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Bound to Rise

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Bound to Rise

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
of Bard College

by
Morgan P. H. Bielawski

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Introduction: Liars and Sooth-Sayers

When you go out with a camera, some people will find you morally indefensible. People can see you taking their picture. They realize that you are collecting information about them which could be good (meaning, in most cases, attractive) or “ugly.” As a writer, on the other hand, you are under the radar. You may collect information to your heart’s content without social ramifications. The fiction writer and the photographer have in common the process of telling little truths, and fabricating realities. They are tall-tale documentarians.

When I started out as a writer, I gravitated in my reading towards magical realists and absurdists. Daniil Kharms was an early source of inspiration. Here’s a translation I wrote of his story “Red-Haired Man.”

There once was a red-haired man who had no eyes or ears. He had no hair either, so he was called “red-haired” for no reason.

He could not speak, because he had no mouth. He also didn’t have a nose.

He didn’t even have any arms or legs. And he didn’t have a stomach. And he didn’t have a back. And he didn’t have a spine. In fact, he had no insides at all. He had nothing! So, we don’t even know who we’re talking about.

We’d better not talk about him anymore.

Here, Kharms (so named after the English word “charms” for his love of the occult) takes back what he has given. By the end of the poem, the reader is left frustratedly reaching out for a

dematerialized character, grossly unconstructed. The poem goes up and comes down like a carnival tent and leaves only crushed grass and popcorn kernels. I was struck by how refreshing it was to be disoriented.

Kharms' incomppliance with the rules of reality inspired me to attempt my own. I wrote "Burning in the Sky" in 2017:

A young student was new to the color darkroom. She did not believe when she was told that she would print in the total darkness – without even a red light to guide her. With time, she and her childhood fear of the dark became acquainted and friendly. She practiced her conjugations in the dark – Я живу, ты живёшь, он живёт [I live, you live, one lives] – and printed a self-portrait of a dead possum folded in on itself on the winding highway. The possum was sniffing itself. Or it would have been if it had been alive. Its eyes were gone and its teeth stuck out, making it seem a bit devilish. She'd pulled over to capture it on her way to the King of the Catskills car race, thinking "wonderful."

She pulled the test strip out of the easel and slid it into the black bag to walk the portrait to the other dark room where the machine ate the paper. "I need to get out of here," she thought. In the color darkroom, a row of closets stood across from a machine with a special closet shielding its holy mouth. Between the closets is normal space with light and air – the whole deal. That's the reason for the black, light-tight bags: to transport the exposed paper to the mouth of the machine without disturbance.

"Ah," she thought, "shit! The sky's blown out. I will have to burn in the sky. And the whole damn thing is too red."

She shut the closet door behind her and turned off the light. She moved her hand up to the top of the enlarger, searching in the total darkness with her blind fingers for the “magenta” dial. Satisfied, she turned the knob two tiny stops.

To tell whether the emulsion side was up or down, she licked the paper.

To burn in the sky, she added extra seconds of light to the parts of the print that were washed out or barely there. These extra seconds would darken light corners.

It’s easy to get stressed out in the complete darkness.

The self-portrait came out redder. “Hm,” she thought.

While she was turning the knob in the closet, a surge of frustration bubbled up in her. She was furious – furious with herself, furious with the picture, most of all furious with this town. She’d known for months, she’d had that little hateful instinct. It was like molasses. It was like toothpaste. It was like congealed blood. “I have to get out of here!” She thought in catharsis but kept working silently, against her instinct to run.

The machine produced a redder image. She went back in and turned the knob with vigor, more than twenty or thirty stops.

Her image – all the redder.

“This needs cyan! It needs blue! Maybe it needs green!” she thought at one-hundred miles per hour, turning the knobs labeled “M” and “Y.”

The sky came out cherry red and the possum’s blood went black. She marched inside the closet with infernal rage, twisting and pulling all manner of things in the dark room – drawers out of cabinets, negative sleeves out of their binder, paper strewn on the ground.

Now the sheet, expensive thing, came out pure red like the devil’s tongue.

She printed it and printed it again. The color of her eyes went the way of possum's blood and she stood in the dark, exposing emulsion to light and printing deep red rectangles. They locked enlarger closet #3. She and the Devil are in there still, making red squares for no reason.

I hoped to defy expectations, surprise, please, and frighten my reader in a version of reality flooded with sinister but playful undertones like Tim Burton's *Halloweentown*. For a while, I enjoyed bending realities like this. I had almost no interest in stories in which reality functions the way it does in real life.

Two stories in particular changed that perspective. "The Man to Send Rainclouds," by Leslie Silko, and "92 Days" by Larry Brown led me to believe there was more to be said about reality than alternative reality:

"The Man to Send Rainclouds" takes place on a reservation after an old man dies under a tree, on a hill. Then it moves with the family as they get ready for the funeral and decide whether or not to contact a catholic priest for last rites, or if they are only interested in their own processes of burying the dead. They choose to ask for last rites (but that's all, no extra stuff). What stuck with me was Silko's use of plain color words: yellow corn meal, yellow pumpkin flowers (instead of mustard, ginger, or ochre). Her simple color words allowed the story to flourish on its own terms using its plot and its meaning or force, instead of its linguistic flare. The attractiveness of simplicity shone very brightly. Where I used to concentrate on making beauty elaborate, her story inspired me to come back down to earth.

"92 Days," by Larry Brown was unlike anything I'd read previously in its straightforwardness about human doubt, human ruts, the way life seems to be about general

discomfort with brief thoughts of something nice. The story often focused on beer or getting drunk, but not in the way college students write about beer and getting drunk. In my experience in the photography department at Bard, I had one professor forbid us from taking pictures of people smoking because it's overdone; it's a crutch used to look cool. Sometimes, writers write about beer to appear fresher, less academic, more "real-world," "real people." But Larry Brown's character, perhaps by virtue of being a stuck adult some people would recognize as a "loser," actually does appear to be a real person. "Authenticity," the word, has been cheapened by over use, especially in advertising (an ironically inauthentic context), but this story was authentic.

"The Man to send Rainclouds" and "92 Days" guided me towards a new kind of writing, that the stories in this collection, I hope, represent.

My writing process involves research, which my works consulted is evidence of. I read that crows collect pieces of shiny metal and bits of colored plastic and immediately thought of my works consulted; it may have more in common with a crow's pile of bottle caps than a traditional research bibliography, but it provides a constellation of my disparate sources.

The thing I love about researching for fiction is that your sources don't have to be legitimate or verified—they don't have to be true! Anything can be a source—gum wrappers, billboards, LP covers, moving truck slogans, as well as researched papers on medieval manuscripts, psychological theories on trauma survivors, and manuals for understanding the symbols on gravestones in the United States. I was also motivated a great deal by art and photography: Julian Onderdonk's paintings of blue bonnets in Texas, and Robert Frank photographs in *The Americans* come to mind first. Great fiction research requires that everything can be source material.

This idea of a wide scope for fiction research suits me well because I am a collector. I keep scraps. For years now, I've pocketed little pieces of life that go by me—a bus ticket from Austria, the wrapper on the end of a Gurkha cigar, post cards, business cards, labels for plants you buy at the store, plus lots and lots of old photographs (found in boxes in used book stores). I consider all of these things to be viable primary source documents.

Driving across the country twice became an important research experience for my project. I drove two different cars from the San Francisco Bay area to the Hudson Valley. The first time I went through the middle. The second time I went up and over. Before those trips I had only hazily considered myself an American. I found a sense of pride, ruddy and round like a garnet, rolling around the back of my tent in Glacier National Park, and again, deep in my pocket when I was on horseback in Yellowstone (where the wolves are free). (American pride being dangerous words these days, more often associated with hate than national parks). All of the stories in this collection are focused on American characters except two: "In the Smirr" is set in Scotland, and "One-Legged Rabbit" is set in Siberia. I wrote the latter originally in Russian and then translated it to English.

Some footage of singer-songwriter Townes van Zandt keeps coming to mind. In it, he's seated on a stool in a dark studio to play for Segway TV Productions, somewhere in Austin Texas, sometime during the 1970's by the look of it. Here's an artist. He's humble, but he's confused. Due to electric shock therapy, he can't remember who wrote Still Lookin' For You (he did) and who wrote Dead Flowers (the Rolling Stones did), but he's going to play a fused version of the two anyway. He cites the Rolling Stones' influence to the best of his ability, but still confuses the notion of authorship. Regardless, the two songs lace up seamlessly. Townes van Zandt's willingness to proceed without a clear idea of who wrote what reminds me how

important it is to focus on what you're making, rather than what you're making says about you.

Free yourself up and focus on the beauty. I tried to follow his example to the best of my ability. I

hope these stories are meaningful to you.

Bound to Rise

I find solace in hardware stores. The screwdrivers and bolt cutters smile at me. They say, “Good Job Joe. You’ve done well for yourself.” I sip my beer, wipe the froth off the inside pocket of my Carhartt vest, and think, “Good job Joe.” Good for you. The guy who owns the store, Old Man Joe, Joe Stavinsky, is a nice guy. He waves at me when I come in and knows that I’m coming to church so he lets me take my time. He never asks me, “Can I help you find anything?” because he knows that before I’d need help finding anything, I’d need help looking for something in particular to find. Sometimes I leave with a new wrench, or some new batteries, but usually I just say some prayers and go home. Sometimes, when I’m extra nervous, I come twice a day. This is my second time today. Jess told me to meet her tonight in the parking lot of the grocery store where we usually meet. I’ve got a bad feeling about it. Maybe I should bring her something. “Good thinking Joe,” said a handy multi-use tool with a screw driver, miniature scissors, and a small, fold-out knife. I grabbed it and checked out.

I watched Jess close up shop in the grocery store through the window. She had her hair up in a pony tail so that the end of it flicked out. She wasn’t breathtakingly beautiful, but a lot of myths and memories had built up around her over the years which gave her a kind of glow. It made her stand out. When we were falling in love it didn’t feel so much like anything “ignited,” caught fire, or burned. I remember I described it at the time as wading into rushing water. But really it was more ambivalent. I couldn’t even say it was like deer in the woods because I hadn’t had to prove myself or fight off another deer or anything. It just started to happen like seasons start to happen; once it was fall, then it was frosty, then it was winter. Her guitar bumped into her leg while she walked out to me, “Joe baby guess what?”

“What?”

“I got a deal to do a tour with Denver and his cellist friend. I’ll be gone for a couple months, touring all over the upper states and lower Canada. I think I want to take them up on it!” I thought about being alone at home eating frozen tamales and my gut sunk.

“Well okay honey.” I said.

“Can’t you be a little bit happy for me?”

“Sure thing baby,” I said unconvincingly. I thought again about being home alone, twiddling my thumbs while the electronics blinked their lime green eyes at me. We took both our cars home and parked one in front of another in the driveway. Her HOWL sticker lit up in my headlights. I always thought she had it there because she knew wolves are my favorite animal, which was really sweet of her, but I learned yesterday that it’s for some book that isn’t even about wolves. Inside, she heated up a frozen pizza.

“You want to hear a song?” she asked me.

“Hell yeah,” I said and blanked out at the white wall while she played me a song about snow. “That was great,” I said.

“You think so?”

“Oh yeah,” I said. The day came for her to head out with Denver and the cello guy. She kissed me in the doorway with excited eyes. She wore her yellow corduroy coat with big feather earrings. “Do you have your pocket tool?” I asked dumbly.

“M-hm, I have it,” she said. Denver stood behind her in a cool blue Levi’s jacket. I felt self-conscious in my dirty white shirt. He had a belt buckle with a bull on it which he showed off by resting his hand on his hip. He whipped his head to move his blonde hair from his eyes. Jess said, “Bye Honey,” like they were the best words in the English language. The three of them left

in a stylish blue van. Then I was alone. Immediately the sound of the kitchen clock made me antsy. I took it off the wall and looked at it. Every hour a different little bird makes noise. I would have thrown it off the deck, but Jess's aunt gave it to her. I laid it gently against the wall outside. I got my car keys and went to the hardware store. I headed straight for the screw driver sets. I admired their little plastic pockets and how their heights decreased in steady intervals. It was soothing to look at them. It was nice to know they were here. I moved away from them and graced the side of the clothing section, which is not part of my usual route. A Levi's tag made me think of Denver's sleek blond hair and side burns, his broad shoulders, and long Levi's legs. In a brief conniption of anxiety and rage, I breached the clothing section and found the Levi's jackets. I pulled one labeled "L" over my arms and when it was on I tugged the two panels of lined fabric that went down my otherwise unremarkable chest. Right then in the hardware store I prayed to be more handsome. I prayed to wake up and find myself stronger, handier, and more capable. I prayed to find myself inside of something, something big, something helpful, to leave dangling Joe behind for a sharp-jawed Joe.

At the register Old Joe said, "Big bucks today," and fluffed his eyebrows.

I said, "Yes Sir," with conviction. Then I went home and sat on the couch in my new, Sherpa-lined jacket.

It took time, but eventually I was moved by some inhuman, exterior force to sign up at the firehouse for training. A voice came on the radio and said, "Firefighters needed!" I'd wait all day for our six-to-nine PM sessions. The other guys would show up after work and I'd roll in as fresh as a daisy, ready to put all my energy into the only thing I had going. And so, I was pretty successful. I remembered how to organize the fire truck. It was easy for me. Wrap the hoses counter clock wise as tight as you can. Make sure there are nine axes in place in the compartment

underneath where the guys hang on. Always remember to scrub the back nozzle of the hose so that it can fit easily onto fire hydrants. Magically, these were all skills that wandering the hardware store taught me. The only thing I fell short on was the strength component. Even in high school I hadn't been able to pull myself up a rope. At the time I thought, "When the hell am I going to need to do that?" Apparently, now. So, I bought some metal weights in the "Home and Living" section of the hardware store and started lifting weights all morning while watching TV. People on the street started saying, "nice jacket man." Even Old Joe admitted that it suits me pretty well. I decided I'd grow side burns and even that was going pretty well so far.

One day while I was browsing the store (my visits there were becoming less frequent), a song came on the radio. It was a good song. I bopped my head while I looked through pipe parts. It was something about cardinals and how pretty they are, something about a feeling of loneliness that feels pretty good, something about how beautiful the open road is. It was the best song I've heard in years. Then the radio announcer said, "That song is courtesy of a local singer songwriter Jessica Lark, currently on tour in..."

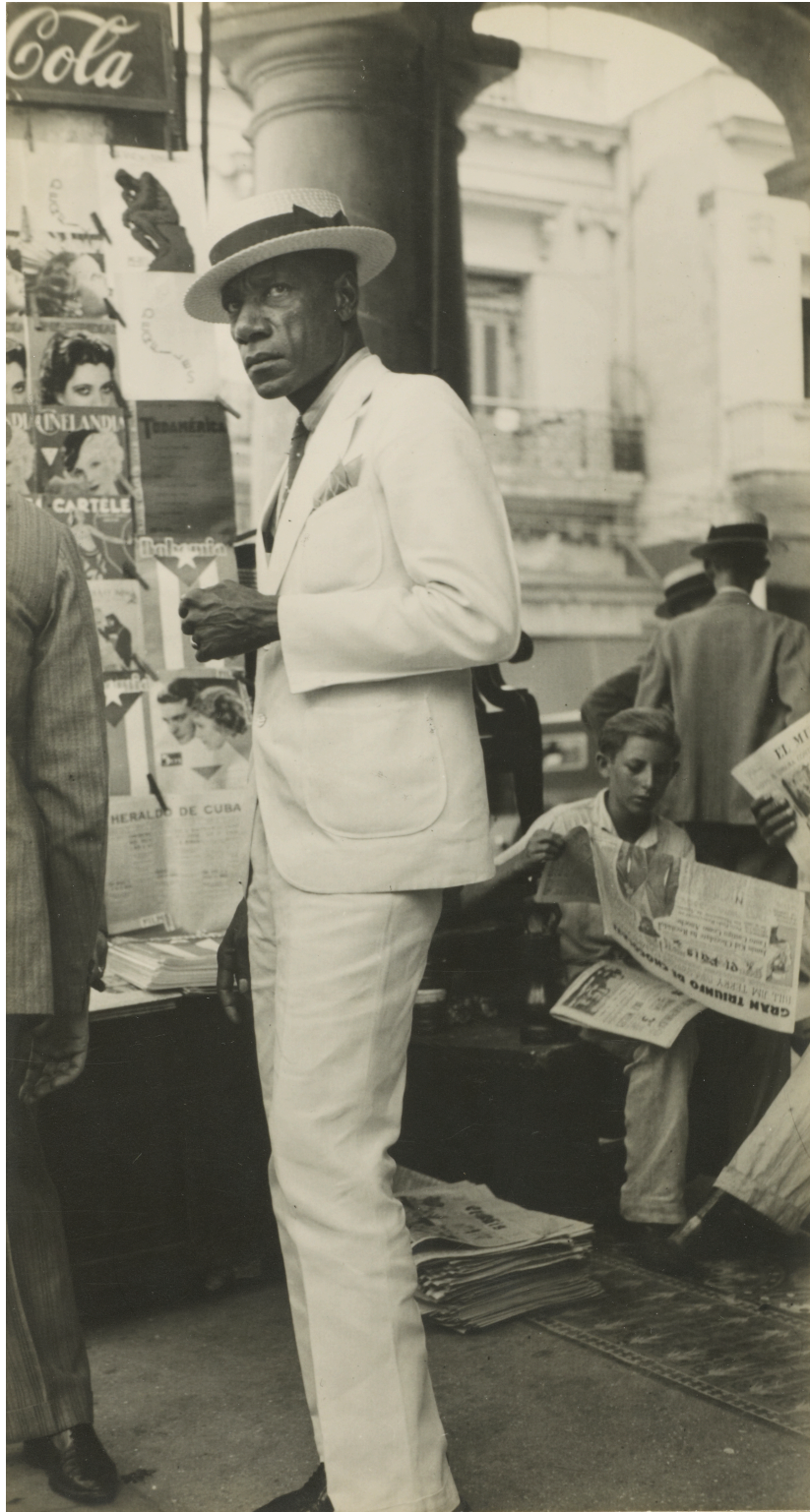
"Holy shit!" I turned to a white-haired woman who scuttled away, "It's Jess! Jess is on the radio!" I told all the guys at the station and they said, "nice!" and "lucky guy!" I was pretty sure that I'd summited, that I'd reached the top of my life. For two months it seemed as though I had. I went through my life flying, like I was ice skating through it with my hands wide open. I skated through my visits to the store. I skated through breakfasts and dinners. I even skated through my fireman's test and became a real firefighter. I enjoyed my nights at the firehouse. Despite the big white walls and the shiny pole right in the middle of the bed room, it was homey. We joked and made fun of each other. When we were all in there with nothing to do, I felt like we were a bunch of a hens in a henhouse, somehow piling up the respect of people outside. But

even then, when we were resting, I was more excited to get the chance to save someone from a burning building, or even their dog, to say, “Don’t worry miss, we have it under control.”

Then, we got an assignment. We rode the truck to the scene of a blue Winnebago on fire on the side of a country highway. I saw Jess in tears, wrapped up in a Levi’s jacket that looked just like mine. “Jess?” I said, “What is this?” She didn’t recognize me under my fireman hat. The flames on the car reached up as high as the tops of trees. Lights from cop cars whirred in circles and illuminated Jess’s face and the sideroad turf in red, and then in blue, and then in red.

“What’s going on?” I took my fire helmet off while the other guys jumped off the firetruck and started unloading stuff. Jess was so beside herself she still didn’t recognize or even look at me until I grabbed her arm. She kind of yelped and then whispered with horror, “Joe?”

She and I stood next to each other – her in Denver’s cool blue jacket, me in my yellow fireman outfit – while we watched the shape of a man burn through holes growing in the frame of the car. Uneasily, I knelt down and picked some little white roadside flowers and tucked them into the crease of her folded-up arms. Then I left her standing there in the hot orange light to help unwrap the hose.



¹ Walker Evans, "Havana Citizen." (1933).

Demolition Derby

For A.M.

I loaded film in my camera sloppily and felt feverish in the front seat of Austin's car. We drank beer in the grassy parking lot of the county fair and bent up the cans when we finished them. We stayed in the car while the late sun became the early, pinkish night and the lights of the Ferris wheel turned on. They looked like a bunch of stars in one spot in the sky, the milky way, or just Orion, rolling around and around.

"We should head in soon," I said. Austin nodded but didn't move. So, I opened my door and then he copied me. We paid our ten bucks and went straight to the food stands. We got fried dough and frothy beers from a girl in a red tank top with blond hair and blue makeup. By the time we got to the stadium it was packed. We walked by the chain link fence and I noticed a beat-up derby car that said, "R.I.P. Mom." A chain held the passenger side doors closed. Most of the other ones said stuff like "Jugs" with spray-painted pictures boobs underneath them with nipples that pointed off in different directions. There were no seats in the stands so Austin and I sat on some stairs until an old woman walked directly through us and scoffed. We joined the crowd standing at the base, next to the pit. The guy next to us said,

"Have you heard there's a lady-driver going today?"

"Hell yeah," said the guy next to him, "Aleksa." He drew out the middle syllable.

"She's for *real*."

"Hell yeah she is," said the other guy. Austin and I raised our eyebrows at each other. He leaned over and said,

"For *real*," sarcastically.

The cars lined up in the part of the rodeo turf sectioned off for them. There was a cement wall between us and them. The cars blew smoke and huffed while they rolled out. A megaphone made the announcer's voice indistinguishable above the din and the drivers gesticulated in angry confusion out of the holes in their cars where there are usually windows.

"What the fuck!" said a driver.

"Park vertical!" A man in a bright orange suit yelled back. A pink car with black numbers spray painted on it drove in second to last.

"You go girl!" whispered Austin.

"And now let us sing the national anthem," said the announcer. His t-shirt peeked out from underneath his flannel and depicted an eagle breaking through an American flag. We took our hats off and shaded our hearts. The man on my other side had a Vietnam Vet hat. I looked at the corner of his eye and appreciated his pot-marked, dignified face. I took a picture with my brain but didn't dare raise my camera. I noticed two lanky kids with their arms at their sides and figured they went to college. Their arms were unusually long so their shirts didn't reach their wrists. One of them had a short afro. A little kid played his Gameboy with the sound on, on the floor the whole time. I thought about kicking him, right in his dyed-pink-hair head. The singing was terrible, but then it was over and the horn blew. All the cars immediately pulled out of their spots and rhythmically smashed into each other. One would back up and then charge into another and the crowd would moan sympathetically. Once a car stops moving, you can't hit it anymore. One by one the cars stopped until we were down to three left. A green, a pink, and an orange-and-black car. The green car got crushed on both sides and the announcer blew his whistle three times.

Two firefighters jumped over the barrier and helped a figure get out of the green car. Long black hair rolled out from under the helmet so I was wrong about which car was which. They walked her over to an ambulance. She kept her hand against her helmet as if it was her head.

“Now don’t you worry,” said the announcer, “We have a team of specialists over here. She’s going to be a-o-kay!” He blew the whistle again and the last two cars duked it out.

When I got home my Mom was up watching television over her belly. She said, “How’s it going sweetie?”

“I saw a lady-driver at the derby.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah she went out in an ambulance.”

“Oh, Jesus. Bless her soul.”

I showed my parents a Walker Evans’ photo. “It’s called ‘Havana Citizen,’ from 1933.”

My Mother said, “he doesn’t look like a very nice man.”

“He looks sharp,” said my father, “as sharp as a millionaire. Especially with that martini.”

“What martini?” I asked.

“The one in his hand, stupid.”

“That’s the triangle of the Cuban flag.”

“No, it’s not.”

“Yes, it is.”

“It’s got an olive.”

“That’s a star.”

He grunted and left, “Well it’s not remarkable. Anybody can take a photo of a guy with long legs.”

“Yeah Dad?”

“Yeah stupid.” He wandered off and my mother was already preoccupied so I sat on the couch looking at the guy’s martini for thirty minutes.

I went to the derby again to try to look for the girl but she wasn’t there. Cars smashed together like rock planets but no one got out of them. I took some pictures and walked around. This time the universe seemed to sag. The red-tank-top-woman’s breasts hung down like deflated balloons. Her make up ran. Men with beer bellies that usually saluted outward resolutely had bellies that hung flaccidly over their belt lines. Sheep’s wool fell off of sheep in pessimistic waterfalls. I sat on a curbside next to a quilting exhibition and ate tater tots until I saw a flash of black hair go into a tent. I threw my tater tots into a trash can and followed her.

“This tent is about birthing,” said a plastic sign overhead. There were newborn cows and goats, with skin thin enough to be licked off. Their mothers worked on it. I saw a small black horse with a black tail, but no derby woman. I turned to leave and then found her at twelve o’clock, straight on, right in front of me. She was watching a goat give birth to kids. Her long figure split the inside of the tent in half, her hair hung down to the nape of her back, and her legs began from there, barely wider at the hips, and then slimming down. Enchanted, I walked up next to her. I almost tried the line, “you come here often?”, thinking it would be funny, or that maybe she did come here often, but instead I was silent. Her face wrinkled up.

“Do you think she’s in a lot of pain?” She asked.

“I think so.”

“She’s not making any noise.”

“Animals are tougher than we are.”

“Or she’s embarrassed. There are so many people here. And lights.” Her voice was soft. I looked around. There were a lot of people, and lights. But no one except for us was paying attention. Everyone was busy eating corn dogs or corn on the cob, drinking lemonade out of giant distended tubes with pink straws reaching out of them. I have thousands of pictures of people doing those same sorts of things. “I wonder if we could help her.”

“She seems okay right now,” I suggested.

“She and her babies are going to be made into goat-meat-sausages.” Another little goat started to breach but appeared to be stuck at the head. Now the mother goat did make a noise. I looked around.

“Shouldn’t somebody be here?” I asked.

“Do something!” She said. Awkwardly, I crossed the white fence into the goat pen. The mother goat eyed me insecurely. I handed my camera to the woman in black.

“Alright,” I said out loud, kneeling behind the goat, facing the beginning of life coming out of her backside, “Jesus.” I reached in, grabbed the back of his head, and pulled it through. Immediately the baby goat made noise. Lots and lots of noise. Then the rest of it came out and plopped on the floor. The mother turned around and started licking.

“Oh wow,” said a large woman in a flower printed dress, “this young man just birthed a goat. Did you see that Beth? He birthed a goat.”

“He must be with 4H.”

“Well, of course.”

“You know I’ve heard mixed reviews about—” I heard a click and realized that the woman in black took a picture of me on the ground in the hay next to a mother goat and three baby goats, enclosed by a wall of plump women in floral prints making noise. They took pictures, too. I covered my face.

Those women came down on us. The flashes on their cameras were incessant, and so were their comments. I’m not sure if I heard my shutter release again, but the “click” became the impetus to stand, and then to say, in a peculiarly steady voice, “Alright, everybody! Wonderful of you to come by our tent today to observe and appreciate the miracle of birth. Now old Bessie needs to rest and have some private time, so we would appreciate it you would move down to the cow section of the exhibit. Moonbeam should be calving within the half hour.” The ladies fluttered, bumped into each other, and shuffled towards the cows. Someone spilled an ice cream and swore.

Between the two black curtains of her hair, the young woman said, “we could carry all these goats away.” She said it almost like a question.

“Do you have anywhere we could put them?”

“No.”

“Me neither.”

“I don’t want them to become sausage.”

“I don’t think they will.” We both paused. I searched for something to say.

“Here’s your camera.” She handed it back to me. Its familiar weight nested in my hand. She’d taken seven frames.

“Do you want a picture of you next to the goats?” I asked. It sounded a little dumb.

She smiled and said, “yeah.” She crossed the barrier and knelt down next to the babies. I noticed for the first time that her black hair hid a big purple bruise on her forehead that came out into the middle, above her eyes, and curved down around her cheekbone. In all black, sitting on her shoes, she looked like the black iris of a goat-colored eye staring into my camera. We made eye contact, like an evil-eye does with evil, but we did it between good and good.

She stood up, shook my hand, and left the tent with so much power and direction that I couldn’t possibly follow her. Through the opening, I watched her blend into the swarming crowd of shoes, and ankles, and jeans with sequins pockets, t-shirts, sweatshirts, food, and cowboy hats. It swallowed her. I hadn’t noticed that I’d been raised up. That whole time I was climbing, and was now being brought down in the slow mechanical circle of the Ferris wheel, with all its glorious light.

In the Smirr

Alistair wiggled out of the chokehold of an older boy. “That’s not funny!” He yelled defensively and bared his teeth. His brother, leaning against the wall, laughed. The boy who’d been choking him laughed.

“Don’t be so tough,” said the older boy. He was large, with arms the width of legs and a head ballooning with flesh like a science fair volcano. He was twice as tall as Alistair. Ricky. Ricky with the basement his parents let him have.

Alistair leaped. Ricky sidestepped, grabbed him by the back of the neck, and held him down. “Calm down,” he said patronizingly.

Alistair left without his brother William. He walked home with his hands in his pockets on the grey sidewalk. The town was full of short, narrow shops. Town center still had cobblestone streets from a long time ago. From Ricky’s house it became more rural. The stone backs of walled gardens shrank into stone barriers for sheep. Eventually, the sidewalk ended and there was only the road and the grass next to the road. Alistair walked on the road, up the hill, in the direction that the sun goes down. At the top of the hill, Alistair surveyed the puffy sheep, and the town behind him. “That should be mine,” he said to himself. He picked up a stick next to him and imagined going back down to Ricky’s house and smashing him so hard that his invisible crown crushed into his head and cracked his skull open. He beat the sideroad grass until he was tired. Then he started walking down the other side of the hill to his mother’s house.

Alistair believed that his mother could read tea leaves and tell the future until the time that he failed fourth year. End of year tests were coming up. His mother looked in the bottom of

his cup and predicted a great success. Alistair rejoiced and played. He thought himself marvelously lucky. While the other children had to study, he could enjoy himself. The morning of the tests, on the way to class, he broke a slight sweat as his mother rounded the corner to school. Shouldn't he feel ready? The teacher handed out the test booklets and while everyone scribbled furiously, Alistair mumbled with his pencil. Then Alistair was the largest person in his class, by far. Too large. He felt that he had big arms and a huge head. He crunched himself up as well as he could in his chair, and in this pain, all the things his mother had told him with a red smile and bright eyes became lies. It was as if he had been up on crutches, and then those crutches turned to water.

Everyday his mother wore a long velvet dress. She had a huge closet full of them: red, pink, leaf green, dark green, purple. Some of them laced up in the back. Some of them had long, trumpet-shaped sleeves. Some of them showed her chest. Some of them hid it. When Alistair was young, he loved that she looked like the women in fairy tales. Her long hair came down in waves. He followed her in the house and loved to clutch her dress right beside her knee while she did dishes, or when they watched television. William was less susceptible to that. He was embarrassed, Alistair could remember, when their mother got out of the car to pick him up at school. Other mothers looked boring, Alistair thought. Besides, it was wrong to make their mother cry.

Alistair descended from the top of the hill. When she ran out of the house to Alistair as he walked home then, Alistair wished for a moment that she instead approached in a slow, measured gate. Or, rather, that she didn't leave the house. He wished that she was reading in an armchair by the fireplace, that when he entered the house she would look up and smile, but then

prefer to continue her book than dote on him. “Who did this to you?” She knelt next to him, rubbing over a bruise on his arm, which hurt him.

“Nothing.”

“Nothing? You mean no one?”

“Nothing.” He crunched up his face.

“Did William do this to you?” She put her face closer to his.

“No.”

“He did, didn’t he. Did William hit you?”

“No.” He felt she was almost right against him.

“Let’s go have a talk with him right now.” She picked up his balled fist.

“No!” Alistair shrieked and ran into the house. He ran into the kitchen and hid in a cabinet. He wished hid in a cabinet with food in it. He desperately wanted a snack. He wanted toast with butter and honey. Maybe he would go out and ask her for it. She could hear from inside the cabinet that she was crying in the garden. He didn’t mean to make her cry. After a few minutes, he exited the cabinet and went to the front door. He left it open when he walked out to her. With the sun going away, all the sunflowers hung their giant heads down and looked down at him, crying shriveled yellow petals.

Alistair stood next to his mother in the garden while she cried, unsure of what to do. He was frightened when she cried. Her face was different. “I do everything I can for you,” she wailed.

“I know.” He said. “I’m sorry.” When it was dark out, and cold, she stood. The velvet around her knees was crunched up and muddy. Alistair felt sheepish. “Can I have toast with butter and honey?” He asked her. Her face quickly changed.

“Lots of honey?” she smiled.

“Lots of honey.” he agreed. They went inside and ate.

Since he'd failed a grade, Alistair felt like his school work was his enemy. It was what separated him from playing and not playing. It was what separated him from being smart. Everything came back covered in red marks as if it was speckled with blood, a murder note, a warning that he would be next. He was often called on by his teachers and often at a loss of what to say. He felt that the answer could be anything, and rarely could be just one word. Other children, when called on, would say one, tiny, round word, and that would be it. A word as small as a rabbit, or a rabbit's poop. Alistair found himself tangled in longer and longer sentences, trying to explain something that didn't make sense to him while the lines of his teacher's frown deepened. Her silent face seemed to scream at him, “You're stupid! Don't try to be so tough!”

The way to and from school marked his days. He went up and down the hill, down the road, over the bridge with the willow tree next to it, through town, and to school. Then he did that backwards. One day, next to the bridge, he found a black dog licking the leftover charcoals from a little dead fire. “Who are you?” he asked in a high-pitched voice. The dog didn't stop licking, so Alistair screamed, “who are you?” The dog kept licking. Alistair walked over to him. More quietly he said, “hello.” The dog wagged. So, Alistair took him by the scruff and walked him home.

In the garden he called out for his mother, who ran out the front door in a flowing red dress. “Can I keep him?” He asked.

“Of course you can!” she said in a singing voice. And so, he got a dog. They became fast compatriots. The dog slept with Alistair, ate with Alistair, and followed him around. Alistair

started skipping school to be with the dog. He walked out the front gate with his backpack on, but once he was at the top of the hill, he turned into the big green field there. They walked East for a long time, until they came to a giant slab of rock. There they sat down and stayed until it was time to go home.

One of the games Alistair played with the dog was Ancient Funeral. His mother told him about cairns, big piles of rocks from a long time ago that are for the dead. Alistair collected rocks and piled them up on the big rock. He and the dog walked solemnly around it. Then, Alistair wished he knew how to sing, so he could sing something beautiful and somber.

In the evening at home one day, the phone rang and Alistair picked it up. "Hello?" he said into the receiver.

"Hello Alistair, we need to speak to your mother." It was the headmaster of school. Alistair stood there, completely silent for a moment, shaking. "Alistair?" she repeated.

Almost whispering, he cupped the receiver to his lips and said, "she's dead." He hung up and ran back into the kitchen, where his mother smiling and swaying to music on the radio.

"Pancakes for dinner!" She announced. Alistair celebrated.

After dinner, William walked in. Alistair and his mother were dancing in the kitchen, drying dishes. His mother's face darkened. "You missed dinner," she said, sharply.

"I missed three dinners," he said, angrily. Alistair didn't know why he had to incite her like that. She let go of the dish she was holding. It broke into three sharp pieces and made a loud noise, which scared the dog.

"You are so disrespectful," she stepped over the dish.

He turned to Alistair, "You need to come with me."

Alistair shrank.

“Don’t speak to him.” They yelled together for a while. Alistair left and sat in the living room with the dog. He listened to the rain. He noticed William left again. He probably went back to Ricky’s. His mother came into the living room, “go upstairs and brush your teeth.”

“I’m not tired.”

“Get tired.” She put her hands on her hips. While he was looking in the mirror and brushing, he saw lights pull into the driveway. Then there was a strong knock at the door. He heard his mother speaking to someone, he couldn’t tell if she was crying. A shiver went up his spine. “Alistair get down here right now!”

“Coming!” He yelled back.

“Now!”

He spat and walked down. He turned the corner into the kitchen very slowly as if he were moving through molten glass. His headmaster was there, plus a police officer, and his mother, looking very angry. The lines on their faces were deep and dark. “So, you’re ready to explain to these people how I died?” She asked. “What, did I fall down? Did I collapse on a knife? What is it?”

“I’m sorry.”

“Not good enough.” The three of them scowled.

The next day his mother walked him all the way to school. School was long and painful. When he came back his mother did not greet him outside. He hoped she would, because he was sore. She was at the kitchen sink, washing dishes.

“Where’s the puppy?” he asked in the doorway.

“Gone.” She said, not turning.

“Gone?”

“He was obviously distracting you. So, he’s gone.”

Alistair dropped his bag and ran off. He went up the hill, turned, and went to the stone. He’d kill his mother. Or he’d never go home. He didn’t know. He rocked back and forth on his knees in the wind, which tore at him so hard he could barely see.

When he didn’t come home for dinner his mother was not concerned. She was slightly lonely, but she figured that he was out looking for the dog, or he was with William. She woke up at four in the morning, however, with a terrible feeling. The wind slapped the shutters against the window pane. She walked into the front yard in her pink pajamas with a thick robe on. She pulled it around her. She thought he might be sleeping in the garden. He wasn’t, so she kept going up the road. She came to the top of the hill and strained to see in the fine, drizzly rain. She turned from the road and found the slab of rock, but all she found there was a tiny cypress tree, bobbing like a sobbing child.

To Gain is to Lose

For a hundred years of American history, Max's hometown had been the egg-producing capital of the known world. The dry grass makes it yellow there; it seems as though it'd been yellow (and only yellow) for all those hundred years. Big, corrugated silos lay on their sides, with fans stuck on the ends. That's where the chickens lived. They don't live there anymore, but these silos used to be booming with life, like chicken cities. Their clucks echoed against the metal, and the noise blurred away like a smudge, smeared by the doppler effect as Max drove by.

Max spent a great deal of time constructing and arranging little towers made out of matches. He bought a big load of matchboxes (which only cost nine dollars), then he positioned himself under his burning clamp-on lamp, which he attached to his wooden desk. He focused and used the pads of his fingers to press one match against another; he bound them with glue. When he first started, he used to get very frustrated. When one obstinate match refused to marry another, no matter how gently or firmly he pressed it, or when there was too much glue and the sticks slid against each other, Max threw the tower and roared. Once he hit his desk so hard that he broke a turret, a beautiful, tower-of-London-style tower. More furious, he broke other things around him until he was panting and humiliated. These outbursts used to happen when he hunched over to work, his eyes drilling into the matches between his big fingers, teeth grinding. Now, when he sits up strait and looks at the sticks down over his cheekbones, they are less infuriating. When they defy him, he chuckles. "When you get older," he tells his imaginary pupil, "you learn to take the waves as they come."

In fact, Max became quite adept at ignoring pain, which aided the fact that life was often painful. Once, while cooking breakfast, he flipped a frying pan by its handle and hit his naked

legs with two, boiling-hot eggs. While at first his instinct was to scream, his secondary instinct took over and he breathed in and out calmly, then bent over to collect the mess. “Pain is momentary,” he said under his breath, “it is better to maintain control over one’s self.”

Petaluma is no longer the egg capital of the world. People still boast about it in whispers, and the Egg and Butter Parade still happens in summer, but now big commercial farms in the flat plains of the country where chickens are up to their necks in filth, clucking in distress, are where all the chickens and eggs come from. Those wide, metal silos in Petaluma are empty. Sometimes the wind pushes a fan blade around in a circle, but usually they are still.

Max works at a warmly lit restaurant-bar. In rural California, people collect “rustic” decorations in their Uncle’s field. Old window panes and pieces of weathered wood are good rustic, but somethings are just too rustic, like the engine for a truck that’s rusted over to the point that the texture is like sandpaper, or hemimorphite. The restaurant-bar is regularly described as “rustic,” but the regulars are more often simply physically dirty. Endurance is important for restaurant work, and Max is a good worker.

For now, Max lives in his father’s house on Two-Rock Avenue. For the last two and a half years, Max’s Father, Halleck, has been touring the world gathering mysterious rocks. Halleck went to Dartmouth for geology, led a long and successful career in oil, and now, in his retirement, is exploring all over the world for the most curious, most beautiful specimens in the world. The house, covered in crystals and minerals already, would often be greeted by a mysterious box. An indifferent postman would stick an electronic signature pad in front of him. Max would sign. Then the box was in Max’s possession. The return address read Namibia, or Afghanistan, or South Eastern China. Max opened the boxes with a box-cutter, unwrapped them, and put them in somewhere next to their nametag.

Most recently, a box arrived from Aachen, Germany. There were a number of government stamps on the skin of the box, which was usual. The box was heavy, which was also usual. He signed for and carried the package in through the front door. All the plants and windowsill rocks seemed to look over his shoulder at this particular package. He unearthed it, and found a giant rock, bubbling up and over with aquamarine. Chards of charcoal bit into the blue-green color, and crawled up into it, as if, on a map, they were the rivers, not the blue-green mass of texture. Where Max was usually indifferent, or perhaps mildly attracted to the specimens that arrived in the mail, now he was so taken aback by the beauty of this rock that he spent a good hour, turning the rock over and over to admire all of its faces. He finally set it down to read its name tag.

HEMIMORPHITE

3.4 KILOS. AACHEN, GERMANY.

Max placed this rock on his desk. He often found his eyes drifting up from his work, towards it. When he dreamed, he found it floating in space in front of him. At work, he imagined it resting in a chair at a table.

Something strange happened as days continued. Max found himself less indifferent to pain. At work, he accidentally poured boiling water onto his hand while trying to make coffee for a man at table six who looked like Tom Waits. Max yelped from the pain and startled the kitchen. At home, he stubbed his toe and swore. He worried this reintroduction to physical pain would make him a worse match-creator, but it didn't. He had begun the architecture of a giant medieval city. In the center of town would stand a giant, spiked Cathedral. He sharpened the wooded bases of matches to achieve the maximum pointiness for their topmost turrets. North of that would be an attractive, gothic-style town hall building. There would be a pavilion with

columns, museums with arches, and even hot spring with blue water Max made out of hot glue. He designed a forest that would rule the world just outside the city. It wrapped around the city plan, protectively.

Designing and building the city was much more rewarding than designing one tower, building it, and putting it to the side (or breaking it). With a vision in mind, Max could more easily dismiss harsh, self-deprecating thoughts, and focus. The plans, and their construction were beautiful. Since the plan was bigger than his desk, Max set the base of the city-center down in the middle of his room. Town Hall rested on his nightstand. A large section of the forest grew on his desk. He found that a number of the towers he had built previously made themselves useful in the design of this city. He also designed a smaller, neighboring medieval city to go on top of his bookshelf so that it looked like it was far away.

Another package arrived but he did not open it. He put it in the corner in the living room, still in cardboard, covered in government stamps.

If he had not been such a pleasant, handsome man in general, Max would have surely seemed like a maniac to the men and women who worked at the grocery store where he bought his boxes of matches, to the postmen, and to most of the people around him. His focus was hawk-like, but relatively easily interrupted by things that took his interest; luckily, he found human-kind to be of interest. When he went to the grocery store he bought sliced turkey, bread, apples, tonic, and gin. Eggs he got from the neighbors who were very kind and perhaps slightly worried.

The neighbors consisted of an elderly couple, a man and a woman, from Iran. The man, Bijan, was a calm man. He watched a lot of soccer on television and had two different newspapers delivered to his house, Max noticed. It was the wife of the couple, Anahita, that Max

particularly admired. Her kindness to him prompted him to mow their yellowing lawn when she asked him to, to trim their attacking wisteria plant, even to organize their garage when she asked. Her skin folded elegantly around her jade-green eyes, which she surrounded with dark, charcoal-colored make up. She wielded her hands elegantly, and wore rings. Most of her clothing was red. She sent him home with food, always, which broke up his diet of bread and sliced meat.

When they came to the states, Bijan studied and became an accountant. Anahita raised their two children (who visited twice a year) and, in her free time, she blended teas. She took a black, green, oolong, white, or (her favorite) red tea, and added botanicals — roses, violets, lavender, or cornflower, for example. When she needed something, she phoned Max. By the time he was at her doorstep, tea leaves had settled to the bottom of a glass teapot from which steam was rising.

When he entered their home that day, Bijan nodded to Max from his chair. Max sat in front of Anahita at the counter.

“Have you found a girlfriend, Max? You seem inordinately focused.” Anahita asked. She poured tea into small, glass cups with straight, red sides. Max laughed.

“No, I’m designing something.”

“What is that, Max?”

“A fortress of sorts, a medieval castle city, made out of matches.” His eyes flickered. Anahita raised her eyebrows, then smiled.

“How interesting.” She paused, “I’ll admit, I was worried for you Maxy.” For a few hours, Max broke wooden rounds into fire-place-sized lengths of wood with Bijan’s axe. He imagined how much more he would have to cut them to make them into matches. Anahita sent

him home with a dozen eggs, a tin of red tea, and some fesenjan sauce with chicken. Max stood in his miniature fortress and ate the meal out of the Tupperware with a fork.

Max was fluid and uncompromised at work. He did everything efficiently and smoothly. After work, he sat at a table, lit overhead with string-lights, with several coworkers. They drank cocktails from the menu in great quantities.

“Did you see this, Max?” Ray asked him.

“See what?”

“Someone left their phone number for you on their placemat.” Ray brought it over. Max flipped over the paper placemat and groaned jokingly. They laughed and drank. He couldn’t remember, was she attractive? He couldn’t remember her at all.

Max waved as he left. He tightened his jacket around himself and walked on the edge of the road towards his father’s house. After a few minute’s he went by Bijan and Anahita’s dark-windowed house, and then arrived at his doorstep. There were two more foreign packages that he had stacked by the door. All the window-ledge stones glittered in the light from the moon. He closed the door and wandered into the kitchen in the dark. He couldn’t tell if the house seemed to be full, over-crowded with personalities buried in the rocks, or if it seemed completely and utterly empty. For the first time in weeks he felt loneliness. He walked into his room in the dark, knowing the safe places to set his feet so that he wouldn’t crush his fortress, and sat at his wooden desk. He turned on his desk light, and grasped the Hemimorphite. He turned it over and over. It didn’t have any broad, flat sides to reflect the light, since its texture is so matted, like coral. But there are tiny, little flat edges imbedded in the structure. They are like all the windows in a city you cannot see when you fly over it in an airplane. He followed the uneven surface with his eyes, and let his field of vision be relaxed by the oceanic color of the stone, by the

sloshing seawater held in place in its form. The dark thoughts were dissuaded slightly. He got into bed, and fell asleep.

Rural California is marked by an amazing smell. It gets very cold at night, from air that rolls over the ocean, which comes down from the North. That wind pushes inward and makes the whole land smell and feel fresh. That day, it was not that smell that woke Max up. It was another smell, that of fire.

When he woke, his consciousness was right under his nose. He sprang out of bed and swore after kicking over a tower. Through his window he saw Bijan and Anahita's house on fire, on the kitchen-side. He put shoes on and ran over in flannel pajamas, bare-chested. He gripped the front doorknob, which was hot, and pulled. Black smoke poured out.

He ran around the house and in the back door. He bear-crawled, low to the ground around the side of the kitchen, past the television, into the master bedroom. He opened the door. Two lumps occupied the bed. He crawled to them, stood, and shook them.

"Wake up! Wake up right now." Anahita's big, pear-colored eyes blinked. Bijan flipped over aggressively. "We have to go right now," Max continued. Smoke poured into the room.

The three of them stood outside while firemen poured water onto Bijan and Anahita's house, and on all the yellow grass around them. They stood together on the road, Max in flannel pajama bottoms, Anahita in a pink dressing gown, Bijan in blue and white striped pajamas. Their kitchen was open to the elements, warped, and burnt.

"Kitchen fires are not uncommon," said a man under a helmet, "we believe you accidentally left the stove on yesterday evening. Luckily, we got here in in time to save some

sections of the remaining building. This could have been a lot worse. Everything is flammable that this time of year. Do you know where you will stay tonight?”

Anahita and Bijan looked at each other.

“With me, of course. They can stay with me,” Max blurted waving his hand, “if that’s okay with you.”

The glittering eyes were unaccustomed to guests. Anahita realized in the doorway that she had not entered this house in a decade, and even then, she had not made it past the kitchen. Bijan had certainly never been inside.

“How about a gin and tonic, in light of, events” asked Max. Bijan and Anahita sat on Max’s father’s small, blue, velvet couch in the middle of his overcrowded living room, “You can stay in my father’s room for as long as you like, honestly.” He left to go stuff Halleck’s bedsheets into the washing machine while three gin and tonics developed condensation in the kitchen. Anahita’s eyebrows had not yet settled to their regular position. She rose her eyebrows at the over-prominence of everything, the mess, the smell of cheap deodorant.

“Maxy, is your room such a mess as this?”

“No, no. Not at all. It’s a-whole-nother mess.” He returned and handed them drinks. Anahita put hers on the table.

“Let’s see it.” She commanded. Max led her to his room. He opened the door slowly. He could almost hear her eyebrows raise higher still at the huge layout, walls, buildings, forests, completely tan, with little green stubby dots in otherwise unruptured flanks. “Maxy, this is huge.”

“Thank you! Yes. I’ve been... hard at work.” Max looked around.

“You know this is a fire hazard.”

“Ah, nonsense,” Max waved. Anahita knelt down and admired the construction while Max explained. “The Cathedral is the center of town. And then you have the wall around the city. The city is essentially a circle, and these roads lead out into the forests.”

“Do you build little people that live here?”

“No, no. Well I hadn’t thought of it. I focus on the buildings and trees.”

Anahita interjected, “Maxy! My chickens!” Through the window, they saw a chicken run out of the chain-link fence behind their houses, into the grassy wilderness. “Catch them!”

Max spent thirty minutes catching the three remaining chickens. He caught the last one, completely exhausted, with a pool net.

“Gotcha!” He barked. It fluttered under the blue net. Crouching in the grass, he lifted the net. The hen clucked distrustfully. It was jet-black. In the sunlight, its feathers were iridescent, purple, and green. It’s circle black eye reflected his face back at him. “Oh, hello chicken.” He cooed. “Yes. Good chicken.” He added it into a makeshift chicken coup he’d made out of two retired dog kennels and some cardboard boxes he filled with t-shirts. It was getting dark.

“Do you get soccer?” Bijan asked him. Max set up the TV for soccer. Anahita made tea in the kitchen. It was almost like they always lived there, except for the smell of fire, which wafted in through the window. Max escaped to his room for some peace and quiet. He sat at his desk and worked on some forest. The house felt crowded, warmed up by all those people. The image of his face in the chicken’s black eye kept returning to his vision, his growing hair and stubble, his tall cheek-bones, he could almost imagine that the vision he saw was himself as an old man—it blurred the view of the two matches which slid against each other and were not

sticking together what-so-ever. Max stood, shrieked, and broke the tree he was working on in his hand like an egg shell. His phone rang.

“Where are you?” His boss asked. She was a tough woman with thick calves and an imposing demeanor.

“What? I’m at home.”

“You work tonight.”

“Do I? Jesus, what day is it.”

“What’s going on Max.”

“My neighbor’s house burned down.”

“Don’t make it my problem.”

“I’ll be there.”

“Then be here.” Max ran out of the door at full speed. Bijan called a question after him and he heard Anahita say something (he wasn’t accustomed to the formalities of coming and going in a populated house). He arrived at work in under three minutes.

His boss squeezed her eyeball between her cheekbone and her brow at him, but didn’t fire him. He was rushed, but efficient at work, except for two bushy-haired women at a corner table continued to smile at him. They called him over on a number of occasions for meaningless tasks, “Can we have *another* hot sauce? What’s *your* favorite?” Max huffed.

At the end of the night he sat at the same table, lit overhead, with the same people. Ray held up another placemat, “Is this the same number?”

“Who knows.”

“Not interested?”

“Not interested.”

“Hey I heard sirens today. Any idea what happened?”

“My neighbor’s house burned down.”

“Really? Holy shit!”

“Yeah. Now I have house guests.”

“People in the Max-cave... dangerous.” People laughed. Max went past Anahita and Bijan’s house and walked up to the front door. The front door was still intact. But the rest of the left-hand-side of the building was gone. The two-by-fours that used to hold up the plaster walls stuck up into the sky like lopsided spines. He sighed.

There were lots of skeletons of tea tins in Anahita’s kitchen. He imagined that this house was his house. If that were the case, it would be covered in rocks, since rocks don’t burn. All the other treasures in his house would be gone (one in particular), but the stones would be there, shining amicably.

Lonely, he returned home. The house was dark and quiet except for Bijan snoring. There was a plate of rice and ghormeh sabzi in the kitchen. He ate it, leaning against the counter in the moonlight. He pulled his shoes off and tossed them into the living room, then he walked to his room silently. He pulled the door open and found Anahita sitting on the floor, in the middle of his kingdom. “What are you doing in here?” He realized he sounded defensive.

“Just looking. This is remarkable Maxy, really.”

“Yes. Well. I need to work on it in peace.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. Don’t be angry. I was just admiring.”

“No. I’m sorry. I’m glad you like it. But really, you must go.” He stuttered. She stood gracefully and left. He sat at his desk but was too tired to work on his structure. He lay on his back in bed, gripping the Hemimorphite with both hands, like it was a giant, blue egg.

Over the next few weeks, life developed a comfortable rhythm. Max worked. When he wasn't at the restaurant he worked diligently on his fortress. When he was tired to work he read texts like, "The German Medieval City: The Architecture of Medieval Daily Life," by Bernard Zoomis PhD. Bijan read his two newspapers, which still arrived at his charcoaled doorstep; he collected them in his bathrobe and slippers. In the mornings Bijan drank very strong coffee. In afternoons he drank tea and watched soccer in his surrogate blue-velvet chair. Anahita shopped at the grocery store, cooked, ran errands, fed the chickens, and cleaned. On the "living room occasion" as she called it, she made Max assist her, piling boxes and cleaning rugs. There was always good food and good tea in the house; the house was never empty, which was constricting and comforting at once. This continued for over a month while Bijan and Anahita called contractors, men who made granite countertops, and plumbers.

Bijan and Anahita had been in residence for the unveiling of two packages: an enormous hunk of rose quartz which came from Rajasthan, India, and three fist-sized pieces of citrine from Dauphine, in France. Anahita was very taken by them. She arranged them in the kitchen. Max was not particularly impressed, but he was stung by the postcard that accompanied the citrine.

Dear Max,

Heading back to Aachen. Needed to let you know that your brother is coming back from the Massachusetts school. He'll be staying at the house for a few months. We'll have to figure out his next step. I need you to get him at the airport, I'll let you know the specifics.

Best,

Dad

The other side of the card was a black medieval gate.

Max wove through the over and underpasses of San Francisco International airport late in the evening. Daniel stood on the curb wearing a red Hawaiian shirt. He looked like a sweet kid, minding his own business. His skateboard was tied down to his backpack, and he had a duffle bag. That's it. He took his headphones out when he got in the car and said, "hey."

"Hey. How's it going?" asked Max.

"Pretty shit."

"Oh yeah?"

"Is Dad still in India or China or whatever?"

"Germany, at the moment."

"Aren't you mad?"

"No. I'm grateful. It's nice of him to—"

"And what, I'm ungrateful?"

"Don't. It's good to see you."

"I'm sure it is."

When they pulled into the familiar driveway Max remembered to warn his brother.

"Daniel. Do you remember Anahita and Bijan?"

"The old people? Yeah."

"They are our guests for a while."

"Why?" Daniel was obstinate, offended even, on behalf of a house he hadn't been to in two and a half years.

“Because their house burned down.”

“It doesn’t look burned down.” They had done a fair amount of construction, but the drywall was visible in the kitchen. He considered explaining this.

“They’re going to be here for a while.”

“This is bullshit.”

“Is it?” Max said, brimming with anger. Daniel got out of the car and slammed the door.

“I’m going out.” He set the skateboard on the road and left in the direction of town. His bag was still in Max’s car. Max left it there. Inside, Anahita was waiting by the kitchen counter with snacks.

“Where is Daniel?” She asked. “I made Sohan.” Max ate one of the desserts.

“He’s going out.”

“Now?” she asked.

“I guess so.”

“Bijan has gone to bed. I will wait up for Daniel to say hello. You go to bed, too.”

“No, I’ll stay awake. It’ll be the easiest.” Max struggled to keep his eyes open in Bijan’s velvet chair after Anahita had gone to bed. He blinked in the chair looking at nothing but the rocks and the books, his father’s two degrees hung on the wall, and a diagram about minerals, until Daniel walked through the door, head hung down.

He said, “I can’t do this,” in the doorway.

“Are you okay?” asked Max. He looked over. It was four in the morning.

“I can’t stay here. And I can’t go back to school.”

“Why not?”

“I’m expelled.”

“For what?” Max was surprised.

“Weed.”

“They can’t expel you for weed, can they? That’s your first offense.”

“Well, it isn’t.”

“What else happened?” Max wished he hadn’t asked, or that he didn’t have to ask, or that Daniel wasn’t here, or that when he was a baby Max had whispered to him, *don’t fuck up. Live a good life.*

“I set a fire.”

“You set a fire?”

“A kid pissed me off so I set his jacket on fire, okay? It’s not fucking rocket science. He was messing with me. I lit his jacket on fire.”

“Jesus, Daniel. That’s not how you deal with things.”

“Actually, Max, it is how I deal with things. Things piss me off, I do things about it. I change them. Look at you. You’ve been here forever with your eighty-year-old best friends. You’ve probably never had sex or jumped over a fence or fucking blown your nose in front of an audience.”

“That’s a problem Dan. That’s on the list of how they tell if you’re crazy or not—have you ever committed arson—it’s on the list.” Max looked around, grateful Anahita was asleep. “Is the other kid okay?”

“He’s fine.”

“If he wasn’t fine, you’d be in Juvenile Hall. You realize that, right? Why do you have to make a problem?”

“I am a problem. At least I live my life. What do you do? Make match figurines of Mommy and Daddy?”

“Why are you like this?”

“I bet you still do.” Daniel dropped his backpack and walked over to Max’s room. He opened the door, surveyed the room, and burst out laughing.

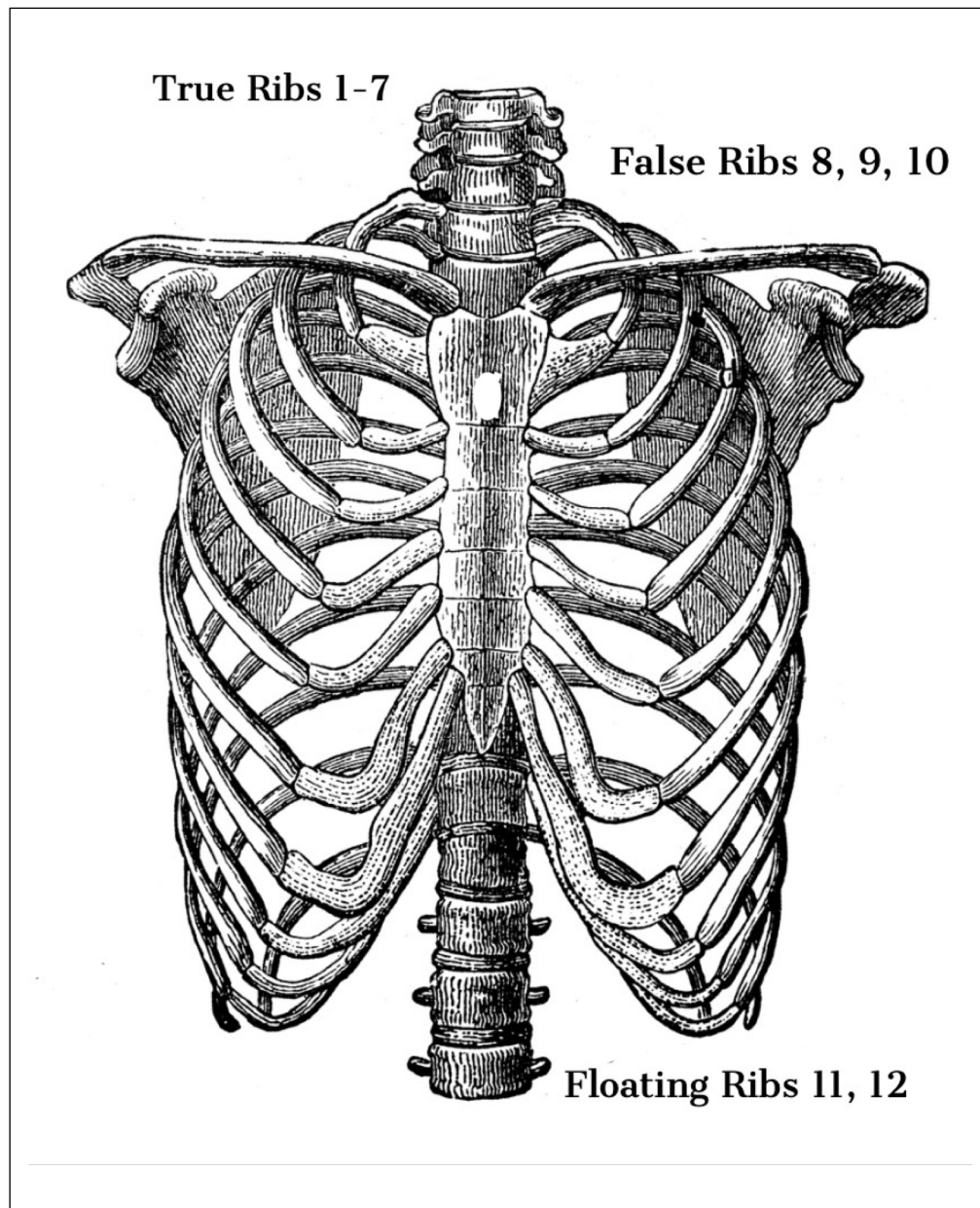
“*You’re the psychopath. This is crazy, you realize that, right? You’re nuts.*” Max hardened himself. Daniel continued, “I’m leaving. You hang out with your figurines.” Daniel left. Max hoped, vaguely, that he would hit a rock and break an ankle. He sat on the velvet couch blanking out.

He gathered himself and went to the kitchen in the clean, white moonlight. He poured some gin in a tall straight-edged glass. He opened the fridge for the tonic. He reached up for a lime, and held it to cut it in half, then into wedges. “Ay!” He cut into his finger and yelped out. “Fuck!” He put it under the tap. Through the kitchen window he saw a truck go by, its lights shined and then went out in the distance. He imagined the light as his brother—gone. As a parent, you can’t wonder if your kid’s light has gone out. But as a brother, or as a friend, you can. He put the bloody half of the lime in the sink, and cut the clean half into wedges. He drank it next to the counter. He sat there thinking. *The moon is so bright tonight. Must be full. Is it?* He walked out the back door to see.

The moon was full and round like the face of a woman. He basked in it. He felt completely empty, like a shopping bag or a burnt tea tin or a corrugated silo on its side. He went, drunkenly, to visit the black chicken. He crawled through the kennel door, leaving it open behind him. He found her sleeping gently. “Hey,” he whispered, “Did you get fed today? Hey beautiful,

I'm sorry." He petted her. He reached under her and found an egg, perfectly warm, perfect for the center of his hand.

Wielding the egg, he wandered out into the backyard. The grass went on and on and eventually up and up until he was on a hill, surveying the houses on his street. He felt the wind, which smelled like California, and suddenly he felt an enormous amount of pain. He clutched the shirt over his chest. He tried to recall the names of his friends from high school. "Tomorrow I'll divide the city," he muttered, "I'll put the forests on top of the bookshelf, town hall on the shelf by the door. Anahita can have the cathedral. My town will be broken up. I'll free up the carpet." He stopped. "No. No. I'll have to move, won't I. I can't live here anymore." He chewed on the thought. "I could go anywhere in the world," he said. "Where in the world could I possibly go?"



2

² Antique engraving illustration: ribcage, istock photographs.

True, False, and Floating

Long, marbled strips of bacon perfumed the apartment in crackling oil. I broke eggshells against the red enamel pan and plopped the eggs into the grease. Their ghost capes immediately became opaque. Their yellow humps shook on the quaking heat.

“Good morning. Breakfast?” I asked Lima.

“Oh. Don’t we need coffee beans?”

“We’re out but—”

“Let me go get them!” Lima Rose put tights on under an over-sized shirt and left the apartment. She was like a leaf that won’t settle on the ground. Any wind made her talk or leave the room or change her clothes. The eggs overhardened slightly. I took them off the heat.

She came back in twenty minutes and said, “here!” She put a bag of coffee beans on the table, unloading winter clothing — scarves, and gloves — from herself. “Oh, you know what? I’m sorry Lyn, I can’t stay. I just realized that I have a morning shift at the library. I’m already late.” She put her scarf back on.

“*No mi amor*,” I feigned a tragedy, “Not the eggs!” She laughed and left the house in one fluid motion. I looked at the eggs and my plate. The plate had black speckles, and green shapes, trapezoids and squares. It was a solid, thick, ceramic plate. The two dumb, yellow eyes looked up at me over their wiggly mouth. I glanced at the clock and realized I was also late, got up, and left.

Medicine was not my undergraduate degree. In all honesty, I studied birds — their nesting patterns, their migration tendencies, et cetera. I do have a degree in Biology. I know how to pipette and prepare Petri dishes, but really, I studied animals. After college, finding myself

utterly useless to human life and bird life, both, I decided I'd go back and get a nursing degree. My family was happy. Lima Rose was happy, too.

I'm nearly finished, and then I will have something to plug into. I'll have a singular reason to open specific doors forever: "I work here." It's nice to work somewhere. It's nice to have a job that makes sense to people. I think that's why Lima chose library science. It's easier than explaining, "I'm an artist, I work with watercolors." She likes the library, too. She likes the kids.

Nursing school is in an angular building. It has an awning that is jealous of Frank Lloyd Wright's prairie houses, that one in Connecticut. The awning mostly makes all the students invisible to people walking on the street. There's a lot of that inside, too, being invisible to people. Or at least, there's a lot of being brief and anonymous. Sometimes you have a moment though, a moment of eye contact or comradery. On the inside the walls are white and the floor is blue. I change into my uniform, which is blue, and join the group, which is already standing in the hall being gesticulated at.

"How was your oral exam?" Lima asks me.

"I knew most of the stuff. Could have been better." Silence. "Did anything happen at the library?"

"A kid threw up on the carpet."

"Oh, Jesus."

"It was okay. Poor thing. His mother was so harsh on him, I couldn't believe it. I just hugged him and told him if he threw up on me it was okay."

“Huh,” I said. We made a salad together with beets in it. I reached but I couldn’t think of anything to tell her. She was also quiet.

There’s something in particular about going to bed and waking up at different times than the person you share that bed with that makes it seem as though you are somehow bed-roommates. You split the rent, and you split the bed. You’ve learned how to not take all the blankets at three in the morning because you’ve gotten in trouble for it enough times, and you’ve generally trained yourself how to keep everything going without problems. Lima Rose, on the other hand, had no problem rocking the boat. She could become hysterical or cry or accuse me of something, but in a way, I think she did it to keep us from going numb. She wanted it to seem like we were still having passionate conversations.

I could appreciate her internal wars but she exhausted me with the quickness of her voice and the inconsequence of her comments. “Have you ever been to the Sleepy Hollow Cemetery?” She would ask me, “Do you get dizzy in cemeteries? I get dizzy.” She told me a long drawn out story about looking for Washington Irving, finding only van Tassel. “Did you know most of those weird little buildings for multiple coffins have *drainage systems*? Otherwise they explode!” I looked at my food. I looked at her food.

“Are you not hungry?” I asked.

“Oh no, my stomach hurts.”

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah, of course. My stomach hurts.”

We have two posters in our bathroom, one of the human muscular system, one of the human skeleton. They are both well-labeled and laminated. I got them in the first year of school to practice the names while brushing my teeth and I keep them to remind me that are made up of

simple parts. We are a mechanism first, and then a consciousness. Sometimes it surprises me that underneath our fleshy bodies we have such firm, unyielding bones. And what are our bones to us? If you somehow switched out one man's ulna for another man's ulna without making any incisions or anything, would he wake up and turn to his wife and say, "I feel slightly less myself today Dierdre." No. But the arm in any likelihood would not be long enough to reach both joints, or it would be wider than the original ulna, causing a great deal of pain. So, they are not anonymous. Perhaps they are more than just scaffolding. It just seems impossible that under our harmonious, fleshy faces are stern, resolute skulls.

Once, for Halloween, Lima Rose wanted to be the human skeleton. We planned to meet friends at a costume party at a bar in Chapel Hill. We stood in front of the poster and drew all the bones on her in icy-blue acrylic paint. She asked what they were. "These are phalanges. Those are metacarpals." I explained. Her favorite part, which should have been fun, was the ribcage. She lifted her shirt and I stuttered politely. Then I painted the clavicles, the sternum, the true and false ribs, then the floating ones. It was a bad idea, I think, to do that project, because the way she looked then stuck with her.

Every couple of weekends I visit my Dad in Raleigh. It's not a long drive, or a complicated one. In fact, I relish it. The highway is lined with giant lodgepole pines that make a perfect, fibrous carpet of pine-needles. Lodgepoles secrete a chemical that makes it nearly impossible for other plants to grow; it's called allelopathy, the effect of one plant on another. When I drive by I imagine myself walking barefoot amongst them.

I woke up early on a Saturday, shoved some clothes in a duffle bag, looked in the fridge, and filled a thermos with coffee. I went back in our room and looked at Lima under the pink quilt

her mother gave us. She always sleeps on her side, with both of her hands tucked under her head, so that her elbows are stacked. I left a note next to her, reminding her I was visiting my Dad this weekend, and that I'd be back Sunday night.

It's amazing how much room there is in a car without a passenger. I could see my breath in the car until I was out of the driveway and it extended in front of me without interruption for almost a foot.

My Dad has worked at the same Old Folks Facility for the last twenty years. It has residences and a meal hall that reminds me of the University of Virginia Library. It has a tall dome and handsome, navy-blue window shutters. He met me at the curb of the building with his arms out. "Hey kiddo," he said, "you're looking kind of skinny. Is that on purpose?" We went through the main building and through all the tables where people were eating lunch. I waved at some people.

"Let's get some food with Mrs. Hunter tomorrow. She'll be happy to see you." My dad guided me to a table in the back. We sat down. "So, how's it going?"

"School's good. My sink is still broken."

"Didn't you have a test?"

"Yeah it was good."

"That's good."

"I got a good look at all the moldy leftovers we have in the fridge before I left."

"Why do you have moldy leftovers?"

"Well Lima isn't eating anything. I don't even know why I cook."

"I thought she went to therapy."

"It didn't really help."

“Well,” my dad leaned back, “If someone is truly drowning, you know, head under for more than thirty seconds, arms flailing, you can’t go out and drag them back to shore. They’ll kill you. The best you can do is push them something that floats.”

“Yeah, I hear you.”

“Do you?”

“I’m not sure she’s really *drowning*.”

“You know what I mean.”

I helped at work the next day with some other volunteers, most of whom were in high school, some of whom were in a church group. They were very smiley and difficult to talk to. I brought meals to certain apartments and then I cleaned some plates for a while, until my dad and I got ready in his apartment to accompany several ladies to the ballet in town. My dad sat next to a woman in a pink skirt-suit who complemented his beard, which was fading in color from reddish-brown to grey. She turned to the woman behind her and said, “I get to sit next to this handsome young man,” in a southern accent. He laughed with the ladies and assisted with seatbelts.

I sat next to a woman I didn’t know. She wore a purple coat with leopard print on it, and suede purple pants. Her hair was frosty-white at the roots and dyed-blond further out. She wore dark lipstick and a friendly demeanor.

“Hello,” I said.

“Oh, hello,” she said. “You’re looking very nice today, very chic.”

“Oh, thank you.” I said.

“The boots are a bit much, but I get it, it’s the style. People like to wear those *Doctor Martin* boots, big clunky things. I get to wear Ugg boots because I’m an old lady. You have no excuse.”

I laughed. “I guess that’s true.”

“So, what do you do, young lady?”

“I go to nursing school. I’m going to be a nurse.”

“Good. We need more of those. My son is going to be a doctor. I’ll tell you what I tell him.” She rose a finger. “Take care of yourself! Get enough sleep!”

“Yes. Absolutely. It’s funny how many people in medicine desperately need a nap and a backrub.”

“And a good meal.” We watched cars together through the window. “Are you a good cook? Tell me what you make that is nutritious.”

“Well, I make a pretty good borscht.”

“Are you Ukrainian?” She asked, smiling.

“A couple generations back.”

“I am Polish. We make borscht too.” She leaded up against me for a second, “I grew up in Krakow on a street with cobblestones. They were so blue. I remember them the color of blueberries.” She laughed. “It got tougher as I got older. My mother was a gentle, hard-working woman. I think if she had been more disobedient, she might have lived through the war.” The story unfolded gently, like a letter found in a book. “The last time I saw my mother we were asked to get in line by a group of men in order to talk to a German military officer. I was twelve at the time. I had a terrible sense. I told her we should leave, but she told me she would just figure out what was going on. She thought she’d get us some information and meet me at home.”

“Did you go home?” I asked

“I headed home, but at the last minute, I changed my plan and went to a friend’s house. I knew him from school. Later, I spent over a year and a half in his attic. Can you imagine? It was smaller than this bus. Luckily, Petya’s family had books. I read lots of books, Dostoyevsky, Balzac. I *ate* everything, bread scraps, broth made from just a bone, anything we got, I ate. But I survived. I met my husband. I had my beautiful babies. That’s what it is, survival.” At that moment, the bus stopped at a cross walk. A family walked across it, two parents, two young boys, and an older girl. “Look at this girl,” she said, “She has no sense. Bare shoulders. And she has the stupidity to be anorexic.”

I unlocked the door before dawn on Monday morning. Lima Rose lay on the middle of the bed, over the covers. The thermostat was set to 85; the room was sweltering. I set my bag down silently and sat on a chair to look at her. Her skin clung to her bones; her joints were balled and enlarged. She looked dead, except for her breathing; underneath her skin and her ribcage, her lungs still did their work, they fought powerfully for her to live. You could call it vain. Or you could call it earnest, or painful. While she was sleeping, it appeared only fragile and blameless. Her lungs persisted while the early light made its slow, undistinguishing exodus across the white window ledge, down onto the blanket, across her body, and onward.



³ Robert Frank, "Chinese Cemetery—San Francisco." From, *The Americans*. (1955). Printed 1981.

Cypress Tree

The smell of cypress is an armless hug — lonely, but consoling. Melody stood in a graveyard in outside of Austin, Texas, smelling a fresh-cut face on a cypress tree. Here, a bough had overgrown. She imagined the chainsaw that severed it from the tree making streams of mournful mulch. The butterflies were dressed in mourning. They wore black dresses and fluttered from one dead man to another, over the wiry beards clinging to their mandibles.

Aida was buried in the front of the cemetery where gravestones have sun-bleached photos on them. In the back were two kinds of American flags and old engravings of hands holding roses, pointing to heaven. Melody thought those old carvings were better suited to mourning the dead. Aida would have certainly preferred them. They could have been record slips or punk patches, something she would have liked.

Now, the dirt over Aida had settled. It was no longer mound-shaped. Melody took a seat on an iron bench by a tree in front of her and wondered what it'd been like when she'd been lowered down. Her mother would have caused an abject scene, probably on pills, disturbing the long dead, who would then shrink from Aida as they lowered her. Few people Aida knew well had been at the ceremony because none of her close friends could afford the ticket from San Francisco International to Austin International, and everyone was down and out with whoever could have bought one for them. Mel put down a Lone Star and a slice of birthday cake on her stone (which drew the attention of wasps) and wandered out.

In Texas, she stayed with the Aunties. Aida's mother, Belle, had been in a facility for over a year and was still there "correcting herself." In the years since Aida had been dead, Melody made an effort to unburn bridges in the family. She remembered when all four sisters

were together in the house in Texas, when her mother used to bring her to visit, and the four of them would squawk together. Now only two of them are left squawking in this house

“Twenty-six now!”

“Good for you, that’s a good age.”

“A good year.”

“That would’ve made Aida—”

“Twenty-eight.”

“To the day.”

“Well, you’ll have to find your own way soon.”

“You can’t cruise forever”

“You’re not a drifter.”

“When we were your age we’d already started the laundry service.”

“And don’t count on that camera to do you any good.”

“Won’t bring the money,”

“Or the right men,”

“The important thing is you’ve come back to Texas.”

“You know what happens to women that *wander off*.”

Mel’s mother went to California with the best job of the four of them by far. She’d shown some promise with computers in high school, so teachers pushed her in that direction and eventually she learned to program. Her sisters reminded her incessantly, even in birthday cards, that she was not that good at cooking. But she was, objectively, the most impressive of the four of them. When she married a San Franciscan tech buyer and the sisters nearly fainted—a flat in San Francisco, tickets to the ballooning opera house (not that they liked opera), and new clothes.

They said she was losing touch with her roots (tea should be cold and sweet, not hot and green), but they wanted what she had.

When Eli cheated on Melody's mother, she went from being Frances Stoke back to being Frances Underwood. The sisters approved of this loss of power and urged her to come home. The most she would do is come and visit, but she brought little Melody in tow. And so, they had their first encounter.

Melody and Aida squared off to each other on opposite sides of the path to the front door. Each had one arm raised, holding a mother's hand like a spear over the shoulder. The other hand hung down by the waist. Their two heads of curly hair roared in the sun. And since everybody in that family has the same old grey eyes from a long-dead Patriarch, they stared at each other with those too—four eclipsed suns shooting right into each other. Melody approached. Aida held fast. Then what had been the almost unhearable background noise of grackles became a full-blown intervention of human words, a ceasefire.

“Mel, sweetie, this is Aida.”

They looked down at their shoes and decided never to speak to one another. Over the next few days, however, they bonded over aunties stubbing their toes and cats falling asleep in undignified positions in the sun. Eventually, words were exchanged.

“Do you want to come get the eggs with me?” Aida asked.

“Yes.” Mel had been secretly harboring a great deal of curiosity for the feathery beasts. They went out to the hutch behind the house, getting red mud on their shoes. Aida carefully unlocked the door while the chickens made their long, incredulous noises. Then they opened the lid to the nesting boxes. One chicken looked up like it'd been caught on the toilet. Aida reached right under her and pulled out an egg.

“You want to see something cool?” she asked.

Mel nodded, suddenly aware of the vast array of things Aida must know. Aida cracked the egg on the side of the feed pan and its yellow contents slapped into the chicken meal. The chickens went berserk pecking it up as fast as they could. Mel winced.

“Isn’t that bad?” She asked.

“No,” said Aida, “They like it.”

The two became allies and friends. They looked forward to their visits like nothing else. For Aida, Melody brought in a gust of Pacific air. It differentiated her from the other kids to have a cousin from California (the long word that rolls like an ocean). For Melody, it meant she had “roots,” something lots of people in San Francisco had, but she was certainly glad she had them, too. Also, going to see Aida always meant an adventure of packing, traveling, setting out, and arriving.

The first time the two of them had ever been drunk was on a bottle of Japanese plum wine that Frances brought for the sisters from San Francisco. The label was a big white square with strange, architectural symbols on it, and a picture of a long green plum which didn’t look right for eating to Mel. The taste was unbelievably bitter. They could hardly get it down, but they worked on it in sips. Eventually, they were rolling on the floor, sucking ice cubes. Here, the two girls first encountered the thinning veil—that which feels weird, laughable, ticklish, and dark. The borderline between this world and the next was indisputably weakened, but the girls laughed into the void, hooding their curly heads with laughter, cloaking themselves in unstoppable, meaningless joy.

“I’m feeling it,” Mel confided, eyes rolling.

“Me too.”

Halfway through the bottle, the girls lay on their backs on the tiles and the world spun around them—around, and around, and around, on, and on, and on—it moved with nauseating speed. Frances found them asleep on the floor scooped them up one at a time to put them in bed. Maybe she should have disciplined them, but Frances understood that with nausea began adulthood. She took the rest of the bottle out to the sisters on the porch, who wouldn't have noticed that they hadn't drunk the first half anyway.

When Mel began to show interest in punk music, Frances was unconcerned but slightly disappointed. When she was pregnant, she had been unable to stop singing. She sang everything she remembered from elementary school, old American songs, country songs, and folk songs. She walked through the light in the kitchen singing, "Oh my darling, oh my darling, oh my darling Clementine—." Punk music has no melody, Frances thought, you could make that music banging pots and pans together, yelling at the neighbors' dog. Melody altered her appearance in certain ways that lots of young people do—she dyed her hair black and cut it. She asked for piercings and got some of them. It wasn't particularly miraculous or exciting to Frances. Melody was still a good girl. She got good grades. She didn't talk back. They shared the apartment amicably with some house plants and a cabinet full of seldomly-used spices.

One of Mel's last visits to Texas happened after a letter came about Aida's father. He'd be going on tour again. The letter said, "The job isn't done." Frances anticipated that Belle would be in pain, feeling forgotten and unattractive, and might do something stupid. She might enlist in the military to try to join Ted, or tranquilize herself.

They bought tickets on a red eye. Tall men in stiff cowboy hats disembarked the plane in San Francisco. Mel fell asleep with headphones in and woke up briefly thinking she was deaf. A woman in the aisle looked at her expectantly.

“What?” Mel asked.

“To drink.” She said.

The plane landed at six in the morning. Mel and her mother wove through the airport, onto the familiar street where people get picked up by their hosts. A girl in leggings jumped up into a man’s arm. His hat fell off. They found their rental car and drove out of Austin.

When they got there Wanda and Elise were smoking and drinking coffee at the circle table in the kitchen. “Coffee?”

“No, no,” said Frances. Mel laid down on a couch that someone had made up as a bed and woke up at eight. Aida was shaking her arm.

“Wake up.” In the two years since Mel had been there last, Aida’s face had become more heart-shaped. Her cheek bones stuck out in a beautiful way. Her eyebrows were thick and curved. Mel blinked. “Come with me.” Aida smiled. Mel rolled out of bed in the jeans she’d worn on the flight, snuck by her mother on the opposite couch, and the two of them went through the sliding glass door to the backyard.

“Where are we going?” They walked over the wooden fence at the end of the backyard and started down a path that led over the hill back there. Over the hill, a sheet of pure night sky had been rolled out. Mel stopped in her tracks, awe-stricken. “Those are blue bonnets, right?”

“You came at the right time.”

“Holy shit. They’re amazing.” They sat down in front of the big, blue valley and talked for a while. Mel fell asleep and woke up hot and alone. She followed the path back to the house

where Aida was eating cereal at the table, Frances was asleep, and the other sisters were still drinking coffee. That house is poorly lit. The brown hanging cabinets block out all the natural light, not to mention the flow of the house. Mel went over to them to get a mug.

“I know he won’t come back. There’s another woman. I know it.” Belle held her coffee cup with two hands. The sisters nodded over over-creamed cups of coffee. “I had the pendulum out. I asked, ‘Will he come back?’ ‘No.’ ‘Does he still love me?’ ‘No.’” Her face, which was usually attractive, foxlike, made-up, nice to see, was wet and pinkish. “I can’t take it anymore.” She finished, and then started to outright cry. Aida shoveled her cereal.

“Well I guess we don’t measure up to Teddy.” Said Elise.

“Not sexy enough,” Wanda joked.

“Not broad-chested.”

“Or hairy.”

“And then of course there’s *that*.”

“Nothing synthetic can make up for *that*”

“Nothing plastic or silicone or—” They giggled.

“Shut up!” Belle screamed and ran to her room. Aida was still over a bowl of milk.

“You know that’s illegal” Wanda said to Mel. “You can’t pick them.”

“We won’t tell on you,” said Elise, “if you do our bidding.”

“What’s that?” asked Mel. She settled a vase of blue bonnets on the table, which radiated warm-nighted energy.

“Take this sad Aida and the truck and go and get more half and half.”

The wind pressed into Aida and Melody on the way to the store and on the way back. They were quiet and grateful for the silence. They were quiet for most of that visit. The week went by like a day and Mel and her Mother were back on a plane very soon.

A phone call shook their rhythm, but not their foundation. Belle had been arrested for possession of narcotics. Knowing that Wanda and Elise were useless at the best of times and childless, Frances offered to take Aida for a time.

So, it was reversed. Now Aida approached a foreign house in a foreign land. She was now smaller, weaker, and more vulnerable than Melody, even though she was older. But again, the gunfight was totally eschewed. Mel ran out across the path to lead her to her door.

“Alright. You’ll stay in my room with me.” Mel put Aida’s bag on a kitchen chair. “Our room’s the one on the right, the blue one. The last one is my mom’s. I’m sorry your bed is a cot but—”

“Can we smoke inside?”

“Oh, not really. But you can on the balcony.”

“Okay.”

Mel realized she’d expected an extended sleepover and forgotten the circumstances under which Aida left. She joined Aida on the porch and tried to change her approach.

“Are you okay?”

Aida dragged her cigarette and played with the soft curls of a potted thyme plant on the white, metal table. Honking, driving, and parking noises filled the time before Aida responded, “I mean, I don’t know. She was a bitch anyway.” Her eyes were wet and glassy. Melody couldn’t

remember if Belle was a bitch. She certainly was often the loudest, or had to be. People rolled their eyes at her.

“Are you happy you’re here?” Mel asked, tentatively.

“I am actually,” Aida smiled, “and you can show me around.”

Mel showed her everything she knew. That included good parks to drink in, bars where they don’t card, botanical gardens, sushi, and most importantly, punk music. Soon it was their shared religion. They particularly enjoyed finding places to mosh where they hurled their bodies (and simultaneously were hurled by other bodies) against anonymous human parts. Sometimes the whole pit moved in a circle like a hurricane.

When Belle was released on parole, Aida decided to stay in San Francisco. A life was growing there in the fog that matched Aida’s fierceness. But Mel watched in awe and concern as Aida gained speed.

Things began when Aida started going to house shows Mel was not invited to attend. They were for older people, people in the circle. Sometimes Aida got her in anyway, sometimes she didn’t try to. Mel had only had her clothes evaluated on two occasions in her life: once when her father had come and taken her out to golf, she’d worn a band t-shirt and someone had scolded her. And once, she’d dared to wear brown to a punk show. Mel made jokes about “the uniform” to Aida, but Aida was distracted by a new fascination: she’d collected a boyfriend from the band, “Black Shame,” that played house shows and small zine-covered venues in the city and outside it. Aida became new. She appeared gaunt, sometimes half-awake, and she developed a greenish complexion.

Black Shame had a show an hour north of the city and they decided to make a day and take some band pictures. They wound their dirty, smoky car around Pacific hills. Mel held her

camera in the back seat. The metal box and circle, which used to be a paperweight in Frances' bookshelf, had become Melody's new friend and tool for understanding.

They stopped at a small sandy parking lot by a cliff and made their way through the whale watchers towards some barren spot of grass and rock. Wind whipped their skulls and flooded their ears the way tidal pools are flooded and emptied and then battered again. They cracked the lids of tall cans and worked on lighting cigarettes in undignified positions, hiding inside their jackets.

Moments like these, when the people around her did not seem noble or free, made Mel feel particularly sorry for her mother, who was becoming increasingly pissed off and exacerbated by never knowing the girls' whereabouts, by their bad attitudes, and worsening grades.

"Wow, look at that tree," the drummer popped up from his protective shell with a lit cigarette. The wind ripped and pulled his clothing and hair. Mel had already been looking at the tree—the cypress tree is the tree of Hades, and here it was as tall as a cliff, on top of a cliff, like a wheel within a wheel, brushing its branches around in the sky and creaking from the wind.

"Let's take the picture over there!" Someone yelled. They approached it. By a bough leaning down, almost touching the ground, Aida posed for the camera. She knelt on her heels, unfurled her tongue like a fat, dead fish, and used her middle fingers to pull the skin around her eyes down. The underside of her thighs pressed against her calves and through her tights, the black triangle of her racy underwear pointed down towards the ground. Aida struggled to hold the pose. Mel looked at her through the camera lens, and felt as though she'd been stabbed in the back.

To this day, she can hear the slurred whisper of the tree above her prophesizing Aida's doom, when the lines of the viewfinder held Aida in her future casket for the briefest moment.

While Aida pressed up against that fierce life, Mel pulled backwards and fell first and most deliberately onto school, onto grades and getting good ones. Then she worked on regaining her mother. Then she took solace in the darkroom, watching chemicals drip off new photos. Sere parts of her life that had nearly shriveled up and died slowly regained life. Roots awoke and wriggled blindly in fresh dirt. But then she had to watch Aida fade, flirting with the dark half of human nature, moaning in the ear of the void. Mel felt like a parent wondering where Aida was and why she insisted on being the way she was—was it noble or free? Why she refused to save herself and fall back on what was good enough for her for so many years.

The sisters blame the boyfriend — they say it was his introduction to heroin that started her down the path to her death. But Melody felt it was her choice. It was her nature. Or her curse. Now, for Melody, there is only the aftermath. It rings out and reigns.

The One-Legged Rabbit

Morning was so cold, it was almost minty. I sat on the front porch but there were no finches and nothing to look at. The snow, like a desert, went on forever in lumps. When I stood up to go inside I creaked like a statue come to life.

Inside, my mother made dumplings and steam rose around her. “So?” she asked me.

“Nothing.” I answered. “It’s cold out.”

“I don’t have any butter. Will you go get it for me?” She asked, not looking up from the dumplings.

“Why do you need butter?”

“I just need it, Nikolai Andreevich.”

Needs must. I left. Outside there were a few rabbit tracks. I counted them: fifteen. How could there be fifteen? Could there be a one-legged rabbit?

“Good morning!” I knocked on the door. Snowflakes kept falling. Peter Ivanovich opened the door and brought the smell of tobacco with him.

“What is it” He asked.

“My mother needs butter.”

Peter Ivanovich left and returned with butter. I gave him the money and asked if he had seen a one-legged rabbit.

“Oh him! Yes, I saw him. He came and asked me for butter.” He closed the door.

I left to look for rabbit tracks. Then my mother leaned out of her door and shouted, “I need the butter today, my hero!” So, I went home, but I kept my eyes fixed on the window.

Here's the trouble with snow bunnies: they are exactly like snow. They are white. They are lightweight. They are quiet. And you cannot catch them with your hands. What of my rabbit? Is he quick like the others? Invisible like the others? Or not invisible at all, due to his set back. No, he is elegant and agile, I know. And I will be just like him.

When my mother barked at me, I did not growl back. I just twitched my nose and ran. Our house is small; I could not run far so I ran up to the loft. There it was only me, my bed, and the round window. No Mother.

But she called up to me, "Nikolai, it's time to eat lunch." I didn't answer. It was getting dark outside.

I sat on my bed and looked out the foggy, round window. Then, suddenly, something flashed by in the snow. It was him! My rabbit! But underneath him were two feet. "Now what?" I wondered, overcome with sadness.

"Come on, come down," said my mother. "Don't be silly Nikolai Andreevich. Come down and try your birthday cake."

Одноногий кролик

Утро было таким холодным, что было мятно во рту. Я сидел на переднем крыльце. Зябликов не было, и смотреть было не на что. Снег, как пустыня, продолжался вечно. Пустыня в комочках. Когда я встал, чтобы войти в дом, то скрипнул. Будто статуя ожила.

Мать делала пельмени. Вокруг поднимался пар. «И что?» спросила она меня.

«Ничего», ответил я. «Холодно».

«Масла нет. Сходишь?» спросила она, не отводя глаз от пельменей.

«Зачем тебе масло?»

«Надо, Николай Андреевич, надо».

Надо так надо. Я пошел. На дворе было несколько кроличьих следов. Я их сосчитал: пятнадцать. Почему пятнадцать? Кролик, что ли, одноногий?

«Доброе утро!» Это я постучал в дверь. Снежинки все еще падали. Петр Иванович высунулся за дверь, а за ним – запах его табака.

«Ну?» сказал он. «Мать масла просит».

Петр Иванович ушел, вернулся с маслом. Я отдал ему деньги и спросил, видел ли он одноногого кролика.

«А, этого. Видел. Тоже масла просил». Дверь закрылась.

Я шел и искал следы. Потом мать выглянула за дверь и закричала: «Масло-то сегодня нужно, герой». Пришлось идти домой. Там я приклеился к окну.

Беда с этими снежными кроликами. Они точно, как снег. Белые. Легкие. И молчат. Поймать их рукой невозможно. Какой он, мой кролик? Быстрый, как все? Такой же невидимый? Или невидимый совсем, потому то одноногий? Нет, он изящный и проворный, я знаю. И я таким тоже буду.

Когда мать залаяла на меня, я не стал рычать в ответ. Я только носом дернул и побежал. Дом у нас маленький, поэтому я не мог убежать лишь недалеко. На чердак. Там только я, кровать и круглое окно. Матери там нет.

Но она позвонила мне. «Николай, обедать пора». Я ей ничего не ответил. На улице темнело.

Я сидел на кровати и смотрел в мутное круглое окно. И тогда что-то мелькнуло в снегу. Это был он! Мой кролик! Двуногий, правда. «И что мне теперь делать?» Подумал я. Стало грустно.

«Давай, спускайся-ка вниз», сказала мама. «Не глупи, Николай Андреевич. Иди сюда, попробуй. Вот торт к твоему дню рождения испекла».

Conclusion: When All the People Go to Heaven and Then it's the Apocalypse

A few months ago, waiting in line somewhere, I overheard a little kid talking to her dad. She was trying to remember the word for: “when all the people go to heaven and then it's the apocalypse,” the word for rapture. I waited there, holding paper towels and oranges, while she explained, “you know, when all the people are naked and they float up into the sky.”

“Whose naked” said her dad, putting a twenty-dollar bill into the self-check-out machine. They left and then I was alone in there thinking, if I were raptured right then, would I be satisfied?

I remember when I was small I used to sing a little ditty to myself: “if I die, before I'm twenty-five, I hope that I have a lot of memories.” I realized, even at six or seven, that it would have horrified my parents, so I sang it privately. I have accomplished the goal of the song. I do have a lot of memories. But I don't have a long list of accomplishments. Maybe the song encourages a person to “pack lightly,” to have a short list of requirements for success (something I have never been good at). Or maybe it's about rolling off the knot in your back that you lie on when you lie awake at night. Maybe it's just about how die sounds like five. Who knows. But it's stuck in my head again.

In a version of the introduction, I wrote about a hen I had when I was in high school. Her name was Camus because she was all-black. All the chickens were named after philosophers — Nietzsche was old and fat and not a “good layer,” Simone de Beauvoir was a bossy red chicken, Pluto was regular, Dostoyevsky had great plumage. There was also Nugget, the only chicken my dad named, a chicken with a puffy face that laid bluish-green eggs, as all Ameraucana chickens

are wont to do. But Camus was the smartest. She used to occasionally break into my truck by sneaking into the garage and hopping in to the car through the open window.

Once, groggily, I almost drove her to high school. She was roosting in the passenger seat, blending in, and I didn't notice her until she clucked. I almost took her with me anyway, just to see what would happen. Who knows, maybe she would have been good at math.

I treasured reaching under chickens and finding an egg. Their perfect smoothness amazed me, the fact that chickens made them, and that they were warm. Once, I laughed when I felt a likeness between these stories and eggs. They are, at least, warm I hope. And I made them.

In the formulation of this project, I took many cues from Monty Python's John Cleese. He gave his notes on creativity to a room full of business executives in London in 1991. In the lecture, he outlined some research on creative thinking. His first (and perhaps most interesting) point is that creativity is not a talent, it is a "way of operating." A creative person gives him or herself that which is necessary to get from the "closed mode" to the "open mode" in order to play, think openly, and create. To get to the open mode, a person needs "space, time, time, confidence, and humor." You need somewhere where you can be alone to think, enough time to work through a problem (during which you will have to tolerate a great deal of discomfort), and an ending time to resume normal life. Plus, you will need to be confident that anything you do in the "open mode" is good enough, or not wrong, and a sense of humor to flip things upside down.

Cleese cited Alfred Hitchcock's mistrust of working under pressure, which is essentially what senior project is. However, I attempted to use Cleese's strategies to make something worthwhile. I tried to use them to do something another thinker suggested: to get off the reservation of the mind.

The Atlantic conducted a series of interviews with notable writers on creativity and inspiration. The first interview in their compilation book *Light the Dark* (suspiciously situated in the “self-help” section of the Kingston Barnes and Nobles) is the best by far. That interview is with Sherman Alexie, called, “Leaving the Reservation of the Mind.” Alexie grew up on a reservation in Spokane, Washington. For him leaving the reservation was about “breaking the circle,” getting out of restrictions, and feeling free to move forward rather than dwell on the past. Do not define your life by how it relates back to your prior experiences or your roots. You will be far more inventive if you think forward. This idea relates to everyone: “I am in the suburb of my mind. I am in the farm town of my mind. I am in the childhood bedroom of my mind.” Alexie writes, “every writer stands in the doorway of their own prison. Half in and half out.” He says succinctly, “hold the power.” Tell the story. Say something.

I wrote in my introduction about how urgent it is to write freely, to free one’s self from defining one’s self, so that you can make. This creative power is threatened by our constant connection to the world, which disallows us the space to be creative, and the fast pace of the world, which disallows us the time we need to make. Confidence and humor are also constricted.

So, in the future, creativity will require a great deal of ingenuity to even get to the open mode. New creatives must be dedicated to leaving the reservation and starting new paths, without being snooty or self-explanatory.

If anyone can offer us some solace it is folk musician Blaze Foley, affectionately known as the duct tape messiah. He says, “Some days you win and some days you lose. A chair got knocked over, I got the blues. Some don't get any and some get to choose.” Many of us are lucky enough to get to choose what we do with our lives and our free time. If we choose to stay dedicated to creative thinking and creative output, maybe we will be ready for rapture-day.

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