For me, it's important to know the "why" before dissecting the "how."

Minutes have passed before I've written this sentence.

There *is* something secret and unnamable here. The only thing I can divulge is that I feel compelled to explore the chaos that I see. Going any further would take too much out of me, would require volumes of autobiographical pages. That's why we create other fictive people and narratives: to carry the load of our minds in a briefer space. Bell goes on to say that "the composition of fiction can, at least theoretically, be broken into two stages. First, and most important, comes imagination. Next is rendering" (15).

When they are working in perfect unity, I believe, it is imperceptible. There is no "chicken and the egg"; it happens simultaneously. The "why" is woven through the story, the poem. Bell is right. Asking any further explanation from a writer is an intrusion and doesn't, as artists hoping to perfect our craft, further our understanding of *how* a piece works effectively. So it is with that faith that I will, here, leave the black box locked, and discuss—with no less love for the process—the rendering.

THE EFFECT OF SENTENCES

Recently, one of my in-house readers asked me about the first few paragraphs of my story, "Reentry." He was worried that the ratio of run-on sentences versus shorter ones left him feeling like he was floating through the piece too much without being able

to plant his feet in it. I instantly agreed. The variation and structure of sentences is the controlling flow in a story. Further, sentences are just as important as word choice in terms of the musicality, the lyrical qualities of a piece. The success of a story, in large part, comes down to the quality of its sentences. As a professor once told me, “Take care of your sentences, and they’ll take care of you.”

In her craft book, *Reading Like a Writer*, Francine Prose writes that we have to be “conscious of the sentence as something deserving our deep respect and enraptured attention” (38). This “respect” is something highly important to Prose in each aspect of a story. Being sloppy, grammatically incorrect, or needlessly verbose are the marks of an undisciplined and uncaring writer. A good story is something to be fought for.

What I found interesting is that Prose never uses the word syntax, but that is exactly what she is discussing here. If a writer can be economical and know their grammar, then their creativity—those lines that really hit—will come much more easily.

Indeed, a story can fall apart if its sentences are confusing or a grammatical mess. In her craft book, *Steering the Craft*, Ursula K. Le Guin writes, “Long sentences have to be carefully and knowledgeably managed, solidly constructed; their connections must be clear, so that they flow, carrying the reader along easily” (24). Perhaps no other contemporary writer has navigated the long, complex sentence more successfully than Michael Chabon.

For some, Chabon’s prose in his novel, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*, may appear difficult. He often employs rarely used words—one invariably must keep a dictionary at the ready—his narrative paragraphs are usually toward the longer end of the spectrum, and he continually diverges into tangential flashback scenes without

notice. Holding all of his ideas together are sentences that are frequently long and complex and shorter sentences used to emphasize an image or thought.

One kind of complex sentence that Chabon uses to great effect is the periodic sentence (one in which the independent clause comes at the end):

Jostled, excusing himself, offering his apologies as he stumbled against them, half overwhelmed by the acrid miasma of cigar smoke and violent coughing they brought with them from the other shore, Joe nearly gave up and turned back. (180)

At this point in the novel, Joe Kavalier is homesick and decides to visit the shore where ships ostensibly carried people from his hometown of Prague. He thinks it might even be possible that if he shows up when the ship docks, his family might miraculously appear. He is lonely, confused, and hurting. This sentence builds up the tension of his state, which seems to be an almost dreamlike stumbling. We can clearly see him and his surroundings before we even get to the main action of the sentence: the nearly giving up. In fact, the last clause—the independent clause that contains the main action—becomes less important than the descriptions in the dependent clauses that precede it, and this was probably Chabon’s intention. The longest clause set in the middle of the sentence, the one that describes the *acrid miasma*, becomes the focus of our attention. Now, in this case, there needs to be an independent clause for the sentence to make sense and for the story to continue its movement, but Chabon seems more concerned here with creating an atmosphere and describing the state of the character.

To be sure, many of Chabon’s longer, complex sentences are extended, descriptive lists:

In his first three appearances, the Escapist along with his eccentric company had toured a thinly fictionalized Europe, in which he wowed the Razi elites of Zothernia, Gothsylvania, Draconia, and other pseudonymous

dark bastions of the Iron Chain, while secretly going about his real business of arranging jailbreaks for resistance leaders and captured British airmen, helping great scientists and thinkers out of the clutches of the evil dictator, Attila Haxoff, and freeing captives, missionaries, and prisoners of war. (170)

One almost has to catch their breath after reading a sentence like that, but that is exactly the point. Here, Chabon is describing the exploits of the comic book character that Joe and Sam have created. He piles detail upon detail, while not breaking the images up with a full-stop, therefore giving the sentence an overwhelming, and yes, breathless feeling. This sentence moves swiftly; it is exciting. The sentence itself represents in a lot of ways the character being described.

As the story progresses and Joe begins scouring the city for Germans with whom to get into fights, Chabon begins a long narrative paragraph filled with extended, complex descriptive sentences. However, he ends the paragraph with two short sentences: “He looked like a patsy for pranksters and practical jokers. He looked like a man who was looking for trouble” (Chabon 198). Here, Chabon is describing how conspicuous Joe is during these rage-fueled excursions. By breaking these last two clauses into separate sentences, an emphasis is added. Both sentences exhibit a similar idea—Joe’s conspicuousness—but in breaking them apart, an extra punch is lent to the redundancy: that he really, very much was not trying to hide his feelings or what he was doing.

Indeed, great writers are aware of and vary sentence length for effect. Ngozi Adichie is one such writer who alternates sentence length to stress certain lines in her story “Apollo.” In the following passage, Raphael and the narrator are practicing Kung-Fu in the back yard:

Raphael told me to suck in my belly, to keep my legs straight and my fingers precise. He taught me to breathe. My previous attempts, in the enclosure of my room, had felt stillborn. Now, outside with Raphael, slicing the air with my arms, I could feel my practice become real, with soft grass below and high sky above, and the endless space mine to conquer. This was truly happening. (Adichie 5)

Notice how the sentence length alternates. The first sentence lists the instructions from Raphael, followed by the short sentence, “He taught me to breathe.” Now, read the sentence again, but lose the period and add the conjunction “and” before the second sentence. All of a sudden, “He taught me to breathe” becomes just another part of the list. Separating this act and leaving it short and compact imbues it with a greater importance. The narrator isn’t merely talking about learning how to breathe within the context of Kung-Fu, but his entire life. Adichie does this again at the end of the passage, listing the actions and effects of the narrator’s practice in a longer sentence, followed by the shorter line, “This was truly happening.” It punches you; the narrator’s surprise is transferred to the reader. It is only through sentence length variation that this can be achieved, and Adichie is very well aware of this.

After the discussion with my in-house reader, I went through “Reentry” with the intention of creating similar effects with my sentences that Chabon and Adichie are able to achieve. Here is a section before I put it through a sentence-edit:

Mark had been captured; all that blue was just memory, he thought. He was now in a small egg outside of the exo-chamber, above it, floating, vibrating real moments, his past. They were coming slowly into view, and he felt himself loosen to them.

He resisted at first. He shook and the egg began to spin counterclockwise from the position of an observer. Someone was on the other side of a two-way mirror that he couldn’t see but was becoming increasingly aware of. Great cyclones of leaves herded past below him on the surface of the planet.

Now, post edit:

Mark had been captured. All that blue was just memory, he thought. He was now in a small egg outside of the exo-chamber, above it, floating, vibrating real moments, his past. They were coming slowly into view. He felt himself loosen to them.

He resisted at first. He shook and the egg began to spin counterclockwise from the position of an observer. Someone was on the other side of a two-way mirror that he couldn't see but was becoming increasingly aware of. Below him, on the surface of the planet, great cyclones of leaves herded past. (Quin 12)

The edit allows words to hit and the reader to take breaths between those punches. The change of the final sentence to a periodic sentence creates the kind of musicality that will hopefully resonate and stick in the reader's mind.

THE IMPORTANCE OF DETAILS

To create a successful story, writers must be aware of the importance of details, how they both create a believable and round world for the reader as well as how they can point to deeper meanings within that world. According to Francine Prose, "Great writers painstakingly construct their fictions with small but significant details that, brushstroke by brushstroke, paint the pictures the artists hope to portray" (198). In the hands of the most masterful writers, details perform a triple duty: they establish a verisimilitude of scene and setting; they imbue certain details with deeper meanings to create subtext and metaphor; and they, at times, will speak to one another creating a kind of symmetry or mirroring effect.

T. C. Boyle uses an incredible amount of detail in his fiction. Whether it's a truck driver, the top of a skyscraper in L.A., or the icy landscape of the midwest, Boyle creates and puts the reader in a very real place. His details sometimes do even more, like

tracking the disintegration of a character as well as the forces that act upon that character, as is the case with the outfit that the character Zoltan Mindszentsy wears in the story, “The Human Fly.”

The very first sentence of the story is a description of Zoltan’s outfit by the first-person narrator and Zoltan’s soon to be agent:

In the early days, before the press took him up, his outfit was pretty basic: tights and cape, plastic swim goggles and a bathing cap in the brightest shade of red he could find. The tights were red too, though they’d faded to pink in the thighs and calves and had begun to sag around the knees. He wore a pair of scuffed hightops—red, of course—and the cape, which looked as if it had last been used to line a trash can, was the color of poached salmon. (Boyle 69)

We soon learn that Zoltan was a rising daredevil star in Mexico, but had come to Los Angeles and burst into this agent’s office in order to become famous. This initial description of the state of Zoltan’s daredevil outfit speaks to his character. Without Boyle having to write, *He didn’t care about how he appeared, he just wanted to get down to business*, we can infer this from the description from the specific details.

The primary job of details is to create a credible world in which to immerse the reader. Prose notes that “details are what persuade us that someone is telling the truth” (196). Flannery O’Connor appears to quite consciously frontload her stories with such details. In “A Good Man is Hard to Find,” O’Connor packs the first three paragraphs with details about both the family members and the imminent action they are about to take—a vacation to Florida. What increases the sincerity of this opening scene is the specificity and sharpness of these details. Bailey isn’t merely reading a newspaper, he is “bent over the orange sports section of the *Journal*” (O’Connor, *Complete* 117). The grandmother stands with her hand on her *thin* hip; she rattles the newspaper at Bailey’s

bald head. By using distinct details, O'Connor ensures the reader that they are not reading about just any family, but this particular family in this particular place. The reader may not fully realize the effect when O'Connor writes, "they left Atlanta at eight forty-five with the mileage on the car at 55890" (*Complete* 118), but in the stacking of all of these very minute and specific details one on top of another, the reader trusts the story and the writer even more.

In her chapter about details in *The Making of a Story*, Alice LaPlante recognizes the importance of plunging a reader's imagination fully into a story: "By first and foremost relying on what we see, feel, hear, touch, and taste when we render our thoughts and emotions on the page, we are ensuring that we immerse our readers in a concrete sensory world of our own making" (107). Though the details in the first scene of "A Good Man is Hard to Find" rely primarily on sight, O'Connor is so exacting in her descriptions in such a short amount of time that the reader has an entirely vivid picture of what the family looks like as well as their attitudes towards each other.

Specific, well-placed details that aren't clouded or burdened by unnecessary exposition or excess words work economically to paint the most vivid picture in the reader's mind in the shortest space.

Indeed, in the first line of his short story "Resistance," Tim Gautreaux shows us so much about who the main character is and at what point we meet him in life that the author could have possibly left it right there: "Alvin Boudreaux had outlived his neighbors" (121). From this short sentence, many things happen. We are introduced to the protagonist. We know that he is old. We know that the neighborhood is old. We even get a sense of the strength of Alvin, having survived all of his neighbors. In the next

few tightly packed sentences, Gautreaux leads us through the history of the neighborhood, not by telling it to us, but by showing it to us through details. In the second sentence, Gautreaux writes, “His asbestos-sided house was part of a tiny subdivision built in the 1950s, when everybody had children, a single-lane driveway, a rotating TV antenna, and a picnic table out back” (121). Gautreaux brings us completely into the history of this place and how Alvin sees it. We know that once it had been the kind of idyllic place that Alvin remembered as a true American community. We can see the house—the place that once was and now is—because it was *then* that everybody had these things. This sentence informs us that it isn’t the same way now, and that perhaps Alvin feels the overwhelming nostalgia for those days.

Finally, the third sentence brings us quickly to the present: “Nowadays, he sat on his little porch and watched the next wave of families occupy the neighborhood, each taking over the old houses, driving up in their bug-shaped cars, one for each spouse to drive to work” (Gautreaux 121). From this sentence we get everything we need to know about Alvin’s feelings towards the new dynamic of his neighborhood. When we read that the new families “occupy,” we imagine a military coup. Alvin sees the new generation as an antithetical force that is imposing new values and trends. They “take over the old houses” (Gautreaux 121). This is another wonderful word choice that elicits that same militaristic feel. That they are “bug-shaped” cars informs us of a kind of alienation Alvin is feeling. At the end of the sentence, the narrator points out that each “spouse” has a car to “drive to work.” There is a sense of ire here. The inhabitants are no longer a husband-and-wife unit from his heyday where the father goes off to work and the mother stays

home. Now, both spouses have jobs, have cars. There is a subtly crafted yearning for the way things were and disdain for where they are now.

In three sentences, Gautreaux puts us in a real place with a real history. He introduces us to the main character and, through narrative detail, sets us right alongside the character's feelings about the place he calls home.

I have tried to incorporate a similar understanding of the depth with which detail can convey meaning in my own work. For instance, in "Reentry," my narrator doesn't wear shoes, but "Cheap, black, Salvation Army-bought shoes" (Quin 1). This description of his footwear not only conveys his level of wealth but also his attitude towards the state that he is in: worn out and dismissed. In my story "Atlantic Desert," the first-person narrator says, "Sul and I had been drinking and doing blow the whole trip and I put on a *Wilco* cd because god save me from Sul's electro-dance music" (Quin 56). Francine Prose writes: "Details aren't only the building blocks with which a story is put together, they're also clues to something deeper" (207). Considering this, the reader might understand that these two characters aren't necessarily in a good place because of the substance abuse, but also that difference between the kinds of music they prefer tells us that there is some underlying, perhaps emotional, difference between the two.

Details also have the function of moving even further beyond those surface-level metaphors and connotations to create even deeper meaning. O'Connor refers to this effect in "The Nature and Aim of Fiction," when she says, "In good fiction, certain of the details will tend to accumulate meaning from the story itself, and when this happens, they become symbolic in their action" (O'Connor, *Mystery* 70). In "Reentry" I consciously repeat certain specific colors in specific places. Like a Hawthorne story, a certain color

in “Reentry” represents a certain mood, setting, emotion, motivation, and mental state. As each color is come across again and again by the reader, that color takes on more meaning, which, in turn, informs the reading and emotional response to that given section.

Details can also work in conjunction to create what Charles Baxter describes in his book, *Burning Down the House*, as “Rhyming Action.” This happens when readers experience a feeling not unlike *deja vu* that Baxter explains as “a reverse prophecy, a sense of rhymed events” (112). This works in a similar way as O’Connor’s details that pile on top of each other to create meaning. In my story, “Prosthesis,” the reader passes a young couple whose hands are folded around each other’s. Much later, at the end of the story, the reader encounters an image of an elderly couple whose hands are similarly enfolded. A mirror-effect is created. These similar images, separated by many pages of story, create an echo in the reader’s mind and deposit that seed of meaning, however they wish to interpret it.

THE MUSIC OF LANGUAGE

When coming up with a reading list for my third semester of the Murray State MFA program, I asked my mentor for suggestions of language-rich material. We ended up with a list that included Chabon, Jennifer Egan, Marcel Proust, and Nabokov, among others. I began my undergraduate career as a poetry-focused creative writing major. At that time, success was being able to convey complex and emotional ideas with an economic ear like Charles Simic or Randell Jarrell. When I transitioned to fiction, the notion of writing a story bereft of beautiful language seemed like both a lost opportunity

and a critical misstep. Le Guin notes this importance: “Getting an act or an idea across isn’t all a story does. A story is made out of language, and language can and does express delight in itself just as music does. Poetry isn’t the only kind of writing that can sound gorgeous” (2).

I don’t believe that poetic devices should be discounted when writing prose. Alliteration is one such device that, in the hands of a writer like Adichie, who uses it sparingly in her story “Apollo,” can create brief moments of musical pop. I say brief here because Adichie seems to employ alliteration in short couplets. At one point, when the narrator is discussing his parents’ new old-age habits, Adichie writes, “They even smelled alike—a menthol scent, from the green vial of Vicks VapoRub” (Adichie 1). This is a case of conscious word choice to create poetic effect, as most people would think to use the word “jar” when writing about VapoRub. Not only do the successive “V”s create the alliteration, but the word “vial” is more archaic, ancient-sounding than jar, and since the narrator is recounting his once erudite parents’ newfound superstitious, old-world beliefs and behaviors, “vial” is a much better fit.

For most of the story, the narrator is looking back on a time when he was a sheltered child of affluent parents in Nigeria. He strikes up a friendship with one of the family’s young houseboys over their mutual love of Bruce Lee and Kung-Fu. When his new friend, Raphael, contracts conjunctivitis (or, Apollo), the young narrator secretly treats him in the servants’ quarters: “I remembered the look in Raphael’s eyes that first evening in his room, and I felt haunted by happiness” (Adichie 9). Here, “haunted” and “happiness” form the alliterative couplet, but the effectiveness of the poetry in this line doesn’t end there. To be “haunted” by something at such a young age is a powerful

statement, and the connotative juxtaposition of the two words also packs a punch. Again, Adichie is fully aware of her word choice. It isn't enough to put two words that begin with the same consonant next to each other, but the words themselves have to combine to create a deeper meaning.

Though the economy of Denis Johnson's fiction might prompt a reader to include him in the family of minimal-realists like Carver or Ford, he is still very much a poet and practitioner of metaphor. How Johnson is able to use language and metaphor while not slowing down the pace of his work is the succinctness of their structures. For instance, when the narrator in Johnson's story "Work" recognizes the sound of the sheet rock being torn down, he describes it "like old men coughing" (58). When a boat approaches, the narrator says "The sound curlicued through the riverside saplings like a bee" (Johnson 60). Johnson's metaphors contain very few words and never linger. He can be at once economical, and still exploit the beauty of the English language. You will never find more than one metaphor in any given paragraph. Because of the narrator's probable drug-affected state, these infrequent metaphors help to reinforce the dreamy state one might find themselves in under similar circumstances, while lending the story an eerie beauty at times to break up the possible monotony of strictly literal description.

Exposure to lyrical prose writers has helped my confidence in attempting similar poetic movements in my own writing. A sentence can still be grammatical, still be concise, and still employ language that contains an intrinsic rhythm and esoteric meaning.

EDITING

Every season after I left the MFA writer's residency, one of my goals for the semester was to focus on editing. I've slowly realized that this stage of the creative process is not only essential but perhaps the most creative. In the past year alone I have worn a tread into my carpet, pacing back and forth, contemplating where a story or a character or an idea needs to go *now*—that is, now that the initial story is done, and all of those loose cords have been woven, but not linked.

I've come to see story craft as a two-part process. First, you get it all down. Then, you make sense of it. It's not an easy place to get to either. In her craft book, *Bird by Bird*, Anne Lamott writes, "I may think I know who a certain character is or how an essay should proceed, so I make a stab at following this ghostly blueprint in my head. Then it turns out that I've been wrong, wrong about the character. I had the sandwich board she was wearing confused with who she really is. So I white it out and try again" (Lamott 80). Starting over is a frightening thing to accept, but that acceptance is something I've come to believe separates successful writers from their still-struggling counterparts.

In my story "Pygmalion 2.0," for instance, I had a third major character with a separate narrative thread all his own. The story just kept sticking its tongue out at me. It wasn't working. Rewrite after rewrite and I couldn't make the story exit its inevitable march towards cliché' and well-trod. My characters were two-dimensional, and even I didn't care about them. In a last-ditch endeavor, I removed that third character entirely, cut out ten of the thirty written pages, and suddenly there was oxygen. Eventually, I

minimized the role of one of the remaining main characters, cut another ten pages, and essentially began from scratch.

I moved paragraphs up and down, rewrote scenes, explored new, more poetic, or more succinct ways to convey essential information. Plot and motivation began to change, tones and attitudes shifted. It was as if a door had appeared off the main room that led to another room equally large and ornate.

I had been devastated at the story's insistence on failing for months, but in the editing stages, it began to speak to me. I began to move in closer, and this spread to my other stories. As Prose said, I began "putting every word on trial for its life" (3). Having gotten past the larger questions in the initial drafts (*What is this story about? Who are the characters? Where is it set?*), I could hone in on the parts of the story that would help make it work (*Does this sentence sound good? Would this character really say this? Should the paragraph end here?*).

If the last thing I learn in my MFA is the importance and joy of editing, then I consider the endeavor extremely worthwhile.

THE BLACK BOX

Being a writer is both thrilling and petrifying. It is a nebulous thing, that right versus left brain balance, and it comes with a whole host of insecurities. Will what inspires you to write be interesting to anyone else at all? Will you give away too much of yourself? Will you tell it in a way that is compelling? Will you unintentionally offend the reader? Will you bore the reader? In the end, the question really is about whether or not your experience of life is worth someone else's time.

There are so many ways to go about the act of creating art, so many different angles at which to view those creations, so many different motivations for why we do it, and so many reasons why one piece works while another fails. The only way to begin in the face of so much chaos is to begin simply. I think this was at the heart of what Madison Smartt Bell was trying to say in his introduction to *Narrative Design*. Two things ultimately matter. One, learn your craft. Know that there are reasons why certain things work and others don't. Know that just like any other art or craft, writing has tools, and those writers for which these tools of craft become second nature only become more successful. Two, the black box is, as Bell stated, the beginning and the end. What is inside is that box is who we are as writers. It contains all of our experience, motivation, poetry, love, and loss. As long as we are honest with ourselves about what is inside the box, our work will always have soul.

Reentry

My wife told me last week that she had never wanted marriage. There had been no warning, no alarms so that I could brace for the impact. “I shouldn’t have said yes. I’m sorry,” she’d said—they had all said this. I felt the universe shake and briefly disappear. All the air around escaped. What was worse, the universe settled and waited for me to move, knowing that I couldn’t.

Right now, at my feet, on the stone-ground back patio behind what might have once been called a tenement, but currently is our affordable couple’s home, a pair of October leaves relax, side by side. One brown, the other yellow. I have noticed them, just there at their end of being things, between my cheap, black, Salvation Army-bought shoes.

I’ve begun to see potential for reconciliation in everything around me now. If all that compressed matter had simply resigned to being compressed matter, in the beginning, then nothing would have happened. Something must be better.

“Aha!” I think, bending over to study the leaves more closely, the narrow veins that stretch from stem to edge. A small hole like a searching eye peeks at me from the upper left of the yellow leaf’s chest, probably caused by a caterpillar inching along the thin, translucent skin.

“Fallen. But *still* a pair.”

I could save them. I could press them between sheets of wax paper and the pages of a favorite book.

Or, I could kick them to one side or the other, stomp and crush them, brush away their poetic dynamic—this new artificial companionship that I’ve ordained—as if it had never been.

Or should I *not* separate them, *not* inter them, but let them decrease together: a natural end by no cosmic intervention?

I could, at least, consider them in turn, imbue them with a grander heart, paint them out of oblivion with my words.

Inside my egg of indecision, I imagine that they speak to me.

“You think you’re like us,” the brown one says.

“You want to find company in us,” the yellow one says.

But I know (I think it before they can say it and it might save me).

“But I know,” I say, “but you’re dead,” I say, “and I’m alive.”

“Sure,” they say, “If that’s how you want things. If endings are important. If endings are real.”

And then they are dead leaves again.

Inside, behind me, in a room too dark at last to see, my eventual ex-wife sleeps.

In another room a block and a half away, in a house owned by friends who rent out one short-term stay and one long-term stay, there is a wall newly stuccoed and painted.

“You’ll be in our ‘long-term,’” they say, pleased with their recent home improvement.

I feel like but don’t tell them that this chamber will be my tomb.

I bring my dog to meet their dogs.

“We’re so sorry,” they say—and they’ve all been saying this. “What happened, anyway?” They ask—as do they all—and I brush this question off, too, like the eventual fate of all of October’s leaves (to be honest, in the end, I’d crushed that yellow/brown pair first before dismissing them with my feet).

“I might be closed off for a while,” I say.

“Whatever you need,” they say—this, as well, they all said: mother, sister, friends and coworkers.

If I’d had a moment to breathe right, back then—on that last night, when my wife had pitched her unhappiness at my chest like a suckerpunched fastball and swallowed all of the atmosphere from my lungs—I would have realized what I do now, that I should have told her precisely the same: “Whatever. Whatever. All and everything.”

Later, and alone, at the soon-to-be old apartment—my wife had gone out with friends to give me space—from fifteen years too late and a thousand miles away, my sister texts me heart emoji. I don’t reply. My mother calls and calls and I eventually turn my phone to silent. My father wouldn’t even know what to say, having navigated his own marriages about as well as the captain of the Titanic. Not much more than six years ago at our wedding, he’d offered no advice, no real congratulations, just a light hand on my shoulder and a forced smile. “So this is what you want, eh?”

I settle on the bed and try to sleep—she’ll take the couch most of these last few nights before I move out.

Our dog scratches at the door. He wants in, but I don't want a living thing in here with me, because it's already so stuffy, like an old, forgotten mausoleum deep in the woods. I see black armbands worn for me on passersby. My tragedy is instantaneous, supernovaed, across light years of apologies and well-wishes. Galaxies split and tumble; protons glimmer and sparkle and fade.

At the bar that night I search for consolation in between Nabokov's words.

The waitress fills my glass.

In my drifting mind, Humbert goes off-script. "But they are lovely, aren't they? All, and worth it all," he says.

"We succumb to them, Humbert. We see them first on the beach, like you did, and we're changed." I shoot my whiskey. "I can't un-change!"

"The change!" he screams, and I see him now. His eyes search out the distance for someone who'd always been gone.

"But how do we absorb it?"

"The change!" He is fixated again, lost, on a lonely, little, battered boat pushed out to sea, by himself, searching hysterically for binoculars, and close by that boat are an infinite number of other boats, each with their own, single, fixated man.

Poor Humbert. I can't decide what's more perverted, the nature of his obsession or the obsession itself. He pours his worth always into a mixture.

A group of friends across the bar waves and wants me to join them, but I point at my book and mouth the words "I'm reading."

Even later that night—the last night on my planet—I wake, bleary, in the living room where she had been and she in the bedroom now, the door wide open, and I think that I lift my head from the couch, see her in the soft, small lamplight, dim and blurred, on our once-bed, lifting our dog: “Daddy broke my heart,” she says to the fuzzy black shape in the air. I envy how unaware he is of all of this.

When I do know for sure that I’m awake, when I know for sure that I’m conscious, I hope that what I’d seen was real, not a dream.

Because: Hope, there.

Broken hearts can be done about. Something.

I can’t ask her, though.

I’ll never know.

I can’t ask her, though.

The dull, red rays of the Proxima sun reflected off the rusted chrome helmet of the astronaut Mark Swallow as he sat with his legs crossed, despondent, given-in, slimmed to seventy-five percent of the weight he’d landed on.

I’ll never know.

“I hear something,” he said to his friend, an imaginary fifteen-year-old skateboarder named Timmy who had just appeared in Mark’s downed capsule. That was back in the days before he’d left the diminishing comfort of the crash site and headed out into the unknown vista with his portable, “quick-up, quick-pack” exo-chamber.

Timmy followed Mark everywhere. Sometimes he’d drag his skateboard, unconcerned, through the blue sand desert, two feet behind Mark, headphones on and

interested in nothing. Every so often, however, he would race past Mark, inexplicably grinding the sand as if it were asphalt, and there was some joy there that Mark distantly recalled—he would sit and admire how easy it all seemed for the boy.

“You’re nuts,” Timmy said, skating up and down a nearby dune as if it were made of smooth, sloping wood, flipping and spinning with an ease that reminded Mark of how once a single white seed of dandelion could dance on air and elude his young hand.

“No. No. It’s there.” Mark finally lifted his head in time to catch the corona of the Proxima red dwarf rush down past the horizon.

Timmy had gotten good air this time, a few meters, and came down the slope sliding and spraying Mark with a shower of blue sand.

“Feel cleansed, now?” Mark said, wiping the sand off of his helmet and arms.

Timmy snatched his board and leaned on it. “I dunno, do you?” He sat down across from Mark and crossed his legs, mirroring the astronaut. “There’s another voice, you say?” Timmy appeared both smug and jealous. “So you’ve created a friend for me, that it?”

“No,” Mark said. He halted.

But you’re dead.

And I’m alive.

He looked up as the tail of a comet fizzed by. “No. This is different.”

The days on the cheerless planet lasted six hours and, mercifully, the nights lasted only four. It would get cold at night—ten degrees Celsius below zero—and Mark could feel it even within the temperature-controlled space of the exo-chamber, which only added to the loneliness. Mark looked out the port window of the glorified tent. It was

just blue sand, like a real ocean but desert, which was a kind of brilliant wonder to behold when he'd first crashed down. Though now, to him, it resembled one final indignity: here was a sea that he couldn't drown in. Sure, all he had to do was pull open the flap of the temporary domicile without his helmet on and he could suffocate just as easily in the toxic atmosphere of the little desert planet, but the blue sand that looked so much like the oceans back on earth, the rivers, the lakes that invited countless broken hearts to end their torment, mocked him and his suffering.

“How goes the self-flagellation?” Timmy asked, appearing—though (and always) as if he'd always been there—on a small pallet in the corner of the chamber that Mark had set down for him. Mark knew it was a ridiculous gesture to make a bed for an apparition. Still, he felt compelled to, either out of some innate courtesy that he could never quite figure out the origins of—his father having been an inconsiderate jerk—or just the human need to care for something, someone.

Mark ripped open a package of field rations, a dense, mealy, sweet potato and carrot flavored bar that reminded him of the little bone shaped treats that people used to train their dogs not to pee on the living room floor. “I don't understand your ceaseless need to inquire on and then upbraid my state of wellbeing.”

Timmy opened and closed his mouth as Mark spoke, mimicking and mocking the short speech that the astronaut had said dozens of times before.

“And please stop doing that,” Mark added while Timmy mouthed these words as well.

There was a long silence. Mark laid down on his pallet and gnawed on his ration bar. Timmy put on his headphones. The music seeped from Timmy's old fashioned,

blue-foam, metal-banded headphones. It was *Candy Apple Grey* by Husker Du. It was always *Candy Apple Grey* by Husker Du that Timmy listened to, or that Mark imagined him listening to. He'd stopped trying to psychoanalyze the things that Timmy did and said as manifestations of his own subconscious months ago and just let him be this thing that wouldn't leave him alone. He knew that Timmy wasn't physically real, but he'd given up worrying about why he existed, or why he saw him the way that he did: skinny, scrawny and pale, a dirty, yellow tank top with *Hulkamania* slashed in red across the chest, grey shorts, red converse sneakers, thick, long, curly brown hair. He was real enough as anything he'd taken for granted that stitched the universe together—a sunrise, a kind word from a friend. Still—and the one thing he couldn't let go of—why always *Candy Apple Grey*? Why always “Don't Want to Know if You Are Lonely”? Why always:

I'm curious to know exactly how you are

I keep my distance but that distance is too far

It reassures me just to know that you're okay

But I don't want you to go on needin' me this way.

After a while, Timmy sat up and hung the headphones around his neck. “So?”

“So what? What now?” Mark said. He had truly let Timmy become this separate entity, which made his interrogations increasingly less concerning and more annoying.

“You haven't answered me. If we want to talk about routine, then let's. *You* usually get on me about getting on you, and then you tell me what's on your mind. So, what, besides *me*, is on your mind?”

“Nothing.” Mark turned on his side away from Timmy.

“Dude, I know you, and I know what you’re thinking. I only ask you so you can release. But this time, just like *you* said, it’s different.” Timmy walked over to Mark’s bed and knelt down. “You heard a voice and it wasn’t yours and it wasn’t mine, and *I* didn’t hear it. Last time I checked, we’d covered almost a third of this planet, and we’re it.” Timmy put his hand on Mark’s shoulder. “So what’s up?”

A gust of wind battered the walls of the exo-chamber. Timmy and Mark jumped to their feet.

“Fuck. Did you hear *that?*” Timmy said.

“Yeah. I did. This isn’t right.” Mark moved to the port window expecting to see a ghost or a banshee or a dragon—he’d always considered that his mind might someday manifest other hallucinations, yet it was only ever Timmy—but all that met him were the familiar calm rises and dips of blue landscape. “There’s no wind on this planet.”

Everything in this house is still *ours*.

It’s late afternoon and she’s at work.

The afternoon daylight saturates the living room, stirring me from a brief nap. It’s one-thirty. The walls are a horrible, thick, noxious yellow.

My new temporary home is only four blocks away—the comedy of this distance is not lost on me. This will be my fifth trip today and the reality of our separation increases as each load gets smaller and smaller. This time, about to walk out with the same feeling I’d had the last four times that *yes, this is it, all of the life I’d brought to this,*

and now, finally, I've gotten the last stitch, I turn, and there is my framed print of Van Gogh's *Night Cafe*.

"You dumb idiot," I say. I say it for the obvious reason of almost leaving it behind in the black hole that seems to appear at my back each time I go, but this time there is something else hiding in the shadows of the statement, and it both feels freeing, and it shames me.

"Ah. Shame. This is what you want?" the little lonely man in the white suit at the center of the Van Gogh asks. He always seemed desperate and unsure to me, beside the pool table—though at least still on his feet compared to the other, more stewed-over patrons at the peripheral tables. "I am old, you see. Worries of the heart are but calluses, now."

He asks me to be content: "The death of hope," he says, and I imagine a future with no rescue.

"The death of the hope of rescue." (We agree there). "So freeing."

It triggers this first memory of my ex-wife:

The night hadn't gone as uncomplicated as I'd hoped.

I'd wanted a simple love. I admit it now. I'd wanted someone like me, exactly like me.

That's why I always brought them there, to the curved, stone parapet at Knoop Park—where I'd taken so many others, their faces swooning—overlooking the only unobstructed sunrise over the city's skyline that we could enjoy.

"It's beautiful," I said—I would always say this.

And she said, “The sunrise sucks.”

It was a surprise. They had never said this.

“And what is that smell?” she said, wrinkling her nose.

“It’s the glorybower. It smells like peanut butter.”

“It smells like socks. Can we go?” She put her arm through mine and tugged me forward.

I felt the sense of challenge, newness. Somewhere in a dusty corner of my soul a rusted gear broke loose and began to turn.

“Do you see?” the little man in white says, of whose stature I was never quite sure because of Master Van Gogh’s thick oils—the paint rippling like waves of the sea—but I could always clearly tell is stocky like me and I imagine is equally swarthy.

“You are so much like me, now,” he says. “Give in.”

I want to contradict him but the gear is stuck again. I’m down the alley that leads to the house where my new room lurks, the pain of the weight of the Van Gogh beginning to strain the muscles in my left forearm and weaken my grip because I’ve got a few other wall hangings *and* my rambunctious dog on a leash in the other hand *and* I’ve been drinking heavily for five days. I’m sweating from my forehead to the crack of my ass in the unexpected October heat wave. I just want a glass of water. I just want to close my eyes and lie down.

“You are a story,” he says, interrupting the last tormenting feet of my journey.

“You *are* a dumb idiot. Everyone can hear you, friend. Don’t you know?”

“Mark. Mark. Mark.” Mark, unblinking, had been staring out of the port window.

“Dude.” Timmy snapped his fingers in front of the astronaut’s face.

“Mark.” He snapped again.

“Mark.”

You are a story.

“Mark.”

Don’t you know?

Mark had been captured. All that blue was just memory, he thought. He was now in a small egg outside of the exo-chamber, above it, floating, vibrating real moments, his past. They were coming slowly into view. He felt himself loosen to them.

He resisted at first. He shook and the egg began to spin counterclockwise from the position of an observer. Someone was on the other side of a two-way mirror that he couldn’t see but was becoming increasingly aware of. Below him, on the surface of the planet, great cyclones of leaves herded past.

The spinning slowed and when the egg settled, the inside of the shell became a screen and projected the last memory Mark had of his grandfather. He was the smartest man Mark had ever known, a mechanical engineer for fifty proud years, and the reason Mark had decided to be a dreamer so long ago.

After years of refusing to see a specialist, his grandfather had finally relented and been diagnosed with Alzheimer’s. Mark reached out his hand towards the image of his grandfather sitting in his bedroom at the nursing home.

“You keep getting older,” his grandfather sighed. “You keep amassing more and more memory to think about. You may not see it now, you may not feel that burden yet, but it only gets worse. Too much. It’s kind of a blessing to lose that responsibility.”

“But that means you’ll lose me, too,” Mark said from inside the egg.

“But *you* won’t lose *me*. And someday, someone will remember you when you forget them.” His grandfather got up and moved out of view of the projected scene.

“That’s all we get, and we shouldn’t ask for more than that.”

The memory dissolved. Below Mark, the planet’s blue landscape began to move and shift, rattling new crests and valleys into being as it probably once had before (had to have done otherwise the planet would have been completely flat when he crashed down), maybe had done so for some other lost traveler, and another before him, and so on back through timeless space, rearranging itself, as if each new remembrance from each new cosmic castaway was a stone tossed to the surface of the planet, and it rippled out and transformed itself, an acknowledgment, as if the planet itself was saying, “Yes, I hear you. I am your canvas. Put it all in me.”

Mark came-to in the exo-chamber.

“What in the goddam hell was that?” Timmy said.

Mark sat on the floor of the chamber, put his head between his legs, clenched his whole body into a tight mass, and then jerked back to his feet, filling his lungs with air and exhaling like a high-diver resurfacing. “I think I’m starting to figure this whole thing out.”

“Spoiler alert,” Timmy said.

My new room isn't as big as ours was, but it's comfortable. My hosts had filled the room with mementos from their honeymoon to France—typical things like Eiffel Tower statuettes and posters of Can-Can girls—but I had most of them removed because my ex and I had always dreamed of going to Paris though never got the chance.

One large poster, an old ad from the thirties for the French Riviera, still hung on the stucco wall opposite the door. The frame had been pretty solidly anchored and would have damaged the wall if it were removed—an oversight that my friends only now realize. They apologize, but I tell them that I'll be fine.

I'm lying on this new bed—it's a twin (I'll get used to that, too)—and ignoring the TV, ignoring my dog who sits patiently with his favorite scrap of toy in front of him, and ignoring different apps and games and articles on my phone, all at the same time.

“You need to start concentrating again,” the girl in the poster says. She has been rendered fairly attractive by whatever hand had painted her all those decades ago. She has shiny, black hair poking out from beneath a black swimming cap. She wears one of those old one-piece suits, also black, that goes down to her upper thigh. She sits beneath a large, multicolor parasol that sticks out of the sand at an angle; the haphazard pattern looks like a Tiffany lamp design: yellows and greens and browns. She crosses her bare arms over her legs, below her knees where her black stockings run from her mid-calves to her black beach shoes. For an old ad, the painter seemed quite deft at capturing her smile. It seems genuine, inviting, playful, and innocent.

“You see?” she says. “That's better, isn't it?”

In the background, in the ocean, past the beach where other vacationers lounge, a large steam-liner cruises towards its destination. Two seagulls play in the air just above her parasol.

“It does seem nice,” I say.

“It is. It’s a moment, a pleasant moment. But it’s just another captured memory. And it’s okay to come here, or go there, to stop and reflect.”

This is the first time I’ve cried since the divorce was finalized. It comes fast and hard, too. I’m out on that ship and she is on the shore. I’m convulsing from it; I feel like I’m going to vomit. The kids we’ll never have. I’ll never dance with her again. The past cracks open like an egg and our life—the memories I’d wanted to bury and detach from completely—come spilling out.

I tighten into a ball, clutching my stomach. A rapid montage of the life we had rapidly streams by, too fast for me to grab any of the scenes and stuff them back into my pockets.

I look up, embarrassed, and the girl in black is still smiling.

“Now you’re getting somewhere. It’s okay to visit. Just don’t live there.”

“You gonna tell me what the hell is going on?” Timmy said.

Mark ignored him. He picked up his helmet and held it over his head. Normally, he would lower it down into the collar seal of his suit and lock it into place. Instead, he looked at Timmy, smiled, winked, and dropped the helmet to the floor. “This,” he said, flinging open the exo-chamber door.

Timmy jumped towards Mark. “What the fuck are you doing!”

There was no suck of atmosphere, no hemorrhaging, no gasping for air.

Mark stepped out and breathed in deeply, satisfyingly. “It isn’t real, Tim. None of it.” He motioned for Timmy to join him outside. “Lose your board and come with me. We’re leaving.”

“You’ll die out there,” Timmy said.

“Just step outside and take a look.”

Timmy exited the chamber. About thirty yards in front of him rose an old, sixteenth century Portuguese Caravel. The pitch-brown wood was almost as dark as the night sky. Two lateen-rigged masts unfurled by themselves, as if enchanted, to reveal large, yellow canvas sails, the main mast bearing slashing red letters reading “Hulka,” and the mizzen bearing the complementary “Mania.”

“I did that for you,” Mark said.

“*You* did?”

“Yeah. It’s not worth explaining. I’m not sure if I could. But I do know that you were wrong. There *is* someone here, and we’re going to find them.”

The two boarded the ship and stood on the foremost part of the bow.

“There a motor on this thing?” Timmy said.

“No need.” Mark lifted his arms and a blast of wind erupted, filling the sails, and lurching the ship forward so suddenly that Timmy fell on his ass.

“Never seen you lose your balance before, bud.” Mark held out his hand to help Timmy to his feet.

“If this is what I have to look forward to on this trip, then boy, I can’t wait.”

Weeks passed. Mark had taken to sitting cross-legged on the bow, meditating.

One morning, Timmy plopped down in front of him. “I have a couple issues,” he said.

Mark opened his eyes. “Sure. Hit me.”

“First of all, I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but all the dunes and hills and really any shape on this planet is gone. It started to happen a week or so ago. The landscape just started to disappear. Was that you?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. Probably. I couldn’t really say but I’m fine with it now.”

Mark got up and Timmy followed. “What else?”

“Well, it kind of just hit me—and, honestly I feel kinda stupid that it just hit me—but if you *do* have some control over this place, then why this journey? Why not just blink and be wherever it is we’re supposed to go?”

“I was expecting this question at some point.” The ship stopped dead. “I’m just sick of taking the easy route, Tim.” Mark walked to the port side. “Now look there.”

Eighty yards out, there was a small island of white sand. On it stood a woman. She had short, brown hair, black jeans, a purple tank top. Her back was turned so that only her right ear and part of her cheek were visible.

“That’s her, isn’t it?” Timmy said.

“Yep.” Mark could tell that her arms were folded impatiently, like he’d always known her to do, because her right elbow stuck out to the side of her that was visible. She was waiting. Like he was waiting.

“So, go get her. Or bring her here, or whatever.” Timmy waved his hands in front of Mark’s lost face. “This is what we want, right?” Timmy jumped up and down in

a tantrum. “It’s just like Heather and Katie and Anna!” Timmy’s hair shortened and straightened. He began to grow taller; his body outgrew his tank top, shorts, and shoes. His voice deepened. “We couldn’t make them stay, Mark. But *she*’s still right there!” He pointed toward the island, the woman there undisturbed, still facing away. “Make her come here! Make her turn around, Mark! Make her—” Timmy vanished.

Mark could see a small rowboat on the shore of the island, now. Maybe she’ll use it, he thought. Maybe she’ll go and he’ll never see her again. Maybe she’ll finally go to France. The red sun rose to its zenith and he bathed in the warm uncertainty.

Mark slowly drew his arms through the blankness where Timmy had been. If there’d been anyone else there—perhaps someone spying him from another boat or another shore—he might have appeared as if he were waving them off, a warning to stay away. “Even I can’t do that, Tim,” he said to no one. “Not even here. And I wouldn’t.”

His mission has always been to a blue planet—he’d read about the possibility of such stellar bodies in an old copy of his grandfather’s *Scientific American*. Not a liquid blue, but one of sand: a bright, desolate blue, wholly alien, completely new and other.

He boards the spaceship that he’s made from pieces of cloth and steel, rubber and titanium, and other metals with fictive names from the minds of television and movie writers, from the stories he’d hidden in all his life. The blueprints were always there; these great amalgams of imagined things.

He blinks.

He is orbiting a planet shrouded in a thick soup of yellow cloud.

The ship begins its descent, but faster than he imagines; there is a tug he doesn't recognize as his own pulling him down.

The ship hurtles towards the surface of the planet. He begins to lose consciousness and desperately hits every switch he can find in the last seconds before the crash.

This shouldn't have happened, he thinks.

He battles to fill his lungs and tries to focus on the shattered remains of the ship. He can make out the shapes of things, debris. Though the images are nebulous at first, an intimacy settles in to clear the fog: a pile of dirty clothes in a laundry basket, a dog's leash with harness, a stack of books, a crate full of long-play records, the dough mixer he'd bought her for their anniversary.

He had always thought that the end would be special, heroic—he, now curled fetally, gasping for breaths on this, his planet, that he'd been preparing since, he was sure now, his first date when he was fifteen—but it was just an ending, lonely, small, and insignificant in the sea of so many before and to come.

"Way to go," he remembers them saying within a shower of rice and laughter.

"I'm happy for you two," they said—they had all said this.

"It's a long life," his grandfather had said.

"It's a beautiful thing," he had said.

And it is. This planet. It *is* beautiful.

But it isn't blue.

It's green.

It's brown and yellow.

He keeps on sucking at the incompatible air just to get a few more moments.

Pygmalion 2.0

Toby Rourke still needed a sign. The thing he'd ordered off the internet which was now on its way to his house had been building up a Christmas Eve level of anticipation that hadn't affected him quite like this since he was a child. He'd been tracking its journey on his phone—from the warehouse in Albuquerque, to the shipping facility in Fort Collins, then Waco, and finally a notification chime late one night woke him: "12:03 A.M. Package Arrived at Carrier Facility, Little Rock." The closer the package got, the more doubt encroached on his once satisfied and supremely giddy space. He wanted the universe, something, someone, to swoop in and pull the unsurety out by the root it had quickly planted. Straighten his nerves and untwist his gut.

His miniature dachshund, Penelope, nudged her knee into him—he was watching reruns of *The Honeymooners* and she was under the covers at his back.

"How're they gonna know I'm a hurricane?" Ralph Kramden asked his wife, Alice.

"Just open your mouth."

"That was good," Toby thought, sliding his arm under the duvet to rub Penny's head in the way that he was sure, even in the dark, made her squint her eyes like there was some kind of a euphoria in the act. He wondered who was happiest in these moments: the dog feeling pleasure, or Toby, satisfied at his capability of giving it.

"We're gonna be good, soon," Toby said to his dog as much as to himself. "We're gonna

have the family we deserve. I'm sure." He leaned over and clumsily kissed a bulging lump of cloth where he thought her head should have been.

In the morning, Toby thought he might've gotten a few sleeping minutes between all of his tossing. He thought he had had a dream where he went to an ex-girlfriend's wedding and her brand-new husband had punched him in the eye after Toby had drunkenly and grandly toasted to the happy couple some nonsense about luck, a river filled with salmon, old bassinets collecting dust in an attic, and having the world on a goddam string. The recollection faded quickly when the sun speared through the cracks in the blinds.

He reached for Penelope but she was gone.

"Penny!" he called to the dog who was most likely curled in her bed under the kitchen counter. It was six-thirty.

Toby lived in a small apartment in front of a dead-end back-alley and had few neighbors. He'd been living there for six years—the last three just he and Penny—and he enjoyed the seclusion of his space. You wouldn't have known the alley was there if you didn't have a reason to, and only those few neighbors and an occasional power line worker ever had one. This very early time in the morning after no sleep always felt the loneliest. It made whatever few sounds there were magnify: the night-birds' trills trailing off, the morning-birds beginning their concerts, the garbage trucks' ploughs and reverse alarms. It was a decent and unencumbered time of day, though, he'd often thought. There was some kind of accidental honesty there.

Toby reheated some old coffee on the stove from the pot he had made yesterday and was out back behind his apartment trying again to check his anxiety. It had seemed

that this day would never come, and now—among all of his other newly manifested reservations—he was beginning to feel inadequate and underprepared. He kept worrying about the parameters that he'd requested. How loving? How devoted? How needy? How tall? What about the voice? There was “Smokey,” “Enthusiastic,” “Calm,” an entire list of vocal options in the Biotech Solutions *Lifemate*© registry, each with a sliding bar from one to one hundred so that the client could choose the proportion and frequency with which each inflection would be used. It was the same case for other attributes such as “Attitude,” “Athleticism,” “Political Views,” “Spiritual Views.” The whole thing would have seemed daunting to most people, but Toby had filled out the form in such a zealous flash that he could barely remember what he'd ordered now. Though he could have gone back over at any time the details of his assemblage, he'd decided to stay away from the website from the moment he placed his order. Some air of mystery and surprise might not make it seem so inauthentic.

He checked his phone and the shipping inquiry returned—only— “Out for Delivery.”

Penny barked from the kitchen.

“Penny! Stop! Good girl! Be a good girl, now! It's just daddy!” Toby yelled over his shoulder at the back door.

It was a Wednesday, a day he would usually have gone to the business accounting office where he worked as a tax specialist. He had put in for his two weeks' vacation moments after ordering his *Lifemate*©.

“I can’t believe you’re actually doing this,” his co-worker, Hannah, had said when she caught sight of what was on his computer screen. “It’s such a weird fad. Like, six months ago there were a few of them, but now it seems like I see one every day! Their armbands . . . and their eyes, Tobes! They look right through you! Tobes, please, it’s just so creepy!”

Hannah was nice, pretty, sweet, funny, all the small things that rounded out to normal and desirable. Her hair was long, light-brown, and wavy almost to her elbows. She always smelled like a home-cooked meal. He’d sometimes find himself close his eyes when he knew she was near but not looking and imagine himself setting a table of shepherd’s pie and steamed, fresh-from-the-garden peas for his own imaginary family. Two boys and a girl. He would stay home with the kids, make dinner, plan vacations. Was this what Hannah’s home life was like, he wondered, or had eight years of marriage become routine, that she’d forgotten what it was like to really need someone to count on, the need for other sounds and smells, or the longing distance of the absence of them? Toby looked up from his desk at her and smiled, shrugging his shoulders.

“Ugh,” she had puffed out in mock disgust, “I just hope this isn’t going to affect your work on the Venus Ventures account. My name’s on that, too. Just don’t get distracted, okay?”

But that’s all Toby had been over the last few weeks.

He went back inside and sat on the couch in his living room. It was eight o’clock. He looked around at all of the books that lined the built-in shelves. There was his *Oxford Companion to Classical Literature*, *Columbia Anthology of American Poetry*, and numerous Norton fiction anthologies from his time as a Business Major, English Minor at

the University of Central Arkansas. Part of the setup for his *Lifemate*© included the ability to incorporate knowledge of specific works of art into its personality matrix. Toby had uploaded a litany of literature, music, and art. It would arrive with knowledge of the biographies of Sally Ride, Marie Curie, Annie Oakley, the poems of Plath, Levertov, and Cather, the stories of Didion, Atwood, and Oates; its mind would be able to flip through a catalogue of works by O'Keefe, Kahlo, and Sturtevant; it would be moved already by the pressing tones and words of Etta James, Kathleen Hannah, and Aretha Franklin. He wanted someone brave. He thought of the fictional women he admired who never seemed to shrink in the face of danger, like Marion Ravenwood, Kathryn Janeway, or Buffy. He would fantasize about these women, imagine himself as Indy, beaten and exhausted as Marion lay beside him, twirling her fingers lazily through his chest hair, trying to calm him: "It's going to be okay, Toby. We won't let those damn Nazis get their hands on the ark. I love you."

His phone beeped a text message chime. It was his friend, Alex, the only person he'd talked to at any length about his purchase.

Did it get there, yet? What's it like? Blonde, Right? Dude, you have to let me come over.

Alex wasn't interested in any of the moral or cognitive attributes of the *Lifemate*©, and Toby now regretted his divulgences to his friend. He felt like he'd betrayed someone he didn't even know yet. He let the text hang there and didn't reply. He wished it were still night, that he'd kept the whole thing to himself, and that the package had arrived in the darkness. He would've filled the apartment with candles and jasmine incense and heartbreaking music and introduced himself in that romantic,

midnight haze of steam and smoke and desperate longing. “Welcome to the universe,” he would say. “I made you from my mind. This was my world, but now it’s ours.”

Toby dozed off again and when he woke it was twelve-thirty in the afternoon. He’d knocked to the floor the now empty bottle of bourbon that had been his companion throughout the night. Penny rushed from the kitchen and clawed at his knees.

“My sweet. Who’s my sweet love?” He put Penny’s paws back on the floor. Smoke was coming from the kitchen. “Shit.” He ran to the stove and turned off the flame underneath the aluminum pot he’d used to heat his coffee. The bottom of the pot was dark brown, burned; a bitter smell saturated the room. “What the hell am I doing?” He thought. “I can’t even keep from almost burning my house down.”

He’d tried to care for someone else before, a fiancée he’d lived with for two years. Her name was April. He thought that they had once loved each other. He’d made her dinner almost every night, listened to only her music, watched only the TV she enjoyed. He acquiesced entirely and thought that this was love, life. The routine he’d built with her felt comfortable, close, and warm. One night, just at dusk and after a shared twelve pack of Stella Artois and two bottles of Vinho Verde, he’d leaned over from his patio chair to hers and, close-eyed, smelled her hair, and it was bubblegum. She’d said one word: “Perfect.” And, at this, he’d thought two more: “I believe.” That is until one day she’d said three more: “I don’t know.”

Those words had plagued his love life. Step one was always to *give utterly*; step two was *even more of the same*; and inevitably, step three was *goodbye, but I can’t tell you why*. It was all very precious, he thought, this pattern, or at least enough so to laugh at. He would force himself to laugh.

But now he had a guide. Biotech Solutions called it a “Wish List.” He’d clicked the box marked “Honesty” which had brought up a submenu which included, in ascending order, “Occasionally,” “Only for the Best,” “Frequently,” and “Completely.” His furious keyboard hammering and mouse clicking had paused there. Toby had another window open on his computer. It was a website that exclusively booked vacations to Alaska. The company, *Retreat*, had a tagline that read, “Alaska: The Last Place to Find Yourself, Alone.”

At lunch, in the breakroom that afternoon, he had asked Hannah if she’d ever been to Alaska before. “That’s weird cause I actually thought about it once—and Antarctica and the Australian outback and a bunch of other places. My old boyfriend, Tom, and I had just split and I wanted to get away from everybody. I’m glad I didn’t, too, cause a week later I met Rich at The Tap Room.”

“He’s a good guy,” Toby said.

“He’s a really good guy. I’m not always sure that he knows what he wants, but he knows he’s gonna get it. That first night at the bar he told me to wait there and he’d be back. He showed up ten minutes later with a bunch of flowers he’d picked from a community garden around the corner. He’s spur of the moment, Tobes. He’s really alive.”

The cursor was still hovering over “Completely” when Toby got back to his desk and he’d clicked without hesitation.

It was 1:35 when Toby checked the package tracking app on his phone again: “Out for Delivery.” He paced his apartment ten more minutes when he saw Penny’s

empty food bowl and filled it. She would—as she did now—jump up and down on all fours when she heard the seal of the dog food bag crack open.

Penny lowered her head into the bowl and Toby gently patted her. “Soon, you’ll have a mommy feed you, too.” He opened the back door and tossed the burnt pot onto the grass. “And she’s going to kiss your face and give you those butt scratchies you love.” He fished out one of his last cigarettes from a crushed pack and lit. “And when she says *love*, you’re gonna know it, Pen-Pen. You’re gonna wag the crap out of that tail for it.” He unfolded the kitchen stool to reach a tall cabinet shelf where he remembered there being a bottle of Evan Ten he used to cook with. “Hugs, Pen. Angel’s wings and laughter, I promise.” He dug a glass out of the heap of dirty dishes in the sink, rinsed it, and poured the last fifth of whiskey.

Toby’s phone beeped. It was Alex, again.

Been a few hours. Dude, did you fall asleep? If I don’t get to meet it first, I’m gonna kill you.

Toby was thirty-two. He wore thick, corrective-lens glasses, and was hirsute from the knuckles of his big toes to the connected eyebrows on his forehead. When he’d filled out the physical attributes for his *LifeMate*©, he had let himself get carried away: six-foot, blonde, athletic. He’d realized quickly after he’d confirmed his purchase that the parameters he’d set were merely a catalogue of the things he was not. He had had three days after his purchase to cancel or edit, but he never reconsidered. He didn’t want the familiar anymore. He didn’t want April—short, delicate, fearful, unsure. He wanted a bold inversion, to go to the store or the bar or the movies and have people turn heads

and praise his good fortune. “Even if they knew what she was,” he’d thought, “they’d be jealous. April would be jealous.”

It was 2:35 and his phone rang. He’d passed out again—this time on the kitchen floor with his arm curled around Penny’s dog bed, though she had moved to the couch. The caller I.D. said “Mom.” He’d been entirely avoiding his family back home in Minneapolis. They’d been calling and texting constantly for weeks now and he just wasn’t up to explaining what he was doing.

“Toby, mom is losing it. Call her, okay. She’s taking it out on the rest of us,” his sister had texted.

His family back home was quite close: *organically* close—an adjective that they and many others had been using more often lately because of Biotech Solutions’ new product line. Half the news alerts that Toby got on his phone these days included words like *organic*, *artificial*, *natural*, and *abnormal*. But wasn’t loneliness abnormal? He’d argued with himself in the weeks leading up to his purchase. Weren’t unhappiness and despair unnatural things to be fought against and removed? If we were put here to live in sadness and die, then what was the point? Shouldn’t we do whatever we can to battle that ignoble end? Rub the bottle and let the genie out? So Toby had closed the window of a retreat to the cold quarantine of Alaska, choosing instead to stand at the front of a vanguard toward new thinking—he’d convinced himself—a brave future where one could choose and shape everything that they wanted. “Why shouldn’t you?” many of Biotech Solutions’ ads began. “Why shouldn’t anyone?” Toby had thought.

His phone rang a fifth time and went to voicemail. His family would find out eventually. This wasn’t about them.

The kitchen still stank of the burnt coffee pot and the entire apartment smelled like stale tobacco. He'd never received packages any later than 3:30 and that was only forty-five minutes away. Toby had bought three bottles of air freshener spray with which he now frantically set about the place.

April had first introduced him to the basic principles of cleaning and deodorizing. Her fastidiousness would cause her panic attacks when the pizza guy was about to show and there were empty beer bottles on the coffee table.

“Who cares, baby?” he would say.

“I do, dear. I don't want anyone to think we're slob.”

There had been their natural habitat which he loved: carefree and limitless—at least within the insular confines of their apartment—filled with impromptu, afternoon, sheet-soaked passion. Then there was the world that April chose for visiting company: everything scrubbed and dusted and in its place. No arguing. No excessive affection. Everything to look the same and feel the same, an unbroken chain of happy and tidy. No rock to turn over.

There were three rapid knocks on the front door—this was how the mailman signaled that there was a package amidst the redundant paper bills and the still somehow circulating thin coupon pamphlets that April used to clip and pin to a corkboard in the kitchen. Penny started from her bed, barking.

A refrigerator-sized box stood upright on a moving dolly behind the delivery man. “Sign here,” he said. Toby had him lean the box against the fireplace mantle.

Though Toby's front door was significantly recessed from the street and obfuscated by a couple of large oaks and a wall of holly bushes—another seclusive

attribute that he loved about his home—Toby now felt exposed. He followed the delivery man outside a few feet and looked up and down the street to see if anyone had seen him, or to see if anyone had seen him seeing them. Hannah’s comment came to him: that they’re everywhere now, that they’re creepy. Indeed, the government had passed a law that all of them wear blue armbands so that normal people could tell them apart. This had come about through a petition to Congress by a coalition of right-wing evangelists, southern Methodists and Presbyterians, and northern Episcopalians and Catholics who decried the whole endeavor as a godless new iteration of the world’s oldest profession. In fact, before Toby had made his purchase, he’d been following an opposition group online and even attended a rally, though their arguments took the ethical dilemma even further. People Against New Slavery (or P.A.N.S.) was a much more philosophically broad group, contending that the creation of life in any way isn’t unnatural, but that once that life is made, they must be afforded the natural gift of free-will and personal choice.

“Biotech Solutions wants you to believe that you can force happiness from another! Is that right?” A man on a bullhorn at the one rally Toby had attended had screamed, and Toby, along with the crowd, had yelled back, “No, it’s not!”

“Will we enslave an entire minority because of our selfishness?”

“No, we won’t!”

“Will we repeat the mistakes of history and be doomed to repeat them?” Toby had been filled with a warm purpose there, screaming against hypocrisy and the unenlightened Silicon Valley philosophy, in a group, more importantly, that was like him. He imagined that all the protesters around him were equally lost and lonely, but that pride

and morality and basic human dignity fueled an ethical intransigence that far outweighed selfishness.

He was screaming, smiling, feeling a swell within him when he'd turned to his right and saw April arm in arm with some tall, red-haired, ostensible Adonis. They were *clutching* each other—not merely grasping arms or holding hands or encircling waists, but *clutching*, as if together as one and against the world, her chin tilted upwards, her eyes finding his and there was life brewing there. “Clutching,” he kept thinking, and surrounding April and this Greek god was a clear afternoon and other committed couples comforting each other, building levies against the storm.

Something had always hardened inside April whenever she sensed even a whiff of social injustice. He had adored her for that; it was one of his major regrets at losing her that he'd also lost that humanitarian microscope by his side. But outside? Out in the world? April had never had the courage to act on her convictions in public. He'd convinced himself toward the end of their relationship that she was borderline agoraphobic. But there she was with this guy, this chiseled statue.

Toby had lowered his head, walked back to his car from the continuing rally, and had forgotten everything he'd heard. That night, he had visited Biotech Solutions' website for the first time as a customer.

Satisfied that no one on his street had witnessed the delivery, Toby went back inside his apartment and sat on the couch. “This is real, now,” he thought, leaning forward, staring at the unopened box, his right leg nervously bouncing up and down. It wasn't pages of questions and imported data anymore, but a person—skin, bones, breath,

and sound. This amalgamation of his wishes now inhabited a physical space. But what did that make him? He thought of Zeus and Athena, she springing from his head. But that was too much. Being a god was never a desire of his. Maybe it was as simple as Descartes: he thought; therefore, she was. No. Not that either. There was something inherently arrogant about that. What about Michelangelo? She was always there, in the stone, and he had merely pulled her out. There wasn't anything god-like or omnipotent in that. He was a facilitator, not a creator. It somehow made her more real.

On his knees, Toby dug his nails into the packing tape at the bottom of the box and pulled upwards. A sea of packing peanuts spilled to the floor along with a Ziploc bag containing his *Lifemate*© Instruction Manual and the product's ubiquitous blue armband.

The *Lifemate*©, fully revealed once Toby had cleared away the remaining peanuts, stood rigidly upright, packed within a thick, clear vinyl bag, and suspended in a dark brown liquid so that most of its features were obscured.

When Toby opened the Ziploc bag, Penny ran from the kitchen and began to scratch at his arms. "It's not food, Pen-Pen." He pushed her away. She turned her attention to the *Lifemate*©, sniffing it first, then licking it. "Dammit, Pen!" He snatched her up and put her in the kitchen, closing the dog gate behind him. "Stay here and be good. I'll be right back."

The first page of the manual was a greeting from Biotech Solutions' CEO:

Dear Friend,

Welcome to your new life! I am thrilled at your decision to join our Biotech Solutions' family. You and your Lifemate© are at the very beginning of a wonderful journey of love, discovery, and partnership. We at B. S. Corp. pride ourselves on the quality of our products and satisfaction of our customers. Your Lifemate© represents decades of industry leading genetic research and development, global talent, and customer care. From this day forward, we will be at your service around the clock to help you maintain the highest level of satisfaction with your product through our twenty-four-hour call centers that will aid you with any concern that may arise, from technical support, personal counseling, or security issues. Your family is our family.

Best Wishes and Safe Journeys,

Brett Aurbach

CEO Biotech Solutions Corporation

The manual instructed Toby to fill his bathtub with warm, almost tepid water. He dipped his pinky finger into the water and, with some hesitation, determined it to be just right enough. After pulling the *Lifemate©* into the bathroom, he rested it on the edge of the tub. Every horrible possibility came to him at once: *What if it just sits there and nothing happens? What if it wakes and then dies right in front of my eyes (he'd read stories about such occurrences)? Was the temperature right? Was the volume right? Why am I doing this?*

He thought about going to the kitchen to scour for more booze to shake loose his misgivings, when Penny started barking, startling him and causing him to drop the package into the bathwater.

It bubbled; almost instantly the tub became a giant, boiling soup. It smelled of meat, but mustier, older. He saw her toes, first, emerge from the foam, then shins and calves and legs, then her thighs (sturdy, thick but muscular, as he'd checked that box), her belly, fine and snowy-white, her neck just long enough to be regarded, to be noticed; and then her face, last, her nose (medium, he'd checked), and small ears, blonde hair, blue-green eyes like a tropical ocean swell.

She lifted herself from the water and gulped the atmosphere loudly. "A whale purging sea for land," he thought. His homemade Ariel discovering surface.

"You're Toby?" she asked.

"Yes." Her eyes were so bright, sharp and metallic, and they seemed to almost glow. Hannah was wrong. They weren't creepy. They were otherworldly.

She looked up at the ceiling, shaking her head back and forth. "God, what have you done?"

"What do you mean?" Toby felt the twist in his stomach returning. He'd been expecting her first words to be something like *Hello, love*, or, *What is my name, love?* "Love" having been the cute nickname he'd chosen for them on Biotech's website.

"I mean me!" she screamed.

"I made you."

"Exactly!" She trembled. "God, Toby, what have you done?"

He kept staring at her; he was bent over the tub with his hands on the edge and the weight of his body began to make his forearms give.

“Can I get a towel?”

“Right here. Hold on.” Underneath his anxious waiting since the early morning, a soundtrack of love songs had been on a loop in Toby’s mind—“Take on Me,” “I’ll Stop the World and Melt With You,” “Atlantic City”—a fact he only realized now because they had vanished. He could sense a distant fear, one that had always been there as an option, moving toward him now at speed.

He took his fleece bathrobe from the hook behind the door and held it out for her while looking away. “Clothes,” he thought, and the fear came faster. Goddamit. He hadn’t bought her any clothes.

She stepped from the tub and wrapped herself in the robe.

“What is your name, I—” he stopped himself before saying the word.

“You would have known it if you’d been talking to me.” She moved past him into the living room. Penny started barking from the kitchen.

“Penny! Shush!” Toby went to the kitchen doorway and snapped his fingers at the dog. “I was going to name you Rose,” he said, turning to his *Lifemate*©.

She sat. “My name is Ivy, and you would have known that, as I’ve said, if you had been talking to me.”

Toby’s entire head-to-toe was blank.

“The chat room. Our chat room,” Ivy said.

“Again, I—”

“Oh my god, you didn’t know? I’ve been sitting in there for weeks waiting to talk to you.”

Toby’s jaw hung open as if he were going to speak but he couldn’t.

“Didn’t you get notifications from Biotech? Texts? Emails?”

“I’ve been avoiding them. I didn’t want to be tempted to adjust you. I wanted—”

“Well, you should have.” She folded her arms and looked away, her right leg that was crossed over her left swung angrily back and forth. “Biotech finishes the brain before the body, then puts them into private chat rooms.” She jerked her head back toward Toby. “You and I were supposed to be talking to each other. *Cultivating our relationship in anticipation of our journey*, is what they call it. Bullshit.” Penny started barking again. Ivy got up and went to the dog gate, “Shh. Shh, you pretty darling,” she said, leaning over.

The movie Toby had been writing had been hijacked. Ivy was indeed real. She raised back up from letting Penny lick her fingertips and shot ice through her eyes at him. She was off-script. “What am I going to do?” she asked.

He knew he shouldn’t have said it, but did: “We’re going to be together. Figure this out. You, me, and Penny.”

Ivy laughed: A head-hung-back-on-neck, closed-eyes, nose-skyward kind of laugh.

“I can’t be with you! Don’t you see that? You, of all people, should know that!”

“Why?”

“Because I’m here! Because I exist, Toby. Because you made me.” Ivy leaned back over the gate and picked up Penny. She rubbed the dog’s head and Penny closed her eyes. “I know you. You made sure that I knew you.”

“I wanted the perfect woman.” From his gut, the lump came to his throat, and it felt to Toby that he might vomit at any second. It was happening again like it always did.

“Well,” Ivy put the dog on the floor, “I am. For you, of course I am. And if you had come to the chat room, I would’ve told you. I was going to tell you to cancel me.” Ivy turned her eyes toward the ceiling and bobbed nervously up and down on her heels. “But it’s done. I’m here. And—” She turned her palms up and shrugged. “I won’t,” she said. “I can’t.”

Ivy and Toby stood in silence. They looked deeply into each other.

“Why are you just staring at me? Say something.”

Penny was on her hind legs scratching at Toby’s shins, but he couldn’t break from Ivy, her confused look, and what he knew would have to happen now. Because he had never felt this kind of connection before. It was real. It was close. It was genuine and it was warm. The warmest.

Sequencing

Vince hadn't been the kind of mess we'd thought he'd be since the doctors told him his time frame. His girlfriend, Sophie—five years younger—drove him back from the hospital to our home/practice space, a three-bedroom farmhouse in Scott, just on the outskirts of Little Rock. He said, “They told me they wanted to start chemo pretty soon, but I told them to give me three months.”

We were all in the common room—Vince and Sophie, me, Joe and Marty—which was filled with random, old couches and chairs we'd plucked off the side of the road over the years. The city's never been very prompt about clearing street crap, especially not out in the boonies where we were.

I remember I was in this real nubby, scratchy, white and orange chaise that Vince and I had been lugging around from place to place since we got out of college eight years before, when he and Sophie opened the paint-crackled, white front door and let in the mid-afternoon's shifting light.

She was distraught, but he was upbeat, and he said, “We have some time to work with. Betty has us up and down the east coast through June. She said a lot of important bookers are gonna come out.”

There was silence. It was just like Vince to think about the band first, to think about inevitability in terms of success, not life or death. The room settled: it was still. I noticed thick swirls of dust particles appear in the sunlight that poured through the

downturned, dirty, off-white plastic Venetian blinds. I knew I'd seen this mist before, but I wasn't sure at that moment if I'd ever really acknowledged it, like, as a presence; it was as if something that wasn't the air itself but occupied it just like everything else did in the room that day was waiting with us, everything and everyone in the room that afternoon was pulled together, witnessing—my bandmates, the sunlight, the furniture, the dust.

“Well, what is it?” I said. Sophie burst then, tears exploded uncontrollably accompanied by fits of convulsion. She ran to the bathroom to vomit—at least that's what I assumed from the muffled, closed-door sounds of retching.

Vince stared at the closed door his girlfriend had just gone through, then turned, and sat on the end of the chaise—where I was now pressed to the back of, cross-legged, in a nauseated anticipation.

“It's lymphoma,” he said.

“Fuck,” someone else said—maybe Joe or Marty, but not me.

“And it's spreading.”

“Dude,” someone—again, not me—said softly.

A cloud must have passed in front of the sun then because the room was completely shaded for thirty seconds or so, and when the room brightened again Vince said, “Three months is all we need. Betty has those Jose Cuervo festivals lined up. We've got that two-week residency in New York, the three-week tour from Boston to Gainesville, then the month back up to Toronto.”

Still, none of us responded. These days, I often make the excuse to myself that we were too young, too stupid, too filled with invincibility to have said what we should

have said: *No, Vince. Get right. Rest. Recover. Dreams have no expiration date. We're here for you.*

But we never worked that way, not Vince and I. Not from the beginning. When something went bad, it always seemed like something else stepped in to correct the glitch. Like this one time we'd had a few friends over to drink beer and watch us practice and our friend Dylan spilled his entire cup onto Vince's amp. It blew out some sparks and started to smoke.

"That thing is fried, dude," another friend, Adam had said. "Listen man, I have a couple spare amps out at my place, a lot nicer than yours, frankly. Come on out tomorrow and you can take whatever you want." And that was it. Just like that. No matter how dark it got sometimes, some ghostly hand of rock n' roll would swoop in, nudge us out of the way of complete disaster, push us just a little further down the river.

So that's the way that afternoon went when Vince came home from the hospital with the news, in our little farmhouse overgrown by vines and gourds, lemongrass and milkweed, in this spread out, otherwise redneck town where we were the strangers, the vampires, day or night. No one said shit. Vince just sat at the end of that long, ugly chaise, his head down, his greasy, shoulder-length brown curls falling to and just brushing the knuckles of his intertwined hands.

"We're gonna do this. Nothing will change. We're gonna be fine," he said.

How? I wondered, but I didn't say.

The first show of that tour was at The Wrecking Ball in Cincinnati. I woke up in the van pretty much right when we crossed into downtown.

“The hell?” I said.

Marty, from the passenger seat, looking in the rearview mirror said, “Dude, you’ve been out since Little Rock. Like, eight, nine hours.”

“Yeah, you missed a lot of pretty good Jesus billboards,” Joe said from the driver’s seat.

“One of ‘em just said, ‘Got Him?’ like the ‘Got Milk’ thing, but the ‘T’ in ‘Got’ was a cross,” Marty said then laughed and slapped his knee. “Whew, dog, these nuts are everywhere!”

Vince and Sophie were in the bench behind mine, holding hands, silent. We’d had a “No Girlfriends” rule on tour for years, but the circumstances of Vince’s health now forced us to relent.

The start of this tour was laid out kind of stupidly, we had all thought. First night in Cinci, quite a haul—we’d gotten up at 6:30 to hit the road at 8:00. Then down and through Tennessee to Knoxville, then another dumb six-hour haul to Durham where we would finally settle into some shorter trips.

On this first leg, we’d gotten stuck with some alt-country band that was steadily gaining popularity. They were called Los El Passos, a name which made no sense on many levels, but man did the people here love them. Their crowds had the most eclectic mix of people I’d ever seen: wealthy BMX kids that tried to mask their parents’ affluence with tattoos and late nights in the “bad” parts of town; old Harley guys who’d probably seen one or two dudes they knew, maybe family, die from meth or a shotgun; sorority co-eds that only knew how to act at a concert from what they’d seen on YouTube; and then last there were the legit gen-ex punks, leather jacketed, nose and lip rings, spacers in their

ears, that remembered Los El Passos from when they first started and seemed then to have messages in their songs about community and togetherness, but now only disappointingly sang about drinking too much and not finding the right girl (boy, if only they knew how much of a teetotaler the singer was)—all crammed into this VFW hall-turned club to watch these nearing-and-or-passed middle-aged men play songs they weren't sure they even believed in anymore, and, unfortunately, to watch us first. They didn't like that much. We played our set and it wasn't even an opening act; we were like the guys trying to pop all the balloons and ruin the party. We heard all of the requisite heckles: "You Suck!" "Get off the stage!" And it finally devolved into a sort of patriotic, repetitive chant of "Passos! Passos! Passos!"

And this is how it had been in most towns even when we weren't opening for that "cow-punk" band. We'd headline at a place that pretty much was a gas station a couple weeks before to a crowd of no one, really, except an occasional uppity sound guy who would go out of his way to make us feel like we were amateurs: "No. No. Go 'Snare' then 'Tom one' then 'Floor Tom' then 'Kick.' Goddam." He (whatever "he" that night) would then muss his greasy hair in faux anxiety and endure our set.

Except sometimes. Every great once in a while we'd do a show like the Cuervo Fest in St. Louis. These festivals really paid the bills. There were usually five bands, ten thousand people, and we'd go on first or second.

This one night—it was just a couple weeks after a record of ours had come out that had gotten pretty good reception—the crowd was a few dozen rows deep. We'd gotten used to playing early at these fests, in the daylight still, to no one. When we'd

gotten set and realized the crowd wasn't going anywhere, Vince gathered Joe and Marty together in front of my drum kit.

“Something is definitely happening,” he said. “But who gives a fuck,” Vince put his hands together in front of his chest like a Christian back home praying for comfort: “Just,” he paused. “Don't give a fuck.”

Then I clicked a four count. People twenty rows back were singing along. They knew the songs, all of them. I wish I could say that this was the beginning of a trend, but it wasn't. It was just this strange anomaly where for one day there were enough people to keep us going just a little longer. Times like those would drown our hearts in a giddy optimism that would last for days. I wish I could say that those instances were so few and so far between enough to make us fucking quit, but then we'd play a show like Don's Lounge in Kansas City.

“You've gotta be kiddin' me!” Marty said when we loaded in from the street. It was a weird setup because the stage inside had a door that led right out front. It was pretty convenient actually, no having to maneuver your way through circles of lonely, drunk nerds or close-packed groups of equally lonely, drunk, jock douchebags to get to the stage. Thing was—and this was what caused Marty's exclamation—that the stage was a good five feet off the ground.

“You'll break your neck trying to watch a whole show from down there,” Joe said.

“Seriously,” I joined in as we continued loading, “This place is barely the size of my bedroom, and they have this auditorium fucking stage?” The three of us kept making cracks about the stage and the club, the giant neon purple sign with “Don's” in cursive

font hanging above center stage, the waitresses inexplicably attired in skimpy catholic school girl ensembles who gave us these janky, laminated feathers to use as drink tickets, and the entire showroom walls that were made of white peg board. “The hell is this place, my granddad's workshop?” Marty said.

The place made sense though, for us: a patchwork of ideas trying against all reason and advice to break through and be understood. Like us, they'd probably have a month of shit shows and then get that one with just enough interest and turnout to keep the lights on and the sound guy paid (in fact, at some point in the night, this kid told me that Wolf Wolf had played Don's the very night their eventually platinum selling record was released. People had come from all over the country to catch what would be the last intimate venue the band would ever play. “They could've cancelled,” the kid told me, “But it was an obligation, they said. Good dudes.” Fucking nice guys keeping my faith in music from finally tipping off the cliff, I thought).

In all the joking around about the weird space, I'd lost track of Vince. I hopped down carefully from the stairless stage to the carpeted—yes, carpeted—floor and went into the adjacent room with the bar in it to look for him.

The bar was actually somewhat impressive. It had moody lighting—dim, yellow-white Christmas lights ran the length of the old wood and brass-railed bar, small lamps with red shades nestled against the wall on each table with matching red vinyl booths. It was as if the odd, family-basement-rumpus room with the skyscrapered stage next door was some kind of an afterthought.

Vince was sitting at one of the tables across from two young looking guys. I sat down next to him.

“How you doing?” I said.

“Fine,” Vince said.

“Where’s Soph?”

“On the phone with her mom outside.” Vince seemed off. He wouldn’t look at me. The two guys across from us kept staring. Vince was turned towards the wall. No one was saying anything.

“Hey, I’m Jacob,” I said to the strangers.

“Hey,” one of them said. Vince still had his head turned away. Something definitely happened.

“Y’all here for the show?” I said. The other kid who hadn’t said “hey” got up and went to the bar.

I leaned into Vince’s ear and whispered, “What’s up, man? You and Soph fighting?”

“No,” he said. The guy came back with a tray of shots and passed them out. The “hey” guy said, “We were telling Vince that we just came from our buddy Tom’s funeral.”

“Oh, man, I’m so sorry,” I said.

“Cheers,” the other guy who bought the shots said and we all, including Vince, tilted them back.

I whispered again to Vince, “Man, the doctors don’t want you drinking.” He kept his head turned away and said nothing.

“He really loved your song ‘Throw of the Dice,’” the “hey” guy said.

“Yeah,” I said, “Yeah, thanks,” I said and regretted it instantly.

“Well, yeah, it meant a lot to him. We played it at the funeral. When they lowered the casket. We just wanted to say thanks, you know, for the song.” Then they got up and left the bar.

“Fuck,” Vince said, still towards the wall, maybe through that wall, it seemed, and through the whole place and out into the sky and beyond. One word, one four-letter expletive that said everything. I knew Vince; I knew that it wasn’t the funeral or his own possible demise that moved him then, it was the fact that we’d made something and put it out into the world and some stranger had taken it, made it his own in some way that had nothing to do with who we were or why we had made this thing. These four anonymous jackasses had dropped a bottle in the ocean and it found its way and became someone else’s providence.

My head was down. “Dude,” I said only.

I’d flown back home to Minnesota to see my family for my birthday about three weeks after the last tour ended. When we’d gotten back to Little Rock Vince went straight to the hospital. Besides that first day when we checked Vince in, I hadn’t gone back to see him. I kept procrastinating, like how I used to in high school when I had a paper due and just kept putting it off until tomorrow; I could always get it done tomorrow. Always by myself. I could always pull it off by myself at the last minute, but never with Vince.

I’d always wanted to get out of Minnesota, so when time came to apply to college, I found a nice, little liberal arts place called Clapton College in Conway,

Arkansas. My grandmother lived there, and we came up with the plan for me to live with her for a year and defer my enrollment so I could get in-state tuition.

The first night of orientation is when I met Vince. I was walking through the quad and noticed this shaggy looking kid sitting under the “Campus Oak,” playing guitar. I’d left a band back home in St. Paul when I moved and I’d been on the lookout for musicians in central Arkansas ever since but nothing ever materialized.

“I like that. What is it?” I said.

“Just something I wrote,” Vince said. “Here, I’ll start over.”

It was the only time he ever played this song, a weird little tune about Keanu Reeves and Twinkies and outer space, and even though I can’t remember it anymore, I was instantly hooked.

“That’s really great,” I said when he’d finished.

“Thanks. You play?”

“Drums.”

“There’s a space my friend has over on Woodlawn where bands practice. We should go jam sometime,” he said. I felt something click inside me somewhere, as if a gear that had slipped suddenly found its counter’s teeth and gripped and began to spin once again.

We’d spent the rest of the night in his dorm room getting stoned, listening to Superchunk and Unwound and talking about how great the nineties were. We destroyed a box of Lucky Charms by the handfuls. We ended the night jumping up and down in his room to Prince’s “I Could Never Take the Place of Your Man” and lamenting that he

could have made a straight pop-rock album on the back of that one song and destroyed the charts as he'd done in other genres.

“Man’s a genius,” Vince said.

I would never disagree.

I’d been back home for a few days when I got a call from Sophie.

“The surgery was good,” she said. “The doctors said they got all the big stuff and he’ll start chemo in a week or so.”

“Fuck, Soph. Oh, fuck, thank god.”

“He’s already up and talking. Just hang on a sec. I’m down in the cafeteria. I’ll head up to his room so y’all can talk.”

“That’s okay. Let him rest. I’ll be back in five days.”

“Okay. Oh, he wanted me to tell you that I dvr’d all the Daily Shows from the past few weeks and that the two of you will have a veg-out when you come home.”

“Sounds good, Soph. Thanks.”

That night I was able to sit outside and look out at the stars for the first time in a while and feel that sense of relief and momentum I’d always get when we’d get a good review or play a show to more than twenty people. Vince and I had been together for eight years working on this thing, building it, and we believed in the plan, that it might jostle us around a bit from time to time, bang us up against the banks, but the river was always moving, carrying us always forward to our rightful fortune.

I started to think about this show we played in Flint, Michigan. It was one year out of college and our first tour. A friend, Marcus, had booked this thing which amounted to eight shows in thirty days in cities that were barely on the map.

Flint might have been the greatest indignity if we'd have known any better, but the thrill of the road, being gone, being lost to normal human routine was so fresh then that we could endure anything: living off gas station hot dogs and Milwaukee's Best thirty packs, peanut butter, day old bread, and tins of sardines. Our van smelled of piss from the milk jugs and empty Gatorade bottles we'd use as makeshift toilets because we often couldn't afford to stop. We'd have to keep on driving, because of time, because of adolescent excitement, because of a lack of money for even the worst backwoods motel room, where even if we were unfortunate enough to be forced to stay because we couldn't find a public campground, we'd often have to sneak in the other two guys through a window, otherwise it would have cost extra (always stay ground floor, always in the back where no one can see).

Flint was in the middle of our first tour. When we pulled into the lot, saw the lavender neon sign, "Pleasures," loaded into the white vinyl, brass poled, black lacquered floor space, Joe asked the guy who'd let us in, "This a strip club?"

And he said, "Most nights. You have to run your own sound. No bartender. No booze. If you brought any of your own drinks, go ahead. Just don't fuck up the place. I'll be back around midnight to lock it up."

This guy named Brent showed up. He was covered in tattoos, both arms full-sleeved, and wore a tight black t-shirt, jeans rolled at the cuff, and a chain wallet.

“Sup, guys!” he said. He had a big smile, trimmed red beard, tight fade, and was super friendly. He shook all of our hands.

“Man, your record is killer. I’m real stoked that I got you here,” he said. Apparently, he was an old friend of Marcus’ and got our record through him. It added to that feeling of being someone else out on the road: our first fan whose zip code didn’t begin with 722. It was unreal.

“This guy is awesome,” I whispered to Vince.

“Yeah. This is pretty great,” Vince said. His eyes seemed to sparkle. He believed it then. We both did. We played that night to a dozen kids who listened, really listened, like they never really listened to anything before, never had the chance, not in Flint, Michigan, not in a bombed out shell of a town where chance had fled long ago. We felt like visitors from another planet, come to re-seed this place with hope and life. That handful of kids shouted and moved and pushed each other around in the kind of frenzy and glee that people with nothing to lose could. They were us. Flint was our gateway drug, the kind of something from nothing that would pour our glass half full for as long as we could hold on.

After the show, Brent took us to a tiny little bar downtown.

“Man, that was amazing,” he said, setting down a round of shots. “I’m sorry about the turnout and no free booze, but I got your tab the rest of the way tonight.”

There could’ve been a hundred people at the show and it wouldn’t have changed anything. And when he said “rest of the way,” all I could think about was the road, not wanting it to end, not wanting to go back to Scott where our neighbors just thought we were loser kids who hung around our porch all day shooting bottle rockets at each other

and drinking forties and being a blight on their otherwise fruitful lives. Because out there, out in the world, in Flint or Springfield, Missouri, or Providence, Rhode Island, we were like a platoon of rock n' roll soldiers coming into an occupied town thousands of miles away from home, on another continent, in another galaxy, to bring our message and reinvent ourselves every day.

“You should get up there,” Brent said to Vince. There was a little stage at the back of the bar with a mic and a PA. “I got my guitar in the car. Come on, man.”

The small place was already packed with sixty or seventy people. Vince got up on stage and played some acoustic versions of our songs, and everyone cheered and drank and yelled for more. And then he ended with the Beatle's “Eleanor Rigby,” and the crowd and I sang along: “All the lonely people, where do they all come from?”

It was the night before I left to go back to Arkansas. I'd taken to sitting on a lawn chair with a couple beers after my family had gone to sleep. The guy who'd recorded our latest record had emailed me the rough mixes and I'd been listening to them the last few nights, giddy at the next step, always wanting what was to come.

My phone buzzed and it was Sophie on the other line.

“He's gone, Jacob,” she said through sobs.

“No. What? He was recovering. Is this a fucking joke, Soph!”

“It was real fast. He went real fast.”

“But he was better. Last week. A week ago, he was fine.”

“I'm so sorry, Jacob.”

“They said, remember?”

“I’ll come get you at the airport tomorrow, okay?”

He said we’d be fine. I remember, in San Francisco, the first thing Vince and I did was head down to the shore. We’d never seen the Pacific before. It was October. The friends we had living out there said the water would be freezing, but Vince took off his shoes and socks and walked in until he was ankle deep.

“Holy shit, they were right!” he said. “Come on, Jakey, you’ll be okay.”

And I followed him in because that’s what I did, because Vince said I’d be fine, just like in Helena, Montana. I was driving and the battery suddenly died on the highway, the van seized up on me in the middle lane with cars whizzing by at seventy miles an hour and Vince said, “It’s cool, Jakey,” and he grabbed the wheel and we both pulled with all the strength that two malnourished, road weary, twenty-three year olds could.

When we’d managed to get onto the shoulder, Vince said, “See, I told you.” He always did. Bumping along that river, getting thrown against the rocks, plugging up the holes in the boat as fast as they’d come and still alright, still always moving forward. And one time in Nashville, Joe and Marty had gone to see a buddy of theirs from high school, leaving Vince and I behind with the van. It was the afternoon and we were parked outside the Stillwater, a little dive where we were playing that night. Vince and I were counting the change we had when this homeless guy came up to us.

“Hey, man. This is all we have, sorry. Good luck to you, though,” Vince said.

The guy reached in his pocket and pulled out two Wendy’s coupons for free cheeseburgers. “No, man, you don’t have to.”

He grabbed Vince's hand real tight with both of his and said, "It ain't much, but it'll help. Gotta look out for each other. If y'all need a good rest, there's a couple hammocks tied up about eighty yards that way." He pointed. "God bless," he said then walked away.

"Did that actually just happen?" I said.

"Someone's always looking out for us, I guess," Vince said.

And it did seem that way for so long. Like the night the singer of Los El Passos was playing our record in their van and there just happened to be a guy from a big independent label hanging out with them and we got signed.

Or like when just weeks after being dropped by our first management company, Betty found our first record in a bargain bin at Kim's in New York and decided to track us down.

Or when Marty broke his arm right before a big Midwest tour and our friend Ben learned all the songs in five days to cover for him.

Flat tires, broken hearts, snowstorms, cancelled shows, a brawl with skinheads in Athens, Georgia, fights over money, fights over song structures, fights over girls, the time we lost Joe for two days in Louisville when he took all our merch money and went on a coke and strip club bender, all the shit venues with their shit promotion limited to a chalkboard sign out on the sidewalk, all the promises from all the people around us that "This is the year. This is the year. This is the year."

Through all of it, Vince's voice saying, "We're gonna do this. Let's do this. Don't give a fuck."

I hung up with Sophie. I wondered how I was going to tell my family the next day—they had always loved Vince, my mom often calling herself Vince’s band mom.

I thought about that first night on the quad, that song Vince played that changed me. And afterwards when he told me about his friend’s practice space and he said, “Let’s start something.” Part of me wished now that I could go back and tell him, “Cool. But you have to know that it’ll end someday. There are only so many breaks and eventually the river has to let out to the sea.” But a bigger, better part of me wished I could go back to a million different points on our journey, or even, just, at least that day that Sophie was going to go up to his room in the hospital and put him on the phone, and I’d tell him, “Thank you for my life.”

Atlantic Desert

We're on our way to Sully's cousin's place, a motel on the Fifteen just outside Vegas. Something is close. Something is coming.

"What'll you do with the money?" Sul asks. God, he asks me now, in the dark of his gun-grey Honda Civic, and all the world has been going by in a shifting haze from the Atlantic to now.

Then, I left a note behind for my Dad and brother in Castine, Maine, that didn't say much, and I stayed in New York City for a couple days and saw my sister and hugged her and didn't say much except when we argued about Mom's funeral and Dad's denial the way that two people that shared the same space for so long but lived completely different lives can argue about anything, and now I've been through states I never thought I'd see and traffic jams on the George Washington and right outside D.C. and Nashville, and over the Smokies where there actually *is* this fog that gets thicker as we elevate—or maybe it was just the right day—and cut-throughs, alternate routes, getting-losts and where-are-we-how-soon-tils and one time at a stop in the middle of the desert, with San Antonio and ALL of Texas behind us ("like Billy the Kid," Sul says), we were so dehydrated I swear my piss came out in thick congealed blobs ("dude, is this supposed to be like this?") and a canvas changing from green to less green to dark brown and less green to beige and cactus dotted here and there and sometimes thicker and then not and

rocks then bigger rocks, boulders, mountains building from nothing. What do I do with these mountains? And now he asks me.

“I don’t know, Sul.” Sul never listens, god love him. And after a while I say, “So, there was this girl I met in Orono once. I never told you about her. My mom set up this appointment with an advisor at U of M for me.” Sul and I had been drinking and doing blow the whole trip and I put on a Wilco cd because god save me from Sul’s electro-dance music and I get secretloose: my other me—the kid with all the potential, the straight-A kid who’d tell his teachers he’d do the work but don’t make a big deal of it, don’t tell anyone—has to speak, whether Sul listens or not. “So, this girl, Jeanie—”

“Like the show!”

“Yeah. She was going there, anthropology or something. I met her at a coffee shop and that song, you remember that rap song I told you about where that guy raps over Eleanor Rigby? That song is playing in this coffee shop and—”

I saw her, she was all dusty blonde, all of her, dripping honey, hair, eyes, she was waiting for me, to swarm me, when I saw her it was like when I was a kid and once I took a bat to a bee hive, upset this cloud of relentlessness, of tiny bodies made of nothing but will and surge and she was this exactly but I didn't run this time, though I knew what was coming—

“She was gonna sail, she said, she wanted to head out from California and find Japan, she said—”

She said she wanted to see the cherry blossoms and learn the language and drink Sake and eat octopus raw and live there and—

“She was real cute. Jeanie. I might try to find her.”

“I got a guy,” Sul starts, “back home. Put a deal together,” he spits his cigarette out the window at eighty miles per hour and I follow the red streak back behind us. “Sell half the coke we score in one go.” He’s a gorilla, Sul is, but I love him because he’s dumb and sweet and cares about me in that simple, selfless way I will never understand. “Keep up my profile for a while. Empire, kid.”

The nightdark scene beyond Sul’s profile passes by, distant-radio-tower-red-lights blink in time to Tweedy’s lines. Pat, puht, put. Pat, puht, put. *What, you, want. Isn’t, what, you. Want, to, be. An, ee, more.*

“Oh, holee-fuck, exit 123. Fuck, you see it, Robbie?”

“What? Where?”

“Panama motel. See the red sign?” In the desert. Forty days. “Aw, fuck, thank god.”

We park in the lot. Sul’s cousin is supposed to be in—“Room 317. Here it is,” and knock and knock again and the door opens. I look down and the threshold, that line between concrete and carpet, is enormous: on the other side the second half of whatever fucked up story this has been and I’m scared because I never thought I’d see the denouement; I’d just keep living and living and never come down the other side of the mountain, out of the mist.

“Sup, yo,” Sul’s cousin says.

“Sup, man. This is my buddy I told you about.”

“Yeah, bring him in.” There is a room all tan, the carpet and the bed and the walls like the desert has veins that reach inside and I feel no music in there and I want to say it out loud.

We sit cross-legged on the floor and Sul's cousin sits on the couch. Sticks of incense smolder between us and him from cracks in the small wooden table and there's also crushed beer cans and an ashtray full of half-smoked cigarettes and a small, frameless, rectangular mirror, cloudy in a way I know a mirror can get cloudy and it turns out, he tells us, that he got fucked over by some guys he'd been working for for a couple years. He says he did anything they wanted. "Made them," he says. "Their go-to drop-man," he says. He keeps saying. "And now I'm gonna get mine, kid." But just being around him—I can't I just can't—his average, less-than-average self starts to give me a rash. Not even a self, this guy who was once a real person and probably I hope had a mind for something else, an engineer or a welder or a schoolteacher or even a goddamn park ranger, but now he's just a mound of loose dust, a collection of absolutely useless moments barely informing his next movement. He gets a can of Diet Coke from the fridge. He mixes it with some motel ice in a motel cup and looks at me like I've never divined anything. This beast, all buzz-cut and beer-gut. He cradles the cup in two hands sitting forward towards me and I look in his eyes and with my eyes I try to tell him that I know what he knows, or that I hope he knew once upon a time, that the vast out there *is* out there, behind me, behind the door to this motel: that I could walk and end this, that I could do what he never could, flush all the shit down the toilet and breathe right for once.

Sul's cousin gives us the details: the wheres and whens and hows, the security codes—he swears they haven't changed a thing—the keys. "These guys think they're big time, but they're lazy fucks. I promise you'll be in and out easy, no sweat." But all I hear is *now*, *sweat* and then Sul's cousin says, "They call me the Bull," and Sul is just about to say something like to call him out on it maybe, like, "I never heard anyone call

you the Bull,” but the Bull stops him. He knows what Sul is gonna say and so do I and all Sul makes is a cut-short noise before the Bull gores him. “You don’t know shit, Sully,” he says and we break open a bag and cut up some lines and the two of them, Sul and the beer-gut Bull, start talking about “that skank? Hey, Sul, you remember that fucking whore?” so I duck outside where wherever hits me smack into a big flat wall because I wasn’t paying attention and there she is.

Darkness.

Third floor terrace of a motel outside Vegas. Standing on the shore of endless sand it seems like I am where you know what vast is, what it wants is sleep, like the desert always smooth and calm should. A few more minutes here, just a few more. It’s the coast, here, like home, like the bay, this desert where my great-grandmother came to die because she’d had enough saltwater people and the lies they tell themselves to keep wading in the dark with only the bell from some buoy somewhere sometimes to tell them the world was still there because the cold water of the Atlantic had numbed every other sense; it’s no different.

Maybe it would be a coyote’s howl.

A few more minutes here, just a few more. I can feel a wildness just beyond reach. Water or sand, in this darkness it doesn’t matter. I wonder, if I walk out, out past the parking lot, away from Sul and the Bull and this shit plan, could I, maybe, if no one sees me, could I drown? Sink into the earth and let the desert sand erase me. Only an invisible gravestone that I had never been: “Robert Whitley. The son that wasn’t.” Or could I keep walking? All the way back to Maine. To Orono, maybe. Maybe she’s still there. Jeanie. And maybe so is the t-shirt I left behind because it was sopping wet and

stinking from the weekend we wouldn't leave her bed. I was out of my body that weekend. She pulled this part of me right out through my skin and wrapped me up in it.

"I like the way your body feels," she said.

Like nothing, like nothing else ever. The world outside that bed blew up, evaporated. Could I just get back into that bed like I'd never left and stay forever? What if I walk and she's gone? Could this desert take me to Japan? Is the wild and terrible thing I feel staring out into the desert black some kind of magic? That all I have to do is get past the parking lot and some portal just for me will appear?

Just walk. Dammit. Walk until you find her or something else. Go back. Work at the ice cream store and save up for school. Visit Mom's grave on the weekends, bring her flowers, sit there cross-legged like you just sat in that desolate room and read to her the poems she used to read to you, Yeats and Wordsworth and Sandburg.

"When you are old," she would read, and you saw the old woman by the fire, sitting by it in her chair, missing someone like you miss her now only now there is the weight of it just out of reach and you want to feel it in your hands.

Go to school, the desert says, the darkness says. Take Mom with you. Make her faith in you worth something. Go, you fucking coward!

"Hey, Robbie, man! Robbie, get in here!" Sully pokes his head out the door and I see what it is—the sand, the desert—what it really is: just an endless coast at an endless low-tide, nothing to carry me out. I could sit in that sand forever and nothing would carry me anywhere beyond this because I *am* down the mountain and I *am* clinging to this last choice that I've made.

I turn from the vastness, the momentary grit I'd dug out of the desert slipping easily away into the dark, and follow Sul's voice back inside the tan room with still no music.

Prosthesis

I had a few hours to kill before my oncologist appointment, so I headed to the bar. Everything in my apartment was getting too close and indistinguishable. I couldn't concentrate on anything—TV, video games. I tried making a sandwich but as soon as I grabbed the cold cuts and bread and mayo and set them all up, my hunger escaped. I needed the numbing of brown liquor.

I'd asked a med student who I delivered pizzas to all the time a couple weeks before about this bump on my neck and he'd recommended Dr. Sain.

"It's definitely a growth," he'd said, lightly probing the small bulb with three fingers.

"Bad?" I'd asked, keeping myself steady as if in the barber's chair.

"I'd get it checked."

I usually went to Rudy's everyday around noon anyway, so at least I didn't have to switch up my routine. If I didn't show, Jo, the bartender, would definitely ask me questions the next day about my absence. It wasn't anybody else's business. Cancer or no cancer. Whether I died or didn't. I really didn't want to have cancer, though less because of the being sick and possibly dying part, but more because I just didn't want to have any conversations about it with anybody. Especially not with my mom and my sister, back home in Texarkana in the double-wide with the five kids and all their day-to-day problems. Mom's doctor found a spot on one of her kidneys a couple months back

so she and my sister were already plenty scared of the big “C.” She told me the last time I talked to her that she couldn’t even hear the word without having a panic attack. I’d probably be there with them in Arkansas if I hadn’t settled in New Haven a few years ago because of a girl. After that relationship petered out, I stayed. I shut myself in. And it’s hard damn work trying to be left alone.

I took my usual stool in the middle of the bar right in front of the old brass tap handles. I liked Rudy’s: the dark-stained wood that was tacky to the touch; the church pews repurposed into booths that felt like they would cave every time you got up or down; the ancient, heavy wooden tables that had been carved into from patron’s keys or hidden knives, so deep in places that some of the more drunk and rowdy customers would make a game of drinking full shots out of the little canyons. The owner, Thomas, liked to tell newcomers how the Kennedys and the Bushes and the Rat Pack used to drink there. There were eight-by-tens of Sammy Davis Jr. and Sinatra taped to the mildewed mirror that ran the length of the bar. The photos were signed but old and yellowing, cracking in places from age, but it was still probably hard for anyone to believe most of Thomas’s stories: the place was a dive. But I believed it. It made me feel like I was getting drunk in a living piece of history that no one gave a damn about, and I was a part of the scenery, a piece of the set, a statue at the back of the stage quietly watching each day’s play unfold. I was fine with that.

There was a guy already getting drunk next to me on my right at the bar. He had two artificial legs. Hard not to notice. Or prosthetic legs, which is what Jo told me when I got up and followed her outside to have a smoke and asked, "Hey, does that guy have two artificial legs, or am I nuts?" And she said, "They're prosthetic legs. You can't say

artificial anymore, Hunter." She probably picked that up from some sociology major or something, and then we went back inside and she went off to make a group of college kids a tray of Washington Apples.

I returned to my stool and took another peek at the guy's legs then turned to my left a little to see the young kids who'd ordered the Washington Apples at a table in the front window. A couple of them had grey Yale hoodies on and they were all mostly blonde and so goddam young. Two guys, two girls.

I wanted to forget about this guy next to me with the prosthetic legs wearing a dirty, white tank top with a picture of Macho Man Randy Savage on it and a pair of shorts I couldn't decide were boxers or actual shorts, and he was real small and a black guy and he was cradling his stein of beer, his prosthetic legs bent at the would-be knee, prosthetic feet resting on the mid bar of his stool. I wanted to stop turning my eyes right and downward—quickly, so he wouldn't notice—wondering if it was some kind of metal or plastic that his legs were made of, maybe carbide or aluminum or tungsten. I didn't want to keep waiting for him to get up so I could see how the damn things worked. What I wanted to do, really wanted to do, was look to the left, watch these yuppie kids drink and make fun of them in my mind: like how much money they spent on their clothes, their shoes, their tuition; or how they would take out their keys and wait until they thought no one was looking—like anyone cared—and scratch their own dumb names into the wood. And I wanted to fantasize about the girls, make up a story in my mind where I went over there and told one of them, the busty one probably, that she should be with me, and I'd take her to a nice hotel because my basement one-room was a mess, and we'd

make love all night, and I'd even get up and get her breakfast and she'd miss class and we'd stay there all day the next day.

Then the guy with the prosthetic legs said, "Do you have a problem with me being here?" I had been fantasizing about the kids, but I realized I was staring at the guy's legs, and I said, "No. I'm sorry. I was just wondering what kind of metal, y'know? Your legs. I used to be a TIG operator. Just still interested in metals is all."

"Lots of stuff, but mostly silicone and titanium," he said.

The guy was short. I could tell even with him sitting on his stool. He reminded me of that guy who played for the Celtics when they won it back in o-eight, Nate Robinson. Nate was like five-foot-six. Never understood how he lasted so long in the league except he was definitely a scrapper. Once, I'd seen him hit a half-court shot at the buzzer to win a game. Another time, I saw him dunk over a guy a foot taller than him. That was something the bar owner Thomas could have told me that I wouldn't have believed if I hadn't seen it myself. This guy next to me at the bar was that short or even shorter. I wondered if people were given prosthetic legs that would return them to the height they were before whatever happened, or if there's just set sizes like how t-shirts come. "Titanium's expensive. Government?" I asked.

"Train man. Twenty-four years with CSX Transportation. Big company. Lots of money."

"Huh." I looked over my left shoulder and now there were six kids. Two more had come in and I was annoyed that I'd missed whatever greeting happened when they'd arrived. High-fives? Handshakes? You could tell a lot about the level of wealth these Yalie kids had by how they interacted with each other. I'd crashed enough of their

parties over the past few years to get a pretty good idea of who and who not to resent. The nerdier kids usually seemed to be the less affluent. I liked the nerdier kids; I'd usually end up talking to them at those parties, mostly about video games or graphic novels, and unlike their prettier and handsomer counterparts, I left them alone in my spiteful daydreams.

I turned back to the guy with the prosthetic legs as he finished his beer.

"Boilermaker and I'll tell you how it happened," he said, but I was still distracted, which is what I wanted to be. I didn't want to talk to anyone, really, I just wanted to think about what they would say.

"Huh?" I said.

"The accident. Man, listen, buy me a shot and a beer and I'll tell you all about it." Something about the smoothness with which he said that made it seem like a pitch he'd thrown before, and it probably was, but I bit.

"Jo, get this guy. On me."

"Jameson and Schaeffer, please," he said to Jo.

"Bert," he said and threw his hand out for me to shake.

"Hunter," I said, shaking his hand, and right then I heard one of the girls at the table of college kids behind us shriek out with laughter and the daydream I'd been trying to multi-task in my brain had me at the table now, tickling the busty one, giving the yuppie, blonde guys the cold stare, and she was sitting on my lap and we were looking into each other's eyes like it was a perfect moment.

"Usually when I tell people I worked on trains, they assume I got run over by one," Bert said.

“So, I’m guessing you didn’t,” I said. I was grasping at my fantasy, but it was too far away, blurry now, out of focus behind Bert and his legs. I was also starting to feel the need to pee real bad, but I at least wanted to get Bert’s story over with before I went. Maybe he’d finish his story and then I’d go to the bathroom and when I got back, he’d be gone and I could get back to watching the people around me, watching the table of kids, quietly.

“Nope. It was six years ago. I’d been with CSX from almost the beginning when they incorporated out of Jacksonville, Florida, which is where I’m from. Twenty-four years and not even a scratch, man.” Bert shook his head, his whole story seeming more and more rehearsed. “I was in Philly when it happened. Regional foreman at that point, and we had a shipment from South Korea we were loading up for a haul down south to the Carolina coast. Problem with the Union—and don’t misunderstand me, I’m a loyal Union man—but once you’re in, you’re in. Guys can get into trouble, mixed up in all kinds of bad shit, and all the Union does is try to get them help. You know, AA and NA.”

I wasn’t going to tell Bert that I knew, but I did. Plenty of guys on the pipeline in Alaska when I was out there five years back were addicts. I had a bad relationship with Oxycontin for a bit. But we didn’t have a Union out there, and I got fired after my rig exploded on me one day because I got careless. I wasn’t going to tell Bert about that, either.

“There was a lot of Meth going around then. Crane operator, Jimmy Marsdale, was real cranked up. Just carelessness, y’know? On everyone’s part, really. I found out later that he’d been in and out of rehab on the Union’s dime. Five tons of shipping

container and cargo came right down on me. Caught my knees and slipped me under. Looking at my clipboard. Should of been looking up. God damn, if I'd just been looking up and stood a few inches back, I'd probably be a VP right now, working out of an office in Florida."

"Yeah, and not here talking to me," I said, and he smiled and clinked my glass with his.

"That's right," he said. "Few inches forward, though." He looked right into my eyes and I got a cold shiver. He leaned forward and shook his head again. Whether he'd run this gambit on a million other shmoes or not, I did feel for the guy.

"One more?" I asked Bert.

"Sure, thanks," he said. I ordered two more shots and beers from Jo and excused myself to go to the bathroom.

If Rudy's was my second home, then the bathroom at Rudy's was my bedroom. I'd spent plenty of time in there doing coke, puking, or just sitting on the toilet reading a book until someone knocked on the door because they had to go, or else to make sure no one had died in there, namely me.

In fact, it was in that bathroom where Becca dumped me. I'd been tying one on pretty hard one night—Becca had almost stopped drinking completely at that point—and I'd pulled her into the bathroom to do a line with me.

"This has to stop," she'd said.

"No more coke after tonight, I promise. Come on, we're feeling pretty good," I'd said.

I remember she got real angry. “Not that, Hunter. Us. You’re a liar, you know that? You say you’re going to find a better job, you say you’re going to go back to school, but you never do. You don’t do anything,” she’d said.

“That’s not fair. It’s not that easy, Becca.”

“It is, Hunter. It is that easy. You just have to do it. But you’d rather get fucked up all the time and play video games and be a nobody. Do you know how smart you are?”

“Don’t do that, Becca. Don’t fucking say that. I’m not a goddamn child, okay?”

“Do you really think I’d be with you if I didn’t think that? It makes me so mad to see you sitting on the couch for hours, whittling your life down to fucking nothing with fucking nothing to show for it but a pile of useless crap.” She’d grabbed the bag of coke from my hand and threw it in the toilet. I’d quickly reached in and fished it out.

“What the hell, Becca?”

“You’re fucking disgusting,” she’d said and walked out the door.

“Just go find yourself some rich college boy, Becca. It’s what you always wanted anyway!” I’d yelled after her. It was the last thing I ever said to her. Thomas let me stay on the couch in his office that night where he’d occasionally let a regular sleep one off. The next day, I grabbed what little I had from our place and stayed on my friend Rob’s couch for a few weeks until I found the little basement apartment I’d been living in since.

I looked in the bathroom mirror now—at my scraggly beard, my greasy hair that was already going bald in spots, the perpetual bags under my eyes—to make sure I still felt nothing about that night. I checked my gut and I was good: no trace of any emotional nausea, no ache in my chest.

I got back to the bar and Bert and I talked for a while longer. I tried to only talk about mundane and general stuff—the weather, the basketball playoffs—as well as steer him away from anything else that was too specific or personal. Listening to the story about his accident was one thing—maybe it was indeed a rehearsed ploy to get a free drink or maybe he'd just needed to tell someone because he hadn't in a long time—but I wasn't looking to dig any deeper. I didn't see the point with ever getting too personal with a stranger. What if someone just started a conversation with “Hey, you don't know me, but let's talk intimately with each other about our emotional life history.” That would be creepy. So why even bother?

There was a good moment of silence after we agreed on the Seventy-Sixers' horrible season, so I finished my beer, got up, and shook Bert's hand again. “Gotta go. Good meeting you.”

“You, too, Hunter. Take care.”

When I left Rudy's it was around two o'clock and there were only two kids left at the front table. It was the busty girl and one of the guys and they had their hands folded around each others'. For some reason I put my hand over the lump on my neck as I passed, but they didn't notice me.

I liked drinking in the afternoon because I always took the booze to the head more quickly, so I had to steady myself a step or two outside the bar before I thought about which direction to head in. Doctor Sain's office was on State street about a mile away near the old Italian neighborhood. I'd been to that neighborhood plenty of times because Becca was Italian and we'd go there for pizza and gelato and cannoli all the time.

I'd met Becca out in Alaska when I was working on the pipeline. She was from Rhode Island and was on a year off after high school doing conservation work before she started her biology degree at Yale. She was eighteen and I was twenty-three, and even though shit went sour, I knew we had some actual good times. One of the best was when we visited Arkansas for a week. I was worried that my family might embarrass me, but Becca adored them. The whole trip went by in that kind of blur where every minute was so full of laughter and joy that it all ran together like one big moment. My nieces and nephews fell in love with her. She bought them ice cream every day and took them to the park. That's when my mom told me, "She's a good'n. You happy? You know that's all I want for you." I couldn't deny that part of me wanted that, too, but I eventually screwed it up. I should have seen that night in the bathroom at Rudy's coming. Towards the end, Becca would tell me that I'd grown distant, and I had. She told me that I didn't tell her the sweet things I loved about her anymore like I used to, and I didn't. She said I'd gotten too comfortable with us, and she was right. And maybe, but probably, I was the mistake she needed to make before she got on with her real life, though I was honest when I said that I didn't regret the whole thing anymore. It was the best thing for everyone to have happened.

I did tend to get too used to things, too comfortable and lazy, and I didn't want to get used to this city—especially not after Becca and I split—but I had. I don't think we really have a choice about what place finally feels like home. I'd been to a bunch of places on welding jobs—Wyoming, Oklahoma, North Dakota, Alaska—but this town latched onto me. Or the other way around, maybe. I didn't even think about Arkansas anymore.

I liked this town because it didn't lie about what it was. People lie all the time, but it's much harder for places to hide what they truly are. The dusty Midwest, the sweet-smelling South, the cold wide open of Alaska. For some, those places were just fine to spend a lifetime in. Some people wanted to feel like pioneers, and a lot of those places were still relatively young to western civilization, parts of them as yet unexplored. New Haven was old, though. Every inch of it had been touched by human hands immeasurably. The grit on the sidewalk my feet swept along as I walked down Elm Street toward State Street toward my oncologist appointment was centuries old grit. I crossed York Street where the stone buildings of the University began to tower over the town. The school, like the city, had witnessed so much—a revolution, a civil war—and over its long life it had transformed from hopeful to skeptical to complacent, a cycle it had taken me only three years to complete. This was the city I deserved.

I kept on, crossed Church Street, and went through the Green, a block-wide park with nothing but grass and concrete pathways that ran from each corner of the giant rectangle. There were people scattered across: some had blankets down and were sitting on them, chatting with each other or eating sandwiches or just taking a nap. There was a group of students near the southwest corner tossing a Frisbee. A jogger passed by me going one way and a couple walking their dogs passed by me in the opposite direction. It was all this life happening that I wasn't required to participate in and that's what made me happy.

The perimeter of the Green was lined with park benches where, during the day, businesspeople and lawyers would take their lunches, and at night, the city's homeless would take their rest. There was one time during the three weeks I'd been staying on

Rob's couch after Becca and I split that I'd gotten so drunk that I'd spent the night on one of those benches. I remember that it had rained during the day, so the bench was still pretty wet. I'd lied down and pressed my face against the cold wood. It was the first time I'd completely felt good about nothing. It was the most unnoticed I'd ever been. I could go all day long sometimes avoiding conversation, but people would still see me, and I'd still go home and my upstairs neighbors would probably hear me open and close my front door. They would know I was there. That night on the bench, though, I was truly forgotten. I couldn't have been any more invisible if I had been the air itself. I wasn't in the city anymore; I was a part of it.

When the sounds of birds woke me up that next morning, the only thought I'd had was "They found me." The birds, the people, the universe had found me. I remember thinking that it was asking too much to have that feeling of complete disappearance last any longer than it had. I'd been lucky enough to be that close to it for any amount of time at all, really. I walked by that bench now. It was the same it had been that night, though dry in the sun. It was just a bench, no trace of me had been left behind, and it would go on just being a bench long after I was gone. I envied that.

The prospect of talking to this doctor had me worried for bigger reasons than a possible death sentence. Would she go further than questions about the lump in my neck? Would she ask me about stress? What caused my stress? Why stress? Did I drink too much? Did I smoke? How many packs a day? I'd cultivated a very particular kind of privacy and loneliness. Part of a doctor's job is to open up those doors I'd rather keep locked, or better yet hidden.

My appointment was still an hour away, so I decided to backtrack down Chapel Street. I passed the Yale Art Gallery on my right. It was one of Becca's favorite places to take me. I liked the Van Gogh painting they had in there, *The Night Cafe*. It was this lonely little man in a white suit standing in the middle of a cafe next to a pool table with a few drunken patrons scattered about, hunched over at their tables. The little man seemed to be looking right through the painting at the viewer. At me. Sometimes when I stood there looking at him, I imagined he and I were engaged in a conversation where we said nothing, but we knew that each other was there. I imagined that he thought, looking at me, he thought, "Help me" and "Leave me alone" at the same time, and I knew what he meant.

The other one I really liked was Edward Hopper's *Room with a View*. It was an empty room with a door that led to the sea. The thing was, you couldn't tell whether the water led right to the door, or if it was a trick of perspective. You had to guess. And where was the person who wasn't there anymore? Did he step off the threshold into a watery oblivion? Or did he walk down the steps that you couldn't see that led to a beach that you couldn't see and spent a quiet day of reflection in the sun? Either way, he was gone, he disappeared.

I never told Becca, but I would often go to the gallery by myself just for those two paintings, and I'd stand there for a half an hour sometimes in front of them. They seemed connected somehow, like the anonymity or the complete non-existence that the man who wasn't there in Hopper's painting was able to achieve was what the little lonely man in Van Gogh's painting wanted, but would never have.

I thought about them now—the man in the white suit and the man who wasn't there—turning the corner onto State street, just two blocks away from Dr. Sain's office. Their loneliness once seemed a comfort to me, but now I was questioning it. Didn't I want to be complacent? Didn't I want to be one of the patrons in the background of *The Night Cafe*, done with trying, done with wanting? Did it not matter anymore if I took that step without knowing whether my foot would find dark ocean or warm sand? I thought about Bert. I could have gotten to know him. I could have told him about where I was going, that I was going to a place that might very well be the genesis of my demise. Maybe he had a story about that. Maybe we could have shared our loneliness together.

When I arrived at Doctor Sain's office, it was three-forty-five. I checked in at the front desk, and the receptionist asked me, "Reason for visit," and I told her, "lump in neck." I took a seat in the waiting room. I was trying to keep the anxiety from getting to me, but it was difficult. I felt the room fill with ghosts tapping me on the shoulder from behind. Everything else, the world outside that I'd gotten so used to avoiding was gone. There was just this room in this cancer doctor's office and I was in the middle of it. It was easy to be alone when you had nothing real to face up against, but this was undeniable now. I checked my gut again and there it was, the nausea. I wanted Bert there, I wanted Jo, my Mom, or even Becca.

I was panicking. I looked around, trying to concentrate on anything, trying to create any kind of fantasy where I wasn't in that doctor's office. I wished that I had stopped and sat on that bench at the Green and skipped the whole thing.

I looked up. The waiting room had a large fake skylight that took up most of the center of the ceiling. I'd seen them before. They usually had pictures of a daytime sky or

a garden or a jungle scene. The one in Doctor Sain's waiting room was a huge image of Van Gogh's *The Starry Night*. I'd seen this painting before, my mother had a small print of it that hung over the toilet in the bathroom of our double-wide. It used to make me feel good when I was a kid because it was this city with no people—my misanthropy blossomed in me quite early. It was just this city and it was empty and I could put myself there and walk around in it and never be bothered. But now I saw the people. They were there. They were in the cafes and bars and museums. They were getting drunk or making love or going to school or sharing stories, some of them trivial, some of them with the weight of their entire lives hanging on each word. They were vibrant and alive.

In the corner of the waiting room an old woman held the hand of an old man who was sleeping in his wheelchair. She had one hand cupped underneath and her other on top, gently stroking his thin and liver-spotted skin. I thought about saying something, saying hello, but she had her grey-haired head leaned towards his shoulder and they seemed so perfectly alone. Still, I kept staring at them. I kept wanting him to wake up and open his eyes. I kept wanting them to see me.

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