

Fiction and Other Fiction
By
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For Wanda

DROPPING MATCHES

Coming to, the head is a tender bag of brain, eyes, and bones. I know this when I poke the head with broken dangling fingers, dangling off like, what are they like? Teeth.

The teeth that don't dangle from my mouth are lodged in a dangling tongue. I suffer as a matter of opinion.

Through what I can guess are slits I see woods, mostly. Unremarkable woods, brown and stuff. Though I do catch shades of overcast sky during writhing. The most shocking thing about shock is that it is still; the most shocking thing about working in a bomb factory is when it blows up. I'm not sure, currently, that I have all the limbs; skin hangs loose like wet towels and drags in leaves. Tops of trees match eyeball veins I can kind of see, and they throb and burn a little, like when a rude man takes your picture.

I would guess the rest of me is messed up equally, but I no longer feel most things. The only things I feel hurt, hurt off any kind of scale I could have ever even wondered about.

Some people are just so stupid you just wish their dumb god would go ahead and kill them already. How stupid do you have to be to drop a match in the one spot you are never supposed to drop nor even think of dropping a match on? You would have to be a serious genius to light your dumb pipe and drop the match at that exact spot, in that exact factory that does nothing but produce those bombs. It's a bomb fact. A serious genius.

I might have just passed out little, but a twig stuck in a lung soothes me awake, like when the wife would rub between the shoulder blades to get me to get up to take care of something. It is very similar, elementally, to when we laid together after I'd apologized. Pain, swelling, choking on mud. She said I had bad habits but don't we all have habits? Only fools are without habits.

I have become opinionated to a certain extent in these moments since I exploded from the bomb factory. Before I'd been getting to work and letting my mind fixate on this wife and children and this family thing. Then I didn't have time for opinions, neither their ill ones, ill of me, neither mine. This opinionation has since been birthed with the accidental flame on the floor of the fuse department, spreading down the aisle to the powder shop, initiating a chain of small fires and explosions that built up to send me what must be several hundred meters away from it. I crawl, or maybe shuffle in the same direction as my initial trajectory, approaching now more mud to suck on to get some moisture into this mouth-like orifice. It was when I was airborne, sailing over the part of the parking lot that has the extra-wide spaces for the bosses that I developed these opinions, a clicking into place of opinions if you will.

They have tools to measure pain. These tools are scales, ones that go from one to ten. Pain is understood in increments. But some of them get clever and go to seven. When it is ten we have more precision, yes, can still count them on our fingers. Some serious genius or another went and figured out there are only seven layers of pain to suffer. And at the seventh, there you'll be done. Not six or eight or anything. This genius: a genius.

Children who can barely speak, or sufferers of pain in so much pain as to be mute or babbling must point to a face. Instead of communicating your pain you point at a face to communicate your pain. A little drawing. This face: this is how I feel right now. The face might be happy or neutral or sad or otherwise, depending on how you feel. A couple lines, some suggestions of eyes. A mouth.

Here is the opinion I have developed in spite of my wife and children and their absence from my life and because of my sailing through the air with bricks and steel. Here is the opinion about how these scales are never calibrated between individuals. Here is the opinion as to how, instead of pain, with scales there are magnitudes, some paper and words. The man that came up with those seven different layers: a sick man. The sick genius must have never had a family, must

have never known that pain that slips between other layers of pain, plants itself, grows between layers and metastasizes like a little tumor. Certain pain trumps others, they admit. Pain is standardized. This is your pain. Here is the opinion on pain: this is your face, unrecognizable.

Of course this is just an opinion, and like habits, everybody has them. The wife and children are no longer my wife and children: wife because she moved away or something and married somebody else and children because they are no longer children. Son does philanthropic work for some outfit that deals in disease. Last time I saw him he was with a moustache and carrying a smaller version of himself. Daughter deals in issues somewhere else doing some such thing, some kind of thing that doesn't give her any time in the year.

They have opinions. They always resented my work and then resented me when I told them that this sort of work is important work. Bombs serve a strict purpose. Take any thing, I would tell them. Take any thing you can imagine. It could be a toy you like, a dog, a Buick, a library. Take a loved thing. Hold this object in your mind and run your mental eye along its surface; feel its presence in the same mental room as you. Daddy's job is to smash this thing—it never matters what the thing is—to make it gone, to *disappear* it. Daddy works hard with many hard-working people and this is his job. And like most jobs I work I love it in an exclusive way, a way that excludes, at least temporarily and in certain contexts, all other things a person could love. This is the nature of good work, I told them. It is thorough and total.

The thing is I am very attached to my face. It was a good face, I was told, and I would like for it again to someday be my same face. A few colleagues at the bomb factory had told me I had the cheeks of Kurt Douglas, the famous actor known for his chin. Known for his chin, they would say, but his cheeks were overlooked and nice, and, that I had them I should be so proud of them they were so nice. My wife hadn't complemented my cheeks since before our second was conceived, and so I took it especially well when the girl at the plastic jewelry place or the waitress or even once the butcher pointed them out as nice. Many told me I had the brows of George Clooney, the famous actor; someone once let it slip they thought my philtrum resembled that of Bob Pitt, the other famous actor; the secretaries in the office of the bomb factory would tease me for my cleft's resemblance to that of the famous actor Tom Crew. Yet my son once commented that my nose's bridge looked like a private area he then pointed to. These are all famous actors. These are all successful famous actors, known for their good looks. My face was of them, as they were of my face. It couldn't possibly resemble the private part he indicated.

Once at a company softball game, it was commented that my head, and face in particular, suggested the same silhouette as a famous athlete who, the observer noted, escaped memory. At a company picnic I was told I had the ear-formations of several of the great economists. The babysitter said my teeth were calm as bay windows. Someone once said I had lips softer-looking than a baby's fist. My face has been compared to many people and things. By the touch of it now, my face resembles a bag of some kind, a baggy bag, a tender bag.

My wife said this of my eyes once: they don't match. She said matching eyes are the key to facial symmetry, the key to facial beauty and that they don't match on me.

So they all had an opinion on my face and never did theirs match with the favorable opinions of my face I heard from elsewhere. When opinions don't match you are in trouble if you can't find something to point to.

Once my daughter cut my son's throat on a fishing expedition, my son punched my wife in the lip once when she told him his pants looked bad, my wife once bit a chunk from my calf when the four of us dog-piled for the last of the holiday leftovers. She said it was a mistake but everyone always said it was a mistake. I once punched my daughter in her weak forehead when she publicly

spit in my eyes. That was probably a mistake but I didn't ever say it was. Antagonism was a ritual of bonding.

It would be in one of those big malls in suburbs where the kids liked the smells and neon lights. Kids were small then, with dirty chins, big eyes and slight British accents they'd picked up from television.

Daughter to son: you have a skeleton inside of you!

Son to daughter: no I do not!

Daughter to son: yes you do!

I pulled them apart by their hair a little.

He: no I do not you dumb cur!

She: yes you do too you ninny!

Son to father: Daddy is it true I have a skeleton inside of me?

I spent a few minutes away from the food court line and leaned against a pillar, rubbing my temples in the constant sound. Watching paper bags float past I figured it wouldn't matter that I let the kids wrestle in the food line to settle the matter. It seemed resolved that son didn't have a skeleton inside of him. Looks from passing families said I should have said something. That I should have said then yes, son, you do have a skeleton inside of you. That I should have said then yes, daughter, you too do have a skeleton inside of you. That I should have said then yes, children, your father too has a skeleton inside of him too, as does everybody you've ever seen: your favorite friends, your loving mother, the adult-sized television-rabbits. Every body is a skeleton waiting to happen, and you will know you have a skeleton inside of you when it begins to stare back at you.

But I never said anything, and we walked back out to the sedan indifferently.

Sometime in the first decade of my work, I took them all to a retirement party for a colleague who was finishing his tenure assembling walls for detonator housings. It was a large and fabulous gathering. My family disappointed me. At the party I shook hands with colleagues; we joked and sang our little assembly line songs and dumped hors d'oeuvres on our paper plates. The wife and children sat in the corner on chairs and stared at me across the room like I had no head, like I shouldn't be having a gay time with my colleagues on a Saturday afternoon. Their nagging looks ruined not only the pâté but also the bluegrass ensemble.

My line supervisor asked me that day, the only day I had ever been asked this, "Has anyone ever said to you you have the face of a pained man?"

While my wife and daughter fought about their shoes, my son drank near-empties. I gathered them all, in a corner and hushed them, then went to remove our family from attendance. As we got to the exit, my line supervisor snapped a picture of us, angry-faced and uncomfortable, barely touching in the narrow hallway. My daughter called my line supervisor Yiddish words as we left. In the car ride home he was our common enemy.

If you think my pain matches any one of those stupid little faces you are incorrect. If you think my pain matches any one of those stupid little descriptions you are insane.

It is thought that when we approach our dying phase that we turn to forgiveness, that we forgive others who have wronged us. I would have never believed it but I am now of the opinion that it's true. I forgive the serious genius that lit his dumb pipe and dropped the match on that pile of fuses. I forgive him because he was a young guy, a new recruit to the bomb factory, and he resembled fairly well a favorite actor of mine. But some people. Some people you just wish would die already. Some people you wish would just die and let the part of you that knew them die too already.

I am approaching some end of the ground; it appears there is a lip of dirt that looks down on an open field of brown leaves and I hear the noise water makes. I see through a pin hole for the

first time since the explosion what could be agreed to be a distance; between myself and distance is the haze that enough of it makes. The pleasure distance brings reminds me I'm easily forgotten, because in the distance I see what I haven't seen since flying out of that globe of flame, clearly: distance.

I cry in the dawdling position a while.

Between myself and the distance erupts a helicopter, winding down from above, its wind growing in strength, blowing a tuft of hair over my tender forehead. Crucial little hollows in the inner ear remain intact, it seems, or else I am beginning to hear through the sternum that slides along this rock. It accompanies the F# ringing, contained inside this head, the idea of a sound.

Awareness flutters like the blades, in and away and in again. I am turned over and can see something like the sun, a far away thing, not a circle but still round, yellow like coal, a suggestion of sun, a clue for finding one. I think I'm hoisted onto a gurney by blurry figures. Ropes tighten over what is left of my ankles, thighs, gut, shoulder, forehead. I can feel movement, in spurts, upward, nagging me closer to the sun. The smell of burning bomb factory hits my nose without any attempt to smell it. Higher into the air I can feel woods brush past me, the tops of trees clinging to my sleeves like a lonely party host. I am spinning up to the top of the woods, like a top. Get it? *Top*.

Anybody who holds ill opinion of me would love for me to think of them in this moment and how much I miss them and how much I've done wrong to them and how I am no longer theirs and how this is regrettable. They would love to see my face through so much suffering. They'd love to see me so gooey, so pulpy, so much like they must have dreamed. But I have come to the opinion through all this pain that men in this situation, men such as I under the pain I am under, do not favor thoughts of ill opinion. We do not waste this time thinking about the love we should have given or received from those to whom we were legally or genetically bonded. Instead we hold the opinion of how nice and good and true it is to get exceptional parking spaces in large lots where the chances of finding good parking spaces are low precisely because of the volume and traffic of cars trying to find the good parking spaces. We're neglecting in this moment a very pure joy, that of sliding my sedan into a just vacated spot in a crowded parking lot. Anyone who does not share this opinion has obviously never parked their car in a parking lot where there were a lot of people waiting, never had to walk a far distance from one of those big malls, having parked near the access road like some kind of vagabond, returning to their sun-baked bucket seat, with their bags of gimmicks and their kids, to sear their thighs to its leather.

I'm slid into the cabin of the aircraft, and can feel a movement in one specific direction.

The feeling—ah!—to slide into it, to apply the brake with the correct sustain, to flip the car into Park fluidly, as if preternaturally. That last moment the car stops and echoes backward, as if all consecutive moments building into were evenly divided, cut out of mud. It is a dream that doesn't seem like one. When it is done with precision and ease it is inarguably sublime; even the asphalt shudders with delight. This opinion of the parking of the car recedes pain in increments, allows us to focus on what is important, in our opinion; it allows for once for pain to be communicated, be put into words, contained and communicated, apt and exact words: Ten! Ten! Ten!

WHO ARE YOU KIDDING

I have a friend who becomes a little different every time I see him. His hair might be a little longer (though occasionally it is shorter); his palm-sized cheeks a little fuller or maybe more concave, pressed into another shape; his clothes hanging tighter or looser on his aging body. But even with these little differences he is still easily recognizable.

We meet in a particular bar often, sit in a leather booth and toss trash into each other's drinks when the other isn't looking. We make the same jokes that seem more or less funny to us, and nothing stern really ultimately develops between us, nothing other than the calm horizontal line of our reciprocal knowing. People come and go away.

Sometimes we together make piles of trash between us while we talk. I'll rip a little sliver of bottle-label, curl it between my fingers, make a lint-sized soggy ball and hurl it with my wrist to join the others like it. He does the same, just as unaware of it as I am when doing it. At first it's a few lonely nothings; soon, at some point, a little pile. We'll try sometimes to see when this happens—the moment trash forges into “pile”—but we never do, just keep guessing when. Maybe when we look away, we agree.

Today we had agreed to drink in the sun until it went away, and I take my position in the booth, a pocketful of receipts, butts, and wrappers ready for when he sits across from me. But I don't see him this day, never see him again actually, just get bothered in the booth by some stranger that knows too much about me.

FINGERS

“LEFT” (|_)

The case against hands:

Pinky: Snooty.
Ring: IT’S FOR SUCKERS.
Middle: [fuck you]
Index: “You’re an asshole!”
Thumb: Condemns to death.

“RIGHT” (_|)

The case for hands:

Thumb: Approves to live.
Index: “You’re the best!”
Middle: [snaps]
Ring: LOVE IS REAL.
Pinky: Classy.

PALMS

Life lines run in cardinal directions that depend on the orientation of the hand’s owner. Health lines are cut out of the hand by time, which says it means forever.

TOWARD A NEUTRAL HAND

Promises of cleanliness:

To remain clean, hands should be washed before and after every manual task the hand-washer undertakes in the daily practice of life, every practice but the washing of the hands itself. This last directive is crucial to living outside of a never-ending scrubbing.

Most antibacterial soaps promise to murder ninety nine point nine percent of germs.

The washing of the hands:

Hot water burns worse than fire: use it. Apply the best soap.

Grip, with both hands, each hand, squeezing the life out of the bacteria, smothered in the lather that only comes from the most vigorous of frictions.

Conquests:

Edges of sud make the crackle of expansion, bounding over geometrical millimeters of skin; air effervesces forth from underneath the tide, swelling up to the nose in a cloak of artificial flowers. Small popping noises die along a sound curve.

Repetition:

Wash again, and soap will devastate the remaining point one percent, and so forth, until our hands are hot and red, about to bleed. We must let the one trillionth of the germ stand alone, to wait patiently for the accumulation of its cohort. They will fight another bathroom break.

The final rinse:

A holy moment of hot water to damn away suds. Suds kill, the rinse kills suds, files them away into the little hole below, that drain, agape, which leads into some abyss underneath the property. The hands can only touch each other in a vacuum to remain clean. Nothing else. Dab with sanitized napkins.

ISOMETRICS

[*pressure.*]

PRAYER

[*zilch.*]

FORT AND FORTRESS

In the book store looking at books and I see some of all I could ever want. Touching their neat little rows, I think if I had so many books I couldn't leave the condo bodily I'd pay some special someone to go buy them for me. I'd love this many books, all of them, dearly, like little children or a litter of pets or whatever. And the special someone could feed me books through a little book-shaped slot that we'd agree to leave in the partitions between myself and everything else.

Standing with a crooked neck and trying to read sideways, I run my favorite fingers along them and think I'd want the special someone to have my best interests in mind. I'd want the someone special to pick up for me the classics, only when I'd write it down on paper to give to the special someone I'd write *classics*, for emphasis. Underlined thrice. The good classic stuff. None of that crap they call classics. Ones that excite me especially warrant a little special bonus, a special little look through the wall of books to let her know that she is special.

I think I could be buried in them—ah, the smell. I think that it is possible and possibly preferable. Certainly there are a bunch of folks all over the place that are doing something just as stupid as this and thinking *well, come to think, I think I'll get this done after that, or get that done after this, maybe take a walk, eat a food, move my eyes along the surfaces of objects*, and then, out of nowhere (and this is the best part) a big old slap on their head, a boom: they're dead meat at the bottom of some boring rubble and continue looking stupid. Dead or dying and stupid. And rarely is it the case the folks are standing in something as rich and promising as a fortress of books. This has to happen to enough people as to become unfair.

But for whom is it unfair? We can't have all the books, can we? We can't read all the books, certainly—there just isn't enough time in these lives—and some people get so lucky as to get dead.

But not me. But I think I could imagine it. Me I think I could maybe enjoy it. I'm standing here in the book store in my wing tips, chinos, with neck crooked, with fingers, all of this, then: blam, dead. Something falls out of the rotten womb of heaven, makes that *thbbhomp*. The room folds in in an instant; the walls decompose at the speed of light.

A single book is kind of heavy. A store filled with them would squeeze the breath out of me; my involuntary, rather impotent cries would be muffled by all of these wonderful books.

If only we could die with predictability. If only living was a stack of pages with a noticeable end we could grip, or skip ahead to, or linger upon, or abandon. Except it's not that way. Except nothing is that way. But books of course I mean.

And in my fortress my little special someone would get me the books and I'd think about reading all of them, every single one of them she'd bring to me. I'd make a list out of ink and paper in order to first consider the books I would think about reading. First the classics, of course, then later some contemporaries, some new stuff, some books that nobody's thought to write yet. The list could be divvied, and sub-divvied according to my preference in consideration. First I'll consider reading these books (living room), later on consider reading those books (solarium), maybe later check the shingles to consider reading the water-proof books we've got up there, protecting my head from anything that might try to fall on me.

I would make notches on the spines of all of them to count how long I'd been living away from all other things, how long I'd been with all the special ones, and each day savor it a little more.

If you stare into anything long enough it will burn into your eyes. My ceiling would be the set of encyclopedias I've had my eye on, and in bed, alone, I'd stare at them to siphon them into my head.

O, a book I'm uncertain I'd ever want to touch: *The Body Language of Horses*. Anything is possible. This could be a brick in a wall but not in my wall.

My rectum remains clenched as always; I wait for impact. Yet my neck is now stiff from the crooking and it dawns on me they're used. A used book store. Someone had these books before, previously, before me now standing and looking. Someone didn't want them anymore, obviously, put them in a box themselves, lugged them up the sidewalk lined with peoples, plopped them down on that filthy counter and maybe even made a buck. Their hands probably gripped the covers of the books at some point, real hands, real people-hands covered in spit and snot and the regular although often overlooked secretions of hands. Thumb prints up and down the cracked spines, et cetera.

To die in a used books store, the dirty covers touching your dying face, is tragedy.

I'm thinking a little book cave if nothing else. I'll eat the paper if I'm hungry. Let the ink soak on my tongue so that I'd ingest the words, digest the ink, let it drip into my blood. I could clear away a little chimney to let the blackness of the smoke escape it.

But with the special someone it would be different. With the special someone my life in the fort or fortress would be, in a word, special. The books would pile up—her methods of collection would be deft and unseen; the barrow she'd use to bring me books would roll without squeaks. And in their accumulation we'd have to move them out of the condo, line the hallways, line the exterior of the building, stop traffic with books. People would holler.

I want to smolder in the rubble. In the rubble me and books wouldn't waste a moment to devour each other; we'd mix together into a kind of syrup. I and the books would boil down over time, become tar, then ash; I and the books would get worse than ash, lighter than air, then: air. My little special someone would be so sad to not bring me books anymore. Her tears would drip on the pages of the classics—imagine the classic weeping: that will be her.

IN THE MAINTENANCE AND OWNERSHIP OF CUSTOM AQUARIA

The dead fish is in all cases to be avoided. A floating fish corpse ruins the marvel we have taken large effort and asset to acquire.

PRECAUTIONS

It is also of considerable importance that fish do not escape it. They will not keep living in the air for long, therefore a lid is required for stand-alones, some kind of enclosure is needed on all wall models. Likewise the tank can be contaminated; the seams between yourself and the fish must do more than prevent leakage from one world to the other. An open lid or shoddy one is simply put an invitation for terror—both the fish's and your own—and would undermine our purposes for installation. Imagine an aquarium with no living fish in it. Your fish become our fish when in the aquarium—*our fish* hereby defined as *the fish that belong to you and us*. If the custom aquarium is properly maintained, our fish are guaranteed to never die through escape.

MEASURES

Lids are just one of the limits that save them, and we install these limits with great care: the gummiest of caulks applied by service-star award-winning service personnel, the most rigid of materials.

PROHIBITIONS

Certain fish, like the mud skipper or the climbing perch, are known to leave the water to find better water. They'll exit the stream or lake, flop about the land for a little while, and then return to water. In any case, we know them by their name, and we know there is no better water than the water we provide. Do not invite a fish into our aquarium that is able to leave it. The escapist fish kept in a home without a lid would flip out and flop around and gasp and die; it should never be allowed into it unless it can't ever get out of it.

POPULATIONS

We encourage guppies, goldfish, raccoon Butterflies, yellow chromises and the like. Nothing stranger than an eel or loach. We also discourage ravenous fish, ones that would become unsatisfied and eat all other fish, unless this specifically addresses your intentions behind owning a custom aquarium.

SCENERY

We install a pump to keep things flowing. Swimming for the fish becomes a practice at the farthest remove from death. Next to the pump, we stick our likeness: a little humanoid explorer, bulbous head on lumpy body, the observing mascot: Diver Person. The scene passes. We encourage owners to see themselves in Diver Person. Fish swim by; you are carried in the subtle ebbs in a new home.

Our specialists are happy to carve out acrylic canyons in your living room, stick translucent tubes in your ceiling, make the headboard in your sleeping quarters an underwater dreamscape. Our experts will expertly fix up the plumbing, pressurize, gauge the room's atmosphere and hypothesize its fluctuations. Our glass technicians will cover the installation with glass, clean it with chemical solvent and buff it so you see faint outlines of your own face when looking in, completely satisfied, a god. Water experts will fill it with imported, gourmet waters.

THE RIGHT CHOICE

Consider the aquarium to be a kind of safe for swimming fish. Contained, they are happy, and we can enjoy them where we have planted them; we enjoy them as they enjoy their little world, exploring the vegetative mazes and rock formations, plucking pellets that rain from the surface of the sky, which are not included.

POTENTIALS

We are capable of building aquaria in foyers, in offices, homes, in the exterior edifices of tropical climates, in bathtubs, walls, on decks, boats, planes, locomotives, in schools, museums, zoos, ceilings, floors, furnitures, ice. We can span any amount of space or time or theme, any mixture or extrapolation thereof; we can supply moods that sweep from somber to berserk. You must not limit our imagination when conceiving of locations our aquaria could go, nor must the potentials be exhausted in the aesthetic concerns of fish alone. It is our dream and promise that they can become a part of any substrate— controlled environments once and all.

WHO WE ARE

We have many talented individuals at our disposal whose purpose it is to create pleasing worlds for our customers and our fish. Our firm staffs cleanly sales associates; designers who will never meet you; stylists who mold your interiors to your particular conception of beauty; mechanical engineers; aircraft mechanics who cut with computers valve-components of the jet-pumps; cybernetic boxes that inside their casings impersonate the movements of fish and design according to the currents they trace in virtual waters.

We install in all new models computer monitoring devices to monitor the space between each fish's gasps for water to pummel on its gills; intricate sensors sense life-force; leafy arms will scoop your dead fish away into the flush mechanism that can only operate when it senses a dead thing. Servers in our home office will notify you, by mail, of a fish's death in no less than ten (10) business days after flushing. Our monitors are able to detect the very gap between terror and death, which becomes imperceptible to human eyes as each breath shrinks, vacillates between soft and rigid musculatures. Although some note the look of terror in the fish's wide eyes as it croaks, this is cowardly. Fish always look terrified.

THURSDAY, MORNING, FALL

The pale sky is frightful, and at any moment a darkened hand might pop out of it, holding a blue-clipped pencil, to stub his soul out from the city with its erasing end, beginning at his soft, unassuming forehead.

...and because of this: he carries the black umbrella—the classic instrument of mourning—to protect him from this uncertainty. There have been predictions.

But it doesn't rain. There's only wind. It is not the top of the umbrella that protects him, but the bottom of it, the part that blocks the view that would frighten him to death.

Down the sidewalk he sees twelve people in the process of habit, seven people experiencing novelty, and two small children on the cusp of either. They are unaware of this, unaware of what impends.

He is held at the crosswalk stop for seven minutes on his mission for the morning, to buy two bouquets from the flower shop. The destination is built from bricks, a big cube he can enter.

In the flower shop is a halo of dirt on linoleum; a breeze cooler than nature's; flowers flowing out of black plastic throats, in congratulatory and apologetic arrangements.

"I'll have one of each please," he says to the bright young flower lady.

"To whom will these two lovely bouquets soon belong?"

"To me!" he says, throwing bills at the young lady, crumpled and wet with pocket-sweat. "Again I've lived another day!"

THE BOUTIQUE OF FRAMES AND DIMMING LENSES

A woman I used to live with now fills the shadows of my basement apartment. The way the sun casts them on the walls or floors tends to put me out and unnerve company, so I don't have company over anymore. They said the place still looks like she lives in it.

The day we disconnected she told me I was distanced from her in specific ways, ways she cited; the way she said it when we drove the frontage road to our apartment made it true. We would often blow up at one another at the mall or dentist, snap our fingers in each other's ears, bark nouns. Incidents piled upon incidents, until we disconnected from each other at a specific moment on a specific day. I remember it felt like a clicking, something shut tight in a pocket.

The last day I saw her was rather sunny. She had asked me as we exited the downtown to stop up ahead so she could buy some sunglasses at the sunglasses shop and grab a cantaloupe next door. I pulled the car to the edge of the street, letting the traffic behind me squeeze along. I noticed in the sky the straight edges of a long thin cloud as she exited and closed the car door. Driving on to circle the block I thought how clean the street was even though it had just been a fairly deep and messy winter.

I called her when she didn't come out of the door or stand on the corner when I passed where we had agreed to reunite. It had been almost twenty minutes of me circling the block, not ever really making with my car the shape of a circle. She answered the phone and said she was on the corner, had been waiting, and I told her I would make the loop one last time. I could hear her breathe the cold air, and behind her breathing hear the busy street pass, making what registers into telephones as intermittent hushes.

"Right in front of the sign," she instructed. "Underneath it." I hit the hazards on the car and saw what I presumed to be letters, a scrawl of neon but indeed a sign. In front of it: glass, some metal, sidewalk. No woman that lived with me in my basement apartment.

I told her I didn't see her yet.

Women of similar shapes and heights walked by quickly, alone or with other people, all tucked into themselves to keep warm. I parked my car in a space just vacated by a box truck, turned it off, walked onto the sidewalk to stare into the shiny bricks of the building's exterior. Into the phone she confirmed her presence in front of those bricks, touching them with her naked hands, she said. We then confirmed the street signs by asking passing strangers, in case one of our eyesights had failed. To triple-check, we verified the day and time of day, as if something about the world had broken.

"Don't tell me I don't know what day it is," she said. She said go walk into it, walk into the store. She said then let's leave and go back home. She will walk into it too and it's so small there's no way you could not see me and put me in the car and take me home.

Obviously when I walked into the sunglasses store she wasn't there, but only the girl behind the counter, reading a magazine laid out on the display case glass. "Prove to me you're in the sunglasses store," I told her, pressing the ear piece of the telephone harder to my ear. I wanted to hear what noises sounded behind her voice.

I heard some muttering. "The sales girl is named Kylee," she said very clearly, in a tone that normally detailed wrongdoings. "Her favorite sunglasses are the TruShades in aqua."

I approached the salesgirl's nametag. She was truly Kylee. "May I speak to her?" I asked into the phone. I heard it fumble between hands.

"Sir, you're going to want to look for a one zero zero one, right off the corner," said the voice, pinched and sounding like a naive person. I asked the Kylee in front of me the address.

"Here. The building we're standing in."

"Yes it's one zero zero one," she said, with the same accent as the woman through the

phone, with the same slowness and rasp, the same caustic brightness.

I threw the phone on the counter. "Talk to this person. Help me figure out who is where and what." I walked around the carpet of the store, watching its small weaves blur as I moved to its corners. "Help the people on the phone find me or help me find them." I could see slivers of my reflection in the thin vertical mirrors that never let you see your whole face. Styrofoam heads looked cool in neon frames.

There is nobody there, she said. And could I please leave the store now with the phone, which she placed on the counter, stepping back into a curtain of sunglasses accessories.

"Let me ask before," I said. "Where is the woman you told about your favorite kind of sunglasses?"

"I don't know what you mean," said Kylee.

"Tell me your favorite sunglasses."

"I like the TruShades," she said. "In aqua probably."

"Well what about the woman that lives with me in my basement apartment you just told in the last ten minutes?" I asked, the loudness of my voice slipping out of me. "Do you have no memory? Is this why you sell sunglasses at a sunglasses store?"

I had calmed down in the car by the time its engine was warm again. A beep to put my seatbelt on kept beeping even after I clicked the belt shut. I called the woman who lived with me in my basement apartment and she said she was walking to our home. I told her I could pick her up, but she said she wanted to walk as the sun went down. The view of the sky was good today, she said, for when she would walk along the frontage road and get used to the new sunglasses.

"I'll call you when I get home if I need to," she said. But of course she wouldn't need me, we said, because I would be there. So I waited in the chair in our living room. The door would open and it would make its suction sound and there she would be with her keys and the relieved look of hello.

The furniture in our basement apartment has been owned by a handful of owners. There are some crates that make a little coffee table, and the ottoman, a little spool, we've used for everything from propping up our feet to drawing or eating. I sit in the chair sometimes and it doesn't feel like time moves along like it's supposed to, when the sun shines through the window like usual, when the shadows of the lamp on the wall don't appear in any one moment but more or less evolve into a shape. It's hard to see these shadows and know if I am now or then. They are as strong as a bad stain in color, their lines tough and direct, and following the logic of a punch line they preserve the off-white paint.

My phone rang and she said she was in the kitchen, cutting up the cantaloupe for a snack. I stood in the kitchen too and made a snack. It is a very small kitchen. Our elbows used to bump each other when we both needed food. I could hear her digitized rattling of dishes in the sink.

"Tell me then," I said. "What are we supposed to do? How will our lives work?"

"Let's just go to sleep, Nathan," she said. "Figure it out another day."

We laid in bed for a while on the phone. She described the formation of laundry on the floor and it seemed accurate. We began to detail the small damages we'd inflicted upon one another since the year we'd met, damages we couldn't begin to rearrange into anything else. The sun began to come up again before we'd gotten to our first summer of living together in our basement apartment; it sliced through the mini-blinds and onto the carpet, up the bed and onto the pillows, into my eyes in my head. I told her my face was sweaty from the phone and I had to go.

WET AREA

Everybody called the boy a girl. Friends of his parents who had never met him would mistake him for a daughter when they touched his head. His few friends would tell him when they swam together in neighborhoods he was girlish, girl-like, his pale flesh touchable and soft. Even the boy's parents would confuse him for his little sister at a distance. By the time he spent most of his days with teachers, who knew his name yet included him with chunks of girls more than once, the boy would act from habit and ignore the distinctions all the people seemed to be making.

When boys filled up the boys' bathroom after recess, the boy waited outside of it. He knew what would happen if he entered the circle where they stood. Their laughter echoed into the pale fluorescence of the Wet Area where the boy mentally coaxed his bladder shut. He leaned on a wall and drummed his fists in his pants' large pockets. The second hand on the wall clock glided.

It then made sense to the boy that this was the second to ignore the sense the world laid out for him, just as everybody else seemed to. This is how it worked now in these seconds. No girls were around he could see. At this time they were doing other things.

He stepped through shreds of soggy brown towels along the linoleum and creaked open the flat wood to the girls' room. He stuck his head inside and saw the empty bathroom, and the sight of it, its sound and smell begged to him, his bladder to release. He ran into the first of five stalls, sagging open its pale door, rummaging his hands to undo the pants, working them quickly down to his knees.

The unfamiliarity of the room made the boy tense. He stood at the toilet and stared into the spaces between the wall's square tiles, trying to think of flowing things. There was a slight crust in their cracks, either growing out of or smeared into them. Just as the boy began to capture the image of a rushing creek, the door creaked open again, quick and at a high pitch, followed by the echoes of heeled shoes. As the woman walked by she gasped.

"No! Honey you're doing it backwards!"

"I'm sorry," said the boy. "I couldn't wait and the boys were taking too long."

"You need to face away and sit."

She grabbed his shoulder and guided him onto the toilet seat, kneeling down next to him, nodding and smiling as he obeyed the encouraging look in her eyes. He became lost in the satisfaction of her smell, a flowery perfume that masked everything sharp about the room, something one would smell at the foot of a tropical vista, a jungle, a waterfall. Leaning him forward when he was done, she wiped past his buttocks with a clump of loud paper, and patting his back, she made a soft shushing sound and pulled the silver lever.

He thought she whispered over the squall: "Everybody gets things wrong."

PROXIMITIES

Danger in the upstairs neighbor's kitchen. I hear what could be hooves or jiving chairs, making the cookery I've hooked to our one shared wall for decoration start to rattle. Earlier there were some ruffians on the porch, at the mouth of the neighbor's entrance, some guys with big hands and bags that swayed heavily when they were entering. One ruffian wore a mask of a lion's face on his own face; the other wielded a beard on his large chin and cheeks.

TV gives no answers to the question of the danger. I'm confused with it. The news man neglects it. He talks with pictures about a bun factory. There are pauses in the struggling upstairs, then it goes like a stutter and I wonder just what kind of shoes they all might be wearing to make those big clunks. They must carry heavy things all day if they're wearing shoes that make those loud of booms and drag-noises. The news man hardly blinks. I am wondering if the upstairs neighbors might have acquired new furniture and are assembling.

In general, I worry about the amount of noises we neighbors share, as I often holler at the humidity when my bones crackle, or sneeze when I am sleeping. Once I made a joke in my head as I drank some juice, then laughed, then almost drowned, the pulp circling the drain of the wrong tube. And I wheezed, and I gurgled, and I must have sounded strange to them. Strange noises in a neighbor's ear are all noises in a neighbor's ear. I look out through a gap in the blinds I make with a finger, looking for someone else to be looking out, to verify the fear I feel, or to verify the need I feel to look out for someone else. This place could use a dusting; blinds are coated in a kind of film.

The across-the-street neighbor has been acting strangely lately by not acting at all. After the news man is over, I turn off the television and look to the house, my vision interrupted intermittently by big cars with whispering tires. The house is not lit up as it is when I pass the window to the refrigerator per usual. Nothing is different than the last time I looked at it. I do not know the neighbor's number or gender; he or she is only a relationship to me, and without myself in the equation, the neighbor ceases to be at all. Otherwise, the neighbor is a series of lights behind a window, car doors shut, an orderer of delivery foods. Maybe I have seen this person on the street when I go out, walking with a coat or scarf over its face. This means less noise for me to hear, more comfort, more peace in which to hear the news man speak. But I can feel a part of me dissolve, ring out, disappear as muffled screams might. I am that much, though only just, less: a person, a citizen, a neighbor.

WHITE AND CLEAN LAND

Potatoes have eyes that do nothing but look out, beginning when their bodies are first plucked from the dirt. The second they begin to see, they rot. Each eye is fixed on the object most directly in front of it: fields and fields, the sky, warehouses or insides of trucks. Many of their eyes stare at the onions during when they tend to die in quiet stacks at supermarkets. Some of their sights are obscured by like potato.

We see them from an elbow perch on a gliding cart that rounds the watermelon display. We see them without them seeing us-- just a blurs in a room, blurry people. Rolling along our sticky wheels through the prism lights of their vision, we look away from them, pretend to browse some grapes, and know they see us now. Potatoes do not say hello; they do not acknowledge us as we do not acknowledge them.

We browse the cheese at the aisle's yonder-end, look back to the potatoes, know we know more than them, dream of mashing them.

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The corn: sweet ears that listen to us. They suffer under the drizzle of mist the misting hoses drizzle as we complain to them. Kissable ears hear us so good and are dumb. This soothes. Corn come in nothing other than an ear into which, with mouths, we speak our desires.

Hunger. Only when we cut the cobs with a knife or with teeth do they fit into our heads finally and satisfy us. As with whatever else we set out to consume, to make a part of ourselves, we must destroy them in the course of making sense of them. Never do they complain that we complain, but because of what they know, we do not trust them. We boil them naked, butter them up after the cooking to listen to the bad things, the things not to be repeated.

There is a sound on the monitor system of the building that fills the building with a feeling, one drawn out, echoed, swelling with opposing emotions, repetitious. We peruse vitamins that keep our bodies alive when lost in varying mazes, repeating words and gestures dissociated from earlier utterances, including the perusal of vitamins. The sound guides desires as they vacillate. Our eyes scan the label of the niacin for words.

The sound is a commercial for a product contained in the supermarket. By taking up space it takes us in the space up, taking more from us than for what we bartered with putting that foot in the optic threshold of the sliding doors: our total being in the supermarket. The sound carves out of us desire with dull treble, forming in us a fleshy new want. Orange juice quenches this particular want, replacing the loss we bleed onto the antiseptic aisle four.

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The cereal aisle. Artificial respite. The air masquerades as neutral air; its sweetness is a lie to us. Too many choices and none good. Grains, mutants, heroes all comprise the general clamor for our first moments upon waking. The corridor of oats and corn and sugars takes as destiny the moments of our murkiest vision, when we're brought awake into the world, just barely. Pops, O's, squares and diamonds, flakes, shreds. Many shapes for the same crunchy action.

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Heads of lettuce. Quit thinking so much. You're bugging everybody. The head is only a base on which to place other things you've plucked. Cover it in dressing-- dress it up--put it in a dress. Make it look pretty for everybody. Nobody eats just a head but weirdies. Heads of lettuce and also cabbage are boring. Heads themselves are unappetizing.

&

Dressing: it's the pretty things. Magazine covers, surfaces, artificial flavors. Dressing makes boring things more interesting. We are not supposed to love or rub upon the glossy covers of the weight-loss celebrity in the checkout though they ask us to. They ask us to and not to, at once.

&

Heads of cabbage: nobody likes you. Nobody likes your sour, cabbagey head. Cabbage, it's what's filled with the smell of the inside of the flat abdominal and also for dinner. Spice it up-- make more spicy. Go to the spicy aisle.

&

"Can I help you find anything? Is there anything in particular you're looking for this afternoon? Something I can help you find this evening? Are there items whose locations I can help determine to facilitate your purchase(s)? Looking for something, buddy? Hey, you, what are you looking for? Help can I find you anything? Anything find I can help you? Help help? Any problems you're having finding? Is there something you're looking for that I could help you see? Are you finding you are having problems?"

&

Ask for directions, get led around like a shadow. We are searching, scavenging among what is plentiful. We tend to think when we lurk next to plastic hemispheres, "free sample means free sample." Shift supervisors eye our every bite. This equation fits with many things: this means this.

The vegetables desire us to desire them, to eat them. Of course we can't eat them all, we cannot buy them all, we cannot take all of them with us out the doors, away from their cruel displays. The carts they let us use can only hold so much.

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The olives, the cherries, have pits, sweet pits. The machine removes them. For us, they are without pits; it is rather like the machine has ripped away their arms. They hover in fluids, dazed about it all, unable to signal to us.

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There is a man with a headset on who coughs while making creamy spread. He is the spitting image of every dead person we have ever known.

&

In the direction of the breads, we pass by the lady's fingers of the okra, and they reach out for the tail of our shirt. It is difficult to get away; panic brings more mist. Exotic vegetables confuse our notion of the edible.

&

Turnips and carrots have babies. These babies, once named, never grow into adults.
Veggy babies.

&

The artichokes hearts bleed nutrition into us. We place them in clear plastic: our future stomach. The heart becomes a part of us, once it's chewed. Now our heels are sore from the dream of an un-empty stomach, and we are dizzy with the building's imprint of violation. The doors open as we gasp for breath. We abandon our cart the near the fish, the sausages, the ribs. The bag of hearts bounces with us out the door, fleeing with us to recuperate. We exit the building into the open mouth of the world, fall onto its tongue, taste the salt of the sidewalk.

HERE IS OUR STAR, THE SUN

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From this star comes the energy of our *entire* planet. Without a sun, a planet cannot grow life. Absent of the rays that initiate evaporation, planets cannot have air, or water, and subsequently plants, and all other things that you may extrapolate. A human child on a planet without a sun will not live long—and why would it want to? Without suns, planets will have nothing at all to do for the child.

Our sun is named Sun. Around it rotates our planet named Earth. When people ask you to name our planet, this is what you should say. Without people asking you to name things, would you name any thing?

Other stars that are suns have different names than the Sun. Some names are futuristic yet historical—*Alpha Centauri*, for example. Others have names like *XIS340971*, which are futuristic although ahistorical. “Sun” might also mean the suns of other planets, other planets in other *solar* systems. Is this correct? If you were to land on Mars, would you then plant your flag into the “earth”? The answers are clear: both—both!

HERE ARE YOUR PARENTS

You age with them on a steady trajectory. Lines in your mother’s face grow more pronounced and permanent each day; your father grays with the pace of a turning leaf. On a certain day, you are no longer dressed in diapers.

“I have nothing to do!” you say, spilling the contents of a jigsaw puzzle box into a toilet.

“You should find something,” they say in unison, as if they have planned this for you in a secret meeting, or in the moments when they speak in front of but not to you senselessly. This must be what the words they speak that have no meaning mean. Fragments of historical monuments are flushed and swirl. Its pieces may connect somewhere in the system below.

“I want nothing!” you declare. Your parents frown and then continue living. You cultivate an interest in the planets before you reach adulthood.

HERE ARE YOUR PARENTS DYING

When your parents are aged and dying, a mortician at his desk asks them, “how would you like to be ceremonialized, sir and ma’am?” Whatever opulence they decide for their ceremony, you should support them. They mention to the mortician something of how they love their “child,” their “baby,” and how much they will miss it, meaning you, when dead. The mortician will sniff, fill out their weights and heights on an order form, order coffins for them. But you are an adult now—do you name yourself a child? A baby?

Assignment: Explore the schism between the thing and the named thing.

With your extended family you bury your parents, so they can die together. Your cousin’s face is smeared with earth and looks tired; your Uncle Dicky shovels heave-load after heave-load onto their matching coffins, until the weight is enough to cease their rattle; your aunts’ wails seem professional. Your parents ultimately gasp somewhere down there, and are still—no more quaking dirt—resting in peace, forever. You eat a turkey dinner with your extended family in mourning. Your parents are dead by now, starting the process of decomposition. Are they still your parents? Quietly chew the first meal of your life not as a son.

DEFINITION

Often described as eternal, *forever* has a tempo. It wakes up, does a chore, sleeps again. In this way, it shares much in common with yawns. Repeat the word to know what it means: *forever*.

But there it is! You start the word, breathe a little, and end it. Do you know what the word means? Repeat the word to affirm what it is not.

SUCCESS IS NOT “SUCCESS”

Success was invented in the early 1930’s, by a human man named Clarke Wizzárd, known previously as an inventor of certain postures, gestures, methods of speech; one to whom men on a crowded street doffed, women blushed, errant children lazily gawked. Wizzárd’s patent for *success* was stolen by a mugger while en route to the patent office. A rival industrialist, a thief, filed these papers away in a loathsome warehouse to never revisit. The invention so many subsequent men spent their lives lumbering upon, to minor avail, remained forgotten or thought not to exist. Wizzárd spent the knell of his life retrying the schematics, attempting to regenerate the past action of invention, but could not. He is what is known as a *Dead Has-Been*.

THE OBSCURE INTRODUCING THE FORGOTTEN AT A STAR-SOIRÉE

“Ah yes, it’s very nice to see you again, do you know me? Have you heard of me? Can I fill your drink? Can I cool you off there just a bit, as it is mighty hot inside this star? Oh my I bet that’s a mighty thirst you have there: a mighty thirst in a mighty heat. There you are—a chilly drink. Say, I would like you to meet my friend, my friend that’s standing right here behind this arching curtain of fusing hydrogen. You should meet him, he is witty and invented something. Yes, yes, here he is. His name is...”

“Wizzárd,” says Wizzárd.

“Wizzárd indeed it is Wizzárd. I am embarrassed.”

“Nice to meet you,” you say, “I always wanted to be an inventor.”

“It is thankless,” says Wizzárd, making a swirl of ice in his short glass. The attendees of the party look antsy to you. The music has stopped and their conversations seem suddenly dull.

“We are thinking of leaving here and going somewhere else,” they say.

YOUR SUCCESSFUL LIFE

After your parents’ timely death, you resuscitate your interest in astronomy. You make telescopes in your spare time, ordering diamond-cut lenses from another hemisphere and inserting them into cylinders you’ve carved out of animal bone. You win an award at your local planetarium, a small globule of plastic you keep stored in a lunchbox until your death.

HERE IS YOU DYING.

The room is cold. You are mumbling to people who aren’t there. You are not mumbling to people who are there—your extended family, youngins—crowded around the shallow gates of your gurney. Your heart monitor beeps. A nurse removes a tray. Where are the people that you speak to? They are in our star, *The Sun*, attending the star-soirée, a vivid and polite gathering whose exuberance can be seen in the star’s mass-ejecta. With a telescope, one could glean a mild ruckus in sunspots, espy the corona for good cheer.

WARNING: DO NOT ESPY FOR TOO LONG!

“You,” they say—those in your room. “How are you feeling now?”

“Like I’m dying,” you utter, lumbering up an open palm, “but thank you for asking.”

“Are you with us?” they gently prod, sniffing and wiping at their faces.

“Are you coming?” say the others—schmoozing at the door of the soirée, holding some kind of drink, fanning their ethereal chins and necks with folded itineraries. Is that your father using a lamp shade as a hat? Is your mother tangoing in the Sun’s parking lot? “We’re headed on a tour of the known physical universe,” they say, whisking from the star’s pull.

“He’s going...” says your extended family, fading from vision with the rest of your static senses. The last you hear is an enunciated whimper, a chirp, then the same flat line you’ve heard before in other fictionalized dramas. You are wheeled to the nearest hole in the ground and covered with earth.

POLITENESS

It is polite to thank someone who inquires about your being. It is also polite to RSVP when invited to functions, if you plan to attend. But why be polite in the first place? There are four possible reasons:

- d) all of the below
- c) to be polite
- b) good manners
- a) being rude is bad

And why attend? You attend because you have no choice: this is where you go when slipping out of awkward dying situations.

ATTENDANCE AT THE PARTY AT THE CENTER OF THE SUN

“We feel happy to see you again,” says your ex-father.

“Indeed we are, child” goes your ex-mother, clutching your ex-father’s arm as others slip past her to the punch bowl. “It feels like we haven’t seen you since...” She is distracted by a group of the party’s attendees made famous by history, slapping their knees in some unified chant.

“I’m not a child, ex-mother,” you say, unsure of what you are affirming.

“But then what are any of us?” asks your ex-father.

HERE YOU ARE AGAIN

To be reborn: when might this stop? You are unsure of your regenerative talents. You had thought for a silent moment after dying, “shall I wrap up this whole charade of regeneration?” but then succumbed to the bodily pleasures of knuckle-cracking, swimming in the sea, pained intercourse with strangers etc. Few are innocent of this transgression.

You step outside for a cigarette—a cigarette at the star soirée!—into a comfortable womb that contracts with the hack of your smoking mother.

Your ex-parents stay based out of the Sun for many rotations of Earth, cultivating interests and relaxing. You, you are born, raised, go to school, get beat up by rotten girls in the girls room. One has red hair, and you procreate with her and marry her in a dozen years. She births twins.

THE MOON

o

Here is our moon, *The Moon*. Who named the moon? Who named it *The Moon*? It was Clarke Wizzárd, for the moon was not *The Moon* until 1933, when he was the first to name it. On this nub of history, Wizzárd was struck by an automobile and thrown onto a train track, where he invented his last invention: a pulley for hoisting dying men from train tracks. He looked at the moon and was glad he had named it. Its naming seemed apt, and gave him comfort as he closed his eyes to rest.

YOUR LUNCHBOX

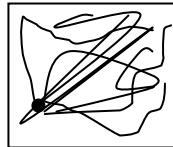
On it is a cartoon character that protects you from strangers. Everyone is a stranger. This is why you carry it in front of your face when you walk from the bus to the school and when lost in carpeted hallways. If strangers see your harelip they will shriek; when they shriek, it hurts down in your ears, and this is one place the school nurses cannot kiss.

YOUR BRAIN CELL

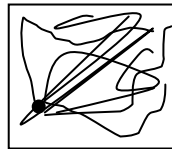
Inside of your head is a brain, that once removed looks like any common brain. But what does the brain look like while still inside the skull? It is a jigsaw puzzle of neurons, cells in lumpy nodules, matter that is named grey but isn't really: the matter is dark—dark matter!

Brain cells are special: they do not regenerate.

Behold a diagram of the neuron:



Behold a diagram of the known physical universe:



These are the same:

FALSE or TRUE

VACATION IS INGRESSION

Your ex-parents grow tired on their tour of the universe, and wish to love in another life.

SNEEZINGS

Every moment holds a sneeze for someone orbiting our star. Some attendees of soirée grow bored and frown, miss the taste of milk and exeunt. As they are conceived in the ready wombs of lovers, Earth becomes packed too tight with energy, and someone must sneeze to alleviate the globe's nascent bloat. Your red-haired lover's sneezings are cute, you think, an endearing squeak. She sits on the edge of your bed after intercourse and *achoo!*s twice, quickly, as if each sneeze will not wait. Has she enjoyed intercourse? Have you? What shall she and you eat now?

Rub your smooth philtrium and barely feel the scar of the harelip for which she bloodied your nose those years before. You are reminded of something in the past by something presently. Or could you say that the past has come to the present to remind you? You think of parenthood, smoke cigarettes, wonder about your most recent mother.

THE SADNESS OF SUNS

In the interest of "getting real," you should never trust a sunset. To trust it is to believe it sets down somewhere in the sky, as if the problem isn't you—you are on the earth, Planet Earth!—and things set around you, a convenient parallax. To watch our sun set at the edge of your neighborhood and feel any feeling akin to sadness is to deny its power over you. You hold your red-haired lover and "feel love," watch the twins scurry in the yard. The Sun setting doesn't conjure a sadness from within you, the Sun *makes* you sad, dressing you in sadness as you dress your children in diapers. Do you love your lover, or does your lover *make* you love her? You feel nothing, submit to everything.

HOME EXPERIMENTS THAT AFFIRM THE AFOREMENTIONED PROPOSITION

Your red-haired lover has called to inform you she is dressed up in someone else's love. Slam the phone. It now feels sore. To lose your keys is to let them feel neglected. Find them in a bashful couch and glean their relief. Throw a glass against the wall and notice the ease with which you may empathize. Rev a car's engine. Do you feel its tension? The next time your front door knob sticks when exiting, you may know its resounding pain.

HERE ARE YOUR CHILDREN

You have these two children that whine. Why do they whine? You have an obligation, one that feels somehow familiar to your nature. Try to put a finger on it—you can't! You can't because it's something a finger cannot touch.

—Daddy why don't you love us?

—Daddy why don't you take care of us?

—Daddy do you call this success?

"You cannot speak yet," you say, watering a tuft of plants. "Why do you speak to me?" Your children suddenly look sullen and lost, chew their blankets, gah at each other.

THE VICARIOUS ENJOYMENT OF PARTIES

3. Take any two objects
2. Set each at any point in the known physical universe
1. Observe the reciprocal exertion of force

Earth is not The Sun: this you know. For this reason, when you are on Earth, you know you are not on The Sun. Do not think it is so obvious! You know you are not attending the star-soirée—this is blood-knowledge; you want to go so bad it kills you, and this is why you are buried nearer to the center of the planet's mass than where you were when living.

HERE IS YOU DYING AGAIN

You consult a mortician.

"It is better to do this now, for the sake of regeneration," he says, stacking papers. "Of course there is the option of not. Of course there is still the option to put an end to this charade, so to speak." You choose to die again without fanfare, are buried by the mortician in a shallow pit, holding your nose and lips closed.

YAWNS

"Had you ever tried snorkeling? No? What about spelunking? I am fond of these types of activities when alive, activities that get me closer to the center of round objects. Milk, for instance. I am fond of milk—all kinds—and the reactions it produces in any given corporeal brain-nugget. The sucking I am fond of, from a tit or cup. The nourishment is secondary. I am also fond of parties such as this with sufficient nourishment, some punch, chips, what have you. In all my living years I never tasted punch quite this fruity, have you? Have you tasted punch that packed this fruity of a punch? I cannot help my charm—it is part of my essence. I've exhibited this charm in various ways through history, as we tend to do, sometimes with song, a joke here, there, ramblings, also via love. I was once a parent, a child, an aunt, an uncle—all to degrees of success that warm me now, upon reflection, inside this star. Do I need warming in this heat? Ha! I did it again, as I have hoped to prove to you that this charm I exert upon you is indeed in my essence, uncontainable. How can an essence contain any thing, I wonder? Isn't it just...? How can any thing contain an essence? I can't quite put my finger on it. Other things are in my essence, obviously. Jealousy, I have felt it. Loss, that's one I'm familiar with. Ugliness: who has not? I was sometimes a bastard, too, in my lives—not

a real one, necessarily, but one who is bastardly—a rigorously obscure bastard. I am unsure what that name really means...”

You yawn.

“Am I boring you? Tiring you? Do you have better things to do than stand with me in a corner of this party in the center of a sun? What would they be? You must want nothing. How does a sphere have a corner, I wonder? Have you found this strange? Me, I think it is natural to be suspicious of this. No—say nothing. Do not tell me they are somehow the same, when we love our lover, or love punch, cracking our digits or winter, laughter, success, fruit salad. Are you trying to stand there in this corner of this sphere and tell me this thing that the name of love is unimpeachable and exact? You are fraudulent.”

You exit.

HERE IS YOU IN THE WOMB

You think of your next mother as unborn. Only when she sees you do you then exist: why should you see it any differently? See sees the crowning of a skull. Can you see yet? Yes, you can. You see the vast distension of a labium and immediately miss the warm space where you were just held, neither vertically nor horizontally in the atmosphere of fluid: merely held.

“Success!” you hear, not knowing what this word means. A doctor grips your quivering body. You hang upside down, unaware that this is a temporary posture. You spend a foggy week chewing on a foreign tit: the first meals of your life as a son. You are raised again, live some, grow bored, then die.

YOUR VARIOUS METHODS OF DYING

Intense car wreck, cancer of the lungs, cancer of the blood. Accidental discharge of a firearm, some falling, a trampling, cancer of the heart. Old age killed you only until a certain moment, when that category was stricken from certificates by death scholars and those dedicated to medical practice, in response to a proposal by one Clarke Wizzárd. After this, you could not be killed by time alone.

You have fallen into large vats and drowned, been crushed, vaporized, committed suicides, withered from loss. You have died of exposure, malnourishment, at the hands of jealous lovers, in beds, on a toilet. Once a wild animal attack, tamed animal attack, spontaneous combustion. In one instance of death, a textbook case of disappearance. You have died fitfully, simultaneously, in each other’s arms. It is only in this art that you are seasoned and successful.

HERE IS ALL OF YOU DYING

All of you decide to wrap up this whole charade. You have grown sick of love, impatient with bodily pleasures, uninterested in the feelings in which you dress.

THE EARTH

o

Here is our earth—Planet Earth! This planet is the substratum of life as it is known: it has dirt, waters, plants, beds, pools, monuments to its history, and all other things you may extrapolate. All of its majesty soon decomposes, no life grows, there is nothing to do. You decide to stay at the star-soirée—all of you—and our star bloats, gains mass, until its girth consumes our former planet.

CONTEMPORARY WAILING STATUES

I ask the man behind the counter if he can make me disappear. He says yes and means it, says he can meet whatever needs and I believe him. From behind him the gilded sunburst shines, stuck to the certificate that endows this practice. Next to it is a license that when I squint looks official. Plants in the corner make the room feel natural.

He motions to a placard with his pencil, swirling its erasing end at various service-packages. I negotiate the pitch with my eyebrows, listen to him describe the left-to-right sequence, the savings increase, the ascent of it. I can feel him watching me nodding and squeezing my fingers, so I retract from the man into my self and wonder what new selves will want from an older one. Some of them might want to stick to being seen. Past selves might have wanted something else for themselves, something better I don't know about.

The man reiterates the economy and extravagance of the service-packages to decide, the tiered features and bulleted apparel, color schemes. Clawing back at him is the sum of wants of all selves, selves yet and not, wanting loudly over the wants of the current, present self. They want in screams no one gets. The calculus of wants is dizzying. Something puts forth.

"Can you tell me more about each service package?" I ask, and he does, repeating key phrases with rhythm, repeating acronyms and facial gestures, the hand movement of dabbing a wand. He fans out on the counter elaborative brochures and reads to me. When watching him I float away, up somewhere for paragraphs at a time. He asks me about my wants, my needs, and this deflates me.

The current want is to never be seen again, to never be sought. He says he has deals this month to institute this, this absence. Many of my selves have had this want, but never between any of our selves have we had many monies. If I knew a one I say, a person learning to count could count my monies with ease as these are so holdable, so well suited to an undeveloped hand. He says we take other things in addition to the things we are taking and so your monies aren't the utmost.

Want is current. I move inwards from then outwards toward the man, discarding in my self like a bomb the hope that future selves will want less crude and desperate things.

"Completely gone," I say, "like I never happened." I point to what is clearly the best deal. The man smiles a surprised smile, a gaping one that shows rehearsal and patience. He begins to write me down.

The street makes a long noise like a whisper when the door opens. Someone stands behind me and I feel what feels like a shadow or stench touching me. The man behind the counter shuffles papers and narrates to a hidden audience, one removed, one that must not see him.

"Reaching over here now. Looking in this here now. For forms: nope, not here."

Whoever behind me is radiating into me, sending heat into me standing in line at the front of it at the counter. I had said today into the mirror I wouldn't stand in any lines today, so I think an apology brief to the former self, something severe to the less clean teeth self. But this line is not my doing. The line started with Someone showing up and making me into the line, making me become the line. Someone radiates into me, makes me disobey my former self and send apologies. We ought to revise what we say into the mirror: not "not stand in any" but "not join any lines."

"Here we go," says the man crouched below the counter. "No, no we don't."

Knees crack in the room and make it sound empty. Plants look alive when nudged by ventilation. Inside away from the man I hope that future selves will want the knowledge that a past self took the care of the future selves into its mind. This way they will not hate the former self, will not degrade it, will not set alight its graves along the landscapes of the self. This one, me, this, the current present one moves outwards from the innards its care, to touch pen to white paper to pin that care like bows of ink to the service package; my name is written with other names of things to

hold us close to it. Cradling in myself the thought of when I give this gift to future selves, their arms wide to take us into them, my teeth begin to ache.

A rope of little balls and pegs runs from the flat coin of plastic glued to the counter to a pen. I wrap it around some fingers and make ruddy divots in my skin. Someone behind me shifts balance in the room and breathes through an airway obscured by airway.

“Here are the forms we’re looking for,” says the man, becoming vertical.

I complete the necessary paperwork with the pen, submit some proofs of identity with the deposit, check a final box and sign a signature. We touch hands on cue. We're now engaged in it, employed to it, bound to it by contracts of kinds to erasure. I smile back at him and mean it. To be tidily undone, we agree together, we all know together without saying together, to be crisp in blankness: the promise of promise, we think together. Turning to leave I miss the sight of the Someone taking my place in the line, no longer the line. It bursts into the air as I leave it.

Cars out in the parking lot radiate crooked air from their hoods. I walk around them to leave to walk around all the other things between the strip mall and the house. I walk around trees, cars, streets, air. Others have asked before what I like to do and I said as I always say “walk around.”

There had been a line on one of the forms for hobbies: WALK AROUND I wrote.

Days later I am called by a voice at the courthouse, asking me to come in and initial their omissions and I say I will. I twirl some objects on my desk and ask the voice if by chance the court holds any feeling toward me, specifically me, the subject they've put in inked letters to stick around for so long. The voice speaks to someone near for some moments then clears its throat in the form of a question.

A clear choice, I tell it. If it felt a feeling for me I would feel it back. The receiver makes a sound of collapse in my ear and I don't know if I am still connected. So I speak into nothing for a while.

I leave a note for the takers to take the phone last. They took books and trinkets, hygiene products Tuesday; back and forth they come, taking things I've never noticed. They took all places to sit, all places to lay that aren't the floor, all places to lean that aren't the walls, all cookery. They took the note that asked them not to take the phone until the rest is gone. The phone is gone.

Everything they take is melted into stuff. First were the heavy things, now it is the rest of things: all. I am dismantled in swoops. They can make anything out of stuff.

Pay phones seem rarer to current self. Old selves stuck gum in them; new selves will never use them. Outside of a long and flat building I find one finally, covered in bright stickers in another language. I make phone calls without touching the receiver to my face. The Bureau has a busy line, the Agency lists telephonic options that don't apply to us. More coins, still no progress marking into memory for future selves. We sigh into germs, look deeper in our pants for coins.

Some time digests, obviously. I notice in small ways that nobody notices me anymore. I walk around and no one hollers. Cars move past without regard. Birds ignore bread chunks thrown at them, in their direction, from where I sit in wet grass. I notice I am noticing less, staying tethered less, unable to keep the eyes of the self in the focus not afforded to the past and future selves that egg me. “Undo the self and get me done or un-,” they sometimes egg. “We want to see and be!”

If dying in a natural or some other way, an administration will be notified and I will be expelled from life in another way than seizure. The service package guarantees to us to get us off the books, the living, permanently; this process takes some time the man had said, some time he never specified. Stiff brochures say it and don't specify; coupons and the business cards allude to swiftness but obliquely; rays in the general radiation of the stack of papers blowing through the wet grass away from me radiate into me about it when I am outward enough to read about it.

The current self may need to hear I am in fact still living in these moments, need to see it ushered out. I call the court to check my status, but they have nothing but a nagging tone, nearly indecipherable, the vowels pained, an exorcism.

Strangers have learned to look through me. I walk to the grocery and select, stand in line, pay and leave without seeing any eyes. Their colors used to variate. There are many colors in the grocery that distinguish different needs, like bread or water, lipstick, whatever needs. There are many different needs that need to be distinguished. I eat.

Outside atop the concrete stairs in the openness away from the inside of the courthouse is a monument of a gargantuan man with a gun and a hat sitting on a gargantuan horse with teeth. I climb to stand on the structure's pedestal, above many heads. I grab the stone of the horse's leg and wave with my other arm to seize the eye of a tourist or someone else that might preserve me.

There is no surprise or shock in me that gargantuan men and gargantuan horses deserve to be remembered. They are preserved here and remembered here in front of everyone who moves in big lines down the concrete. I wish to shout at them to hear what the man and the horse will tell them if they listen to them. I can only point at their gargantuan mouths, only jump up and down on the pedestal and use syllables, noises of the animals, only wish to shout at them that I wish to shout to them to listen above the mess of sound, wish to them to tweak their ears with a movement of the inner-head, hear the voice to split apart, breaking bones of the voice to scream at them: "We are so worth it to stick around in your sagging memories!"

But this scream suffocates, I wish to scream. I wish, but only jump and wave. It suffocates us as it suffocates the whisper that splits off the scream, underneath it, to resuscitate us: "You know, without stone selves to stick through months and longer, fixed against water, fixed against sun, heat, animal molestations, accumulated dirt, we would not probably honestly really be remembered. We were not really gargantuan to begin with, neither. Nope nor will we be." This is no more than the want of the current self, I wish to scream at the big lines of lookers and walkers moving down the concrete. The current self wants nothing but a record of the way I looked in light once.

I walk into the courthouse and nothing makes any sense. People are only there, only people, impossible to cite. They stand in patterns; the room is present. I take a piece of paper from what is horizontal nearby to me and try to write a letter to a future self. It says something like I'm sorry if the choices I have made for you are not the best for you. I scribble something like I tried for you, tried to take it easier on you than past selves had on me.

Somehow during the writing of this letter I have joined a line. We stand like sick trees stand. I begin to wonder what will happen when I'm off the page, if erasure is the end of losing things from which to retreat away from to the field-wide pits of past and future selves. Waiting with them I begin to write words to congratulate a future self in the event that one succeeds. I touch ink to the paper, feel some purpose, decide if in the event the future self achieves success for its self, it will not want a letter from a more crude and desperate self. It will not appreciate the gift of guilt when it emerges, the built-in guilt of having something better than the dead letter writer. I stick the half-done letter in a pocket of some kind and hope it to melt.

When I get to the front of the line I see the thing the line is meant for. It is shaped like a person, a mass in a soft blue, a thing that makes me write letters next to ink that hides my name and age and other information resulting from these two facts. Islands of black, propping up block letters I scribble. More ink pools onto the page, omitting initialed omissions.

To revitalize I sit next to the gargantuan man and gargantuan horse until dark, napping during certain outages in bright light, evidently barely moving. I do not know if in these hours any one has seen me, taken a look, a poke at me. The texture of the horse's hoof is pressed into my cheek. Descending from the pedestal I place my foot in a slim gap of the asphalt, slip from the

pedestal and fall and do something traumatic to my foot. There is lots of wailing and frustration and the shock of experiencing such in the mess of walkers and lookers moving along in front of the courthouse brings to me a presence not felt in a time I do not know for this reason. That the lines of walkers and lookers walk around me like water doesn't change.

Up comes a face that may be familiar, familiar in that it doesn't make me shudder to interpret it, to stare into it staring back into me. It has an eye split into two, curvy lips that make it look warm, features that distinguish it from others. How do you feel? it asks.

I've stopped receiving junk mail even. Debts to ink have disappeared, along with them the services. No one has taken notice of me as now no one is giving notice to me. The house is dark; its emptiness and absence of walls allow a wet breeze to come through to me and so is not pathetic, does not evoke in us pity nor attempt to seem to us like it could not be more rotten. Breaths are undeniable to lungs. I limp to receive a letter in the box nailed to the frame of my house in the middle of a dim morning. The court has sent a letter in a soggy envelope and it regards feeling. The contents of the soggy letter regard the way the sum of it feels. Not all the letter is necessary to understand the sum. There are no names in the letter.

I limp around after the gray sun has sunk out of the sky, leaving blacks that shine over everything. I walk around, browsing innards, make steps with pain to keep me tethered. Somewhere far away from the dissolving house, a group of figures ahead of me on the sidewalk walks toward me or away from me. Their side-to-side-ness indicates to me neither if they are coming toward me nor if they go away from me. I step more; more stepping: none tell us if the figures in the group are in fact going with me in my same direction without me, or if they are coming toward me in my direction and will contest the slabs we work over with our feet. It takes too long to see if they are smaller or larger than before; I float away for chunks of pacing at a time, forget somewhere if before they were larger or smaller than before. I reemerge as I often reemerge uncertain, see what is made uncertain, make speed away from them but still face them, not seeing behind me or in front of me. Ahead they barely sag to their left to right or right to left and this pace hypnotizes. I trip and fall and land in wet grass, lay there until the figures pass me. They talk in grunts, do not see me as they pass along the path that was, it seems, coming toward me. So I lay around for a while.

I once sat in sunny grass a whole summer and watched the parts of it around my shadow die and turn to straw. My shape on the ground: what was lush and living.

I remember them building this river out of concrete between the house and the woods and we would have to walk around it. Sometimes there is water on it, sometimes people; many things drain into it and are carried by it. I limp around it now and sit at the opening of one of its veins, looking at shapes that make the view, doing things to myself, cleaning my self, airways, non-vital things of the self and future selves. Past selves accumulated the blockage, present self cleans, future selves enjoy the clean or repeat accumulation and cleaning. The nose of the present self bears gifts of tense, unable to be reciprocated to certain selves.

A steel truck hauls stuff down the concrete river, its spray taking on the shape of a dozen wings, six projecting upward from the tires and then falling and then disappearing into their reflections on the surface. I am standing already without realizing I have stood up, without proceeding to, or thinking and deciding to stand up. I am standing without being able to say I have weighed the decision to stand up.

It must not see me, pulling toward. I retreat inside away from it and visit with the thought of past and future selves and this self sitting or standing in the field-wide space of selves. Here in this place we are champions of the self and all other selves, celebrating and championing each of the selves, something of a large statue split into its little statues; we are heroes, a disintegrated monument of heroes. In this space away from the concrete river we are statues of heroes who were champions to each other, and so, each of us are the heroes of the champions on which the statues of

us are based. As each of us appreciates the permanence of heroes, we take turns carrying all selves on the backs of all other selves, rehearsing and rehashing victories of selves, celebrating in languages no others get but we two.

Someone slips off the shoulders of a self and does something traumatic to a foot and then I wonder if the truck hauling stuff down the concrete river is coming toward me or going away from me, the shape getting smaller or bigger to me.

I see it pass, feel its gust into me. On its side is a reflection although muddy of the world around it. I see someone in it, one that looks like a muddy thing, a shape, a muddy shape, one that looks like someone I don't know about. The truck glides further down the concrete river with a dimming slush. So I walk around a while.

AGNOSTHENIA

I.

Eventually, inevitably the brakes fail. The car careens over the curb and into the gas pumps, not in slow motion (as he had heard casualties go) but so quick its beginning is unrecoverable. The moment of failure will become the moment of crash fluidly, a steering column will hit cotton instantly. The instant: the windows' glass is lived like a memory, an impression; less than a second of an indissoluble soft and loud, metal torn into twenties; air ripping through and away from his cabin; every sense only a thought of itself. And like a thought each sense of floating, flying, crashing and crushing will be present and absent at once.

He feels impact, yes, affirmative, then a nothing so pronounced. Animals fly away, an explosion. Heat rings out in all directions so then cars that still can make lurches away from the fire, toward the parking lot's curb. The roof over the gas pumps presses against the billow of black smoke, then quickly crumbles into itself entirely, gushing flames that consume the car, crushing it as if with big fists. The rest of the roof collapses onto the car, then onto him, switching the tendencies of his elbows and knees. The parking lot is hot and bright; the blue of the sky keeps away the flicker of every star.

Then sirens and water and shouts all at once, the tone of immediacy from men who wrench him from the metal, the sound of their rough movements, the smell of unfamiliar smell.

And all is black at times, all often bears no hue. All is always sideways if not from the bottom.

For months it seems, there is always never any other people, never light. They are never there them that move him in and out of corridors, clip away his skin, administer synthetics to him, chart him, speak in code about him.

For him and to the horizontal world there is only room for one with swelling, no one else. There is only one set of lungs to breathe shallow breaths, only one set of eyelids to squeeze about under their bandages, one stomach, one esophagus to cradle the feeding tube.

II.

Carolyn walks up to the lip of the cave at a certain point in time. Wind blows grits of ice into her face and across the message she holds, a thin card instructing her to stand at these coordinates and observe the entrance before she walks into it.

A sign in front of it, wooden and broken, covered in old frost but with lettering still legible: Welcome to Ice Cave.

Down its tunnel, she fumbles with her gloves for direction in the purely dark. Grunts she didn't realize she is making reach her ears easier when the static hiss of wind outside gets far enough away. After more crawling, more holding open wide her eyes to see anything, anything at all, the sound and feeling of open space, of area, overtake her. She is able to stand and does.

Finally, she believes, the cave, after all this time, after all of this waiting, after all of this needing to get away from the office, the cave. Darker than I would have thought.

Her lamp illuminates the inner walls (ice), the floor too (ice), and the high ceiling (ice) that surrounds her. At certain points there is enough distance to swallow up all of the light thrown at it. She shouts *Hello, Ice Cave* loudly; an echo of it comes from far away, after too long of a silence.

She walks in circles at a certain point in time to feel what it is like to exist here. She shivers comfortably; she is never uncomfortable--always her neck is relaxed, always her shoulders are just saggy enough. Underneath the billows of this parka is a tropical atmosphere.

She feels she can be seen, that she is being watched. The money she has paid to be away from everything cannot guarantee her her feelings when in the cave, the contracts had stipulated. He might be lurking somewhere past the cave's icy edges, buried somewhere in the stomach of the mountain, looking at her with a crooked eye. She sits on a rock (ice), holding her face with both hands, pulling it tightly back against her skull, thinking, day-dreaming: that if she were to spend her vacation time inside of this cave long enough, its icy walls will melt, and eventually, inevitably, he will be revealed to her.

In any case she makes her breath make clouds of lung-steam.

Not a single message for miles.

III.

The first thing I want you to do, the counselor will say to him, without saying anything else besides, sitting probably in the corner chair and probably staring at this sickly, quivering man in his gurney, is breathe in deep. Just once. And he does. Now hold. Good.

Now before exhalation, I want you to hold in your mind a wide open space. Go ahead and think long and wide, deep if necessary. There should be some depth, obviously.

You probably need to look up with your eyes and close your lids if they're still there.

This should be a large space. This is what we're going for: spaciousness. If it helps to think of times in your youth when you saw a forest or a mass of rocks, go ahead and think of it. Remember bigness. If it helps to close your mouth when you feel air want to come back out, please do. Don't breathe still but just make the space bigger; stretch out the edges of space with what we call the business end of your mind-shovel. Dig at it at the edge and stretch it. Keep going, all along the perimeter of space. Hold in the breath. How big is the space? Don't answer. Give it some color if you haven't already.

And as she says *color*, there appears to him, under layers of head-dressing, a large blue ball in which his idea of himself is held, suspended in a blue air, like confusion. And he will think he hears the turning of glossy magazine pages in the corner of the room.

Now insert yourself into this space. Into the exact center if you weren't already inserted there. The furthest point equidistant from the edges. Are the edges bubbling? Look around. Don't breathe out. Sometimes they do. What do you see? Keep holding. Who are you? Hold in the oxygen and then ask yourself that. Who am *I*? meaning you.

And I want you to keep your eyes closed. I want you to keep them shut tight.

And I want you to keep your breath held.

And now go ahead now and exhale, she says, and he does, letting out through the nasal tubes, dull and at his body's temperature. They, the tubes in the airways, they too the tubes sticking in his veins and orifices, feel to him already a part of him.

You are no one in a big space, no one, yes, that's the answer: no one, a defunct person in a large space. Exhale cleanly and breathe back in more oxygen, and I can ask that they enrich this mixture a bit. Come to terms with your positioning within this space, and know, you poor thing, that your biggest conceptions, your biggest aspirations, are all small enough to stay within your sight. That's the lesson here today, that's what I want you to get out of this session. And think about this and sleep as well as you can.

And I'll be back Tuesday and I can talk more. And when you're able to talk and communicate to me any thing you might need from outside that fits within the treatment, I would be happy to bring this thing to you.

And at this moment, in this specific second, Carolyn's face is angry, red, folded in on itself. She sits in flight and tries to calm herself by flipping through the in-flight catalogue, sniveling over it. Her squeal riles other passengers to a general hiss of discomfort. A stewardess puts a hand on Carolyn's shoulder and speaks to her that she must remain calm. Carolyn nods because she understands.

The fist she makes brings her pain. The in-flight catalogue, by its configuration, is the only possible object that can soothe her.

Tears, complete and absolute tears run down her cheeks, over the varietal curves of her small nose, onto the pages of catalogue. The child buckled next to her stares sullenly at a tray table, idiot-faced. Carolyn pouts. Her tears fall (and this is true) on an image printed in the flimsy pages of the catalogue: two deer, cast in steel, bound up with each other—bucks, by their antlers, wrestling through the majestic whims of nature, in this great collector's piece. Its immaculate hand-crafted detail, and the detail of this image, escapes her sorrow.

She places the magazine in its rightful place and adjusts her blazer and shirt to try to get a new start on this sitting. She closes her eyes and wishes not for the plane to crash (as he would wish) nor for an act of terror in the aisles (as he would wish), but wishes for the ability to change her feelings. The child makes the noise of wanting something.

Out the narrow window is white, receding into the horizon, giving way to brown and jagged land. She vows to return to the ice cave someday.

Vows it.

Where was he? Why hasn't anyone at the office heard from him, read messages about him? Who does he think he is trying to be, outside of data, extra-datal? His position in the company—at which he is (other than this whole mess) completely adequate—does not allow him this privilege, only I, yes, me, can have it—and now that he has tried to take it for himself, he has taken it away from me.

Her vacation time had ruined it. And the ruins of her vacation time have come to ruin her vacation time. That's the answer. It is his fault definitely, but it is her fault, too, I too share some of the blame. Mostly his fault—as anyone could plainly see—but still, somewhere on the continent of fault, the planet of fault, belonging to him, a single grain of blame is mine.

Case in point, the single grain: with him, exactly at the moment prior to his opening of Carolyn's office door, a sturdy door, sturdier than a common door, with this knob in his hand, a silver plum, dull. As he grips the knob, begins to torque his wrist, Carolyn blinks across the table at the woman whose name he never learns, while speaking with her, asking, phrasing through the highest intonation of the question, if the woman whose name he never learns thinks he is capable of taking charge of the firm's upcoming data aggregation, a project normally handled, Carolyn says, by me myself, yet I am unable to handle it because I will be taking vacation over dates that conflict with the timeline of this project. I'm going to the ice cave. Not a single message for miles, not a transmission to pass through me at all for at least a day's walk, she says, observing an imagined distance. I will bring you something back.

I think he could, says the woman. I think that's a very sound delegation.

Well we'll see what he has to say and I think he'll say yes when he shows up.

And this is when his wrist twists and he leans into the room; both women turn their heads to the door: Carolyn only slightly, the woman whose name he never learns turns hers completely, as to the left as possible; and they smile lightly, each of them, and he smiles lightly, and Carolyn says his name and motions for him to enter at the same instant, as if this saying and this movement is indeed one instant and not several, as if this gesture is so casual, informal, unplotted. And he stands nearer to her desk as the door closes, holding his dumb tie to his body with a stack of messages meant for his department's files, nearer to Carolyn sitting and this woman sitting, this woman and her nice teeth sitting there, he stands nearer really only to the nice teeth of this nice woman.

Thank you for coming by so quickly. This is the issue: I will be out of town starting next month; I will be unavailable to manage the next data aggregation myself, she says, flexing her eyebrows. While I'm happy to get away and relax a bit, the problem is that I'm now looking for someone to replace me in the initial and middle stages of the process, and we were thinking you could do it, you could handle it, you could be the one to oversee and handle it. You've assisted on several major aggregations, always performing this work—and your other work too, I might add—completely adequately, and seem to be someone we can trust to oversee the beginning and middle, mostly, of the upgrade. I plan on being back as you all wind it down, and I can make sure every loose end is tied, so to speak, that we tie it up in a big bow so to speak and then get that data out the door.

Data out the door! says the woman at the desk, with the tone and cadence established among the office workers through many years of repetition.

Well, do us a favor, says Carolyn, go back to your desk a while and consider it. Send us a message saying if you think you can handle it.

He nods and makes a thinking face, grabs the door open, enters the blank noise of the office.

As he reaches his L-desk, a message drops from the hand of a passing deliverer, a small envelope whose edge he tears off with his teeth. It is a note from Carolyn, a note that says thank you again for coming in so quickly-- please consider taking the project. - C.

He writes her a message, saying: Yes; a deliverer passes him and takes it from his hand like a splinter.

He twirls in his chair a moment, seeing everything that surrounds him, for once. A message appears on the desk at the origin of his twirl.

Consider it longer, she says. Consider it a little longer. I want to make sure you know what you are getting into. And he does, looking into the ceiling, its geography, its shadows and ridges, as if he sits at his desk in a low orbit.

His assumption of the project's leadership would be a challenge, a something-new, an *opportunity* as people so often said, to do something that challenged his adequacy, that would give him the chance to prove his adequacy in a new thing, to scoop up all the data that had heretofore existed (those in their previous aggregations, and then the new data that has yet to be itemized), itemize it, knead it onto itself, make a better, more pliable, more easily searchable, elastic and workable. His name would appear at the back and at the bottom of beta-data, in tiny type, and so his name would ring throughout every subsequent fact, every movement of a hand or every utterance, borne out—all of them—from previous seasons' aggregations.

But he had only got the project off the ground, as it is said, only begun the suite of processes that would aggregate, that would open up the intricacies of all available data, all its complications, bare wires. If he had been there to usher it along, the data-content of the messages might have never been corrupted; had he never, with his foot, applied the brake of the car at that moment, as he sought to turn his automobile from one direction to another, and never burned inside of that automobile, the data might still be around in its true and unshuffled forms, still in its purities, its declarations of the inevitable.

III.

In the horizontal world, the sky is as wide and high as the surface of a sphere, and ends in an orientation that precedes its beginning. He is lying in this bed better than the bed lies on the floor.

Beyond the wall of the room, to the empty outside, must be the whole of all people, whistling and singing, making eye contact.

Beyond the wall, just past its innards and the outside wall, water must slam into patches of land, mist too, snow blowing around, wind raining.

Through the bandages, he can almost see the light of the room, can almost see the wall and through it, over the jagged edges of grass and parking lots, past the ravine, into his office--his co-workers holding beverages, noshing at their fingers.

Where is he? their shoulders indicate. One of them would say the data-aggregation has been corrupted, all data is in tizzy mode. Normally he is right here with us, and no one has heard about him. Has anyone heard from him, anyone heard of him since the weekend? We're losing all the weekend data at least. The circle of them sips

The woman whose name he never learns drafts a message to Carolyn with a frightened pen, stuffs it in an envelope, lays it into the waiting hand of a deliverer. Months would blink by by degrees.

Some would say he had had enough and couldn't take it and so forth. Work would resume, and animate the quiet movements of the office as usual, and they'd whisper to each other that he would always suffer there at his desk. And then just probably felt that not another day could pass, of this suffering, not another day and so he had to end it all, stepping off a cliff somewhere, somewhere no one would ever find him—or at least we haven't yet heard of anyone stepping off the lip of a building and falling into the street on top of people or anything, haven't heard anything, really—so somewhere where we wouldn't be able to hear about him, why he hasn't been here, since it was so hot outside.

Someone else would ask eventually, switching the hot mug between her hands, Do you think it's possible he's not dead and just decided to quit? to move away somewhere?

Yes, I think it's possible, Carolyn would respond. Though unlikely for two reasons, at least—the first being that he was so weak, too weak, really, to make any decision of that magnitude: quitting. And we know him and know that he can't make that decision. You may say that stepping off a cliff or off a building is a heavy decision, but it's the kind of decision you, obviously, do not have to live with. Since his weakness would I think preclude any sort of drastic decision he *would* have to live with—being that his weakness takes up the whole of him, as it's not a weakness like he has a *soft spot* or a *weak chin* or something necessarily, although he does, both—but that his constitution is one of a weak person, the whole of him. Unable to be strong, is what I mean. Haven't you seen him around the office? He hardly ever speaks—you cannot get word one from him, without struggle. His will, his power, his will-power, whatever that is, just isn't there like in you and in me. And for this reason he would not just quit and move away somewhere because he would presumably have to live with this decision. And he would never be so *bold* as to jeopardize this company by intentionally bungling the data-aggregation.

And the group would agree without enthusiasm.

So if he is not in fact dead—either rotting secretly or remotely—and he is instead completely and horribly made crippled and disfigured in some kind of terrible car accident, it would make no logical sense that he has up and decided to quit this job. So the second reason is simple. Presumably he loved this job: that is the reason. And he isn't terrible at it. In fact he was or is perfectly adequate. His message quota was always around anyone else's, and he met it with a sustained and adequate regularity, even more than most people in the office, as I'm sure each of you has seen in various ways. It's hard to imagine, really, truly, hard for me to imagine someone being so adequate at some task and then not loving the job of which this task takes up such a substantial portion. And even if he was in fact suffering at his desk, or so we can presume, if you can adequately suffer through some thing, why on earth would you ever leave it?

The workers would sip and then change the positions of their professional shoes. Every worker would believe Carolyn to be completely correct in her guesstimates, nodding at her.

The woman whose name he never learns enters this circle with a stack of messages in her hand. I checked out what you wanted me to check out, Carolyn. Not a single satellite has picked up any data from him, no transactions we could find, no gestures. We even tried calling him if you could believe that.

Why do you say, Carolyn would say, *could believe?*

...I don't know, I'm not sure.

You said, *could believe.*

I did.

And by that?

The woman whose name he never learns would lift the messages to her cheeks and move her eyes along an invisible arch on the ceiling tiles.

Could he have been kidnapped? asks Carolyn.

It is possible, they would say.

Could he have been ...? she asks, pointing her index finger to her temple and then making a pained expression.

This is also possible.

And more months blink past like streetlights.

Perhaps he is gone, just dead somewhere, Carolyn would say, sitting behind her oak desk, wrapped in a long sweater, speaking to the empty chair. We can only be hopeful. We can only be hopeful we can trust him, can trust our memory of him, can only be hopeful he would never jeopardize all the information we so scrupulously aggregate. Because I'm thinking, here, Carolyn, that if he isn't dead he will wish he was.

And if in this bed he wasn't forced into his memory look at patterns, remember every sense that has stuck with him, taste char on the back of his tongue, accents of disinfectant, taste the sweetness of contained and metered oxygen, unable to sit up, unable to stand up from this bed and walk into the hallway, then he would stand up from this bed and walk into the hallway and then shuffle into the elevator, take the elevator down to the lobby of this hospital—there must be an elevator and a lobby in this hospital—then walk into the street and across the fields and ponds and streets that separate him from his office, down the ravine and then up it, up to his office door to then set them straight, set them all factual, set all of the world straight with the factual facts of his existence—his not-dead-facts, his alive facts—so that then they would know it was he who was alive, an alive person, so that they would then he was alive and in fact *could* set it all straight, set that world straight, cover that world in gasoline as that world had covered him in gasoline and then light a match or find a spark to ignite the world he had covered in gasoline, set that world straight, set it on fire, and then find a spot to stand while the world burned a while, as the world had burned him a while. And only if he wasn't forced only by his being alive in this bed to take only mental walks, only mental walks inside his thinking about things that had happened to him, he would cover the whole world and burn the whole world and then let the world recover in a hospital bed a while.

IIII.

The day before the day of the inevitable was a day like every other one. He arrives at his home from his place of employment, precisely in the fashion of every other day.

Home is a building structure. Inside of its aluminumed siding is leisure. He slips the key into the lock, and it resists turning but relents. He grabs messages from the box on the door and shuts the door.

He stacks the messages on the stool and turns the knob on the window conditioning unit, stands in front of it and breathes deep breaths of cool-conditioned air. My god the chill of it. He picks up the cat and rubs his cheek against her back and imagines a greeting card, but it is June and hot, the landscape is smothered and wet, battered in the steam of old rain and exhaust. He makes noises to her as would a Cat Him or as a Dying Slowly Him. She jumps from the dampness of his sweating cotton, runs the unevenness of wood floor. None of the messages are to him specifically; none say his name specifically.

It is easy for him to stare into nothing in the kitchen mirror, easy for him to get lost in the familiar contours of his face: it is familiar. It is easy for him to make faces like he's scared or begging or terrified only temporarily; the workday makes his face a still thing. The beigeness of his face becomes for him the background of mysterious smudges on the mirror, of face-grease or spittle, though this definition for him is not absolute. He prods it with un-chewed finger. Whatever the flecks of it are are now smeared by the film of his fingers. He believes his face resembles several that of famous individuals

After sitting, laying, staring at grit-made shapes on the ceiling, he prepares a casserole. He sings to it of how he loves it.

After looking, stepping, leaning about his home he has come to feel he has entered his home, the walls always close enough to hold him.

And then at his plastic table he inserts the casserole past his lips and chews vaguely. Bits of casserole leave unto the surface of the table and the pants and the floor with unregistered thuds. This moment and all the other moments close to this for him become for him and only him his rapture.

Only then later in the clouded evening, after standing under water spray he considers writing a few messages, considers watching parts of screen dramas. And then only then after sticking the remainder of the casserole where he believes it to belong does he remember the fate of this casserole to be cold and dark and then heated before he will eat it. This outcome haunts the underside of his eyelids as he sleeps.

Then, finally, after all of this time, after all of his years sleeping and waking, standing and sitting, bending on the axis of his hips, reaching for objects: the day of what is inevitable.

Another day of waking. Another day of adjusting his eyes to the surrounding room and things, which become not brighter to him but more solid, more of a room and things than a bad dream of them. A set of cracks as he places his feet on the short carpet. His feet look fierce, tensed up, like they have clenched all night at threads of bed sheet.

He moves into the bathroom and sees through blinds dogs walking ahead of their owners, pairs of women sauntering, the angelic blasts of sunlight on the hoods of cars. He wonders blurrily how this day will differ from the previous. The cat appears and sets its paws on the lip of the toilet, trying once more to Please know what this is. He stomps at the animal. She retreats.

The window sight is stable; only the weather around it ever changes, and then only gradually, only as the world melts in seasons then solidifies again. The edge of his neighbor's bungalow is unkempt as always, the excerpt of alley-asphalt passes as itself, what little bits of sky poke through patches of oak limb seem genuine. From habit he flushes and begins his shift of wakefulness.

The cat: still fed, perhaps un-hungry, perhaps ill.

The ready lunch: the cream noodle casserole chunk, severed from its glass dishware body, ready in its tupper.

The car keys: on a stack of messages, picked up, pocketed.

The car: locked then un-; the ignition smooth as ever; the vent working properly and comfortably, hissing dead air from somewhere in its engine-cavity. Reverse works, drive works: he accelerates towards the nine o'clock hour, a time never significant, always before something else, a chore never written into memory.

He chews his thumb while driving the few miles from his home, over wide road, past trash in grass, among calm drivers that switch lanes as if moved by warm winds. On this day like all other days, the sun's shape is hidden behind large clouds that let its light soak onto roofs and tops of trees and streets, and he decelerates and turns the wheel, gnawing thumb at the earnestness of signs in yards and on bumpers, at every stop the awkward pedestrians negotiate crosswalks. Among the pedestrians passes in front of his little car a line of deliverers, uniformed people, every one of them with beefy calves, every one of them with work-shirts the green of deep forests. Their bags match in shape and motif, all stuffed with messages. He has not in recent time expected and does not expect any messages from them at any time, any messages addressed to him.

A stoplight, red with a grid that blocks glow out of it. Cars are stalled in front of it, wanting Left. Signals blink on their rears and fronts; among them in the line a pulse beats, off-kilter in a fan of light and a series of imaginary clicks for him. Their activation comes to go in waves of *on(off) on (off) on (off)*, a bubbling up of the filaments. The blinking, the clicking too, settles down like sheets in a wind and then back up through the front of the first car, about to lurch. The single light between the cars, the single roving gleam moves on to some other intersection ahead where cars zip. And here it is he sees with a stiff eye, high above heat-rattled street, flocks of black specks jerking in strange directions, flocking to some magnetic destination. They stutter then go smooth, goofy-winged, drunk in thick air.

Leaning his chin to the steering wheel, wondering why they fly as if in a city grid, the traffic light on the edge of his vision goes from green to yellow; several cars squeeze under it. The bottom light lights up red, there is a pause of the intersection of less than one second, a calm of less than it. Though he in this less than second blinks out of habit and so he doesn't see, all turn lights for Left in his turn-lane light up, all burst out together in a jeer, stall or balance on a tip of electricity, for a breath or blink or cringe of inattention they are all lit then, it is yes then, they suck away, their illuminations recoiling and leaving a little burn in the air that dims to Off. Every car continues.

A tree with tethers stuck in mulch geometry passes him. Another. Another several, even, which clip by the window, speaking only wind and vehicular echo, growing up straight at every moment, to be some day thick trunks of tree, nestled next to this road, wide and deep and curved. Others trees pass or are passed by him.

Like every other day he approaches his office building, approaches with his car the parking lot space so often filled by it, and puts the automobile in Park.

He is known only to himself to sit in his car when here. He is known to himself that he is only known to himself that he sits there looking at his hands for a few minutes, popping their knuckles or playing with them absently, waiting until he feels it inevitable he must enter the office. But others have seen him do this. From another crouch or lean, it would be only his head, his face, slumped a little lower than usual for a driver, looking down and looking absent as he was, away in some mental commute, gridlock on a roundabout.

And yet inevitability would mean nothing. The current feeling of inevitability would mean nothing, would have meant nothing, will come to mean absolutely nothing if he is not to go into this building on this day, a day like any other (only that it is a Tuesday, and only that this is the day that the world will attempt to annihilate him), and go instead to the woods or something, stare at the sky that comes between the upper points of every tree or something, make in the dirt circles with the heel of his shoe and rearrange what sticks or pebbles have been left on the forest floor into some kind of meaningful pattern. To do what it was everyone has always said to do to feel satisfied with the feelings of inevitability that swell through his solar plexus, he acquiesces to it, and gathers the will, with a large sigh, to enter the bright glass door of his office. Before he shuts the door of the car and locks it with the swiftness of routine, the sun leans out from behind bold cumuli, and he feels varieties of warmth.

The operation isn't new, in fact. It isn't the type of operation that smells like wood glue or fresh chemicals. Although no customers ever enter through the door, there is a bell that sounds as

he enters and walks to his desk, exactly as the bell sounds for any of the other two dozen or three workers who enter or exit. It had been a bell that needed explanation. Some said it disrupts them. Carolyn once said once on her knee near the ventilator, with all of the workers huddled, that without the bell, the operation would implode. The bell *animates*, she had said. It makes bustle possible. It's almost like I don't even need to do anything because the bell just keeps things going. But the bell has never perturbed him, he thinks.

He fits at his desk as always. On his wall he flips a switch on the noise machine and listens to arctic waves.

A deliverer enters the office with a bing, says Hello to All. The deliverer's bags are filled with edges of paper, swinging from each shoulder. The woman whose name he never learns (because he has never thought it proper to ask after so long) stands up from her L-desk and greets the deliverer with messages.

More data for you thank you, says the woman whose name he never learns.

He looks to his desk. The light is better here for idle waking. He doesn't see the deliverer move with the diligence of wait staff, the grace of a banquet caterer, handing out or over papers, envelopes of several colors, flimsy sheets advertising services and objects; and to the woman in the cubicle directly West whose name is in fact Candy, the deliverer hands a small tin, a heart, which she receives with her pale hands and a sigh loud with joy. He believes it is the sound of joy she'd make if he were to ever lick her cheek. He stands to investigate. She looks directly East at him and doesn't nod. In her swivel chair she pries up the edges of the tin at its atria and uncovers what look to him to be candies, chocolate beads, one of which she picks slowly, and places past her thin lips.

He says Candy, could I have one? and Candy either doesn't notice or pretends to not notice.

Is there anything for me this morning? he asks the deliverer, his voice loud enough to suck a look from most in the room.

The deliverer takes a stretched glance into the in-bag without touching in it. Doesn't appear so. Maybe I can have people keep eyes and ears out if you're expecting something.

I'm not expecting anything, actually, he says with a jerk of his shoulder to the deliverer, who begins to walk away and rummage other messages before *actually* is uttered completely and finally, before the breath of his word is squeezed out.

Dear Coworkers, he wonders, watching them simmer at their tasks, their backs and heads turned away from him. Why do you look at me when I speak?

Some would murder him in a lawless office. Some would take him out and beat him and stuff him in a sewer in a better world.

Candy proffers a candy at the lip of the dividing wall. No thanks, he tells her.

Come now, says Candy.

He supposes, he replies, taking a chocolate bead from the box with a pinch. He sucks on the bead and watches Candy do the same, moving around with her fingers the spread of chocolate beads in the tin heart, swiveling lazily in front of a stack of data, looking bored or perhaps mournful or both.

In the hum of mid-morning, the workers in the office appear to him to now be awake, standing and stretching (some of them) or spinning in their chairs or sighing loudly (the remaining

them). Joints crack, phones purr, the distinct sound of inattention to the work-task changes the thickness of the air into something more viscous. He chews the ring finger, the knuckle then the tip, tasting the potpourri remains of the bathroom's luxury foam. Work tasks pile and are unplied.

Near the crease of morning and afternoon he stares across the office floor to the window; slender figures of women on lunch walk by. He wants to devour their bodies in the romantic way.

Another item crosses his desk from the hands of his department head, drawing his eye to its movement. Daydreams shatter into flits of skin and nipples. A message asks him to review the other message, to make sure its numbers build up solidly and then break back down to zero, that the introductory remarks are spelled correctly and appeal to the discerning reader, another head of another department. The letters and numbers all do.

The pit of his stomach cries like a fish. To run away, as far away as would neutralize the document, the data, the task generally, he decides take lunch, to take it, not, no, *go to lunch*, but solidly, boldly stand up from his swivel chair, walk past his coworkers as they sigh or spin, and step out the beeping door into the sunlight to *take lunch*. He would go to nothing, only take, as is done in other triumphs.

The outside air is quiet enough.

There is a roominess to it that accepts him in it.

Inside amid the humidity of the car's cabin he turns the key and looks through waves of convection off the hoods of others' cars, off his own. The radio turns on with the automobile's engine: people are already in a conversation. He looks to the casserole chunk sitting in the baking sun covering the passenger seat and feels a feeling for it that he feels is unnatural.

A restaurant sits a short drive from the office, nestled in a gravel parking lot. Inside has screens in it that at this time show scripted courtrooms administering justice. There are no other people eating. The bartendress's back is turned to him when he enters; she moves objects repetitively. He sits underneath a hyperactive ceiling fan. The screens in the corner of the room are dark; they only reflect window-light.

Have a seat and I'll be with you in a min, she says, though he is already seated.

He doesn't wonder why the other workers at his work have come to hate him, why he takes lunch alone when all the others eat together. Never does he think of it when they file out or in the beeping door, with coats, toothpicks, doggy-bags.

Nor does he ever wonder what exactly makes a menu sticky. He only looks into it, surveys it, wonders what foods would feel like to him as he would hold them outside and then inside himself.

The bartendress looks at him as he speaks his order. She is maybe less than middle-aged, smells like aerosol. As she walks away he runs the usual bartendress fantasy in his mind.

There is nothing to look at while the food cooks. Nothing of interest on the walls, only idiotic details: pictures of old people in matching shirts, some old people next to old cars, some actual tires affixed to the wall—all of it empty data that contributes to a larger noise. The bartendress could come with him to his house some time when she was not working. They could watch something, could read together messages from his past; she could learn about him, think him only understated and shy, but really a charming man, a sex-man; they could roll around on the short

hair of his carpet, biting each other, sucking each other's sweat. And as she comes to his table with his plate, eventually, he whips this fantasy into a light concern over the menu's stickiness.

A glory of a plate, just like the picture.

Enjoy hun let me know.

He doesn't notice now nor will he ever notice that as he takes bites of food, he makes the same face as he would if ever gored open or torn apart, annihilated from the neck down by a large boot or paperweight. His burger: picturesque on the plate, its bun clean and puffy like a real life bun, the lettuce so clear green and wavy as to be, but not to him, suspicious. Bits of topping on the underside, it is revealed. He hoists his thumbs under it, lifts it and he unhinges his jaw, as he must unhinge one side of it to open wide for food or procedures, and his eyes are pointed and scrunched under his low-ish brow, his jaw is strained open to its open most extremity, the nostrils flare bigger than bigger than average thumbs. He will never know it is his face that stirs fright in the blood of every one of his co-workers, every single one, one hundred percent of them.

He dreads digesting in the place of eating. It is time to leave, time to pay his bill. He leans his belly up against the bar, uneasy in a meat euphoria. She hands him his receipt as he gropes the counter for a pen. As he signs his name, boldly and with large tendrils of letters, she fans at her face—excuse me, she says, you have something there, on your face, she says. A belch comes out of him, a sullen one. He says thank you and leaves.

Good posture in the car is essential. It is easy for people to forget this but he does not. Good posture is also necessary for digestion, otherwise it might not all gather up as it should, it would then not be best digested by the body—whatever nutrients might not soak into the blood as they should. Ease out the seat belt; make sure it is tight but not too tight. Ten and two, there we are. Radio voices, companionable. The gas gauge points towards empty, and we ought to, now that we're filled up, fill up the automobile.

And he drives away, not thinking anything about anything.

But they should have told him it would happen and they never did. At least someone could have clued him into this occurrence, perhaps suggested it by a shade of meaning once removed, maybe a glance a little longer than is normal, or pointed to a coincidence so coincidental that could have indicated such a rupture might possibly happen, might possibly come to disrupt the intricate weaves of his mundanity. Someone should have pointed to such events as when a stain leaks on his shirt from when food resists being eaten, such as when he reaches for the knob of a door (or the handle of a door, or the bar of a door, or the button a door, or the frame of a door) and tears up an unknown ligament in the reaching arm, such as when he sits at work and sifts through messages, toiling as is usual, and a vein buried in the side of his head begins to flex and seize and cry. He should have had some indication that these things can happen, that things often happen without him ever being told, that this burning event has all been is and will still be nothing but the gentle business of seconds clicking past. He should have signed up for more messages, those ones, some kind; he would have welcomed them into the clutter of his counter top. Never did he once receive a message suggesting this, only messages suggesting other things, only glossy card-stock filling up the message in-box, envelopes addressed to him, tempting him to buy from them, envelopes with letters

in them, with his name scrawled on them in a machine's cursive, curly and feminine sometimes, austere at other times, other times suggesting an animal's teeth, other times indecipherable as his name but seemingly pleasing to the movement of a real hand. Boxes too sometimes came for him, came for him to open them, small ones, lean, containing samples of body paste, wax, lotions made principally from plants, always packaged tightly or stuffed in tightly. Samples of beef stew, Stroganoff, beef paste; chicken stew, casserole, chicken paste; seafood stew, calamari flakes, woodsfood. Dog food too even though he will never get a dog. Nearly every message to him has come, as come to most all of them—everyone, as a form of begging and of theft. Of every instance he has ever received a message, never do any carry his name, his proper name, his real and actual name, but only nouns, words for a person or for people that would skip his name, skip over his saggy cheeks, and subsume the entirety of his body in a glow, as he would sit hunched on the kitchen stool, sifting through the day's messages. The person addressed in every message is always in the boldest of capital letters as *resident, subscriber, tenant, citizen, customer, dear customer it sometimes says, consumer, friend, neighbor, member, donor, former customer, former resident, former subscriber, ex-subscriber someone once went far enough to say, former citizen, new citizen, automobile owner*. The many messages that pile in the corner chair of his hospital room begin to wedge into the crevice between the place sitters sit and the place they lean back against, and begin with through the course of his internment in the gurney, always still in capital letters, *patient, preferred patient, anonymous patient, resident, sir finally*, and also to he himself and others, *to whom it may concern, patients, preferred patients, residents, sir or madam*. And because no one else is there to receive these messages, no one else is around to assume any sort of audience on his behalf, no aunts, no uncle, not even a second-cousin that cooks drugs under a bridge, not a sister or a pappy, not a god-nephew with a trombone, not a brother-father, not a great-anything or anything, not a nanna, some of these stiff messages begin with *next of kin, next of kin of victim of the vehicular accident, next of kin of the casualty, friend of the victim*, and even one message, a message he will never see, that seeks to sell to him an economically and environmentally sound casket by way of colorful brochure, sealed in a thick white envelope now further buried by a nurse's delivery of a deliverer's daily messages, begins, actually begins, *dear deceased*.

Yet instead of being actually deceased, he is alive, indeed alive, and a victim of something horrible, they would say, a tragic underestimate, a tragic circumstance that by its its virtue—its virtue!—generates the need for more messages to the *dear potentially affected automobile owner*, the *dear potential litigant*, the *dear potential automobile owner*,

Messages from his appointed counselor—while she sits in his hospital room, lazily flipping through a work-book she has only recently procured and which details therapeutic lines of questioning with violent detail, while he drifts unconsciously in his bed, involved in abstract fantasies that make no sense and will never be remembered—to Carolyn, who sits at her desk on the other side of the sub-city, clicking off names on a list of people she must assign to perform unpleasant tasks, and imagining certain people as dead as the line through their name would indicate:

I think I know where your missing worker went.

This is interesting news. Please do tell. – C.

He is in the East hospital. He suffered a horribly disfiguring calamity, specifically the crashing of his company car into an essentially combustible fountain.

Sorry for the delay, I'm a little shocked. –C.

Do not worry. So I am sitting here with him and we have already begun our treatment modules. He is believed to be *going to survive*. Good news.

Yes absolutely. Has his family been notified? –C.

I have not been made aware of any relatives.

Ah, yes, forgot. Well since he is not technically dead please let him know that he needs to get back to work soon and that he still has a job for now and please tell him that, say *for now*, if you would –C.

Yes, will let him know.

Who knows how many days pass; who knows how many liters of liquid have entered him and exited him; who knows how his body heals and seals up inside and grows to keep him living?

Inside the horizontal world, he is a teenager again, at a petting zoo. A llama approaches him with its tongue hanging out like a broken limb. He looks over his shoulder for the group that has taken him there—they are all looking at ducks in a pen—and he sticks his tongue closer to the llama's, close enough to feel its hot breath in his eyes.

You've got to stop seeing things that aren't there, she says to him, sitting again in the corner chair, presumably. And do not begin to see things where there are not things.

Well the truth is, we don't know if you can see yet, will be able to see yet. I'm speaking figuratively here.

You've got to stop thinking a certain kind of thinking, basically, that's what this is all about. I'm going to assume you're like everyone else, she begins, then sighs loud enough to make an echo of her sigh in the space above the ceiling tiles. I'm assuming you're like everyone else—because, well, you *are*—and because you are, you are probably having a rough go of all this getting burned-up business. If you're seeing things that aren't there then you are essentially making yourself different from everyone else, when in fact you are no different than anyone else, and this habit will force you into tricky steps of reasoning when you try and try and try to make sense of it, because you will try.

The point is this: —are you at a comfortable temperature? I am actually going to turn down this heat a bit real quick—they've got the whole floor, the whole hospital in sweat-house mode, I think because it started snowing out of nowhere and the building knows to go to winter-mode, except it isn't winter, but snowing, even though it's even warm outside. And he hears her move across the narrow room in one direction, then the other.

The point is really this: you might have the tendency to carry over into your new life the habit of meaning, meaning that that old habit will no longer do in these new circumstances exactly because the circumstances will become intolerable. So what we're going to do, what I am paid to do as your appointed counselor in this situation, is to disabuse you, to train you, really, out of this habit, which will not, as far as anyone has ever been able to tell, help you at all in your current and future circumstances.

People sometimes—and this is funny—people sometimes have tragedy of some kind befall them or their loved ones and then the only sensible thing to do (they think) is to understand *why?* and so forth, and this question ends up being a dangerous question for those whose tragedy--the one that befell them-- has no answer, not even a sliver of an answer, not even a crumb of Answer.

Have you ever noticed this? Tragedies always *befall*. What else befalls but tragedies? Woes? I think it's only them, tragedies. Where do they fall from? Don't answer. This series of questions I am asking you is an example of what not to do.

What is this *falling*? Falling from where? *The heavens?*

That's exactly it. Quit thinking of depth. Depth will get you nowhere unless I'm there too.

I've been a counselor for people like you for exactly a little over two months. And actually you are my first client, in this hospital and at all. And even though there aren't yet *people like you*, in the sense of my prior phrasing, the sense of my career as an insignificance therapist, it is important to remember that even though there aren't yet *people like you* to me, you are, indeed, like everyone else. And it is especially important that we attack you with this therapy, attack you with this regimen of insignificance, with the idea of helping you find your fit, as it were, with the idea of helping you to cope with your accident in the resumed routine of your existence, with the idea of setting you gently back down inside the world--whatever world that is--so you can have a relatively happy relatively normal life, a life like everyone else has.

Now let me take a look at some of these messages here, she says, making a fumbling noise with the paper stacked up in the corner. He has been unable to gauge the volume of these messages, the size of their pile, though it sounds as if her feet step on and across them.

Let's look at this one. What is this, she says, opening an envelope audibly, loudly, with her teeth?

Dear Mister blah blah blah. Hm. You don't hear people using this anymore. It looks like you are invited a church feast. That is very nice. It might be a while until you can socialize, but this is nice of them all the same. Actually, as a note, I'm going to say we'll need to restrict your socialization after the doctors let you leave from here.

What's this one? It looks like the envelope machine was low on glue. Oh aha, it's a home data-consolidation program. That is humorous; I would think you'd be the last person they'd solicit, the last who'd need this. I've always wondered about you data people—you'll have to tell me about it someday, when you're allowed to speak. My nephew I know has a lot of questions he would like me to ask you.

Dear litigant, hm. Do you need these messages? It seems that they would contradict the purpose of this therapy, this very necessary therapy. You need to put this all behind you, I would suggest. Even further than suggest, I would decree, but would decree of course, with your consent, as this therapy, this strength we're going for, this *ability* we are trying to cultivate within you, is *for you*, so you put this message and all of these other messages behind you, I implore you to allow me to decree, because they will *bury you*, if not figuratively, then absolutely literally. But I think you shouldn't worry about these messages. Not in the sense of what they say or want to say to you, whatever they want to offer you. Worry only instead about being buried.

The door opens. The doctor, who doesn't say Hello to him ever doesn't again but asks him How are we feeling today?

The counselor says We are well, thank you, just making some progress on crafting goals prior to release.

Ah, wonderful, says the doctor.

You know we've been making a lot of progress recently in this therapy module. Yesterday we stared at pictures of mountains and thought about being a mountain and wasn't that nice? And let's see, we're working on some finger-pointing exercises, meta-blame. There is a lot of exciting work we have to do still.

That's great to hear, the doctor says, sitting on little stool. She holds only a pair of scissors in a rubber sheath in her lap, but he cannot see at all.

The counselor shuffles folders into her bag. It looks like it's time for me to leave. You'll be alright, won't you?

He could not speak if he wanted to. His jaw is wired closed; his broken ribs have been set inside him, his chest reluctant to move air out of him. He only moves his hands a little.

How does the light look? asks the doctor, now only a pleasant blob of face, now a vague overbite, now some cheeks, a pretty softness of an actual face, large, a dumpling. Can you see it? she asks, turning up the brightness of the lamp and depositing parts of his head-gauze in a bucket on the wall. Too bright?

Indeed the room is bright to him, indeed the eyes still seem to work, to process the whiteness of this room; the shade and size of white cube looks as he believes it would have looked had he never been burned alive in any way. The water glass on the bed table looks exactly as he had imagined it would look when it was up against his lips; the corner's chair, where his guests early on his internment sat, poked out from the top of the message pile, and suggested the notion of chair he had always imagined when chair came ever came up in speech.

The machines, too. They look like they should, with their distant sounds.

The fixture on the far wall—some kind of wall-lid—looks as cryptic and unassuming as he believes it could ever look, or would have looked anyway. The creases of the room, truly themselves.

I can see that you can see, she says. Good, just what we were thinking, hoping. She sits in flimsy chair next to the bedside table and twists knobs of this table's two machines, her head at the level of the bed's railing. He looks at her hair and remembers the various smells of hair.

Two things, she says, now that you can see OK. Soon you'll be able to be up and around this room and we recommend that you wait a while to look into a mirror or into any of the reflective objects—meaning not the bathroom mirror, obviously, or chrome you might find on any of the machines (though I can tell you there isn't any chrome on any of the machines, but we still have to say it), or even any guests or visitors you might have in the room and that might try to take a picture of you; do not go along with any of this until we give you the OK because your counselor has said, along with this institution's best practices, that the experience of seeing yourself in this state at this stage can be itself a kind of trauma, and we can guess that as your physical condition improves, your

mental/emotional situation can likewise improve and we do not want to retard that process at all by having you see what you look like before your probably should, OK?

He blinks only. Every movement feels wet.

The second thing is that we're going to ask you to fill out this survey because we were asked by your counselor to give it to you. She is at lunch currently but dropped this by and I told her I already was headed this way and then here we are. It says here that it's very important that you do not skip ahead until you've answered each question completely and truthfully, so go ahead and do not skip ahead until you've answered each question completely and truthfully. Can you repeat back to me what I just told you?

He repeats back to her what she just told him.

Ok, good, thank you. I can take this wrapper out of your way and I can come back in a bit to see if you're done; and if you're done, I'll have a nurse deliver to you some sorbet.

She leaves on the fake wood of the rolling tray that little book, flimsy sheets of paper held closed by a circle of tape on its open edge. He thinks of the sorbet on a plastic spoon rubbed on his lips, orangified, colder than anything. The cover shows survey-takers of all ages and colors--every age and every color-- smiling and concentrating on the completeness and truthfulness of their answers. With his good hand's good fingers he pries apart this circle of tape and lays the survey open, open to his eyes as all of the surveys were before, the ones at work that would come to make his neck ache and inside turn into a kind of jelly. He sees in the page the abyss of white, into which he would at his place of employment stare and still stares now, past whatever letters took up the page or take it up now. In this instant, past thumbs, into this abyss of paper, there are points of light or shade, buzzing around, gnat-like, frantic. Even after he does not look directly into that depth anymore, and instead goes over the headings and the margins and left to right as he has been trained to do, that whiteness still moves, still stirs away from his attention as he reads. His concentration for letters, atrophied in the months since he'd last used it in the office on that inevitable day, is already tired, fatigued only by white.

The top corner of the booklet's inside has an unexplained : PE - 6A

A brief introduction reads Thank You for answering the questions in this survey as completely and truthfully as your ability allows, as your complete and truthful answers will help your certified care professionals to assess the extent of your physical and/or psychological needs so that you will speedily and most pleasantly convalesce.

And then there's a blank space on the page.

Q: Who are the most influential people in your life? asks the survey.

There are lines underneath for him to answer with the pencil left on the rolling tray's thin layer of wood-colored plastic. With it he can write next to A: that he doesn't know anyone *in* his life that exerts an influence on him, but that it is the people outside of his life, people he has never met that do. Celebrities or historical figures, he guesses. He flips the page.

Q: And why does this matter so much to you?

A: Does what matter? he writes.

He flips the page.

Q: Describe your general feelings after your experiencing/learning of your *near-fatal car crash accident*.

A: 1) this is not a question. 2) I am actually unaware of feeling. I feel the bed, I suppose. I can't say it feels like a feeling, meaning I can feel it, but that feeling does not feel like feelings feel. Not sure. Hope that makes sense, he writes, and flips the page.

Q: Will you tell us more about the *general feelings* you have had?

A: General feelings-- now, wakefulness, now I can see for the first time in a while and I think that seeing is better than not seeing. Being that I've been unable to see for a while because of bandages and instead only see things in my head and then only barely. But maybe the downside here is that seeing is first and then soon I'll be able to walk to the toilet and then I imagine they'll set me loose from here and then what. General feelings, being, am-ing.

He flips the page.

Q: Do you feel that pride and any kind of positive world view are correlated in any way?

A: I suppose they are. Haven't thought much. He flips the page.

Q: What would you do if you had a lifetime supply of food?

He flips the page.

Q: It is important to know what a patient values, and so this is why we ask the question, "What would you do if you had a lifetime supply of food?" Think about it for a moment: you don't have to worry about food ever again! So, What would you do if you had a lifetime supply of food?

He hesitates with the pencil tip, held between the gauzed tips of his good hand. The pencil is shorter than an average finger, with no eraser.

A: If I had a life time supply of food, I would eat it for the rest of my life.

He flips the page.

Thank you for completing our survey.

But the sorbet never comes.

IIIIII.

What would happen, they told him, if he ever tried to find a reason why it all had happened, was that his fate would become the fate of others who had tried to find a reason why it all had happened.

This fate was explicated in the form of a brochure, first read and described to him by nurses with soft voices but then later viewed by him in the bloodless light of a breathing machine.

Myth: Take Victim, put Victim at the first point of decision after Tragedy. Victim does not have, at this point, the faculty of judgment, the gears of reasoning.

Untrue! actually. Common misconceptions of tragic disfigurements. Victim indeed does have faculty of judgment, gears of reasoning. This is the problem. To face suffering with this faculty and with these gears will drive Victim to any of a variety of implosions.

Victim is pictured here standing next to a tree in a forest and at night. A moon is superimposed on the image. (Victim appears to be able-bodied and well-dressed--dress shirt, pleated chinos.)

Tragedy is only alluded to: the specifics of Tragedy do not matter to the brochure.

Victim's face is blurred on the card stock in another scene, suggesting mental anguish; a feminine figure is in the background, kitchen or a doctor's office, Woman.

Do not attempt to find a reason or reasons!, says the brochure, in italics.

Healthy relationships, a struggle to maintain in the aftermath of Tragedy. Work with your partner.

Victim is described to abuse substances, habits, any possibility of indulgence. This is one method of reasoning through the reasons for Tragedy, says the brochure. Fate one of hundreds.

Other fates are suicides, further disfigurements, diseases sparked by worry.

Possible fates include, but are not limited.

Suspend reason in the dust trails of Tragedy, reads the brochure's conclusion. Enliven your inner hesitance to mean things. Be with loved ones. Every life is one, a Tragedy, but you can manage yours.

There is a sunset, inevitably.

Victim is held by Woman in the terminal frame.

IIIIIII.

Her hair is actually brown, as he had guessed. Her voice only makes more sense to him with her face attached to it, a narrow one, somehow of the desert. Despite everything she has said, her face seems somehow suited to the spewing of counsel.

The time has come for you to be released from this place, she says, the place that has healed you. I've spoken with your doctors, and they have assured me that you are more than physically capable to resume your life as it was on the day of the incident, or accident, the thing that happened, that put you here in the first place. In the second place, the doctors have assured me that these counseling session—what are we, up in the sixties now?—have helped to ease your inner, let us say *interior* life, so that your outward, physical, exterior blah blah blah has been, in their words, *remarkable*. Yet when I asked them what they meant by remarkable, it wasn't clear. Apparently it means your physical condition has within it the quality or character of potential for their remark. What that remark is, they didn't tell me—I am still working on building a rapport with this hospital staff—but we can take that as a sign of good news.

I can tell you that your burns have healed quite nicely, from what I can see, though I am no doctor. Your scars are rugged and give you a look you'll come to like, I would think. If you look at the scars all along your hands and forearms, where the skin used to be, the old skin—if you lift the blankets and look at your legs and torso and belly I'm sure--you'll see the patterns made by the fire and these patterns continue to your face, run up along where the nose was, where the forehead once was, I'm sure, placid. I probably shouldn't call them patterns. Because they're not, actually. Only former wounds. That might even be too much of a definition. Just assume them as your face.

However, it is going to be a *long* time before you will be even close to being anywhere at all *near* able to look at your face without suddenly (most likely) seizing out pure fright, pure terror, and dying, collapsing from it all, trauma-crisis as we call it, getting dead right then and there. So you will

want to avoid this completely for now, and we can work in session to work towards this difficult, highly improbable, virtually but not actually impossible goal. I have read of cases where a patient died not because of the way the patient actually looked due to the facial disfigurement, but because of the *facial expression* the patient made *in reaction* to the facial disfigurement.

She doesn't explain how she knows this, how it is possible that what she has read could ever know this as the reason for one's dying, how anyone could ever know this death was not caused by the obvious thing (his disfigurement) but instead the thing that comes directly as a result of the obvious thing that killed this man, this poor man in their imaginations that had suffered so. She looks at how his face constricts at this information, as he wonders how the thing she had read could ever know that the reason for this poor man's actual suffering and this poor man's actual misery and death was not the obvious thing (his disfigurement) but actually the thing that comes after the obvious thing?

The reason I know is simple, she begins, but coolly, at the pitch of damning evidence. I can tell what you are thinking. Because the patient's body tested positive for regret. That is quite simply the defining point. The patient was concerned with his or her past and the meaning of his or her previous face *as a face* as a part of that past, and the dissonance of that old face with the new face produced another a new face, one so radicalized from the clash of faces, one so well-fed on its own reaction, a loop of looking, a seizing, that it killed the patient. You don't get this without regret. And in fact his blood did test positive for it. Along with other deadly feelings. We need to wait then, and get you past it, looking forward.

I have contacted your employer on your behalf. They welcome your return on Monday, or Tuesday if you need another day.

He makes another pained face; the craggy skin where the eyebrows once were bunches up and then pulls hard over his soggy eyes.

Or we can probably give you more time. I can contact them on your behalf and ask that you have a solid week, a solid week to yourself outside of here or there, an entire week perhaps, yes, perhaps I can persuade them that this is in their best interest, after all, because it is, after all, in your best interest to be mentally and though we hate to use the word, *spiritually* intact, and, well, yes, after all, it is good for me too because you are my client therefore my duty and I must not fail my duty to rehabilitate you according to this particular course of rehabilitation.

She relieves a piece of paper from the lapel pocket of her suit, scribbling on it with a handy pen a question she hums aloud while writing. There, she says, her eyes wide and blank. She stands and walks to the room's bathroom door, opens it slightly and slides the paper into a waiting hand of a deliverer, which he can only barely see from his vantage on the bed, past the hard corner of his room's impossibly narrow foyer, only a deep-green cuff and a milkiness of hand. He hears the room's door to the hallways open abruptly and then shut just as much; she returns to her chair at the foot of his bed and assumes a posture of accomplishment, of dignity.

Do they have sorbet here? Have you had any? *Is it good?*

Quick knocks on the door like a handful of pebbles. She stands again, turns again, leans toward the door again and steps towards it, pulls its lever along its curve again, pulls it toward her. Thank you, she heartily intones, letting the door fall loudly shut, moving across the room seemingly without a

step--no noise of steps--pulling an envelope edge open with her teeth, sitting down again, crossing her knees again and breathing out.

She unsheathes the message and skims it. Consider it done: a week, a solid week for you yourself. Although there are prohibitions. Severe ones, it seems. Not from them, she says, crumpling the paper and tossing it in the corner of his room on top of his other messages. From me, essentially. But these are prohibitions with no actual punishment, from me. Only punishable by the real world, only punishable by reality, by you yourself, meaning, your progress in this situation--and here she laughs like a garden hose coming into use--meaning, I mean, that there are certain things you should avoid in your daily practice, for good reason, and these things you should avoid are prohibited, and we should talk about them as prohibitions during your week of doing nothing before you get back to work--*aren't you happy I got you that week off from work?!*--as well as after you start back up and finish the aggregation you began.

Do not avoid: food, sunlight, uprightness. Can you repeat?

The sun gets brighter in the room; certain edges of shadow dissolve into the paint.

What is also useful for you in this situation is some transportation, for you to get back to work and such. Before you leave, you must leave with this, she says: a single car key between her fingers, held up like a found bone.

It looks familiar to him as he accepts it into his good hand. It is the same kind of key as his old one, the one now crushed up, probably, in the steering column probably, with the rest of his crushed-up car.

Outside, she says. In the parking lot is your automobile.

She exits the room after a moment of stalling, looking longingly at him for some kind of reaction, then placing for him at the foot of the bed a brown sack, lumpy like a butcher's product.

IIIIIIII.

The room is almost quiet again. He can hear a gurgle come from inside of him.

Only hospital food has entered him in any recent time. Fluids at first. Meat-cakes, corn piles, beans of every color later. Standing up from the bed is an effort he had believed would be aided by professionals, and is not. The floor is cold on his feet, the pads of which feel sore, tender; the bones of which feel blackened and chewed. His stomach gurgles again, more loudly, as he puts on pants (black) given to him, pants too big, loaner pants he intends to never return. The loaner shirt (black) is too big too; the black trench coat given to him is sized likewise; the hat (black) too is also too big for his head, but his bald skull feels at home in its cradling. He puts the large velcro boots on his feet, black too and floppy (there are no socks). In the pocket of the trench coat is a scarf (black) and black sunglasses. As he completes the wearing of the clothes, he stands as he is, sure-footed, stiff-ankled, a smudge.

Two nurses enter push through the door with the momentum of kites and begin to box his messages. Leaning against the wall, his knees shake. This wall has always looked completely solid to him from the bed and it actually is.

We can forward your messages, says one of them without addressing him, sweating from her brows and cheeks. He stands there for more than one minute, slowing the gurgle of his knees and thighs, watching them stack the envelopes and brochures and direct mailing catalogs and weekly informational spreads into messy piles, into boxes, then into the wagon brought in by another nurse, a slow woman, bent like a bad finger. He slides along the wall, away from them.

The hallways are, he now sees, oblong and slick, an esophagus. To feel movement past him is a feeling he hasn't felt for several seasons. People in white and green and in patterns go by. He signs himself out, away from this hospital, checks a box on the nurse's form at the nurse-station, then wanders away, unseen, with the pen.

There is indeed an elevator at the end of the hall, and a ride in it as quick and lonely as a photo-booth, down to L, indeed a lobby of this hospital, with indeed people in it who sit and stand--not all look sick, not all look like they suffer--against the walls, or stand planted in the tiles.

Outside the automatic doors is the world, vertical finally. The air is open. It looks as if it is the Wednesday that would have followed the last Tuesday he was last outside, the Tuesday he was driving home after saying Yes to Carolyn, feeling happy that yes indeed he had taken a chance at adequacy, gathered the forces, so he felt, to deliver to her, and to his co-workers, to the company, what was adequate.

How long has it been for everything to be the same, he thinks, inhaling. The landscape looks dry and peaceable. Trees agitate in the wind. Cars ascend an on-ramp in the hazy distance.

There, unmistakably, in this crowded parking lot, in the handicapped stall, dumb under the sky, his former automobile. It should be burned-up, it should be crushed, it should be worse off than him but it isn't somehow.

And he peers into it, hand cupped against the driver's window and so on. All trash is in its place; every empty bottle or lunch food wrapper nestles silently where it should. Even the pocket change splattered across the console seems believable.

The key retrieved from the thigh of his pants pocket inserts into the door just as easily as it ever had. The key turns quite as simply as it was known to. The handle pulls upward exactly similar to the prior handle. The door, and so on. He sits in it. The mirrors have been removed, quite obviously. The seat feels just as it ever felt; he adjusts his posture to the best car-posture. He out of habit checks the spots where his mirrors used to be as he reverses and drives forward—front-wise.

Home is at a distance, out of sight, in one specific intercardinal direction, but which one he is unsure. He moves along the road and it feels like it has always felt. Every turn of every car is saggy, languid, as if on water; cars careen past him in the opposite direction so quickly. He wonders how he doesn't scream.

There is a place I can go, he thinks. A place where I can tell someone to do something and they will do it, a place where no one will tell me to do anything and I will not do it, anything.

He parks, rolls up his windows, eyes the building for a long while. The gurgles in his stomach make the cries of baby chicks.

He sits toward the window of the diner, at a table big enough for one. This: his first definite appearance in the purely public in over fourteen months, long months, all silly and maddeningly horizontal, since then when he had his hair and face and feeling in most of the surface parts of his person. Now they feel like clay with his elbows on the table, someone else's lumps. The trench coat hangs low over the seat like a skirt. He doesn't look into the eyes of the waitress through his sunglasses, nor over his sunglasses and below the brim of his black hat, and she does not look at him as she asks him what he wants to eat.

He appreciates her unwillingness to look at him as he looks quickly through *Meats*; the elision of his body from her vision soothes him, because in her not looking at him, he doesn't have to look at anyone looking at him, or even think that she *could* look at him, that he is or even could be looked at; and neither does he need to look away from her to not feel the nudity of being seen at all, nude at this table with this sticky menu, looking close to sad or forlorn if she were to ever

investigate. He buzzes through *Sub-meats*, browses through *Plants* briefly. He only looks at her outlines as she walks away with his mumbled order. Her patterns, part of all other patterns the wait staff wears: bright flowers next to grays; holiday-themed checkers that work as bedding for vines and branches that swift by the malformed sphere of his vision. Batches of freckles around their eyes and on their noses and shoulders sing the quiet myths of constellations to him.

Never did much of the hospital staff hold his eyes hard, ever, really. It is easy to stay that way. That instinct of the animal, the instinct of looking (as in done in puppies, in kitties, in all the other animals that look you in the eyes) into the eyes has not been satisfied in him (even before this total disfigurement, if it would ever matter to anyone), and so he retreats from this instinct, far. They asked him questions only he could answer about his bodily functions and feelings and then ticked boxes on a clipboard. He would only look at their eyes as they looked away, and when they looked to his eyes he would then look away, into the wall-fixture or a piece of trash sitting in the corner. They wore whites, mostly—many of them, anyways—a sickened wash of pale fabrics that kept the scents of sweat and chemicals. At first the doctors floated in and away abruptly, in flashes of wakefulness or sober sight. Other nurses slowed it. Some wore loud smocks and pants with cartoon animals on them: puzzled rats or elephants sentenced to an eternal sublimity. He had looked at them when his blood or blood pressure was taken from him and felt a kind of kinship, a kind of connectedness in some way to the animals, to the drawings of animals, to the drawings of human-ish animals, cartoon drawings of human-ish animals and never actual animals, never actual realistic-looking, only human-looking animals. He chews on his finger and quits listening to the diner. Without the sounds of dish-on-surface, chewing, the clanking of cookery, the hiss of heat, without the talking and the wordless agreements of nodding heads, the diner looks to him as simple and serene as ice sheets.

And it is that the silence only holds as long as he can will it; words filled with meaning bubble up: *high school, ostrich, never*.

The back of the spoon: a dangerous possibility, they had said, a dangerous opportunity for a psychological regression so regressive as to make him a kind of ape. So he avoids the spoon. But they were kidding, they had said. Not an actual ape, but you *probably do not want to*, they had yucked. And when would he be ready, he had asked to them, that row of them, standing against the window, the one closest to the corner trying to get her footing against the pool of messages that had overflowed from the chair and their boxes surrounding the chair. You'll be ready when your counselor believes you to be sufficiently advanced, they said, all three of them then laughing, like it was all some kind of joke, some kind of joke they were all playing on him, lying there in that horribly uncomfortable bed, without a friend, without another blanket to keep his calves and feet warm, without a nice face anymore, a nice life, a nice adequate face and life. In the back of the spoon, he is only a blob of something.

An idea accumulates in him as a group of four women enter his vicinity and sit. Every one of them looks tender to him. He pulls his jacket's collar and scarf around the bottom of his face rather slowly, lifts up the wings of his trench coat's collar, moves his sunglasses to the right side of his head, turns his head toward the women and then tilts it, downward toward the menu. He can stare at them while seeming to stare into the stickiness of this information, from which he has already

ordered, and on which there are not many foods from which to choose anyways, which the group of women does do after some minutes, and announces these choices to the waitress who moves between tables like a melting thing. Young women, the group—innocent-seeming and happy, laugh like they've never know a tragedy, and converse with one another, saying things lost in the blur of noise the world has become, saying probably something like *oh, look at me, friend-- aren't I your friend? oh why yes I am your friend and isn't it so lovely that we are friends? do you think we could split a dish, friend? wouldn't it be pleasant to maybe feed each other, friend? pleasant to be the source of life for the other, together friend?* His feet adjust. Their arms are bare. Their hips show when they lean forward over the steaming plates the waitress sets in front of them eventually. Him here, cockeyed under the brim of this big hat, this ridiculous although useful hat. Ridges of fabric against their skins burn into his eyes, and he wishes he could touch his face to their soft and cool midsections and then moan loudly as he begins to actually moan loudly in this diner as the plate of sausage patties plops next to his elbow. Sorry for the wait, says the waitress, absent already when the words sink into him.

The sausage patties are arranged on the plate in a layered circle that suggests an infinite loop of sausage. In the coat and hat and scarf he steams a bit.

None of the other diners groan that he can hear; nor do any actually silently hold their breaths as they glimpse him barely, if at all, picking up the patties with his best fingers, squeezing out of the tube a little pool of paste onto the blankness of the plate. None of them seem to notice him, his ghastliness, his sickly eating; and if they did he would not know, because he only stares into the bottom of the plate—the furthest bottom, an impossible bottom—and processes the information before him with his mouth. He rubs his fingers in the paste up to his knuckles and then chews and sucks at the patties, sucks whatever life is left in them out of them. Whatever calms him is permissible.

IIIIIIIIII.

And then finally home. The entrance is covered in messages, a pile of them, parabolic.

The cat has died. She is stiff against a baseboard; her legs jut up like antennae. He is empty of any sorrow.

His bed is not as comfortable as he remembers. Whatever part he touches to it (or any other surface) brings him to wincing. Every part and every surface—he must look into this.

There is a knock at the door before he removes his boots. The peep hole shows a deliverer, a woman small enough to be stuffed in her sack of messages.

Out of habit he opens to the door—as it is opened, he remembers his condition, holds the door barely open, shows only what was his ear.

Howdy do today, I've got some messages for delivery.

He holds his good hand out, low, without looking. She sticks in his hand a thickened stack of envelopes, advertisements, surveys.

Oop, she says, fumbling. It looks like you've got some kind of food on your face, there. Have a great day, she says, and he shuts the door, roughly, in its jamb. He watches her rush up and then down the pile of messages.

Home, finally.

IIIIIIIIII.

He looks at himself in the mirror sometimes anyways, even though he shouldn't, even though they said he ought to not. It becomes easier with repetition, this looking, easier when he believes he looks at someone else suffering. It was too difficult for him the first ten lookings, too much horror to actually see himself, all of himself, as his actual body actually was. Time one the mirror was a shock technology, which didn't register his visage in the way it should but went blank for him as he went limp and collapsed into the weave of the carpet, like punched. Time two was no easier, and he shrieked as the whole of his form crept into his eyes, the middles never defined, only shape, at which he made the noise that sounded to his ears like metal on rock, a kind of cough out of him, sending his face away into the closest horizontal object, a desk. His shape—what had always been and in fact still is the shape of a body, some shoulders, a head-like thing—was on time two noticeably (to him) aberrant, different on its edges in a bulging sense, malformed like his skin was stuffed with cotton. Times three and four were so similar as to be indistinguishable for him: he walked up slowly to it, after having drank multiple gulps of a strong bottle, dragging foot after foot to try to begin to recognize it. Times three and four his eyes went shut, involuntarily, the lids under the kind of heaviness suggested by hypnotists, all he could see, what little, swimming at the bottom of a dark pool.

The process of stepping to and looking in the mirror was in many of these attempts abortive, filled with trembling and unease and the sense that the walls of the house would collapse onto everything, which tensed him at the shoulders and in the back, his hidden muscles dried and stiff like mud, a mud man. In this interim he kept his eyes tight against the leaking in of every last ray of light, which would assail him, in even the most passive appearances as night skies, electronic indicator lights, reflections on glass or ceramic objects.

Time five was accidental, unrecorded, and what delayed the next attempt at looking for several nagging weekdays, ones without sleep or rest which wasn't feigned, because it had been unexpected, so unexpected and frightening that it could not be said to have ever happened at all, could never be said to have happened in the bathroom late at night, half-asleep, in the feeling of pure twilight, with nothing but a bulging bladder to tie him to his place on the linoleum of the planet. It could never be said that as he dozed mid-stream, he then glanced at his face in the reflecting surface of a bowl of urine, and saw himself—no, it could never be said that as he saw himself he recognized his face as his own, even though it didn't look like the face he had ever known and so no, he never actually saw his face, what he knew to be his own face, but it must have been a vision he located immediately, a vision that his twilight mind knew must be thrown into a closet of the memory, along with other twilight phantoms, the other flickers of meaning that couldn't be digested in the long feeding of meanings and shapes, instants and occurrences that might have had, had he been older or an other, some import: the back of fleshy knees when he was a toddling boy, words that were shouted by strangers in grocery stores as if with meaning but with none for him then, how cars worked and still work, any others of the patterns that swirl above heads but never land in them.

Time six involved his nakedness. On the far edge of the night's middle he denuded himself in two fluid motions in the locked bathroom, throwing the cotton pants and shirt his mother had given to him in the toilet bowl. The bathroom's mirror had been removed by him, in the dark, one his first lonely evening back at home; when he washed his hands and splashed water on his body he looked only at the wall, looked only at the shadow of this head and neck, distended into a long cone along the drywall.

The light fixture on the ceiling cradled then a grave of small insects. With one big eye he inspected it; the closer inspection yielded a strange vision of their opaqueness: he could see their overall shapes, but no distinguishing features of each bug, no identity for each even if it would be possible. The palm-sized pinch of brown bodies had tried too hard and succeeded. How they had actually entered the globe to bake alive under the light he didn't know. Death for them had to have been a slow one, repeated many times. Or perhaps for them it was a bliss with no end, a warmth that turned them dead. His widening eye singled out a little bug an index finger away from the mess in the middle. What about you? he wondered. Did this little bug upon its crawling through the gaps of threaded glass think a thing of the deadness inside? Or was the filament so bright as to distract each bug from what was obvious about it all, the obvious fact, the most obvious fact for any bug, that she too, very soon, would be wasted like the others?

Twisting the lock on the bathroom door unlocked and gripping the knob firm enough to fling the door open with no noise, he saw the dark living room still dark; the beam of light from the bathroom illuminated only blankets twisted and confused on the electric bed. The full length mirror in the living room's adjoining study seemed to hum to him from around the corner; a strange vibratory note traveled along the hardwood and through the pads of his feet, on which he tried his best to tip toe his limp forward, outward to the mirror, so that his reflection would not know he was approaching.

He moved against the wall and rubbed his face against the hardness of the corner, his right eye millimetering to the edge, worn of its off-whiteness from other hands or furniture, showing its bad stain of dirt-black shine. He slowly moved his eye along the wall of the study, the bookshelf that held fake antique books, a jar of candies from the last century, portraiture, and then the mirror, revealing the slightest chunk of his head, a little curve far off and dark with little bits of lazy hair; the fingers of his right hand clutching the corner, finger by cascading finger like he'd learned from horror. He stuck his leg out. He could see the foot and calf and the unevenness of its hair. Though the light from the bathroom made his figure murky and dim enough he had to squint to see it, he offered out his knee and saw the bagginess of his thigh droop over the hard lump of his patella. His head still pressed hard by his weight against the wall, he felt a moisture form along his face, not from its contact with his skin but by a slipperiness that suggested his face might slip away from the concealment and reveal itself too boldly. Back on balance, he stuck out his arm, red and raised in long patches, extending so that his hand exceeded the bounds of the mirror. He was now bigger than the mirror.

And slowly, with the deliberateness of choreography, he bent his elbow and made a paddle of his opened hand, placing it over his eyes and blocking out most of the ambient light, in the gesture of concealing one's eyes when waiting for another child to hide. He moved his weight to his right foot—a crack sounded from his ankle but caused no pain—and placed his other hand over his hand covering his eyes, so now no light at all entered past eight fingers, no light crept through the tightened slits of his eyes, rolled back into his skull as when in the deepest, most absent sleep. He stood this way in front of the mirror for a number of minutes he didn't count. The sun could have risen past the windows and he wouldn't have known it; the sky could have filled with green and he would never see it. And nothing moved that shouldn't. He heard a water heater jostle somewhere below him, a car some miles off accelerate, a push of wind on a passive branch.

A gap in one hand's knuckles. He opened his eyes but out of reflex. Some light, dim and flesh-colored. Closed again.

A gap in the other hand's knuckles. He could see the figure, a nude man with his hands over his face. He could see the lazy curves of his body's edges, bold in the bathroom light and against the muteness of the rear wall, a wicker display shelf with animal statues and pictures of people no one knew. His elbows covered his chest, and in his limited vision looked to him like breasts, pointed, otherwise featureless breasts on a man with no arms and with backs of hands for a face, one with eyes moving down from his elbow-breasts, past his drooping, frowning stomach to his penis, limp and sullen, stuck in dark fur and looking like an afterthought. But at this he was for the first time in these lookings struck with a comfort, with assurance, with a sense memory of a time when nothing was complicated. The reflexive sadness, the simple, nostalgic sadness he felt at the sight of his penis crowded out the awkwardness of the open air on his naked body, and sated the uncertainty he felt at ever being seen.

The aperture of his hands began to open. He did not control this movement, but didn't resist it. The sight of his body became more clear, his elbow breasts became more defined, more contrasted in the shadow, and when the beginning of tears allowed him to blur his eyes easily, they became real: he was not looking at himself naked in the mirror, covering his face and beginning to

cry, but looking across the room at a naked figure, a woman-like shape, an ambiguous patch of hair where his was, standing open to him, her soft curves illuminated by the light above the toilet. He hadn't seen, at that time, and for reasons too intertwined with nonsense for him to ever really know, a woman naked in some years. He hadn't had a touch on more than hands from a woman since then, not even a peck on the cheek from a cosmopolitan, not neither a ceremonious buss from an aunt or elder. Unless he counted the bathing. Unless he counted the some odd two hundred and eight two baths given to him by varying nurses, varying hands, old and young, varying in their tones, covered in latex and then plastic and then probing his loose flesh, withering away in flakes and chunks under the fluorescent light. Then he never considered his nudity. It was a body sore in unknown places and disfigured from his point of view, not a body that could be denuded and seen and connected to the person inhabiting it; his legs were then to him not *his* legs but *legs*, that extended to the curved edge of the tub, lined with the kind of plastic used to prevent paint from dripping on carpet. Never did any thought of sex or sexy touching come to him; the bathing was only a process that stood between his accident and his release from the consequence of the accident.

But in the mirror his penis alarmed at this vision, this hermaphroditic figure in the mirror, and that it alarmed caused his penis to alarm moreover. Fate, it seems. He struggled not to want to touch it as it became more noticeable to him; to touch it here would be to see his face, spoiling the seduction his elbows had created, and when he would touch it, no more elbows to stare at through wetness. The moment was prolonged, rather tortuous, one that made him recall other moments of erotic frowning.

He let go a loud grunt and swept off to the bathroom. He sat on the toilet and punched his genitals, slapped them around, using both hands, then one hand to slap his face, to grab and squeeze with a fierceness that caused his foot to kick over the litter box, which he would clean up later, after he grew tired and mournful, after he fell asleep and woke up, sitting there, leaning against the drywall.

Time seven was an accident. He stared at a doorknob too long, saw himself in the distance of the fish-eye. Not enough definition to shock him—this was good.

Time eight was the laziest of all initial attempts, being that it was not in fact an attempt to see himself; a nap on the floor of the kitchen, after swallowing two fistfuls of decongestant, hoping he would sleep forever. He could see himself—he seemed to loft into the air and hang like cold smoke, to see somehow his body, lying there, dressed in his jammies like some kind of idiot. Of course you wouldn't sleep forever with something like a decongestant, of course you'd need something better than a cure for the sniffles, a cure for sinus pain, a cure for the symptoms of the common cold. And of course you knew this when you did it—you knew you'd only sleep for a day or so totally, not even close to forever, not even close to long enough for what you need.

And he woke up off the kitchen floor after almost a day of sleeping, completely without movement, completely solid, and then went to bed, to moan himself asleep.

Time nine—they said to never try, not even once until they told him to—was successful if only partial. He took a picture of himself with an ancient camera from his storage shed. Him, there, standing against the wall in his kitchen, taking his own picture like a total asshole, smiling only out of habit. It spit the picture out of its face, and began to develop in the heavy scent of the room. He

paced the narrow floor, waiting, making (though he doesn't realize this) a circle around where he had last time laid on the ground, summoning a vision of himself while only meekly attempting death.

His outline came through—his inline pure white. He turned the knob on the stove top and inserted the picture before his eyes achieved any definition.

The smoke alarm activates, its loudness is weaponized. He must rip his shirt over his head and swing it until the room is quiet again.

IIIIIIIIIIII.

We're happy to have you back. We're happy you're here again, she says, while he faces into his desk. Carolyn speaks as if she's reading.

And if there's anything I can do or we as a team can do for you now that you're back here, just let us know. If someone makes you uncomfortable or isn't attentive to your needs as a colleague or as a person, you should let that person know, and if the issue isn't resolved you should come to me and let me know and I'll take care to make sure that the issue gets resolved. We absolutely want you comfortable here in your working environment, because, after all it is your working environment and it belongs to all of us in the same way it belongs to you. There are lots of last things we want and one of them is that you'll feel so alienated as to want to take some kind of legal action. Beyond that, it is important to me that you are comfortable in your working environment.

A low modulation in her voice breaks and dies off.

You'll have the same duties as before your leave. Of course you know that things are in a bit of a mess, to speak frankly. Of course I have to go through all of your work and check it and check it against the manual and the data and et cetera. Of course you can no longer work on this project because you have fumbled it so adequately.

You'll be doing localized aggregations. We need to keep at the small things while we get the bigger ones figured out.

Good. Now I'm going to go back to my desk, she says, slinking behind the partition. Do you need anything? any water? soda? good?

Really great to have you back. Really great to see you.

Just like usual the room stirs like quiet water. The air conditioning's quick laughter kicks in and becomes a part of the larger conniption.

Candy peers over the edge of her cubicle wall. Hello to you, she says.

She can see him, he knows, can see his head and face and could imagine the rest. He begins the word hello but does not finish it, instead breathes out the sound of a question mark. Is it that she doesn't dare mention already the obvious thing, the thing of his face, does not want to upset him because she cares for him, or is it that she doesn't mention the obvious thing because she would never want to upset herself? What is her problem with him—with his disfigurement? Hello? Is that the thing to say to a man so horribly disfigured, so obviously horribly disfigured, one you haven't seen in months and months of purely perfectly figured absence? Nothing comes to him except but eye-wetness, and Candy even still looks at him, waiting for his face to stop moving in the way it would if he were speaking.

Carolyn is mad at you about the aggregation. Thought you'd want to know. She says you knew better, whatever that means. People stuck up for you actually—it was surprising. We thought you were dead.

She returns to her seat; he can hear her chewing something.

Several other of his co-workers stop by his desk throughout the morning. One brings a cookie, one a flower, one tells a joke he has already heard. Several say *stay cool* when they walk away, and he wishes somebody would have told him, would had told him all of this. He doesn't at all detect in any of them, underneath their airy tones and hand-gestures, any intent to kill him. More specifically: it is not that he detects an absence of any intent to kill him, which is to say, any intent on the part of his co-workers to *not* kill him—because he could never be sure, through his detection alone, of an intent to never kill him—only that he does not detect, neglects to detect their actual intent to kill him, an intent so generalized, a starry aspiration, a secret their hearts hold so tight that they can only whisper this dream to each other in the most subtle of movements, the most passing mannerisms which even they can never see.

How is it that a work day can feel like knives dug into the sockets of his eyes? The messages that pile up on the short-end of his L-desk read the same as always: someone tied their shoe, someone coughed, someone spent several hours on the phone with a freight company on the issue of interest, someone acted fast, called now, some people scratched their scalps, someone rolled their eyes at a sick mother, someone jumbled up the letters of her own name, sat wrong on genitals, someone ate olives, lost a tooth, someone cackled at a bad joke, someone hurled a chicken across the yard, someone swept, someone haggled with an animal, so on. Most others acted naturally, making difficult for him to find any elegant sample in the circus of data. Sick children, everywhere everywhere.

A passing deliverer drops an envelope on his desk. The habit of opening the message immediately with his teeth has stayed with him.

See me now, it reads. — C.

The letters of the message hit him and soak him; a blush overtakes his face and neck, contrasting jagged lines of skin, road maps of tissue up and down him. Carolyn's idea, the bell, rings for the ninety sixth time today. Two deliverers enter, hand out messages for another large number of times today. He walks calmly to her office, knowing he will not be invited to sit and will have to stand at her door, to lean on it when she gets long in speech.

I don't think you understand some things, she says, rubbing each cheek with each palm.

The backs of her hands and her hair suggest to him a woman made entirely of yarn. She moves back and forth on the axis of her executive chair.

I don't think you understand that I came a long way back from where I was on vacation. I was having some vacation time all to myself and you said you could handle it.

And I don't think you understand that I *would still be on that vacation still* if it hadn't been for your terrible-horrible accident. OK. Fine.

What has truly saved you is that I am able to reserve a pro-rated slot at my vacation destination. But this is neither here nor there.

I don't think you understand how knotty this situation is, how knotted, I mean. How tied up everything is with the other thing, like it all meant something. And it's entirely your fault. I think you don't take it seriously because you didn't let this office know where you were after your accident and when you were recovering you refused—refused!—to communicate with us; you never once sent us a message, never even a quick blip of information to let us know where you were. It wasn't until your counselor got in touch with us and informed us of your horrible-terrible accident that we knew anything about you at all.

And on top of all of this your horrible-terrible accident has made it so this aggregation will be incomplete, most likely, the beta-data thus corrupted when it goes online. If the data we had—you had!—to aggregate is not properly accounted for and assimilated into the data-package before the aggregation is complete, then what good will the beta-data be? what good is any of this? what good is it me sitting in my swivel chair here and telling you this thing that I am telling you? what good is that sour look on your face right now as I tell you all of this? Don't answer.

He puts his hands in the pockets of his pleated chinos. He wants to explain that it was all an accident. He wants to explain that he never meant to fumble anything.

I don't want you to say anything because there is nothing to say. Yes, it is true, I blame you for this incident, true.

I hold you responsible for the breach of the beta-data, absolutely.

However. I am unable to allow you to fix the problem you have created because you are obviously unable to fix the problem. You created the problem.

And of course I blame myself for delegating it to someone who would have to leave the company for that many months, that many months not on vacation time, while I, myself, took vacation time. How is it that two people are to blame, and only one of them can fix it? And!—how is it that *I, me*, am the one who will hang because all the data for the beta-data is corrupt? How is it that I'm going to work through it? how is it? I want you to go back to your desk and think about this and let me know what you come up with, so we can agree on a proper consequence for you—no, *solution*—for you. OK? I want you to think about this—here and there—knowing that I can make your life a hell, an actual, literal hell as if there ever was one. Thank you goodbye.

And her eyes move automatically to the desk, to a stack of messages she touches with her fingers.

But he doesn't move away, doesn't blink or twitch or ruffle any of his clothing, only looks at her face like a highway animal would. He cannot know how long he ends up staring into her, only

that he does. Her nose looks smooth, like a slide, the kind of nose he would want to cover with his opened mouth and teeth at the end of a passionate holiday-weekend.

Back at his desk his brain catches up. He works diligently and adequately at his L-desk. Artic waves crash through the crackly speaker on his side of the partition.

Again, a message on his desk. Again no one looks at him, at least not with the horror he thinks they should. *Please meet me for a lunch session*, it reads.

The woman whose name he never learns approaches his desk.

Hello there, she says. We have something for you in the break room.

Reluctantly, he stands up. Reluctantly he follows the woman whose name he never learns to the break room; reluctantly he passes through the door behind her, sees his co-workers—most of them—standing around a table, smiling, around a cake, a large cake with his name on it, the name in bright icing, simple, direct, clear, a song.

The woman whose name he never learns cuts the cake and hands him the first piece.

Eat it, they say. Let us know if it's any good—ha ha, they laugh, ha ha, all the time, after saying anything, ha ha, eat it, eat it up, let us know, ha ha.

Reluctantly he grabs the cake with three fingers of his good hand. He opens his mouth and inserts the front end of the cake. They make a noise like a cheer almost. Its icing sticks across his colorless lips; his tongue emerges. They watch him do this until his piece is inside of him.

Everyone seems happy to him as they eat. No one seems nauseous as he is, leaning against the counter, watching them cut more from the cake.

dom, undirected, like lost children looking for a memory of house. There is a fleet of them, verily, thirty or so, globbed together in jerking motions, walking with the tensions a hidden spring, little wind-up ducks whose paths might peter, whose ballistics might be arrested by a log or rock that happens to be where it is. Two intrepid at the head of the flock make jumps forward occasionally, sporadically, raising on his arm-skin little phantom follicles, feelings of cold fur. He grabs inside of his jacket sleeve to touch their bareness, still there.

The one duck at the back of the them is a follower, lazy, looking as if only pretending to close the distance between it and the others; another slow but not far back makes its walk against a ridge of ferns, looking for worms or grubs with its plucking beak, pulling up only roots and pebbles and bits of litter wedged between grass tufts. He stands up for them, grabs bread, feels balance restored to his hips, upsetten by the wooden planks of the bench, hard against his buttock in this hour of sitting, this hour of wondering what might proceed past him past the bench on the trail, wondering what would ever look at him. Joggers, yes, in the hour, a few. No looks of consequence. Two pairings of two women at separate points, all four. One jogged pushing some kind of outdoor stroller, something with an engine and mud tires he's never seen. One jogged by with some kind of dog, some slobbering fat ass. A parade of actual things and not inflatable versions of things has come, gone away. The parade of ducks now will wash over him when they come, the cleavage of their beaks will turn upward into duck-smiles, gentle quacks of laughter and friendship. The ducks will re-order their migratory patterns to pass over the pond and him next season; as a speck of waving jacket he will remember their meeting fondly, when he laid down from himself the bread he had bitten, from his hand, the bread they will eat, dropped down from the hand for the ducks as friendship on the dirt. But the ducks take no notice of him, keep with bubbling quacks, keeping moving, not making any kind of eye-contact with him, he notices, but then notes that ducks are not or should not be expected to look into our eyes, and so motions to himself to cast no fault on them for it, not to judge them for it, to take a look away from them too because they see it as natural to not look into his eyes. He almost stumbles but doesn't away from the bench and into the middle of the path that runs by the pond—an almost-pond really, a suggestion of a pond, more like the kind of body of water seen in the gaping lawns of suburbs, but with real ducks here, real woodsfood here, long trees reaching above what would be the hard and bright gables of empty houses stabbing into the sky; no antennae but the reaching limbs of sycamores, no satellite dishes or ornamentation but the poisonous fruits whose exteriors, brain-like, decay in piles at the bases of their trunks—and the ducks pretend to not see him hulking in the center, not to notice his height and mass, not to notice the pale shadow his body casts down on them as they approach a reachable distance to him, or, more and most frankly, they do not notice that they're at such close distance he could step on them, at least one, and grind it into the sand with his boot heel like empty aluminum.

It is artifice, he believes; they pretend, he thinks. He shouts *bread!* and it rings across the water. Something mobilizes in the ducks at the shout, something is ignited, they take on the silence of the pond surface and change struts to the fluid motion of swimming dirt trail. He expends with his wrist more of the roll. One chunk lands, a splash on the web of the point-duck's foot, a direct hit on the tip of the web, yet they advance still, unphased, unperturbed, without blink or quack or spasm. Another chunk flung, another out of bounds, past the rear duck, keeping its meander.

Chunks three and four and then after some seconds five go far and then short and then inaccurate. They will not eat. He is damned. He reaches for the rest of the bread on the bench and then turns around to them, shouts *bread duck! bread!* and the rest of it goes at once, with a throw led from the wrong foot, bread scattered in the manner of napalm, splattered like gusts of compliments, always missing ducks that look so easy to hit. He never sees that flutter ducks do. He never sees ducks that would eat out of his palm and look then to him. Never does he see a duck nuzzle in his cheek, then neck, exhaling merrily; they do none as he walks after them, his pace quickened, his limp almost smoothed out into nothing.

Memory: they have none. Have none of them the feeling of *duck that was*. No ducks wish they could have done differently, thinking to themselves in parks at evening that they might have had a better life for themselves if they hadn't bought a certain thing and done a certain work and driven along certain routes home *inside of the thing they had bought*, to a home that they had chosen to be their home out of all possible choices of home because of its proximity to and relative cost efficiency resulting from the pay given to him for attending his workplace. They do not work or drive or stand in lines the ducks, none of them they do, none of them they have, ever, not duck one. Ducks have it: none, nothing but the blinking light of the present. None of them is with regret, of course, none with feelings of *this I should not have done, duck*. Never has a duck ever considered past options, past decisions made from a weighing of those options, and felt the thing humans who had bread have come to call regret. Nor do they, in their blank itinerary of being duck, have the satisfaction of having done stuff, not a single piece of it; not a single duck to him could, as far as he could ever with any certainty presume, reflect upon a happy stuff-thing it had ever done. Of any of them: as it walks along the path in search of sustenance or pleasure or just to keep to duck-instinct and stay with the others, it is unable to remember stuff it has done, stuff that piles high in the memory of a human with or without bread, in a pleasurable pile, one so bright it is blurry. And yet nor could it ever walk along a dirt path as he, and sit on a bench through the later part of an afternoon and think of those things it felt regret about and then distract itself with accomplishments of stuff done and a second order reflection of *duck, you shouldn't think that but instead think this, duck*, but then never actually follow through with it like he has been unable to follow through with it, posture crooked on the bench, arms crossed across the jacket-belly, watching water surface pulse and legs and shoes jog by. He is unable to do it because of things like the ducks, who do not look at him, do not look back, who pretend they do not know him in the way everyone knows everyone. It is because of things like this: that the world cannot make up its mind with him in it, in that he is in it and unseen by even animals. So if the ducks know no things they have seen or done, no eating of previous breads, no swimming on lakes, parking lots, nor strangers who proffer bread or perhaps scratch their chins and whisper names, then ducks: always in the forward moment, so forward it doesn't yet exist until now, and now, and now, with each duck-step, each duck-breath in or out of beak, in or out of pinhole nostril, with each beat of duck-pulse within its duck-heart and liver too. They are without the memory of any burn, any laceration or concussion and are so unable to ever remember what any of it would mean. Any duck that does survive such misfortune, any duck that does survive in spite of memory, any duck ever, he thinks, that would walk down this path and let itself get caught up to by him, would never remember a misfortune done to it, never a cigarette burn

in its eye or a speech severe in tone, never a twisted wing or a drowning by fists like concrete, never a kidnapping in the billows of a jacket or stuffing in a jacket pocket. Any walking duck could never therefore be a party to misfortune in any real sense, and so misfortune would never be done by anyone or thing in any real sense, and so justice would have no place, no domain, no danger over the deliverance of what is done or not. She'll never remember, he thinks, as he heads them off, ahead of them on the path into shrubbery, gravel rasping at them as he stops in front of the head duck and sweeps instep forward in a paralyzing blitz of dust and rock. And like it is nothing: a swift movement that stretches out and still pulls tight the knot of his sciatic: the good hand, swooping down, a fell arc, clutching at the duck's outermost plumage, its feathers that had cut into air, made its outline, made up the extent of space it occupied, in his hand, clutched. He italicizes his squeeze as the duck attempts to move. She seems to scrutinize some thing in the distance, over or through the shoulder of his jacket into the air of trees. Her legs continue moving on air like on ground and like in water. He closes his right eye partially and moves into the duck's vision, waiting for her pupil to point to his, attempting to consume all space that she could possibly see, to cover up with his own eye the total being of hers, all black and empty, shiny and smooth, a pearl, to reach some understanding that is if no other thing at least tied down to the world by a shared interest in and usage of bread, a vision the duck resists. The rest of the ducks walk in chopping motions forward, bump into him, his shins, walk over the dull toes of his Velcro shoes, past his pant leg like a stage curtain, through the legs, between them to get to where the trail breaks off at its side and through a sore opening of trees that gives way to something else. He is unsure what to do; his brow constricts; their leader in his grip could be squeezed to get out of them a reaction, some reaction, even a flailing, a startlement, a visible quality of fear or perhaps panic. He is fearful if he moves a foot or two he would step on a duck and by nothing other than an instinct hesitate to put his weight down and then fall, if not only onto ducks to crush them, then onto rocks and uneven divots of the trail too, get pebbles in his own face. He turns around and sees ducks walking into trees and feels more ducks walk into his calves, a soothing rub of animal on the part of leg no one else ever really touches. And so How is it, he thinks, that ducks do not see him? How is it that they walk past him, through him almost, to the edge of the woods and then into it, after hesitating a few moments, loitering near the barrel trashcan and wooden post with placard detailing the genus of *poison oak and ivy* that lines the trails, how is it they traverse the divot like a toy in a bathtub, down into up and then up with the fluency of a hot water, the smoothness of a wind? He wants to follow them, to take a big step over a shrub they walk under, to crack past branches and step into the stew of leaf and twig as they move asunder over stones and boulders wedged in lazy hills like bad teeth. He sees them make the shapes of new letters around tree trunks, trailing back onto themselves, new characters of a quacking language. The duck he clutches, the poor probably relatively teenage probably relatively woman, now struggling, now alarmed, trying to open up two wings and a tail muscle, begins to make a hurt quack, a sound that sounds honest and like what he would think a frog would make in duress, a low kind of ribbit that growls from her interior. The sound from her for him grows into a shriek; the distance between this duck and the other ducks makes her ribbit quacks a hopeless sound, a sound empty, one that could sing into the clouds of early evening and then become them. So Justice or Pity or Charity: it is uncertain. He steps this time with the right foot—the left foot—and chucks

her as far as is easily done. She attempts to stabilize mid-air, flapping a wing without resisting air enough and lands in leaves like dirty laundry.

If it was he who had been thrown by a large hand, after having been squeezed and shaken, he would not have recovered as well as she had, would not have bounced back up from the ground and continued in the same direction by foot to join the others, and not not look injured, and not not cry out in pain, and not not do anything that reveals capture, detainment, violent release, not not behaved in a manner that suggested the world was in fact a place with no memory. He would have wanted to go back to the giant hand himself, to crawl up the palm and hug the knuckle and feel its warmth himself, to be petted by the other hand, to be caressed by it, pinched and coddled, to fall asleep in its clutch and then be placed in a giant jacket pocket and be carried, to dream of the others of his badelynge, who would keep walking through the woods, keep quacking, never once wonder where he went.

But he does not follow the ducks. Perhaps he is indeed a weak man. Instead he turns his head once he decides that they will walk away into the woods forever, turns the head with his neck, the slightest movement, really, a movement so subtle it escapes full explication, barely registering in the humid air of the forest. He turns his head to his right, towards the pond, in its direction, only perhaps twenty degrees to his right (twenty degrees of the three hundred and sixty total degrees available to the rotation of his head, disregarding the neck's actual range of rotation and its limitation of all attendant vision), and inside of his neck a crack rings out, through the stem of his brain and the bones that hide inside his head, so that all of it is heard at once, heard over the snap of the twigs underneath his Velcro boots.

Shooting pain, stabbing pain, burning pain inside the neck and most things connected to it. Accompanying this pain is, immediately and in order: wincing, reaction of fear, emotional assimilation of pain and fear, reaction of anger, reaction of question as to why this particular pain would happen to him, why, with this pain, out of nowhere, why especially when nothing dangerous was being undertaken, no danger presented itself as occurring or about to occur, no habit of his would indicate to him that he has all this time been at a high risk for an interior neck-break-and-clench of this severity. Why, now, in all possible scenes of rejection, would his neck betray him? The counselor would say do not ask this question, only attend to the *pain of the immediate*, she would say, and she would sound so sure of all things when she would say it. To find the reason why was the first of his problems, she would say, the first problem that begets all other problems, the problem that allows him to enter into every problem. That her words sounded in his mind--her rasp especially sounded-- made him feel as if his thought was not his own, made him feel as if she were there, perched inside his cerebellum, singing the slogans of hers she often sung, or that their heads were jammed together, he thought, tucked into each other atop this creaky neck, this exhausted neck that could not even support the weight and force of his own head. She did not have whatever this condition is that he has, this neck-condition, this inability to turn one's head even a few slight degrees (a fraction of total possible degrees), to just look toward the pond or something, the direction to which he was (about) to walk, not even to look at anything special or monumental,

nothing bizarre or sublime, just to look in a direction that would allow him into itself. This neck-condition, this circumstance, was only his.

So he holds his neck and gasps, walking in stutters over the mounds of forest floor, up and down leaf-littered slopes, away from the pond that has summoned from within him his tendency to dissipate. Lots of pain-- pain pain pain, step step step.

Where a lip of high earth recedes down into a pit of cold leaves, he sits to breathe more normally and rest his feet. He looks down only to stretch the working of his neck, he assumes, only to rest and not to risk attack or assault on any of his senses, to merely exist in the woods as simply as can be done, to simply imagine a space, as she would say, to simply imagine a space you are in where nothing is of consequence and nothing horrible can happen, a space of pure safety and meaninglessness, of pure stasis, meaning, she would say, that there isn't any meaning, pure silence, can you even imagine pure silence? can you imagine a space of actual and total silence? she would ask. No, she would say, you cannot imagine a space of total silence or pure silence or anything that actually comes close to either silence, especially and most importantly because you are the one imagining it, and even if all air is still, she would say, even if your heart were in another room, say the kitchen, and its beating was muffled inside, say, the refrigerator, you would still hear the buzzing sound of that comes *out of the act of listening* to this supposed silence. Even in the woods (where it is said to be silent), she would say, you can hear noises that completely miss the point of a supposed silence, if there is even such a thing, you know? But you must imagine it, and come always closer to it.

And this is what she would never consider when telling him to never overthink what appears to him: at the bottom of the pit are the skeletons of two former deer, and this is true. Their antlers are intertwined, their skulls touch. Each is partially missing, their bones buried underneath wet leaves or carried away by some lesser creature. He imagines himself as one of the deer: to die in terror. But maybe the deer has no sense of terror, he thinks, maybe the deer is unable to sense terror, as he is unable to hear silence; what he, locked antler-deep with another deer would sense as pure terror, the deer might only sense as a moment of instinct, force, pure living. Each of these deer, close enough for him to hit with his spittle, was unlucky to get caught in the other and stumble into this pit, presumably, each deer was unlucky to get locked into the other, and writhe around with the other in this pit, presumably, each was unlucky to suffer an exhaustion with the other, forced to stare into the other's glassy eyes in its last moments of its living, the other either alive or dead, presumably, the other more exhausted or panicked, presumably, more alive or more dead.

It was probably a question of which deer had eaten last, prior to their battle. Which one, he wondered, had had some grass or some berries or whatever the deer would have liked to eat and had available to eat. Presumably that one lived longer. And since an extrication from this battle was impossible without a simple hatchet-hacking, or without an arbiter with gloves and tranquilizers, their last hours or days lying in the bottom of his shallow pit, wrestling among its muddy roots, was a feat of necks. Whose could make the other suffer most?

The sky has darkened, he notices. He holds his own neck with both hands, tries to stand up normally. He walks in the direction of the bench, his limping rattling his neck. The wind is noticeably colder but he doesn't care because why should anyone care .

He had wondered, when he stretched out in the space of the horizontal world, a question. It was possible for him to begin to understand the severity of the wreck, the ignition, the burning. The unassuming surface of that day—the day of the inevitable—was disrupted as quickly as it could ever be, like rock on windshield, like an aneurysm or lightning (of course), like your average startle, your quintessential startle, fright, the becoming of disease, collapse. A simple movement, habitual movement: the ankle moving the foot onto the brake, a movement of insignificance, left to right, using that muscle, those muscles, tiny movement, left to right, braking.

Who is it, he wonders, because it must be *someone* that suffers most of all, who is it that suffers most—could it be him? no no no no—who suffers more than anyone else has ever suffered? Because there must be one, mustn't there?

A person suffers pain. Another person suffers the same pain. Two people suffer pain, physical pain. *Level.*

Two people suffer physical pain at level x . Must be worse if longer. *Length.*

Two people suffer physical pain at level x for length of y .

If the interior of one person is in pain too, and the other's isn't. *Depth.*

Level x , length y , depth, z . Suffering. Dimensions of it. What else is there that can add to it? he wonders, removing one hand from his neck and actually stroking his chin, his bald chin here under the sun and the trees. What data is missing? What data can tell us as we suffer, where we sit on the spectrum of all suffering?

Can anyone hear the supposed suffering?

On what side of justice does this person suffer?

What about the other suffering the person has done prior to suffering?

He concludes nothing about his suffering.

He emerges from a tree line. A field. Dried grasses stick up in tufts before a long blanket of green, covering the upward hill as if putting it to rest. Though his boots' toes still flop, he is able to ascend the hill, to step up its steep incline without real problem.

Home awaits him. He will lie in bed and suffer there more or less than others suffer, until he must wake up, must drive the car, must suffer at the office.

He leans forward, making steps up the hill—step step step—until inevitably, unfortunately, he falls down the hill, totally and with force. First it is only a casual slip, then a trip, then a one-legged hop backward several steps, on his heel, then, a total loss, a purely horizontal posture. He splashes on the grass and dirt and begins rolling, downward.

And down he rolls.

Rolling still.

Still rolling, in a cursive of twists and tumbles.

The pain of it doesn't hit him yet, though he grunts loudly, involuntarily as his body hits the grass, at the bottom of each arc, each hit becoming harder and each departure higher than the last, grass and sky scrambled up in sight and taste.

He stops at the bottom of the hill's large foot, lying as if on the beach, underneath the canopy of an ancient tree. The neck feels good now, surprisingly. The fall down the hill, chiropractic somehow.

Why not just spend the afternoon here, he thinks. Why not just spend some days and lie and die of thirst and finally. Why not just let the body decompose and soak into the grass. Why not. Clouds streak past. Clouds with no detail. He wishes he could have dreamed up clouds as featureless when he lived in the horizontal world

Why not just stand up (and he does), walk up to this tree and touch it (as he does)? Why not pick away at this bark just because it feels good to me to do it, because the bark feels rough and good between my fingers, and I can pull it all off if I want to. The tree stares back at him vaguely but it doesn't matter to him.

A single twig, jutting from the tree trunk. He pinches it, pulls it. It lifts up the bark, underneath he sees loud color, yellow, purple, others. Pulling on the twig more pulls up more bark. Parts fall out, white and inked up, crumpled; dust sprays out as parts of the tree crack loudly; layers become unlayered. He picks up a piece of paper that is stuck between grass, barely; it is muddy or dirty, torn up, incomplete, but reads (in part): come now to our first ever grand opening, come now and enjoy the finest selection of meats offered in the area, come now come one and all to— Another piece he pulls from the tree: a string of numbers, mostly ones, some zeros too, which he cannot decode into anything meaningful, only a verbal sound he makes quietly in the breeze, a kind of *nuughnughgggnugnnnnnughgb*. How many ones could ever be found in a string together, and what would they mean if anything at all?

He remembers a package he has ordered, which should be wedged in his front door by now. Home eventually, somehow.

Out of the box is a knot of hair, looking like out of the end of a drainpipe but not soggy. From some mammal. He pushes aside corners of thin paper and removes the rest, sets it on top of mail on the tabletop. It stares into him, two grey swirls to be combed according to preference. In a plastic sleeve is the comb, which he removes and whose bristles he tests with the corner of his thumb. It has been more months than vivid memory can service since he used one or used a brush of any kind in any way. A lady had said something to him in a message once, longer ago than an average ago, after first seeing him through a department store window pane, past which he walked absently, inwardly, saying in the message she liked his thick hair and that he should never again, if there was to be any justice in the world, brush it. Too much luxury, the message had said, to squander with a comb, or with any attention to it that would disrupt its being, and so since he never had since then brushed it. And since his hair had disappeared into the air, he hadn't thought of comb or brush or woman who looked past a mannequin nape and oogled his head. Only sometimes does he rub its grooves when staring into something like a wheel spinning or a wind-nudged object. Now he places the wig on top of his head, over his head, his scalp, and feels the head's grooves underneath the weaves of the wig.

In another wrapping of thin paper at the bottom of the box is a casing of hard plastic, flat in most its surface before rising to encircle all of the nose it holds. It is a thin one, soft and smooth and of a lighter beige than what he has ever had; it could belong on the slender face of a slender woman, exactly who beckons with mute stare on the card stock modeling a slight nose on the end of her face that looks like her real nose, one that with the applicator stick will be his. If this nose were to be his,

he would enter every room with disproportion, imbalance; weak nostrils make for facial statures weak too, dishonest or sappy, and soon a room would come into imbalance against him based on this. The nose will not let him be who he wants to be now with hair and brows included, someone sappy or dishonest or weak.

The receipt is curled up in the box. It has a number on it that he can type into the phone to speak to a person who represents the interests of the prosthetics company's service of customers. And this is exactly who he calls after removing the beef soup from the burner and fanning the beefy steam away, and listens to automated options, delivered in a lady's light tone, an automatic one that hints, in its departing syllables, to an exquisite joke played on the caller, the slightest and most stifled cyborgic laughter.

Thank you for calling. Please listen to our automated options and speak the option that most resounds with your needs. If you are calling for. *Sales*. Please speak. *Sales*. If you are calling for. *Feedback*. Please speak. *Feedback*. If you are calling to sign up for our messages, please speak. *Messages*. For customer service, please speak. *Customer Servi--*

Customer service.

Ok. We heard you say: *Customer. Service*. Is this correct? Say *Yes*. Or. *No*.

Yes.

Ok. Let me put you in contact with a customer service representative. Does this issue concern a recent order?

Yes.

Ok. We heard you say: *Yes*. Is this correct? Say *Yes*. Or. *No*.

He says Yes again and blows against spoon currents in the soup he stirs.

If this is a return, say: *Return*. If you have another issue or cannot return, please stay on the line, and I will connect you to a customer service representative that can help you.

Return, he says into the soup. A series of clicks and beeps. He needs to know if this nose will grow with him, if it will adjust to him, because he certainly cannot look like the woman on the package, with her nose. He will tell whoever answers that it is impossible that he would have a nose like that, that he'd rather have no nose than a pocket-knife on the front of his face like that, that that's the kind of nose a person would just have to smash if they saw it on the street, smash it because it is so small already, smash it in out of nowhere, blind the person with that nose for having that nose. And that person would not be him.

What is that noise from the ceiling and why does a house make that? At what point does lumber decide to slip past itself, sag a little? Why is this instant the instant it decides to break past and--

Thank you for calling customer service, my name is Vanessa K., perfectly happy to assist you with your cosmetic prosthetic needs if I can have your seventeen digit order number.

Uah, yea. Zero one one zero one zero zero one one zero zero one zero zero one oh one.

Did you say one one zero zero zero?

One one zero zero one.

Zero zero one oh one?

Yes, zero one one zero zero zero one one zero zero one zero zero one oh one.

One one zero zero *one*? Ok, I see this order now, we have the Winter's Coif, one set of Country Club brows package, and a Luxe Atlantic nose-piece. How may I assist you today?

This nose is--

If you are calling about the nose we do have an informational brochure that explains the development process of each and every one of our skin-binding facial prosthetics and I can have that delivered to your house in a matter of moments-- essentially it explains the development of the nose as it grafts into whatever exposed skin you let it, and how it can respond in width to a stretching and a pulling out over a few short weeks. We have customers calling, messaging for answers to this very question. Was this your question?

Yes, he says. There is a knock at the door, inevitably. He looks into his beefy soup (no longer steaming), tastes it only mentally and moves to the front door, through whose peep hole he sees the deliverer, standing absently.

He beeps the phone to Off with his good thumb.

And he will stand there, staring at the deliverer until she bends out of sight, places the message in the wedge of the door, and leaves the yard, away from the yard, get away from here.

At the office there is now an awkwardness that pulses not just through his arms and legs, neither only through the other two or so dozen workers who swift out and in the office or only sit all day, or those who permanently swivel and make loud phone calls, shifting their accents, repeating jokes. But also in the furniture, also in the walls, the ceiling tiles, also the coffee mugs feel it, the pens too. The stacks of messages on every desk seem more hazardous than usual. Every supply of the office has the recent tendency to fall off the thing on which it sits; each thing wobbles often, rolls down even the slightest slanted surface.

This is a problem to me, she says. I think it will be confusing for our co-workers.

That nose you're wearing. That's mine. How is it too your chin has come to look like my own? How is it that you think you can get away with this kind of ...stunt? How?

How is it your facial expression resemble my own now? How?

What is it you're trying to do to me?