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## Mutts: A Collection of Short Fiction

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**MUTTS: A COLLECTION OF SHORT FICTION**

A Master's Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate College of

Missouri State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts, English

By

Shane Page

May 2019

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# **MUTTS: A COLLECTION OF SHORT FICTION**

English

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Master of Arts

Shane Page

## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis begins with a critical introduction about narrative closure, as opposed to traditional narrative resolution, in fiction. I cite the work of John Gardner, T.S. Eliot, Milan Kundera, and Charles Baxter to explore the functions of motif, objective correlative, and symmetrical composition, focusing on how these three ideas inform effective characterization. I argue that narrative closure achieves equally if not more satisfying endings by prioritizing characterization above all other aspects of plot. After the critical introduction, you will find works of short fiction and flash fiction. A common theme among the longer, more traditional stories is the process through which narrators make sense of bizarre, traumatic, or potentially unbelievable events. The flash fiction pieces put readers directly into unfamiliar environments, which are rendered as such through either nuanced narration styles or deliberately unrealistic settings.

**KEYWORDS:** objective correlative, symmetrical composition, motif in fiction, resolution in fiction, closure in fiction

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By

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A Master's Thesis  
Submitted to the Graduate College  
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In the interest of academic freedom and the principle of free speech, approval of this thesis indicates the format is acceptable and meets the academic criteria for the discipline as determined by the faculty that constitute the thesis committee. The content and views expressed in this thesis are those of the student-scholar and are not endorsed by Missouri State University, its Graduate College, or its employees.

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## STEPPING INTO THE SAME RIVER TWICE: FINDING NARRATIVE CLOSURE

The other day I found myself lost on my way home from the grocery store, despite shopping at the same time, leaving from the same place, and driving on the same roads I do every week. I ended up three miles from my apartment before I noticed I had completely missed my turn, but I didn't think much of it at the time. Maybe this was an honest mistake, and from now on I simply need to pay a bit more attention to my surroundings while I'm driving. Or, maybe this was a lesson—maybe I *am* a lost cause, and it's time to start listening when people tell me I have no direction in life.

Either way, I'm much less interested in deciding what this experience means for my personal development (I made it home with the groceries, and that's good enough) and much more interested in what it tells me about my relationship to fiction. As a reader, I've never been very concerned with whether a story reaches perfect resolution. I've always liked characters who, even if technically in arrested development, concern themselves with the problems of *today*—of what's right in front of them—as opposed to worrying themselves over life's most complex questions. As a writer, I've always responded strongly to, and tried to emulate elements of, narratives that achieve “logically-exhausted closure in place of emotionally-resonant resolution” (Gardner 53), focusing more on the experience of the journey than the reward of the destination. Narrative closure requires close attention to motif and to symmetrical composition; in other words, motifs should be rendered into semantic formulae for particular emotions, or objective correlatives, that recall themselves at pivotal moments in the plot. In this essay, I explore these techniques in my own work, focusing on how characters find closure, not resolution, in their narratives.



Gardner's logically-exhausted closure differs from traditional resolution through the types of endings stories can have. In traditional resolution, "the classical and usually more satisfying conclusion" (Gardner 53), the reader understands that no further event can take place: the murderer has been caught, the happy couple has been married, and the stolen object has been returned (Gardner 53). A traditionally resolved ending occurs only when all major conflicts have been solved or addressed. Alternatively, closure, or "recognition that we've reached the stage of infinite repetition" (Gardner 53), relies on a fulfillment of motifs, or repeated images, symbols, and ideas. When a reader recognizes a motif's significance, character, theme, and plot can approach more meaningful realization, and, to Gardner, nothing "new" can happen in the story at this point: "More events might follow, perhaps from now till Kingdom Come, but they will all express the same thing—for example, the character's entrapment in empty ritual or some consistently wrong response to the pressures of his environment" (53). The reader's sense of the ending, then, occurs not from a character solving or confronting a conflict but from intellectual recognition of a character's circumstances. While Gardner finally expresses intellectual closure as a reveal "that the character's supposed act of free will was illusory" (53), I reject his suggestively deterministic interpretation and instead see intellectual closure as a representation of how I, and how I think most people, come to understand life: less through the biggest, most emotionally-resolute moments, and more through smaller, day-to-day insights that, whether contradictory or epiphanic, show us who we've been along.

Both T.S. Eliot and Milan Kundera argue for the importance of motif in the theories of the objective correlative and symmetrical composition, respectively. Eliot writes, "The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an 'objective correlative...' a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such

that when the external facts... are given, the emotion is immediately evoked.” In other words, a writer can tie an object or action to a certain character so that, when the reader encounters that object or action, they are reminded of that character’s emotion. Eliot notes the importance of objective correlatives through the failures, in his eyes, of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*; essentially, Shakespeare overwhelms the audience with Hamlet’s intense monologic descriptions of his emotions instead of providing a consistent set of images or actions to represent Hamlet’s emotions (“Objective correlative”). Audiences need, in Eliot’s opinion, more than words to identify with the larger-than-life Hamlet, a dramatic character whose emotions, without image- or action-based reference, would appear at best hyperbolic and at worst completely otherworldly.

The objective correlative is particularly useful for flash fiction and poetry where the writer’s space for emotional development is limited. Flash fiction is one of my favorite forms of prose to read and to write, and I think Brady Udall’s “The Wig” is one of the best, most accessible flash fiction stories with a clear objective correlative.

To give a brief explication, in “The Wig,” the objective correlative is noted by the narrator in the first line, “My eight-year-old son found a wig in the garbage dumpster this morning” (Udall 135). From here, Udall establishes emotional tension between the father, who describes himself as “highly irritated” after failing to knot his tie, and the son, who notably eats breakfast alone and reads the newspaper with the wig “pulled tightly over his head like a helmet” (Udall 135). While the reader does not know yet that the narrator’s wife, the boy’s mother, is dead, Udall separates the father and the son in the opening paragraph and situates the wig as the partition between them. So, when the narrator describes the wig as “a dirty bush of curly blonde hair, the kind you might see on a prostitute or someone who is trying to imitate Marilyn Monroe” (135), Udall combines a sensory description with an interpretive characteristic: the wig is both

disgusting *and* poorly imitative. By piling unfavorable qualities on the wig, Udall keys the reader in to, if not the strain, the discomfort present in the father and son's relationship.

The narrator wants to ask his son to take the wig off, but he can't, so he ends up pacing around the house for a while. Here, Udall begins to complicate both his characters and his objective correlative when the narrator reveals that not only is his wife dead, but also, last spring, she was sitting exactly where the son is now, reading the paper, her hair somewhat messy and resembling the wig. The wig gains additional emotional "weight" when the narrator makes this connection and walks back into the kitchen to embrace his son. He buries his face in the wig, noting that even though it still smells bad, he doesn't care anymore. The narrator then ends the story on this line, "My son put his smooth arms around my neck and for maybe a few seconds we were together again, the three of us" (Udall 136), transforming the wig from a sign of emotional distance and discomfort into the only way for a family to be together again.

The wig works perfectly as Eliot's "formula for [a] particular emotion" because it telegraphs and represents the characters' emotional arcs. Every beat of the story is tied to the wig: the father's annoyance and son's solitude is emphasized by the wig's gross uncanniness; the wig causes the father to remember his deceased wife, leading him to hug his son; the wig becomes the deceased wife and mother during the story's closing embrace, changing from the separator to the connector. In other words, the wig evokes every emotion the characters experience, and the reader cannot access the emotions without the wig. Note that Udall's work with his objective correlative also leads the reader to closure, not resolution. "The Wig" is not the story of the day a father and son overcome their grief; rather, it is one instance of how the characters deal with their circumstances and reconcile the loss of their mother. Any further scenes in this story would only, as Gardner predicts, express the same thing.

While not *quite* short enough to be considered flash fiction, my story “Angels” uses a similar approach with its objective correlative. I introduce the objective correlative, a \$100 tip to the narrator from an elderly couple, in the first paragraph, “Weird day at work. Serving at Maria’s, couple walked up to me, looked like they’d been crying, gave me one hundred dollars... Said they’d been praying about it. Said they’d seen me working hard and God said so about it. So I took it and they cried and I cried.” Even though the narrator initially refers to the cash as a weird occurrence, something she doesn’t really understand but accepts as fortuitous, she quickly admits that the gift also made her cry, setting up, simply, that this character most likely hurts for money. Additionally, the couple claims that God told them to give it to her, which elevates the narrative weight of the money, at least in the narrator’s mind: not only is it one hundred dollars, but also, at least to the elderly couple, it is a gift from God (the narrator spends much of the story contemplating faith, fate, and prayer). Each time the money reappears, or, rather, when the narrator thinks about the money, she reveals more about both her emotional state and the ostensibly inescapable circumstances of her life; that is, the money allows the reader to understand the narrator as a person—as someone made up of day-to-day revelations and contradictions—and not so much as a character working toward a paradigm of resolution.

After serving at her first job, the narrator goes home but does not mention the money to her on-again-off-again boyfriend, Thom. When the narrator ruminates for an entire paragraph about the money, she reveals that she is clearly anxious about it and tries to justify having received it: “Hard to believe about the money... They said they’d prayed and prayed and God said so about it, so the hundred was mine. They said they’d seen me working and trying my best. The hundred was mine. They put their hands on my shoulders.” The language is similar to the first paragraph, showing that the narrator still has to justify to herself that she deserves the

money, and when she heads to her second job as a bartender and keeps the tip in her back pocket, the money becomes both a gift and a secret: she hasn't said anything to her boyfriend, she hasn't said anything to any of her co-workers, and she also hasn't said anything to her friend Dez, who shows up to the bar claiming to have won \$3,000 dollars. Both the narrator's disjointed narration and her attitude toward the money signify to the reader that she is someone stuck in routine, down on her luck, who struggles to understand how or even why something good could happen to her.

Just as Udall prompts a reader to ask "Why?" when the father cannot ask his son to take off the wig even though he thinks it is disgusting, I attempt to complicate the narrator's feelings about the money—why doesn't she tell anyone? At first, the narrator herself may not be fully aware of why she hides the money, but she continues to protect it after some encounters at work, "Served some regulars. Flirted with cook. He crouched low and touched me behind my knees. Moved arms up. Escalators. I liked it but was afraid he'd find my bills in back pocket. I said that's mine. He said what, this. I said oh you." After this, the narrator's friend Dez, who is in love with her, asks her to run away with him using his \$3,000 dollars, though she is not convinced. She is skeptical toward both men and the promises of money—how far can \$3,000, or \$100 for that matter, really carry anyone?

As the story moves toward its ending, the \$100, which could at the very least help the narrator maybe get ahead on some bills, begins to hold all the emotional weight of how undeserved and trapped the narrator feels. When Dez, who becomes more and more drunk, playfully insists on his plan, the narrator thinks about the death of her mother, the unreliability of Thom, and how ugly the elderly couple appeared to her, ending her thought spiral with, "Three thousand. Next time around when God lets us go again. Say you have nothing. Say you have

nothing.” The narrator makes it clear that she does not believe any amount of money is going to solve her problems, and, as Dez leaves the bar, she starts to buy herself and all of the bar staff shots of tequila. When all of the money is finally spent, the narrator seems relieved, saying, “My hundred was gone. Thank you God.”

In the final paragraph, the narrator says she knows Thom will never change, and that even a life with Dez could be equally limiting (notice here Gardner’s sentiment that any further action in the story would just show the reader what they already know). Earlier in the story, the narrator figures her son, Little Norm, would have thought of the elderly couple as angels, but, in the final lines, the narrator reveals an instance of frustration and perhaps even violence with her son as she refuses to accept the idea that the money could have been more than just cash to burn: “Little Norm said Angels, mami. You don’t even know kid. Angels. Watch it kid I’ll knock you out. Angels, mami.” The money, as the objective correlative, has acted as the formula for understanding the narrator’s defeated attitude toward life—the money having been gifted to her is significant as well, because she can barely justify having it and wants to get rid of it. Just as the wig appears at each of its story’s emotional beats, so does the money in “Angels.”

As far as I can tell, flash fiction only succeeds when there is an effective objective correlative or when the writer has other experimental or aesthetic aims for the form—essentially, I don’t think someone can just write a story that happens to be really short. Even the six-word Hemingway story, “For sale. Baby shoes. Never worn,” focuses on an object, the baby shoes, and tells us two qualities that hold within them a story. However, when dealing with a longer story or a novel, a motif’s appearance in the plot requires more deliberate discretion. The great thing about a story like “The Wig” is that the reader can never forget the objective correlative: the wig is in the first line, the last line, the title, etc. In a more traditional short story, or in a

novel, a reader is more likely to forget certain details unless the writer recalls them at notable points in the story—that is, while in a longer narrative a motif can certainly signify larger, overall themes, symmetrical composition can transform motifs into complex objective correlatives, communicating a character’s dynamic emotional development.

Milan Kundera, in an authorial aside in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, argues that a motif should be symmetrically composed along with the plot, thriving not necessarily in the depth of its description, or even in what the thing itself is, but more in its placement in the story, in the character’s life. Kundera gives this example from *Anna Karenina*: when Anna and Vronsky first meet at a train station, someone is run over by a train; later in the novel, Anna throws herself under a train (52). Kundera concedes that the technique may seem obvious, but it is in fact true to life: “This symmetrical composition—the same motif appears at the beginning and at the end—may seem quite ‘novelistic’ to you, and I am willing to agree, but only on the condition that you refrain from reading such notions as ‘fictive,’ ‘fabricated’... Because human lives are composed in precisely such a fashion” (52). So, while the symmetrical composition of the train may at first seem obvious or forced, Kundera posits that the reappearance of the motif signals a change in Anna’s character: what was first the location of a romantic meeting between Anna and Vronsky becomes the location of Anna’s suicide in the wake of her lost love.

In a way, symmetrical composition needs to create enough space between notable plot moments so that motifs can be forgotten then remembered. Anna’s suicide happens so late in the novel that the reader is likely to have forgotten about the initial meeting at the train, making Anna’s suicide recall the earlier meeting. Charles Baxter, who writes about symmetrical composition but calls it rhyming action, would consider this a doubled event, or a narrative echo, “an eerie sense of repetition, of a time spiral, of things having come back around to themselves...

a bit like prophecy, except prophecy run in reverse” (142). Neither event can be understood in its full significance without the other, with the future relying on the past and the past relying on the future. While a motif can appear and reappear as many times as the writer wishes (*things* have to *happen* in a story, after all), Baxter insists that narrative echoes occur when narratives move in reverse, coming “dramatically or imagistically to a point that is similar to one they have already seemingly passed. We see an image that we half remember... We watch as someone performs an action that someone else did very much that way years ago... We *are* stepping into the same river twice” (144). Baxter differs from Kundera in his defense of symmetrical composition by asking writers to use it as subtly as possible, and while Baxter’s essay is helpful as a writer for learning *how* to use symmetrical composition, I still want to briefly return to Kundera to explore how meaning making occurs not for readers, but for characters.

For Kundera, a motif becomes significant and symmetrically composed only when a character can associate a meaningful moment with it. While a writer may use many motifs throughout a story to communicate themes and characterization, Kundera’s symmetrical composition occurs when “an individual transforms a fortuitous occurrence... into a motif, which then assumes a permanent place in the composition of the individual’s life. Anna could have chosen another way to take her life. But the motif of death and the railway station, unforgettably bound to the birth of love, enticed her in her hour of despair” (52). In this passage, Kundera effectively defends the potentially unbelievable coincidence of symmetrical composition: isn’t it just a little too easy, a little too unrealistic? Can a motif lose its power if it becomes too obvious?

I think I can answer these questions through both another Udall story (“Midnight Raid”), as well as through my story, “My Second Appearance in an Adult Film” but I also think Kundera



is exactly right even without further story analysis. When something meaningful happens to someone in real life (a wedding day, e.g.), the “motifs” associated with that day—music, objects clothing, actions, etc.— will forever hold emotional weight. One of Kundera’s characters in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, for example, continuously encounters a bowler hat (also: take a moment and enjoy how literal and explicative Kundera’s prose is, here—if only we could all be so direct!): “The bowler hat was a motif in the musical composition that was Sabina’s life. It returned again and again, each time with a different meaning... each time Sabina saw another river flow, another *semantic* river: each time the object would give rise to a new meaning, though all former meanings would resonate” (88). In short: symmetrical composition makes sense because people naturally associate meaning with objects (Sabina and the bowler hat), but, just as the objective correlative can involve “a set of objects, a situation, [or] a chain of events,” symmetrical composition can also occur when a character a character performs an action that recalls an earlier event, linking them semantically and emotionally (Anna seeing a suicide at the beginning her love affair with Vronsky; Anna committing suicide when that love affair is lost).

Anyway, I’ve gone on this whole excursion because I claimed that the objective correlative, or an emotionally-realized motif, needs to take on a different form in longer stories, as opposed to flash fiction and poetry, and that perhaps the best way to understand that new form is through symmetrical composition. Like “The Wig” contains an accessible depiction of an objective correlative, Udall’s story “Midnight Raid” contains an accessible, if not formulaic, version of symmetrical composition.

“Midnight Raid” uses symmetrical composition conveniently at the beginning and the end of the story, so its application is pretty easy to follow. The story opens with the narrator, a six-foot-three Apache Indian, holding a goat and trying not to startle Roy, a dog giving him the

“evil eye from inside his doghouse” (Udall 13). Instead of me continuing to contextualize the story, I’ll hand it over to Udall’s narrator, who explains the situation in an enjoyably straightforward beginning (this is from the second paragraph):

Roy is the pet of my ex-wife Amy and her new husband Howard, whose back-yard I am currently lurking around in. The goat is a present for my seven-year-old son, Tate. Tate is somewhere in this immense, tacky house and my plan is to get this goat to him without Amy or Howard finding out about it. This is Scottsdale, Arizona, close to midnight and not too many degrees shy of a hundred. (15)

I included the part of the quote where the narrator points out he’s in Arizona not to take up space on the page, but because the last important piece of information revealed in the beginning of the story is that the narrator thinks the backyard is horribly unfit for both his son and for Roy (both the narrator and Roy slowly warm up to each other. In his own words: “The backyard I’m in is nothing more than a football-field-sized patch of dry grass with a doghouse in the middle of it. There’s no swing set or old soccer ball or anything... Poor old Roy here doesn’t even have a rubber bone to chew on. This is more a wasteland than a backyard” (Udall 15).

To bring all of this together, the story begins with what will be a symmetrically composed *action*: the narrator brings a goat *in* to do something *out of love* for his son; for the narrator, the goat will improve his son’s quality of life, with the backyard functioning as a semantic motivator for the narrator. By semantic motivator, I mean that the narrator has already made up his mind to sneak the goat in, and anything bad he notices, whether it’s the desolate backyard or the gated neighborhood his ex-wife now lives in, is just further justification for his actions. For the narrator, the goat is the perfect cure for the empty, horrid backyard, which he has already equivocated to be the exact thing his son needs.

One last thing to know: at a certain point in the story, Roy, the narrator, and the goat all sit next to each other in the backyard, and the narrator notes, “Roy, who apparently has come to

the realization that neither of us provide any great threat, sits right next to me, his butt jammed against mine, and looks up at me with these glossy, rolling eyes. I give him a squeeze. We all need love and Roy is no different” (Udall 20).

After a confrontation with his ex-wife and a tender scene where the narrator tidies his son’s room while the boy sleeps (one of my favorite moments in any short story—such an effective, human moment), the narrator accomplishes his mission and leaves the goat behind. Already the story cannot promise resolution. Does the ex-wife or her husband simply get rid of the goat as soon as the narrator is gone? Does the narrator even make it out of the gated neighborhood, which he described as difficult to enter in the first place? Does the goat, if it stays, make the boy as happy as he thinks it will?

Instead of resolving these threads and showing us what happens because of the narrator’s actions, Udall moves his story toward closure when the narrator finds himself feeling terrible despite succeeding in his goal, “Once Howard has shut the door on me and I’m outside, empty-handed and loping across the scorching street, I feel more lonely and lost than I ever have in my life; it’s as if I’ve been completely scraped out from the inside” (25). The narrator returns to the backyard, finds Roy, and asks the dog if he’d like to come along with him. Roy becomes ecstatic and jumps all around, the narrator etches a farewell onto Roy’s doghouse, and the pair goes off into the night as newfound friends.

The symmetrical, or rhyming, action, then, is that the narrator takes Roy with him at the end, which echoes his bringing the goat into the yard at the beginning. Also, remember that bringing the goat was done out of love—something that was supposed to make his son happier—just as taking Roy is something done out of love (because the narrator has already noted that everyone deserves love, even Roy). Lastly, note that just as the goat, in the narrator’s mind,

might save his son from having such a shitty backyard, *taking* Roy out of the circumstances of the shitty backyard is a similar reprieve. A man brings out a goat in; a man brings a dog out.

In my story “My Second Appearance in an Adult Film” (a loose imitation of the Haruki Murakami story “The Second Bakery Attack” from his collection *The Elephant Vanishes*), I attempt a similar approach to Udall’s symmetrical composition by putting my action and image early in the story, then recalling it, but slightly altering it, at the end. I set up my conflict similarly to Murakami’s, which I’ll summarize here. In “The Second Bakery Attack,” two newlyweds find themselves up late one night because they are so hungry they can’t sleep. The only thing in their fridge is a six-pack of beer, which they decide to drink while sharing stories. At some point the husband, the story’s narrator, reveals he hasn’t been this hungry since he was a teenager. He and his roommate tried to rob a bakery because they were so poor, but the owner of the store allowed the boys to eat as much bread as they wanted, as long as they occasionally worked for him. The wife decides that they must be cursed: because the husband never successfully robbed a bakery, they need to rob one now or else they’ll be starving for the rest of their lives. From here, the story ramps up in intensity as the couple settles on robbing a McDonald’s instead of a bakery. They hold the McDonald’s staff hostage with shotguns in the wife’s car, force the staff to make them thirty Big Macs, then eat as many as they can before they go to sleep. Even though Murakami’s story gets a little bit ridiculous, I’ve always liked how both characters are obviously nervous about the commitment of marriage, which has now become a reality for them, yet seemingly have no problem creating a hostage situation in a McDonald’s. That said, I’ve always thought Murakami could have done more to communicate what his characters are actually feeling.

I attempt more dynamic emotional characterization in my story. The narrator is thinking back to the time when she and her husband, still newlyweds, were lying in bed and a car alarm went off outside their apartment. The car alarm causes the narrator to remember the time she shot amateur porn with her ex-boyfriend, and during the middle of the shoot, a car alarm went off. Here, I attempt to set up a couple things: while the car alarm initially serves to bring back an old memory, it also brings both caution (it is an alarm, after all) and discomfort (the narrator relates in detail her experience making the porn). Also, before the narrator tells her story, her husband spends some time categorizing what he thinks the three types of car alarms are, one of which he calls “the chirper” (an alarm that goes on then off, on then off). The two head out to the kitchen and split a six-pack, and, after some time, the husband posits that the porn must be why his wife has never looked him in the eyes when they have sex (which he calls a porn “curse”): with the eyes of the internet looking at her video all the time, she cannot look at anyone while she’s having sex. Similarly to Murakami’s newlywed wife character, who, perhaps flimsily, believes in curses because she comes from a traditional family, the husband in my story is four beers in when he invents the fiction of the “curse.”

The narrator wants to overcome the shitty memories of her ex-boyfriend, and the husband thinks if they film porn together, then his wife will finally be able to look him in the eye during sex (he claims that filming porn will remove the curse of her inability to do so). While the couple drives around at night looking for a place to film, two patrol cars pass them, headed in the opposite direction, with their sirens blaring (another alarm), which almost causes the couple to chicken out of their plan. However, at the end of the story, the narrator and her husband film themselves having sex behind a dumpster at a gas station, then return to lying around in bed, just

as they were at the beginning. This time, instead of hearing a car alarm, the narrator listens to birds chirping, easing her into a sense of security.

In Murakami's story, the emotional development of the characters, in my opinion, is offset by the almost unbelievable scene in the McDonald's—they don't seem like the same people. In my story, I attempt to symmetrically compose the beginning and the end: the couple lie in bed at the beginning of the story listening to a car alarm, and they lie in bed at the end of the story listening to birds chirping (one of the husband's alarm categories was a "chirper"). The change here isn't anything necessarily definitive or emotionally-resolute to a point that all future problems in the marriage will be solved; but, like Murakami's characters, the newlyweds are both anxious about the reality of the commitment they've made to each other, so turning an alarm into something as sweet as chirping bird helps to communicate that the characters are maturing, easing into their marriage together. Looking at in this way, I wonder if I'm against resolution after all. Maybe I am hesitant of reassurance, that today's solutions will work tomorrow, so I try to remember every last thing and hold on to as much as I can.

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## MUTTS

Bill the Dog had been killed, run down by the mailman, and Mom said Dad was to blame, so she dragged our kitchen table out in front of the television and called to Dad that they needed to settle this. She set two stools on opposite sides of the table. They were going to sit down like adults and arm-wrestle.

Dad asked if the loser had to do the dishes for a week. He looked at me and smiled. He set a 16 oz. Coors on the table, which was flimsy and insectile and made with what felt like hollow tin. He didn't sit down right away, but cracked a window and lit a cigarette and rolled up his sleeves.

"Loser moves out," said Mom. When Dad leaned over the table to light her cigarette for her, she reeled back on her stool and removed it from the corner of her mouth. She set it on top of our television and Dad shrugged. Mom said stuff like this all the time.

Our television was a little white Panasonic, barely more than twelve inches, with a VCR built in—a VHS cassette hanging out the front with its tape all tangled and chewed. Mom and Dad blocked my view as they sat down and locked hands. I remember Mom's hair, which reached to each of the cardinal directions in nearly matted tufts; Dad's tied back in a ponytail, some clusters of strands sprawled and stuck across his cheeks. The way their jaws actually clenched like people in movies, in close-up shots, in diners for truckers where people crowded the table and threw down money.

I knew it was Dad's fault. I'd been there when it happened. But I didn't talk much or really at all back then, so Mom never asked me anything. I never spoke unless prompted, and even then not necessarily. I was five, and it was strange, but that's how I was.



As they played with each other's fingers I noticed this was their first physical altercation that seemed to follow rules. They adjusted their postures, bent their elbows, Mom trying to find some kind of pace in her breath, and Dad still thinking this was a joke. He just kept smiling and looking around the room, his teeth sticking out from his lips like the keys of a smashed piano. He loved to play games, and to toy with Mom, and when he wasn't tired or angry he loved to make us laugh.

Mom had a black tank top on with orange paint stains and specks, and Dad wore his baggy denim shirt, which I sometimes used as an extra blanket. They were both in their underwear. In the summertime they liked to do this after dinner. They'd sit on the porch and drink Doc's Orders (a bizarre concoction they invented that consisted of vodka, lemonade, and Dr. Pepper), catching Cardinals games on the radio and leaning into each other when it got late, laughing and grabbing at each other's arms.

I had been watching *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* because I figured I did. I wanted to be a millionaire. And Mom and Dad did too, so I thought if I studied the show enough we might all have our wish granted. I wrote down the letters of the correct answers in columns of three: AAB, CAB, DCB. I was too young to know any of the answers, but I was convinced it was all fixed and that a hidden pattern could be found, like a treasure map, leading a contestant from A, B, C, and D all the way to X, which would mark the spot.

I can pretend I remember what tie Regis Philbin wore, or what the make-up department had failed to conceal on the contestant's face, but it's their arms I can't forget: Mom's pale skin, her bicep perked like an egg. Her veins scrawling in lithe, full protrusions—a feature I did not inherit—on her hand and reaching to her shoulder, sticking out like when she mowed the lawn, or pulled on the front door, or cut onions and cried. Dad's skin was tan—browned and of a whole

different palette than Mom's. His arms and fingers were long. His upper arm, flexed, was the shape of an ear of corn. Both their arms were camouflaged with the scheme of *Millionaire's* dusky set: deep-toned purple and blue.

Dad squeezed Mom's hand with a strange writhing, cracking her knuckles. I wondered how much he'd been drinking, if he was beginning to lose focus, but Mom cracked his knuckles too, as if signaling the competition was about to start.

I hadn't heard how they'd gotten to this, really. At some point, from the kitchen, Mom had said, "But he was *my* dog. Bill the Dog was *mine*," to which Dad said, "Bill was half blind and dumb as a wrench," which was true, and to which Mom said, "His name was Bill *the Dog*," which was also true, though I didn't get her point.

I didn't care who won or lost, but I was rooting for Mom, in a way. I knew it was Dad's fault, and even then I knew nothing could bring back Bill the Dog from the dead. Our mailman had a bit of a lead foot, and he tended to drive in cough-like jerks from house to house, and Bill the Dog had been in front of the truck at the top-speed of its lurch. I'd watched from the window while Dad dozed in the recliner with a cigarette held loosely between his middle finger and ringless ring finger. The cigarette fell and burned a hole into the carpet, and the smoke woke up Dad, who stomped it out and went back to sleep. Mom and Dad liked to call all their little carpet burns our house's special freckles.

I heard Regis Philbin read a question while Dad tried to crack wise. I'd been tuned in and focused before my parents blocked the screen, so I knew this was the last of the easy pickings before the stage went darker and the questions increased in difficulty. The beginning was meant to weed out the fools, to check anyone whose nerves were already breaking them down.

*H<sub>2</sub>O is the chemical compound for what?*

“You can still back down,” said Dad. He looked at me again. I held a Beanie Baby he’d brought back for me from a long trucking job. It was a dog with roughly textured fur. I changed its name from Puppy to Bill the Dog 2 after Bill the Dog was killed by Dad’s negligence. Mom tapped her nose. Regis read the option for A.

*Water.*

Mom said nothing. Regis read the option for B.

*Ice.*

“You’re setting yourself up to be homeless,” said Dad. He moved his dirty-nailed fingers in sequential taps on Mom’s hand.

*Steam.*

I didn’t know what H<sub>2</sub>O was. Regis said the fourth option, this question’s joke answer, which was usually blatantly incorrect and meant to help the contestants become comfortable. Again, I didn’t know this because I knew the answers myself, but rather because one option in each of the beginning questions always made the audience laugh, so I’d picked up the pattern. Dad said something about trick questions, and Mom said D.

*All of the Above.*

Then they started when, having picked correctly in good nature and recognition of the joke, the contestant moved on to the first slew of harder questions and *Millionaire’s* indigo flooded our ceiling when the on-set the lights turned down, and my parents’ silhouette elongated in the middle of the Panasonic’s projection, like two cowboys on opposite sides of a duel, but connected in the middle by their hands.



It was over in a minute, but I remember it in slow motion while the world moved on as usual. My parents sitting there in a sort of bubbled extended sequence where maybe they still are, timeless, and *Millionaire* proceeding question to question and teasing final answers;

*Which titular Shakespeare character is visited by the wraith of his father?*

me, there in  
the sunken cushion, writing letters into ostensibly revealing columns;

*Which of the following insects are classified as part of the Hymenoptera order?*

a group of scouting  
ants proceeding up the side of the Panasonic to investigate a half empty can of Dr. Pepper;

*The assassination of whom was a catalyst for the start of World War I?*

my father, flinching when the window unit chugged to kick on and whirred for a while but didn't quite make it;

*Months before her suicide, which poet said she was writing the best poems of her life?*

and my mother, just holding on.

It was strange to think that all of this was for a dead dog.

Bill the Dog and I were not exactly friends, but we got along. Back then, when I wondered what type of dog he was, I settled on "puppy" as a catch-all term, though Bill the Dog was a decrepit mutt who Dad said was easily over ten years old. Mom had found him behind a Dairy Queen eating rotten bananas before I was born, and she always said that after she'd taken care of old Bill the Dog and nursed him to passable health she figured she was ready to have a kid, which was when I came along. And again, Bill the Dog and I were never a picturesque Boy and Dog, and he often ate my socks and nipped at my toes, but I liked his brown and gray fur, and how it hung off him in layered patches, and he seemed to like my laugh and to enjoy chasing

me around the backyard, and after a few good laps (which did not take long) we'd collapse in the grass and I'd follow him to his water bowl and drink out of it as he did and pretend I was a dog like him.

Bill the Dog required either attention or a well-tied leash (the usual spot being a leg of the table on the front porch, then being sure to place three to four bricks on the tabletop) when outside. We weren't sure if he was entirely blind, but his eyes were clouded with cataracts, and he seemed to make his way around the house by following the warmth of the sunlight on the carpet. When night came, he'd curl up in a corner and did not like to be pet.

His blindness wasn't exactly the problem. Bill the Dog was vicious. Dad always said he was a Street Fightin' Dog, that he had probably become a fighter in early puphood while fending for himself, which rendered Bill the Dog loyal to us (entirely to Mom, less to Dad and me) and murderous toward the rest of the world. Our BEWARE OF DOG sign was genuine, and Bill the Dog had to be left in the basement whenever Dad had friends over. By day, before he lost his sight, he'd prowl from window to window and bark in warning at anything or anyone who so much as looked at our house. The barks sounded primal and purposeful, a true warning an animal can only develop undomesticated.

So when Bill the Dog was outside, he needed to be watched. Had the mailman not killed him that day, he may have done so the next. Any mistake in the process, whether it be a loose knot or a moment of distraction, could allow for Bill the Dog to take off in any direction looking for something to kill. And Bill the Dog was stupid, so if his target ended up being a car—as Dad said, sooner or later we were going to have a stupid dead dog on our hands, no matter what.

What happened was Mom had left early that morning going no one knew where. Dad had slept in the recliner the night before and was still there when I came downstairs for breakfast. I

fixed myself a bowl of cereal, and Bill the Dog sat next to me where the mid-morning sun came through the backdoor. Dad had slept in the recliner because Mom wouldn't let him in their room. I wasn't sure why. Each time he knocked or tried the handle she'd scream until he stopped. She'd thrown her curling iron at his head and met her target.

Dad walked into the kitchen and said hello and that he hadn't slept well, so us boys were going to have a lazy Tuesday. I liked having lazy weekdays with Dad. When he wasn't out driving, we got to spend as much time together as we wanted, which was usually all the time. Dad and I never really got tired of each other. He used to say he was lucky to have guys like me around.

Bill the Dog paced the kitchen and whined, so we knew he needed to go outside. Dad said if I let him out, he'd let him in. Then he walked back to the recliner and turned on the television and lit a cigarette.

I led Bill the Dog to the front door and hooked his leash to his collar, then he waited for me to tie his leash to the leg of the table outside. I'd thought I tied it tight enough, so I went inside and sat on the couch and watched television while Dad had already taken to sleeping again. There was an infomercial for a clay-like seal that could permanently mend anything broken. Even granite counter-tops, according to the man in the screen.

Bill the Dog was dead before either of us knew what had happened. I heard him bark, I heard the table on the porch scrape on the ground, and I looked out the window to see Bill the Dog, leash trailing behind him, running toward the mail truck. His blindness led him somewhat astray, but not enough to miss the truck or for the truck to miss him, and as the driver kerplunked from our neighbor's mailbox to ours, Bill the Dog assailed our home's attacker and lost, fighting

the good fight. Dad woke up for a moment and closed his eyes, and I waited for the mailman to exit his truck and to look at what had happened.

Bill the Dog returned to life for just a moment. His initial spot on the street had been shaded by a tree, and he lifted himself onto his legs and walked with clear purpose toward our sunlit front yard, where he curled into a ball on a patch of yellow grass and lay down his head, huffed, and closed his eyes.



At first Dad let Mom bend his arm nearly half way to defeat, again smiling at me and raising his eyebrows as if landing a good punch line. Then he'd send Mom's hand back to the starting point and play around with her: moving her hand at will to show his strength. Mom looked at him and never looked away. Dad wasn't sweating yet, but Mom was.

*Which Confederate General was shot by his own men, ultimately leading to his death after a bout with pneumonia?*

Dad's tricks were up. He couldn't move Mom's arm around wherever he wanted anymore, and Mom leaned in close to the table. Sweat ran down her neck and dripped from her hair. She liked comparing herself to Sigourney Weaver in *Alien*, though she'd killed the VHS by watching it so many times in the Panasonic, and she messed up her hair by never washing it or cutting it.

*Hooker.*

(Nervous laughter from the audience.)

"That's what you are," said Dad, and Mom didn't react. One time *Alien* popped out with its tape gnarled and stuck in the VCR's teeth. It remained ever since as one of the Panasonic's many ornaments beside half-empty bottles of Dr. Pepper and a spray can for cleaning Bill the

Dog's vomit—Vomi-Way: For Pets! Dad had said, "That's what you get when you rewind on Pause instead of Stop," and Mom was madder at that comment back then than she was now at this joke (I barely remember—her throwing Bill the Dog's toys at Dad, a couple shot glasses, maybe, and Dad cowering behind the kitchen table, which he'd flipped and held up as a shield, later on joining me in my bed and lying down next to me and covering us in his large shirt and saying, "Life's tough stuff, little buddy.") She looked right through him. I wish I could see him now, as he was then, and how young he must have looked—just twenty-seven.

*Jackson.*

"It's B," said Mom. Though hard to see from my vantage point (I liked sitting in the couch's sunken cushion), Mom had Dad's arm at a forty-five degree angle. Whereas Dad forced Mom's arm, Mom seemed to ease Dad's, like the tortoise against the hare. She'd made the arm-wrestle a battle of attrition, and Dad's energy at the start had cost him in the late-game.

"You don't know that," said Dad, but I believed her. Mom was good at *Millionaire*, and *Jeopardy!*, and really any trivia show. She always said shows like these proved you couldn't just read books to be smart. You had to watch a lot of television and listen to the radio and look at the comics in the newspaper, and stuff like that, which I now recognize as a common sentiment among people, that book smarts carry with them a certain façade of knowledge that supports an undeserved and abused superiority, but I also can't help but think of the times Mom had me reading labels for her and saying it was her eyesight, yet never wearing glasses and needing help with large print just as much as small, or how she called the Speed Limit sign the Timil's Deep, for fun but also in resignation of her struggle—her anger, too, which through the years after Dad was gone was always directed at me for what I could and could not read or do, or on the dogs when I managed to hide, like Thomas and Peter and Blue and Marilyn, all of them *the Dog*, half



of them left to die by Mom's hateful and purposeful negligence (as opposed to Dad's mistake), which she nurtured in her room during deep sleeps (leep seeds), covered in a strained, sickly sunlight made caramel by her thick smoke-stained blinds, never leaving her bed and becoming not *bad*—Mom was *good*, and Dad was *good*, I believe this—but tired and confused and trying, I think, to do her best.

And before *Millionaire* chimed that the contestant had picked correctly (and as Mom sent Dad closer and closer to the table's top, Dad's mustache seeming to have entire sweat glands of its own), I had already added Mom's predicted B to my forming pattern. I compared, quickly, to my piece of paper from the week before and thought I noticed something significant. That every fifth taping—I didn't know it was a *taping*, then—supported at least one BBCAD section, and could be tested first by a contestant correctly picking two Bs in a row, and, if the next answer was C, then the contestant could simply pick A and D for the following two, whether or not they had any idea what the question was about.

I started to understand things I had not noticed before.

Dad laughed and exhaled and both sounded nervous and happy and it was hard to tell the difference.

Mom smiled. Dad's pointed knuckles were an inch from the table. I know now that Mom was beautiful in that moment. Sons recognize this, when they are older, how beautiful their mothers were. She'd lose her dimples at some point. They wouldn't disappear, but they'd become deep, like wounds, and a split in her bottom lip from being consistently chapped would never pull itself together again. And even her hair, which was unkempt and not really like Sigourney Weaver's anymore, looked like it was her own, with little leaves and fingers of

branches that grew in whatever direction they wanted. She and Bill the Dog were two beautiful mutts. Dad too, maybe, and me.

But Dad stopped her. His arm twitched and his veins finally popped, though still not like Mom's, and, in lurches like the mail-truck, he worked Mom's arm back to their starting point, where he would eventually break her ninety-degree angle to eighty, to seventy, to sixty, and overpower her and slam her hand into the table, where her knuckles would make two permanent craters, then apologize profusely and insist he had not meant to do it so hard, but his arm had felt numb, practically, and he was so, so sorry about Bill the Dog, honestly. Really.

And I want to hold them there, their arms equal in the middle, their faces so young. Before Dad apologizes not just for Bill the Dog but for many things—for not fixing the back door, for not letting Mom teach him how to play solitaire, for accidentally shoving me into the kitchen counter the time he was tired and confused, giving me a black eye for my kindergarten picture day. Not that it would be enough for her.

What transpires after—a fatherless home filled with imposters, a six-vehicle crash we see on the news—begins here. They sit in their bubble and time warps around them and brings me in with it (*how slow and forever it felt*), and she waits for him to leave. And she looks to me and asks do I have anything to say about being the new man of the house, and I don't, I didn't, and she says are you sure you don't have anything to say about being the new man of the house, it's a big responsibility, you know. Then Dad saying come on, come on, leave him alone. Jesus.

You're freaking us all out. And Dad standing and stretching and

*Both a measure of time and value, the nuclear physical term "half-life" best describes what?*

cracking open his beer and asking for a best of three, and punching her (*lightly*) on the shoulder, and Mom standing up and saying no, no, no, in the exact same way she'd whisper to my next dad, whom I was instructed then forced to call as such, when he tickled her. And the one after him when he incorrectly explained the ruling of an in-field fly, or any of the

*Time it takes for prematurely bonded isotopes to die*

fathers that followed. And I called all of them Dad until after a writing assignment in the third grade my teacher became alarmed at the amount of

*Lethal radioactivity in an asexual organism*

fathers I'd had in such a short time, and after a conference with my mother I never called any of them Dad again, and still remembered only one as the first, and the truest, but after appeasing Mom he'd leave and die somewhere, a crash on the road that also killed

*The rate of decay of a family of bonded isotopes*

*(see you around little buddy)*

a woman on a motorcycle, though I would know none of this until I was ten years old. And finally, me, seemingly crawling from the sunken cushion and back toward the surface of earth,

*[Unintelligible]*

deciding to use my brain and my mouth to make letters into words and force them into sounds, feeling my tongue on my teeth, trying to concoct

*Yes, I left the animal to die*

the perfect lie that maybe it had been me who opened the screen door and let the mutt into the yard, and I'd even unhooked his leash with a fanged grin, and my father,

*I filled Dad's morning coffee with gin, as a prank, because of something I'd seen on television, because*

standing, looking to me for the final time, and my mother, considering what I might say and how it could save him, her eyes,

*I was the child who did not understand who left the time it takes for an isotope's radioactivity animal to die because Mom will kill us where we stand*

which could not read either words or the expression on my face, asking me the question that could save our lives,

*Mom wants to kill us*

but I did not know the answer.

## ANGELS

Weird day at work. Serving at Maria's, couple walked up to me, looked like they'd been crying, gave me one hundred dollars. Five twenties. Tip, donation, however you want to think about it. Said they'd been praying about it. Said they'd seen me working hard and God said so about it. So I took it and they cried and I cried.

Went home later and Thom was home. Had just gotten back together. Me, Thom, and little Norm watched the news. Thom brought me a beer and him a beer. I brought me a beer and Thom a beer. After news we had little Norm toss all our beers off the balcony into the dumpster. Watch the cactus, I said. Plinks like peeing in paint buckets. Little Norm missed half like usual. I had to work at the bar at six, so I drove away. Little Norm said bye-bye mommy. We were whiter than depressed smart girl pills but he called me mamá. He liked playing basketball with neighbors who were brown. Never knew were they Mexican or what. Thom always said you know by which pocket they go for and I'd hit him in the arm and say Thom stop. He'd say lighten up big n' bad. I'd blush when I didn't want.

Hard to believe about the money. Couple must have been there before. I knew regulars like finger nail grooves. Wondered how much they'd seen me cry and cuss. I cried and cussed a lot at Maria's. Food was shit but everyone loved it. Never got that. The couple said they'd prayed and prayed and God said so about it, so the hundred was mine. They said they'd seen me working and trying my best. The hundred was mine. They put their hands on my shoulders. Never got that.

What is prayer anyway.

Later at bar. Showed up and had a shot of tequila with Carmen. Young writer student from college showed up too. Was in love with me. He said guess what I said what. He said I just won three thousand dollars. I greeted a regular I called Hippie Dippie. Hippie Dippie's hair was used floss. Same color too. Student was Harv but at the bar I called him Dez. Joke. We had inside jokes like fish have water.

Served some regulars. Flirted with the cook. He crouched low and touched me behind my knees. Moved arms up. Escalators. I liked it but was afraid he'd find my bills in my back pocket. I said that's mine. He said what, this. I said oh you. We joked like that and I always liked him. Was a good guy. Made things fun when they weren't. Had many girlfriends.

Couple days before this Thom showed up at my place while little Norm watched TV. I set up the VCR wrong all the time. Little Norm got half his programs and half of stuff he didn't want. Poor kid. Never saw the beginnings. Never saw the ends. Saw the wrong beginnings and ends. All wrong. Never complained. Maybe he should've complained. Got to complain sometimes. Thom said how much flowers cost in this town. I said what. He said it's the thought that counts and kissed me. Blushed when I didn't want.

Back at the wood. Getting tired only forty-five minutes in, where are you God I thought. Dez said won three thousand dollars let's get the hell outta of here. I laughed. Dez was also funny. Made me laugh. Made things fun when they weren't. But Dez loved me. Only because he wanted to. He called me nicknames like Pardner and Killer. I laughed. That's what he wanted. Maybe once I kissed him, later.

Where would we go Dez I said.

The couple was ugly. Both of them ugly. Ugly people believe in God. People with unorganized filing cabinet teeth. I don't know how old earth is. I don't think women fucked it up.

Ugly people believe in God because they believe in people. They hate people because they believe in God. The hundred was mine. They prayed to God and God said so about it. The couple looked sick. Like they both had cancer. Mom died from cancer with a baseball history book in her hand. Said she wanted something to hold and Dad grabbed the book he loved most. All but killed himself years later, saying why didn't I grab one of hers. That one always makes my heart look over the edge. That one always makes my heart wanna throw up. I love you Dad. I love you Mom.

Dez said we could go anywhere. Thom said please just come on and let me in, and little Norm said Daddy, and I cussed the first time in a while at home. No blood between Thom and little Norm. I said Dez what about your classes. I said Thom Jesus Christ. I got Dez another drink. I loved Thom because of little Norm. His eyes were polite. Only polite thing. Never got shiny when drunk. Never thought he knew what I wanted.

Dez said where's your hitchhiking spirit Killer. I said travelling together isn't hitchhiking.

What had God told the couple. I will always wonder. The couple was so ugly. Looked like they never fucked or kissed or anything fun. Man, balding like old blanket. Woman, filmy and pale but nice clothes. How often had they seen me. Maybe I never had their table. Maybe angels. Little Norm would think, Angels, mamá.

Dez said we could find a place somewhere. I said what can we do with three thousand. He said you can kill yourself with three thousand. I laughed. You can kill yourself with nothing.

Thom liked me because—older, needed control. Men don't know what women know. Almost everything. Imagine that. Suckers. Get sick of shit sometimes.

First two drinks for Dez, on the house. Dez liked to talk. Said something to me every time I passed. Big mouth. I did like him so much. Dez six drinks in. I made them weak and he knew. Carmen and I, tequila. Carmen and I and Cheyenne, clocking in, tequila. I said Dez don't you leave yet. Dez looking in his drink like there was sex in there. Mouth curled. Some kind of smile young men do. Eyes slick like water in dreams. Dez was dreams. Stood up to leave and said three thousand and I hated him. I said Dez come on. I'm pouring the drinks come on Dez. Wanted to show me he wasn't a child. Wrong. Showed me he was. Even he was like them and he knew me best. Made me blush and liked it. I did. Three thousand. Next time around when God lets us go again. Say you have nothing. Say you have nothing.

Dez left. Cook in the back said when you get off. I said what. He said how you get off. I said nice try and we laughed. He turned his back. Made food. Made things fun when they weren't. Went out to the wood. Round of shots for the girls and me. Round of shots for the girls and me. Regulars said you girls watch it now. We said fuck you. Round of shots for the girls and me. Thom on the phone said when you get off. Soon. Round of shots for the girls and me. We bumped into each other. Said hey where you goin. Grabbed each other. Hey where you goin. I'm going to the ball said Carmen. I'm a princess. Me too I said. Cheyenne said Benderella and round of shots for the girls and me. My hundred was gone. Thank you God.

We'll get better Thom said, not just later that day but all the time. Men want to fix. I wanted to live. Not young or free. Dez wanted no worries. Dez wanted me. Thom left again. And again. Not how you think. Didn't need him. Allowed him. It was me. I gave chances. Couple touched my shoulders. We have seen you working so hard and prayed about it. God told us you need this. I cried they cried God said you're welcome. I cried by the dying cactus. Round of



shots for the girls. I liked crying. River kisses on my cheeks, warm. Little Norm said Angels, mamí. You don't even know, kid. Angels. Watch it kid I'll knock you out. Angels, mamí.

## AMBER

Outside Speedy's, just right of the packaged ice and snuggled to the side of the building, there was a cage with a hand-painted sign that read, "BEHOLD THE DEVILS DOG." The paint was red, and the squiggly letters dripped bloody hell-snot. The cage was about six feet tall, eight wide, and five deep; its bars were crossed with rungs, which were rusty at the intersections, and across its top lay a plastic, amber sunscreen. Sal "Speedy Sal" Nolan liked to keep roadside attractions in there. This was back when people weren't as ill-disposed to seeing animals in cages, when I was still young and vindictive and rode motorcycles, and when children were just as impossible to find once lost, but much more likely to go missing.

It was September 15<sup>th</sup> in 1994. I'm always the one to remember the date because it was my twenty-third birthday. I hadn't even wanted to confront Speedy Sal that day because we had been at each other's throats since my sister died, but a mail truck ran me off the road while I was on the way to my mother's house. The truck swerved into the left lane as if to pass, then swerved back and sped up like it was going to rear-end me. There was no shoulder, so I cut it into Speedy's and skidded down the short decline to the gravel lot. The mail truck came to a stop and I saw there were two mailmen inside, not in uniform but wearing black tank tops. They drove off.

This was the third time I'd been harassed by the same truck—I remember that, too. I had brought it up the night before to my mother on the phone. "Hey, before you go, what's up with these jackass mailmen lately?" She tsk'd and told me it was in my head, that I was always reckless on my bikes, and that I should respect letter carriers because without them we could not send away for catalogs of books from faraway stores.

In any event, I was at Speedy's whether I liked it or not. I saw a mother and a son walking near the cage as I hung my helmet on my handlebars. The boy slipped something into the cage while his mother wasn't looking. His mother dragged him by his wrist (I thought they had been holding hands) and, as soon as they entered Speedy's, said, "Restroom, please? It's *apparently* urgent." I could hear her because the front door was propped open by a cinder block. Speedy Sal did this from time to time when the AC was out.

I don't remember when I learned their names, but I know them now: Sadie and Gus. Sadie was nineteen, and Gus was five. In different ways, both of them were too young. I remember watching Sadie look at Speedy Sal. Her lip curled upward at one end, her left eyebrow hooked high like an expectant actress.

My name is Christina, but back then I went by Chris.

I tuned out Sadie when she began to yell, and I walked up to the cage. There was a raccoon inside. He wrapped the eyelash fingers of his little paws around the bars and looked up at me. He wore a metal collar with a chain leash. The chain was fastened to a ring that poked out from a mound of cement. The kid had slipped him a powdered brownie. Half of it was on the ground, crumbled into a tan powder, and the other half was gone, its remnants stuck to the devil's dog: a spot of white on his nose. The raccoon looked at me and pulled at his collar to see if he were still a prisoner. He had two bumps on his head that looked like pitiful horns. None of this was anything new to me. I'd seen everything in the cage. A duck with one wing that stretched across its back like a neck-knotted tennis sweater. ONE WINGED PREHISTORIC DUCK. A cat with three eyes—its third sitting on the top of its shaved head. ALIEN CAT?! SEE FOR YOURSELF. Which isn't to say Speedy Sal only had a fixation on animals with the incorrect number of somethings. He had once presented a package of cubic eggs. SQUARE

EGGS—WHAT WILL HATCH. A brown bear cub that paced under the sun and refused to grow. BEAR.

I walked past the cage (the raccoon skittering alongside me like a beggar until he met the cage's end) and entered Speedy's. Sadie leaned over the counter and pointed at Speedy Sal, her other hand busy lighting a cigarette and her lips moving with an awkward chewing motion as she both averted her head down to the lighter and gave Speedy Sal a piece of her mind. "Where do you get off asking me about my period?" she said. Gus scurried to the unisex bathroom, which was also a janitor's closet that had both a ladder to the top of Speedy's and a door to the back. Alongside the back of Speedy's there was a dumpster, a mailbox in the shape of a swan, and a cigarette tower that around its pregnant bottom said: *Empty when full*.

Knowing Speedy Sal, it was not hard to imagine how the conversation had gone downhill in record-time: a young woman walked in, agitated, needing something. Sal could never keep his mouth shut. He, like his stupid little gas station, was crusty and wasteful and had almost nothing to offer. Sadie was demanding that he sell her alcohol, I think she wanted a six-pack of Hamm's, and Sal said, "Now I don't think you need that with you being hissy as soon as you get in here," to which Sadie said, "I'm a paying customer and I don't want to deal with this bullshit right now."

The only humor in this story is how I completely missed the escalation of their conversation. They hated each other more quickly than I'd ever seen any two people hate each other. In young Sadie's defense, Gus had been requesting all day long that they get off at almost every exit because he had to pee, which he always did, but then he would need to pee again and again and again. (Sadie would inform me this later, as we sat defeated and exhausted on her bumper.) Maybe another piece of humor was me, standing behind Sadie, Speedy Sal not having

noticed me yet, and Sadie saying, “It’s not my fault the kid’s bladder is like a standpipe of piss.” Both Speedy Sal and I laughed, and that’s when he saw me.

My original intention, whenever I would have gotten around to it, had been to take him by surprise. I wanted to show up early and demand he close the store for the day. I wanted us to go to his house, and I wanted to collect my sister’s things. He had been holding on to them for almost a year. He had started selling them. They had been married, and at the time I didn’t understand that he was entitled to keep everything she had ever touched, if he wished. My only leverage was that I did not believe he had ever loved my sister, which was something he never commented on. “This conversation is over,” Sal would say.

I hated him. I hated him. I hated him. His thin eyebrows like lazily smeared ash. His pale lips, gleaming like sweaty liver. His spider leg facial hair.

But his perfect teeth. Even I couldn’t hate his perfect teeth.

My sister’s death was gruesome. When people in your family die gruesome deaths, it never becomes normal—to talk about, to think about, to explain. She was killed somewhere on I-44, on her Harley, drunk as a skunk (“drunk as a skunk” being Sal’s words, likely chosen because at the time he claimed to have a skunk that could spray a scent sweeter than perfume, and she must have called him from the road, at some point, her voice like syrup through the phone). Someone she had run into at a rest stop, who was stopped in the traffic her crash caused, claimed he’d been behind her at a vending machine and had noticed that her nostrils were “lined with cocaine” so heavily that they looked like “salt-rimmed tequila glasses.” She’d slipped under a semi-truck somehow. I’d been just a few miles behind. She was heading to Saint Louis to pick up an antique lamp for Sal. I was coming along for fun. We tried to guess which exits the other

would be at. I suppose where I stopped to smoke, she stopped to really cut loose. I never saw her body.

At a certain point I decided I would not talk about it anymore.



These days I tend bar at a place called Tell Someone. My boss thinks the name Tell Someone is pretty funny. During my interview, every time she said the name, it sounded like she was *suggesting* it, nudging it toward me as if to make sure I understood the joke. “So obviously I’d like you here, at *Tell Someone*, given your experience.” My experience was New Orleans and New York. I live now in New Athens, a small village in Illinois.

I have half-listened to different pieces of Tell Someone’s origin story. The ending goes like this, “And so, we *had* to call it Tell Someone.” The beginning goes like this, “Well, it’s sort of silly...”

There are two college students who drink here every day during the winter. They are as consistent as the drunken Santa statue that watches drinkers from its cold corner; as “Seven Crazy Nights,” our holiday drink that’s really just a shitty Seven & Seven with peppermint simple syrup; as Sadie’s Christmas Eve phone calls that detail things she thinks she’s seen, which I am expecting any day now.

At some point, the students became chummy with my boss, so the three of them like to sit at a little table and talk. I once heard my boss complain about me to them. She said, “Look. I’m only going to hire a chick bartender if she meets one of two things. She’s either hot, or she’s talented. And she” (motioning to me subtly, but not enough) “is lucky she’s been around the block.”

One night I heard my boss talking about one of her daughter's friends. She said this girl, another college student who I think was named Casey, had been coming home to Saint Louis, taking 44 from Tulsa. She'd been nervous because a state trooper tailed her for most of her drive, sometimes fading back and out of sight, then approaching again. More concerned with the state trooper, she had not noticed a white van passing her from time to time and, for just a few seconds, probably, coasting even with her until either speeding ahead or falling back. Eventually the van followed Casey for about ten miles, or so she'd be told later. Casey did not notice anything out of the ordinary, and she figured she would lose the state trooper and pull off at the next exit with a Starbucks, which she did.

In the parking lot of the Starbucks, Casey had not even left her car before the state trooper and two more patrol cars popped on their lights and surrounded the van, which had parked next to her. An officer knocked on Casey's window and asked if she would exit her vehicle and come with him to a safer distance. She complied.

Eventually the patrolmen coerced two men out of the van. At this point details blur because I had to pour a line of shots for some floor workers, but the gist of the situation is that these guys had been on the radar for a while. They were human traffickers, and they drove around with technology not dissimilar to police cars. They took pictures of young women driving on interstates, uploaded them into their computer, and sold them to interested parties. Not the photographs. They preemptively sold *women*, sometimes to more than one man, accepting any and all offers. Apparently blurry pictures of Casey had already attracted four enthusiastic buyers. My boss and the students shook their heads and sipped their drinks, all three of them believing and disbelieving the horror. All the men in the van would have needed was Casey in the right

spot, and away she would have went. One of the students said, “I could never have a daughter,” and my boss nodded and left the table.

Stories like this are becoming more and more common, and I think most of them ride the thin urban-legend-line. I believe the men would have run Casey off the road, kidnapped her, and sold her. I believe they would have forced heroin upon Casey during her first year of slavery, would have nurtured a crooked dependence to keep her thirsty and her bones shriveled-feeling and goose-fleshy, and through this they’d keep her for life, which would be short and dark and confusing. I believe they probably had hundreds of pictures of women in their computer. Maybe four men had wanted her, maybe one, maybe none. I don’t believe my boss, who told the story with enthusiasm. I think she must have read this somewhere on the internet.

I would not be surprised if, one night, I awoke to red and blue lights surrounding my neighbor’s house where, perhaps, in the basement, lived some chained up, skinny girl. The more you listen and the more you read, you learn this happens everywhere. Not just in countries that you probably imagine to be mostly covered in orange dirt, and not just at the island stops on cruises where ship-workers encourage you to only spend your time in popular tourist locations. Two blocks from my house, here in New Athens, a tavern called Coyote’s closed down barely a year ago. The owner’s wife, who was thought to be missing, had been found bound and gagged behind a secret door.

You can choose not to believe me, but I shit you not: just like in cartoons, the door was a phony bookshelf that spun if pushed just right.



Speedy’s was too outwardly bland (sans cage) and much too close to a nicer-looking Shell Station to be considered a worthwhile stop and was for most of its life passed over despite



Speedy Sal's steady flow of new cage inhabitants. There were a solid five years in the late 70s into the early 80s when it was a semi-popular spot for people who found themselves both bored on 44 and in no particular rush. Speedy's had two gas pumps and sold cigarettes (and occasionally alcohol) to minors. The building was brick, painted white, except for its baby blue top that had lawn chairs lined end-to-end. If you wanted, you could go up there and have a cigarette and take in the view: gravel lot; Shell Station across the road; Speedy Sal's motorcycle with a purple heart on the gas tank (a Harley that had been my sister's—not the one on which she'd disappeared); a brown creek that fed into something, streaked with translucent, elongated gashes that rippled and moved with the robotic elegance of a pinsetter's confident repetitions, and when the sun touched them shone silver and blinding; the tree-lined interstate with billboards like acne, some of them reminding drivers there was still enough time to TURN BACK and take a detour to wherever.

I liked to stand up on top of Speedy's and look at the patches of road between cars. When I'd seen enough, I'd get on my bike and join the road and unfocus my eyes. It would start to look like the cars around me didn't move at all, and the road just pulled us along. The vehicles merging into an exit looked like a pinball going down the wrong chute. I liked the trees that grew bent toward the billboards, and how they stretched south saying quiet goodbyes to Missouri.

Maybe, if I'd wanted to smoke a cigarette on the roof to see the things I liked to see, if I had knocked on the bathroom door to check on little Gus, things would have played out differently. But I didn't, and Speedy Sal finally surrendered the six-pack to Sadie and she dug into her purse for cash. Words passed between them, then Sadie turned to look at me. Speedy Sal extended his neck upward and looked at me too—his shrunken gopher face positing: *why are you here?*

“Got a five?” Sadie said. She stamped out her cigarette on the counter.

I shrugged and dug into my pockets. I had a ten.

“Take this and tell Speedy to add a pack of Camels,” I said. Speedy Sal hated being called just Speedy. A small regret I’ll take to my grave is that I never asked my sister more about their sex life.

Sadie picked up my cigarettes and her six-pack. My sister had drunk Hamm’s, too, mostly as a way to spite Speedy Sal who called the brand “sugary piss water.”

“Wanna smoke? Think the kid’s gonna be a while,” she said. Speedy Sal looked at me then looked away. I wasn’t sure if I had it in me to talk to him, so I went outside with Sadie. Speedy Sal shuffled around some cigarette packs and muttered something about the mail being late.

She hit my pack against the palm of her hand three times, opened it, and took out two cigarettes. She handed me one, lit it; she stuck one at the corner of her lip, lit it. She was tired. “Handling that pack like you own it,” I said.

“Sorry. Long day. Nice to—” she trailed off and looked at a pump where a guy was filling his pick-up. The back was loaded with fishing gear. She handed me the pack. “Nice to move at my own pace sometimes.”

“Travelling with a kid’s gotta be nuts.” I watched the fisherman look to the left, to the right, to the left.

“It’s just I had him so young.”

“Sure.”

“No idea why he has to pee so goddam much.”

“Kids are crazy.”

“I don’t know who his father is.”

“Huh.”

“He better be going number two in there.”

We smoked and watched the fisherman. I wondered if all mothers, all parents, had to use language like “number two.” I heard the rattle of a chain and saw the raccoon looking at us from his cell. He looked so real and human in there, like he wanted something decent for once.

“It’s weird. All day I’ve felt like he’s been lying to me,” said Sadie. She glanced at Sal in the window.

“Your kid?” I thought back to the secret brownie he’d slipped to the raccoon.

“Yeah. Don’t know why. It’s just I wonder if this stopping at every gas station is some kind of sick prank. Kids pull pranks, you know. I’ve always heard kids who lie become smart.”

“I made up shit all the time as a kid,” I said, which was true. “When I was four, my sister’s dog ran away. Never saw it again—totally disappeared. It was her fault. She always let it run around without a leash or collar or anything. But I told my parents it got killed. That someone ran it down in the street. A gruesome kind of thing.”

“Why?”

“Not sure. I think I just thought it was funny. Didn’t really want her getting in any trouble over losing it, either.”

“Did you end up pretty smart?” She was a mother, but she asked questions like a child.

“I never finished high school.”

“How about your sister? Was she smart?”

“She’s gone now.”

I noticed we had smoked quickly and that Sadie wasn't sure what to say to me. I lit cigarettes for both of us and walked Sadie over to the cage. The sun was beating down on the amber sunscreen, but the raccoon looked fine, shaded in a honey glow.

"He keep animals out here all the time?" Sadie asked.

"Sort of gets his rocks off," I said, recalling an hourglass-shaped snapping turtle Sal had named Junior.

"What do you think his name is?"

"Sal?"

"No, this little guy."

"Does the devil have a dog in the bible?"

"My mother would know."

"So would mine."

The sad thing about the raccoon was he had figured out the cage. I could tell. Raccoons are smart. This little one, pacing like both a thinker and a hunched, heartbroken insomniac, knew how to escape. He must have identified that Speedy Sal kept his keys on one of his front belt loops; he eyed everyone's waists as they passed by and practiced reaching out and grabbing. He knew certain cross-sections of bars were larger than others—some almost large enough for him to stick his head through. He knew how to be cute. He knew how to encourage offerings. He reached out to my feet and picked up a cigarette butt and ate it.

"His name's Houdini," I decided. The black around Houdini's eyes was both watchful and weary. His hand gripped the bars again. His tiny, inkblot feet were one step away from tangling themselves in the chain. Something told me that was on purpose.

“No animal’s smart enough to get out of there,” Sadie said. She looked like she could be in middle school. I looked at her legs to make sure they weren’t stilts. She wore a simple, blue sundress. It looked like it was too tight. She had a speck of lipstick on her nose but I didn’t know how to tell her.

“So hey, your son smart enough to get out of that bathroom or what? You should see the view from the roof.”

Sadie looked at me like I’d called her son an invalid, then smiled, shook her head, and blew her smoke out quickly. She smiled at me like a kid sister and said she should check on him by now. Maybe he needed help with, you know.

I didn’t say bye. I was just happy to have gotten through a conversation with a single mom that didn’t involve the phrase, “Girls gotta look out for each other.” Houdini reached out to my shoes. He rubbed his horns. I heard Sadie’s shoes clopping, and Sal saying something. The sound of a mail slot squeaking shut.

I should have noticed, I should have noticed, but now I remember: pieces and sounds— Sadie, knocking on the door, saying *honey are you okay in there?* The cigarettes had calmed her down. Houdini grabbed at my belt. And *honey are you okay in there?* Speedy Sal tapping his finger on the counter, through the window I could see him (but I didn’t notice, and now I remember) tapping while Sadie pulled on the handle and *hey do you have a key to do this door or what* she said, or what. And Sal saying *of course of course* and he was so eager and helpful and nice, and even I wanted to kiss his white teeth sometimes, and so helpful and *let’s see just which one of these...* the keys jingling. And had he not said *let’s check on the little man, huh* I would have always suspected him, but I looked through the window and not at the reflection, and Sadie *Gus?* and Sal *he mighta crawled up this ladder—* and *why do you have a ladder in here when*

*there could be kids in here you— I could still hear them because the AC was out and I had not even talked with Sal yet. I watched them through the window and let my cigarette butts fall to Houdini who ate them. I looked through the window not at it, and had I paid attention I might have seen it's just the backdoor to the building, he might have run— something pulling away run where you asshole run to the fucking interstate are you kidding me you let my son— a truck pulling away and down the side roads that if he falls off the roof or runs into the interstate I'm going to, I'm gonna and pulling away fast If he's on that roof I swear to god and easing on the curves but also slowing, waiting for a place to turn and disappear in a calm, clever hurry If he ran into the road like it had something to deliver.*



I ended up in New Athens by following a farm road off the interstate and driving until I found a small place away from noise. I don't think I've started my car since. I haven't owned a motorcycle since 1999. I walk to the grocery store, to Tell Someone, to church. I walk everywhere. There is no difference between side and main roads, really.

Sadie always calls on Christmas Eve. We keep each other updated on our addresses, phone numbers, and emails, in case anything changes. I like to answer the phone with, "So, what do you know?" And I know what this triggers. I stay silent while Sadie tells me what she thinks she's seen. Our one-sided phone calls aren't dissimilar to my own interactions with my boss, who always struts into Tell Someone saying, "Well, whaddya know, Chris?" And I usually say, "Nothin'."

I'm not full of stories.

One thing I know is 19 years after Gus's disappearance, Sadie claimed to have seen him for the first time. She had been shopping for groceries, for wine, and saw a man standing on the

other end of the aisle. She said she couldn't explain how she knew, but she knew, and they walked toward each other. She said he had come to look like his father, and she finally knew who it was, and that he also looked like her, and that he walked like an athlete.

Someone told me once the weird thing about having children is that they know you for their entire lives. Any parent has a life, a past life, where there are no children at all. There are distinct divides.

Sadie, 38 years old at the first sighting of the grown Gus, had three divides: her first childless 14 years; her next 5 years with Gus; her next 19 years, an entire additional half, another whole life, without him. Whether you cut Sadie into halves or thirds, there's an expanse of parental orphanness.

Sadie revised this story two years later, as I sat next to my little Christmas tree. It was the grocery store again. Sadie said Gus put his hand on the front of her cart and told her to stay up tonight. Watch the late shows. He'd be around, and they could talk. He then told her to take it easy on the boxed food and spend more time on the sides of the grocery store, where the real things were. Then he walked away. Sadie wheeled her cart straight out of the store, and when the alarms rang she kept walking, and when the employees chased after her she let go of the handlebar and the cart rolled away, caught the angle of a decline in the parking lot, and toppled over. She sat in her car and locked the door.

Sadie stayed up that night as Gus had said to. She sat with her back against her headboard and waited. She watched energetic comedians on late night shows. Gus knocked on her door at midnight.

She said he refused to come in. Gus told his mother he was doing okay, that she couldn't or shouldn't call the police, and he didn't know why he was there or what he was doing but he

needed her to know he was fine. Sadie claimed that a van was parked in the street, and she could not identify any features of the man at the wheel. He was a black outline. She noted Gus's hair appeared to be bleached.

(Another version of Sadie's story involves Gus appearing in her kitchen outright—sopping wet from a storm outside. He tells her all the same things, but this time there is a man outside the window, the black-outlined man from the van, perhaps, and he says and does nothing.)

Sadie never related to me anything else that might have been said between them, though just days ago, on an oddly warm Christmas Eve, Sadie called me to report the finding of six photographs. She said she found them in her mailbox. One of them was Gus as a boy, lying in a dirty bed, looking into the camera like a confused model. The next showed an older Gus, a malnourished teenager, wearing athletic shorts with no shirt on and looking tired, wearing eyeliner, maybe, but the photo and room was full of shadows. A third showed Gus as he appeared to her in the grocery store. He was smoking a cigarette. A blanket covered him from the waist down. Sadie said he looked doped up.

She turned all of the pictures into the police and has yet to relate the content of the other three photographs to me.

At this point, I suppose I half-believe her. If you dig around on the internet you can find stories like this. They are a dime a dozen. Children, usually girls, but sometimes boys, go missing, and years later their parents are either emailed or mailed photographs of their children dressed like prostitutes. Often, the senders and takers of these pictures will include the new names their children have adopted. Sometimes, the senders and takers of these pictures will include what their children do, and supposedly enjoy doing.



One exceptionally hideous case is of a girl who went missing on an interstate after she crashed her car. Her father is on record saying something along the lines of, “Some scumbag must have found her,” or something like that. Every year on the anniversary of her disappearance, a YouTube channel with ScumBag in its username uploads a video of a man looking into a webcam, laughing. It’s a croaking laugh. He’s bald and wears glasses, and he’s seated in the sort of cinderblock-walled, evil basement we all imagine guys like this hang out in. The laugh becomes a yell, then a satisfied growl. Then he smiles the type of smile that makes you look behind you, then it’s over.

This is true. You can watch these videos online.

I am sure Sadie saw Gus, or someone she thought was Gus, at some point. I don’t know if he went to her house. I don’t know if there was a van or a man inside. I’ll give her the benefit of the doubt as far as recognition goes—she is his mother, and even though she hasn’t seen him since the day he disappeared, I’ll concede that she can recognize him as a twenty-something male. I think she stays awake most nights and sees her son’s face and child limbs in the shadows of her blue-lit bedroom. I won’t blame her for her yearly revisions of Gus sightings—my own stories have changed over time. I’ve just recently remembered that Sal’s teeth have been tobacco-stained since I first met him, and my memory of them being white is false. Like my memory of seeing my sister’s head under an eighteen-wheeler. Like my memory of Gus screaming.

I thought of Gus one night when I heard an animal die inside Tell Someone. Though it wasn’t an animal. Ten folks lined the bar, and ten more were scattered through the tables, and their phones and mine were resting in front of us, and all at once our devices screamed a bloody

siren, and for a second all of us panicked. We checked our screens. AMBER ALERT. We read the vehicle. WHITE SEDAN. We looked out to parking lot. We looked back to our drinks.

I think of my sister when my phone does this—screams to me that someone has disappeared. She shares her name with the warning. I think of Gus, too, and Sadie, and how things might have gone differently for them. I think of all of us walking around, yelling Gus's name. I think of how I had not realized summer was ending until the sun had begun to set and project upon us its dull fire.

I remember the police showing up and Sal shaking their hands, and Sal reaching for his keys out of habit as they walked to the front door, and Sal realizing his keys were gone. "Luckily I've got this here cinderblock, ha," said Sal, nervous around authority. He and the officers looked around the store, to be sure of something. I've never suspected Sal, but I've never forgotten us driving to the grocery store one day to get things for my mother, and a mail truck passing by, and Sal saying, "Jesus, I could go my whole life without ever seeing another one of those things." At the time I had assumed he was referencing another Shell Station that had popped up.

(I didn't notice, but now I remember.)

From the roof of Speedy's, I watched Sadie climb to the top of a chain-link fence that separated Speedy's from the trees, and she gazed to the highway, and she and I both saw the mail truck that may have had him. She called, *Gus!* and I looked where she did, and I saw it far away: a white box on wheels full of things that needed to be taken somewhere. Sadie leaned over the fence and the wind caught her dress and we all looked away as the backs of her upper thighs lit up, golden.

I heard a commotion in the store. I ran to the front of the roof and looked down, the amber sunscreen of the cage popped open and upward. Sal and the officers ran outside, and the

officers were almost laughing themselves to the ground. Little Houdini soared across the parking lot with Sal's keys grasped in his smart, mascara paws. Then I saw another mail truck: it sped by as Houdini found his freedom on the road—on its side the blue, sonic eagle—and had Houdini not taken a moment to look around and breathe he would have been hit and smeared along the scorching black of the acceleration ramp. The truck picked up speed and left our sight. Was there a boy inside?

(I didn't notice, but now I remember.)

I stood up there for so long as a useless lookout. There was Sadie, sitting in the gravel of the backlot, and the fisherman, caught up in something he hadn't expected. There was Sal, and the cops, and all of us sometimes yelling *Gus!* There was the breeze, and summer ending, and cicadas calling to us in drawn, ugly unison as if in some collective and final warning. There was 44 and the people on it and their racket crying east to west. You could flip a coin and pick a direction, and either way you'd end up wrong.

## ONE GUY SAYS TO THE OTHER

Remember: none of the men has paid any attention to the overcast sky, so when the downpour begins they find themselves scattered, moseying about the construction site in an almost-time-for-lunch lackadaise. There is a man near a row of concrete pipes, and another leaning against a wobbly section of chain-link fence, and a third sitting beside a trench, humming a song, and letting one foot dangle over the edge. And when the rain comes it comes cold and hard like frozen dimes and sends the first two men running for shelter, and the third man notices before anything else that the Earth is made of dirt, and the rain will muddy all of this, and within seconds the trench's mouth is already frowning itself into a closure.

The man nearest the pipes, Tharon, picks one and crawls inside. He has taken to calling the pipes coffins because they will end up in the ground, in the trench, fortifying a water main. The concrete pipes are cubic, not cylindrical, and lined in a perfect row: a quintupled stretch of vertebrae that Card, the second man to squeeze inside the pipe, calls a spine. (See: this is why the trio calls themselves spinal surgeons, and why they consider their task not the fortification of a water main but some kind of reconstructive surgery, and why, when Tharon needs a cigarette from Card, he holds out his hand while looking down at an invisible operating table and says, *Scalpel*, in the focused deadpan of a TV doctor.) Card has brought with him a paper bag, rescued from the Bobcat's tread, and his cigarettes. He lights one now.

The last man, Stanley, is some distance away. The rain covers him in long, guillotine-blade sheets, and he seems to not understand what is happening until finally he shakes his head, spots his fellows in the pipe, and hobble-runs to them and squeezes inside. His legs barely fit. He wears tennis shoes that in internal monologue only he calls his tennies.

The three men squat inside the pipe, cramped, trying not to adjust their postures too much. Card and Tharon balance on the balls of their feet, while Stanley rests on his heels. They all accept that tomorrow they'll have to dig a new trench, because even though they can't see it, they hear its throat filling: water rushing past its lips, a deep gargle. No one speaks. The downpour clops the roof of the pipe like a million little stampedes. Everything washes away into rainstatic.

Eventually Tharon and Card become antsy. Stanley, who is known to malingering and to talk about things no one is really interested in, starts talking about things no one is really interested in—something like so as he was saying earlier, about the server getting his order wrong... and Stanley is also soaked, more than the others (remember: he joined the pipe last), and keeps shaking his hair around in an attempt to dry off. At some point, Stanley's dead-end story has turned into a joke: "So there are these two guys in a ski lodge. Or, no. Three guys."

Card cuts off Stanley, flicks his cigarette, says, "It's a real bitch, this rain." And the men sit and wait while Stanley starts to hum a ditty. Thunder grumbles somewhere far away in the sky's upset tummy.

Next, the men play telephone. Tharon suggests it. Card wants to get away from Stanley's humming and so obliges and decides to move two pipes down, with Stanley then inhabiting the pipe in between.

As he leaves, Card notices the ground sucks at the soles of his shoes, and the rain, having abandoned any kind of angled trajectory, falls straight into the ground so hard that the droplets hit with fleshy slaps, heading in muddy, snaking shoestring rivers toward the trench, which appears to have not collapsed but grown. Determined little rainfingers swarm Card's boots and pull at him in vain. For a second, he has a light-footed sense of collapse, of everything folding

inward toward the trench and suctioning down into a compressed, suffocating grave. He lifts his feet higher when he takes steps and settles into his new pipe home. Lights another cigarette.

The men do not always get along, but they are capable of having fun together. They are all in the right line of work, all think with their hands, all can and have invented on the spot different ways to pass the time. For example, Card's shovel-vaulting challenge, back and forth across the trench; Tharon's simple but effective shell game, using hardhats and acorns; Stanley sometimes wrangling the other men into singalongs. In fact, just the other day, all three men yelled *Get on your bikes and ride!* in impeccable unison as "Fat Bottomed Girls" played on the radio, which hung from the spike of a fence and is probably now ruined.

With everyone situated, Tharon starts the game.

"I am in love with Card's wife," he says to Stanley. He hopes the smack-pattering of the rain drowns out what he has said. He first met Card's wife two weeks ago when she showed up to the worksite and brought Card lunch. Sometimes, when Card takes a smoke break, Tharon peeks inside the brown paper bags and reads her notes: *Not your favorite*, she writes about the smushed peanut butter and jelly, *but going to the store after work. Love, Love, Love you.*

The rain takes an angle and comes down harder. Each man pulls his knees in closer to his chest. Each man's right arm and right leg are soaked in seconds. Each man feels a shift somewhere below, in the ground, a distant sensation of sliding (remember: the Earth's tectonic plates always dance a salsa so sloppy one might think they are trying to bump the hips of one another, so this particular nebulous sensation could or could not have corresponded to trench's widening and deepening mouth).

Stanley, despite the rain, hears Tharon clearly and decides he cannot faithfully send the message along. He knows what it's like to hurt. He cannot make friends. He does not date. He is

scared, but also lazy, and often wishes (and love, love, loves how, every now and again) he can share a joke with the guys here at work.

“Shit’s really coming to town!” says Stanley, crafting a situation where perhaps Card will think Tharon had said, in regard to the rain, “It’s really coming down!” Seems plausible to Stanley, or at least it’s the best he can come up with on the spot, and the curse word, he thinks, will carry considerable clout with Card. He remembers: the only time he has ever really made the guys laugh is by doing something similar to this, when he jumped up in the Bobcat and said, about an unsuspecting tree, “Watch me *fuck* this trunk,” which the other men rewarded with masculine hollering, and he figures maybe he can appeal to the way the other two like to talk about women and to personify objects as women that can be fucked, or something, and he hopes maybe this is the day. With the rain and when it somehow now comes down even faster and heavier, and the way how when he lets his mind go and listens to all of it at once, the muddy fuck of rain on gravel and jingly whipping fuck of wind through the holes of the chain-link fence, and even the crispy leaves bleeding into crackled fucking dial tones—he wonders if maybe this is the day when the others laugh with him again.

Card, who had also heard Tharon clearly, decides he hates Stanley. Pile the dirt there, Stanley—and he piles it elsewhere. Jump in the Bobcat, Stanley—and he saunters off with his hands in his pockets. All Card hears is that Stanley has once again not done as he’s told, and that Tharon, if given the chance, would probably fuck his wife and keep on asking Card for cigarettes like nothing in the world had changed.

The trench yawns itself into a gaping, drooping maw that swallows the nearest concrete pipe, then the next. *My mother sent these. I know—not your favorite. Going to the store after work. Love, Love, Love you.*

Card feels a gentle pull behind him. Says: "I hate my life."

And no one laughs. Tharon feels anxious, feels somehow his ears are drowning in the rain's incessant rambling, feels everything is beginning to collapse on itself.

So he says, "Three men stranded on an island find a magic lantern containing a genie, who grants them each one wish. The first guy wishes himself off the island. He misses his wife."

Card, whose pipe is nearly swallowed by the trench, finds his mouth filling with mud and water. Says, "Who's there?"

Stanley finds himself crying and says, "In my country, there are many ghosts," and the sun begins to claw through the crystalline sheet, wherethrough sit the men, and you can see Tharon's heart, and Card's ember surfacing from deep inside the Earth, and Stanley, alone as always, beginning to rapid fire: aren't you glad he didn't say lawnmower he barely knows her the horse's name was the horse's name was love, was Friday, love, love, love you two men walk into a bar three men walk into a pipe and the third one listen to this fellas the third one says who's there?



## JODY ON THE MOUNT

I was the first to know when Jody found her boyfriend hanging in their closet. He'd managed it while they were sleeping. She opened the door to dress for work, thinking his absence in bed meant he was outside smoking a cigarette.



Jody had an idea for a tattoo that required a new shape. The shape had to be as recognizable as any other—a functional set of connected lines. Not something ugly, nor such a far cry from symmetry that it looked like an abrasive sketch.

“Like in a geometry book,” she said. “Next to the rhombus, and with a mathematical formula to figure the length of its sides.”



I knew Jody called me before she called the police. She was someone who genuinely and actively opposed the Man. “Pigs at the trough,” she liked to say, whenever two or more police officers convened anywhere.

After she hung up, I walked around by myself and looked at the sky. I pretended I lived upside-down. I felt like I knew this. I jumped and I reached. The blue above me was a chasm to somewhere deep. My feet were stuck to a ceiling.

Something was out there.



Jody's boyfriend's name was Nicholas, but people liked to call him Icarus after he'd claimed to have been abducted by aliens.

“So I’m minding my own business, walking home the way I always walk home,” said Icarus one night while he, Jody, and I shot pool in the backroom of Cosmic Lanes, a glow-in-the-dark bowling alley (after 7 p.m.) where I spent my time cleaning bathrooms and playing *Time Crisis II* in the arcade. “Then I’m falling, and there’s light all around me, then I’m in a bed of some kind—”

“Too close to the sun, Icarus,” said someone at the other table, miming a pull on a joint. “Give it a rest.”



Jody left town within days of Icarus’s funeral. She quit her job and didn’t tell me and was gone. I didn’t expect to miss her. I didn’t expect to miss Icarus, either. But I realized they’d really been my only friends.

I’d been stuck in a town where most of the people I’d known had moved away, leaving me with two strange acquaintances who liked to talk their lips chapped over Coors Light and make fun of the way I bowled. At first I thought Icarus’s death, then Jody’s departure, was a chance for me to leave the ties I didn’t have and move on. I thought about saving money and moving out of my parents’ place and downloading a dating app and something to monitor my credit.

I figured at least I wouldn’t have to hear about her stupid tattoo anymore.



Icarus was minding his own business, walking home the way he always walked home, lighting a cigarette on Jameson and Cherry. He thought he tripped, and he fell into the sky. A coned light pulled him down into the everyday up. He felt his feet in his mouth and described the pull as gentle but urgent.

He lay in a bed. The walls of the room were deep purple and squirm-crawled like dismembered tentacles. The room was there, but it wasn't—not in the way it should have been. Matter was not as we understand matter. Everything was oily against reality's water.

He may have been sedated.

“The way I can explain this,” he told me, pointing to different spots of the Cosmic Lanes arcade, “was that the wall was the floor, and the floor was the wall, but the ceiling was the floor, and the wall was the ceiling. Nothing was right—or left,” he laughed. “Like being inside a kaleidoscope.”

I listened to him tell his story so many times. He often encountered details he could not explain, like the *look* and *feel* of everything—water-like, but also as if submerged in water. A shimmer, but like the placid sheen on newborn mud.

Like a self-aware pariah, he'd say, “I know how it sounds.”



I picked up bits and pieces of Jody through the next year. A group of bikers who had liked to shoot the shit with her told me she may have been around some friends in Dallas. These friends were scene-kids-turned-festival-kids who took acid and went to high school parties—who went out into fields and carved messages to the stars.

Then someone else said Jody had been staying at her aunt's farm growing vegetables and helping with chores. Maybe starting a garden.

Both rumors related that Jody had taken up smoking like a fiend, for some reason.



I used to hate Jody's stories. They changed and recurred as less convincing. They were hyperbolic and desperate and weird. She knew people who knew people who gave her conspiratorial information to which she clung with gospel ardency.

She told me about a shaman her uncle had met, or an uncle's friend had met, who harvested an ancient ink from the depths of a mountain. When the ink formed images, they were said to move in place, to perform, to be able to be trained. A drawing of a dog could play fetch on paper or shapeshift into a cat. She said a prehistoric civilization had left it for us to write our language with its slime, to communicate into the past and future, though the military had apparently already obtained and weaponized the substance and used it to hide drones and spy planes right above our own, sheepish heads. Wake up.

"You could cover yourself in it and change your appearance," Jody said once, not long after Icarus's abduction. "I bet there's a whole hidden fortress up there disguised as a cumulonimbus."

"That bitch was a straight-up liar," I heard someone say, later.



Icarus hanged himself with a belt. Jody said his weight may have been able to collapse the shelf lattice to which he'd tied himself, had he not lost so much after the abduction.

He told me he'd only been on the spaceship for a couple of seconds. The aliens lived between time and space. Perhaps above or adjacent to. They moved so quickly they could build entire civilizations on top of ours without us knowing, but it wasn't really about speed. It was about the potential of a moment. Their forever was the flick of a light switch stretched into a billion years.

The aliens' biological make-up was so different than ours that one could be standing on top of us and we would not feel or see it. Icarus said the world was upside-down, and the aliens waited below to catch anyone who fell off. They lived and died in our homes and became the air.

He said he fell up from Jameson and Cherry, and they caught him, and for just two seconds in the bed, which moved, too, like the slithering walls around him, he rested for an eternity.



But I did decide to look for her, because I kept wondering. Her stories stuck in my mind. His stories stuck in my mind. The way they ate junk food and wondered if the all-round, everything of the Earth was a perfect, knotted mystery.

So I found Jody's aunt online. I asked if Jody was still around, and she told me she'd left six months ago to see friends in Montana. I asked for the friends' names.

I drove to Montana.

My knees felt buoyant.



"My step-dad works for the government," Jody said. "There's stuff in Area 51 I can't tell you about because they would know immediately. They only cancelled *The X-Files* because half the shit was true, y'knew." Y'knew. That's how Jody would say it, ending her sentences with a nagging chime.

This was the first time I'd ever heard her. I was at Cosmic Lanes, bowling alone, when I saw a couple in matching Judas Priest shirts at the snack bar. They each had a pitcher of beer in front of them.

Someone a couple stools over said, “They? Who’s *they*, then?” and Jody zipped her lips shut and tossed the key, while Icarus shook his head.

Later, they’d ever-so-slightly nudge the quarter pusher game without tilting the machine. They’d carry their spoils in cupped hands and spend the entire next day playing ski ball and talking about Elvis sightings, about an ostensibly shapeshifting Beatles cover band made up of Americans.



I found Jody’s friends in a squat house outside Luster, Montana. They dressed like cowboys and cowgirls. They were friendly. They spray-painted UFOs on the walls and had a large amount of Marvin the Martian merchandise.

They all had two tattoos.

One said, “I BELIEVE IN MY BELIEF.”

The other was a series of interconnected symbols, like a stylized zipper. I thought maybe I saw fish in succession—an elongated school—or snakes twisting upon themselves—tunneling inside and outside one another in an attempt toward a conceivable pattern.

They said the tattoos were identical if you looked at them the right way. They asked me if I’d ever felt that prepositions didn’t really do the trick. Why are we *on* Earth?



Over time, Icarus stopped talking about the abduction and often wondered aloud what it meant to be born and when consciousness began and ended; meanwhile, Jody ramped up her conspiracies. Stories meant to intrigue became stories meant to solve. She graduated from secret societies to secret *happenings*. The way animals evolved, the chemical make-up of humankind,

the design and un-design of it all. The way that evolution is random, and every moment is chaos. Every moment is an ignition. The secret is that secrets in flux can't *be*.

"Jody's trying to connect the dots," Icarus told me. We ate yellow corn chips with barbecue sauce because the snack bar's cheese machine was broken. "She means well. She means to be informed. She *cares*. She just doesn't understand that the dots don't make a picture."

I had no idea what the hell anyone was talking about. I said so.

"It's like this," Icarus said, squeezing more barbecue sauce onto his plate. "Take JFK. Jody loves JFK. Now, what's scarier? That an elaborate conspiracy, involving the US government and whoever the fuck else, is responsible for the president's death, and it's all so convoluted that no one will ever figure it out? Or, is the world so chaotic, and so close to going completely off-balance at any time, that one dude with shitty aim and a shittier rifle really *can* kill the president? Or kill any of us? Or that we're the ones taking the shot? That we're like, *this close* to that at any given moment." He didn't end his point, as they usually did, with a self-assured smirk.

And of course that was the last time I saw him.



I learned from Jody's friends that Jody had taken up in a cave in a mountain and had been operating as some kind of oracle to college-age Montanians. I laughed, and they didn't. People sought her for advice about worldly and otherworldly quandaries, apparently (e.g., should they take Astronomy or Philosophy for their gen-eds).

One cowgirl pulled the saluting arm of a Marvin the Martian M&M dispenser. "There was supposed to be an Earth-shattering kaboom!" said Marvin from a speaker somewhere on his head.

“Don’t go looking for her if you’re gonna be a dick,” said the cowgirl, knocking back the M&M’s like a shot.

I imagined an invisible city sprouting from nothing and surrounding me. It collapsed and was gone and I breathed none-the-wiser.

“Are you a Virgo?” said the cowgirl.



Then the aliens touched him, said Icarus. He guessed they had *hands*, but they were more like appendages, but not the curvy, slippery, suction-cupped arms and claws of things from movies. Just functional appendages. Functional beings. The aliens were functions.

Then Jody leaned in, pontificating with a Slim Jim. Don’t you see. Secrets are just happenings spiraling off from their assumed trajectory. Earth is a variable. Earth is never the same second-to-second. Every moment is the beginning of time. It all makes sense.



Along the path to Jody’s cave were the contents of an exploded, hurried briefcase: clothes, toiletries, shoes, books, wallet, purse—the contents from within scattered thereabout in a way that could be mistaken as deliberate. Most were molded into the path, clawing out from mud, rained and snowed over, frozen, tattered and caked and patterned into groundstuff.

The opening of the cave was alight with lavender. I walked in and saw Jody, and belts hanging, tightened into nooses, their purple-outlined shadows like upside-down, hollow balloons. There were candles with perfect pink flames. Jody was surrounded by smoke. I thought of Delphi.

The smoke began to dissipate. She wore a black tank top with a neon-orange jacket. She sat in front of a large ashtray. There were cigarettes everywhere.



“Oh, shit,” Jody said. She stamped out her cigarette like she were killing a bug. She fanned her hand. “Sorry, I know you don’t smoke.”



He didn’t know what shape their ship was. He said their bodies were not bodies, but also not amoebas, or anything totally indecipherable. They just were. They shifted, but *didn’t*. They became. More than anything, they became. They were a becoming. They were an equation working upon itself upon itself upon itself.

“That’s the thing,” he told me. We were in the middle of a Halloween party at Cosmic Lanes. There were aliens, from *Alien*. There were three John Lennons arguing about metaphysics. “People think too Hollywood. I didn’t get any experiments run on me. I just saw. It was like I was reading a new world. Something that moved and was alive and protected me from stuff that was down deeper. Like below us.”

Before I left, he had gotten a little drunk.

He said, “They are here and not here.”

He said, “They’re constants in our equation.”

He said, “The ocean is the sky. Heaven is below us, and it’s Hell.”

He said, “Everything is backwards.”

He said, “I know how it sounds.”



The cave was lined with cartons of all different brands of cigarettes. They were stacked like multi-colored, model western towns. There were jugs of water, and basins and buckets that collected it. There were connected drawings on the wall—a universe of intersplicing lines.

We sat criss-cross-applesauce and talked about Icarus. The flickering of the candles and the haze of the smoke made the drawings appear to breathe. I asked her why she was out here. In here. A smoky, velvet womb.

Jody said, "Before he did it, I had wanted to. It's hard to explain. I wanted to die." She stamped out another cigarette with three quick dabs. "I didn't want to *do* what he did. Kill myself. But I had decided to die. When you know what I know, you realize death is the only way out, y'knew? So he sort of stole my thunder. I don't mean to be brash, but he did. I know how it sounds."

"I don't understand," I said. "I've never understood you at all. What do you know?" I remembered Icarus and Jody watching me bowl, never tiring of their shared and compounding theories, racking up a bar tab I convinced my boss they'd probably someday pay. "You know, Icarus thought you had JFK all wrong." Jody smiled when she heard his name. They really did get along.

"JFK's small potatoes. Why watch Zapruder when you can check the forecast of November 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1963?" She lit another cigarette.

"Icarus said at the heart of every conspiracy is some kind of fear. About if the conspiracy is real, you protect your individuality, or something."

"Isn't it weird? 67 degrees Fahrenheit, with a breeze, a rain having passed that morning. The rain had been projected to last into the afternoon."

"He said, if you look at people thinking the moon landing is fake, they're really rejecting the universe entirely. Because if the universe isn't real, then Earth is special, which makes *them*—"

"But then: the rain cut short, so take the bubble-top off the car. Why not."

“Which makes them more special, somehow. Or, it’s like safety. If the government coordinated 9/11, or if the government killed JFK—”

“The Earth has died six times. The Earth can shake us off like a bug. The Earth doesn’t care how anything sounds.”



A theme night called Crystal Cosmos. Half-off all games, half-off all snacks, the lights practically strobing. Cosmic Lanes’ most intense operation. Only once a month, and only for experts.

I bowled 205 and used a crystalline pink ball and listened to Icarus dispel the Mayan prophecies, and I heard Jody, in a laugh, say no, no, no, that’s the *key*, while she wrung her hands around his neck in a child-like, playful way, Icarus yelling, *check the tapes! Check the tapes!* then sticking his tongue out like a poisoned Looney Tune.



“A slow killing. We always associate suicide with the abruptness. I wondered how long I could prolong a suicide. How long could I survive?” She smoked a cigarette in each hand. “I didn’t want to starve, necessarily, but I wanted my body to kill itself. My *health*. I wanted to take a sharp left turn. A change to my life’s trajectory. I needed to know if I could keep a secret from myself.” Jody seemed to have changed. She’d at least stopped her frenzied gesticulations, her wild hands and shaking fingers that connected yarns of thread to invisible tacks. “I figured smoking cigarettes and not eating would kill me. I started with just two cartons. People around here claim there’s some landfill full of all the cigarettes that CVS got rid of. I think if I can find that, I’ll be set for forever.”

I said, “That’s a lot of cigarettes, Jody.”

“If I don’t die, though, y’knew, any finite amount of anything isn’t enough. It doesn’t matter if there’s a million cigarettes in that landfill. I can drink up the Earth if I’m here to stay.”

“Come home.”

“That’s the thing. I won’t die. Or just *haven’t* died. And so that’s what this is all about. I sit up here and smoke and think. I have no sense of time.”

“You’ve been gone a little over a year, Jody.”

“Not that type of sense. Like a spatial sense. Like so where am I in time? Am I going through it, like a car through a tunnel? Am I on it? Maybe we’re all from time, or of time, and so we walk around ticking and dying, like bombs, because time gave birth to us, or something.”

“You’re so weird. You’ve always been so *weird*.” I felt I could only speak honestly.

“Let me show you something nutty,” she said.

She took off her jacket.



I used to stand at Jameson and Cherry and jump and reach toward the stars. It seemed everyday my feet became a little less attached to the ground. I believed at any moment I might fall. And I believed and I believed and I jumped, and reached.

I convinced myself the sky was a book, and that the movements of us here on Earth were projected from something below us, the traced lines of our lives overlapping, and that even though now those lines might be nothing, someday they might be a map.



“I heard you’re a prophet.”

“Depends how you look at it,” Jody said. All along her arms, purple-black worms slithered in a glossy, veiny matrix. They formed letters. They formed, *Hello*. They formed shapes

I knew. They formed nothing. They sometimes became a becoming, and I would flinch and look away, my eyelids twitching.

They were not worms at all. Sometimes they all gathered near her shoulder and formed a heart with an arrow through it, or a woman whose skirt would lift from a phantom breeze when Jody flexed her bicep.

“Are you a prophet?”

“You say so.”

“Come on, Jody.”

“We change our minds; they change us, y’knew?”

“What does that mean?”

“I’m just kidding. Playing the Messiah.”

“What do people ask you?”

“What people?”

“Come on, Jody.”

She flicked her cigarettes out the opening of the cave. She stretched her arms out toward me, palms and wrists turned up.

“Isn’t this enough for you?”



If I could talk to Icarus, I would tell him what I’ve come up with: my conspiracy. That if the aliens lived their lives in an instant that was forever, then their birth and their death was the same. That had they been unlucky enough to be born on Earth, they’d have been still-births. That the weapon of Hell is time, and living it, and the horror that all of this is only now, and neither

Napoleon nor me will ever be able to do everything we'd have liked to have done, that now is some kind of poison, and that death is still a surprise even after all this time.

That a cup right side up is settled and full, and gives shape to a form. And that a cup upside down is more than empty.



“Now when I saw the crowds, I went up the mountainside and sat down. My disciples came to me, and I began to teach them.”

“If you’re not going to be serious,” I said.

“Hey, read the Bible? I shit you not. Some people saw smoke coming from the mountain. They followed its signal and found me. They asked me what I was doing, and I said dying, and they cried like children.

“People kept coming, and I would speak my mind to them. And ask them questions. It’s just chit-chat. But when it’s me, someone living in a mountain—people want discipleship. They assume I have answers to things because of movies.”

“You’re so full of it.”

“I know how it sounds.”

“You’re so full of it.”

“When the universe reveals itself to us, *we* are full of *it*.” Jody grabbed for a carton of cigarettes and tore off the plastic and grabbed a pack and tore off the plastic and lit a cigarette and smoked it.

“Cut that shit out,” I said. The black on Jody’s arms melted then solidified into little stars.

“Why are you here, then? If it’s for this,” she held up her arms, “I haven’t been to Mars or anything. I’ve found something deep in the mountain. I don’t know where it’s from, or what it

does, really. Maybe someone left it behind, or maybe something is still looking for it.” I hated her cadence, but I wanted to believe.

“I’ll give you a free consultation. Old friend sort of thing.” She just smoked and drank water and smoked and drank water and never stopped and smoked and drank water and never stopped.

“The ink,” I said. “You got your stupid tattoo.”

“If you think this is dumb, you should get a look at what’s down the hall.”



And I went down the hall of the cave, and into a blackness. And I went down into a feeling of secret becoming and Jody spoke to me. I could not breathe. Cigarette smoke had pooled there. I asked her questions. My feet became unstuck from the ground. I fell up into Hell. Our words became like the worms and became each other and became entwined and became becoming. And I dipped my fingers into the black somethingness and we began.



*Icarus* said we are upside-down *If* we are upside-down then heaven is Hell *Icarus* said the aliens could live on top of us that right now they are on top of us as we talk a whole alien civilization could have risen and fallen *When* I found *Icarus* dead in the closet he was light as if he were floating and for a moment I wanted to pick him up and stuff him under my arm like the mail like a package with a blanket inside and take him somewhere safe I even believed for a moment he was still breathing I touched his lips we are not where and what we think we are *Why* do I believe what he said *Because* you have faith in faith *How* do I know if your bullshit is too much or not enough or exactly what it needs to be what it needs to be what it needs to be *You* will know when the world ceases to be and the invisible math of the visible world eats itself and

shits itself out to become the memories of our ancestors bounce from the atmosphere to the ocean and ping-pong this way forever and we live in them and we are them *What* if I fall off the Earth *Then* you will be alien to it *What* is all this *It* is a slimy something from somewhere a new shape a process of design a nothing looking for a form *I* can't breathe *It* may be time we leave then *Why* won't you die oh god why won't you just die *I* would if I could but I feel I am between, now, becoming somehow something secret.



## JUDAS'S GAME

Once upon a thyme-spiced curry, Judas the Taurus lay down a chopstick and said, “Look: it has become a bridge for the ants.” And his partner, Leo, the hungry lion, ate with a spoon and was embarrassed, both because he could not use chopsticks and because some curry had dried in his mane.

“Ants collect their dead,” said Leo. Then, with the pad of his paw, he smashed a lonely ant nearing his food. A nearby group of the ant’s fellows murmured and processed to the scout, who was dead.

Now Judas watched the ants set the scout upon a grain of rice, and the scout stuck there. Two ants then picked up the grain and set it upon their backs, and the whole outfit marched toward the bowl of curry and the chopstick bridge, with the dead scout and its carriers at the front.

“To them, it will be as if walking across a lava-filled lake,” said Judas. He balanced a bottle of sriracha on his hoof.

Then, by putting the bottle between two hooves, he squeezed the sriracha into the curry in two wide-spanning zig-zags on each side of the chopstick. The curry began to simmer, and sometimes a bubble would rise and burst and spray curry in many directions, as though in a charmed cauldron.

Leo shook his head. “Judas—look what you’ve done. I can’t eat such spicy food.” And Judas laughed as a bubble burst and sprayed the marching ants. Two were burned immediately and molted in place as statues. The ants behind them hefted the newly dead ones onto their backs and continued to walk. One ant, in fear, jumped into the curry.

“Judas—now one has jumped in. I cannot eat this curry with an ant floating near the tofu.” And an ant was floating near the tofu, and Judas laughed again.

“Fool. Wait for the ant to sink. When you cannot see it, you will not mind, and you can scoop out the area that you deem contaminated, if it comforts you.” And Leo did spoon out the contamination into a nearby waste basket, and he was not pleased, still, so he watched the ants.

There was a shared focus among the ants, and they were halfway across the bridge when Judas had another idea. He knocked a hoof against the bowl and shook its contents, and more now-boiling curry splashed upon the ants, and five of them lost their balance and fell into the bowl and lay upon its surface before becoming engulfed and sinking. The rice-bearers stopped and planted their legs, and the dead scout upon the grain did not move.

“They are nearly across,” said Leo. He was eating spring rolls and chewing with his mouth open.

“We will see about that,” said Judas, and now he dabbed two hooves into the bowl. He stuck each curried-hoof to opposite sides of his cloth napkin and held it up like a canvas in front of the ants.

Leo looked upon the napkin, and he saw a life inside where dead things were not dead, and many bad things in his life had not happened, and things he’d lost and wanted were his forever. Leo considered what he would give up for the life the napkin showed him.

“Watch the ants, Leo,” said Judas. “Do not look at it. It is not for you.”

And so Leo looked at the ants and found them stopped. He was not sure if they saw what he saw: a life where their friends were not dead? He did not know if they stopped in consideration or reverence or fear. Judas lowered the napkin and licked his hooves clean.

The ants marched on and reached the end and descended from the bowl, and began to form a circle on Judas's napkin. Then the rice-bearers lowered the grain, and those who had picked up the molten corpses set them down, and the ants walked in a slow rotation around the dead scout and their other fallen comrades.

Judas looked conciliatory and disinterested.

"Would you look at that," said Leo. "The littles ones made it after all, and now they honor their friends!" He motioned to the waiter for the check.

"Yes, and now look: they have left him."

It was so. The ants processed down a leg of the table with the two rice-bearers journeying far ahead as the company's new scouts.

"Surely, this has been a day to remember," said Leo. "Though now I am still hungry, and your game is up."

"You say so," said Judas, and he hopped down from his chair and found a willow tree outside and with a rope from his pack he hanged himself, and Leo devoured him and kept the hooves as trophies, which he used as kinged checkers on his board.

## SATELLITE OF LOVE

We heard from one another they were building a satellite to watch us. It would know where we were and make sure we were safe—a real eye in the sky. “It’s going to be able to spot the dirt under your fingernails,” said Christine Walker, high school chemistry teacher, Baltimore, MD.

It had been a while since we’d heard from our leaders. The last twenty years had seen three covert presidents elected. We the people and them the people’s people had been little more than pen pals. We received updates about American affairs through bi-monthly postcards, with an annual deluxe-sized card for the State of the Union.

“Thinking of you!” they said, Papyrus and Comic Sans next to beaches, everglades, and red rocks. One postcard featured John F. Kennedy sprawled out on a lawn chair, margarita in hand, with a speech bubble that said, “Ask not what your country can do for you; ask how you can unwind today!” The postcard told us in eighteen months, visible by looking just left of the moon, a heart-shaped satellite would hang and spectate, making sure we were all right and accounted for.

Something about the news made us take notice of each other. We noticed how Benjamin and Linda Hurr made love with the blinds open; we noticed Layne Parasol and the sweaters she wore in the summer—hiding something on her arms; we kept our eyes on Malachai Evans, who was suspected to have been kidnapping cats. We talked more, face to face, as if finally aware of how many of us there were and how it wasn’t so hard to say how do you do. We said, “It won’t be so bad as long as it’s shaped like a heart.”

We looked up as the sun went down, the sky at its most medicinal violet and its clouds like amoebic hunks of dough, and we saw how big it was up there, and how, down here, if you really thought about it, we were scattered farther than pocket change skidding on a city bus's floor, but close enough to say hello, at least every once in a while.



We named the satellite. None of us is sure where the name started, but by the time it looked like just a little bit of cigar ash, we all called it Lou. “You think we’ll be able to see Lou when it’s cloudy?” said Janet Brown to Marcus Gielow, co-workers standing on the roof of their Normal, IL, office as they’d done for years, and would continue to do for months, watching Lou, falling in love though only slightly—Janet with Marcus more than vice versa. Janet climbed up the short wall that extended around the building’s perimeter, trying to get a better look, and fell off backwards into Marcus. He caught her and asked her what the hell was she thinking, she could have flipped over the side, could have gotten herself killed (she would, eventually), could have, ha-ha, could have fallen onto HR rep Claudia’s ugly-ass Audi (it would be Marcus’s Saab). If Lou had been up there, if his construction had been finished, he would have been able to see the way they laughed with each other, and how their eyes became small and their faces warmed.

Some of us could not bear his impending arrival. Unfortunately, this would become common even after Lou’s construction finished. A clerk at a grocery store was driven out of her mind, and she killed herself in her car, parked in the garage, with carbon monoxide. Her children were with her. One of them survived. The child said, “My mother’s arm is cold and blue.” The grocery store clerk wrote a suicide note on a doily from her wedding. “What am I supposed to do when I close my shower curtain, and It can still see me soaping and rinsing?”

More of us went during this time, and for the same reasons. We used all varieties of suicide. We left letters and sometimes nothing. We left the television on. We liked the way the language of our regularly scheduled programming blended into an indecipherable hum. Couples often went together. We gathered in town squares and held signs like *Privacy Is Not a Commodity* and *Screw Lou* while also carefully cutting vertical lines into our wrists, seated on our couches and toilet seats. We found that just a few ice cubes numb the skin enough to make a clean, fast cut.

A restaurant owner, crappy poker player, and particularly paranoid Texan named Ozzy Simson told the boys he was reaching down to his ankle to grab a lighter, to light a cigar offering from a new guy at the table, and what instead appeared in his hand was a small revolver that Ozzy used to send the back of his head to the ceiling. A travel writer named Louise Dunbar, who had grown up in Philadelphia, PA, and attended college in Dayton, OH, flung herself into the Grand Canyon and dared Lou to find her. Park rangers and search teams did not manage to recover or to identify her body.

Lou, eventually, did.



A postcard arrived. It had Teddy Roosevelt out in the woods, shivering under a tree. “It’d be nice if there was someone to watch over me,” said Teddy. Some of us smiled at this and stuck it to the fridge. Others felt nauseous.

Lou really would be able to see through all our walls, so some said. His lens, his eye, was a state of the art optic experiment that could, if it peered through a window, also angle down and inside, riding the light, seeing through it, behind corners, under and through doors, into closed drawers where secrets sit clumped and unorganized and piled. We felt bad for the shop clerk and

all the others who offered themselves (the worst of which were three teenagers, who hanged each other with extension cords), and we understood, and we commiserated, and we felt that the shadows of overpasses were not as sheltering as they'd once been. We supposed we would be able to see Lou just as much and as often as he would be able to see us, but satellites have nothing to hide.

Some of us welcomed Lou's birth. "I suppose I really have no dirty laundry," said Harrison Bowling, president of the local Knights of Columbus faction in a small county in Saint Louis, MO. Harrison's son, Vito, told his father he had no idea how slippery of a slope that was, a phrase he'd heard in school, then retreated to the roof to smoke a handful of cigarettes his girlfriend had loaned him. Vito's clandestine smoking days would end soon, but, then, so would his father's closeted drinking habit. Harrison had hidden around the home three bottles of gin, and his inconspicuous access of them had become so habitual that he did not for a moment consider them secrets.

Some thought Lou would make them feel less lonely, give them something to point to at night, something to show their children without needing to buy a telescope. Nancy Bowling was not one of these people, and she found her husband's perspective especially disturbing, but she didn't have the guts or knowhow to do anything about it and would suffer such terrible stomach aches after Lou's arrival that one night she would die in her sleep. Simple as that.

Some of us gathered at a volunteer fire department in Indiana and were excited if not overjoyed for Lou's construction to begin, so we threw him a baby shower in a small community event room that was on most days a cafeteria for firefighters. *READY FOR YOU LOU*, read our streamers, old women shakily shuttling trays piled high with homemade biscuits and placing them in front of the friends and family of firefighters and the firefighters themselves, urging to

eat up, have a good time, be a good example and clean your plate for the baby. Teenagers huddled outside and shared cigarettes and wondered if Lou would be able to read the secrets on their phone screens.

(He would.)



One of us, a journalist, Daphne Redford, Newark, NJ, was the first person allowed to see behind the curtains of Lou's birth. She was selected due to her judicial, fair handling of the government's CDP (Closed Door Policy) two decades earlier. She had written: "As the United States government closes its doors from the public eye until further notice, we can rest assured that our lawmakers and leaders will be able to make more beneficial decisions for all of us. They just need some space. It's not us; it's them." Good work, Daphne, said someone. Want to write another?

Daphne entered the MEIS (Modern Expansion into Space) headquarters, which had risen from the ashes of NASA while maintaining the corporate editing policy of the Jet Propulsion Laboratories. She reported thus:

Lou would be constructed by six humanoid robot builders:

Simon 2740

Patty 2850

Uris 9920

Denice 2112

Sharon 8230

Segal 3000



Otherwise called the SPUDSS, or Spuds. The corresponding numbers were thought to account for each of the robots' amount of moveable parts, but that was only a theory. Each Spud looked exactly like a human, but Daphne reported a tech demo where many of their parts extracted and shot out, their bodies opening wide and revealing hundreds of mechanical arms, saws, and multi-tools. Even their heads rolled back and mouths opened and opened and kept opening until there was no head at all but claws and little things that went *spritz, spritz*.

The Spuds would live in a peripheral hangar off the International Space Station and build Lou by hand. Every week, MEIS would shuttle more materials up to the Spuds, and, connected to the space station by cables with miles of length that could retract as fast as furiously reeled fishing line, the Spuds would build Lou piece by piece, setting him exactly where he needed to be in orbit. Until he was ready to fly solo, Lou would also be connected to the space station, with some slack in his cables to allow him some room to move around.

In photographs in Daphne's article, the Spuds looked like us, but on television, the day of the launch, we saw that the Spuds were nearly thirty feet tall. The Spuds waved goodbye, and for some reason we felt like they were heroes. Stores became stocked full of First Wave Spud Action Figures: Uris, Patty, and Simon. They were a hit with boys and girls.

Then, they began to build. Lou was a gray pixel up there, a grain of salt mixed among the stars. "It's how I visualize cancer," said Janet said to Marcus on the roof of the office. "A little dot that grows and grows until suddenly you've gotta go to the doctors." Marcus imagined Lou as a budding microchip that, when finished, would blink and run some kind of program.



We heard of a mishap in space.

The Spuds were building Lou's eye. Construction was almost done. They had just covered his skeleton with what people were calling a satellite skin. We received a post card of Barack Obama and Richard Nixon on a dock on a pond somewhere in middle-America. Richard Nixon said, "Hey, Barry, you heard about Lou's colors? What's that all about? What's he looking for?" Even them, closeted, called him Lou. Barack, throwing out a side-armed cast, said, "Apparently he'll be able to turn green, purple, blue, and red to help Americans spot him among the stars." A cleaned fish on the ground said, "Nifty!"

Uris and Sharon, tethered to the small hangar where the Spuds lived, were fastening the large glass panel that would cover Lou's iris and pupil—the form and machinations of which resembled a camera. Uris's arm functioned as a drill at that moment, his whole robot body floating as far as it could from Lou so as not to scratch the glass. Sharon clung to the backside of Lou, essentially just spot-checking Uris though unable to see him.

On the inside of Lou, according to an informational tab on MEIS's website, was a sphere that connected to Lou's many panels. Lou's AI would be able to turn this sphere, shifting the panels and activating their solar-powered motors, to move additionally in his orbit. He could float around Earth like any old satellite, or he could go wherever he wanted, to certain extents. Some of us thought this was swell. Others thought it should be regulated, that perhaps other countries wanted Lou staying relatively in a place where he could easily watch the United States and nothing else. "Leave us out of this," said the other six continents in a humorous cartoon from a newspaper in Augusta, ME, waving small hands in detest against the United States, who was carrying a bunch of cumbersome film equipment and asking people to smile and wave. Even Antarctica had things to keep to itself. Canada and South America cut along the dotted lines of their borders with safety scissors.

From what we could gather, considering different evening news accounts, reports in papers, and an exceptionally reputable website called Sci-News, Uris had just finished fastening Lou's eye when his legs became knotted in his own line. He grabbed onto Lou and ripped off some siding. Sharon noticed one of Lou's panels was a few feet too long and opened her chest. Her buzz saw whirred to life.

Uris struggled in his own tether and became entangled. He was like a sorry fish in a net. Lou's eye hummed and glowed purple, a color that would go on to signify confusion, and his body strobed through its four colors. "Who are you?" asked Lou, his voice croaking like a hungover man. "Are you all right?" Uris, startled, popped out all his pieces to try to cut himself loose and regain stasis in his momentum, but Denice, manning Uris's tether from the dock, kept letting out more line then reeling it in, not understanding the issue (the Spuds had not been programmed for something as simple as a tangled rope). Uris somersaulted and grasped at dead space with his saws and drills and claws all a-buzz. *Spritz, spritz.*

Meanwhile, on Earth, Janet gazed at Lou, who had lighted up and looked like a far-off kaleidoscope. She was taking her smoke break on the roof alone.

Uris drifted far from Lou then close again. Uris reached out for a panel just as Sharon's saw ran through it, lopping off Uris's arm. Sharon was in full mechanical mode, essentially just a multi-armed chainsaw with clicky spider fingers shooting sparks and chirping. *Spritz, spritz.* She did not sense Uris as he drifted closer to her, reaching out again for help, and she turned too quickly and cleaved Uris right down the middle, and he went floating off, toward Earth, drifting down and down and plummeting to the American Midwest where he split the Saint Louis arch into seven pieces. Lou said, "Is he all right?"

Janet had climbed the wall to get a look at the orange smear that shot across the sky, plummeting fast and flaring to Earth, but she leaned too far and flipped forward, falling over the side and smashing into the hood of Marcus's car. Janet died about the exact moment the arch crumbled. When her co-workers had to put all her things in a box for her roommate to collect, the side of the box said, "Quality Assurance."

Marcus had dreams about catching Janet, and he offed himself like the others six months after Lou was finished, feeling that the eye hanging above glared at him for not saving her. Marcus sat in his tub and dropped a toaster in. *Spritz, spritz.*



One night, we called each other, yelled for each other, sent texts and emails tagged with high importance. Look in the sky, we said. Look left of the moon. There he is.



At first, Lou policed us. He reported some of us to actual authorities with varying degrees of severity. Lou could send emails to anyone in the United States. Lou was a viable witness in any court case. "I saw it all, your Honor," Lou emailed from space. [ST570@meis.gov](mailto:ST570@meis.gov). ST-570 was Lou's real name. Lou always saw it all. Lou's memories were constantly exported and compressed to a village of hard drives a mile south of the Hoover Dam. Anything Lou had ever seen could be recalled by the nanosecond.

Lou reported some of us to each other. When Diane Mountebank, Norwalk, CA, cheated on her girlfriend, Zhenzhen Kawamura, Lou sent Zhenzhen an email detailing everything. He said he saw Diane get milkshakes at three in the morning with a Phoenix, AR, citizen named Mel Walnut. Lou said Diane kissed Mel on the cheek, then the neck, then the two disappeared to a more private location—though not private from Lou.

Malachai, the suspected cat-napper, found that his cat-snatching days ended in a heartbeat. Lou spotted him behind a Dumpster in Boulder, CO, tossing his trash bag of used cats. Lou told the cops and they jumped on the chase, but Malachai, as cunning as his cats, was always one step ahead and lived life as a Wanted Man. Lou knew exactly where Malachai was at all times but had some trouble directing policemen from county to county, state to state, toward Malachai's dust trails. Then, Malachai, four days a fugitive and at that point a national sensation due to all his news coverage, in the ballsiest Hail Mary of the millennium snatched a cocktail dress and heels from a thrift store in Lustre, TX, and stopped into a salon to receive a total makeover, banking on the fact that hopefully the small and relatively out-of-the-way Hair Kair had not tuned in at five o'clock for a few days. When a new and improved Molly Kye stepped out of the salon, the police nodded their caps and asked had she seen the cat-napper?

Malachai was the first to dupe Lou.

Teenagers all over the country were getting caught with pot and porn. Vito Bowling had a brilliant stash: in a pill bottle, in a vacuum-sealed bag, wedged into a floor-board mouse hole and covered by a cut of wood the exact fit. Lou found it. Vito was grounded, then loaded up some Brazzers to relax, then got busted for that, too. "What the hell, Lou?" said Vito to the sky, where on that particular night Lou shone green, meaning all operations were running properly and he was in a good mood. Lou sometimes shifted his pieces around so that his heart-like body appeared to beat.

Crime went both down and up, depending on how you looked at it. Violent, property, and chronic nuisance crime numbers plummeted, but Lou saw no shortage of people to tattle on. Obeying the speed limit was now a stricter matter than ever? in the smallest, prudest towns. Lou was the world's worst intergalactic traffic cop. Car accidents went down to practically none, and

without being able to indulge in road rage, we found ourselves on leather couches, speaking our minds, talking about the time our parents did the thing that set us on the path to who we would become.

We continued killing ourselves.

A group of us learned to trick him. They climbed a water tower and signaled to Lou in semaphore:

WE ARE ALLOWED TO DO WHAT WE ARE ABOUT TO DO

So Lou let them do whatever they wanted to do. They were teenagers, so this meant about two days of as much beer drinking and car fondling as they wanted until Lou sent an email to HQ to confirm whether a small group of teens in Chattanooga, TN, were allowed to do whatever they wanted to do. He received a response that said, “Lou, you know better than that. However, *do* leave *some* of them alone.” By some of them, we assumed HQ meant Wall Street people and various behind-the-curtain sorts of folks. The people we thought we hated but who actually kept the world ticking.

Lou was embarrassed and turned a shade of purple. He faced Mars and noted there were no parking lots, and nothing much moved.

After that Lou didn't fall for any simple tricks, but he was slower in his reporting. This was okay with us for a while. It generally meant that instead of getting nailed with a speeding ticket as soon as we got home from our commutes, we could expect a couple days of Lou considering the pros and cons. Like children count the footsteps of angry parents and find a private eternity before punishment comes, we learned to take our quiet days as gifts. We felt we lived in a house of cards about to tumble. We felt we needed to run to our mothers before anyone

got there first, so that we could clear our names with practiced rationality and communicatively effective gesticulations. *He* did it, we wanted to say.



Lou watched us fall in love. We still had our first kisses and first fights. Some of us emailed Lou to prove that our spouse had done the thing we'd thought they'd done, like sleeping with the community college pottery instructor. Others used that same potentiality, the fact that anything could be proven, to strengthen our relationships. We would not check the archives; we would not ask Lou; we did not need to know; we would confess, your Honor. We could be right, but we didn't need to be. In that way, some of us rediscovered genuine trust.

High school romance was admittedly slower-moving, with sneaking out and breaking curfew impossible, but sometimes, if he'd grown to like them, Lou would spot two youngsters sitting under a tree somewhere and shine his eye bright for a moment. The light would jet across the sky like a shooting star, and all of us, all over, saw it with someone who meant a whole lot to us, and we would talk about that moment for years—the time when we knew we were meant for each other, and everything like that.

Lou often grew to like us.

We fell in love and talked to Lou. We looked up, and Lou was green, and he'd shift his panels to beat like our hearts and as dumb as we sounded we told him we'd swooned. Did you see the way our loves looked at us, Lou? Did you see their smiles?

(Did you see us too afraid to close our eyes?)

Benjamin and Linda Hurr, Springfield, MO, for years childless, conceived their first and only daughter years past what they knew as their biological opportunity while Lou watched from above. They bought baby toys and laughed at them and named their daughter Sue. They started

cooking together because they heard on television it was good for marriages, and Sue watched and clapped when her daddy cut tomatoes and balanced slices on the end of his knife, flipping them one by one over to Linda, who smiled but also rubbed her neck and side-eyed the windows.

We still fell out of love. Our paranoia mounted from our second sun, the red one that hung and stared. We called him It. We knew It had seen her naked before we had. We knew It knew us before we knew each other. We were jealous lovers. We were jealous guys. We asked how was your day, and they told us, and was it true? Was it the same day It saw? We couldn't shake It. We felt something behind us from the moment we woke up to the moment we failed to sleep. We felt something behind us about to wring our necks and we fell out of love and we lived alone, and our stomachs ached. We slept on the floor because our bed felt wrong. We lived alone and ate food from boxes and did not miss them, and hated It and could not shake It. We fell out of love and felt It behind us even with our backs to the wall and It drove us crazier than the first time they'd kissed us.

Linda Hurr closed their blinds, and Benjamin felt their love had changed. Linda became a protective mother and held Sue alone. She slept on a cot in the child's room. She researched homeschooling. She screamed when strangers used their driveway to turn around and chased them, throwing sorted recycling at dissipating exhaust. She dreamt of a red sun crashing into the Earth and scorching her child's bones to dust. She ate from boxes and would not eat food Benjamin prepared. Benjamin was not an accommodating husband and tended toward frustration. In both their defenses, the source of their problems was not of this Earth.

Lou saw us lose ourselves because of him, but he did not understand why. "I only know what I saw, your Honor," said Lou. Lou turned purple sometimes. "The more I see, the less I



know.” When Lou saw Benjamin Hurr exit a motel with a woman who was not Linda, he first sent Benjamin an email to see what was up.

Benjamin never responded. Lou never acted. We think he could not decide what to do because of how Linda had been. Maybe he could not find a good reason to tattle.

So he kept his mouth shut.



Layne Parasol, an exceptionally lonely college sophomore from Madison, WI, signaled to Lou every night with her Lite-Brite. U <3 ME? she asked. BLINK 1. And Lou would blink once, mostly for fun, but also because he thought she was beautiful, and he wished she could visit him. Layne spent hours signaling to Lou.

Lou watched Layne all day and learned she was depressed. She saw a counselor on campus and took pills from an orange bottle. One night, Layne just put a frowning face on her Lite-Brite. Lou tried to use his four colors to make Layne a light show. Layne thought Lou had broken.

Layne eventually offed herself, but Lou was gone by then, so he never had to see it.



Lou started to learn that some of us had secrets. Lou started to learn not everything needed to be told. Sometimes Lou saw a secret and winked at its beholder. One night, after a young Catholic boy killed a bunch of people in a church and was promptly found, identified, and arrested by the police (all with Lou’s help, of course), Lou turned the deepest purple we’d ever seen him. “Lou’s really mulling something over tonight,” we said, pointing and wishing we could pick his brain. Lou would be purple for a while.

When it came time for the boy to be tried in a court of law, Lou’s testimony featured not just footage from the night of the shooting, but also nearly two months’ worth of footage of both the killer’s life and the lives of some of the killed. When the judge asked Lou why he had included so many of his memories, Lou just insisted that everything needed to be watched. He could not make a call either way. He wasn’t saying the killing was justified, he wrote in an email, but that both the shooter and the shot had so much pain, and he didn’t know what else to say, and sometimes everything was hurt, hurt, hurt.

A similar situation occurred when Malachai Evans’ mother stabbed him to death. We thought she was a textbook crazy old bat. He’d returned home, still disguised as Molly Kye, and when trying to explain everything to his mother, everything he’d done wrong, saying over and over again in a reconciliatory chant, “I don’t even know what I’ve done—I don’t even know what I’ve done,” she stabbed him in the neck and shoulders and fake breasts until he collapsed onto the floor.

Again, Lou, though he had once sent every cop in America biting at Malachai’s heels, sent along footage of old Mrs. Evans missing her son, asking her postman if he’d heard anything, writing her congressmen (“Hello, can you tell me if anyone has seen my Malachai?”)—not a single scene from the fatal stabbing, and not a single frame of Malachai’s disguise falling to the floor in bloody shreds.

MEIS worked on a patch for Lou’s AI to do away with his sudden moral relativism.



Martin van Buren and Jimmy Carter were at the highest point of a Ferris wheel. “What’s that, on Lou’s eye?” said Jimmy, pointing with the end of his cotton candy. Van Buren, with his arm around Carter’s shoulder and his legs propped up over the side, said, “Nothing but a satellite

tear, my boy. Lou vows to be better from now on.” Above the two presidents was bubble-letter text that said, “You asked, we listened! Lou 1.2, coming soon!”

Some of us were hopeful—certainly we couldn’t have expected Lou’s AI to be perfect from the beginning. Others shook their heads and pointed their guns to the stars in a warning: *too little, too late, pardner.*



Perhaps we had become too lenient with our children. Children went missing every day. Lou usually found them within hours. If Lou took too long looking for missing children, we knew they’d become dead children. Simple as that.

But they loved being outside. They were probably the first generation of children in fifty years who loved being outside, and we did not have to whisper to one another on porches about how children disappear, or talk on the phone about how we just can’t let them out of our sight, or else *they* will take them. They, who steal and touch and ruin children.

Children do go missing, we figured, but nothing really goes missing under Lou.

Little Sue went missing during the night of a flood that took twenty of us. Lou saw us swept under and away by vicious water. Lou saw the fools among us take our trucks to the edge of rivers, and Lou saw our tires sink into the mud that became glue, that grabbed and did not let go, and Lou saw us panic as water filled our lungs to the brim.

Sue Hurr was gone. We all knew what everyone was thinking: she had been taken by the storm, snatched by the water and pulled far away. She was probably floating somewhere facedown with her hair spread out in stringy tendrils. Her pink shirt would appear nearly red, her jeans, with the daisies studded into the pockets, blackened and dragging her slowly deeper. The storm, the flood, had proven itself a practiced killer. She’d be next.

But then, no: Lou just hadn't checked the right places yet. Lou was just a computer. Computers, sometimes, needed more time. Linda had no idea what had happened. She had fallen asleep on the couch for twenty minutes, and when she woke up, Sue was gone.



Donald Trump and John Quincy Adams, in the middle of a game of chess. Ronald Reagan watches in the background, grinning at the sky. "Check mate!" says Trump. He uses his queen to boot Adams' king off the board. The king is mid tumble-twirl, and Quincy does not look amused. "Lou helping you cheat again?" says Quincy, arms crossed, sharp eyebrows disapproving. Across the top of the postcard: Lou is your friend!



Lou took his time. He told us the rain had been so dense it had been difficult to see. He said among all the chaos, he had forgotten to keep track of Sue. Linda Hurr vomited anytime she drank or ate. Benjamin Hurr was nowhere to be found, until Lou, twenty-four hours after the storm, alerted us to Sue's location.

We found her crunched like the letter K. She did not look comfortable, like some children do in death. She looked like she'd been tossing and turning. She looked like a Barbie with its limbs in all the wrong spots. She was fifty yards downhill from a prairie road, thrown aside like trash. She was wrapped in a blanky. We wanted to find something to tell each other, like, "Her face was at peace," or, "She still had her mother's hair," or, "She was still the same little girl," but we couldn't. She was broken, and she was gone, and she was not alone.

Benjamin Hurr sat hunched next to her body. Nearby was his crashed truck. We saw his face and knew he was dead. Not in the same way as his daughter, but dead, finished, nothing left inside. Linda saw him, and made a motion toward him with her arm back and ready to claw, but

she slipped in the slick grass and fell. She landed with her arm and thigh on top of the body. She was weak, and when she tried to stand, she fell again. We saw the family all together one last time.



We sent back their next postcard with notes scrawled on the back: *Screw Lou*. Whether as the astute policeman or the indecisive moralist—we couldn’t stand him. “Blast him out of the sky,” we said.

We didn’t hear from them, of course, as the CDP was still in play, but we heard from one another they’d be taking him away. Apparently he was too expensive to scrap forever, and MEIS was developing new software that could be ready within the year. For the time being, they’d bring him back down to Earth and rework some wiring. Something like that.

Lou sent us messages from the sky on his last operable night, at least for a while. He strobed letters into his body’s frame. SORRY the first one said, followed by I JUST WANTED TO HELP. When we turned our backs because we didn’t care, he said I UNDERSTAND. Then, I WILL SEE YOU AROUND.

Some of us watched Lou as he shone green. Operations were running normally. Lou became smaller and smaller in the sky. A watermelon, a lime, a pea. At first we thought his light was turning off, then we realized he was drifting away.

The Spuds were commanded to grab him, so we read next morning, but Lou would simply shift his panels to redirect their momentum, and one by one they came crashing down to Earth like Uris before them. *Spuds—Mashed!* said the headlines. Patty had taken out the Hollywood sign and in its place was a crater the size of a Wal-Mart.

Lou disappeared. MEIS still had a reading on him, and from following his *beep, beep* on a little screen they learned he floated toward Mars. Some of us said good riddance. Some of us couldn't help but wave our hands above our heads, signaling for him to come back. Newspapers told us not to worry. There'd be a Lou 2 in no time.

George Washington, planting something while FDR looks at the sky through binoculars. "So Lou is a Martian now," says FDR. George Washington's face is strained, almost annoyed, like a parent wondering how properly to punish a child. "Better hope people don't start parking cars there," says George, and when we look closely we see he is actually burying the remains of a cherry tree, the gleam of an ax visible somewhere behind the hand-drawn branches.

## ALL DOGS GO TO CANNON

All the dogs disappeared, which was no skin off my already-peeling back because I started sleeping eight hours a night. I can't stand dogs for the most part. I've tried to own a couple, but I'm one of those people who has pretty dramatic break-ups with pets. Shredded curtains, shattered pots, ruined carpets from vindictive pissing—just no good, partner.

I still fell asleep with the TV on, which I knew was a bad habit. The beginnings of my dreams often mixed with the end of the news. One night I saw a fluff piece where a man-sized, two-legged dog wheeled a cannon around town. The news portion of my dream must have been for the cannon being constructed on the river bank, which I think had to do with a city fair, and the man-sized, two-legged dog crawled from the utility closet of my mind. It was colored like an inverted Snoopy, and it walked with an Igor gait. Something about it was vaguely mannequin.

I first heard about the dogs after my night-run, which I go on from about 11 to 11:30, when I saw a sign for a Yorkie outside Dogwood's front door. Dogwood Apartments was the name of the place I lived, if you can believe it.

The sign looked like a kid had made it. MISING, it said across the top. SMANTHA A GOOD DOG 3 YEER OLD PLEEZ CALL MY DAD SMANTHA LIKS SAMMIN. I was pretty sure the Yorkie belonged to this little girl and her single dad (who was hot—the dad was), so I jotted down the contact info on the bottom of the flier and pocketed it for future reference. This yoga floozy from Floor 2 showed up behind me and also mused over the poster. “My Chamomile is missing, too,” she said, and I thought she was talking about tea.

What a stupid name for a dog.

She mentioned a search party for the dogs, and I faked a yawn, which turned into a real yawn, and told her I was sleepy and would probably turn in, so I did.



**All dogs** should probably have collars in case they go missing. It can be dangerous to put your phone number on the tag, because people can find your address and rob you, but I've heard leaving an email address is good. I wondered if all the dogs had been found by someone who had no phone, no computer—no home at all.

I think eleven Dogwood dogs were missing, gone gradually over a couple weeks. I started to realize something might be up when I found out other people's dogs were missing, too. Out in the city, I mean. At night, when I was running, or walking the block smoking a cigarette, I noticed I couldn't hear any dogs anywhere. Didn't see any, either. MISSING DOG on windows and poles and benches. Stop signs, even.

I had to wear a collar back then, or at least that's what I always called it. It wasn't a house arrest thing, and most nice people reassured me it was just a bit of an insurance policy. Nobody wanted anything bad to happen to me. I usually wore turtle necks to cover it. It beep-beeped and notified nearby police cars if I was ever out past midnight so they could pick me up and take me home.

One day I heard the hot dad's little girl say, "Sometimes life is rough! *Ruff, ruff, ruff!*" Her hot dad's young laugh tumbled around in the walls. I wondered if they were grieving Samantha—the good dog who liked salmon.

As I was falling asleep later that night, the news again melting into my dreams, I saw the man-sized, two-legged dog. It was lanky and walked like a shadow. I heard dogs barking. I woke



up and saw it through my window, walking down the street. Barks echoed their way to me. It had been so long since I'd heard a dog bark. Ruff, ruff, ruff.

I stayed up and listened to them barking—I heard dogs barking—I could *hear* them barking, and I closed my eyes as a breaking news graphic flashed and beep-beeped onto screen.



**All dogs go** crazy when they see a good car to chase. I don't blame them, but I've never been fast enough to catch a car myself. I've never been legally allowed to drive, either. I can empathize with the idea that cars are something exciting and unobtainable.

It wasn't any fun looking for the dogs, but I figured maybe I was the one who needed to do it. Everyone else walked around like clueless assholes and waved pictures of their dogs in the air. Nothing was going to get done without me.

I walked as far as I could every day before midnight and its beep-beeps rolled around. My feet would go numb, and I'd walk until it felt like I was walking on my ankles. I learned pretty quick I wouldn't just be stumbling upon the dogs. I knew what I had to find. It hobble-walked through my dreams.

One night I had him, it—just ahead of me down the road. I saw the large dog walking on two legs with a basket slung over its shoulder. The basket was full of dogs of all shapes and sizes, wagging their tails and howling. The walking dog disappeared down an alley, so I chased it.

But then my stupid collar started beeping, and right as I was peering down the alley, watching it gallump its merry way to wherever it hid, everything slighted to the left. The ground topsy-turve grooved in a clever little circle and became the sky, and my collar beep-beeped a lullaby as I fell into a dream.

A patrol car pulled up at some point and found me snoozing. The officer said some nice stuff and reminded me of how I was and I was embarrassed but he insisted he should take me home so he did.



“**All dogs go to heaven,**” the hot dad said to his little girl. I watched them from my window. They were sitting outside the apartment complex. “That’s probably where Samantha is now, lovebird.” And the little girl nodded her head and bummed around Dogwood for a couple days. I saw her looking at the toes of her shoes, hopping the most depressing scotch I’d ever seen. Until one day the hot dad came home with a bird in a cage and said lookit this!

Then all their troubles were gone.

One by one the owners decided everything was fine. It had only been a couple months. No one cared anymore.

I was sick and tired of it.

I bought a carton of Camels and a few of those stupid nut bars and enough coffee to keep my narcoleptic ass up for months. I camped out my balcony all night. I stared down the street until the walking dog showed up. My TV was on. My white walls were blue.

Sure enough, it did, sashaying street light to sushi shop with a basketful of doggies. I booked it down the stairs, out the front door, and tailed it all sneaky-like for about ten blocks.

We made it to the river wall, and it descended the bank with me behind, and we made our way to a cannon on the riverside.

Midnight said, “I have just a couple minutes to spare!”

My world slighted but I shook it off.



**“All dogs go to cannon,”** said the man-sized, two-legged dog as it stuffed dogs into a baby blue cannon pointed to some target across the river.

I looked at its face and saw eye and mouth holes. Human eyes stuck behind a plaster canine mask. The eyes looked male. He looked like he hadn't slept in weeks.

“All dogs,” he stumbled to his basket, plucked a dog, “go to cannon.” Over and over. All of them, to the cannon, the puppies and oldies and Dobermans and Rottweilers and even a duo of sheepish pugs—the cannon.

I didn't want to speak. I felt I was watching a ceremony. My collar went off. Beep-beep, all dogs, beep-beep, go to cannon. He lit the fuse on the end of the cannon and it fizzled loud and orange and went as slowly as in a cartoon.

I stood in front of the cannon, angled my head to its target-direction, watched the patrol cars beep-beep pull up to the side of the beep-beep river bank, and there was me and the man-sized, two-legged beep-beep dog and we looked at each other and beep-beep held beep-beep hands and I looked into his mask and we too went into the cannon and beep-beep blasted away.

## MY SECOND APPEARANCE IN AN ADULT FILM

*(After Haruki Murakami's "The Second Bakery Attack")*

We'd been lying in bed listening to the radio when at midnight a car alarm went off. After about thirty seconds, my husband turned down the radio and said, "You know, in my opinion, there are three different types of car alarms."

I closed my eyes and listened. He loved to hear himself talk.

"The first type of car alarm," he said, lighting a cigarette (we still smoked back then), "goes for at most ten seconds then stops. It chirps. Like a bird. And it's either gone off by accident, which can happen to anybody, or whoever's car it is knows they have one of those real touchy alarms and can turn it off almost as soon as it starts. Like a reflex." He scratched his head like he hadn't thought of this before. "Sometimes a chirper goes through a few iterations within a short amount of time, like on then off then on then off—which is actually more annoying to the car-owner than to anyone who hears it."

He leaned over me to grab an ash tray and placed it on his night stand. His had long since fallen somewhere underneath our bed. Our bed faced a television, but we had not yet plugged it in nor paid for cable. We were content with our life coming together slowly. We took our time ironing out the kinks of our young marriage, washing dishes at our leisure, throwing away filmy milk only once we could smell it through the icebox. Something about the first few weeks of marriage felt whimsical, like we were a two-person comedy act and the joke was ending soon. We also loved each other, really, for the first time.

I held his chin to steady it so I could use his cigarette to light mine. He continued.

“The second type of car alarm is the anomaly, which is what I’m guessing this one is. The anomaly is most popular in apartment complexes and is an alarm that goes off for at least three minutes with everyone convincing themselves it’s not theirs. They assume it belongs to the neighbor who smokes weed, or the dick who’s always scraping people’s bumpers. Eventually, one by one, everyone goes out to the lot to check and, before long, the culprit is found.”

I could tell that even if he had actually thought about this before, about the types of car alarms, he was now having fun with this and making it into a story. He always had a nuanced way of viewing the world, based entirely off his strangely specific observations of things you wouldn’t expect most people to notice. I always thought he could be an observational stand-up comic.

“How do we know this alarm isn’t ours?” I said, bringing the ash tray back to my nightstand. Another thing about our early marriage was all the games we played. If you’re lucky, you’ll play games like these forever. One of our favorites was that, when we smoked in bed, we’d carefully snag the ashtray back and forth instead of just leaning over one another, plucking the tray with exaggerated finesse like cat burglars. Sometimes I would say, *J’ai besoin de fumer!* One reason we did this was because we were practically always horny as hell, so if our bodies touched, we were bound to quit whatever we were discussing and fuck. Not that we were trying to avoid this, but we’d lost hours, and, in times of mutual unemployment, halves of days, just because we had for a split second felt the other’s weight on our own.

“It’s probably not, because our car’s alarm never goes off. Though this time could be the anomaly.” When he said this, he smiled and blew smoke from his nose. “Then so, the third car alarm is the martyr. It’s loud, it’s dying, and it has something to say.”

He stopped for a moment so I could laugh, and instead I pretended I was choking on my cigarette (one of my little games). I'd put my hands to my neck, bug my eyes out, and let smoke seep from my open mouth. He continued.

“The martyr goes indefinitely. Sometimes someone calls the cops to see if there's legal repercussion for something so annoying. Sometimes these things go for hours. At some point, though, the martyr dies.”

And that's when I remembered. He plucked the ashtray from my nightstand but I grabbed his wrist and stopped him midair. I lit another cigarette off my first, ashed the first, then let him take the ashtray. I sat up in bed as if awaking from a nightmare.

“I just remembered the most annoying martyr I've ever heard,” I said. He sat up too. More than sharing his observations, he loved listening to stories. He was a writer. He worked at the local library demagnetizing and checking out people's books, and he scribbled in little notepads during all his free time. The notepads always had puppies on the bottom left corner. He used to say they eliminated the stress of writing—that if he could just make it to the puppy, he'd have another page written.

He no longer writes, and I miss that about him.

“Maybe we should go to the kitchen for this one,” I said. He lit another cigarette and lay his head back on his pillow, creeping his knuckles near my thigh. They were barely brushing me, but I could sense them.

“It's after midnight. You know if I go to the kitchen I'm gonna be up all night. I get too chatty.” My husband loved drinking in kitchens. He insisted it was the best place in a home to drink. We had another small radio in there and a steady supply of beer. He often had his friends

over and they'd sing and dance and talk their mouths off around our kitchen table. I miss those nights, too.

I reasoned with him, ready to tell my story. I had a distinct sense we were at a turning point. I will admit that I am paranoid in this regard. I obsess over the potential of a single interaction: where can it be taken, and what are its branching paths? Conversations are mazes, and something as small as an unintended facial expression can impact what someone will or won't tell you, which in turn can impact your relationship forever. People can change—in the smallest and quietest—when you tell them a secret.

I've always considered myself a believer in a darkened version of Taoism—still a free-flowing *way of things*, but not quite the same directionless direction as the Tao. Instead, a winding thread always pulling you along, blindfolded, over infinite trapdoors. Any of them could be the one with the rusty latch that creaks and breaks when you step on it, taking you somewhere you didn't expect. My days are filled with the anxiety of moments killed and moments prolonged. I often look back and visualize a field of corpses and a field of flowers. Moments raised; moments aborted.

“We'll kill the six pack we have in the icebox. You have four, I'll have two,” I said.

He liked the sound of that, so we put on some clothes and met around the table and I started my story, after he made fun of me for saying “icebox.” It was a habit I'd picked up from my grandmother.

The car alarm continued, at that point a full-blown martyr, screaming its message in waves.



I could have just lied. “You know what, it's barely a story—a car alarm went on for hours and made me so angry I smoked two whole packs of cigarettes; I just realized how boring that

story is. It probably wasn't even two packs. Ha." It would be a silly story, made sillier by us having to come to the kitchen, and I could have drunk those beers with him and pulled him back to bed. But I didn't. The *way of things* that night was upward. I allowed the moment to unfold.

"Well," I began, cracking open my first beer, "the most annoying martyr I've ever heard actually lasted for the duration of a video I starred in." I sipped my beer. My husband looked at me. I sighed. I really wasn't embarrassed. I just didn't know how to say it, so I said it. "A sex thing." I eyed him from behind the can.

"You were in porn?" He seemed more interested than taken aback. I realized I was actually telling my porn story. I knew it all along, but somehow also didn't. I don't think I could have told this story on any other night of our marriage. That was the way of things.

"I wasn't *in* porn. You remember me telling you about the gambler?"

"Of course. Ken the turd."

Ken the turd was my husband's nickname for him because he was technically Ken the Third, a junior's junior, the man I was dating before I met my husband. I was attracted to him at first because he seemed to have it together, which sounds typical, but he didn't dress like he was rich or work a demanding job or talk about the sort of work he did or think that his money meant anything other than that it was money. That was cool, to me. He just had money and never made gripes about money and also didn't aggressively try to pay for everything all the time, whether for me or our friends. When I found out he made all of his money gambling, and often lost all of his money gambling, I didn't mind. The only thing I never liked about him, at first, anyway, were his hands. They were always clammy and cold and seemed too heavy. Holding his hand was like carrying a slimy weight. Imagine those hands on you.



It ended up being him who broke up with me. He said he didn't want to date a smoker. Coming from a guy who hung around in casinos most days out of the week, I was certain there was something else he disliked about me, but for some reason I never asked. He broke up with me in my apartment and I asked him to leave and that was that. I let that moment die and met my husband shortly after when I checked out a bunch of self-help books from the library.

I continued.

“We didn't have much money between us because he was in the middle of an unlucky streak. We tried online jobs, we tried starting our own cleaning service for houses. For some reason, we saw our money problems as something we needed to figure out as a team. We didn't even live together.” My husband was already finished with his first beer. “I think we felt that way because, when he had money, we just spent it all the time. We didn't really go to lavish places or anything, but whether I'd just gotten paid or he'd just had a good night out, we liked to spend. Maybe it was weird. I don't know. It was fun.

“Anyway, he and I weren't always sexually compatible in the sense that we were never really into each other at the same time. I always wanted him in the morning, and he liked afternoons. I guess it was sort of an internal clock, sort of thing.”

“You can skip any unnecessary details about your previous sex lives,” said my husband. The car alarm was still going. It provided the same sort of lazy ambience as a television does late at night—glowing from another room, its blue light catching and riding the walls. He lit a cigarette. When we had first moved into our apartment, we said we would never smoke inside. Then we said we would never smoke inside without a window open. Then we said we would never ash on the floor. The ashtray slid between us like a hockey puck. We could have

just set it in the middle of the table, but instead we played this new game of pushing it across, fast enough so that if the other did not catch it, it would fall to the floor and shatter.

“It’s important to the story,” I said. He turned on the radio for background noise and found a jazz station. I brought the beer to my mouth but did not drink.

“Anyway, I brought that up, the incompatibility thing, because he was pretty open about watching porn. If I was busy doing something, he’d just tell me, hey, I’m going to be here in the other room, and I knew what he was doing. I would read the Modernists - this was right before I dropped out of grad school- and take notes and highlight everything—you know how I highlight everything” (he smiled and nodded and pulled the ashtray back) “—and he’d be in his room. One day I had a Hemingway question for him because I hated spending too much mental energy on Hemingway, so I walked into his room and saw him watching a video that seemed to be shot with a cellphone. It looked more like *Blair Witch* than it did any adult film I’d ever seen, but I hadn’t like seen a bunch. Here and there. I’ve only watched mine like one or two times.”

My husband laughed and some beer came out of his nose. He stood up and walked around the kitchen, coughing, saying the inside of his nose burned. He wasn’t laughing at me, he said, well, he was, because no one says *adult films*. He had left his cigarette burning on the table. I picked it up and took it as my own. I realized then that smoking is not dissimilar to *the way of things*. Any cigarette can be your last cigarette, or you can smoke all night, nonstop, forever until it kills you. I don’t mean to bring up smoking as much as I have been, but it will always remind me of how young we were back then. I was 25, and he was 30, but for some reason my favorite of our games was that I always said he was 27. “You think you’re hot stuff just because you’re a whole *two years* older than me.” That always made us laugh. I still don’t know why. It’s not

even funny. But everything was funny to us then. The reason we have wrinkled so young, I think, is because we rarely stopped laughing.

“He explained to me that he was watching porn that people made themselves. Couples like us. He told me sometimes legitimate studios shot videos like this of their own, but he was mostly into the way it looked. He said people who made decent videos could make a lot of money, and somehow it was already decided.

“I don’t remember what made me so willing. I was younger. I liked him. He told me we could hide my face, or blur it out, but none of that mattered as much as filming the thing. We said we’d do something outside. Something simple. He had mentioned the money, but it was barely for that at all. For some reason I just wanted to do it. I wanted to know I could. We did make decent cash, though. We technically still do.”

“You still get money from this?” My husband was close to finishing his second beer. For the first time in my story I felt that I had offended him, but he matched me—he allowed the moment to unfold. “You got a PayPal set up or something? That could be our carry-out fund. Your dad’s been on our asses to make a budget.”

And again we laughed.

“So, we filmed it on his camcorder. We drove to that park that used to be down Forder, River Cave, or whatever, *Cliff Cave*, and we drove off one of the longer trails to a dirt road for I don’t know. Half a mile. Not far. Then took his car, his truck—we went a little farther off that road. Kind of out of sight but not totally hidden. And it was kind of exciting, actually. And we said we didn’t want to do any narrative, it would just start with—”

“Again, feel free to skip whatever you need to.” He slid a beer my way, and I realized I had barely started mine. I took a big drink.

“So we fooled around in the car first, because we had stage fright, and it was a little tricky at figure it out, how to film the thing. But once he had me how he needed me, so he could still hold his camera—we were in the grass next to his truck, and once we had it figured out, we just went for it and filmed. And about 30 seconds in, we heard this car alarm go off. I don’t know if it was one of those crazy echoes that just happens sometimes when you’re outside, or if maybe we were way closer to a parker lot than we thought, but a car alarm that was like, loud as hell just blared forever and wouldn’t stop, one of those alarms that goes through like eight cycles of different noises, and he said to me we should just keep going because it would probably stop, and it didn’t.

“After a while, we’re still filming, still going, and so is the car alarm. I think, by your definition, it was officially a martyr. He turned the camera off a couple times and considered waiting, but then we’d look at ourselves, half naked in a park frequented by families, and decide to just finish the video and go home—we’d committed up to that point, so, you know. We figured maybe the video was ruined anyway, with all the starting and stopping, but when you film yourself fucking, it’s harder than you think to stop.”

“Not sure about that, but continue,” said my husband, his words not matching his grin. Our moment was taking a new direction. He looked like he was ready to say something, like he’d figured something out. We both stopped for a moment to take drags of our cigarettes and sips of our beers. The car alarm hadn’t quit. It pulled on our pant legs like a hungry child.

“And so he ended up putting it online. I told him it was fine. He cut it together to about eight minutes, tossed it somewhere on the internet, monetized it, and we never really thought about it. About a month later, when I was still hating Hemingway, he called me into his room.

He showed me a string of comments on our video, then he circled his mouse around our view count, which was nearly 300,000.” My husband’s eyes about popped out of his head.

“300,000? No way. I’m sure I would’ve seen it somewhere. I watched a lot of porn when you were in Japan.” Sometimes I felt like he could make me laugh whenever he wanted. As if it weren’t him being funny, but just a button he could push that pulled my breath out from the back of my throat.

“It probably has more nowadays. I can show it to you if you really want. Apparently it became so popular *because* of the martyr. Fans of that kind of stuff, the sort of home-made adult videos, especially like to know if it’s real—or so he told me. People in the comments mentioned the car alarm, how it brought the video to life (in more crude terms, but still). Even when we left the park the martyr was still going.”

We sat there for a second. My husband had an unlit cigarette in his mouth, his eyes pointed to the ceiling. I noticed had had drunk a third beer.

“And that’s my martyr story, which I guess is my adult—my porn story.” I quickly lit a cigarette and lit his for him. I wasn’t sure what I wanted from our moment anymore. All I knew was that, better than anything in the world, cigarettes are practically emergency aid for conversations.

“That explains why you won’t look at me,” said my husband. He eyed me like he had a secret. “I don’t think you do it on purpose, it’s probably some kind of curse. But you’ve never actually looked at me, like into my eyes, when we have sex. It’s not even that you have to. I don’t mind and it’s not really. It’s not like a *thing* I’d like you to do. But you don’t. If you didn’t know.”

I couldn’t read him.

“That can’t be true,” I said, but when I thought about it, I knew it was. He didn’t seem to care. He looked like he was excited. He started talking with his hands. He became passionate around his fourth or fifth beer, so this was a little early.

“We need to make a video. We need to make an adult film.”

“What?”

“We don’t have to put it online, but it needs to be in public. If we make some porn, I think you’ll be able to look at me. I always thought you were bored with sex, thought I was a lousy fuck, but you *can’t* look at me. It’s a curse. Like a porn curse of some kind.”

“This is stupid.”

“We’ve gotta make some porn.”

“You’re crazy.” I started drinking the beer more quickly. My heart felt weird. Too much nicotine; me, a two-beer girl; the way I hated and loved how he analyzed me like the characters in his stories. I believed him. I shouldn’t have, really. My husband, in-line with his weird observations, had a way of projecting things onto the world that were not necessarily there. Sometimes his observations were not observations at all, but just more stories he had come up with to pass the time of a day.

“Baby,” he said, and he rarely called me, or calls me, baby, and so I knew he was either buzzed, serious, or didn’t mean a word he said. “Let’s be stars. Let’s make some porn. Let’s make an *adult film*. I want to look at you.”

Then I *knew* this was one of his bits. He often acted on them and turned them into games, with us as the players. I couldn’t tell if he was bored or jealous or excited.

And I realized now he was the one doing the unfolding. He really wasn’t wrong. He wasn’t really right. He was joking and he was serious. He just *was*. My wondering eyes were a

curse, or they weren't, or they were. The curse might have gone back as far as the beginning of my sexual history; I couldn't remember ever looking someone directly in the eyes. Somehow I knew, the *moment* knew, the thread of the darkened Tao pulled away in front of me and I chased it like a curious kitty.

I thought of just a few hours earlier, when we had sex to a late-night broadcast of *Coast to Coast*. A particularly frazzled caller-in spoke about a ghost in his life. That was what he said. "There's a ghost in my life." While I listened to the man describe the way it lived in his mirrors and ate his snacks (or so he hypothesized), I looked at our ceiling, and only our ceiling, to a small brown spot of water damage that was shaped like South America.

We smashed out our cigarettes and finished our beers and, giddy and nervous and warm from our drinking, left our apartment without locking the door and found that the alarm was coming from a car next to ours. My husband held the keys in the air, pressed the panic button, then pressed it again so our car made a little chirp. He gave me a look that said, "See?" as if to prove the alarm was someone else's. We were anomaly free.



We drove everywhere looking for the right spot. It was later than two in the morning. My husband ruled out restrooms in Denny's and McDonald's, inferring that it should be outside like the original. He also said he was so hungry that if he went into a McDonald's he'd be inclined to hold up the place for a Big Mac. He'd forgotten his wallet. I looked out my window at buildings that because of a ripple in the glass looked like botched, melting cakes, and when I was a little girl my grandfather pulled me in for a secret, and I could smell his sweat, and he said the trick to a good marriage is hitting a woman until she loves you. I think because of his glaucoma he had mistaken me for my brother. We had similar haircuts back then.

I suggested we go under the water tower. It would be inconspicuous enough, maybe even romantic—a unique location for our video. It was my favorite time of day. Other cars passed us and I thought they looked like submarines. My husband said he thought he knew where the water tower was. A cop car shined its ruby and sapphire lights and went after someone in the other direction. I watched them through the mirror and their brake lights became flames that fell into a far-off void; my sister, on her wedding day—dressed in black because she was still an artist, still wanted to break convention—told me she could have loved anyone and she just happened to love her husband, and it was noon and she was drunk on whiskey, and she kissed me on my mouth, and put her tongue in, and I still don't know if I was dreaming.

We could see the water tower, but we couldn't get to it. It was tall yet stout and green yet rusted and looked like you could knock it over if you found its weak spot. The roads wound around and we ended up in neighborhoods we'd never been to. We would point between houses, say let's do it there, but we both stayed silent and didn't want to talk about what-ifs. What if some kid. What if a cop. What if a neighborhood watch. Suddenly we had questions. He kept driving and was just as enthusiastic as ever, and he turned on a late-night talk show where people could not help but be and fall in love. We considered their calls like psychologists, eating a bag of peanuts I'd found in the glovebox, nodding our heads, making a game of it while we waited for the dashboard lighter to heat up and pop out—my mother told me love was when you stopped asking questions, and she said that was trust.

We drove alongside the river, maybe to check if we were brave enough to get close. We smoked our last cigarettes, and I watched the black waves eat themselves and cut toward somewhere south. I looked at the trees and imagined us below them; I looked at the dark water and figured it was what a curse looked like; I looked at my husband and his hands on the wheel,



and I wasn't scared; my gambler boyfriend once held my literature anthology with his left hand and I watched his lean muscle pull taut. He told me Hemingway must've been terrible with women, forearms as big as he had. When I asked him why, and laughed a little, he told me to read between the lines.

Finally we were tired. We both surrendered our moment and felt okay to let it go. We told ourselves we would have gone through with it, had we made it to the water tower. We pulled into a gas station so he could use three dollars in change and a Marlboro coupon to buy us a pack to split. I sat in the car. Other than a bloated trucker at a pump, no one was there. The gas station was green around the top and lit like a lightning bug.

When my husband exited the gas station, I exited the car. I walked around the side of the building. I don't think we lacked courage, and I don't think anything had to happen that night. Hours earlier, I think I could have let him uncurl his knuckles and touch me, and I could have leaned over him to ash my cigarette, and our game would have become our love. But I waited around the corner of the building and took his hand, and pulled him to me, and behind a dumpster like a pair of swooning homeless we went to the ground. After we had already begun he took his phone out, and I held his arm steady, and he laughed like he did when I kissed him, and he said what am I supposed to do, and I stopped his wrist midair and looked into the small lens's eye, and I knew all it could see was my face, my eyes, moving slightly and awkwardly like we did. He said into my ear isn't, isn't an adult film supposed to have some, have some fun angles or something, and I let my knee hit the metal of the dumpster again and again and it sounded like a gong, like a low-flying warning, and anyone watching would know this was real. And he dropped the phone, and we took our time and kept our eyes closed to avoid looking at the spilled soda and food around us. The phone had landed on its screen, and all the video would

show was the lightning bug green of the gas station and the sky above that, and its audio would pick up our subtle movement and the occasional knock of my knee on the hollow dumpster, and traffic passing by, and laughter.

Later, in bed, after we'd showered together and wondered what flavors of slurpees and what classifications of gasoline were stuck to our bodies, we sat up against the wall and passed our ashtray back and forth. The sun was coming up. It was Sunday morning, and the library was closed. I had nothing to do all day. We stared at the TV, still unplugged, and listened to radio news and ate breakfast burritos we'd microwaved. We watched our adult film, its shaky first couple minutes showing mostly my face, occasionally my breasts, and I stared into the eyes of the me from a couple hours before. I think it's a promising directorial debut, said my husband, and I said the experimental approach shows a well-studied cameraman, but the vague ending leaves a little to be desired.

We joked about our little movie until we were comfortable with it, and we ran out of things to say. The sun shone white through our blinds, and my husband, on occasion, would hit the panic button on his keys, then turn it off, disturbing the birds who slept high in the budding trees outside our apartment, forcing them awake with a chirp and beckoning them to sing.

## INTO THE NEXT

I believe in a past life a wood chipper killed me. I believe I was a child because, in this memory, I have a young mother. She screams from the porch while the chipper eats me up. I believe I went in head first, though that image (i.e., the chipper's blades approaching as if at the end of a tunnel) might be a dramatic effect of memory. I may have gone legs first, backwards, upside-down. Perhaps I reached too far inside.

The details materialize because I am close to death again, stabbed with plastic worms that drink from my arms and nose. Time is trays. If I think long enough I know what is coming, and what has been, and how it feels.

The memory begins when my grandfather drives me home, where my mother is waiting to take me from his car. She opens the door and plucks me from the passenger seat of my grandfather's car. This was before children so strictly had to sit in car seats. She hugs me. My grandfather notes the neighbors have a large wood chipper. It rests on the curb, and a tree sits chopped up in the yard—its wood waiting to be chewed and spat out smaller.

My grandfather and I had been somewhere together—I do not remember where. In that past life, the day I spent with my grandfather consisted of the last things I ever did, and I cannot remember anything at all. I also cannot remember the final days of my most recent grandfather, who has been gone for forty-five years. Why is it that the hours leading up to one's death often feel the most insignificant? It could be because the end cancels all of that, renders it nothing. I am always going to die, and die again. Deaths are eternal in the memories of those who grieve them.

My mother and grandfather sit on the porch with the dog. I play in the yard. The wood chipper rattles and clanks and coughs while the neighbor tosses pieces of his tree into its dicey teeth. I want to see how it really looks when the wood goes through. I need to see in the way children need to see.

I once pulled apart a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and threw it at the ceiling because I had never seen it done. Was it possible? Could a sandwich be thrown? For children, the spectrum of possibility and impossibility is the greatest unknown, and they are its researchers and practitioners. I had never seen the way peanut butter held to the bread in sections that latched, but the jelly slid—how it looked muddy when stuck to the ceiling. We forget how so many things we do for the first time are because we need to know, and want to know, and we mean nothing by it except to see the thing be and happen right there.

My grandfather and mother laugh. The dog runs to me. The neighbor tosses in more wood and it somersault-soars out the other side—brown confetti. We are there in the front yard where it must be summer because of how green the grass is. We are under the trees that bloom wide and shadow us. The neighbor walks into his garage, and my mother warns me to please not go near the wood chipper. I obey her for a while. This past life mother is sterner than my most recent mother, who left me at fifty, who looked as I must now, here, drinking and being drunk by thirsty vines.

But I disobey. Because children disobey, and children forget. I have forgotten the way the once-whole tree looked after it billowed out the chipper's backwards snout.

Now, I can see it all better. My Velcro shoes. My grandfather's tanned face, scarred with hooked wrinkles. My mother's curly black hair. Her new haircut resting on her shoulders like ink stains. The interior of her minivan: cassettes and blackberry-flavored water.

I pick up a stick of my own and approach the mouth. I hear my grandfather ask me what I am doing, and his broken cadence reveals he already knows it is too late—he has lived life and seen many go, and next is me and he cannot stop it even if he wanted. I hear the dog's collar jingle. My mother cries out in a way that is painful and shrill. When her voice breaks, I learn something about all the mothers I have had and will have, of all the mothers anyone has ever had, of all the mothers who have loved deeply and fiercely through peanut butter and jelly.

Even I am scared, when I see the blades of the mouth rotating and crossing and pulling. I feel vaguely that I am falling. The end of my stick catches one of the teeth and away I go into now.