

The Animals We Are (Hunting)

by

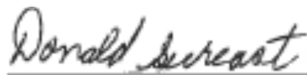
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A thesis submitted to the faculty of Radford University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in the Department of English

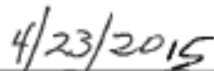
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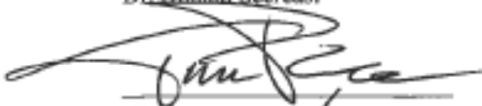
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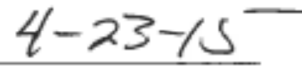
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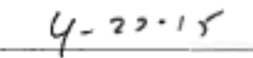
Dr. Tim Poland



Date



Dr. Louis Gallo



Date

Abstract

Fiction is the egotistical act. As we create we become the demiurge. We name, we place the pieces into motion—the story begins to unfold. At the core of creation the author must think that what he or she has to say is worth speaking into existence. We must believe that others will want to hear what we have to say. Ultimately, though, fiction is about making the false become more real than the truth. Because of this transfer there is a certain magic inherent in the process of writing as it is a practice founded upon creation.

My fiction, in this collection of short stories, attempts to combine Magical Realism, and the Postmodern meaningless world to form a vision of a society on the brink of total dissolution. Not only do the “magical” and the “real” exist in unison here, they are now fully digested within each other. This amalgamation serves to create a sense of unease—the same sense of unease seen in the postmodern text. In the six stories that comprise *The Animals We Are (Hunting)*, meaning has been erased. In this world a group of young boys hunt each other with pellet guns, a machinist realizes the promise offered by America is merely an illusion, and a state trooper confronts his desire to kill and to create. Each of these stories serves as a window into a given character’s world view but does not purport to posit total meaning, only to examine different situations as the characters come to see them. In the worlds I create there are no absolutes, but, by fusing the “real” and the “magical,” I hope to speak into existence something that will resonate with every reader and make them question their own ideologies.

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Dedication

To Katherine. Thank you for putting up with me. To my father. You're the best man I know.

Acknowledgments

This project would not have been possible without the help of Dr. Donald Secreast. Thank you for reading my work and helping me become the writer I am today. I would also like to extend my gratitude to Dr. Louis Gallo and Dr. Tim Poland for taking the time to be on my thesis panel and helping me along the way. Lastly, I would like to thank my parents for their love and support.

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Foreword

Western man has become a confessing animal—Michel Foucault.

The woods were real. Even the death within them existed sometime in the past, in a different forest, founded on the memory of a friend who, to be perfectly honest, would like that image to dissolve forever into nothing. I don't really know how these stories came together in my mind. The cruelty of two boys in the woods and the cruelty of someone, forever unknown, abandoning a child to a different womb form the crux of the following body of work. Sadly, I chose to preserve both of these stories for one reason or another. Is it cruelty though? I can't really answer that question and don't intend to. My fiction is not about answers. Instead, it seems upon looking at these stories now, as a whole collection, that they revolve around secrets and confessions. And could we say that these themes are, in part, really, what the entire history of fiction is founded upon or led to? Again, I can't answer, or maybe I'm afraid to—all I know is that "The Animals We Are (Hunting)" was the first story I wrote in this collection, and I wrote it many years ago when I was fresh out of undergrad without much of a purpose. At that point in my life, I realized that I was not a very good at writing science fiction, but I could never banish in total the science or the fantasy from my own work.

Magical Realism, then, came to my mind. The term, coined by German art critic Francis Roh in 1924, denotes a form of literature in which there is an "urge to leave nothing veiled, to grasp all things as sharply as possible" (Ben-Ur 153). Where Science Fiction veils our world, Magical Realism lifts that veil, not just from the real, but also from the unreal in order to create a fissure in the border between fiction and reality. Whenever a rift appears in central meaning a seepage must be present—a mutual transfer from the real to the unreal and back again occurs as the crack in our world widens. In this merger, in this mutual transfer, there is also present an urge

to explore the secrets we harbor inside of ourselves. As we know, man is “a confessing animal” (Foucault 59). We crave confession in a perverse negation of our desire for secrets. In these acts we form identity. I quickly realized that this was the terrain that I wanted my stories to inhabit. I did not want to build new worlds but to construct something new on top of our own. In this zone, the secrets we harbor, even from ourselves, would be confessed. I decided to draw from the Magical Realists that I admired and, later, from the Postmodernists who would extend the rupture between fiction and reality into a new zone—a zone of secrets and confessions.

Where, then, does the aesthetic of this collection, and of literature in general, arise from and in what direction does it chart its course? Aristotle looked at art as a form of mimesis, but does this definition hold? As history advanced, the set reality that art was to imitate began to waver. In this progress through time, certain events occurred in the foundation of consciousness that would transform this fissure in reality into a full blown rupture, fundamentally changing forms of literature and human thought. My work mirrors this rupture rather than the natural world that is said to compose reality. Here strange machines, structures, characters exist on the edges of some dim reality. As literature has progressed, it has distanced itself from Aristotle’s mimesis and I would like to think that the world composed in the volume that follows is not a representation of what is, but, instead, what could be if we were to reach slightly beyond the limit of our own physical world—if we confessed our secrets to ourselves.

After Aristotle, we arrive at Descartes whose proclamation “cogito, ergo sum” ushered in the application of scientific reasoning to the study of art and philosophy. His “cogito,” his “I think,” became a creed for generations of scholars. Following from this assertion it is logical, then, that we would begin to apply scientific principles to, not just the study of aesthetics, but the study of language itself. We see this scientific study of language in the thinking of the

Structuralist critics who broke language into a system of signs. This scientific discourse on art and language led to Barthes' famous proclamation in "Death of the Author" that "[a]s soon as a fact is narrated no longer with a view to acting directly on reality but intransitively [...] the voice loses its origin, the author enters into his own death, writing begins" (Barthes 142). We must subsequently "substitute language itself for the person who until then had been supposed to be its owner" (Barthes 143). Following from Descartes, and by extension from Barthes, we detach language from the influence of the world and the author—no longer does art act as imitation, but as a force driven by its own will. Here we begin to find the liminal area in which I wish to position myself and my work.

Continuing in this philosophical vein, the writers of the Modernist period began to integrate this sense of detachment into their texts. In this movement based in the early twentieth century, we see authors react in horror to the first glimpse of modern death: In Eliot we become the "The Hollow Men," men who "whisper together/Are quiet and meaningless," who are estranged from their very world (Eliot, 6-7). Like Eliot, Hart Crane drifts through this world as well "unsure of his own form and lost to Time" (Crane xxxi). Has modernization doomed us? Crane cannot seem to tell: "The last bear, shot drinking in the Dakotas/Loped under wires that span the mountain stream" (Crane 24-25). He sees death spanned by modern technology—the same technology that destroys the modern subject also formulates that very same subject's world through the advancement of technology and time.

The dissolution of meaning inherent in progress is the foundation of "A Brief History." Above all, this is a story about America, a story about growth, about what happens when promises are not fulfilled. The American dream then, is the myth of progress, but progress inevitably leads to our own death. By believing in this "dream," we hasten our descent. In the

end, the American dream means nothing beyond the words used to speak it into existence. It is only sustained by advancement through the cycle of birth and death. Benefits reside here, yes—there is still hope, but we must search for it. My characters are lost externally and internally as the ideology that once buttressed them is revealed to be titillation rather than patriotism. The narrator’s secret is that he knew this all along. Alver’s confession is that he never really cared. I would like to think that the narrator of this story echoes the mindset present in the worldview of the Modernists. Here the fissures in meaning refuse to vanish, and the search for that fragile significance commences, but is never resolved. In this area, the cogito is beginning to lead away from the sum.

Then, in the formation of the literary aesthetic, another break in the central meaning disrupted the foundation of Western thought—World War I led quickly into another, harsher, World War and the meaning hoped for, sought after, in the structure remained absent. Derrida tells us that “[p]erhaps something has occurred in the history of the concept of structure that could be called an ‘event,’ [...]”. What would this event be then? Its exterior form would be that of a rupture and a redoubling” (Derrida 278). My fiction mirrors this redoubling as I attempt to layer worlds upon each other that exist both separately and simultaneously; both aware and unaware of the others’ secret lives.

In “Apnea,” we see the distinction between “The Real” and “The Fictitious” brought to the forefront of the imagination. This story explores the redoubled world where levels of reality become difficult to distinguish: First, we have the reality of the reader, then we are drawn down, funneled lower into Eljer’s reality. On top of these two actualities, though, is a third—the reality of Eljer’s own fiction. All three of these worlds exist simultaneously, mirroring each other, and at the same time breaching the limit between them. My stories find their basis in the rupture that

arises when these realities combine. This rift occurs as hope—as meaning—fades and we are left “thinking that there [is] no center” (Derrida 280). The center that was present, albeit however vague, to the Modernists is lost—now there is no “transcendental signified” to cling to and “the domain and the play of signification” is extended “infinitely” (Derrida 280). Eljer thinks he can find this transcendental signified—this vital essence in the act of killing—in his own secret desires, but this action only leads him back to the beginning of his alienation.

It is here, in our own origins, in the disillusionment of the human mind, that we arrive at Postmodernism and Magical Realism. It would be easy, and a stupefying simplification, to say that Postmodernism and Magical Realism erase the distinction between signifier and signified in service of this goal. The relationship between these two elements of the sign are arbitrary, but, as Derrida tells us, “we cannot do without the concept of the sign, we cannot give up the metaphysical complicity without also giving up the critique” (Derrida 281). We write within language, we exist within language, and, therefore, “every particular borrowing drags along with it the whole of metaphysics” (Derrida 281). Because of the realization that language is subjective yet inescapable, Postmodern authors self-consciously play with the arbitrariness of the sign system that they inhabit. In the breakdown of meaning, our heroes abandon us, and all that we are left with is our own secrets and our desire to confess them. My goal, then, is to combine these two genres and these two competing desires, so similar yet so different, in an attempt to create something terribly magical, terribly secret, both infinitely on the verge of confession.

In confession, we form the identity that was lost as philosophical thought tore itself away from central meaning and the transcendental signified. As secrets and confession are oppositional yet intrinsically linked, so are the genres of Postmodernism and Magical Realism. In Postmodernism we find a desire to play in the space that is left once we realize that language

is inescapable yet fundamentally arbitrary. Magical Realism, while still disregarding the border between the real and the unreal, wishes to draw the reader into the story, to forget that fiction is separate from a firm exterior reality. While both of these genres practice art in oppositional ways—one drawing our attention to fiction, the other drawing us into fiction—both deal with a central tenet of human consciousness: the grounding principle of identity.

In service of the exploration of identity that arises from the transgression of language and meaning, the Postmodernists halt the search for logocentrism. This is the meaning that, in Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, Slothrop's ancestors possess: "All those earlier Slothrops packing Bibles around the blue hilltops [...] data behind which always, nearer or farther, was the numinous certainty of God" (Pynchon 245). This certainty of purpose, the certainty of a higher being, is the ultimate form of logocentrism. With an ever-changing language comes an ever-changing human perception of the world that language describes. The rocket, the mythic V-4, of *Gravity's Rainbow* represents this uncertainty: "Rockets are supposed to be like artillery shells, they disperse about the aiming point in a giant ellipse—the Ellipse of Uncertainty" (Pynchon 432). The rocket follows the trajectory of a human life ("each will have his personal rocket") fired up with imprecise coordinates only to fall, uncertain, scattering about in some unknown zone (Pynchon 741).

But what is this uncertain scattering? It is not only indicative of meaning, but also of human identity in general. This loss of identity is a symptom of human consciousness come too far; past a certain point, a certain limit, we can no longer rely on a transcendental signifier to tell us who we are. We see this loss of identity play out in *Gravity's Rainbow* in an exaggerated fashion. This process begins in the Casino Hermann Goering when conspirators steal Slothrop's "ID, his service dossier, his past" (Pynchon 212). After Slothrop's identity is disrupted he

escapes into The Zone and he takes on the persona of “an English war correspondent named Ian Scuffling” (Pynchon 260). Next he dons a ridiculous faux-superhero costume and is dubbed “Rocketman” (Pynchon 365) followed by an even more ridiculous “pig costume” (Pynchon 578). Each new identity brings with it a loss of self—a loss of purpose: “He is growing less anxious about betraying those who trust him. He feels obligations less immediately. There is, in fact, a general loss of emotion” (Pynchon 499). By the end of the novel, this dissolution of the self results in Slothrop being “[s]cattered all over the Zone” both existing and not existing in an area between life and death (Pynchon 726).

This loss of identity is, similarly, also present in my collection. It emerges most prominently in the story “Personal Shell.” Here one of the three main characters is isolated from the outside world by his own hand. He dons a suit, as Slothrop does, to separate himself from the outside world, from other humans, and, most of all, from a reality he can no longer bear. For Old Man Suit his secret is the true self grounded in actual reality. He pretends that somehow this suit will enact a separation that will allow him to return to the world lost to his eight year old self. Just as we cannot escape language, Old Man Suit cannot remove himself from the reality that surrounds him. By attempting to enforce this separation, he becomes fragmented—scattered—and the narrative mirrors this redoubling of identity. In the end, as the three main characters coalesce, this reality aligns, but does not erase the secondary world that exists in the old man’s memory. This layered reality, then, is a trait that follows directly from the loss of meaning and identity present in Postmodern fiction. In these texts, the characters, and the audience become lost, stuck between the reality of the outside world, the reality of the book, and the secondary reality that the text creates internal to itself.

How, then, does Magical Realism's portrayal of identity differ from the Postmodern aesthetic? While both came to prominence in the wake of Modernism, Magical Realism uses fiction to reform the identity that is lost in Post-Structuralist thought. We see the history of this reformation, and truly the history of the world, play out in Garbriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Here we find ourselves in a world "so recent that many things lacked names" (Marquez 1). In this realm, we must use the power of language to create a sense of identity and a sense of the world around us. As Pynchon reminds us "names by themselves may have no magic, but the act of naming, the physical utterance" allows us to emerge fully formed into the physical world. This is why the insomnia plague is so devastating to Macondo—it is not the lack of sleep that is to be feared, but the "inexorable evolution toward a more critical manifestation: a loss of memory" (Marquez 44). In this loss, all identity is abandoned; the erasure of memory leads to ultimate death—the death of the self.

It falls to the writer, then, to Melquiades, the ultimate author, to bring the town back from the brink of dissolution: "He gave Jose Arcadio Buendia a drink of a gentle color and the light went on in his memory. His eyes became moist from weeping even before he noticed himself in an absurd living room where objects were labeled and before he was ashamed of the solemn nonsense written on the walls" (Marquez 49). While the ways in which we label the physical world around us may, in the end, be arbitrary nonsense, our memory allows us to form meaning, to form identity, in this swirl of infinite play. At the conclusion of Marquez's novel the last Aureliano discovers that Melquiades' secret text is really "the history of the family, written [...] down to the most trivial details, one hundred years ahead of time" (Marquez 415). Here, as Aureliano "[prophesies] himself in the act of deciphering" we see the ultimate formation of

identity (Marquez 416). Aureliano reads his own moment in time—he finds the secret confessed in art, and he, like the reader, is drawn down, down, deeper into the text.

In the final story of my collection, a similar revelation leads to the formation of identity. In “Matador,” the unreal struggles out from under the real to emerge fully formed. Here the influence of Magical Realism can be felt most palpably. The structure that appears in the park is incidental—it exists, not to veil the reality of the narrator, but to unveil, to confess, certain secrets that lead him to a type of catharsis. The narrator’s ideology has been broken down by grief and he, now, stands isolated, feeling as if the world is one vast secret never to be confessed. By the end of the story, though, a comedic revelation allows him to find some purpose, some secret that can be held onto in service of identity. Yes, the loss of meaning is still reflected in these pages, but that does not preclude one from finding a purpose in the chaos that surrounds us. Just as we are confessing animals, we are meaning-making animals who cannot escape the implications of an arbitrary sign system.

And here we must, inevitably, talk about “The Confessional.” In this story, we find the dualistic themes of secrets and confessions come to the forefront of the text. But what is confession truly? Foucault tells us that “confession is a ritual of discourse in which the speaking subject is also the subject of the statement” (Foucault 61). In the act of confessing, we reveal the truth we would hide from ourselves. This story is about this truth, this secret, and the lengths a human will go to escape the inevitable confession. Again, we are presented with a layered reality formulated by language. Here, though, the separation is not easily picked apart. Just as the Postmodern aesthetic calls for language, for reality, to be called into question, Jim must be similarly scrutinized. In turn, Jim questions himself. He questions those around him as he hoards

their secrets. In the end, he must reveal his own secret, he must face reality, as no conscious agent can escape the act of confession.

The history of this collection and the literary aesthetic that it follows arises from the breakdown of signification that led to the formation of Magical Realism and Postmodernism. In these two genres, the text is not a mimetic reflection of some divine world, but an unveiled reality built upon our own. Heroes are not present in this zone, only the secrets and confessions left in their wake. As meaning begins to vanish, we must interrogate ourselves. This interrogation is a form of “self-examination that yields, through a multitude of fleeting impressions, the basic certainties of consciousness” (Foucault 60). In the amalgamation of Magical Realism and Postmodernism that I have attempted to achieve in this volume of work, my characters’ identities dissolve and reform in an endless loop. These ideas are not mutually exclusive—nothing is. Instead, they feed each other just as the unreal is nourished by the real and vice-versa.

What is real though? Yes, the woods were real. Yes, even the death present within them existed in some space and time. And, then, what is fiction? The device, the structure, the plots that hold this collection together? All of these narratives exist in memory; they are all appearing and disappearing forever—constantly forgotten and remembered—constantly real and unreal. Everything is unveiled in this movement as we confess the secret that is held in the structure of language to ourselves—it is arbitrary yet inescapable. We are caught in the labyrinth even now...we are caught...we are...

The Animals We Are (Hunting)

The woods were cold. Winter had descended fully into this zone of the earth—the trees stood disfigured, transformed into the bones of some great fire. Old pines, still full and green, shot out of the ground at odd angles. Sam and Brian walked farther, down a narrow trail lined with bare shrubs, into the bowels of the forest. Both had guns—B.B. guns—but all the same it made them feel important. Sam hoisted his over one stooped shoulder. Brian had on the Yankee's jersey he always wore. His father gave it to him when he was a just a boy.

"I'll get a good one today." Sam laughed. "Right through both windows I bet."

"I'll try for a double too."

They had been hunting for about a month. Going into the woods after school. Posting up on the edge of the forest with their guns. When cars drove by, they'd bust out the windows. It was a game. They hadn't been caught yet. A large man in an S10 chased them through the husks of trees, but they lost him near an old drainage ditch. Years later, in this same ditch, Eliot Rygal would corner Brian and beat the shit out of him for selling bad pills. Eliot lived to be twenty-nine years old and then suddenly died.

The embankment next to this trench became Sam and Brain's favorite spot. It was right on the edge of a smaller road that branched off from the main throughway. There was good cover. A row of pines gaped toothlessly at the road.

"D'you see Katie hit Mike Davids with a soda can during lunch?" Sam stumbled and dropped his gun as they moved to the trench.

"Nah, didn't see it." Brian kept walking.

"She wacked him right in his fucking nose man. I think he loves her."

Sam picked up his pace to catch Brian. His friend was a year older and a foot taller. He had been held back a few years earlier, not because he was stupid, but because his dad had died in a bad wreck on 81. They just didn't think he could take it. At his father's funeral, they played "Taps" off of a tape recorder shaped like an old trumpet and fired blanks into space.

The boys met a year after the wreck. Alan Taylor had pulled the fire alarm to get out of the annual eye exam. They had nothing in common. Brian liked baseball, and Sam wanted to become a bass fisherman. Most of the teachers considered them prime suspects until they found Alan crying in the locker room blubbering about how he didn't want glasses like it was some great shame. Ever since then, they had become the best of friends.

The trench lazed in the distance as the boys approached. It ran along the edge of the woods for about ten feet. A line of pine trees stood between this ditch and the sharp drop down into the road. They held the high ground which was always ideal. Brian's father had taught him that years earlier on some hunting trip, or during a war movie marathon. He couldn't remember anymore. His memories overlapped, and all he could think about was the quiet of the woods and the fury of John Wayne raining death in black and white. The soldiers bled ink—they fell over but never looked dead.

"Time to get started." Sam smiled and jumped into the trench, hunkering down and pumping his gun furiously.

They waited for about ten minutes before the first car drove past. The rumble of the engine pulsed toward them, and Sam pointed at himself silently to indicate it was his turn to shoot. They never fired together. That way, if they shattered a window, there would be no argument about who received credit.

The car came into view. It was an old Crown Vic, and for a second, they both hesitated, thinking it was a cop. As it got closer though, they could tell it was just an old lady. You could barely make her out over the steering wheel. It was like the car was driving itself.

Sam got into position. He laid the barrel of his gun into a groove worn in the side of the trench. The car got closer. The gun felt like something newly dead, fading in his hands. Sam could see his breath coming out, the echo of an old ghost, and as the car passed his sights, he stifled himself and gently pulled the trigger. The gun jumped. Both boys held their breath. In the distance, they heard a small sound scatter off the car. Just a small *ting*, like someone tapping in the distance, or a rat scuttling through a pipe. The car drove past without hesitating.

"Damn, I thought I had that one." Sam inhaled deeply and laughed.

"Yeah." Brian scratched his neck. "Hey, what're your parent's making for dinner?"

"Don't know, man. Probably something weird. My Mom's outta town at some conference and Dad always makes shit you don't like."

Brian nodded and turned his attention back to the road. They could hear another engine toiling in the distance. He poked himself in the chest, mimicking his friend from a moment earlier. Sometimes, he couldn't tell where he began and where he ended. Brian held his breath, relaxed his hand, and cradled the trigger. The car came into view. An old Honda Civic. Some college kid was driving back to campus—he had just told his girlfriend that he loved her—and they could hear music pumping out of the windows.

Brian's finger trembled as the car crept closer. He tapped the trigger just as a disembodied voice leapt from behind them.

"Hey guys."

Brian jerked the barrel wide.

"What the fuck are you doing here, Alan?"

It was Alan Taylor. Sam whipped around. His face was knotted tightly. He looked like his bones were melting.

"I heard voices." Alan's hair curled down over his glasses. "I'm bored."

Alan's dad was a state trooper and an amateur science fiction writer. He wrote stories like: "The Unbecoming Man" and "All behind the Quiet." Other times, he was addicted to internet pornography. All three boys lived in the same neighborhood on the west end of town. Long abandoned factories sat hungry, lining the bank of the river. Up the hill, their houses stared down onto these empty buildings. One time, Sam stole Alan's bike and pissed all over the thing while a group of boys stood, backs turned, laughing. Alan found it days later stinking of urine next to the baseball field.

In the woods, the torment was even worse. Then they could use their guns, chase Alan around, shoot him as he stumbled through the dense foam of needles that slept on the ground. They never shot him in the face. Only the back—the legs. They aimed for his balls and laughed their asses off, but neither of them was a very good shot.

"I'm sure you're bored, asshole." Sam smiled. Their guns lay in the dirt.

"No one likes you, man. That's why you're so damn bored all the time."

Alan never left. No matter what they said. He just wouldn't go away. He was like some abused dog.

"Have you guys played the new Mortal Kombat yet?" Alan fiddled with his hair.

Sam thought that Alan looked like a rat person. He had described this theory to Brian at least ten times:

"Some people just look like rats and those people are rat people," he told him one day at lunch. That day, like many others, they ate Pizza/Corn/Fruit. Brian could see it. The beady eyes, slender nose, a head that slowly tapered down to the chin. Yes, Alan was definitely a rat person. Brian sometimes looked in the mirror and wondered what animal he would be. His teeth were skinny and leapt out like flames. Maybe he was a rat person too. Maybe everyone was some type of creature.

"Yeah, I've seen MK3 you fuckin rat man." Sam elbowed Brian and shook his head.

"I really like Milenna's fatality. Have you guys seen it?"

"Of course we've seen it." Brain reached to his side. "She spits out like 1,000 femurs." Brian felt the stock of his gun. He started to pick it up, but Sam already had his raised level with his pupil and let off a shot that flopped against Alan's gut.

Alan slumped over and held his stomach. He let out a god awful noise. It sounded like he was going to vomit.

"You guys...stop."

"Hell no, man. It's rat hunting season."

Both boys leapt up holding their guns tenderly. They started pumping the stocks, forcing air into the barrel. Alan turned and stumbled back into the forest, still clenching the welt plastered across his stomach.

"Let him get a little head start man." Sam laughed. "It'll make for a better hunt."

Brian nodded silently. He wondered if his father ever did this sort of thing.

Then they were running through the woods. Bare limbs slapped them in the face as they pried into the skeleton of the forest. Ahead of them they could see Alan crashing through the trees. His brown-blond curls trailed behind him, snagging in the branches.

"We're gonna get you, ratman!" Brian forced the words out and fired off a shot when they broke into the next clearing. The BB went high, hurtling over Alan's left shoulder. Beside them an old engine sat rusting to nothing by a log.

Once they passed through the clearing, they were back in the thick of the woods. Large bare trees stood naked in the forest. Vines—deeply red, covered in fine hairs—crept up the bark of others. Alan had disappeared. Brian pumped his gun furiously as they tried to navigate over fallen trees rotted beyond the point of use.

"He's this way." Sam pointed with the barrel of his gun. "Gotta be."

He was. In about twenty feet, the woods emptied into another small clearing. Pine trees lined the edges of the area. A tall mass of vegetation guarded the perimeter making the woods look too deep for human exploration. Inside the ring, bushes dotted the ground. A few young birch trees attempted to crawl from the earth. Alan was standing with his back to them in the center of this clearing, his head lowered like he was in mourning.

"Hey, looks like we found the rat."

Alan didn't speak.

"You're about to hurt."

"Hey man, you gotta run or it's no good." Brian pumped his gun.

"What the hell?" Sam jogged to where Alan was standing. He put out his hand and squeezed Alan's shoulder whipping him around.

Alan was crying. He was looking at the ground, but both boys could see he was weeping uncontrollably. It looked like he had sprung a leak.

"What the hell's a matter with you?" Sam said.

Alan didn't speak. Tears continued to pour out of him. A strange sucking sound escaped from his nose. He turned and pointed at the ground where he had been staring. On the forest floor, surrounded by pine needles, sat a bundle of old rags. Wrapped inside, a baby rested in its new womb. It was beautiful. It lay there cold and blue and dead. Brian jogged up to the other boys. He stuck his head between Alan and Sam and saw the small child. It looked like it was sleeping—just napping in the woods. Alan wept. Brian and Sam said nothing.

Time passed. Sam moved closer. He began to make a sort of circle around the clearing, staring blankly down at the small thing, changing the angle of his head methodically. He looked like some caveman studying fire; like he was going to read the thing and write a report on it.

"Aw man..."

The atmosphere opened and shut. A BB thumped against the small bundle of rags. It sounded like a pebble being sucked into a body of water. Alan and Sam turned around. Brian was standing behind them with his gun raised to his shoulders. Tears poured down his face.

"Why the hell'd you do that!?" Sam waved his arms like he was standing on the other side of noise proof glass. Alan cried. Brian leaked water profusely.

"I uh...it's dead," Brian sputtered, his gun still raised to his shoulder. He cried but couldn't put it down. It felt foreign and ugly, but he was connected to the thing. The gun had become an extension of his body folding out into the world. Brian couldn't tell where he stopped and where everything else began. All the boundaries that held him together were gone. It was like he went on forever. In those infinite spaces, in the woods, through the trees, you could see the sun descending into nothing. Brian lowered his gun. The world sank behind the forest. Sam yanked Alan away from the baby. It just lay there like it didn't even care. Cold and blue, and it didn't even care. It had evolved beyond that.

A Brief History

Alvers was a physicist. He grew from his mother's womb into America. In America we have Facebook, guns, and Jesus. As a child, Alvers took communion in an old church with giant stained-glass windows for eyes. Sometimes this made him feel transformed, but that was before Jesus became crackers and grape juice. Years later, he caught a fish on the muddy bank of a river, unhooked it, sat it on a big grey rock, and let it drown in the void of air. It lay there in the midst of a limitless spasm, flopping around, contemplating the great equation in the sky. True, he felt bad about it, but that was some time later. Eventually he died alone.

When I first met Alvers, the fish had been dead a long time, and he had sworn off the body of Christ. We were in an empty bar downtown that smelled like lunch meat and cigarettes. The walls had been painted over several times. Alvers wore an old baseball cap with the number THREE sewn on in black and red stitching. It looked like he had spilled acid on his jeans, or been attacked several days earlier. His belt buckle, though, it was his belt buckle that stood out to me—red, white, and blue. A vicious eagle trying to tear itself off the metal disk. He wore it like a drunken angel, floating around the place, blessing the other half-filled sacks that lounged against the jukebox. A claw machine sat at the opposite end of the bar. The top of it read “Big Choice” and flashed in multicolored bulbs. Greg Prawn stood half-awake next to it. He cursed the thing as if it had killed someone he loved, or stolen one of his shoes. In a few years, Greg would be accused of manufacturing illegal drugs and go to jail for eighteen months. He told his cell mate that he didn't believe in certainty.

It was beginning to get late. The bartender, a girl I had known previously from some other place, called for the drunks to be swept out, but not us— I knew people. It turns out an old friend of mine had got her pregnant. She was alone now, and she fed us shots in the dark belly of

the bar. I felt digested. It had been three years since I graduated from the local college with a degree in what they call “machine technologies.” I could work a lathe, set up a mill, grind—run CNC. I had been making rings for missile navigation systems, but the war was over now. With no one left to kill my job disappeared. Now I just ran parts for a local guy down on the west end of town for ten bucks an hour. He heard about me getting high, and the mix-up on the lathe. .015 millimeters cost them a half-million, but he hired me anyway. “Goodwill” he called it.

Eventually we were thrown out of the bar. Like I said—I knew people, but no one that well. Alvers was just surprised that other places existed beyond this one. As we stepped into the street, a wet heat smashed into us.

“Hot...humid.” Alvers took off his hat and wiped his forearm across his head.

“Yup.”

“You know I invented the dual coffin?” He had been going on like this all night.

“Never knew a person needed that type of thing.”

“Oh sure plenty, tons of people want that type of thing...” Alvers kept rubbing his left eye as we walked down the street. The world stood deserted tonight, and only a few lonely cars blurred beside us into the road.

“It’s the companionship really.”

“What?” I said.

“The coffin.”

“Oh right.” I had forgotten all about the coffin. “If you’re dead, though, who cares what’s next to you?”

“It’s the dirt. People wanna be buried in American soil...have I told you I’m also an inventor?”

“Is that different than a physicist?” I had no idea.

“Of course, of course.”

Alvers picked at his eye occasionally as we walked by the old sandwich shop a few doors down. Someone was still inside sweeping up. I had eaten there every Wednesday for the last three years. The owner knew my name and order, but I couldn’t tell you a thing about him. Sometimes at work, I’d sneak behind the building to smoke a joint, or have a drink, and invent scenarios concerning this man’s life. In one he was an astronaut who refused to go back into the stratosphere. You see his mother had died while he floated up there in the milk of space. He was afraid to miss something like that again.

“About that coffin...” I said.

“Nature, the Universe, I’ve seen its ugly face. I know how it behaves. You see that sandwich shop?” Alvers pointed at the building fading behind us.

"I think, yeah, I saw it. I mean I know it's there."

"Do you? You know it's there but have you seen it?"

"I just..." My tongue was dry. I had eaten anchovies at the bar.

"We all live in that shop. The universe...we, all of us. God, we're all just crumbs, just crumbs on the floor."

Soon the inhabited buildings melted away. Cars drove by and wandered into the distance. Alvers walked beside me muttering: “The physicist...coffin maker...god damn internet admin...President ain’t even from this country.”

We passed VOLK—my old plant. There were no cars in the lot. Nightshift had been cut. Alvers stopped to look at one of the gnarled trees that lined the property. They had been planted to improve employee morale. A child's coat struggled in one of the branches; it fought with the

wind like the kid was still in it. I continued into the dark. Alvers lingered behind me looking at the coat.

"You know I invented a way to shrink quarters to the size of nickels." He raised his voice, but his eyes didn't follow me. They stayed on the coat. It looked like he wanted to eat the thing as he spoke, "Matter can be tricky...It can be condensed," he yelled after me into the hollow night.

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Alvers appeared again a month or so later. We found ourselves, both of us, on the patio of a local Cajun restaurant. He was covered in a layer of dried dirt that ran from his boots half way up his denim jeans—the same jeans as before. The holes looked similar at least. He passed by my table and eyed my sandwich.

"Looks like you got yourself a handful," he said, lurching past me farther along down the wooden balcony. He walked from one end to the other a few times. Waitresses buzzed around the deck. They kept Alvers at a distance, but also ignored him. This, to me, seemed very hard to do. To avoid and ignore is of great value here. An old co-worker of mine sat at a table behind me with his wife. We both pretended not to know each other. We were all useless. He still worked at VOLK, but he remained useless too. Another great value—to work and be useless at the same time. Here we were, all useless strangers pretending to know each other, and not know each other. Everyone pretended not to know Alvers because no one did, except me, and I wasn't even sure about that.

"Hey, uh, you mind if I, uh...sit and talk with you?" he said as he passed by my table for the third time. Alvers smelled like stale beer. I couldn't tell if he had been drinking all day, or hadn't changed his clothes from the night before.

"I mean if you want to..."

"Thank you, thank you. Name's..."

"Alvers, right?" I interrupted. "You're a physicist, or, I mean a physicist and inventor right?"

"Do I know you? ... oh," He laughed. "I just got into town."

"What brings you back?" I asked.

"Forty thousand cigarettes."

It was a rather large number. Progress is amazing. First you have one and then before you know it you're into the thousands. I had a friend once whose phone became bigger and bigger every time I saw him. A new model he would say. Bigger and bigger—but first—smaller and smaller, and back again. Eventually they'll just connect our phones to the walls of our homes and be done with it.

"Do you like muscle cars, son?" Alvers questioned me suddenly.

I had forgotten all about him.

"I guess, I mean I don't really know much about them."

"I'm, well you see...I'm...I've built a smuggling car." He was very pleased with himself. He smiled. His teeth were fighting for room in his face.

"Oh, you mean for the cigarettes?"

"What?"

"The cigarettes." I took another bite of my sandwich. A waitress walked up to the table smiling hideously.

"How's the sandwich?" she asked.

"It's, you know it's..." She walked away.

"Hey, did I tell you that I invented a way to condense a quarter to the size of a dime?"

Alvers lowered his head at the end of his sentence. It looked like he had just been switched off. His head bobbed in a rhythmic motion. I ate my sandwich. The restaurant creaked and spoke all around us. Work loomed on the horizon. I had been at my new job running parts for about seven months. It was unbearable. That place had no flesh; it had all evacuated. This is something I realized back at VOLK—America is all bones and oil.

Alvers' head jerked back to life. "Eventually I'm, well, I'm going to," he paused and burped. Alvers looked like he was about to vomit. "I'm gonna, well, the troops. I'm gonna condense body armor for the troops."

"Sounds like an honorable endeavor...."

"The denser the material, you see, the..." He nodded off again, but his head rattled back to life like he was surprised to still be living.

"You all right?"

"My daughter, she's in Alaska. I raised her you know. I raised her." He pointed at his chest. His hand seemed to be made out of rubber.

"What's she do out there?"

"What?" He frowned angrily around the deck.

"Your daughter."

Alvers smiled. His face looked like it had been beaten in a few times. Inside of this man certain things were trying to escape, but could never get past that worn skin. I had very smooth skin. I was young. I wanted to have my face beaten in as well sometimes. Alvers got up abruptly. He looked like a skeleton come back to life.

“I think I’ve taken up quite enough of your time.” He almost fell back into the chair. It was crafted from black iron with a pattern of leaves welded and frozen into the back.

“Well, it was, uh, nice seeing you again...”

“I live over there.” He gestured to the apartments across the street from the restaurant. At one point they were new, but now they slumped over, hanging onto themselves, gasping for breath. Young trees lined the front of these buildings to improve the city’s morale.

“That’s nice,” I said.

Alvers turned and walked to the steps that led downstairs. He passed under the frame of the door. Everyone looked toward the emptiness, happy for his vacancy.

“I’m one hundred percent American.” I heard his disembodied voice echo from beyond my view. It was followed by more sounds, like a fish flopping through a wooden maze. The waitresses all rushed to the door.

“He fell!” the short one yelled.

“He’s dead.” the tall brunette whispered.

“Did he pay his tab?” my waitress asked. She tortured bugs as a child. Soon too, her father would be dead.

The short one walked over to my table. She reminded me of an ex-girlfriend I briefly dated for three years. By the end of it, every time we had sex it was like she was raping me I hated her so much. Maybe, because I didn’t love her, I was raping her too.

“Do you know that guy?” She put her hand on her hip.

“No. No, not at all.”

“Well you better get him.” She looked back at the bar. “If you don’t, we’re gonna call the cops.”

I walked toward the door. The first five steps sat in a narrow hallway surrounded by stained glass windows. The twenty stairs that followed dropped in a steep descent to the right, into the bowels of the restaurant. Alvers lay at the bottom, half conscious. Managers, waitresses—customers huddled around him. He looked like a G.I. Joe after you rip the rubber band out of its guts. I walked down the stairs. At the bottom, there were so many people. I felt the heat of their bodies as they stood around this human wreck.

“He’s my friend,” I said, like it meant something. He wasn’t, but these words seemed appropriate. A manager, or some authority figure, walked up to me. He was tall. He had a symbol tattooed down the front of his arm. I could not decode it.

“Get him outa here.”

“I will. I will,” I grumbled as I hooked Alver’s limp body around my neck.

“Thank ya. Thank ya.” Alvers had spit bubbles forming on his lips.

Behind us, the manager stood with his arms crossed. I couldn’t understand the ink beneath his skin. He flexed his muscles, and it writhed and moved, but all recognition had faded away.

“Don’t bring him back!” God, these people all thought we were friends.

In the street, the sun was unbearable. Alvers babbled as I dragged him toward the building he had pointed out earlier. We reached the street. Cars honked at us, indicating we should not cross; other cars honked, begging us to proceed. We did both, proceeding hesitantly—

always in fear, across, to the line of newly planted trees. At the door to his building, a register existed that recorded all of the inhabitants in alphabetical order. The list provided a roster of all the tenants inside the structure. I found Alvers' name—Alvers, Melvin 4B. I tried to buzz us in but realized Melvin Alvers was already, presently, with me. I reached into his pocket to find his keys. The ring that contained them was almost full to bursting. Some of them were laid out in abnormal patterns—others were grey, worn with age and dust. After a few tries, I found the correct key and opened the door. It took some effort. The door was pressurized. The building wanted to keep us out.

“Fuck ye. Thank ya.” Alvers's eyes were closed now. Blood leaked from his head.

We went up the elevator. It had a small portal that looked into the dark of the shaft. The window had many holes filled with many rusted pennies. You could see the chute passing by through the empty slots as we ascended to the fourth floor. When the door opened, Alvers vomited. It just slipped out of his limp mouth. I let him go, and he fell into the bulk of it. I picked him up. He vomited again. Now he was covered in goop. Personally, I was covered in it too, but didn't know it yet. We reached his door—4B. A low noise crept from beneath the wooden frame. Alvers continued to thank and curse me simultaneously as I tried to find the right key. When one fit, I turned it, and the door fell open. Stale air rushed out. The noise from inside grew into a living thing.

Inside the apartment, the TV was the only sign of life. It formed a fleshless noise and flashed incoherently. Clothes lay everywhere, even in the kitchen. Farther back in the corner was a bed covered in loose papers. I dragged Alvers to it and dropped him into the mess of documents. He had bookshelves lining the walls. In between them were degrees framed in cheap plastic proclaiming him “Master of Sciences,” “Doctor of Physics”—“World's Greatest Dad.” I

didn't know which were true or false. In the middle of his living room, in front of his television, was a large tripod. It looked to be originally used for a telescope but had been converted to hold a bizarre jumble of electronics. It seemed to be about half finished. Wires shot out, looped back in, and sprang out again proclaiming their freedom. When I walked towards it, a book hurtled passed my head.

"Get out! Out!" Alvers screamed, collapsing back into the nest of old paper.

I picked up the book. It was called "A Brief History of Time and Space." Large chunks of the pages had been torn out. They littered the bed. Alvers writhed around in them like some disgusting pinup girl.

"Stay. Stay." He breathed out quietly.

"You alright now?" I asked, as I walked to the bed.

"Thank ye. Thank ya. Fuck ya." Alvers was somewhat conscious now. "Leave. Leave." He was crying.

I walked past his strange machine to the emptiness that was the door. As I closed it behind me, I heard his voice cry out joyously, then in pain, "Fuck ya. Thank ya." He wailed. "Come back, I need help."

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I went by his decaying apartment again some months later. They had just killed Osama Bin Laden, and I had spent most of the day watching the coverage spin itself into an endless loop. I felt patriotic. America had gotten off my back and put me on its shoulders. Life was great so I bought a Slurpee and some gas station nachos. They had killed a man and in turn made the

world safe, although I was still frightened of many other ideas. At about this time, I decided to go check in on Alvers. I figured I could help him with his body armor. It was for the troops and I wanted to give for some stupid reason.

When I reached his apartment, the door was locked. I pressed the metallic button under Alvers' name. My finger stuck to it. I detached my finger from the panel leaving a trail of reddish brown syrup. The speaker let out a hideous noise. Someone had spilled soda everywhere. In parts of the country now, people are said to have what they call "mountain dew mouth." The pleasure simply rots out your teeth. It's amazing that we're privileged enough to have something like that destroy us. I pressed the button again. There was no answer. I became worried. I paced back and forth in front of the door. What if he was dead? Worse, what if he was alive and needed my help? I worried, and thought, and almost left altogether until an old woman walked out of the pressurized door. Before it could close I caught the edge of it with my foot. She looked back. She was very old, very close to the edge of life—she was on the verge of further progress. I entered the building silently.

In the lobby, the elevator had a sign on it: "OUT OF ORDER." It spoke to me. A door past the mailboxes seemed to lead to a set of stairs. Above it, there were words. These words read: "STAIRS." I went through and climbed the narrow steps. Nails stuck out at odd angles. The boards, where any existed, sagged and creaked as I walked over them. When I reached the fourth floor I exited the staircase. The door to Alvers' apartment was slightly ajar. The 4, and the B hung at odd angles. They had been connected at one point but had now fallen into disrepair. As I was about to turn the knob, a voice spoke from behind me.

"Hey buddy."

“What?” I turned around. A short man was standing behind me. He wore a shirt that you’d find at the Goodwill. I could see his hair poking out of the collar. It had the logo of some long defunct softball team on the front.

“Hey buddy,” he repeated.

“Sorry, I was just looking for my friend.”

“Alvers right?” He seemed angry. “Melvin?”

“Yeah, I think. I mean yes.” I was nervous. This man could have been my father.

“He ain’t here. Hasn’t been in months.”

“Oh, well when you see him...”

"I came out here cause I thought you might be him. Melvin I mean. Landlord’s been askin about rent is all." The man scratched his chest.

“That’s a shame.”

“Not for me. I can’t get no sleep when he’s around.”

“The experiments?”

“Yeah, the experiments.” He smiled. “Go in if ya want. You see him though...”

“I can go in?”

“Yeah.”

“I could be anyone, though,” I pleaded. “A thief, a robber, anyone.”

“No you couldn’t.” He turned and started back down the hallway.

“Couldn’t what?” I said.

“You couldn’t be anyone.”

After the man had disappeared into the dark hole of his apartment, I pushed open Alvers’ door. Inside, the television churned out noise. Images jumped and flickered on the screen like

magic. Papers still littered the floor, but they had multiplied. Hundreds of pages were torn out, strewn everywhere. Some were tacked to the walls and connected with old yarn and pushpins. The shells of books lay in heaps like dead birds.

Then I noticed the device. It still sat on the old tripod, but now it appeared to be completed. Tubes and wires dangled all over the thing limply. It looked like something that would be used in construction—like some type of new jackhammer turned sideways. In front of the device was a chair. In the chair a remote with a long cord led back to the machine. I walked over to it and picked it up. It looked like it had gone to the television in some distant past but had now been modified to do god knows what. I pointed the end of it at the television. The stupid thing had been blaring news coverage since I'd entered the apartment. "Osama...Dead...Local weather...Cooking tips." It bubbled, and fizzed, and spoke of nothing. The remote didn't work on the TV, or the machine. I pointed it at the device and hit POWER—again nothing. I tried a few other buttons: FAST FORWARD, VOLUME UP/DOWN, LAST. Nothing worked. The machine sat motionless and alone. Then I noticed a small piece of paper attached to the device where the cord from the remote connected to its body. I peeled it off. The tape was brittle like it had been there a long time. I sat down in the chair and held the note to my face. The handwriting was jagged—cresting up and down.

"Hello I knew you would come eventually this thing has taken up so much of my life. I always wanted to be this, To INVENT. This country was founded on invention. On PROGRESS. On understanding UNDERSTANDING our world. I think I finally do. It is funny though all this way and I feel like I have gotten nowhere. I have INVENTED, I have UNDERSTOOD. This machine it does not shrink it condenses. I wanted to grow but I finally realized I could only go

smaller. I am in the apartment now. I am condensed. I am the crumb. God look what I have made and all I wanted to do was see my daughter again.

--Alvers"

I crumpled the note and let it fall to the ground next to an empty liquor bottle. The apartment sat lifeless and vacant. The machine remained silent. The chair didn't creak as I sat in it. I felt alone and surrounded. The TV shouted into the world. It showed me a rally at the local college. Osama was dead. These kids were out in the milky gloom celebrating this death. It was glorious. They chanted in the darkness, "USA, USA, USA." Then a girl was hoisted onto her boyfriend's shoulders in the midst of the crowd. She rose up higher and higher. The student's songs and incantations echoed, resounded back and forth—changed now in the midst of her: "USA, USA, SHOW US YOUR TITS, USA." Alvers was dead. America was alive.

Apnea

Chuck Titsky put out his cigarette. He hadn't expected a visitor to the office today. She was a blond of course—long legs—but there was nothing behind her. She was a vacuum. The ash was particularly bad that day. Chuck could see it in her hair. The factories must have been working overtime to meet quota. The war was in its third year now. The singularity had come and gone, and those who had merged decided the planet wasn't big enough for two competing species. There were cyborgs of course. Beyond that there were digitized personality constructs floating between smartphones. The blonde didn't look like either.

"You're a detective, aren't you Mister?" She brushed her hair to the side.

"I am indeed, Ma'am." Chuck lit another cigarette and took a long drag. "How can I help you?"

-He Bled Through Space by Eljer Taylor.

Eljer Taylor was a Virginia state trooper. In his spare time, he wrote science fiction novels and desperately wanted to kill someone. It's not like Eljer was a murderer—he just dreamed of stopping a mass shooting or doing something else significant. Other times, he was addicted to internet pornography. The ritual foamed, rabid, churning beneath his borders. Sometimes he would masturbate so long a scab would develop on the crown of his penis. This was not only painful, but also caused him to worry endlessly that he would be found out in the midst of coitus. He had many excuses to explain the scab away. In one scenario he would say that his dick got caught in his zipper. These things happen, and it seemed to him it wasn't really that unusual.

This addiction began in a pile of trash. Eljer had never seen a woman's breasts before, but there they were next to the bones of a vivisected chicken in his neighbor's garbage can. It was a wonderful terror, a wonderful shame—neither could be altogether vanished. Instead, the memory penetrated an ever-growing future. The only other vision Eljer could recollect with such clarity was the night he saw the old K-Mart lit up like hell. The baseball team used to hold batting

practice in its abandoned stomach. He was surprised by the glorious light. Eljer had always imagined nothing could live in there.

Thirty years later, he was stopped on the side of an abandoned highway. The car he pulled over had the left taillight out. Wires were hanging from behind the license plate. Eljer did not know this. It was dark and the entire world stumbled along blindly.

“License and registration.”

“I wasn’t speeding.” It was a college student. The time was 11:08 p.m.

“License and registration.” Eljer repeated. The college student looked half alive. Not that he seemed ill or strung out or any of that, but just barely there. The boy reached into his glove box. It was full of shadows. A part of Eljer wanted to shoot him right there, but he knew somehow that was the wrong idea.

“Here you go sir.”

He handed him a dog eared scrap of white paper. Eljer examined it closely. Everything looked to be in order.

“Your taillight’s out.”

“Oh, sorry.” The kid couldn’t stay still. He drummed his fingers on the center console. Underneath the emergency brake rusty pennies waded in something brown and viscous.

“It’s not anything to be sorry about.”

“Well, like I said, I’m still sorry.”

“Just get it fixed.”

Eljer was frustrated. The night before he had masturbated to a video of a man being forced to do things against his will. Eljer was attracted to women but desperately wanted to be raped. This filled him with an ambiguous guilt as if someone, somewhere, was constantly

judging him for a fact he could never determine. Eljer watched many different types of pornography. All of it reminded him of the chicken. He saw a video once of a brown haired girl in a skin tight skirt masturbating. She looked so happy, and when she came she appeared to be dying. He imagined if he had a daughter she would look something like that.

“Have you been drinking tonight, Sir?” Eljer shined his flashlight into the window.

“No.” The boy was telling the truth. Earlier in the night he had been fighting with his girlfriend over whether he would say grace. He never had before, and refused to now. They yelled at each other inside a dirty Chinese restaurant. On other occasions the boy thought she was going to hit him, so he would go downstairs and beat holes in his drywall closet.

Eljer did not know this. He was more concerned with his dream from the night before:

This vision occurred between flashes of light. Eljer was reading a survivalist novel in the fiction section at the local bookstore. The next thing he knew a man walked through the door smiling warmly. He may have been black or Chinese and looked to have yellow Chiclets shoved into his gums. This man had a pistol. He raised it like he was picking a gigantic flower or waving to a long lost friend. The next thing Eljer knew, he was covered in goop. To his surprise, it was a large amount of blood. It reminded him of his time in the academy when he bit a gaping hole through his own tongue. Now he had killed this man and people were cheering. Somehow he had become a hero.

“Officer?”

“Yes?” Things vibrated back into focus. Reality sank into the night. The bushes on the side of the road whispered terrible secrets to the wind.

“Do I get a ticket?”

“It’s not some sort of prize. I’ll write you a ticket if you want, though.”

“No, that’s fine, Sir.” The boy was confused. He tapped his fingers on the console again.

Eljer watched the pennies drown in thick brown syrup.

“I’m alive,” he mumbled to himself and scribbled in his legal pad.

“What?”

“Get it fixed.” Eljer handed him the ticket. It was just a warning.

And then he began falling apart. This was after the incident with the homeless woman. Riley still felt bad, but then again what could he do? It began with his nose. He awoke from a terrible dream to discover it had simply disappeared. At first he thought he was just going invisible like that boy in Canada the year before. They blamed it on Thetan level build up from the Toronto collider accident, but that didn’t stop the boy from being lost altogether on a family vacation to the Grand Canyon. This was not at all like that situation. Riley’s nose had completely disappeared. Sometimes things like this happened. Where had that poor child gone? Riley thought about this child, about where and when the boy could be, as he searched underneath his bed for the items that had become undone.

-The Unbecoming Man by Eljer Taylor.

A few nights later at the local VFW, Eljer was chewing on his slack tongue and fingering his sidearm. He played with his gun in any situation that required thought. That night they were hosting a dance in honor of this great country. The room was filled with the terminally old and the morbidly young. Some of them looked like they barely had skin. Across the room a woman clung to the punch bowl. In the void that lay between them old men and women danced close together—the men dressed like the war was still surrounding them. This woman though, the one by the punchbowl, she was beautiful. Her arms hung apelike. She looked like she could whip a man to death with those things, but Eljer guessed she never had. He had been having the dream every night, again and again. It had become real to him. Somehow this made his addiction more

bearable which only caused it to get worse. His life revolved around pornography, the dream, and now a woman. She stood so still, it was like she was a sofa or some other piece of inoffensive furniture. Her certain stillness, her stationary existence, gave Eljer the courage he needed to force his way across the old VFW hall to talk to her.

“Hello,” he said.

“Hello,” she replied.

“My name’s Eljer.” Words abandoned him—the conversation was becoming more difficult now. He felt sweat trickling down his armpits. “I’m a police officer.”

“Oh”

“Well, actually a state trooper. You see, my son, my...Alan.” Eljer looked around the room. “He wanted to come.”

Alan wasn’t there. He had, in fact, really wanted to come. Instead he was in the woods doing whatever children did in those days. Eljer was divorced from Alan’s mother. He hadn’t been intimate with a woman since. No one knew where she had ended up, not even Eljer.

“That’s nice.” The woman looked down. “My name’s Sarah.”

“Nice...good to meet you.”

“Oh, uh, where’s your son?”

“He must have wandered off.”

They talked until the night began to eat the sun from the sky. Eljer did most of the talking. He chewed his tongue and felt confident for the first time in a long while. He told her about the academy; how he was hit in the head by a basketball and bit a hole through his tongue. He complimented her hair—it was blonde and nice he said. Then the crowd thinned into nothing. The music became a warm silence. Soon they were the only ones in the building except for a few

old men cleaning up scraps of paper and Styrofoam cups. She told him about her miserable life. It was happy enough. She was a bank teller downtown. Once she was robbed at gunpoint. The man wore a dark mask and held his hand in his sweatshirt. Did he even have a hand, or was it some type of claw? God only knows.

Then even the old men were gone and they were forced into the darkness. The VFW lay vacant behind them. Eljer wondered if buildings ever got hungry with no one inside of them, but didn't make a big deal about it.

"Do you, uh." Sarah rubbed the curve of her neck. "Wanna come to my place for a drink?"

"I'd like that very much."

Eljer chewed on his tongue as they walked to her car. It sat fat in his mouth. The car was an old Crown Vic, and he wrestled with the idea of telling her that it looked like the one he drove, but in the end said nothing. Inside this empty cavity, it was like outer space—dim and cold and vast. Sarah turned the key and the vents spit out dry air. The car began to move. As they drove along, many different buildings lounged on the side of the road. Close to her house an old structure had stray cats running through its veins. It was burnt out and on the verge of transformation.

"D'you think they'll ever do anything with that one?" she asked.

"Don't know. Possibly."

"I wanted to be a real estate agent, you know." Sarah cracked her window.

"Really?"

"Yeah, but they said I wasn't sales material."

"I write books." Eljer said.

“Oh yeah?” she turned down a street lined with old trees. “I always thought it’d be fun.”

“It’s not.”

“What?”

“Writing.” Eljer looked out the window. “It’s not fun, but I can’t stop. Writing is movement.”

“I was talking about real estate.” Sarah rolled her window back up.

Sarah’s house was really a townhome. Another couple lived next door. They had two small children. Sometimes she would babysit them while their parents were out buying pills. As they walked into the house, Eljer could see shadows behind the blinds. These shadows had limbs that went on forever. They traversed the world in one giant embrace. Sarah began to disrobe. Eljer walked toward her as she pulled a gray blouse over her head. He kissed Sarah clumsily and looked down at her breasts as she struggled to kick off her shoes. They were purchased at Shoe Carnival the year before. The manager was on the floor that day shouting through a microphone, “Come spin the wheel to get a guaranteed fifteen percent off,” he yelled. Sarah spun the wheel and got a ten-dollar coupon.

Sarah took Eljer’s hand. The contact scared him. It was altogether too real. She led him through the dark mouth of her door into the bedroom. In the darkness, Eljer took off his clothes. He took off his holster and gun. He could feel the shadows watching him. The scab on his penis had fallen off a few nights before, and as he fondled his growing member he could feel the rough patch where it had vacated. Sarah was naked by this time. She lay on the bed with her legs spread like she was getting some type of examination.

“Do you have a condom?” Eljer whispered. He began to lose his erection.

“I have an IUD.”

“Isn’t that a terrorist thing?”

“No.” she looked concerned. “It’s birth control.”

With safety in mind, Eljer got on top of her. The bed sheets were cold. He imagined they were floating on top of a calm lake. Eljer stroked himself a few times and attempted to enter her. He could feel the moisture below the surface. Sarah moaned. His penis bent and felt like an old sponge.

“Let me help you.”

Sarah guided his penis inside of her. Eljer closed his eyes and thought of the entire internet—what kind of monster it must be. There are so many hallways in that little box you could almost get lost in there. He thought about the distance. How you could be so far away from something so close, and how that made it safe. The next thing he knew they were smashing into each other. Eljer was far away himself. He felt like he was forcing something out of his body. It was difficult though, the flesh was impossible to escape.

“You like it?” He thought he should say something like that. Sarah mumbled incoherently.

“Is it good?” Eljer stared into Sarah’s eyes. She looked like she was watching T.V.

“Could you stop chewing your tongue?” she said

Eljer’s body felt like it was lacking bones. He rolled off of Sarah and closed his eyes and heard her say something from miles away. Shapes formed in that black ocean. They seemed to be starving. Amoebas floated in the dark hungry for light. The history of the world rolled passed the house. It was the history of Eljer. It was like her room was on the side of a busy highway.

“It’s alright,” she said. Sarah was close now. Eljer could feel her looking at him. He kept his eyes closed until he slipped into a familiar dream:

Now the book was different. It was a guide to birds of the Southwest. The gunman walked through the door. His smile was jaundiced skin. Eljer raised his gun desperately and felt something smack into his stomach. He looked down. He was wet, completely wet. There were crabs crawling out of a large hole blown in his guts. They walked sideways out of his stomach. Their legs looked like they were typing a book report. Eljer smiled and smiled and smiled. He never believed that freedom could feel like this.

He was sailing to freedom, or at least he believed he was. An ocean of trash churned and spat as he rowed out. Waves of tin cans and old diapers leapt out of the muck, crashing into nothing with a sucking sound. John Dory couldn't believe his luck. He was sailing towards the horizon, towards freedom, on an ocean of shit. On shore, he could see Helen growing smaller and smaller. She may have been laughing or crying, it was impossible to tell. He had loved her once, and when they had crossed the forest of silent trees, he had hated her for making him feel strange things rise and shake in his chest. She wouldn't leave with him. After all that. What was it she said? "No one knows what's beyond the wasted sea." John knew. It was freedom. He felt it. Helen was barely anything now. He missed her terribly and waved, shouting across the churning sea,

"I'm sailing to freedom! I'm sailing to freedom!"

-All Behind the Quiet by Eljer Taylor

Eljer woke slowly, covered in sweat. Sarah lay beside him snoring. He saw a sleep apnea machine unused on the bedside table. It made him wonder if she was some type of cyborg. He had to get out of there. The dream had disturbed him greatly. It made him want to masturbate to all the invisible things that rested on the earth. Eljer got up and put on his pants. He put on his holster and shirt. Then he was closing the door behind him quietly. Eljer thought about calling a cab, but the air felt thick against his skin. It was like he was wading through a pool. The entire world could have been consumed by water for all he cared.

The walk back to his house wasn't so long anyway. Down Terry Street, Giles Avenue, and then a left onto Progress. An old man had lived there once. He—the old man—had wanted to live and die simultaneously. It was very confusing, but Eljer, without knowing it, felt the same way, only years later. As he walked down Giles, Eljer's thoughts turned again to the personal computer. What did it feel when it was shut off? Did the PC ever suffer? Eljer wanted to be decommissioned himself.

That's when he saw it. A shadow creeping down the sidewalk a few yards in front of him. It slunk along turning its head toward the houses that lined the streets. Most were dark by now, but some were beginning to wake. Eljer saw the shadow look at these houses, the ones stirring gently. He was hungry, Eljer thought, hungry for the light. So he followed. One block passed, then the next. Eljer missed the left onto Progress without knowing it. A few streets down the shadow stopped in front of an unlit house, and stared into its void. The owners were on vacation in Toledo. Their daughter was going to win a dance competition. The shadow did not know this. Eljer did not know this. Next door a house gave off a warm glow. And there were two fences, one belonging to the unlit house and one to the house lit kindly with a warm pestilence. The shadow cut between the two. Eljer knew its hunger. It was the same one he felt in the halls of the internet—a hunger without purpose. So he followed it down, back into an alleyway that ran parallel to the street.

In this alley trashcans lined the old fences half-broken and stained with ash. The shadow was closer now. Closer than it had ever been. Eljer saw it and felt some distant connection. He began sweating as he followed this thing into the dark. Then the shadow began hitting each can that he passed. One—Crnnggg—Two—Clrnngge. The third one he struck fell over and hissed out an echo. It startled Eljer.

“Hey!” He yelled.

The shadow turned and began to run.

“Hey!” Eljer was running now too. He felt the night speeding past him. Houses empty and full cheered for him silently in their foundations. A dog was chained. An old lawnmower rusted in a field. A dog laughed, standing on top of his own home as Eljer sped past. The lights from the houses cast dog shadows into the night. When the shadow Eljer was chasing took a right, he followed. They were back in the street now. Eljer felt his heart beating oil. It beat desperately. In a block he was right behind it. The figure had slowed down to a fast stroll. Like it didn’t even care. Like it was speed walking. Now Eljer could almost reach out and touch it, and when he did, the shadow manifested, multiplied, into something solid.

“Hey.” Eljer grabbed his shoulder. The shadow—heavy, full of purpose—shrugged him off, but stumbled and fell to the ground.

“What, motherfucker?”

“I said stop.” Eljer was out of breath. He was beginning to get an erection.

“No, you said HEY!” The shadow was now a man. A boy really. Eljer could see this as he stood up. He was wearing a black hooded sweatshirt.

“What were you doing at that house?”

“Nothing, man.” The boy turned and looked up at Eljer. “Why you fuckin care?” He brushed himself off, and moved his hands into his pockets.

“Hands up, hands up!” Eljer screamed. The night surrounded them. Eljer moved his hand towards his gun.

“What?” The boy’s face was barely visible.

“Hands up!”

“Fuck off, man,” the boy shouted. He pulled a hand out of one of his pockets.

Eljer couldn't tell if this figure was moving forward or backwards. He thought about the night that lay behind him. He thought about the internet's vast chasms. He thought about Sarah lying in bed with that machine breathing next to her. Alan was in the woods. Eljer's dream was floating somewhere just above the surface. He had the best erection of his life. It was throbbing next to his holster. He might have drawn his gun, or it might have gone off accidentally, but all he could remember was screaming into the pale night:

“Don't move! Don't move! Don't move!

The boy fell to the ground and shivered. It was like his bones simply gave up. Eljer could see the blood beginning to pool beneath him—the dark expanding mirror. At that moment, this boy was neither dead nor alive, and Eljer could only think of how easy it was. Easy as clicking on a link and just as certain. There were things in that box that no one would ever know. You had to write those things. It was his job, and he felt righteous, but he also felt shame.

All those years ago in the trashcan.

The boy's name was Sam.

The ivory bones of a chicken.

Sam loved steak and video games.

The chicken lay there helpless.

Sam was going to college.

Eljer could feel his gun pulse.

Sam was no longer moving.

The Confessional

Jim had been in a vegetative state for about a week. Really, though, he was faking it in order to avoid a court date for fraud. This was not some esoteric offense like insider trading—he simply hadn't paid his taxes in ten years.

Julie cried. This woman stood there crying, his wife, but how sincere could she be? He could never trust her. Jim's children didn't appear to care either. Even when they found him lying next to his crumpled ladder, the tears seemed forced.

He had planned it poorly at any rate. Jim lay next to that ladder for a good two hours before anyone came home. The thing cost about one hundred and forty-nine dollars. Jim thought about the cost as he lay motionless, waiting to be discovered. He thought about pissing himself. This was part of the preparation. Jim had spent time on the internet figuring out the best way to fake it. He found out that you should practice letting your hand fall, limp, onto your own face so that the paramedics didn't think you were a fraud. The pissing, though. Was that the right course of action? The crippled can't hold it in anymore, so their bodies give up every border. How far would he go for authenticity's sake?

But then Kyle showed up at about the same time Jim was going to let his bladder flood into the outer world. His son dropped a bag of groceries. Did he drop them soon enough? Did he even care? Of course they called 9-1-1, but the act seemed vacant. They hugged—his Julie arrived and dropped to her knees. She wore the brown skirt he had acquired for her forty-fifth birthday. It cost sixty dollars, but Jim had just stolen it.

The misconception is that theft is somehow vaguely sexual. Jim thought of it like a crow instead. All of these things simply added to the pile that constituted himself, and he became more and more that pile with each new article.

Theft is also about secrets. Every item attained by stealth or deception lay furtive and dark inside the pile. There was a time in Jim's youth where, secretly, he had wanted to die in the hope of discovering everything that existed beyond life. In this dimension, all the world's mysteries would be revealed.

Now he lay in the hospital, shitting in a bedpan, pretending to be on the verge of death.

The tubes were the worst. They kept him moist. They fed him. Jim felt like a tree with deep roots. His bed had wheels in case of his own swift death.

God, he hated hospitals, but as they rolled him in, and the smell of disinfectant swelled in his nose, he knew the first round had been won. They believed his lie. This was a great success—almost erotic. Another secret. At any rate, they wheeled him in with his wife and kids following in slow procession.

Jim's children had never done anything with their lives. His son was a bank teller who recently abandoned his long-time girlfriend. Her name was Kim and she claimed to have fibromyalgia. Jim didn't believe her. Kyle loved animals. Kyle was the enemy. He lived in a world surrounded by little green numbers. Little numbers that smashed together and separated and crashed, again, into the black expanse behind them. These numbers made good men into desperate sacks. They told old men to die in hospice surrounded by infertile nurses. Jim's daughter taught morons how to read. She worked in a metal trailer outside the elementary school with a group of elderly women.

Jim felt old now, too, as they inserted the tubes that were to keep him vital.

On the first day, the doctors shoved needles into his arms. It was a test, but he had prepared himself. Jim practiced sticking sewing needles into his flesh without flinching. He sat in the garage next to a broken wood chipper poking his arm until it was covered in a multitude of

red dots. Oil ran from the chipper's bones into the gray concrete. Jim had to dissect his mind from the pile that formed his body. He couldn't move, much, and anything he did move had to seem natural. This was part of the separation. The coma patient is the total rejection of Darwin—the ape descending, down, through the floor, crawling back into a sterile ocean. Jim lay there like a fish refusing to abandon the sea. His lawyer showed up around noon. Jim could hear him muttering strange words to the staff. He had paperwork that needed to be signed and who, now, would sign it? Then the mourners came. Their tears made Jim feel electric.

“We're praying for you.” Susan gripped his arm.

Jim found it hard not to move with his daughter hanging above him. She cared. His blood, his sweat, all the juices that pumped him into life were furious with motion. Julie and Kyle stood behind her. Their tears had already disappeared. They looked like strangers at a party on the verge of introduction. It would never come, the introduction, it would always be just on the horizon, leaving them strangers in that cold white room.

Would one of them betray him? He had hoarded this money. He had also spent it wildly, but always for the family, and now he lay here crucified in an assless robe.

Jim's boss from the water treatment plant brought flowers. He brought what they call “Paperwhites.” They smelled like piss. Was it the flowers or the hospital itself? Sewage maybe? Either way, the visit signaled another victory. Adam was a little shit. That's what everyone called him down at the plant. Jim had always hated Adam. Rumor had it that he fucked the secretary. She collected British television shows and ate large amounts of canned meats. Adam visited and stayed for a solid hour. In this visit, he spoke of business and pleasure. He told Jim that he was sorry—that he was sorry for not giving him that promotion, and not letting him have the employee of the month parking spot even when he obviously deserved it. These were lies. Jim

took them in happily. Later, though, Adam's tone changed. He settled calmly into the chair and began speaking—almost confessing.

“I have a daughter” He was tearing up. “She's not on drugs, but I always worry that she's gonna get caught up, you know?”

Jim said nothing.

“Anyway... I can't see her like you. On trial, or worse...” Adam took a melon ball out of the tray of fruit salad that lay dormant next to the bed. “God, you know, it's just, she's in college.” He pushed the orange ball into his mouth, his face was wet with tears. “I think she's been fucked,” he cried. “I think she's been fucked.”

This was the first of many visits. The mourners came as pilgrims. A line formed at the mouth of his room. All of them brought flowers. There is, actually, what they call a *language of flowers*. Jim had learned this from the internet. Each bud has a different meaning in *the language of flowers*. The daisy indicates innocence. The violet represents the faithful. Jim saw these plants arrive in bobbing lines and wondered what flora symbolized more obscure emotions. What flower said: “I hate you for fucking my husband.” Which spoke these tender words: “I killed a man drunk driving.”

That night, after his family and visitors disappeared, Jim lay in bed thinking of the trial. He was safe now, inside himself, but how long could he maintain the separation? Who would speak against him once they realized the money was gone? Even his lawyer would quickly abandon him if payment ceased. Jim lay in bed with his eyes open, pondering all the invisible secrets of the world. He thought about the courtroom packed with smiling hungry faces—his eyes closed. Slowly, these faces began to melt. They leaked down the bodies of full breasted woman and down the ties of men—Jim slipped into a warm dream:

In this dream, he occupied an old farm house. There was a party—the smell of ham. A distant cousin had wanted to fuck. Outside the house, a boy sharpened his blade on an old stone wheel. The noise from the wheel crept inside the house. It sounded almost human, almost newborn and alive. Jim could hear it as his cousin's tits bobbed in front of him.

Then the darkening skies...the tornado descending from nothing. The earth's hungry mouth opened, gnashing away at its own body while the sound rang through the party, happy, as his cousin sat fleshy before him surrounded by the smell of a nice ham.

Jim woke in a dark hospital room. The field disappeared in fog. The sound evaporated. Suddenly, he couldn't remember whether to keep his eyes open or shut. The internet was very clear. The coma patient remains, eyes closed, totally inert. It is the vegetable that grows—sleeping...waking...growing. Or was it the other way around? He decided to open and close his eyes, but to make sure that his stare stayed generally blank. This, in the end, was the best course of action.

At noon, the doctor arrived. He checked Jim's vitals. He handled his balls for some unknown reason. Thirty minutes later, Jim's family showed up. They filed in professionally like he was already dead. The doctor shook their hands as they walked towards him. Had they just matriculated? The doctor bowed each time in his white coat like some monk.

"It appears your husband's in a vegetative state." The doctor fiddled with his stethoscope.

"Will he wake up?" Julie held her face like it was about to fall off. The children stood behind her in different states of grief.

"I'm afraid it's hard to say."

"Is he going to die?" Kyle touched his mother.

"Well..., like I said, it's hard to say in these situations."

“Dad...,” Susan mumbled uselessly.

Jim said nothing. Julie appeared to be crying, but he couldn’t tell without moving in a vital way.

“We’ll continue to monitor his progress.” The doctor looked at his watch.

“God,” someone muttered to the left of him.

“Yes, we’re all worried about the state of things, but all we can do is wait.”

Their bodies exited the room single file.

As the third day began, routine set in. Jim could count on the nurses to arrive around dawn and examine his life. Sometimes he felt like they were there to check on the machines instead. At noon, his doctor would walk, casually, through the door. Jim found this annoying. Even though he was faking his condition he expected a certain urgency from the caretakers. Then the pilgrims would arrive. Great-aunts and uncles, cousins from simple places with no teeth, or too many. Friends arrived that he could not even place in his own personal history. Together, in large groups, they would offer tender sentiments. “God is good,” and, “Let the Lord lend you his strength,” they’d say. In private, though, they would confess their secrets.

An aunt told him about the time she stole kitchen-ware from the Cracker Barrel next to the highway. She was closer to death than Jim. At sixteen, she had a clandestine abortion. At twenty, she married her high-school sweetheart. Jim’s cousin was gay. An old friend, Joe or Bob, had been laid off, but refused to tell his wife.

Jim kept his eyes to the ceiling as they spoke. Patterns made themselves known only to disappear and reappear moments later in the swirl of tiles. The mourners came in a steady stream. They brought secrets as payment—payment for the privilege of confession. A nephew had accumulated a large amount of debt due to online gambling. He cried and begged and

seemed to be asking, not Jim, but God for money. Jim was elated. He lay there being kept moist and vital, trying not to smile, to laugh, and jump from the bed.

The confessions continued for two more days. New pilgrims arrived, but each day the numbers dwindled. The decline in visitors didn't bother Jim at first. He found pleasure in each individual confession. A friend from work was cheating on his wife. He began to cry as he spoke. Jim smiled inside himself. He had been stealing this man's lunch for two years. Jim was giving of himself freely and all he had to do was lay there motionless, covered in his own filth.

His family still came, too. He imagined that they were living in the hospital, but every day they had on different clothes. Somehow their outfits bothered him. Shouldn't they have been locked in a mindless grief? Sorrow would have been enough. His family should suffer as he was suffering. They should have been covered in their own filth as well. Hadn't he provided for them? And anyway, if the judge found him guilty, his family would be ruined just the same. Really, this entire process was all for them. As much as his family and the impending trial bothered Jim, he took comfort in the secrets. He felt like a crow in beady-eyed flight.

On the sixth day, no one came. Jim awoke from a dreamless sleep as the nurse pulled the bedpan from underneath him. He could smell his shit from the night before. At first, it was difficult to relieve himself outside the comfort of the bathroom, but like everything else, it had become routine. The "Paperwhites" were beginning to wilt on his bedside table. This nurse watered them occasionally. She was a fat black woman. Fat in the way many black women were. It was becoming difficult to ignore her as she waddled out of the door into the guts of the hospital. Jim lay there, maintaining the separation. He played games in his head. He counted as high as he could until he got bored. His record was around three thousand. Sometimes he pretended he could look down upon himself, as if his soul had escaped from the body.

The separation was becoming increasingly difficult to maintain. Any movement gave him the urge to run—to explode out of bed. Jim resisted, but without visitors, without secrets to hoard, he was becoming restless. At noon, the doctor arrived. Stupid fuck. He checked Jim's charts and left. When would he confess? No, he wouldn't, just as the nurses wouldn't. They were all too numb to the death and vegetation. Jim hated them for it. He imagined them swept into the sky with the infant noise and the grindstone blaring behind them. At dusk Kyle arrived alone.

"Dad." He pulled a chair over and sat beside the bed.

"Dad, Dad, Dad." Kyle drummed his fingers on the bedside railing. "Jeez Dad you don't look so good."

Jim said nothing.

"Mom's not doing so hot. She's cooking, though, so that's something." Kyle leaned back in the chair. "You know she's made meatloaf three days in a row."

Why hadn't she brought him any? Who was eating the meatloaf? In all honesty, Jim hated her meatloaf, but where was it all going?

"Susan's the worst. She hasn't been going to work. I went to her apartment the other day, but all she does is look at the internet."

Jim said nothing. Where was all this meatloaf going?

"I think she's chatting with someone. Maybe Steve. I heard he left for Europe after they broke up though. I tried..." he laughed. "I tried to get a peek when she went to the bathroom, but, you know..."

Julie put ketchup in her meatloaf. Jim hated ketchup in meatloaf. What he wanted to know was who ate it?

“It’s hard, I…” Kyle put both hands on his face and wiped them down his chin. “I kind of hate you dad.”

Kyle’s feelings didn’t surprise Jim. He had always, not disliked or hated, but he simply didn’t care much for Kyle. His son had no secrets to give. He masturbated to pictures of black women—so what? He stole that boy’s, what’s-his-names, bike—so what? He nursed a bird back to health in his underwear drawer when he was fourteen—so what? Jim knew all the deep caverns of his son. He knew everything.

“I kind of hate you dad.” Kyle laughed. “I hate you dad.”

Jim said nothing. Here he was, motionless, shitting in a pan, providing a great service for his son, getting nothing in return. Even Aunt Martha had secrets.

“I hate you.” Kyle stood up. “I hate you like I hated Kim. Jesus, you know in those last days. I hate you like that.” The room sat hollow and silent. Kyle stared down at his father.

“We found this squirrel a week before we broke up.” Kyle began pacing the room. “We took it in. It was so small. We put it in a shoebox.”

Jim was beginning to get nervous. Kyle looked like he might hit him, and he didn’t know if he could maintain the separation through all that.

“I fed it. We fed it. I named it Timmy. Kim dropped water in its mouth with an eyedropper.” Kyle sat down again and drew his face close to his father’s chest. They began almost breathing in unison.

“When it was well enough, it started to move around, you know. We had to let it go. That whole week, though, we hadn’t fought.” Kyle stared at his father’s chest. “First time in years we hadn’t fought.”

Jim said nothing, breathing together with his son.

“So we bring it down to the park and we open the box. It doesn’t wanna go though. It won’t move, so we shake the box and there it goes out into the grass. The little guy, he looks around. God, I remember Kim smiled. I hadn’t seen her smile in forever, and this little guy’s just hopping away to the woods. And then he’s at the edge of the woods and something big comes outta nowhere. It was a dog, Dad. A dog ate him. A big German shepherd runs over from outta nowhere and picks up the little guy and starts shaking him around like a toy and Kim’s crying and the dog’s owner’s apologizing, but you know what?” Kyle seemed to move even closer. His breath smelled like old coffee.

Jim said nothing.

“You know what, Dad? Inside, I’m trying not to laugh. Kim’s crying and I just wanted to laugh because after that thing died, we had nothing left at all.”

Jim lay silently in bed. Kyle slumped back into his seat. For a long while, they both sat there motionless. Jim began to wonder which one of them was supposed to be a vegetable. He felt something for his son now—not love. Jim was happy. He had another secret to add to the pile. It felt odd, though; his son’s confession seemed to carry an extra burden. He imagined a jury of his peers all with Kyle’s face. They were laughing at him as he mounted the stand—as he hefted a new weight in the presence of judgment. This burden, this vision, stayed with him into the night.

Jim couldn’t sleep, and sleep had been his only relief besides the secrets. His court date was five days out. Thoughts of the trial consumed him now as his body lay wide awake, as his mind hovered above him with the machines buzzing horribly in every corner of the room. Could he maintain the separation, and for how long? Eventually, he would have to wake up—to move again in the world of the flesh. And those fucks who were after him wouldn’t forgive. No they’d

be on his ass again in no time. He had heard one talking to his doctor a few days earlier. Felt the man's presence in his gray suit as he loomed heavily in the doorway. They watched, ready to take him in. But he could maintain. Jim would lie dormant inside himself until the world simply descended into nothing.

As the seventh day began, the nurses wheeled in and out. The moisture machines ticked along endlessly. Jim counted to one thousand. He acted out old episodes of Andy Griffith in his head. The black nurse showed up, then the doctor. A woman with a newborn walked by his door. The noise was the same from the dream—both stone and flesh. Was he descending into pre-history? Fuck Christ and Jesus walk with me. The ceiling tiles spoke in code. They formed new languages in the sky, code languages telling of the wheel and other misfortunes. A television from an adjacent room was letting someone know the best way to sue their doctor for a botched trans-vaginal mesh.

Then Julie arrived. She had her hair pulled into a pony-tail. Who was eating all of that meatloaf? She stood over his bed half crying. There were no tears—a dry cry like a dry vomit. Julie touched his hand, pulled away, reached forward and stroked his sour skin. She paced the room. At four, she watched judge shows. A man refused to pay rent. Step children fought for custody of their guinea pig. Jim imagined being caught in that screen. He pictured himself sweating behind the glass, testifying before one gigantic fleshy human face.

At five, Julie wept into the empty fruit tray beside him. This felt genuine. Jim was seeing her stripped bare. He couldn't even look at her, but he knew she was more real now than ever—all bone and sinew. And then she began laughing.

“Jim.” She put her head down. Was she crying or laughing? “Jim goddammit.”

Jim said nothing.

“What’s wrong with you?” she leaned back in the chair. “The garage is dirty. Kyle won’t come clean it. I asked. He said it wasn’t his problem.”

The garage was always dirty. Jim hoped no one found his collection of bloody sewing needles.

“There’s so many things. Not the garage.” She touched her face. “So many things I wanna say.”

Where was all this meatloaf going?

“Jim it’s just that I don’t know how to say them.” Julie began crying again. “I feel my chest. My chest hurts it’s so full—God.”

The black nurse walked into the room. She started straightening the dresser tucked against the far wall. Why? It’s not like Jim had been changing underwear.

“How is he?” Julie turned to look at the nurse.

“He’s alive.”

“I mean is he comfortable?”

“Not sure really.” The nurse didn’t turn around. “You can’t ask them those type of things.”

“What can you ask them?” Julie looked at the pale floor.

“Nothing, I guess.” She shrugged. “Tomorrow they’re gonna put a feeding tube in his chest.”

“Will it hurt?”

“Not sure, really. Never had it done myself.” The nurse walked out of the room holding a balled up tissue.

A feeding tube. Could Jim maintain the separation through all that? It smelled like an old fart in his room. Had she farted? What was her secret? This old black nurse, fat in the way many women are fat. Had she farted as she left? Julie didn't seem to notice. She was still looking at the floor. Jim wondered if the tiles down there held cryptic warnings as well.

"A feeding tube." Julie touched his arm. "It makes it feel permanent, like they're locking you up or something."

She was right. After that, if he kept it together through the pain, it would all be absolute. He would be part of the hospital—a kidney or liver maybe.

"It's just that...It's just. I feel like I'm gonna explode and shrink at the same time."

Jim said nothing. Where was the meatloaf? Who farted?

"You know last summer..." Julie looked at the ceiling.

Jim could see her on the edge of his vision.

"You wondered about me and I told you it was nothing. I was just out late at a friend's that one night. We got drunk."

Jim didn't speak. Something was taking place in this room. He felt like a syphon.

"It wasn't Pam, though."

Where did she go then? He remembered the smell of cigarettes. Pam didn't smoke.

"I was at a bar." Julie looked down at him for the first time without crying. "He took me home...He took me home."

Who was eating all that meatloaf? Was it "He"? The man who took her home. What did that even mean? "Took her home." Did they fuck or play board games? Who farted in his room? That doctor, his bitch wife, some black nurse? Who would betray him? His son? His wife with her fat lover covered in ketchup? Susan? Would his daughter take the stand and, through her

tears, confess all of his secrets? The patterns on the ceiling began to unravel. The secrets, the confessions, were waterlogged now. They were close, too close. They hung around his ankles carrying him deep into the earth.

That night Jim slept numbly. He dreamed. This time the dream was of only the wheel and the small boy sharpening his blade in a glow of sparks. Jim kept trying to make out a face, but it was only darkness—the face formed from the mechanical newborn sound. And then there was his body. It floated above the bed, a reflection of his crippled form. It began to descend. He tried to fight it off, but the shadow melted toward him inch by inch. Jim could feel—he could taste and smell. He wanted nothing to do with the physical world, and then he craved it desperately, but the shadow slipped through him. Jim grabbed for it. He flipped onto his stomach, grasping down at the white tiles and the slowly drifting form. It was gone now—disappeared into the other realms of history. On the eighth day he woke.

...

...

I am awake now. Nurses and doctors swarm around this stale body. I tell them he's fine. My family arrives. The doctors explain that he woke suddenly. They found me tearing the IV's from his arms. And more arrive. The aunts, uncles, half-friends and bosses; they pile into the room. The doctors tell me not to talk. He has a dry throat. It's a miracle they say. I shake hands and laugh to the best of his ability. Aunt Martha is here. I know her secrets. She has confessed them all. And Adam with his slut daughter and my gay cousin—they're all here. I feel like he's about to molt. He has too many things inside of himself. Smile, smile, smile. Kyle goes to the bathroom four times before he hugs me. He knows your secrets, Kyle. Smile and smile. Julie cries and touches me softly. I know where your meatloaf goes—to "He." Susan hugs him tightly,

crying, not wanting to let go. She's in the corner now. He looks at her. I look at her. He has all of these confessions inside of himself that I can never give voice. They will never speak. But what is hers? Susan standing in the corner. Will she be the one to betray him? Susan fumbling with the television suspended limply above the room. What is her secret? It must be horrible. It must be the worst of all. I know it. He knows it. We know the terror that fills her silence.

Coenobito Clypeatus

The dead are resurrected, bright and electric, in plastic masks and short skirts—others vomit in strange toilets. A man years earlier than this leaves his family for, not a woman, but an old Ford truck. Even the leaves abandon the world now, running red and orange, like veins, into the belly of the street. It is this absence that bothers Sarah. Quickly...down into the hollow stomach of the town leaves stagger, sucked through darkness. And what rests down here? Giant alligators... a clock radio...Jesus and Hitler and Simon too. Water swirls past them, down into all the unknown places of the earth. A half-eaten hotdog bobs in a brown green sea. This lower world is only hunger and absence. It is this absence that bothers Simon who floats through day old shit in the lower world. Simon is a hermit crab—*coenobito clypeatus*. Sarah is a human woman. The man, older now, has lost his truck and feels nothing—not absence or hunger—only the weight of his metal suit.

But Sarah, she walks to the bus stop in the heavy fall air. Men can be seen at these stops installed in different states of transformation. You would think it was the future if you saw them. Most are strapped to some machine, only half human in their present states. This is the true form of the cyborg—men whose bodies have simply given up. An old drunk wears a boot designed to inhibit his ulcers. Next to him, a mechanic drools into the stubble stretching across the plane of his face. He looks at Sarah as she approaches. She's beautiful, but he can only see the ex-wife he used to stalk. He beat her and she threw empty bottles of Miller Lite at his head. They were in love. The last ten years he couldn't even get an erection. Sarah is beside him now, waiting on her bus. Simon is below them. He's caught on an old toilet paper roll, reaching his little pincers out of his shell trying to clamp onto the cardboard. A rat looks down at him and moves on to other vistas. The walls down here are green and brown and alive. They crawl along too, digesting

things lower and lower. And here is Simon finally pulling himself into the brown tube of highly manufactured ass paper. It bobs along nicely in the subterranean waters until a valve releases—AWHOOSH—and the levels rise and Simon is sloshed onto the concrete walkway.

“Hello, hello?” The old man is knocking on his son’s door in the upper world. It is not his son’s door. No one answers. A lobotomized pumpkin sits mute on the porch. He remembers his son having that same pumpkin look in the days before he escaped. A sign reads “Please take only one.” The old man ignores it. Children run by him, resurrected, sacks full of candy. A boy, he also ignores this sign, is dressed like a cartoon snail. He reaches into the pumpkin’s skull and takes an entire handful of candy between his fat fingers.

“Nice suit.” He bumps into the old man near the congested street.

“Oh?” The boy has vanished into the crowd. Years later, this boy will live on the edge of town. You will see him, if you look, stomping on old beer cans in the parking lot of his apartment. It will look like he’s dancing, like some ritual is being enacted in the early morning fog.

What is the world? Shadows extend and retract, blinding the sidewalk. As the children move through those dim patches of concrete, they morph into older things. In this light they are beyond fossils. The ghosts of long dead fish, the images of creatures only half-born in myth extend across the pavement. And who’s to blame? The sun is kneeling behind the clouds ready to fall on its own sword. It is shining with guilt. The old man, shining in the falling sun, steps into the current of children full of guilt as well. Sarah is still at the bus stop. She is trying to avoid the mechanic’s stare.

And then the bus arrives, driven by a retiree from the tire plant. Sarah rides this bus every day. She knows the driver, but has no idea what events have fractured his life. She gets on one step at a time in her blue apron and the driver greets her as he does every day.

Hidey ma'am, Hidey, Hidey.

Sarah works at the 24-hour market that smothers the site of an old pond. Years ago, geese came here to swim in the muddy water—to breed. Now it is a tangle of metal and rock. The sign stays lit at all hours of the night, radiating bluer and bluer into the cavity of the world. Stores like this require a sacrifice. They must eat, like us, to survive.

GOOD RIDANCE! The words are spray-painted onto the old brick of the sewer in neon orange. Simon creeps along under them. Other words exist down here too. Apparently, someone in town really hates cops; others simply WERE HERE. A face grown in blues and yellows gapes outward as if it has discovered the total secret of the world. Simon doesn't care. He wants food. He needs rocks and dirt and a place to hide. Oh...but the old man's suit, it is marvelous. His Ford truck, after it shit itself to death, became the base. The siding was folded into a hard exoskeleton; pounded with hammers and bent tenderly in the metal shops that litter the edge of town.

The suit has expanded over the years. The man has expanded. As he moves through time, scraps of life are drawn to his body. He wears a welder's mask over his face; an old hockey goalie's glove on one hand, and a snow-mitt on the other. Match-box cars are glued to his back...a kitchen timer on his left shoulder...a glass jar that used to contain grape jelly on his right. He is a shadow made both flesh and machine, residing in this upper world, wearing what looks like a pair of metal waders. Children surround him. It's a celebration. Children who could be his children run and play. He hasn't removed the suit in front of anyone in the last ten years.

The bus slows. People will soon begin removing themselves from its grip. Sarah has been avoiding the eyes of a man she may have slept with years before. He was a state trooper. In the VFW, he seemed nice enough. He wore his uniform and drank punch across the room. In bed that night he said things that made her feel strange, and when he left, she was certain he was still living in the walls of her house. It isn't him after all. As she steps out of the climate-controlled compartment, she remembers his face clearly—it was on the verge of disappearance. He looked like a missing dog. And this is similar to what her manager looks like, Jim or James, who stands in front of her presently.

“You're late.”

“Sorry.” Sarah's clocking in, forgetting her numbers, re-entering them nervously.

“Oh, don't you worry.” JimJames smiles. “Debbie's already preppin' the chicken.”

Sarah cooks here in the deli. She makes chicken and potato salad. All under the supervision of JimJames who is currently yelling at a sixteen-year-old stock boy pulling a pallet of canned fruit. Across town, Simon is still crawling along under the bright graffiti. We could say he remembers, but that really isn't the right word: Simon feels absence. The only time he felt any sort of presence at all was in his moment of birth.

These were his impressions: Darkness, shuffling darkness. Hunger. The hard shell of his mother, her legs scraping him into a large mass of water. He was surrounded by his brothers and sisters then. They huddled together and ate the trash that the world would allow them. And then there were meaty vessels flying down from the sky grabbing him by his own freshly acquired shell. Darkness. In a strange land, he smells sand and metal. Other crabs, new brothers and sisters, move slowly on the threaded wire. The alien vessels return each day. They pick him up...drop him. The small ones make him dizzy. They smell like sulfur and hotdogs. Really,

Simon is slowly drowning in the air. He is leisurely slipping away from life. And finally he is chosen—put into a hot room that moves. He can feel the movement, but doesn't know how to describe the sensation. It's like his personal shell has been consumed by another vast moving, sweating fossil. Then he stops. He is carried inside yet another shell and put into a dry box. They give him tomatoes to eat. Sounds exist all around him at different proximities. A week later, he can sense that he is returning to the ocean—glorious—but this water is not salty after all. Instead, it smells like the abandoned fish that line the rocky bottom of the sea. If he had any language at all, Simon would say this smell was ammonia and shit—cleaning fluid and old toilet paper. Simon is spinning, faster, down farther into the lower world.

The man is known in this town as Old Man Suit. At this moment, he is walking down, past the quickly darkening woods, towards his apartment. He's lived here for years. There's even a special section in the tourist guide dedicated to his terrible life. Imagine it, a middle-aged man in a fanny pack ticking off the details of Suit's total history. He was married once—yes. Did he beat his wife? No. Had he ever loved her? Yes. What happened during the second grade talent show? People say he tried to prove that the globe was hollow. He wanted to take an expedition of eight year olds into the belly of the earth. In reality, it simply says: *Watch out for Old Man Suit. If you're lucky you may see this local legend walking through town in his homemade suit. If you ask him, he might even pose for a picture.*

Across the bridge, Sarah is chopping celery. Debbie is behind her, lowering a basket of chicken tenders into a vat of grease. As the meat breaks past the oil, bubbles launch themselves into the sky. Sarah is scared. A year ago a cashier, Brenda, her husband came into the store and shot her in the face. Sarah hadn't seen the lifeless body, but she saw a vague red stain on the floor the next day. JimJames assured her it was an exploded red marker. All Sarah can think of,

and Debbie too for that matter, is who'd want them dead and how easy it would be to accomplish this task. That is not what Simon is thinking about. He feels the shell on his back. He can sense some magnetic pull emanating from the open pipe slowly approaching. A fresh wind blows down into the vein, down into the stomach of the sewer. It is not salty, but Simon can't be picky. He's dying and doesn't even know it. Everything is simply becoming thick. Amidst the wonderful pressure, he feels like he's at the bottom of the sea—like he's gone home.

Suit is on the bottom of the sea. This ocean is full of children. A grey rock shines down on the trees that sway desperately in the salt-less air. Above them this rock, the moon, hangs like a giant testicle—white and cavernous. They say the moon is mechanical. That it runs on gears and microchips and that stars are steam billowing off its milky body. This may not be true. Could Suit take his ragtag group of merry-eight-year-olds to the center of this mystery? Not likely—instead he is unlocking his apartment door under the testicular moon. He can hear his next door neighbor watching T.V. This man, his neighbor, is a bad drunk. You can see him in the morning sitting in his truck drinking vodka out of the bottle. Suit has come home, both late and early, to find him passed out on the steps that lead to the upstairs apartment. The couple that live up there have a stuffed toy that they pretend is a living child. Its name is Robert. Below them the entire hallway generally smells like liquor—like bodies shedding fluid.

“Hey man...Hey.” The door has opened. His neighbor leans out, about to dissolve under his own weight.

“Yes.” Suit turns his head. The welding mask scraps awkwardly against his metal chest piece.

“This might sound weird, but can I borrow your phone.” This man's apartment can be seen in the background. It is oddly clean. He has a large wood grain tube television in the corner.

It's playing footage from last night's race. There's a man on fire dancing in the screen. This man is running around his racecar, covered in flames—yelling. He looks like he's screaming at his own car.

“Don't have a phone.”

“Hell man, I lost mine.”

“Sorry.” Old Man Suit begins to breach his own doorway.

“Got another DUI.”

“Oh.” And it is now that Suit notices the bruises on his neighbor's face. The racecar driver is still aflame in the television screen—still screaming.

“Yeah...They pulled me over.” The man leans forward and catches himself on the frame of his door. “I didn't even have a bottle in my truck. Caught a seizure in the holding tank too.” He turns and pulls up his shirt. A purple-brown splotch of skin reveals itself on his back.

“Wow.” Suit walks into his apartment. Behind him he hears a voice dissected.

“You call my phone if you get a chance...call it.”

Sarah cuts herself. She sucks her finger tasting metal and salt. “Oh hell.”

Debbie is sneaking a French fry from a plastic tray. The exhaust vents hum above the steaming oil. They sing a little tune as men and women shop for new goods—cereals and vitamins and tampons.

The blood won't stop. Sarah has to make her way to the back office to get a Band-Aid. Debbie is enjoying her stolen fry. It smashes between her teeth. We can see the food, now, a white starch squeezing down into the depth of her throat—into her own personal lower world. Debbie's husband is at home with their two boys. She doesn't know it, but both of them will go

on to become pharmacists. And Simon crawls into the night. And Sarah wraps her hand in adhesive tape as JimJames walks into the office.

“Hey lady.” JimJames is touching his chin.

“Hi.”

“Watcha got there?”

“Cut my finger.” Sarah can feel herself inching away from JimJames. He seems to want her, but his lust is vacant. He looks through Sarah, beyond her frame, at the wall—at the soda machine which dispenses multi-flavored carbonated drinks. JimJames, in reality, is attracted to abstractions. He enjoys the idea of women, but can’t bring himself to actually love one.

The air is glorious. Simon is still slowly dying. Giant sea trees surround him now. They sway in the current underneath this gray moon. Suit stares into his fridge beneath this same sky. A dark brown liquid stains the refrigerator’s walls. He has expired milk and fresh cheese, but no eggs. Simon’s memory of his own egg is fading. Really, it’s not a memory, but a sense of fear and openness. He is beginning to get this sensation again. Now it is transformed. Under this new ocean he feels himself swelling. Giant fish swim by on four wheels smelling of oil and the half-forgotten dreams of the road. Simon has the urge to find new, bigger things. If he had any language at all he would call these things shells. The Old Man—Suit—although he refuses to embrace this new name, curses his lack of eggs.

Old Man Suit remembers a different egg now; an egg in his ex-wife’s stomach. A machine and the smell of petroleum jelly. There was a little screen...a little heart flexing in black and white, just a little wind-up bird. A woman telling him it’s a boy. And presently the metal trashcan in his dim apartment becomes this woman, or his wife, or his son—grown now into god

knows what. So he kicks it. He really fucking lays into the thing, and it falls on the floor with the sound of a brass band. His foot hurts. Now he has to get some fresh eggs.

And where did we leave Sarah? Oh yes, JimJames is standing, his breath in her face, talking endlessly about last night's race.

"He was on fire," he laughs. "Man, it was funny."

"I bet."

"You know we could watcha race together sometime."

"Well..." Sarah looks at her finger. Blood can be seen expanding underneath the adhesive strip.

Old Man Suit is out the door. Soon his house descends behind him in the night. It is an egg night. The wind is white, and the few children still out are beaten yolk. Suit can see them slumping towards home, sacks full—about to burst, about to send these boys and girls crying back to whoever still cares for them. Down the hill, Simon is rolling around the inside of an old drainage ditch. This world confuses him. The current here is weaker. There's nothing to lift him above the embankment, so he can be seen, if you were to look, moving slowly up the dirt ledge and tumbling back down for lack of footing. Up again as Sarah pulls out a freshly brined ham and moves it to the industrial slicer. And down again, falling, spinning in his shell as Sarah slices ham and thinks about that night down at the river in high school. She was drunk—there was a fish and the sound of rushing water. The next day she woke up surrounded by a couple and their dog. The dog, a golden retriever, was licking her face over and over again. She never truly knew what happened that night.

So here's Simon still stuck in the oily runoff. The moon lies above him reclining erotically against the total black universe. The urge to expand, to ejaculate out of his shell into

something larger haunts him. Each moment—thrusting himself up, half out of the water then retracting back down into rocks and algae—brings with it a building tension. It’s funny, at this moment, Simon is close to experiencing the only fear he can ever truly know, but if you were to simply stomp him to death he’d just die in complete ignorance.

Old Man Suit nearly does just that. He walks through this creek, towards the bus stop, out of a sense of nostalgia. As a boy, before he got married, left his wife, and moved across town to escape the love he felt for her, he would go fishing in this same creek. He would pull crawdads out from under their homes and take them to his mother. This memory—*take them back, release them honey*—sits inside of Suit’s guts, beneath the steel frame that forms his new skin. He looks down, now, as if time could be reversed at differing heights. As if down in the creek there is a Young Man Suit and at the bank a Middle Aged Suit and higher and higher progressing into his death. He looks down, though, and there are only rocks, running water, beer cans smashed by human feet and...Oh, a hermit crab named Simon.

The ham has been thinly sliced. Next it goes into the vacuum sealer where the meat is left to smother. Finally, Sarah puts the plastic bag full of ham into a Tupperware container and prints a sticky label to adhere to the lid. This ham costs four-ninety-nine-a-pound. Behind her, as she peels the sticker off of the printed paper, JimJames is talking quietly to Debbie about eating fries on the clock. Across the bridge, Suit bends down with some effort and picks Simon up in his right snow-mit covered hand. He brings the little guy closer, up to the narrow window that allows him to view the world through his welding mask. This window lends the world a cinematic quality. Suit is the Earth’s audience. Now he is watching a nature documentary:

The Hermit Crab has a spiral body that it hides inside its adopted shell. As they grow, the crustacean will need to find larger and larger shells to inhabit—abandoning their previous

homes. Different species live at varying depths and... so on and so on. Really Simon feels that primal urgent fear more than ever as this strange creature stares through him.

“Look at you.” Old Man Suit pivots Simon in his hand. Simon, drowning still in this gas filled sea, retracts into his home. “Hmmm...good, good.” Suit gently touches the outside of his new friend’s shell. He runs his gloved hand down the smooth surface, but can feel nothing. At home he feels...at home there are countless sensations, but outside, in the upper world, he needs to maintain some type of separation. Simon is separated too. Sarah is on a smoke break. She inhales this heavy smoke deeply as Suit, across town, unscrews the lid of the jar that previously held grape jelly and drops Simon softly inside.

Sarah drops her cigarette onto the sidewalk and crushes it with the heel of her non-slip shoe. This store makes its employees smoke in the back next to the rusted dumpsters. These metal behemoths read “TRASH ONLY... SOLO BASURA.” Inside, Debbie is taking out a tray of bread. The entire deli smells like golden yeast and a little like cleaning fluid. She looks over her shoulder as Sarah walks back behind the counter.

“Goin to Myrtle Beach next weekend.” Debbie puts down the hot bread and walks over to Sarah who, at this moment, is opening a new package of sandwich bags.

“Really? Ain’t it cold this time a year?”

“Well Greg,” this is Debbie’s husband, “he wantsta go golfing. Right now they got the best deals.”

“God I hate the trip down there. Feels like you’re goin straight into Hell.” Sarah can feel the exhaust vents syphoning air out of the building.

“I guess.” Debbie shrugs. “I just like all the fruit stands shaped like strawberries.”

Now Suit and Simon are on the bus. It is totally vacant. This is its second to last run of the night. Sounds can be heard drifting from the radio. The retired tire man changes channels, whirling the audio into a sack of jumbled voices. Old Man Suit unlatches the empty grape jelly container from his right shoulder and peers into the magnified glass. He has it set-up, it's ingenious really, so that this jar pops in and out of a plastic base to facilitate the collection of specimens. This is his best one yet—really friend more than specimen. Simon looks out of this glass jar into a creature's enormous eye. He retracts further, deeper, into the bowels of his home.

“What're you little man?” Suit taps the glass. We can see where the purple label used to expand across the clear surface. Strips of sticky paper still remain, crusted in strange patterns that obscure Simon as he attempts to vanish. And as he disappears into his shell the urge remains—stronger now—the desire to explode outward into the larger world is heavy in his small crustacean gut.

A toilet makes its home in the back of the deli. It serves both men and woman, and, because of this, you can see old pubic hairs dried onto the yellow porcelain rim. Sarah is shitting into this things open mouth. She feels water splash against her bare skin as a particularly hard turd breaks the surface tension. This movement isn't being cooperative. She has to wipe about six or seven times before the paper comes back clean. When she finally returns to the deli, Debbie is eating fries again—wiping the grease on her blue smock. The noises of the market surround them as they cook. These sounds form a certain type of code. If we could decipher it, secrets might be revealed—they might tell us of the ideal universe. In this universe, Suit is a hero. He makes his fortune drilling into the caves beneath our feet.

“You know.” JimJames appears suddenly. He's smiling in Sarah's direction. “There's a race on next week.”

Simon exits the bus. Old Man Suit exits the bus too, heavily, stepping into the electric breeze. A blue glow shines against his visor. Technically, it is illegal for a man in a metal suit and welding mask to enter into any establishment in city limits, but Suit has become just another fixture in this town. People don't even turn to look at him. Yes, certain tourists—the ones who would come to see the river—will approach him, but they are few and far between. He ignores them. Their concerns are alien to Suit. If he's in a good mood, he allows them to take a picture, but never with him. These pictures are just Suit standing—he doesn't even pose, really—like a mechanical Yeti.

We see him now, sliding through the gaping mouth of the store. These doors are said to be opened by the idea of manifest destiny. You can practically see the geese scattering for cover as steel beams drop miraculously from the sky penetrating into the earth, as the concrete is poured, as the shining neon sign is lifted, by an invisible force, into place and Old Man Suit strolls through the door cursing his lack of eggs. Here he is, picking up a basket, trailing it along behind him in a gown of metal. Over there he looks at a display of multicolored markers. These markers happen to smell like different types of fruit. Old Man Suit walks by this cardboard stand-up complete with an anthropomorphic cherry that wears a cowboy hat and smiles, imploring us to “Take a whiff!”

In the deli, just feet away, Sarah is attempting to forget every image of the beach she has ever known. As a senior in high school, she descended into this new world carrying ten cases of beer in the trunk of a friend's Caprice Classic. The terrain drops lower and lower. They roll slowly down a fog drowned mountain into the flat lands of the Carolinas. Gradually the dirt turns to sand. Nothing exists on the horizon in this world. As they ride past fruit stands shaped like strawberries and abandoned gas stations that seem to be buried alive, old roads choke backwards

into the trees. The woods are bone thick and later, at the beach, they eat what is called Calabash and drink until she vomits into a toilet with no lid. Here, presently though, in the sickly light surrounded by excellent deals and ham, she sees a man dressed in a suit shopping for eggs.

Simon feels at home in this suffocating light. Not his original home with its blackness and grit, but his middle home where the sun exploded suddenly out of the sky and reappeared just as suddenly each new morning. He smells what, if he had any language at all, he would call hotdogs and slowly roasting chicken. Sarah is behind the counter dissecting one of these chickens as she watches Old Man Suit examine the eggs. It is really kind of hard to pick up these yellow Styrofoam containers with gloves covering your hands. You would know if you ever tried it yourself. Old Man Suit is wrestling with this difficulty, trying to force the tiny hole over the fabricated packaging nipple.

Finally the nubbin slides out from its little home. Suit counts the eggs: one, two, three...yes, there are twelve finely shaped eggs living in here, all perfectly white and unbroken. Sarah sees him counting these eggs. She slices a pale chicken in the industrial slicer. No one knows where Debbie is, probably eating fries somewhere. We all know what Simon's up to—presently he is bobbing up and down on the shoulder of a large creature that carries him along toting a basket full of groceries.

Debbie reappears. She exits the bathroom with what seems to be the sniffles. Either she has a cold, or she can't get the smell of Sarah's shit out of her nostrils. In reality, she's just snorted a Xanax on the back of the pubic hair stained toilet.

"Well." Sarah turns back and looks at Debbie, still scratching her nose. "I'm about outa here for the night."

"Better sign off with the boss." Debbie sniffs twice. Once to clear each nostril.

“Oh, fuck him.”

“What, he ain’t bad,” Debbie laughs. “I think he’s sweet on you anyhow.”

“I know. He won’t let up about it. Wants me to watch the race with him.”

“Awww.” Debbie makes a strangely exaggerated face. She looks like her eyes are about to explode.

“Jesus, Deb,” Sarah laughs. She picks at the Band-Aid hanging off of her finger. The blood has now totally dried. “You’re just as bad as he is.”

At register fifteen, surrounded by gum and items AS SEEN ON T.V., Old Man Suit and Simon begin unloading their basket. Out comes toothpaste...an orange...finally those perfectly unbroken eggs. Granted, Simon has no idea what’s going on at all, but at this point, he and the creature are intrinsically linked. Something is missing, though, something he desires inside of this glass cage. It is the darkness of a new, larger home. Simon is prepared to fight for one if he has to.

In another world, the dance would begin so naturally. He remembers, if we can call it memory, a young female on her back. He wanted this shell for himself. They probed back and forth—it almost looked like they were in love, but in the end she refused an exit. And now we have returned to this point in time. We watch Simon exorcise her from the shell. He’s so much like a little surgeon. And now it’s as if he’s at a gourmet restaurant. He picks at her body, half living and dead, until this new shell becomes his home, his shell—a new darkness.

Old Man Suit feels he’s been overcharged. He enters the bus, attempting to read the receipt through the glass of his welding mask. Three dollars for a dozen eggs seems outrageous. He sits down, not realizing in fact, that he has placed himself next to another human being. Simon is on his shoulder dreaming of that shiny new shell. Next to them both sits Sarah,

scratching her knuckles. If you were to wash your hands as much as she does—and now we zoom down to see the cracks exploding from her hands—you would know the burden dry skin can enact on your flesh. Presently, Sarah looks over and sees Suit meticulously going over this small scrap of paper.

“They overcharge you?”

“Oh, what? No.” Suit turns his body to face this new phenomenon. We can hear his get-up crunch and grind against itself. “Maybe. I can’t really read through the mask.”

“Let me see it.” Sarah takes the receipt from his hand and examines it. “Looks like they did. Just for those eggs though.”

She hands the paper back to Old Man Suit. The radio on the bus is playing a song about the beach. The entire compartment of the vehicle is lit up by this noise. Suit feels sticky. Another man, a cripple, is riding home with a batch of losing lottery tickets. These are the only inhabitants of the bus.

“Hey.” Again she turns to this tin can man. “Can I ask you something?”

Suit nods. No one talks to him much. He feels his heart pumping lubricant to his chassis, to all the tiny nuts and bolts that screw him into place.

“You’re, what they call you? Old Man Suit right?”

Suit nods.

“Oh man.” Sarah moves closer to him. “You know, I always see you in the store, but to see you—well you’re kind of a celebrity.”

“My name’s not Suit.”

“Oh.” Sarah turns and looks at the other man scratching lottery tickets across the bus.

“What is it then?”

“Doesn’t matter I guess. They named me Suit, I wear the suit.”

“Could be right.” And a silence precedes them as they travel past the strip of fast food restaurants that line the streets leading to the new bridge. The old bridge was demolished years ago, and a new one was built in its place. Children were led out of the high school on the hill overlooking the river and the park. They were dragged here in single file lines to witness this destruction. Some of them will never be able to forget the dust that rose as the bridge stumbled into the river. Some of them will never remember the new bridge that rose in its place.

“Can I ask?” Sarah can’t help herself. “Why d’you wear it?”

“No one’s ever asked me that, you know.”

“Really?”

“I had a wife.” Suit touches the jar on his shoulder. Inside, Simon retracts again, back into his shell. “A son too.”

“I’ve never been married.”

“I left them,” he says.

“Oh...”

“You know, I’ve thought about what I’d say if anyone ever asked me what you just asked me and I always planned to tell them: ‘I put it on for IRON MAIDEN.’” Suit breathes or laughs. It’s hard to tell.

“What?”

“The band?!” He moves forward in his seat loudly.

“Oh yeah. I’ve heard of them.” For the first time, Sarah realizes the noise that this get-up creates. It’s like music from the future. Inside it must be terrible.

“It’s not true though.”

Across the aisle the cyborg man scratches tickets—all losers—until his finger is covered in a shiny silver film. The driver reaches down as they spill onto the bridge. He turns up the music. Now the song seems to be about trucks. Below them, below this truck music, the river flows lower and lower until, finally, it releases itself into the Gulf miles away.

“The internet...” Old Man Suit continues. “My wife was pregnant. Everything was touching me all the time. I felt like I had no privacy.”

“I can understand that...”

“And the T.V. What was it telling me?”

“Yeah, I...”

“The radio too,” Suit interrupts. “Even the old forms were harassing me.”

“I guess...”

“And then that little monitor. I saw a heart beat in that screen. It was coming alive. I thought it might come right out of the machine and attack me.”

Suit reaches for the little guy sitting on his shoulder. Sarah is totally silent. Simon is silent too. He still thinks that he’s surrounded by water.

“And it’s been good. I’m safe in here.” Old Man Suit twirls the jar in his gloved hand. The bus driver turns around briefly. He coughs and turns back to the road. Now the bridge is behind them, fading quickly into the night.

“What’s his name,” Sarah asks.

“Who?”

“Your little friend there.”

“Oh.” Suit touches his welding mask. “Simon, I’ll call him Simon.”

“Good name.”

And now everything is drawing out and drawing in. The entire Earth is throbbing, but none of these stupid humans can feel it. Suit and Sarah talk on the bus. Simon dreams crab dreams in a jar. Children all across town are beginning to dream as well. They dream child dreams as they burrow into the thick skulls of their beds. In the bus, Suit tells Sarah about his alcoholic neighbor.

“Bothers me all the time,” he says. “The guy must be in his forties.”

“Shit, how old are you?”

“Thirty something.”

“Jesus,” Sarah laughs. “I can’t even sleep without being hooked to a god damn breathing machine. You ain’t old yet.”

“I’m old enough,” Suit pleads with this woman. He extends himself outward desperately, but Sarah only sees him shrinking—getting smaller and smaller as he speaks.

For a while, there’s silence. In silence, they ride past the burned-out lumber yard and the pack of feral cats that call this place home. A man and a young girl can be seen here on Sundays feeding these cats—helping them survive the coming winter. And then the bus begins to stop itself. It pulls alongside a gas station and now we see Sarah stand in the pressure controlled cavity.

“You complain too much is your problem.” Sarah looks down at Suit and Simon as she gathers her things. “At least I thought you’d be fuckin funny.”

Sarah walks down the aisle and exits the bus. These two creatures would never speak again. We see Old Man Suit crane his neck after her. Does she look back? Does Simon look forward? Who is looking and why? The bus jerks to life. The driver turns up the radio. Now it rolls farther into the night.

Two stops later, Old Man Suit emerges from the bus. We see it now pulling away, vacant, leaving him behind. Simon is on display. Suit begins to walk home in the cold light of the gray testicular moon. Sarah is at home watching television. The television watches her. On the screen, the image of a man engulfed in flames is signing out to the world in a recursive loop. He seems to be yelling—he dances around this wreck of flaming metal yelling and singing as if he could bring his car back to life. On the street, and now we see Suit cross through the creek from his youth, the last remnants of children are heading home. These kids don't even wear costumes. They've been out late tipping over port-a-potties and smoking. Suit looks down at the creek pouring into the old earth. In another world he would have taken his band-of-merry-eight-year-olds to the center of this mystery. Sarah gets up and goes to her kitchen to make a cup of Ramen Noodles. The steps are as follows:

Step One: Bring two cups water to a boil. In this other world, the ideal world, Suit and his men are steeped in muck and shit, chiseling through layer after layer as they dig into the asshole of the earth.

Step Two: Add noodles and remove water from heat. Suit stands above these children. He is wearing a yellow vest, relaying complex directions into this terrestrial cavity. Simon is on his shoulder. They are both smiling widely.

Step Three: Add flavor packet and stir. But we are not in that underground world—we are in this world. Here a middle-aged man walks home, up the hill and into his house, stepping over the drunk passed out on the porch. The man wears a dilapidated pair of metal waders. A dying crab rests on his shoulder. Sarah is at home eating noodles. It is late October. A racecar driver melts slowly in the night. Children are running through the streets, heading home to their parents. They are hungry for illness. They are hungry.

Matador

The breasts themselves are as two eyes...We do not know how the nipples of the breast are as fountains leaping into the universe, or as little lamps irradiating the contiguous world, to the soul in quest—D.H. Lawrence

The doctors in high school told me that my vision was in the near twenties. I could see well enough. I could see Big Dan's nose ooze blood onto the gym floor after he ran into a black metal pole. Coach Easter was led away in handcuffs to die of AIDS, and I saw that too. Time had eaten away at them, but I could still see.

Years later, I was in the park being felt up by darkness. Me and Manny walked through this old gloom as fireflies sparked and burnt out all around us. The bars had closed. I may have been thrown out, but who could remember? We argued about wrestling as we walked in the stomach of the night. Was it sports entertainment or performance art? Could Jesus have been the first true wrestler? Upon the cross he sold it well enough.

Bugs whistled—they hummed in unison as we walked under the old trestle. A boy had died there years ago. He thought he could crawl under a motionless train, but soon separated from himself. Motion is fundamental to all things. We—me and Manny—were full of motion. The stroll through the park became packed with meaningless energy. We didn't know why we were there, or where we were going, ever, in all honesty. In moments like this, I touched the urge that statues must feel—I just needed to move. My dog was dead. Heaven consumed him now. His name was Little Hank. I never had any type of bitch wife, and now my dog was dead. As I said before, meaning had escaped from my life and the only thing left was motion.

“You ever seen a bullfight?” Manny scratched his ass and ate sunflower seeds.

“No, why?”

“Don’t know. Saw a documentary on it once.”

The night reeked of oil and salt. We took a left into the center of the park. My house was to the right down a blind road. The path disappeared towards home, into the dark throat of trees.

“A bullfight,” Manny began again after some hesitation.

“What about it?”

“It’s like a dance, you know.” Manny’s family was known for their stories. His mother had arrived here illegally. She worked in an Italian restaurant on the west side of town. Rumor had it that they put bugs in their dough—that the entire crust involved all of the insect limbs that ever combed the earth. His father’s family had settled this great nation. Trees north of here had his grandpaps initials scrapped into the bark.

“Oh yeah.”

“Yeah, you gotta respect the bull.”

“You kill the bull,” I corrected. A shelter sat to our right. People gathered here to grill dead meat and relax. As a child, I went to birthday parties there. Hornets lived in the rotting wood, and fed off whatever syrup we left behind. Beyond that, beyond the shelter and the field, sat the river. It hummed with copulation.

“No. You respect the bull.” Manny kicked an old Mountain Dew bottle full of piss. “You fight it, and, I don’t know, you wear it out.”

“Okay.”

“Then—like in this show—the bull is all pissed off, and tired, and snot and blood is, like, dripping out of its nose.”

“What happens next?” I was excited at this point. I never had anyone to tell me stories. My father left to go to clown college and never came back. Mother never said very much about

it. She was dead now too—both her and Little Hank. I imagined them swimming through the earth like boneless angels.

“Next?”

“Yeah, next.”

“Well the bull’s all tired.” Manny popped a sunflower seed into his fat mouth. “And the guy, the, what is it? The matador—he stabs the fucker right through the hump on his back.”

“Jesus!”

“Yeah, I know.”

“Wow.”

“Right after, a guy jumps outta the crowd with a tiny pistol, you know. He shoots the bull square in the head.” Manny put his finger to his temple. His hand was meant to resemble a gun.

“That’s it?” God it was terrible. I saw mother. I saw Little Hank. Both of them were snorting on all fours, squatting like animals, their feet scraping at the earth, searching for whatever traction would connect them back to life. I imagined they were in heaven now with all the other ideas that had disappeared from this earth. In heaven, everyone is covered in a red mucus, so I hear, and the sinful ancient gods of Greece and Rome crawl around half-born. I could not remember where I learned these truths. I had been to a lot of different churches. I had watched a lot of television.

“Yeah that’s tradition.” Manny smiled.

“God.” We were close to the second shelter now. “D’your parents ever do anything like that?”

“Nah, they hate that shit.”

A friend told me once that the moon was a mechanical hoax. He sold me good pills, and we did them, together, until we passed out in the bed of his truck. Who paid for that machine giant? Was it just the eye, just the tip, of something larger? A train laughed behind us now as if it was remembering my friend too. It had just escaped, whistling as it sped over the old bridge. In a few hundred feet, the trail would bend around the old public pool and lead us back towards home. This pool was now filled with dirt. I had fond memories of the place. Mother used to drag me there so she could tan on the ten dollar-an-hour chairs. Her skin became leather by the end of it. Life was preparing her to be a nice pair of gloves. These were good memories, but how could I be sure they were real? Summer overtook us now, and I craved the touch and sights of the public pool, but it was all filled in. I anticipated this sight. Moving closer to the field, though, I saw the emptiness had transformed.

In front of us sat a structure made of dirt and rocks. I was surprised. There hadn't been anything here earlier this week. It was here now though. The structure struggled out of the ground like a half hatched child. Walls shot from one end of the field to the other, sharp and smooth. They formed a large rectangle. We moved closer. I felt very small in the presence of this thing. When I was just a kid, me and my friends would burn bugs with a magnifying glass. We'd strap firecrackers to bees and watch them disappear into smoke. Many of the same old feelings from back in the bug and smoke and glass days returned in the presence of this thing, but all of them were reversed.

"Shit." Manny ran his hand over the rough surface as we traced the perimeter. Roots poked out of the walls like the earth could barely contain itself. Beyond the dirt, the river sang as it flowed to the lower places of the earth. Insects creaked mechanically along its banks. We were reaching the end of the structure. An old bus sat in the parking lot out front. Its tires were flat and

rotted to nothing. As I turned the corner, I saw that the entrance to the pool was still standing. Manny ran toward the gate that formed its mouth. Whoever built the thing had attached it to the old office. Manny pried at the door, stopping to eat his seeds, spitting the shells out, shaking the metal bars until the gate creaked open. A black hole stood toothless where the door had been. I had heard about the black hole on television. They say nothing, not even light, can outrun this phenomenon.

The office was really a shack. It had a long hallway with two rooms on either side. Everything became a vague shape swimming in the night. We passed the old locker room on our right. I tried to get a girl to let me finger her back there one sunny afternoon, but she didn't go for it. Kids splashed in the kiddie pool. My mother lay spread across the ground on her ten-dollar-an-hour chair. That was the closest I've ever come to loving a woman. Manny walked right beside me in the dark now. He seemed scared. I could smell his sweat. He hadn't washed his clothes in some time and they stank of beer and piss.

"Can't see." He looked from side to side.

The office sat to the left. Here the night descended into a lower darkness. I had heard about this type of thing in a song once. *In this darkness*, he sang, *this singer, you're in the stomach of a giant—some machine giant*. Both man and machine existed in heaven. I knew this to be true as well. We were pushed forward by this truth—by nature—the oldest machine of all. The only light, and that, really, was the dark itself, waved at us from the far end of the hallway that used to open into the pool. In the past, a sign hung over the entrance that read "Pool." As we exited the hallway, though, we could see that it had taken on another form.

"It's a maze." My stomach hurt. I must have eaten bad nachos.

"No, it's a labyrinth." Manny had eaten the nachos too.

The Labyrinth expanded before us. We walked into its body, into a large room. Here the entire thing looked to be made of rocks and hard clay. But the walls—televisions and cell phones were strapped to the dirt with chicken wire. I didn't even own a God damn phone, and here they were for anyone to steal. Ratchet sets littered the ground—they spread themselves out like rusted birds. I would have taken everything for myself if it weren't for sin. There were benches too. Old ones from the park had been dragged in and thrown around unevenly. Most of them were missing a plank or two. Some had boards snapped in half, still attached to the corroded metal. It was amazing. The machines were still speaking; still flashing to life with the hum of insects. Wires ran from the walls and congealed into fat bundles that crept back into the office.

"Must still have power." Manny walked toward one of the televisions. It was playing a commercial for orthopedic shoes. He touched the smooth surface.

"Why isn't it a maze?" I suddenly remembered our disagreement.

"Huh?"

"A lab-ee-rinth not a maze, remember." I had seen the movie with David Bowie as a child.

"Oh." Manny kept his hand on the screen, smiled, removed his hand and walked to another set that was showing exercise videos. He turned it off then back on. It popped with life. A new image blossomed on the screen.

"Yeah, a maze has, like, multiple paths...or, you know," he looked over his shoulder at me.

"What's the difference though?"

“There’s only one path man,” he pointed to a dim corridor that extended deeper into the center. A warm glow flickered with hunger from inside. “A labyrinth is, you know, it a...only has one path.” He threw a seed into his mouth. “It only has one path straight to its heart.”

I had a heart. I had lungs, and skin, and even an ear. Inside my ear lay the cochlea. This is the labyrinth of the skull. It signaled some mystery. The cochlea is the auditory portion of the ear. It hears the words—words like *bull* and *train* and *Little Hank*. The words vibrate through the cochlea to reach the brain. Inside of me an idea flashed to life. This labyrinth had some mystery at its heart. I could taste it in my pupils. What greater mystery than death? I had listened to preachers and televisions speak this wisdom to me for years. These vibrations—felt by eyes and ears—were still present. Little Hank was still here. He sat in my cochlea—Little Hank sat at the center of all this beautiful humming dirt.

“We...”

“Come on let’s explore.” Manny ran ahead of me before I could explain.

The labyrinth had only one path, but it twisted frantically. I tripped over bundles of wires as Manny ran ahead into the darkness. I felt strangled. The walls argued around us in flashes of blue-green light. Which soap was the best? Which computer? Who was I supposed to fuck? Who to kill? These lights strained against my face. I must have looked strange. Manny looked strange too. He was my shadow leaping ahead of me. I could hear him laugh like death just beyond my sight.

“Manny?!” The walls pulsed with energy. I felt the blind terror of heaven like I was being circulated to the center of some great mystery. Little Hank would be at its core. Maybe mother would be there too and all the old dead things of the world.

“Hello,” Manny called back from somewhere deep in the gullet of the structure. The Labyrinth had eaten him just as it was eating me. I ran forward to catch the sound, or some vision of my friend. When I found him, he was staring into a doorway covered in vines and wires. The lower dark from the office lived here as well. It seeped out of the entrance. This had to be the heart—the center. Little Hank rested here. Mother rested here like a tired old bull. In this dark stomach, something called out to me. I walked past Manny into the shadows.

Inside, there was only the dark. Televisions flickered off in the distance, but they were forbidden here. I could hear Manny follow me in. I felt a certain need rise up in my chest. It was frantic. I wanted to cry or beg—I wished my life was in danger. Where was little Hank?

“Little Hank!?” I cupped my hands to my mouth. Manny tapped me on the shoulder. I turned around—it was odd I could almost see right through him.

“Look at that.” Manny pointed at the ground in front of me. An old rotary phone lay in the dirt. It was smashed to bits. The receiver’s guts hung out loosely. I could almost see them move. God, they looked like little worms trying to rip free of the plastic. I wonder if that’s how the soul feels; if it just wants to escape from us. But there was no Little Hank. Mother was not here. Nothing lived in this cold tomb except an old phone waiting to die.

“C’mon.” I turned back to Manny. He was eating his sunflower seeds again, spitting the salty shells on the ground. “Let’s get out of here.”

“Now?!”

“I havta work in the morning,” I told him.

“Ok, ok.” Manny looked like he was going to pass out. He had done a handful of pills on the back of the toilet in the bar. They were beginning to take advantage of him.

The labyrinth started to unwind as we traced our steps back to the office. Televisions lit up all around us, blinding me in sudden bursts. Manny didn't seem to notice. My stomach hurt. I could barely see. I stumbled over a set of pliers as we walked north towards the bridge hanging high above the river. The old bridge was destroyed years ago. At the time, I was in high school. They let us out of class to watch it crumble into the depth of the river. They call this a controlled demolition. I could almost see it exploding, almost see it rebuilt, in those moments walking through the passageways of the structure. The walls lit us dimly in the night. We existed between these flashes of light, between commercials and darkness. Eventually we arrived at the old shelter. I was surprised to see it, surprised to ever be returned. Soon even the shelter was behind us. I could hear the river again. I could see the road that snaked back to my house.

"D'you hear the news?" Manny suddenly turned to me.

"I heard about Tiffany's baby."

"We've finally done it."

"Done what?" I needed to shit. We had left the labyrinth behind, but the lower darkness was now living in my guts. Little Hank was dead. Little Hank was dead.

"We've broken out of the heliosphere," Manny gasped. He raised his head like a machine being powered on. "We've left the solar system. We've finally done something."

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The next morning I woke up with the floor stuck to my face. I was wet. Manny was gone. My punching bag hung dry in the back of my throat. They call this the uvula. It means *little grape* in some foreign tongue. The television told me this, but I wasn't sure I could believe that beautiful screen anymore. Little Hank was not in the labyrinth. All of the old mystery had

vanished from my life only to be replaced by the labyrinth. Who built it and how quickly? Where were my socks? Really I didn't care. Where was Little Hank?

I got up and went to the bathroom. A puddle of piss was reaching out from the base of the toilet. My house was built crooked, so that when you pissed on the floor, it would slowly expand outwards all night long. Everything came back to me now. We had watched a kung-fu movie. This one had to do with Chinese vampires. In China, vampires hop around looking for what the Asians call "Chee," but if they come across a sack of rice they have to count every grain before they move on. I turned on the shower. Are they vampires or zombies? The bathroom began to fill with steam. I got in and sat down level with the rotting caulk. Old beers and old bottles of body wash littered the rim of the tub. The shower had always been my baptism. Now, though, my left big toe was numb and I felt nothing. I wondered if my chee had been sucked dry in the night, but I was beginning to question everything I had ever known to be true.

Later I cooked eggs over easy and let the yoke dry on my plate into a deeper shade of yellow. This was how Mother cooked. I had dreams about her that I could never really surface. We were just shapes rearranging ourselves, bumping into each other, shifting into other patterns. These thoughts ran through my mind as I shut the door behind me—what shape was Mother and what shape was I? The sun sat in the sky laughing at me. Who cares what it thought about me anyway? As a child, I bet a friend that he couldn't stare at the sun for ten minutes straight. Eventually he went blind, not from that, but from being sprayed in the face with pesticides.

Outside, my moped sunned itself next to the curb. I had acquired this shit bucket from my blind friend. Really he wasn't all that blind, but pretended to be for the disability. I strapped my helmet on. This is how I was forced to get around—on an old moped. Other bikers would pass by and wave like we knew each other, but really we were all strangers. Most days this brought me

comfort, but today I did not wave. Cars buzzed by me and I couldn't even lift my arm. It was a wet morning, and the fog made itself known on the rim of my visor. When I got to work it dawned on me that I may have still been drunk.

Inside, the restaurant vibrated with activity. People talked about the mysterious labyrinth that had appeared in the park. Idiots, I knew there were no mysteries to be found there. I was a chef by trade. These humans lined up for my food every morning—every afternoon and night. Management stared at me. His name was Dave. We had graduated high school together. He went to college, but got kicked out for committing a minor rape. Is there anything beyond this stupid world? Any punishment for men like him? It was heaped on all of us, but I couldn't think about that now. Instead, I walked right to my grill. Dave glanced at his watch. His hair looked like it could fall out at any minute. In fact, his whole body seemed to be on the verge of levitation—he could barely hang on. I began to wonder if the rapture was upon us, but no, the sky rested empty today. I busied myself at the grill to escape these ideas. I thought about wrestling. I imagined the burgers as little wrestlers flipping on the hot skillet, selling their pain.

“Hello? Hello?” Dave tapped me on the shoulder.

“Hello.”

“I need you to go ahead and pay attention to what yer doin.” He ran his hands through what hair he had left.

The truth is I wasn't. All I could think about was Little Hank. He seemed very distant. How could I pay attention to these burgers with the worms so quickly advancing? Now I was forced to look at the pink of all this meat. I began to get an erection. There is something sexual about death. The French call the orgasm “La petite morte.” This means the petite death. I told this to Dave.

“What’s that haveta do with anything?” He grabbed my spatula from me.

“Don’t know.”

“Jesus man.” He shoved the spatula back into my hand. “You even listenin to anything I’m saying?”

“I’m tryin,” I lied.

“Well, try harder. Get back to fuckin work.”

I worked. The burgers moved up and down. Baskets of golden fries were dropped screaming into the hot oil until they drowned beside me. Nothing worked. I felt like throwing myself into the fryer to see how crisp I would become. Dave was still watching me. I wouldn’t give him the satisfaction.

“What’s your problem?” Dave was behind me again. He had a large brown stain on the front of his shirt.

“Me?”

“Yeah, you.” He twirled a set of keys around his fat fingers. “You’re movin slow as hell.”

“My dog died,” I told him.

“I don’t...”

“He got run over.” I felt my eyes begin to water. “I saw all his insides.”

“I don’t care about your damn dog.”

God, he was smiling. I could see the spit shining off his teeth. There’s a story in the Bible where Jesus fed a starving dog. I think this dogs name was Canaan. Then Jesus spoke. He told his followers: *Even dogs eat the crumbs from the man’s tables.*

“I...”

“And another thing.” I couldn’t listen anymore. Dave’s voice became a low hum. I was empty—no—I was full of the lower darkness. It was even worse. All my insides had emerged just the same as Little Hank’s. Manny stumbled through the door. He was supposed to work today, but no one ever knew where he was or even cared. An old woman filled her water cup with Mountain Dew a few feet away. She was all alone. Manny bumped into her as he walked to the counter. Her drink sloshed all over the floor. Pellets of ice slid across the dirty tiles.

“Jesus.” Dave looked out of the kitchen.

“Hey! Hey man.” Manny was twitching mildly. The old woman crouched down behind him, picking up all the loose ice that had fallen from her cup. She was bringing her children home—scooping them up in the bony hands.

“Hey.”

“This guy,” Dave snorted. He seemed almost happy about it.

“Yeah.”

“Hey man. We gotta go.” Manny leaned on the register. “Gotta go.”

“Why?” I was confused. Motion surrounded me.

“Manny.” Dave ran his hands through his hair violently. “You’re late”

“Go. We gotta go.”

“Get back to work.” Dave pushed me toward the grill. “You can’t show up intoxicated, Manny.”

“I’m not intoxicated,” Manny told him. “I’m fucked up.”

“Where we going?” I dropped my spatula. Customers were beginning to stare.

“The labyrinth...The labyrinth.” Manny did a little vaudeville dance.

He was a puppet without strings, but I could see deeper connections running from his limbs.

“You ain’t goin nowhere.”

“Ok, ok.” I couldn’t take it anymore. There was too much motion here. The burgers spoke to me from the grill. I took off my apron and threw it on the ground. Dave yelled and yanked at his hair as I walked around the counter. Nothing in me wanted to go back to the park, but I had nothing in me anyway. As we walked out of the restaurant, the old woman was still collecting her ice.

Behind us, Dave waved his hands like a drowning child. He busted through the door as we got in Manny’s car, yelling, “I’ll replace both your ass. Oh boy, I’ll be glad. I’mma replace you with a fuckin toaster!”

Manny’s car quivered as it snorted to life. The floorboards were full of trash. Receipts sat piled among molding soda cans in the backseat. Every time I got in his car, I was amazed.

“Good Lord man.”

“The trash?”

“Yeah, the trash.” I picked up a melted piece of gum and examined it.

“It’s for disasters.” He gripped the wheel and pounded on the gas. “You never know what you’ll need.”

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The light was dying behind the mountains when we arrived at the park. The field hummed with life. Humans swarmed everywhere in their little tracks. Cars hung in the grass half parked at angles that suggested urgency. The labyrinth was still here. It lounged in the warmth of

the summer, intruding in a natural way like it was here to replace something. The structure fought its way out of the earth. It looked like some abortion that wouldn't let go. That was a sin too, but did it even matter anymore? Manny parked illegally. We had seen cops parked in the grass too, but no one cared. I heard the labyrinth buzzing underneath the crowd. People were yelling. Tickets—Help—Tickets—Bathroom? God, they were selling tickets to the thing. We got out of the car and walked past a wailing child covered in shit, or some type of frozen treat.

Reporters crowded the park as well. “No one knows where it came from, but reports indicate two unidentified males were spotted leaving the scene late last night.” A blonde professional readjusted her skirt. “Let's try it again.” She motioned to the camera. “No one knows...”

The camera's red light blinked off and on. People were arguing. Dentists fought over the true meaning of life. One of them had removed a molar from me the year before. He was a Jew the same as Christ. I felt nothing, although I was scared. Manny appeared to be delighted.

“Look at everyone.”

“People?” I asked.

“No. Human nature.” Manny was always full of shit even when he wasn't. I secretly hated him, but he was my best friend.

Ahead of us, the old office welcomed people into the labyrinth. Time hung heavily all around it. I remembered walking into its dark mouth with mother and then with Manny just the night before. I remembered Little Hank. The water waited for us somewhere in the past, but now men in bad suits waived signs frantically. They claimed to give tours to this mystery as if it had meaning. Behind them, the structure seemed to shift in the hot sun. It still spoke. I heard an ad prophesizing the end of bad breath. The river laughed painfully beside all of us.

“We should get a tour.” Manny reached into his pockets and pulled out an old bottle cap.

“Why?”

“The knowledge.” He smiled. “Can you spot me?”

It seemed reasonable although I had no money. As we got closer to the structure, the future became clear. Manny would own a hot dog restaurant that would fail miserably. He would occasionally be accused of beating his wife. I had a bright future. I felt like Lucifer. Little Hank’s death soaked into my pores. He was never coming back, never. Time had stopped for me, and I was falling through it—falling toward the labyrinth once again. All these people were here to worship it, and I hated them. I suddenly realized I hated all of humanity. The love of God our Christ may have been real, but I couldn’t feel it inside me anymore. When mother would take me to church as a child, I would raise my arms, and I felt this love pour into me. In the past, I was an empty vessel filling with holy love. Now, the lower dark sloshed around inside my stomach, and I just had to shit.

“Can you help me?” I felt something tug on my sleeve. An old woman stood behind me. She was short and fat. Her shirt looked like some type of spandex material. It barely covered her gut. She was leaking everywhere.

“Can you help me?”

“What?”

“I need help.”

“What can I do?” I felt sick again. Manny was off near the entrance, haggling with a man waving a sign. He had no money, but that didn’t stop him.

“I’d like a picture of myself.” She smiled. “With the maze.”

“It’s a labyrin...”

Her teeth were gray with age. Some of them were missing.

“Well sure, I guess.” I wanted to crawl inside of her, but instead, she handed me a camera. It was a Polaroid. The thing looked like it came out of a science fiction movie.

The old woman waddled over to the labyrinth. It expanded behind her room after room all connected and strung together. She blended into this mess like she was simply woven into it. I had trouble telling which parts belonged to her and which belonged to the dirt. Somewhere in my backyard, Little Hank sat motionless in the same earth. He could not be resurrected. This woman smiled like there was still joy in the world, but I could not see it. Looking at her, I felt nothing. Her face—nothing. Her arms—nothing. Her stomach—good Lord!—below the hem of her shirt sat two mounds of flesh.

What I originally thought to be her stomach was actually the tips of her breasts. Blue veins arched and flowed underneath the skin. It was like there were men welding under this woman’s flesh. They lay there calmly lounging on her belly. A simple shirt could not contain the eyes that wriggled down through her shirt to peer into the outer world. The nipples were gray points surrounded by pale white flesh. Skin smooth, the veins so blue, almost flower purple—they pumped hot purple-blue light to the iris. They blossomed like two eyes. God, they were staring right into me. A gray-blue pupil poked out of each one becoming purple, and then gray, and then blue again. When she moved they rolled in their sockets—blue and gray against the white. I wanted to laugh. The laughter rose and mixed with the lower darkness that hung in the bottom of my stomach. In truth, and when I say this I mean it: It was the greatest moment of my entire life. I had discovered the secret of the world before it could find out mine.

“Say cheese.” I smiled. The woman smiled too, her nipples hanging out, shining into the world. I pushed the button. The camera fizzled and vomited out a white negative. The

photograph was hot to the touch. The river moved beside us. A bull somewhere across the ocean was enjoying his own death. The labyrinth, here and now, buzzed with the sex of water. And this old woman's nipples, they looked right into my eyes. The urge to testify, to dance, to sing and laugh pumped through the spontaneous centers of my body. Little Hank was not in heaven. Mother lay infertile deep in the mud. I shook the picture violently until life burst from its skin.

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