

Fragmented Perspectives: Creating Empathy Through Experiments in Form and Perspective in Short Fiction

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A Doctoral Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the award of Doctor of
Philosophy, Loughborough University

January 2017

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Abstract

This thesis addresses a creative writing approach to exploring reader empathy through the critical analysis of writing devices implemented by contemporary American short fiction writers and through creative experimentation through a written collection of short stories. It explores the ways in which writers can implement specific literary devices to potentially affect a reader's emotional reaction to a character or situation. The specified devices in this research have been utilised by contemporary American authors in their short fiction collections, namely Lydia Davis (*The Collected Stories of Lydia Davis*), George Saunders (*Tenth of December*), and David Foster Wallace (*Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*), who have influenced reader empathy in their short stories.

Two categories of devices are in focus: narrative perspective and story format. These categories are signified due to contemporary American authors' experimentation with these devices and due to their inclusion in literary theory on reader empathy and fiction, namely Suzanne Keen's theory of narrative empathy. She focuses on the importance of reader empathy (namely, the effects that fiction can have on a reader in reality) and discusses devices that writers have used to possibly evoke these emotions. Keen explores the relationship between a reader and character identification, with a further emphasis on reader empathy and reader altruism in an inter-disciplinary setting, stating that reader empathy may lead to reader altruism; however, little to no research has been conducted on the *creative implementation* of writing techniques in regards to reader empathy from the perspective of a creative writer.

Through creative application, this thesis aims to show the ways in which devices explored by narrative theorists can create the possibility for reader empathy. Therefore, the thesis takes into account first-, second-, and third-person narrative perspectives and question and answer (Q&A), short-short (a.k.a. flash fiction), and segmented formats through literary analysis of contemporary short fiction and through writing experimentation in the form of a short story collection.

The thesis aims to explore the creative use of these devices and their linkage to reader reaction by the production of a short fiction collection entitled *Fragmented Perceptions: A Collection of Characters*. This creative work intends to implement the specified devices researched in order to experiment with perspective and format in relation to a possible empathetic connection of the reader to a character. Finally, by analysing possible effects on reader empathy through devices employed in the creative work, the thesis explores ways in which authors can use narrative perspective and format to discover various ways in which a writer can implement devices to affect reader empathy through short fiction.

Acknowledgments

The experience as a PhD research student has been both challenging and enriching. Throughout the many sleepless nights, the lack of weekends, and a work day that often stretched into twelve hours, I have been blessed with those around me who have supported me along the way.

First of all, I would like to thank my supervisors, Dr. Kerry Featherstone and Dr. Paul Jenner, for their encouragement and support, especially when finagling with technology in order to speak to one another. I will always be grateful for the help and the laughs, and for excessive talks of coffee and cats. On a serious note, I believe both of you have pushed me to excel as a researcher and a writer. You have helped me to improve extensively, especially in regards to my analytical skills and my patience, and I hope that you survived the years being subjected to my Americanisms and Americanness!

I would also like to thank my family. My mom and dad, Lori and Jon Bigler, and my sisters, Erin and Elyse Bigler, have made it possible to finish my research while holding on to some segment of my sanity. From long talks on the phone to Skype sessions and those rare face-to-face instances, all of you have made me feel as if I am not alone. Especially through the more stressful periods and times in which I thought I would not succeed or finish, having you there gave me the strength and confidence to take a deep breath and kick at least some of the anxiety. I know my family is there for me. Always has been; always will be. I've come such a long way in life, and I owe that to each of you. I love you all so much.

Finally, I would like to thank my rock, my best friend, my teammate, and my husband. Alexis Alamel, you are the reason I pursued a PhD in the first place. You constantly believe in my intelligence, and you challenge me every single day to learn and grow. You have always believed in my ability to pursue this colossal life experience and have never once doubted me. Through the tossing and turning at night, the tears, the panic attacks, the frustration, the fatigue, and the lack of confidence, you have always been there to make sure I don't ever doubt myself. I'm honored and so lucky to have you by my side. *Merci et je t'aime.*

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I. Introduction

i. Narrative Theory and Creating Empathy

In contemporary narrative theory, the term "narrative empathy", defined as "the sharing of feeling and perspective-taking induced by reading, viewing, hearing, or imagining narratives of another's situation and condition" (Keen 2013, 2) has become a prevalent topic of discussion to American literary theorists. This is, in part, due to contemporary narratologists' increased interest in exploring empathy in literature. A particular aspect of this exploration is the recognition and study of narrative devices that can evoke empathetic responses. One focus of Suzanne Keen's research that will be explored in this thesis is writing devices that can lead to empathy for a character or situation. Keen's work, which is referenced by both Eva Dadlez (e.g. *What's Hecuba to Him?: Fictional Events and Actual Emotions*) and Mary-Catherine Harrison (e.g. "The Paradox of Fiction and the Ethics of Empathy"), looks at ways in which narrative perspective and story format can evoke emotional responses. She is considering empathy in that she believes it might lead to altruism. I am focusing on her discussion of writing devices in order to experiment with how writers might implement these devices to evoke an emotional reaction. Elements of Keen's work I consider are studies of narrative perspective and structural devices that writers can utilise regarding writing empathy. Dadlez references Keen's observations on empathy with a section of her work on altruistic actions towards humankind after experiencing empathy to a character, and finally Harrison discusses empathic bias for similarity (a.k.a. similarity bias) (e.g. feeling more empathetically inclined to a character that has a similar background or experience) and uses Keen's studies on narration and empathy to examine how a writer might influence the overcoming of similarity bias through fiction; however, little analysis has been done to address how a *writer* might create the opportunity to connect empathetically with a character through both perspective and format.¹ In this thesis, I explore Keen, Dadlez, and Harrison's studies on empathy in order to explore writing devices that could be used in creative writing to structure an empathetic response.

The perspectives of reader response theory and creative writing theory have been taken into account. As this thesis focuses on the creative implementation of devices that have the potential to influence the empathetic nature of a character or situation, reader response is not necessarily in focus. Both writers and readers' responses can be considered subjective (as each

¹ Coined by Martin Hoffman, "similarity bias" is defined by Harrison as "our unwillingness or inability to empathize with people who are not like ourselves" (Harrison 2011, 257).

person has his or her own perception of a situation), therefore attempting to create an empathetic response tailored to a specific reader is not necessarily pragmatic. Addressing both Wolfgang Iser and Umberto Eco's concept of the "model reader", there exists the issue of the writer assuming the reader's background and responses, which is not a universal representation of readership. Eco states that "a text is the result of two components, the information which the author supplies and the information which the model reader adds and which is more or less strictly determined by the author's input" (Eco 206). I focus on the author's input in creating empathetic short fiction, and stress that the information which a reader adds cannot necessarily be determined by a wide and varied audience, thus avoiding the concept of a model reader. Instead, the thesis aims to indicate creative writing devices that have not been discussed in depth to aid in creating short fiction pieces that *could* foster an empathetic response.

Creative writing theory and the creation of empathy have also been taken into account when discussing the creation of empathy in short fiction. Though several writers and theorists have addressed empathy and creative writing, little research has been produced on the use of both perspective and format as writing tools to create possible empathetic responses. For example, Andrew Melrose's research touches on both readers' and writers' perceptions of certain narrative perspectives (namely first-person), but does not study how this perspective can be implemented in *multiple* ways in order to evoke an emotional response.² Likewise, David Morley's *The Cambridge Introduction to Creative Writing* touches on characterisation of a protagonist and situational response, but does not address specific devices of characterisation that can be implemented in order to influence empathy. His instruction also correlates to the issue of a writer supposing the response of the reader when he states that creative writing is "translated through a writer's prism of influences and artistic sympathies" (Morley 2007, 73). Therefore, the creative writing techniques in this thesis are discussed in regards to their use by writers, including myself, and the various ways in which these devices could influence empathy with a character; however, the techniques addressed are suggested possibilities for empathy, and are not definitive due to the subjectivity of creative writing construction and reader response.

As a writer and a researcher, my interest focuses on the writer's employment of narrative techniques to influence empathy for characters. An empathetic connection with a character can become engrossing in a fictional story, which in turn can allow the writer to have an impact

² This is communicated through his article, "Reading and Righting: Carrying on the 'Creative Writing Theory' Debate" (Melrose 2009).

through creative writing techniques. Keen states, "Readers' cognitive and affective responses do not inevitably lead to empathizing, but fiction does disarm readers of some of the protective layers of cautious reasoning that may inhibit empathy in the real world" (Keen 2006, 213). The loss of these "protective layers" can allow more freedom for the writer to create prose in which empathy for a character can be addressed. Keen's concepts relating to empathy in fiction are discussed in Chapters I, II, IV and V, in relation to her observations on varied types of empathy through creative writing, including (but not limited to) ambassadorial, bounded, and broadcast strategic empathies. The desire to study and implement writing tools to evoke empathy is triggered by my interest in the construction of short fiction with the deliberate application of perspective and form to influence an emotional reaction to a character or situation. Therefore, I consider Keen's theoretical work on empathy from a creative writer's position. I explore the writer's construction of empathy in fiction through narrative perspective and story format; this acts as a study into all three theorists' emphasis on potential altruism, which refers to the fictional piece's effect on actions in reality (e.g. a person reacts empathetically to a story on beggars, and therefore gives a beggar money). My thesis focuses on creative writing devices that can create empathy through experimentation in writing technique with these specific devices. Keen, Dadlez, and Harrison discuss empathy in creative writing possibly influencing altruism. Empathy could then lead to altruism, however my thesis focuses solely on the creation of empathy to a character from the perspective of a creative writer.

I consider Keen's claims and examples of empathy, referred to by Dadlez and Harrison, to explore the possibilities for writers to employ literary devices and formats that affect the connection to a character or situation. Keen states that her theory of narrative empathy "elaborates the uses to which real authors/narrative artists put their human empathy to work in imaginative character-creation and in other aspects of worldmaking, as well as theorizing readers' responses" (Keen 2006). One way in which I consider Keen's theory is the author's use of tools to create potential empathy in the construction of short fiction. Certain aspects of "character-creation" and "worldmaking" explored in this thesis relate to the influence of narrative perspective and narrative structure on a perception of a character. I also identify potential writing techniques that can create empathy, and I explore their effectiveness by implementing them in my creative work. These are: first-, second-, and third-person narrative perspectives and segmented, Q&A, and short-short fiction formats.

As stated above, Suzanne Keen has worked extensively on the concept of narrative empathy. Keen states that empathy "can be provoked by witnessing another's emotional state, by hearing about another's condition, or even by reading. It need not be a conscious response"

(Keen 2007a, 4). She continues, "in empathy, sometimes described as an emotion in its own right, we feel what we believe to be the emotions of others" (*ibid.* 5). This is a reference to empathy as the capacity to place oneself in the position of and experience similar emotions to a character. Additionally, Keen identifies empathy as an emotion within its own right. Empathy for a character can be experienced through the writer's implementation of certain techniques, and by doing so has the prospect of feeling a similar emotion that the character feels. Keen believes that empathy for a character can be expressed through literature, but does point out that empirical studies on reader empathy have not been numerous or extensive enough to prove that certain narrative devices absolutely lead to empathy.

Keen also speaks of the potential for empathy to be understood and explored in various disciplines besides the cognitive sciences, including through the analysis of literature. She believes a "consolidation of inquiry into the emotions going on in many different fields may now begin. An exemplary statement of intention, the Myrifiend Manifesto (Freeman 2008), explicitly calls for study of the emotional experience of literature and the arts and nominates empathy as an underlying artistic structure" (Keen 2011, 38). The Myrifiend Manifesto is an example of the growing interest in the empathetic nature of art. In my short story collection, I experiment with writing tools that could create an "underlying structure" of empathy so that the writing allows an identification with the emotions of a character. It is this "emotional experience of literature" that is being considered in this thesis through the writing style and possible emotional reaction to the way in which a story is crafted through certain writing devices that have been mentioned as potential (note *potential*, not probable) factors in creating empathy. Sternberg's Proteus Principle is taken into consideration as well, which cautions "narrative theorists who would make generalizations about the effects of particular narrative techniques. Sternberg's Proteus Principle asserts the "many-to-many correspondences between linguistic form and representational function" (Keen 2016, 109). Taking this into account, my research focuses on various writing devices in the possible creation of empathy, but does not explicitly state that one technique is wholly responsible (if at all) for any potential empathy, as empathy in and of itself is subjective. Instead, these techniques will be explored to see how they could affect emotions with the implication that many techniques could be used within the same story from a writer's perspective.

As stated previously, empathy and other emotions are subjective. Both writers and readers have different backgrounds and varying life experiences, which could affect the reaction to a character's emotion. For example, a war veteran might experience a stronger empathetic emotion upon reading a fictional account of a soldier than another who does not

have the same history. In addition, a writer might not be able to succinctly convey precise emotions through that fiction if the writer is not fully aware of the emotional implications. In this, it is key to remember that the reader "feel[s] what [he or she] *believe[s]* to be the emotions of others", that each person, reader and writer, has his or her own perspective of the situation and the character that might not correlate with the writer's intent. This should be considered when attempting to create an emotional connection to short fiction. As Keen states, "that readers also make willful decisions about how to take or use narratives (rather than guilelessly receiving or consuming them) follows on a long tradition understanding readers as co-creators of fiction" (Keen 2016, 108). Writers and readers can overcome personal experience or bias through their own co-creation, but individuality must be recognised as a possible factor when creating a story on a certain topic or for a certain audience.

Eva Dadlez' research follows Keen when discussing and elaborating on empathy in narrative forms, though she branches into the study of altruism through empathy. In her book, *What's Hecuba to Him?: Fictional Events and Actual Emotions*, she notes that "to empathize is to imagine having the thoughts and beliefs, the desires and impulses of another" (Dadlez 1997, 7). This aligns with Keen's observation that empathy is based on one's personal perception, however both Dadlez and Keen believe that fiction can create an outlet to connect to a character who is unlike him or herself. Dadlez' choice of "imagine" shows the involvement in the interpretation of the emotions of the character; however, if a reader has been able to empathise with the character, he or she has possibly become receptive to the "thoughts and beliefs" of the character. Dadlez stresses a purpose for evoking empathy. She states that "empathetic responses to literature can often provide the clearest route to a work's ethical perspective on the human condition or on human nature, for empathy involves imaginatively entering into a perspective other than one's own" (*ibid.* 190). As does Keen, Dadlez argues that empathy can be used in literature to address differing beliefs and ideas between the audience and a character. For example, a wealthy person who may not have a concept of poverty could imagine awareness by connecting with an impoverished character. Keen states that "Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* (1935) provides a good example of ambassadorial strategic empathy in a novel, written in English for a readership outside the caste system that in the 1930s still governed India" (Keen 2006, 224).³ An empathetic reaction to a character who has been written a certain way has the ability to create an attachment to a character of varying background. The

³ Wherein the writer "uses an 'ambassador', a representative to the reader for a chosen group whose job is to cultivate empathy" (Utell 2016, 157), discussed further in later chapters.

span of empathetic emotions is expanded through narrative devices, with Dadlez clarifying that "empathy can provide insights into denial, self-deception, rationalization, self-destructiveness, and conflicts among desires" (Dadlez 1997, 183). By using creative tools discussed below, empathy could lead to a greater understanding of a particular concept or situation that may be foreign or previously misunderstood, though this is not to say that the work will necessarily lead to altruism.⁴ My work focuses on the narrative ways in which a writer can create a connection to characters of differing backgrounds stressing the tools used to create empathy through creative writing.

An element of another narrative theorist's work I focus on is Mary-Catherine Harrison's discussion of the importance of empathetic characterisation. She indicates that empathy is "primarily used to refer to... perspective-taking, that is, imagining ourselves in another's place or with another's emotions and thoughts" (Harrison 2014, 135-36). This reflects the views of both Keen and Dadlez. Harrison describes this as "imagining", which echoes Keen's "believe" and Dadlez' "imagine". The narrative definition of reader empathy retains the reminder that the perceived empathetic connection and the emotions created through the connection involve imagination that can be influenced by writing choices. Writers can elicit empathy in order for the relation to a character of a differing background, but the subjectivity of writer and reader perception and personal background must be taken into account in the creative writing process. Harrison argues that "narrative empathy is uniquely capable of circumventing the similarity bias through compositional strategies related to foregrounding and perspective" and that "the act of reading can overcome the bias that scholars have observed in relationships between people" (Harrison 2011, 255). Harrison elaborates that "empathic bias for similarity means that the affective bonds and ethical motivations that accompany empathy are significantly diminished in relationships with outgroups, as defined by sociological difference" (*ibid.*). In my analysis and in my creative works, I look at compositional strategies that can be useful to writers when attempting to connect with a character that might differ from cultural, social, and sexual normative states (amongst others).

When looking at narrative theories of empathy and creative writing theory, there is a difference between an affect and a feeling or emotion. Affect theory, or theories of prepersonal feelings or actions, are not addressed in my analysis of writing empathetic short fiction as they

⁴ Keen is sceptical of altruism through empathetic reading. She "criticizes accounts of narrative empathy that insist on moral efficacy as an outcome of reading, arguing that narrative empathy does not often lead to documented altruistic action" (Keen 2007, 145).

are not necessarily directly connected to the expression of empathy focused on in this thesis.⁵ This decision has been influenced by the work of Ruth Leys, whose research addresses affect and literary devices. She states that "affect is a non-conscious experience of intensity... [it] cannot be fully realised in language... because affect is always prior to and/or outside consciousness" (Leys 2011, 456). Affect could be considered the unconscious moment before an empathetic connection with a character. In my analysis, I discuss the possibility for writing emotional response through considering the position of a character, therefore processing the emotions a character feels.

Writers can construct empathic characters through varying emotions (empathy differing from facets of sympathy). Harrison looks at the changing definition of sympathy, stating that "sympathy is now used in a more limited sense to describe pity or compassion for individuals in states of distress" (Harrison 2011, 256). Being aroused by erotica, for example, denotes empathy arising from reading a text. Keen elaborates on this concept by stating "although psychological and philosophical studies of empathy have tended to gravitate toward the negative, empathy also occurs for positive feelings of happiness, satisfaction, elation, triumph, and sexual arousal" (Keen 2007a, 5). In my thesis, I explore multiple character emotions and the possibility of an empathetic response. Empathy, in Keen's theoretical context, differs from sympathy in that sympathy (when pertaining to the reaction to a character) is the understanding of a character's emotions or positions within the narrative, whereas empathy is the experiencing of an emotion similar to that of a character.⁶ Empathy and sympathy are closely related, however, the goal of creating my short fiction is to experiment with the ways in which *empathy* with a character can be fostered through narrative technique.

ii. Contemporary Short Fiction Experimentation

With the turn of the 21st century and the introduction of new technologies, there has been an apparent rise in American writers' interest in creating stand-alone short stories. *The Bookseller* (a prominent publishing industry magazine) finds that "short-story sales rose 35 per cent in 2013" (Baker 2014). This increase is due, in part, to the introduction of reading

⁵ Brian Massumi's work on affect theory is highly regarded within academia in reference to affect as its own entity. His definition of affect in his introduction to Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* states "affect is not a personal feeling. Feelings are *personal* and *biographical*, emotions are *social*, and affects are *prepersonal*" (Shouse 2005, 2). Therefore, this thesis will focus on feelings and emotions as opposed to affects, due to the social emotion of empathy.

⁶ Keen condenses the main difference between empathy and sympathy: "Empathy: I feel what you feel. Sympathy: I feel a supportive emotion about your feelings" (Keen 2006, 209).

technologies such as the Kindle and the promotion of short fiction by online booksellers.⁷ The demand for short fiction has expanded, which has created channels for writers to experiment, theorists to analyse, and readers to experience. The narrative prose fiction form that I work with both in relation to literary analysis and in my creative construction is the short story. The brevity of this form permits me to experiment extensively with a variety of techniques within the confines of the thesis. As short fiction has become more prevalent both in consumer tendency (through simplified electronic purchases as well as apps such as "The Offline Reader") and writer interest (in part due to the expansion of creative writing undergraduate and MFA programmes in the United States), it is also taken seriously by the literary community. David Foster Wallace's short fiction collection, *Oblivion*, was awarded the New York Times notable book of the year in 2004. Literary interest in short story collections has increased since then, with Lydia Davis' *Collected Works* winning the Man Booker International Prize in 2013. She is the first author of a short story collection to receive this prize. Shortly after, George Saunders was awarded the Folio Prize (formerly known as the Literature Prize) in 2014 for his collection, *Tenth of December*. With increased literary interest, short story collections have reaffirmed their place within contemporary American literature. Using the short works of Davis, Saunders, and Wallace, I critically evaluate the writers' implementation of narrative and structural tools in relation to empathy. This is pertinent to my analysis as all three authors use narrative perspective and story format when discussing the possibility of creating empathy with a character. Other authors were considered for analysis in this thesis by consulting various short fiction collections, anthologies, and literary magazines (e.g. *The O. Henry Prize Stories*, *The Scribner Anthology of Contemporary Short Fiction*, and "The New Yorker"), namely Lorrie Moore and Jim Shepard.⁸ Though their short fiction works are critically acclaimed, they did not necessarily have the range of narrative perspective or format within their works that have proved beneficial to the analysis of creative writing devices. In addition, the three chosen authors have also acknowledged themselves and have been understood by critics to be interested in questions of narrative empathy. Multiple examples of critical ties to empathy exist. Baron states, "what Davis requires—and what she solicits—is our empathy" (Baron 2009), which points to Davis' ability to create empathy to the point that her works "require" an emotional

⁷ J. Hillis Miller states that "literature in the old-fashioned sense, such of it as is left, is migrating to e-readers like Amazon's Kindle or Apple's iPad. Amazon now sells more e-books than hardcover printed books" (Miller 2011, 253). This is also supported by recent market reports, which show Amazon's e-book sales at 69 per cent and print sales at 39 per cent (Author Earnings 2014). Many writers promote their longer works by offering free or reduced price short fiction, causing an increase in short fiction consumption.

⁸ See bibliography for full list of works consulted.

investment. Clark states that in his interview with Saunders, "Saunders spoke warmly of the central importance of fiction to emphasise the connections between us, to allow us to engage our empathy" (Clark 2014). This shows that Saunders has constructed fiction pieces with empathy as the pivotal outcome of the creation of the prose. Finally, Santel states that "Wallace's writing [is] characterized by attentiveness, empathy, and selflessness" (Santel 2014, 629), whereby the essence of Wallace's works can be considered to encapsulate narrative techniques that lend towards empathetic experiences. By examining these three authors' uses of literary techniques that could lead to empathy, I experiment with certain writing devices in regards to empathy that have not been discussed in depth by narrative theorists or creative writing theorists. The thesis offers a collection of fifteen creative short fiction pieces which demonstrate the application of narrative perspective and format, and their relation to fiction writing and empathy.

iii. Narrative Perspectives

One way in which I practise with writing devices in order to explore possibilities of empathy involves character identification. This is a prevalent factor in experiencing similar emotions to the character in my short stories. Keen states that "character identification often invites empathy, even when the fictional character and reader differ from one another in all sorts of practical and obvious ways, but empathy for fictional characters appears to require only minimal elements of identity situation" (Keen 2007a, xii). This potentiality for identification with a character relates to Harrison's assertion that an emotional reaction can be experienced to a fictional character different to him or herself through literature, as noted earlier. In my fiction, I experiment with character relatability. Character identification can be influenced by narrative perspective, and is considered a key element of a possible empathetic response in the study of narrative empathy. A writer's use of narrative perspective in emotional responsiveness is discussed by narrative empathy theorists (including Dadlez, Harrison, and Keen), explored in later chapters. I take first-, second-, and third-person perspectives into account when attempting to explore writing devices and narrative empathy.

Using first-person perspective to influence identification with characters has been perceived as a common writing technique in writing empathy for a character. Keen states, "Narrative theorists, novel critics, and reading specialists have already singled out a small set of narrative techniques – such as the use of first-person narration and the interior representation of characters' consciousness and emotional states – as devices supporting character identification, contributing to empathetic experiences" (Keen 2006, 213). Where first-person

narration can influence empathy, Keen believes that at times it can cause distance (e.g. through over-identification, discussed in Chapter II and IV). One way in which first-person perspective can lend itself to empathy is the possibility for the writing to place the reader into the position of the character. This applies both to the singular first-person (e.g. "I") and the plural first-person (e.g. "we"). A greater feeling of connectivity may be experienced when presented with a narrative in which the character is also the narrator. For example, a stronger emotional connection might be formed when a writer creates a character who states "I feel this" versus "He or she feels this". Writing in the first-person perspective can give an in-depth impression into the mind of the character. A commonly assumed effect of first-person perspective and empathy is the formation of intimacy to the character through the character voicing his or her opinions directly.⁹

I address certain opportunities when using first-person narration as a writer to examine its effectiveness in creating a connection to a character. As Keen states, "within the category of first-person narratives, empathy may be enhanced or impeded by narrative consonance or dissonance, unreliability, discordance, an excess of narrative levels with multiple narrators, extremes of disorder, or an especially convoluted plot" (Keen 2010, 72). The issue of dissonance and discordance can relate to what was discussed earlier when addressing both the writer and the reader's personal background in relation to the background or position of the character. If the narrator has an opinionated view that is read as "dissonant" or overbearing, an empathetic reaction to the character might be less likely and could cause discordance. Narrator unreliability could alienate a character by causing feelings of distrust, which could cause distance from that character, but could also be used in writing to form a connection to another character. An excess of narrators, especially in short fiction, can lead to the writing not leading to a connection with any of the characters as not enough information about each character may be able to be given succinctly. This translates as an example of a convoluted plot. For first-person perspective in which the writer aims to have a connection with the narrator, these factors must be considered within the writing when crafting an empathetic character or situation.

First-person narration is not solely used to evoke empathy for the narrator. A writer can put into effect first-person narration to influence a connection with another character within the story. Because of this, the narrator does not necessarily need to be likeable or even tolerable. Indeed, a frustrating narrator could signal the theme of the piece in terms of a elusive

⁹ This is widely accepted, and is exemplified by Franz Stanzel's statement, "In a first-person narrative situation, free indirect style promotes the reader's empathy with the experiencing self-much more frequently than it ironizes or creates distance" (Stanzel 1984, 224).

empathetic connection. Furthermore, an impersonal or neutral first-person narration can cause distance from the narrator, leaving open the possibility to empathise with another character.¹⁰ Unable to connect with the first-person narrator through the writing, another character's position could be considered more open for empathetic connection. This possible occurrence, as well as over-identification, is discussed further both in my critical analysis and my creative pieces that experiment with first-person narrative.

A writer's application of second-person narration to connect with a character has not been studied in depth in creative writing theory, therefore leaving room for exploration of second-person narrative empathy in this thesis. The most common form of second-person narration is constructed to have the "you" subject refer to another character or conceptual entity. Referring to this first example of the second-person perspective, Keen poses the question, "Does the use of second-person 'you' narration enhance the intimacy of the reading experience by drawing the reader and narrator close, or does it emphasize dissonance as it becomes clear that 'you' can't include the reader?" (Keen 2007b, 98). With the narrator referring to "you", it is possible for the writing to include the involvement of the actions of the characters and the alienation with the realisation and representation through the text that the audience might not be the "you" of reference in the story. This conflict is created in the very ambiguity of using the pronoun "you" in creative writing and its various references.

Writing in the second-person pronoun could also refer to the audience as the protagonist or to the narrator him or herself as the protagonist. Ambiguity exists with the second-person perspective, which could lead to detachment, but could also foster inclusion through a universal "you" protagonist. Mieke Bal gives a scenario of this with her statement that second-personhood "indicates the reversible relationship of complementarity between first- and second-person pronouns whose use produces subjectivity and constitutes the essence of language precisely because the pronouns do *not* refer" (Bal 1993, 307). When using the second-person narrative, a writer must be aware of the stress of the pronoun. For example, the statement "You think that I feel this" is technically second-person narration, but leans on the first-person pronoun. The nature of the construction of a second-person narration can be versatile in relation to evoking an emotional response through its possible ambiguity. In my creative work, I experiment with second-person format and its emotional effectiveness, thereby contributing to the critical analysis of writing empathy through a creative writing perspective. In addition,

¹⁰ For example, a first-person narrator who gives his or her perspective of another character without giving information or being involved in the story could create distance for the narrator and empathy for the other character.

short stories are constructed that differ in their second-person protagonist's characterisation (whether the protagonist be the narrator, another character, the reader, or the writer herself).

The final narrative voice under analysis is the third-person narrative. The most common narrative perspective, third-person narration is varied and extensive.¹¹ When taking into account empathy, there are certain facets that may aid or hinder empathetic connections. Keen summarises major questions that present themselves in this narrative form. She asks:

In third person fiction, does the use of a figural reflector, rather than an authorial (omniscient) narrator make any difference in readers' emotional responsiveness to situations and character? Does the location of the narrator inside (or outside) the story-world effect readers' reactions to the content of the narration? Does a covert narrator, who scarcely does more than provide cues about characters' movements and speech, disinvite empathy for those characters, or invite readers to see the action with a greater sense of immediacy? (Keen 2007b, 98)

Third-person perspective can give writers the flexibility for the writer to shape the way in which characters are perceived. As an example, there is a difference between writing "She was upset that he hit her. She didn't know why he hurt her", "She was upset that he hit her. He was angry that she had lied", and "He hit her and she cried". These three perspectives of narration could evoke an emotional response, but in differing ways.¹²

Third-person narration in terms of empathy most commonly works to create empathy for one of the characters that the narrator has introduced. There are, however, other possibilities of implementation. The third-person narrator could be written as the character with whom a connection could be formed. In this case, the narrative voice can describe other characters or a setting surrounding him, her or it. If there is not a feasible link to the other characters or setting, the third-person narrator's perceptions around him or herself could be perceived empathetically. Another possibility is a change from one empathetic character to another, in which the third-person narration can give both sides of characters' interactions, and therefore can inform of the thoughts, emotions, and experiences of all characters. Because of the multiple options that the form holds, third-person perspective could be an advantageous tool in writing for empathy.

iv. Short Fiction Format

The second aspect of writing construction in my analysis is story format. In contemporary short American fiction authors have experimented with different styles of format

¹¹ As an example of multiple sources in accordance, The University of Ohio's creative writing template states, "third-person narration is very flexible and should not be discarded without thought. It is still the most commonly used point of view" (Hartley 2012).

¹² This concept is discussed in depth in Chapter II, especially in the comparison between Davis' "Mr. Knockly" and Saunders' "Tenth of December".

(structure) in a way that accentuates the emotions of characters. As with narrative perspective, writing techniques in narrative format can influence response to a character as the format affects the process by which the material is presented. Focusing on three prevalent formats in contemporary short fiction, I look at the effectiveness of Q&A (Question and Answer), short-short, and segmented stories. I then apply the formats to my fictional works to test their empathetic properties.

The Q&A story format was made a seminal example of uncommon structure in contemporary literature by David Foster Wallace in 1997 with his collection of short stories, *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, which subsequently influenced Lydia Davis to use the format in her own short fiction. It is a peculiar format and is not prevalent in short fiction, though it is relevant to the discussion of experimental form and its empathetic effects, as well as to the experimentation of both Wallace and Davis in relying on the format to elicit empathy. In his review of *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, Robert McLaughlin points out that "David Foster Wallace collects twenty three pieces of fiction.... Few of these are stories in the conventional sense. Rather, the title interviews construct the structure of the book" (McLaughlin 1999, 158). This shows the influence that writing in the Q&A form has on the perception of the structure and of the meaning of the stories. Straying from more conventional formats, both Wallace and Davis have utilised Q&A to create characters of both the questioner (though no dialogue is revealed) and the respondent. The omission of the questioner's dialogue may influence an imagined interaction with the respondent. The questioner's dialogue may also be inferred, and therefore could create a connection with the questioner's position through an absence of written dialogue.

The second format I will be researching is the "short-short story", which has also been labelled the "micro-story" or the "very short story". Helen Cousins states that the "myriad of names of such [short-short] fiction indicate its proliferation: micro, flash, sudden, postcard, fast, skinny... the list goes on" (Cousins 2013). For this research, I will be using the phrase "short-short fiction", though all other names listed are to be found in recent discussion. The short-short story format challenges the very definition of the short story in both length and paragraph structure. It can consist solely of one sentence, or it can involve several paragraphs. Normally, short-short fiction contains 1000 words or less, but in this research I will be restricting the word count to 500 (along the lines of flash fiction)¹³ in my own fiction and in

¹³ Macmillan defines flash fiction as "a style of literature in which stories are extremely short and often consist of less than 300 words" (Maxwell 2013).

the selected authors' works so as to create a more challenging task and to examine the possibilities for writing empathy in short-short fiction. This precision is an important tool in the creation of works that can evoke empathy essential to the thesis. As the works are minute, they require full attention through the writer's careful construction.

The third, and final, format I refer to as the "segmented story". Though many fiction authors have written in this format, there is no definitive word or phrase as of yet in academia assigned to it. Therefore, I will be using the phrase "segmented story" to describe it. This form consists of mini-chapters and/or uses line breaks within a short story, creating smaller segments in the piece. This can deliver additional information through segment titles. It can also influence the pace of the story, which could create instances of emotional reflection within each segment. By segmenting the story, the writer creates a further outlet to process the emotions of a character.

v. Creative Short Story Collection

My collection of short fiction experiments with ways that the devices of narrative perspective and story format can create an empathetic connection to a character. I create characters' background connections in the collection where one or more characters from one story will play a pivotal role in another story. This was inspired by my interest in exploring the different ways in which a single character may be perceived across two separate stories. This allows me to see the effects that narrative perspective and format can have by introducing the same character through two varying perspectives. The short story collection consists of fourteen short stories and one self-contained collection of short-short stories, entitled *Fragmented Perceptions: A Collection of Characters* (56). The title refers to the perceptions of the characters and their situations, as all protagonists appear as a secondary character in another story. The fragmentation of their perceptions refers to the perspective of a character in one story, but not necessarily in another. Each character included in the fourteen prior short stories are included in at least one short-short story focusing on that character (e.g. the protagonist in "Dear Tom" (short story) is the same as the protagonist in "First Kiss" (short-short story)) in the short-short story collection, *Fragments*, which refers to the fragments of perspectives of the characters.

I conclude with an analysis of the completed collection of short stories in their adoption of narrative devices examined in the critical chapters. I discuss the potential for writing empathy for a character that can arise with certain perspectives and formats, and focus on writing techniques to show how their characteristics can be utilised are utilised. By exploring

Keen's emphasis on narrative empathy, I focus on the writer's ability to create narrative empathy, which has not been studied in depth in an academic light. I also show the varying ways that the narrative devices can be implemented to affect an emotional response. Through my creative work, I demonstrate how the devices explored can be used in contemporary short fiction, and how writers can construct stories through narrative perspective and format to leave greater opportunities for a writer to create emotionally engaging characters in the short fiction pieces, and how the tools can be used to distance a particular character and to cultivate connection with another.

II. Narrative Perspectives and Empathy in Short Fiction

i. Introduction

Theorists have stated that narrative perspective should be taken into account when discussing empathy, and Suzanne Keen points out that the "formal quality most often associated with empathy would be narrative situation (including point of view and perspective)" (Keen 2007b, 93). Discussing the relationship between empathy and narrative perspective, Mary-Catherine Harrison states, "while the first component of empathy can be automatic or involuntary, higher-order empathy involves a causal relationship between perspective-taking and emotion: we imagine 'what it would be like' to be the other, and subsequently come to 'feel with' or share their emotions" (Harrison 2011, 256). Keen and Harrison both stress the importance of narrative perspective in relation to the connection to a character. Therefore the writing techniques in first-, second- and third-person perspectives are studied to show their ability to create an empathetic connection to a character, and this analysis informs and influences the creation of my fictional pieces. My analysis of empathetic connections in relationship to the creation of my short fiction (both in terms of theme and character) explores ways in which writers use narrative perspective to give a character resonance.

Different perspectives used in the construction of short fiction offer different possibilities for empathy, and this will now be examined through analysis of the use of perspective in various authors' works. The freedom to change perspectives in order to elicit empathy for various characters exists within short story collections, as each story can have a different point-of-view separate from the others (e.g. Saunders' short story collection includes "The Semplica-Girl Diaries", written in the first-person as journal, as well as "Tenth of December", written in the third-person). Short story authors are able to experiment with different narrative styles within one collection by being able to use characters and stories with differing perspectives. Indeed, I explore how narrative perspectives found in American contemporary short stories can affect the connection to a character. There exists the potential flexibility of shorter creative works by exploring and creating empathy through different narrative perspectives. Lydia Davis, George Saunders, and David Foster Wallace implement first-, second-, and third-person narration in ways that work to cultivate empathy for a character. These three authors have been selected in part because the critical reception of their

work has tended to emphasise empathy in different ways.¹⁴ My own critical judgment of writing various states of empathy is also explored in their works. The relationship between empathy and narrative perspective varies in each author's work. For example, a first-person narration can form a connection with the narrator, or it can be used to form a connection with another character aside from the narrator.

ii. First-person Narration

Both Davis' "Mr. Knockly" and Saunders' "The Semplica-Girl Diaries" feature first-person narration, but the way the authors utilise the same perspective creates different effects. A standard notion of the effect of first-person narrative is that "as a reader, we are not only limited by what the character shares, but what the character knows. He or she may not have all the information or knowledge about events. We would also not know what other characters are thinking" (Surber 2014). Not knowing what other characters are thinking or feeling is not the same as not being able to associate with the emotions of other characters, though it can make the connection more difficult. Through these two first-person narrations, it is possible to relate to the narrator even though the subject is another character (as in "Mr. Knockly") and to connect with other characters and become distanced from the narrator (as in "The Semplica-Girl Diaries"). This could cause distance from a possibly unsympathetic first-person narrator. An important factor to consider is the relationship with and representation of the narrative voice; as Andrea Schwenke Wyile states, "In answering the question, 'What is engaging about first-person narration?' the emphasis must be on the relationship between the narrator and the narratee" (Schwenke Wyile 1999, 187).¹⁵ I look not only at the narratee's connection with the narrator, but also at the effect the narrator's voice has on the connection (or lack thereof) with both the narrator and the other characters.

In "Mr. Knockly", the narrator, who is not named, becomes intrigued and consumed by finding and interacting with Mr. Knockly, the partner of his or her dead aunt. By creating a narrator-protagonist who is genderless and nameless, Davis has created a character to identify with, though this imaginative investment risks self-projection or assertion. Davis creates an understanding of the narrator's mounting obsession with Mr. Knockly through the first-person narration which relates the perceptions of the narrator. Near the beginning of the story, the protagonist states:

¹⁴ The empathetic nature of Davis, Saunders, and Wallace's works are referenced in the Introduction.

¹⁵ The term "narratee" "designates the addressee of the narrator, the fictive entity to which the narrator directs his narration" (Schmid 2013, 2).

I looked into doorways, into living rooms, into store windows; I watched through the glass as people ate dinner by themselves in coffee shops; I walked behind restaurants through clouds of steam from the kitchens and through the noise of clattering dishes.

I think I might have been searching for Mr. Knockly, though often I went where I was unlikely to find him. (Davis 2009a, 263-64)

The repetitive use of the pronoun "I" shows a character who is focused on the self, even though he or she is involving him or herself with another character (or at least is trying to). There is also an implication of the self's persistence and the self's lack of transparency to itself, despite the narrator's attempt to focus on something or someone else. The narrator does not fully admit to, or even recognise, the search for Mr. Knockly, and he or she even relays that the places he or she had been to were not likely to be places that Mr. Knockly would frequent. This creates an air of vulnerability within the narrator. As the story progresses, however, the narrator becomes more explicit in his or her feelings, and this creates an association to the character. This is expressed through the narrator when he or she states "I felt uncomfortable. I felt suddenly that it was very strange for me to be there. I left" (*ibid.* 264), and "I knew I had no business bothering him, and I was embarrassed" (*ibid.* 266). Davis uses short, succinct phrasing in the first-person narration that expresses transparently how the protagonist feels.

The first-person narration in this piece focuses heavily on the protagonist (the narrator), not on the subject matter (Mr. Knockly). It is never revealed or wondered how Mr. Knockly feels, and even his death is somewhat trivialised and reversed to highlight the narrator. The statement "When Mr. Knockly died, I was there" (*ibid.* 269) is an example of the narrator's focus on the self. He or she does not relate sadness towards Mr. Knockly's death and does not contemplate how he must have felt. His or her emotions are not focused on a friendship or curiosity lost in Mr. Knockly's death, but in his or her own observation of him or herself and the situation. Harrison states that "most narrative theorists have predicted that the more we are inside a character's head, the more we will align ourselves, sympathize, or empathize with that character" (Harrison 2011, 261), which she believes is the case in most instances with first-person narration, but not definitively. The narrator's thoughts are the only ones introduced in the piece, causing a focused, restricted first-person narration. As Mr. Knockly is never fleshed out, the character most accessible to connect with is the narrator him or herself.

The theme of "Mr Knockly" is the alienation of the narrator from the rest of his or her surroundings. The narrator states, "I walked after the sky was completely dark, after I had seen people go home or into restaurants for dinner or into the movie house; sometimes I went on walking until the streets were deserted" (Davis 2009a, 265) and muses that he or she "would

return to [the buildings] again and again, look at them under different lights and in the dark, as if trying to discover something about them. The people of the town, though, remained strangers" (*ibid.* 265). There is peace within this introversion, and the narrator finds the empty streets calming. He or she is more preoccupied with his or her surroundings than with the people inhabiting the town. The narrator searches for Mr. Knockly, never interacting with him. The lack of interaction weighs on the prose, which could cause the anticipation of Mr. Knockly's appearance in a similar way, emotionally, as the protagonist.

Through the first-person narrative there is a disconnection between the protagonist and the people of the city. The discomfort of crowds and the comfort of solitude are experienced through the narrative voice, and the use of the first-person can allow the experience of what the protagonist feels through a growing sense of the protagonist's isolation. There is an ironic connection here. Though the narrator is disconnected from the life he or she is living, a connection to the character can be made *through* the disconnection. Though the name of the narrator is never revealed, nor is his or her gender nor age, the writing creates empathy with the protagonist who cannot (or does not wish to) interact with others. In his discussion of Davis' short story collection, *Can't and Won't*, Baron postulates that, "first and foremost, what Davis requires — and what she solicits — is our empathy" (Baron 2009). In this instance, Baron is not necessarily speaking of solicitation in a negative sense, but is pointing out the craft with which Davis requires empathy in her short pieces. She strives to create an emotional connection to a character in a way that is accessible and sometimes blunt, and it is a bluntness that creates distance yet also gives way to empathy. However, this bluntness can also work against the author in creating empathy, for if the author pushes the writing to empathise with characters, there might be a hesitation, as the pressure could hinder the ability of a developing association to a character (e.g. Davis' "Selfish").¹⁶ This potential impediment to empathy, from a writer's perspective, in Davis' writing is expanded on within the chapter when analysing her work, "Selfish".

Another way of applying the first-person narrative in order to evoke empathy for a character is represented in George Saunders' "The Semplica-Girl Diaries". The narration consists of the first-person diary entries of a middle-aged married man. The protagonist is representative of middle-class America in Saunders' alternate-present setting. The protagonist writes, "Stood looking up at house, sad. Thought: Why sad? Don't be sad. If sad, will make

¹⁶ The analysis of "Selfish", discussed later, shows that the repetition and over-exaggeration of characterisation has the potential to influence the creation of a less empathetic character.

everyone sad. Went in happy, not mentioning bumper, squirrel/mouse smudge, maggots" (Saunders 2013a, 112). The clipped sentences and colloquial manner show the personality of the protagonist. In addition, using colloquial speech could create an authenticity of character realism. This could help in writing a more familiar narrator through the representation of the narrator's voice.

Unlike "Mr. Knockly", the more the protagonist's thoughts are revealed, the more controversial his opinions and ethics become. It is through this disconnect from the protagonist that empathy for the Semplica-Girls might be achieved. In his article, "The Impersonal Voice in First-Person Narrative Fiction", Henrik Skov Nielsen states that "the protagonist in first-person narrative is often recognizable by his idiolects, idiosyncrasies, prejudices, etc., as these directly appear in the rendering of the narrative" (Nielsen 2004, 136). Saunders uses the first-person narrative of diary entries in order to get into the head of the protagonist. The narrator states, "Do not really like rich people, as they make us poor people feel dopey and inadequate. Not that we are poor. I would say we are middle.... [I]t is not right that rich people make us middle people feel dopey and inadequate" (Saunders 2013a, 118). The protagonist is consumed by his aspirations to join the American middle-class and by his struggle to keep up with wealthier families, and this is expressed through the clipped, blunt nature of the narration, similar to the bluntness in Davis' work. His thoughts may be clipped because they are familiar, i.e. he is trapped within them, and this implementation of colloquial speech expresses unfiltered opinions and thoughts about status. The protagonist's middle-class voice (e.g. through the use of phrases such as "us middle people feel dopey") highlights his position in society and reiterates his status throughout the piece.

Saunders creates a protagonist with which the reader might disagree. This written perspective can be used in order to see the other characters. The more sympathetic and contrasting character to the protagonist, from a writer's perspective, might be his eight-year-old daughter Eva, who is conflicted about the purchase of the Semplica-Girls (third-world workers who function as lawn ornaments, and have "holes in their heads, for one thing; the surgery is risky; they're away from their families for years at a time; it's incredibly boring; and all the while, they have to watch this other family happily living right over there, in that warm, cozy house" (Treisman, 2012)). Saunders' story differs from Davis' in that he has created a first-person narrative that could encourage disconnect with the narrator. Through this potential disconnect, similar conflicting emotions that Eva feels are represented.

The first-person narration in the work also aids in the exploration of Eva's emotions. The protagonist describes his daughter's school drawing, noting "In yard, SGs frowning. One

(Betty) having thought in cartoon balloon: 'OUCH! THIS SURE HERTS.' Second (Gwen), pointing long bony finger at house: 'THANKS LODES.' Third (Lisa), tears rolling down cheeks: 'WHAT IF I AM YOUR DAUGHTER?' (Saunders 2013a, 141). There is an interesting point here, in a creative writing sense, as to Saunders' construction of the story. Though the protagonist is speaking in the first-person, so are the Semplica-Girls in Eva's drawing. Eva expresses her worry and connection to the Semplica-Girls through a first-person imagined dialogue for each of the women. Dadlez points out, "since empathy is said to involve the adoption of another's perspective or point of vantage on the world, an empathetic emotion may be taken to co-opt those facets of other people's experiences" (Dadlez 1997, 158). Eva humanises the women, and in doing so expresses empathy for them. She has done this through placing herself in one of the women's positions by her claim "What if I am your daughter?" Eva's father cannot (or perhaps will not) confront the true situation of the Semplica-Girls, and therefore cannot empathise with them. Because of this, it might be difficult to empathise with the protagonist.

With his daughter's objections to buying the Semplica-Girls, the protagonist continues to alienate himself through the text, from a writer's standpoint. When describing how the Semplica-Girls look before being strung up by their heads in the yard, he states, "SGs holding microline slack in hands, like mountain climbers holding rope. Only no mountain (!)" (Saunders 2013a, 132). He speaks of the women holding the line to be strung through their brains in a light and joking manner. His perspective is detached from Eva's opinion and the reality of the Semplica-Girls' situation, but this detachment establishes the distance between Eva and the protagonist. As David Galef's review of Saunders' short story collection, *Tenth of December* says, "At their best, the voices are ridiculous and poignant at the same time, defeating their own pitiable qualities with a half-realized truth about love or justice in this world" (Galef 2014, 145). This shows that a sole character could be both unrelatable (in that the protagonist believes it to be ethically valid to string women up by their heads) and poignant (in that the protagonist does feel protective of his family and worries about his daughter).

The protagonist seems to be in denial about the ethical implications of having the Semplica-Girls. When the women are being strung up by the doctor, he says "[Doctor] gives me meaningful look, cuts eyes at Pam, as in, Wife squeamish? Pam somewhat squeamish. Sometimes does not like to handle raw chicken. I say, Let's go inside, put candles on cake" (Saunders 2013a, 132-33). Here Saunders depicts the protagonist as someone reducing the horrific to the merely unpleasant in order to obtain social acceptance. This is achieved through the first-person as the protagonist's motives for purchasing the women are expressed. The

narrator's continued attitude towards the Semplica Girls does not necessarily bolster an empathetic connection with him. His emotions might be understandable, therefore leading to sympathy, but might not lead to empathy with him due to the gruesome nature of the Semplica-Girls as a "lawn ornament". When the women are strung up by their heads, he has decided to decorate a cake, which signifies his disconnection from the Semplica-Girls' terrifying reality. He has shielded his wife and children from viewing the Semplica-Girls being mounted in the yard, which suggests that he has an understanding of the grotesque nature of the concept; however, he chooses to ignore the Semplica-Girls' shared medical procedure. This is exemplified by his statement, "SGs up now, approx. three feet off ground, smiling, swaying in slight breeze.... Effect amazing. Having so often seen similar configuration in yards of others more affluent makes own yard seem suddenly affluent... feel different about self" (*ibid.* 133). The blunt first-person entry shows the protagonist's preoccupation with his family's place within society. It also communicates his satisfaction at becoming affluent, even if that involves the exploitation of a lower class. This concept can be connected to the current exploitation of undocumented Latin and Central Americans in the United States: their low pay scale, their long working hours, and their gruelling jobs that middle-class United States citizens do not wish to do (e.g. manually harvesting heads of lettuce from 5 in the morning until 9 at night for a season whilst away from family).¹⁷ This suggests that an emotional (and empathetic) reaction to a character that has experienced a hardship is possible through the text (or, in a positive respect, an elated event) by the utilisation of creative writing devices.¹⁸ Keen refers to this as ambassadorial strategic empathy, which "addresses distant others with the aim of overcoming both similarity and here-and-now bias" (Keen 2011, 370).

After Eva releases the Semplica-Girls, there is a moment where the protagonist muses on the mind-set of the women; however, this is in relation to his own hardship in losing the Girls and being responsible for their replacement fees. He says, "SGs very much on my mind tonight, future reader. Where are they now. Why did they leave? Just do not get" (Saunders 2013a, 167). The protagonist's narration highlights the empathy experienced for the Semplica-Girls. The statement "do not get" represents how the writing shows, unlike the protagonist, that the audience may "get" it. The writing could alienate the first-person narrator, which could

¹⁷ Saunders details his underlying inspiration to the story: "The women in the yard were symbols for, you know, 'the oppressed,' and that the whole story, as I was imagining it at that moment, would be 'about' the way that people of means use and abuse people without" (Treisman 2012).

¹⁸ For example, Harrison suggests that "inducing empathy for a member of a stigmatized group... *even when he or she is a fictional member*, improves attitudes towards the group and consequently inspires actions that help that group (Harrison 2008, 260).

contribute to empathy for the Semplica-Girls. The last line of the piece solidifies the materialistic nature of the protagonist and the existence of the Semplica-Girls as ornamental objects instead of human beings. He states in annoyance, "Empty rack in yard, looking strange in moonlight. Note to self: Call Greenway, have them take ugly thing away" (*ibid.* 167). Now that the rack no longer has the exploited women on it, the protagonist does not want to look at it. It has become "ugly" to him merely because it is no longer a status symbol, or perhaps has become a symbol of guilt both to his family and to the Semplica-Girls. As a writer, this shows that multiple characters can be related to, based on the construction of the text and the connection with the characters through writing techniques.

iii. Second-person Narration

Second-person narrative can also be used as a device to create an emotional understanding of characters, and often relates directly through the use of the "you" pronoun. Monika Fludernik highlights the diversity of second-person narrative by identifying four types of second-person narratives in her article, "Second-person Narrative and Related Issues": an epistolary, "you" as the protagonist, "you" as the narrator, and "you" as the audience. She also states that "the 'you' second-person texts can induce the hypnotic quality of complete identification by a maximal bid for readerly empathy" (Fludernik 1994, 445). Writers' deployment of these different forms of second-person narrative have interesting effects in terms of empathy and character identification. David Foster Wallace and Lydia Davis apply the "you" protagonist and the "you" narrator, respectively, in ways that arouse empathy for a particular character. However, though the second-person narrative can be implemented in multiple ways, it is sometimes unstable due to the pronoun "you"'s ability to refer to multiple characters' points-of-view. This ambiguity, coined "referential slither" by Helmut Bonheim, can be identified in both Wallace and Davis' pieces, and should be kept in consideration when constructing second-person narratives, especially in evoking empathy for characters.¹⁹

David Foster Wallace creates a "you" protagonist, second-person narrative in his short story "Forever Overhead" in which the speaker addresses a defined protagonist. Bonheim states that "one of the more prominent emotional effects of second-person narration [is]: its decidedly involving quality, which provokes much greater initial empathy with second-person protagonists than with first- or third-person characters" (Bonheim 1982, 77). Wallace applies

¹⁹ Referential slither denotes the "inherent capacity in second-person narrative to address both the actual reader and a narratee as well as denoting a protagonist and the narrator" (Bonheim 1983, 76).

the second-person point-of-view to connect to the perspective of the protagonist, a boy who is turning thirteen and who experiences changes and emotions involved with adolescence. The experience of having been a thirteen-year-old pubescent boy is not pertinent to empathy, as the second-person narration creates a familiarity and a closeness with the protagonist's emotions.

Wallace emphasises the physical changes of the pubescent protagonist. The narrator says, "You have seven hairs in your left armpit now. Twelve in your right. Hard dangerous spirals of brittle black hair. Crunchy, animal hair" (Wallace 1999a, 4). The pronoun "you" and the description of the hairs that have appeared show the tactile properties of the hairs. Wallace continues using the second-person in order to describe the protagonist's physical changes and to connect these changes with the audience. Through the narrative, the sensations of the boy's pubescence are presented. When describing the protagonist's nocturnal emission, the narrator says, "you have awakened through fluttering lids to a rush and a gush and a toe-curling scalp-snapping jolt of feeling from an inside deeper than you knew you had, spasms of a deep sweet hurt" (*ibid.*). Again, the second-person narration coupled with vivid sensory descriptions can create an understanding of the protagonist's physical changes by having the writing signify what the protagonist is physically feeling through the use of "you".

The author connects to the physical experience of a thirteen-year-old within the first page of the text, which primes an emotional connection to the protagonist. Whilst the physical transformation of the protagonist is discussed, so are his emotional changes. Wallace shifts between the physical and the emotional multiple times throughout the piece in order to retain a connection to the protagonist in his entirety. From a writer's perspective, by constantly reminding of the protagonist's physical sensations, the author keeps the audience immersed in the protagonist's world.

An empathetic connection to the protagonist can be achieved through phrases such as "Immoderate swells and swivels that melt in light into a surrounding space that cups and accommodates the soft curves as things precious. You almost understand" (*ibid.* 6) and "You decide this needs to be thought about. It may, after all, be all right to do something scary without thinking, but not when the scariness is the not thinking itself" (*ibid.* 10). Both of these quotations are abstract reflections of the protagonist and show the cognitive pattern of the pubescent boy and his struggle to understand the world around him. The woman's curves are described as "swells and swivels", but this description is quickly followed by the second-person explanation, "You almost understand". The juxtaposition between the description of the curvaceous woman and the second-person bluntness of the protagonist's understanding show the conflict occurring within the protagonist's mind. The second quotation serves the writer in

creating a similar emotion to the boy. Immediately, the second-person keeps the audience in the mind-set of the protagonist.

The end of the work incorporates an imperative form of second-person narrative. This serves as a jarring difference from the style of the rest of the work's narrative. The voice in the narrative, up to the last page, has been passive. The emotions and the physical changes of the protagonist are represented through writing in the second-person point-of-view. The language is descriptive, vivid, and it delves into the inner-thoughts of the thirteen-year-old boy. Wallace diverts from this style in the last few sentences of the work: "Step into the skin and disappear. Hello" (*ibid.* 13). The narrator's imperative statement demands that the boy has no choice but to "step into the skin" of adulthood. The narrator greets the protagonist with the salutation "Hello" and the reader could conceivably, from a writing point-of-view, be introduced to the protagonist throughout the story. Marshall Boswell postulates that the boy's "desire for solitude is a new development, perhaps the product of his new self-consciousness, which has split him into a self and an entity conscious of that self: ergo the use of the second person" (Boswell 2003, 202). As a writer, this change in use of second-person narrative represents an important point of the piece, the connection to the thirteen-year-old boy's own consciousness and the changes and maturation he experiences on his birthday. It might also suggest that the narrator and the protagonist are one and the same. Both probabilities create a similar response, as "altruistic behaviors are motivated by imagination and emotion, adopting another person's perspective and feeling 'other-oriented' emotions like compassion and tenderness" (Harrison 2008, 258), the altruistic behaviour in the story coming from one character to another, not necessarily to reality because of a character. This could be an example of the use of referential slither in order to connect to the character, as opposed to alienating or confusing the association to the character. In either case, the perspective of the protagonist could be adopted through the writing without the loss of an external perspective.

Lydia Davis' "Selfish" constructs a "you" narrator in order to detail a selfish person's realisation of the need to be, in some sense, selfish. This is expanded to include the thought that such actions might feel selfish but actually are intended to help another. In the short piece, the narrator describes conflicting views on how a parent must be truly selfish in order to raise a successful child. The narrator (not signified as either male or female) speaks in the second-person point-of-view, but is referring to him or herself (and the role of parenthood) as opposed to someone or something else. This style of writing in second-person can create a connection to the narrator through informal speech. However, it is also to be said that there are possible differences within this type of writing perspective. Though Davis does succeed in creating

empathy (albeit subjectively, in terms of literary analysis), she has been criticised for over-empathising. Arno Hofstadter, from the *American Reader*, points out that Davis "tends to over-identify with her subject matter.... As a result, the writing tends to vacillate between over-empathy and quiet smirking" (Hofstadter 2014). These issues can be spotted within "Selfish", and it is up to the writer to determine if the over-empathising (by the "you" repetition) detracts from the overall connection between the audience and the protagonist. The repetition of "you" could create over-empathisation by continually addressing the reader (as the "you" character). For example, in one sentence she includes "you" phrases that are directly connected to actions and emotions: "you enjoy them... you laugh... you have little patience... you become angry... you know... you don't notice... you are busy... you wonder... you ask questions... you believe them" (Davis 2009b, 441). This constant, battering repetition could be considered an overbearing narrative voice, and may distance the narrator. If a writer's goal is to create an alienating character, however, this writing technique could be used to the writer's advantage. As with Saunders' use of the ridiculous and the poignant, Davis' work shows that empathy is dynamic, shifting, and subjective.

Davis begins the story with the narrator stating, "The useful thing about being a selfish person is that when your children get hurt you don't mind so much because you yourself are all right" (*ibid.*). The subject referred to in "your children", "you don't mind", and "you are all right" refers to the narrator as opposed to the audience, as the protagonist is speaking from his or her own frame of mind. This is bolstered by the narrator's postulation that "It won't work if you are just a little selfish. You must be very selfish" (*ibid.*). This suggests that the protagonist is speaking of his or her own personal opinions and experiences, which may include the experience of not being sufficiently selfish. By having the narrator referring to him or herself in the second-person, Davis creates an informal and intimate narrative with the narrator. At the beginning, this might not necessarily create an empathetic connection to the protagonist, but it could permit an open relationship with the narrator to be built throughout the piece.

A common attribute of Lydia Davis' short stories is her tendency to begin the piece with little connection to the character that could eventually evoke empathy. In "Selfish", the narrator's thoughts gradually become more personal, more open. There is a difference between the first sentence of the piece "The useful thing" versus "then the trouble begins and you don't notice signs of it because you are so busy.... [I]f you have been selfish, this is what sometimes happens, and if you have not been selfish enough, then later, when they are in serious trouble, you will suffer" (Davis 2009b, 441-42). The narration and the point-of-view in the second example imply that the narrator has failed in not being "selfish enough" before, and therefore

both he or her and his or her children have suffered in consequence. This differs from the first sentence, in that the first few of the protagonist's thoughts focused on an amusing concept of parenthood, "because you yourself are alright".

As the narrator continues, a writer might draw the emotions of the narrator through the use of second-person narration. The text shows that the parent looks at his or her child in relation to him or herself. Referential slither is involved in this piece. Sometimes it is unclear whether "you" refers to the reader, to the narrator, or to the narrator's parents. This slither could detract from an empathetic connection depending on application. Fludernik details referential slither: "many second-person texts start out with a passage of what initially appears to be a generalized or generic 'you,' a 'you' with which the reader in the role of (any)one can identify, but the text then proceeds to conjure up a very specific 'you'" (Fludernik 1994, 445). Referential slither could help to create a connection to the characters (e.g. a reader connecting both to "you" as an audience and to "you" as a narrator), but a potential shortcoming is that the perspective can easily become less convincing if the writing does not convey a solid character (e.g. is "you" referring to the reader, the addressee, or the narrator him or herself?).

The end of the piece could be considered as "smirking", from a writer's perspective, as the protagonist states, "So if you are going to be selfish at all, you must be more selfish than that, so selfish that although you are sorry they're in trouble, sincerely and deeply sorry, as you will tell your friends and acquaintances and the rest of the family, you will be privately relieved, glad, even delighted, that it isn't happening to you" (*ibid.* 442). The concept of being extremely selfish in order to better one's children is fairly unconventional (from an American perspective). The protagonist warns of the problems of being only "a little selfish". This could, at first, seem contradictory given the social aspect of raising children, but by the end of the piece, empathy could be felt for the parent's mistakes and for his or her new-found perspective on parenting, which reflects a paradox of parenting in this piece: the impossibility and necessity of stepping back.

iv. Third-person Narration

Third-person narrative is arguably the most common form of narrative in fictional pieces.²⁰ There are various ways third-person narrative can be used in short fiction in order to cultivate a connection with a character. George Saunders' "Tenth of December" involves a

²⁰ Amongst others, Dina Felluga's *Introductory Guide to Critical Theory* states that third-person narrative "is perhaps the most common sort of narration" (Felluga 2011).

third-person narrator, fluctuating between the actions and thoughts of two protagonists, which could be considered a form of figural reflection,²¹ whereas David Foster Wallace creates a third-person limited narrator to eventually cultivate empathy for the narrator's child in "Suicide as a Sort of Present".

"Tenth of December" consists of the writer using language that divides the two protagonists from one another and creates a familiarity with the personality of each character. This can be beneficial to the connection with different characters. Harrison postulates that the "narrator plays a powerful role in evoking readers' empathy... including free indirect discourse/narrated monologue and narrative omniscience that moves inside characters' minds" (Harrison 2011, 261). Though she is referring to first-person narration, the points she makes still apply. Saunders uses a free-moving narrator, whilst giving each protagonist a different voice through third-person narration. For example, when the boy, Robin, is the focus, the narration includes words such as, "Wham!" "dunderheads", and "peen". These are words which would normally be used by a pre-pubescent boy. This vocabulary is not uttered by Robin, but is described by the narrator. Phrases are used, as well, to express Robin's age and personality. The narrator describes Robin's motions towards a dying raccoon: "That was sad. He didn't do well with sad. There had perchance been some pre-weeping by him, in the woods" (Saunders 2013b, 219). The writing can create an understanding of Robin's emotions and his childish mentality. The third-person perspective "moves inside characters' minds" through the use of personalised vernacular displayed by both characters, which, though resting in third-person perspective, does introduce the differing perspectives of the characters.

The first time the second protagonist, Don Eber, is shown through the eyes of Robin. Robin describes Don as looking "sort of mental. Like an Auschwitz dude or sad confused grandpa" (*ibid.* 221). The narration shows Robin's description in his own words, and the writing could then relate to how Don must look to Robin. Saunders uses the third

-person narration to describe the second character through the eyes of the first, giving the audience an impression of Don Eber before having met him.

When the story changes perspectives, the language and word-choice changes as well. Following the old, ailing man, Don Eber, the third-person narrative morphs into a vocabulary retained by an adult who is having problems with his memory. This starts out slowly with small

²¹ Keen touches on the empathetic use of figural reflectors (moving away from omniscient narrators) in third-person narration, mentioning that "readers fuse [third-person] narrators and characters as a result of perceptual access to a particular character's perspective" (Keen 2006, 230).

slips such as "...begat. Began. Goddamn it. More and more his words. Askew. More and more his words were not what he would hoped. Hope" (*ibid.* 223). The writing portrays Don's frustration through his confusion with words and his expletives while trying to remember the correct usage. As the story continues, Don's sense of vocabulary becomes more scattered. As he plunges further into the cold woods, the narrator states the thoughts occurring in Don's mind: "Let me pull this off. Lord, let me not fuck it up. Let me bring no dishonor. Let me do it cling. Let. Let me do it cling. Clean. Cleanly" (*ibid.* 226-27). This deterioration of Don's psyche is exemplified by Saunders' choice in narration, vocabulary, and sentence structure. By showing rather than telling the condition of Don's mind, Saunders creates a character that could cause an emotional impact through his writing technique.

As Don interacts with himself through internal monologue, so does Robin in the form of the fictional representation of the girl, Suzanne (a girl from his class who calls him "Roger" and does not socialise with him). Saunders applies the third-person narrative in order for Robin to interact with "Suzanne" in his mind, thus giving the audience a deeper look into Robin's state of mind. This excerpt shows Suzanne's role as the subconscious voice in Robin's head:

He doesn't have much time, Suzanne said, bordering on the hysterical.
There, there, he said, comforting her.
I'm just so frightened, she said...
He must cut across the pond, thereby decreasing the ambient angle, ergo trimming valuable seconds off his catch-up time.
Wait, Suzanne said. Is that dangerous?
It is not, he said. I have done it numerous times.
Please be careful, Suzanne implored.
Well, once, he said. (*ibid.* 228)

The interaction between the two runs in a string of sentences without quotation marks or normal dialogue punctuation. This writing creates an air of excitement and speed. The hasty nature of his thoughts and his reassuring of the fictional Suzanne encourage the connection with Robin and the fears he projects onto Suzanne. Having a hurried stream-of-consciousness places the prose's pace at the same pace as Robin's, and the story depicts Robin's rushing through thoughts by short, quick dialogue. However, by the end of the exchange he has calmed "Suzanne", in effect calming himself. The narration slows pace once more by returning to a structure not wholly focused on inner-dialogue. This third-person narration shows the emotional range Robin experiences through Suzanne, and could create empathy for Robin and his plight by the expression of his doubts through a fast-paced (inner) dialogue.

The narration is third-person, and Saunders advantageously changes the point-of-view of the narration multiple times (from the perspective of creative writing choices). As Robin

contemplates crossing the lake with the help of the imaginary Suzanne, Don Eber is shown attempting to freeze himself to death. The third-person narration explores the inner-thoughts of Don as it has done with Robin: "Ouch, ouch. This was too much. He hadn't cried after the surgeries or during the chemo, but he felt like crying now. It wasn't fair. It happened to everyone supposedly but now it was happening specifically to him" (*ibid.* 231). This is an interesting device between interior-monologue and free indirect discourse (also related to Keen's discussion of figural reflection). The words "Ouch, ouch. This was too much" suggest that Don is thinking this to himself; however the next sentence is clearly in the third-person. Saunders has blended the vocabulary of Don within the third-person dialogue to create an emotional connection with Don, which is referred to by Keen as "figural reflection", which refers to a third-person narrative that uses a character's vocabulary and voice within the narration. The same tone continues as Don succumbs to the cold. The narration states, "This was it. Was it? Not yet. Soon, though. An hour? Forty minutes? Was he doing this? Really? He was. Was he? Would he be able to make it back to the car even if he changed his mind? He thought not. Here he was. He was here" (*ibid.* 232). As with Suzanne and Robin's rapid conversation, these questions and answers create an anxious tone. The representation of the tone and the emotion encourage the understanding of the protagonists through the third-person descriptions of thought processes.

When the two protagonists interact with one another, Saunders continues to shift between protagonists through his narration. This produces the oscillation between two points-of-view and to continue a connection with both protagonists. The writing portrays the terror Robin felt after falling through the lake "...there was no him, no Suzanne, no Mom, no nothing, just the sound of some kid crying like a terrified baby" (Saunders 2013b, 236), and can also connect to Don's determination to overcome his fear through self-deprecation: "He was afraid he might fall in. Ha. Dope. Poser" (*ibid.* 237). Through this juxtaposition within the narrative, the writing shows both of the protagonists' emotions that have been expressed through their inner-monologue, candid consciousness, and individual vocabulary.

The end of the story culminates in the conclusion of the fiasco of the tenth of December. Saunders does not stray from his pattern of third-person modulation of viewpoint. He keeps the inner-dialogue of his protagonists separate through word choice, and this serves to show the audience the emotions of the two characters. The narrator says that Robin had "bolted. He'd bolted on the old guy. Hadn't even given him a thought. Blimey. What a chickenshitish thing to do" (*ibid.* 243) and that Don had "embarrassed [his wife]. He saw that. He'd embarrassed her by doing something that showed she hadn't sufficiently noticed him needing her" (*ibid.* 251).

Robin feels guilt and disgust at leaving Don, and Don feels guilt and disgust at leaving his wife.²²

Both protagonists experience two different scenarios together, but end up feeling similar emotional strain by the end of the piece. In his review of *Tenth of December*, Galef points out that, "Saunders iterates his message of empathy in his essays [and] has really thought long and hard about what ails us.... He advocates one human's helping another" (Galef 2014, 151). Here, Galef believes that Saunders focuses on the emotional experiences within humanity, as well as each individual's ability to empathise with another through shared experiences through his essays. One can assume, then, that Saunders implements this concept of empathy in his short fiction. Saunders considers empathy as opposed to sympathy in that Saunders attempts not only for his writing to convey a character's emotions, but also to create an emotional effect. In this piece, for instance, Saunders shows both characters feeling as if they should have done more, while at the same time knowing that they had tried to help the other. This relationship between two different humans and the representation of that connection to the audience forms the foundation of empathy within the work.

A different take on third-person narrative in relation to empathy is found in Wallace's "Suicide as a Sort of Present". The narration is from a third-person limited point-of-view focusing, for the most part, on a masochistic person who eventually becomes a masochistic parent. Here the third-person at first is seemingly attempting to relate with the protagonist. However, the delivery of the finale realigns one's connection to the protagonist's child. Interestingly, Wallace uses the limited third-person narrative in order to leave open the connection with the characters. He does this so that the ability exists to experience the emotions of an unexpected character at the end of the work.

The narrator focuses on the protagonist, and tries to describe the emotions the protagonist experiences throughout her life. The narrator says, "The point is that, from as early an age as she could recall, this mother-to-be loathed herself... as if every occasion or opportunity were some sort of dreadfully important exam for which she had been too lazy or stupid to prepare properly" (Wallace 1999b, 241). The protagonist is referred to not simply as a person, but as a "mother-to-be". This title creates an awareness of the inevitability that the woman might eventually have a child. By stating this through his writing, Wallace subtly

²² These multiple voices serve as a strategic attempt at empathy. Keen states, "Strategic narrative empathy on the part of authors indicates their manipulation of potential target audiences through deliberate representational choices designed to sway the feelings of their readers" (Keen 2011, 136). In this story, Saunders uses third-person figural reflectors to influence empathy by the representation of both characters' emotions and thoughts.

alludes to the story's conclusion by presenting the protagonist's low self-confidence and high expectations of herself. Indeed, the narrator states simply, "Her expectations of herself were of utter perfection, and each time she fell short of perfection she was filled with an unbearable plunging despair" (*ibid.*). There is no doubt of the way the protagonist is feeling and how she views the world, and one can empathise with her in some way given the pressure she puts on herself.

When the protagonist becomes a mother, the limited third-person narration rests on the emotions of the woman, not of the child. The tone becomes more negative, and one can see the inner-conflict growing inside the woman. The narrator specifies her feelings towards her child by saying,

The mother's expectations of her small child were also, it turned out, impossibly high. And every time the child fell short, her natural inclination was to loathe it... Thus every time the child was rude, greedy, foul, dense, selfish, cruel, disobedient, lazy, foolish, willful, or childish, the mother's deepest and most natural inclination was to loathe it. (*ibid.* 242-43)

Here, the connection with the protagonist begins to change, as the opinion of the woman and the way she thinks of her child is not one that many would like to admit to feeling or understanding. It is a social taboo to "loathe" one's own child, and the description of the woman's thoughts begin to separate the audience emotionally from the protagonist.

In fact, Wallace continues to complicate the connection to the protagonist through the persistence of the narrator's description of the protagonist's emotions. A selfishness emerges within the woman, and she becomes increasingly absorbed in her own shortcomings in relation to her child's actions (which acts as her own failure in empathy). She not only cannot separate herself from her child's failures, but also cannot express her disgust at the child. To do so would be to fail at being a mother. The narrator states, "Inside, as the child grew, the mother was filled with self-loathing and despair. Surely, she felt, the fact that the child lied and cheated and terrorized neighborhood pets was her fault; surely the child was simply expressing for all the world to see her own grotesque and pathetic deficiencies as a mother" (*ibid.* 244). Here, the third-person narration disconnects from the woman. One might not be empathetic towards someone who is self-absorbed to the extent that everything, even another's actions, somehow involve her. Empathy in Wallace's story could be a writer's conceptualized way to get beyond the self. Through his technique, Wallace highlights the pitfalls of being trapped within the self, which may be experienced as an absence of empathy.

By the end of the story, the writing might disconnect the protagonist due to her self-centeredness. In one last sentence, Wallace changes the third-person limited narrative

protagonist. He writes, "She could not, of course, express any of this. And so the son – desperate, as are all children, to repay the perfect love we may expect only of mothers – expressed it all for her" (Wallace 1999b, 244). The narrative changes from "she" to "the son", making the son the last character the narration addresses. The writing portrays empathy for the son, and it is imperative to reconsider the story through the eyes of the son in relation to his mother's actions in order to understand why he commits suicide.

v. Conclusion

These examples of first-, second-, and third-person narration show the importance of the application of a particular viewpoint in structuring the way the writing can create associations with characters' emotions. It should also be highlighted that over-identification, misplaced sarcasm, and egocentric characterisations could hinder an audience's empathetic experience with a particular character; however, these same writing techniques could also be used to purposefully create an alienating voice. In addition, empathy is subjective, and one character who might not be relatable to a particular audience could be relatable to another.

III. Short Fiction Formatting and Empathy

i. Introduction

Helen Cousins states that short fiction writers are "revelling in opportunities to innovate, challenged by the brevity of the form to explore how they can make every word count. Stories frequently embrace postmodernist techniques of borrowing and merging of different forms" (Cousins 2013). The act of "borrowing and merging" shows the flexibility the short story offers a writer, as writers can borrow existing formats (e.g. Davis using Wallace's *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* as an inspiration for the Q&A format for "Jury Duty") and merge formats (e.g. the segmented story being used as a merging of short-short stories). Short fiction allows a writer to experiment and vary story format structure. The ability to change the format (e.g. story length, line breaks, and paragraph structure) of each piece creates a myriad of possibilities for the writer. There exists an opportunity and a freedom for contemporary short fiction writers to investigate different forms in order to experiment with the impact the form has on the piece in terms of both narrative format (or structure) and writing reception.²³ In this chapter, I discuss format influencing the connection between the subject matter and the portrayal of the writing.

I look at several different story formats present in the short fiction of Lydia Davis, George Saunders, and David Foster Wallace to analyse possible empathetic connections with the characters involved. These authors have all deployed three distinctive formats that have become quite prevalent in creative short fiction: Q&A (Question & Answer) style, short-short fiction, and the segmented short story. I evaluate how these different formats aid in writing techniques that could affect empathy with the character.

ii. Segmented Format

The segmented short story format can be found throughout contemporary literature (notably present in works from Davis, Saunders, and Wallace), and involves the breaking of a short story into smaller sections, or segments. They are commonly sectioned through the use of paratextual markers such as Roman numerals, Arabic numerals, and titles. Asterisks have also been used, but are often implemented in stressing a scene change or point-of-view shift²⁴

²³ Unless otherwise specified, form, format, and structure are used interchangeably.

²⁴ POV shifting using asterisks (e.g. a dinkus (three asterisks in a line) or an asterism (three asterisks in a triangle) is described in Noah Lukeman's *A Dash of Style: The Art and Mastery of Punctuation* as signaling "a major transition within a chapter, usually a change of time, place, or even viewpoint" (Lukeman 2006, 161).

as opposed to a break using a number system or titles. Segmentation can be used to retard the flow and the progression of the story, providing the opportunity for connection with a character. Dadlez also points out that "an empathetic emotional response is therefore linked to our contemplation of the features of another's experience" (Dadlez 1997, 157), a statement that can be used in relation to segmentation. The segmentation stops the prose from immediately progressing and can, arguably, lead to further contemplation in relation to characters' positions in the stories. Lauren Lovett considers this issue, stating that "Keen outlines that the pace of a narrative can invoke or hinder a reader's empathy" (Lovett 2014, 66). The pacing of segmentation has the possibility to affect an emotional response to the writing. With segmentation, I will also look at how the unique titling of segments can be beneficial to a writer's creation of a short story by offering readings of George Saunders' "Escape from Spiderhead" and Lydia Davis' "Mrs. D and Her Maids". I will show the effectiveness of segmenting forms that can be used to shape possible empathy for a character.

Saunders uses segmentation in his short science fiction story "Escape from Spiderhead", making use of Roman numerals. The story consists of ten sections (I-X), all narrated in the first-person perspective of a convicted felon forced into laboratory experimentation involving the fabrication of emotional states. By exploring the content in each segment, and by investigating the nature of the segment breaks, I will consider the dynamics at play in relation to the writers' choices and how they can be implemented in creative writing pieces. Given the subject matter, the fabrication of emotion being at the forefront of the story's theme, Saunders could be said to manipulate the segmentation in order to successfully create an opportunity for empathy with the protagonist and, indeed, the other characters involved as well. It is interesting to note that not only could the writing elicit empathy for characters, but it also revolves around the theme of the synthetic production of emotion.

Segments I, III, IV, V, VI, VIII, and IX have similar lengths. Each segment involves the introduction of new characters and concepts within the story. For example, the beginning of segment I introduces the director of the experiments, Abnesti, within the first sentence: "'Drip on?' Abnesti said over the P.A." (Saunders 2013c, 45). Abnesti's character and the procedures of the laboratory become familiar. Segments III, IV, V, and VI involve the continuation of lab experimentation and introduce different characters. They are each concluded when the protagonist, Jeff, has finished with the experimentation being conducted. In segment III, Jeff is introduced to Rachel, and they are given a drug which induces love. Jeff realises in the middle of the segment, "I just loved Rachel so much.... [W]e whispered feverishly (precisely, poetically) about how long we felt we had known each other, i.e., forever"

(Saunders 2013c, 53). The segment, however, concludes with Jeff being "sad that love could feel so real and the next minute be gone, and all because of something Abnesti was doing" (*ibid.* 55).

From a writer's perspective, Saunders uses these segments to provide time for the protagonist to scrutinise his own emotions, and therefore allows the opportunity to consider the protagonist's interactions as well. The structure is similar in the other segments. Segment IV involves an experiment, with Jeff choosing whether to "Darkenfloxx" Heather or Rachel ("Darkenfloxx" being a torturous depressant Jeff describes as "the worst you have ever felt, times ten. That does not even come close to how bad you feel" (*ibid.* 56). Segment V introduces Rogan and VI introduces Keith. These four segments (III-VI) demonstrate Saunders' creative writing choice, the use of the format, to cause a pause after each experimental interaction. The segments create an opportunity for Jeff to reflect on his experience and emotions one segment at a time. It is easier to process Jeff's emotional reaction to the manipulation of his perceived emotions through the breaks, and therefore easier for his or her connection to Jeff's emotions to progress. Through the writing, the breaks also could represent the abrupt and narrative-less transition between chemically induced emotional states. In segment IV, Jeff realises that he "honestly felt completely neutral toward both" Heather and Rachel (*ibid.* 58), showing that the effects of the combination of amorous drugs have subsided. In segment VI Jeff "feel[s] a little jerked around" by Abnesti's emotional experiments (*ibid.* 64). The text, as well, may represent Jeff being "jerked around" by the segmentation of the story. This reaction is due to the content in segment VI, and can be separated as a different emotional response than was present in segment IV, thereby expressing and separating Jeff's array of emotions through the segments.

There is a discrepancy in segment length when Jeff is introduced to Heather (segment II) and is forced to watch Heather being "Darkenfloxxed" (segment VII). They are the longest segments, and also go into explicit detail as to Jeff's experience with the experiment. It is readily acknowledged that Jeff does not have any true feelings of love for Heather after he is taken off the medication used to emulate amorous affection, yet considerable detail is given to his interactions with Heather. In segment II, Jeff states "I had the memory of fucking Heather, the memory of having felt the things I'd felt for her, the memory of having said the things I'd said to her.... But in terms of feelings? I basically had nada left" (*ibid.* 52). This is important, as this revelation comes at the end of the segment, leaving the definitive opinion that Jeff is not emotionally connected to Heather. In this case, the writing might empathetically distance from Jeff in a similar way that Jeff feels distance from Heather's character.

Jeff's response to Heather's fate is relayed in segment VII. Though he does not know

her background, when she is being tortured he describes her as "beloved of someone" (*ibid.* 70). Jeff cannot know that she is loved by someone else, as it is stated he is forbidden to know any part of her background. He has stated himself that he does not love her, and yet he still uses this description. After the end of segment VII, a similar emotional despair is experienced (that Jeff has been through before), and the end of the segment could leave a feeling of frustration at Heather's situation. In fact, the entrapment of the protagonist continues in segment VIII when Abnasti commits to the continuation of the trial, saying "I hated it. I'm a person. I have feelings. Still, personal sadness aside, that was good. You did terrific overall. We all did terrific" (*ibid.* 73). The perspective and writing create the potential for a reaction. By Abnasti's words to the protagonist, the writing conveys a sense of Abnasti attempting a connection with Jeff. Through the contemplative prose of the short story with segmentation, each of Jeff's emotional responses can be taken in. This can be connected to the effects of the short-short story, in that both formats can be used in creative writing practice to promote reflection on a character's emotions. In "Escape from Spiderhead", though Jeff does not give a direct reaction to Abnasti's twisted outlook on Heather's torture and subsequent demise, his silence alone represents the restrictions placed on him. As Jeff cannot stop Abnasti, helplessness can be felt as well.

Segment IX begins with Jeff's question, "Are we going to Darkenfloxx Rachel now?" (*ibid.* 73). Since the effects of the drug and the previous disaster with Heather are now familiar, the same hesitation, anxiety, and dread that Jeff must feel at having to watch another person tortured in front of him is represented in the text. Mark Athitakis' claims that "Saunders is asking the reader to make the same kind of choice that Jeff is compelled to" (Athitakis 2010). Indeed, the writing creates the opportunity to become immersed in Jeff's position. Integrated into Jeff's emotions, the prose poses a similar moral dilemma to the protagonist. When allowed to read her file (involving her past criminal charges, including a triple homicide), Jeff states "that made me feel a little funny that we'd fucked and I'd loved her. But I still didn't want to kill her" (Saunders 2013c, 74). It is presented in the text that Jeff does not love Heather, yet the absence of love does not result in him wishing harm upon another person. He feels empathy for her. From a writer's point of view, this could be akin to experiencing empathy for Jeff, just as Jeff is empathetic towards Heather.

The beginning of segment X uses the first paragraph (a long, detailed sentence) to describe the conflict that Jeff is feeling. He flatly states, "It was sad" (*ibid.* 76). There is no ambiguity in this phrase, and the bleak shortness of the statement creates an atmosphere of hopelessness. The culmination of his experiences with the experiments, his perception of others

being affected by the same experiments, and his aversion to causing another harm all contribute to the understanding of Jeff's emotions. This connection is created slowly and painstakingly, by relying on the segments to express Jeff's emotional condition. Dadlez suggests that "it is our awareness of another's behaviour (the effect of an emotion) coupled with an awareness of an emotion's causes that leads us to feel the same emotion as that felt by the individual with whom we empathize" (Dadlez 1997, 160). The nature of the experiments in general (their fabrication of emotion) and the effects that the experimentation has had on Jeff and his relationships with the other prisoners, mimics the possibility to feel what Jeff feels.

The last piece of fiction to be addressed in this section is Davis' "Mrs. D and Her Maids". Davis uses paratextual titles to separate the segments of the story. They not only work to dissect the story into segments, but they also provide information and contribute to the plotline. Through this writing technique, Davis uses the titles in order to engage with the subject matter. The titles are integral to the story, and also serve as a condensed story within themselves. The titles, in this case, are used as narrative cues to submit information. Through the titles, empathy can be addressed by using the segmented technique.

The first segment, "Names of Some Early Maids, with Identifying Characteristics", serves as a condensed summary of the short story. Each maid's name is listed along with a brief notation about her character. For example, Birdell Moore is described as "old-fashioned, with warm Southern sweetness" (Davis 2009c, 592). These characteristics can be revisited after finishing the short story to compare the condensed descriptions to the longer segments about the maids and the interactions between them and Mrs. D. In effect, the first segment acts as a table of contents for the short story. In addition, the short and succinct phrasing gives an immediate impression of the narrator of the segment, Mrs. D, and the number of maids she has employed.

In certain instances, Davis uses the titles as shortened summaries of a maid's story. On one page, the titles create a story in and of themselves. They state: "One of the Earliest Maids Is One of the Best", "But Nellie's Health Is Not Good", and "Nellie Writes from the Sanatorium" (*ibid.* 595). This creates a specific, short arc in the story between Mrs. D and Nellie. The titles and the text sometimes flow together, accentuating a dilemma or an emotional struggle. In the segment "Hope for Better Things to Come", Mrs. D describes the new maid, Birdell, as having "all the warm Southern sweetness and flexibility of the old-fashioned Negro servant" (*ibid.* 602). This is followed by the title "Birdell Does Not Work Out" (*ibid.* 603). The prose solidifies the fact that Mrs. D's attitude towards Birdell may not have been an unbiased one through her allusion to slavery. The abruptness of the next title and the brevity of Birdell's

employment can influence an opinion of Mrs. D's treatment of the maids.

The titles involve repetition to enforce the reality that the maids' employment under Mrs. D are often short. This includes: "Mrs. D Reflects on Gertrude, Who Didn't Work Out" (*ibid.*), "But Mrs. Langley Will Not Stay" (*ibid.* 609), "Minnie Does Not Work Out" (*ibid.* 611), and "Anna's Employment Is Not a Success" (*ibid.* 613). It is not, rather, the constant replacement of employment. Dadlez states that "empathy can also provide insights into responses to certain kinds of treatment or experience. Different complexes of beliefs, desires, impulses, and reactions can constitute responses to the behaviour of others" (*ibid.* 183). The understanding of this employment and situation are represented through the consistency of Mrs. D's replacement of maids. This would suggest that Mrs. D is the character creating the issues, not the maids. Keen refers to ambassadorial strategic empathy, wherein the writer "uses an 'ambassador', a representative for a chosen group whose job is to cultivate empathy" (Utell 2016, 157).²⁵ By Davis using the maids as sort of ambassadors, there could be an empathetic connection with the maids and the assumption that not one would be able to satisfy the expectations of Mrs. D (reiterated through Mrs. D's own letters and through third-person narration).

By the end of Nellie's employment, in the section "Nellie Writes from the Sanatorium", Nellie's emotions are conveyed through an epistolary format. This is one example of how the segmentation of the story works to show multiple viewpoints. This technique is used throughout the piece, including a first-person perspective from Mrs. D's letters, a first-person perspective from the letters of maids Nellie, Minnie, Anna, and Shirley, a second-person narrative through the agency's letters to Mrs. D, and a third-person narration placing Mrs. D as the protagonist. Through these voices, aided by the writing technique of segmentation in order to facilitate a narrative shift, differing perspectives are experienced between Mrs. D and her maids. This aids in the possible empathy for the maids, and also in an understanding of Mrs. D's personality and disposition.

The last segment is titled "Names of Some Later Maids, with Characteristics" (Davis 2007c, 619). It parallels the first segment in both title and content formatting. This represents the continued quest of Mrs. D to find an acceptable maid. The title and subsequent segment is used to stress that Mrs. D has not, and does not, change. Through a writer's perspective, this creates an air of exasperation and, perhaps, slight pity for the woman. The constant rotation of people in and out of Mrs. D's life does create a venue for sympathy, but because the segments

²⁵ Discussed previously in Saunders' "The Semplica-Girl Diaries".

often detail experiences from the maids and Mrs. D's picky attitude towards their work, it is not assured that empathy can be gained from her experience. For example, the other maids remain in contact with Mrs. D, and do not speak ill of her; however, it is the fluctuating standards of Mrs. D and her discontentment over minor discrepancies that might not depict the understanding Mrs D's perspective or her actions.

iii. Q&A (Question and Answer) Format

As discussed previously, the Q&A format was popularised by David Foster Wallace's progression of short stories in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*. This was later adopted by Lydia Davis in her short story "Jury Duty".²⁶ The form omits the questioner's (interviewer's) dialogue, instead focusing solely on the respondent's (interviewee's) words. Rachel Haley Himmelheber describes this form as involving "a partial transcript of [the respondent's] interview (that transcript a frame conceived by an implied narrator that conveys its own wider story)" (Himmelheber 2014, 523). This description can be applied to Davis' piece as well, as she omits the questioner's dialogue in order to create an implied narrator. There are a total of four interviews in Wallace's *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, though the interviews are labelled with the numbers #14, #40, #59, and #20, suggesting that numerous interviews have been conducted within the fictional world of the text. I will focus on Wallace's "Brief Interview #20", as it has been previously linked to the representation and evocation of empathy, in order to deduce whether the format can, indeed, represent the subject matter and characters at hand.²⁷

In "Brief Interview #20", Wallace introduces the format of the story. Without the words of the questioner, the assumptions about what the questioner is asking the respondent must be inferred. For example, the story opens in the middle of the interview. An interaction is already taking place, and the writing demands attention in order to comprehend what is transpiring. This is aided by the personality of the respondent, which is introduced at once:

"Q.

'Let me explain. I'm aware of how it might sound, believe me. I can explain"
(Wallace 1999c, 245).

Because the questions are blank, this writing technique could create an opportunity to leave the questioner's role open to interpretation. This is due to the writing pushing the piecing together

²⁶ This was confirmed by Davis in an interview with Andrew Lawless: "In [the case of 'Jury Duty'] the form was provided by David Foster Wallace's 'Brief Interviews with Hideous Men': a Q. and A. with the questions left blank" (Lawless 2006).

²⁷ Aili Pettersson Pecker suggests that a character in #20's "extraordinary ability to empathize under extreme circumstances could be interpreted as [Wallace's] ultimate version of acknowledging the 'queer nameless ambient urgent interhuman sameness'" (Pettersson Pecker 2014, 24).

of what the questions may be, which could create an interaction with the respondent through creative writing technique. In the first few pages of the story, the questions can be filled in with little struggle by deducing the natural response to a question. However, as the piece continues, the tone of the answers becomes nuanced, creating the opportunity for a more complicated interpretation of what is transpiring between the questioner and the respondent. This can be demonstrated with this interaction:

Q.
'Their certainty that they are different is what makes them the same.'

Q.
'You would be surprised.'

Q.
'All right.' (Wallace 1999c, 247-8)

In this case, it could be more difficult to decipher what the questioner is asking or saying to the respondent. This is striking because now the questions are being constructed as if in response to the answers.

The subject matter of "Interview #20" involves the respondent recounting a one-night relationship to the questioner. He, a law student, speaks of an interaction he had with a "glorious girl whose kiss tastes of liquor when she's had no liquor to drink" (*ibid.* 250). The student appears arrogant and judgmental of the girl, and Wallace uses the format in order to give the prose the immediate ability to stop and question the student's personality. This is demonstrated when the student begins to generalise, stating "I doubt I need to point out that this is nothing but a particular female variant of the psychological need to believe that others take you as seriously as you take yourself... I can tell by your expression what *you* think of brutal candor" (*ibid.* 249). Here, Wallace is using the student's direct conversation with the questioner to both show the mind-set of the student and to hint that the questioner does not agree with his stance. This is all done without the questioner's words to rely on, only the dialogue of the student. There is a duality of judgment taking place in this interaction. The questioner is judging the opinion of the student, and the student is judging the reaction of the questioner. Therefore, through the text, the student might be judged (being placed in the questioner's position) and there might also exist judgment from the student through the construction of the text. Himmelheber references this phenomenon succinctly when she says, "Eric [the respondent] often distances himself from his own actions with the use of a general 'you,' a rhetorical device that simultaneously distances him from his less honourable actions and engages the interviewer, forces her to assume some culpability. (If the interviewer serves as a proxy for the reader, this 'you' applies to us as well)" (Himmelheber 2014, 528). His use of rhetorical devices

and his somewhat aggressive conversation with the interviewer could cause a wariness of his opinions of women and, by extension, his opinion of the questioner. As David Rando puts it in his article, "David Foster Wallace and Lovelessness", "the law student tries to anticipate at every turn the response of the woman who is questioning him and, by extension, the readers' response to the story" (Rando 2013, 587).

The student believes he can anticipate what the questioner thinks and feels of his attempt to empathise with the young woman's rapist's emotions. He continues to do this throughout the retelling of the young woman's ordeal with her attacker, and often acts defensively to the questioner. It is through his words that the position of the questioner and the frustration of the student are signified by the writing. He indicates his defensive stance towards the questioner with exclamations such as "please be aware that I'm quite familiar with the typology behind these bland little expressions of yours" (Wallace 1999c, 260) and "from gauging your expression, no I am not suggesting that this was the same as her asking for it or deciding she wanted it unquote" (*ibid.* 264). This alienation through the beginning and middle of the piece, however, could influence the gaining of empathy for the student by the conclusion of the story.

In this format, there is no narrative description outside of the respondent's words. Settings and descriptions are merely alluded to and never fully developed. From a writer's perspective, this keeps the focus on the student's recounting of the story he is telling and on the interaction between the questioner and the student. The story is interrupted often to hold attention and to give detail about the nature of the interview. For example, the prose shows that they are speaking at an establishment that serves (alcoholic) drinks when the student states "she had an amused expression during the whole conversation that made it hard not to smile in return, and an involuntary need to smile is one of the best feelings available, no? A refill? It's refill time, yes?" and "I have to confess that it was the first time I did not find her one bit dull. Care for another?" (*ibid.* 252). Each time the student interrupts himself, and therefore, the reading of the story. After each of these interruptions, another question is posed and the conversation is directed on a slightly different path. The Q&A writing format creates the possibility for Wallace to redirect the concentration through the redirection of questions.

The student speaks of the "Granola Crunch" young woman's near-death experience with a rapist. It is here, in the middle of the interview, that the prose represents a story within a story. The student begins to compare himself (somewhat empathetically) to the rapist and would-be murderer. He attempts to describe his empathy to the questioner, and becomes defensive of the rapist's actions. He confronts the questioner and states that the rapist is "a predator, you believe,

and he too thinks he's a predator, but *he's* the really frightened one, *he's* the one running" (*ibid.* 259). In addition, his empathy for the rapist is expressed through his recollection of the story. He states that the rapist "was crying and chewing his lower lip like a frightened child, making small lost noises.... By this time I found that even though I was focused very intently on her story and the rape by the road my own mind and emotions were also whirling and making connections and associations" (*ibid.* 264). The student has indicated similarities to the rapist in the young woman's story, and compares his own actions around women to those of a frightened predator. At this point the writing presents an intricate and complicated series of emotions. As Dadlez points out, "it is quite possible that even paragons of probity and virtue can imagine having some of the beliefs and desires of the blackest fictional villain, if that villain's doxastic repertoire is imagined selectively enough or if the attention is focused selectively enough" (Dadlez 1997, 182). Here, Dadlez is referring to the relationship to a character, but this can also be considered in the relationship between two characters. The student expresses empathy for the rapist, and is selectively associating himself with the "villain", which begs the question: is the student the "villain" of the short story at this point?

By the last pages, the student has been revealed by his own words and reasoning to be emotionally lost and desperate for amorous female contact. He has, in effect, tried to convince himself that he had fallen in love with the young woman. His tone becomes increasingly frenzied and saddened as he tries to convince the questioner (and himself) that love for the young woman is a valid emotion. He says "I'd fallen in love with her. I believed she could save me. I know how this sounds, trust me. I know your type and I know what you're bound to ask. Ask it now. This is your chance. I felt she could save me I said. Ask me now. Say it. I stand here naked before you. Judge me" (Wallace 1999c, 271). If the writing technique does leave open to interpretation the position of the questioner, then the student's pleas could create anxiety within the text and potential empathy towards the student's emotions. The last paragraph of the piece invites the acknowledgement of the student's attempt to construct a non-existent loving relationship with the young woman, and through the interviewing stance and the placement of the questioner in this writing technique, not only pity for the student but also an understanding of his torment might be conveyed. On this point, when his anger and frustration is spewed forward with a torrent of expletives ("dyke", "bitch", "cunt", "slut", etc.) along with the final words to the questioner "Be happy. I don't care. I knew she could. I knew I loved. End of story" (*ibid.* 271), his actions add to the description of a man who is breaching the line between denial and comprehension. Because of this, the expletives do not tend to cause the reader to turn away from the student, but instead might aid in the appreciation of what the

student is truly feeling and how desperately frustrated he has been. Rando's statement encapsulates the trajectory of the story: "Wallace turns irony against itself to represent sincere emotion" (Rando 2013, 589). By comparing himself to the rapist and would-be murderer in relation to his interactions with women, the text shows just how judgmental the respondent is of himself, and how he considers himself of low moral standing. Irony is turned upon itself in this particular story, which, through this technique, can produce sincerity rather than further irony; however, this sincerity might influence a connection to the character through his candid speech.

The character could garner empathy even though he is not necessarily a likeable protagonist. This pertains to Keen's observation that "empathic distress at feeling with a character whose actions are at odds with a reader's moral code may be a result of successfully exercised authorial empathy" (Keen 2007b, 134). This character creates a potential "moral" struggle for the reader by causing them to possibly empathise with someone who has unresolved issues with women (demonstrated by his interaction with the questioner and his use of derogatory language), but this is dependent on background, opinion, and personality. The referential slither of the pronoun "you" helps to create an interaction with the student. The "you" the student refers to can be considered as addressing the questioner, the reading audience, or to social conventions in general. Therefore through this slither, the story can be approached as an interaction between questioner and respondent, between the reader and the respondent, or between society and the respondent.

The Q&A creative writing technique presented in this short fiction creates the opportunity for the emotional understanding of both the questioner and the respondent (and it is interesting that the obvious choice for an empathetic character, the girl (rape victim), could garner little to no connection due to the perspectives deployed). Layers of possible emotional interactions exist within the story due to the respondent's voice, the questioner's absent dialogue, and the respondent's own relation to the rapist in the girl's story. The respondent's ultimate lack of love (or even the ability to love) is portrayed through these emotional relationships. This lack of love is expanded on by Rando, who states that "the revelation of lovelessness is made through the man's homosocial preoccupations with and reflections on other men in the woman's narrative, which thus mediates between them" (Rando 2013, 580). This resonates with the writing's disconnection from the girl due to the student's empathetic tie to the rapist.

iv. Short-short Story Format

The short-short story format is one that has been steadily on the rise both in contemporary literary collections and in consumer popularity. Robert Shapard of *World Literature Today* states that since the turn of the twenty-first century "in the United States, anthologies, collections, and chapbooks of [very short fiction] have sold about a million copies" (Shapard 2012). This form is easily accessible due to the rise in electronic book technologies (e.g. the Kindle) and vendors who offer short-short stories through their websites (e.g. Amazon.com). Not only has the short-short story gained readers' attention in the United States, it also has been widely accepted in the global literary community, as mentioned previously regarding the accolades given to Davis, Saunders, and Wallace. Thus, the short-short story format is of importance in contemporary short fiction and deserves exploration regarding emotional reaction and empathetic response vital to this thesis.

In this section, I look at the effectiveness of the short-short story in relation to the use of writing devices to evoke empathy. Every phrase in a short-short story is vital to the piece in its entirety. In order for the short-short story to evoke the intended reactions to the creative writing, precision in word and phrase choice should be considered. The short word count could foster an interest in the piece, as the focus would have a greater potential to be solely on the words in the short-short story. Joyce Carol-Oates observes that, "The rhythmic form of the short-short story is often more temperamentally akin to poetry than to conventional prose, which generally opens out to dramatize experience and evoke emotion" (*ibid.*). This thesis focuses on short-short fiction and its relation to creating empathy as opposed to prose poetry, in that prose poetry is not necessarily constricted by length. Though the short-short story and prose poetry can share certain characteristics (such as careful word choice), the short-short story is a construct in its own right. In addition, I take into account that whilst short-short fiction might be more akin to poetry, it is not, in and of itself, poetry as defined by the author. As Jonathan Monroe states, prose poetry "aspires to be poetic/literary language's own coming to self-consciousness, the place where poet and reader alike become critically aware of the writer's language" (Monroe 1998, 35-6), whereas the writing of the short-short fiction at hand does not necessarily focus on the *reader's* critical awareness of the language.

Attentiveness through the dramatization of the experience is vital to writing short-short fiction, as attention must be given to each phrase, and indeed, to each word. Therefore, by analysing short-short stories from three separate authors (Davis, Saunders, and Wallace), I discuss the usefulness of the short-short story by studying how a smaller and more concise word count can inflect an emotional response. The stories I will consider are Davis' "A Double

Negative", Saunders' "Sticks", and Wallace's "A Radically Condensed History of Postindustrial Life". Their word counts are (not including the titles) 39, 388, and 79, respectively.

Davis' work, "A Double Negative", consists of only one sentence: "At a certain point in her life, she realizes it is not so much that she wants to have a child as that she does not want not to have a child, or not to have had a child" (Davis 2009d, 373). In this story, the writing questions the emotional state of the protagonist in order to understand and empathise with the predicament. Davis' words are succinct and precise, and she does not muddle the protagonist's struggle with extra information. "A Double Negative" involves conflicting ideas expressive of the protagonist's emotions towards parenthood. Though only one sentence, Davis is able to convey detailed information through suggestion. This story, though minute, can be broken down into a beginning, a middle, and an end. It has a conflict and a resolution, and is able to stand on its own as a story in and of itself.

The short-short fiction begins with the phrase "At a certain point in her life" (*ibid.*), which shows not only that the protagonist is female, but, I would argue, that she most likely is also at an age where she is either a.) expected by society or her position in life to have a child, or b.) nearing menopause. This is established with only seven words, yet it gives the context to the setting of the short-short story. By beginning the story with the expectations imposed on the protagonist, Davis' writing addresses the protagonist's conflicting thoughts. The familiar predicament of decision-making and consequences is introduced. Dadlez postulates that "empathy with the protagonist may enable spectators to explore aspects of themselves they would normally repress or resist, that imaginative engagement with fiction may ultimately permit us to resolve moral or psychological conflicts within ourselves" (Dadlez 1997, 201). Through this short-short story's conflict, accentuated by the brevity of its form, there is a universal conflict of indecision.

After defining the protagonist, Davis continues by posing the paradox "it is not so much that she wants to have a child as that she does not want not to have a child" (Davis 2009d, 373). The double negative "does not want not to have" is strategically placed to convey a sense of uncertainty that the protagonist holds. For example, if a writer constructs the phrase "I don't want to not go to the party", it does not necessarily mean that the character wants to go, only that he or she may regret not going. This is the case with the protagonist, and the prose shows the protagonist's indecision through Davis' structure. The title of the piece must be taken into account here, as the "double negative" is the crux of the protagonist's conflict. Here, both the title and the processing of the double negative are pertinent in the writing technique. The link between the title and the story begs consideration of the actual double negative as the conflict

within the story.

Finally, the last phrase of the story expresses the protagonist's worry of regret through its tense. By stating "or not to have had a child" (*ibid.*), the author is demonstrating the character's fear by having her say these words. This segues into suppositions about the future and basing actions on possible repercussions from the past. This is a common conflict of decision-making that most people encounter at one point or another, and the prose relates the uncertain emotions about an action (or inaction) because of the effect acting (or not acting) could have.²⁸ Davis uses the common struggle with fear of regret to open the ability to associate and empathise with the protagonist, even if he or she is not familiar with the particular conundrum that the protagonist faces. The idea of a common struggle is mentioned by Keen, who refers to broadcast strategic empathy, which foregrounds "common vulnerabilities and hopes through universalizing representations" (Keen 2006, 215). The short length of the story may leave an uneasy reaction to the conclusion, but the incredibly small word count gives time to re-read the story, though this may increase the uneasiness felt. The ability to re-read the material allows the opportunity to create a stronger link to the protagonist's conflict, and the familiar emotion of decision-making fear through repeated readings could be present in the text. This directly contributes to experiencing broadcast empathy for the character through the writer's attentive and brief formatting.

Saunders' "Sticks" is the longest short-short fictional piece out of the three under consideration, consisting of 388 words. It deviates from Davis' short-short fiction in that it is more akin to a traditional short story in layout, although at just a page long and under 500 words, it is most assuredly in the short-short story category. "Sticks" spans decades and creates an entire lifetime of stories with a limited amount of words. This is an impressive feat, and being able to convey a character throughout an extended period of time through the short-short story invites the presentation of the life and feelings of the character.

The narrator of the piece is the unnamed son of the Dad. The Dad's actions drive the plot, and it is through the son's eyes that the life of the family and the mental and emotional stability of the Dad are glimpsed. This particular narrative foregrounding can "orient readers' empathy toward protagonists while providing the necessary informational cues about a character's cognitive and affective states" (Harrison 2011, 258). The Dad can also be said to assume the role of a protagonist by the end of the story, as the son's opinions and voice are

²⁸ There is a plethora of literature on the fear of decision-making and its commonality. Mike Figliuolo gives an example: "Biologically and psychologically, people abhor risk. That's why making big decisions is too tremendously difficult" (Figliuolo 2014).

absent. By writing through the son's perspective, the eccentric behaviour of the Dad is revealed. At the conclusion, however, the writing might encourage empathy with the Dad's "cognitive and affective" state.²⁹

The renewed importance of precision in word and phrase choice within short-short stories is also pointed out by Cousins, who states that "writers are revelling in opportunities to innovate, challenged by the brevity of the form to explore how they can make every word count" (Cousins 2013). The "brevity of the form" is not lost on Saunders, and he effectively begins the story *in media res*, beginning the prose in the middle of the family's dynamics from the first sentence, "Every year Thanksgiving night we flocked out behind Dad as he dragged the Santa suit to the road and draped it over a kind of crucifix he'd built out of metal pole in the yard" (Saunders 2013d, 29). The information provided at the beginning of the narrative creates the first perception of the Dad (his character and his actions). The peculiar relationship between the Dad and the pole is highlighted through further explanation of the pole's outfits throughout the year. The Dad's "one concession to glee", the significance of the pole, is not understood by the son, by the family, or by outsiders. The Dad, therefore, is alienated from the normalcy of the family.

The son focuses on the Dad's stinginess in all other affairs apart from the pole. The son states that the Dad "hovered over us as we poured ketchup, saying, Good enough good enough good enough" (*ibid.*). There exists a contradiction between the word choice and the subject matter. Whereas the Dad is ensuring none of the product is wasted, Saunders has chosen to have him say "good enough" three times, thus repeating (and perhaps wasting) the words that Saunders is using. There is a dichotomy between waste and excess, of the Dad's priorities versus his own expression. The repetition also creates a sense of pressure in the prose. The narrator's position shows the restrictions placed on the children. This distances the character of the Dad, creating empathy with the narrator and his perception of the Dad.

Saunders' writing changes tone when the narrator explains that his siblings and he have grown and "had children of our own, found the seeds of meanness blooming also within us" (*ibid.* 30). The son implies that the "meanness" is created through the pressures of having children and being an adult in general, and that he sees his metamorphosis into a similar character to his father. Though there is a hint of an alignment between the son and the Dad's characters, the word "meanness" has a negative connotation and shows that the son has not forgiven the Dad for his actions when the son was a child. This tonality shows that the son is

²⁹ Defined by Harrison as "narrative focus on particular characters" (Harrison 2011, 258).

still hurt by his father's actions.

Another shift within the story takes place when the Dad begins "dressing the pole with more complexity and less discernible logic" (*ibid.*). Saunders uses the next few sentences to describe the unorthodox ways in which the Dad dresses the pole. This contrasts with the beginning of the story and the unconventional dressing of the pole. The Dad is portrayed as moving further away from reality, and the son's narration depicts his unravelling. Yet as the Dad moves closer to delusion, we are introduced to his emotions. There is an emotional disconnection from the son, as he does not reveal his emotions through his narration; however, the Dad's thoughts are learned indirectly through his pole. The son describes how "Mom died and he dressed the pole as Death and hung from the crossbar photos of Mom as a baby" (*ibid.*). The depiction of the (now old) Dad mourning his wife reveals that the Dad is emotionally involved with those around him. He also "provided offspring by hammering in six crossed sticks around the yard" and "painted a sign saying LOVE and hung it from the pole and another that said FORGIVE?" (*ibid.*). The Dad desperately attempts to reconnect with his family, but the opinions of the son have gone silent, implying perhaps that they have become less vehement and certain, which is suggestive of empathy towards his father, from a writer's perspective. The final sentence brings into question the son's character, and empathy might then be felt for the Dad. The last sentence states that the Dad "died in the hall with the radio on and we sold the house to a young couple who yanked out the pole and left it by the road on garbage day" (*ibid.*). The treatment of the pole is an extension of the opinion the son had of the Dad. By showing the pole being left by the road to be thrown away, the son is, in effect, discarding his father. Saunders has used repetition and the brevity of the form to create the emotional connection to different characters at different points or different readings of the story.

The sheer amount of action in "Sticks" is remarkable here as it works well in this form to create a reader's bond with the son and then to overthrow the bond to create empathy for the Dad. Because the story is swift, a writer can use this technique to foster the rereading of the first part of the piece in which the son posits why his siblings and he are aggravated by his father. When the story is re-examined, greater sympathy can be gained for the Dad, as the prose shows that the Dad's infractions (from his children's perspective) were for insignificant episodes such as restricting their use to "a single Crayola from the box at a time" or for "Birthday parties consist[ing] of cupcakes, no ice cream" (*ibid.* 29-30). When first reading the story, empathy with the children not receiving these favours could exist. The demise of the Dad and his pleas ("FORGIVE?") might transfer the empathetic reaction from the son to the Dad. This is done primarily through the ease with which the writing prompts the re-inspection of the

short-short story. Saunders' short-short story has the capacity to change the perception of the characters throughout each separate reading. Though this is also possible with longer pieces of short fiction, the short-short story format in this case presents an opportunity for the writer to create an opportunity to re-evaluate the beginning of the story through the ultimate perception of the Dad. This might change the empathetic connection with the story's characters through the perspective and word choice of the short-short fiction. This suggests that when the totality of the story is known in regards to the characters and their situation, empathy has the potential to grow or shift with and between characters.

The third short-short story, "A Radically Condensed History of Postindustrial Life", (interestingly located on page 0 in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*) is made up of a title and two short paragraphs. Wallace uses the title to give an initial impression on the scope of the story. The word "postindustrial" must be taken into consideration with Wallace's choice of title. As postindustrialism generally involves service positions (e.g. desk jobs) as opposed to factory and manufacturing jobs, the writing implies the topic of the short-short story.³⁰ Wallace has used the title as a setting to the story. Additionally, his use of "radically condensed" suggests that the overall nature of 'postindustrial life' is succinct and compressed.

The story in question revolves around three characters: "he", "she", and "the man". At the opening, repetition is used to show the typicality of the thoughts and inherent anxieties that "he" and "she" are experiencing. He "made a witticism, hoping to be liked", and in response she "laughed extremely hard, hoping to be liked" (Wallace 1999d, 0). The insecurity of the emotions and expectations of the two characters are recognised, and the feelings that both would be experiencing can be deduced. Because of the repetition and the connotation of the word "hoping", the prose shows the mentality of the two characters and the emotional suppression they are experiencing.

"He" and "she" are packaged together as similar (if not, arguably, identical) characters, and could be considered as representative post-industrial workers. Wallace binds them together, not giving them separate personalities nor differing actions. After the strained interaction, they are described as "staring straight ahead, with the very same twist to their faces" (Wallace 1999d, 0). The "twist" to the face has a strikingly similar connotation to that of "hoping". The twisting is the physical representation of holding in one's emotions. Neither "he" nor "she" has been true to him or herself. His witticism rings as an empty (and veritably

³⁰ Wallace expresses a negative view of postindustrialism, of which Cooperman and Nelson claim that "many of the social problems in contemporary society are a consequence of recent innovations in information technology" (Cooperman and Nelson 1998, 583).

unoriginal) attempt at humour, and her hard laugh displays an identical emptiness. Though this could be seen in a negative light, it is also a common social occurrence to have restrictions and expectations placed on oneself. Therefore, at this junction, the actions of "he" and "she", and may, in some respect, connect to the afore-experienced emotion of societal expectations can be understood. As with Davis' theme on decision-making, Wallace's theme of social expectations could connect to a familiar emotional dilemma.

When the man is introduced in paragraph two, the protagonist angle shifts from "he" and "she" to "the man". His opinion of the two previous characters is described, and he "didn't much like either of them, though he acted as if he did" (*ibid.*). As with her laugh and his joke, the man acts contrary to his own opinion. He does this because he is "anxious... to preserve good relations at all times" (*ibid.*). This, in effect, is the crux of this short-short story. The anxiety of all three characters carries throughout their actions. Each person acts in opposition to his or her true opinions due to the anxiety of societal expectations and manners. "He" falls to making a witty phrase when meeting in hopes of being liked. "She" reacts to this by embellishing her laughter, hoping to be liked. And the man does not act as if he does not like the two, because he, too, wants to be liked. Arguably, now all three characters are representative of "postindustrial life", insofar as they represent social alienation through the consequences of postindustrialism and technology.

The last sentence, once again, utilises repetition in a similar vein to Saunders' repetition of "good enough". The narrator ponders, "One never knew, after all, now did one now did one now did one" (*ibid.*). There is a shift, again, of the protagonist of the story from "the man" to "one". This can be read as encompassing all three of the previous characters. The repetition of "now did one" three times is representative of the thoughts of the three characters (a phrase for each character). It also continues the theme of the somewhat preoccupied expectations each of the characters has depending on the way that he or she is being perceived by another. In reality, the perception is a lie, and none of the characters truly know what the other is actually feeling. The writing leads to this conclusion through the word choice and brevity in the short-short story. This is, in part representative of Dadlez' postulation that "many of our experiences of the fictional are indeed participatory.... [T]his is due to patterns of thinking, feeling, and interpreting typical of the empathetic imagination" (Dadlez 1997, 50). The subject can be seen as a foray into the world of postindustrial workers through the title of the story, and the writer can help to interpret what all three characters are experiencing.

Thus shown, there are specific ways in which the short story form can be utilised by creative writers to construct possibly empathetic characterisations. This is aided by the

condensed nature of the story, the reliance on precise word choice, and the ability to re-read the passage immediately after the conclusion. The rise of this format, aided by electronic and online web presence, gives the writer another avenue to create a piece that can resonate within a relatively short period of time. Because a writer is restricted by the word count, the essence of the story and the emotional point of the characters must be represented concisely.

v. Conclusion

The utilisation of various short story formats by creative writers has the potential to foster empathy for a character within short pieces of fiction. The Q&A format (with the questions left blank) leaves the questioner's position open. This could create an avenue to interact with the respondent, and gives rise to the possibility of empathy for both the questioner's apparent opinion of the respondent, the respondent's opinion of the questioner, and an empathetic understanding for the specific plot. However, writing issues can arise within the Q&A format with the prose representing distance from the respondent's character, as it is possible that the blank questions and the necessity of creating the questions might represent the questioner more than the respondent; however, this might be the writer's desired effect. The short-short story format relies on word choice and concise phrasing for the desired effect to be implemented. A writer could create an emotional investment in a character within a short period of time, and this can be accomplished if the writer considers characterisation in the construction of the short-short story. Unnecessary phrases or information can be omitted if not pertinent to the story, and the writer should consider the use of direct details and characterisation. Finally, writers can utilise segmentation and the use of creative segment titles in order to accentuate a character's emotional experience within the story. The segments can decelerate the prose so that a character's emotional response can be reflected upon. Segments can also use titles to present information about a character, highlighting events instead of embedding them within the text. One possible result of segmentation, however, is a distracting interruption of prose that can affect the writing of an empathetic character. Therefore, the segments should serve a purpose within the story relating to the writer's technique in creating a possible empathetic reaction to a character.

IV. Fragmented Perceptions: A Collection of Characters

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1.) Dear Tom

I detest you. The way you sit with your right leg loftily above the other, jingling in time to Duran Duran from the speaker behind bar. The way your fingers twiddle the toothpick on the edge of your glass, like a large, albino spider toying with prey. Stick's end drips vodka tears against glass I polished last night. Two hours making sure the bar was disinfected and spotless. Two hours squinting at liquor orders through swollen eyes. Wanna get out from behind bar, run outside, scream "damn you!" to world.

That would include you.

Ya know, before you graced my place of business with your presence, was pretty calm person; content to make fifth lemon drop or one hundred and twenty-third cosmo. But you came in with the gust of Chicago wind, and I had to get up and make you a drink.

"Can I get a dry, dirty, vodka martini?" You said more so than asked, your voice rough with cigarette smoke, your shaggy head bouncing back and forth.

Your order made me scoff. All you had to tack on was "shaken, not stirred" to add to cliché. I figured you viewed yourself a James Bond sort of type, someone who I wouldn't waste time on... yet I'll admit, was jealous of the self-confidence you carried, and a little intrigued by the way you slung it over your back nonchalantly, like a macho man-purse no one would dare make fun of.

In all actuality, you ruined me the day you walked through the door. If I thought you were going to be a one-time customer, it may not have perturbed me as much. But the way you were looking at Blondie Mc-Fakeboobs, who comes to bar every Thursday without money looking to pick up suckers, screamed *I'm sticking around!* I knew you would be permeating my life, if only to get her number. Refused to let myself realize how much you'd creep under my skin.

You did more than that. You didn't *creep*, you dove.

"Hey thanks."

The first thing you said to me.

Your unexpected words made me slosh martini over table you were sitting at. Dabbed the wet spot then shuffled along my way, not daring to open mouth. Figured a nod would suffice.

Really.

Who the hell wears their hair all floppy and long, brushing the overgrown bangs out of their eyes? You looked up at me with those piercing blue eyes as if you were doing me a favor.

"Pay attention to me," I imagined you thinking, "I'm humoring you and making you feel like you matter at all in this trivial freaking world. Now get me another martini."

You *would* say "freaking." Hadn't heard a curse word out of you since you'd been frequenting the bar. Made me feel elated at the time. *Now there's a guy who has his head on his shoulders.* Had no idea that you were saving the truly biting words you would never utter, things you wouldn't even consider saying, for my ears.

I'm a lucky bitch.

When back at apartment after meeting you, I stole roommate's "delicious apple red" fingernail polish. Drops hid haggard fingers, clumsy hands. They were now beautiful, graceful. Pranced around my room like a little schoolgirl, flapping them in air to dry, dragging them across my face to see contrast between bright burgundy and pasty skin. Imagined my reincarnated fingers intertwined with yours. Yeah, I'll admit it. I was infatuated with you.

Add it to the list of why I hate you.

Took a good look at myself in the upright mirror and scrunched up my nose. Came to grips with who I was, and a manicured girl was at the bottom of the list.

Stupid.

Dragged acetone across each finger.

Never again, alright? Never. Again.

"Hey, can I get a dirty, dry vodka martini?"

"Garmphunkle," I think was what I said in reply, and glass in hand fell to floor with embarrassing crash. I could feel the heat radiating off of goddamn face.

Stupid blush.

"You alright?" you asked with this peevishly amused tone, peering over the counter while I picked up shards from sticky floor.

Mouth was dry. Licked lips to try to wet tongue. However, thinking about tongue made me even more nervous. Forced myself to reply with a noncommittal shrug.

"Alright man," you said, abandoning the bar and retreating to a table.

Man.

Should've known there. You'd only refer to me as a dude if you'd already slid me into the friend zone. Mind was fully resolved to forget about you, make your ridiculous martini, get back to life I'd had before you stomped all over it. Tried to keep hands from trembling.

"Thanks," you said, looking up from your notebook as I ever so smoothly slopped half of drink on table.

With you, I lose all motor function. I lose the small bit of suave nature hiding in me

somewhere.

"Hey, can you help me out with something?"

Hadn't realized I had turned away from you, scuttling back to safe haven behind bar. Your voice jarred my movement, and I nearly tripped on tip of shoe.

"Huh?" I asked, turning back to you, hoping you wouldn't notice sweat on forehead.

Better yet, I hoped the lighting was dim and shitty enough for you not to notice the spot on my chin. Debated placing my hand over spot, but realized that not only would I look more retarded than I did anyway, it would also make nail polish debacle noticeable. Settled by placing hands in pockets and turning chin down. Looked like hand-less turtle.

"Yeah, so, I'm new here, and kind of want to get out. I've met some great people, but I'm not really into the whole 'party 'til you puke' thing. I don't know. You know of any good places to listen to some music? Maybe some local bands or something?"

"Uh," I said, because am completely suave and all that jazz.

You looked up at me with those crazy, expressive eyes, and I forced myself to blink and remember what the hell we were talking about in the first place. Music. Tried to think about music. Pulsating bodies and loud noises make me restless and uneasy. But I wanted to please you, wanted to see you smile, so I scrounged up punk club a boho'd been going on about.

"There's a place just down the street," I said, realizing I didn't even know the name of it.

"Cool, well I'll have to check it out sometime. Oh, and it's Tom, by the way."

You stuck out your hand for me to shake it. Mine stayed stubbornly in my pocket picking at stray piece of lint.

"Alex," I muttered, pissed that I couldn't control myself enough to touch you.

Wished I had balls to stay and talk, to come up with something to say to you that would keep you intrigued. Leaving was the best I could come up with.

Damage control.

I turned away again, ready to tackle dishes that had started to pile up when you called to me.

"You busy tomorrow night?"

I gulped and looked around wildly, expecting to see Blondie somewhere in the vicinity. Head spun around like something out of *The Exorcist*.

"Uh, no."

"Alright, well do you want to check it out with me? I'd feel a little lame going by myself."

"Surkay," I said.

Wanted to face palm myself and chop off tongue simultaneously.

I've added my tongue to my hate list. It's jotted down right after your name.

"Meet you there around ten."

You left the bar an hour later with a small salute and a beaming smile. Why did you have to do that? A simple "goodbye" would have sufficed. The air whipped around your hair. Watched you leave through the open window like some stalker with a wet dream. Walked over to the table. Picked the uneaten olives from the table top. I popped an olive into my hand and abruptly stuck it in my mouth. Tangy pimento gushed between my teeth, and I winced as salty residue rubbed against cut in mouth. Wasn't necessarily unpleasant.

You made me an obsessed creeper.

Changed shirt three times between nine and nine-fifteen, washed hair twice before nine-thirty, and removed most of "delicious apple red" disaster from fingernails by nine-forty. Plucked a few stray hairs from my eyebrows. Well, alright, I picked them out like an athletic kid picking the best players for his kickball team. Aggressively and without mercy. I puffed out chest, flat and pathetic. In sixth grade stole sister's bra and stuffed it full of cheap tissue; A crappy, itchy lilac scented paper. "What the fuck are you doing with my bra?" sister had asked, snapping the back clasp and letting the tissue fall to the floor. She always hated me messing with her stuff.

Circled block three times before mustering courage to approach club's front entrance. And there you were, looking all disheveled and hip in your jacket. Your hands were covered, closed up in your pockets. I felt a pang of sadness that they weren't out for me to look at. Regretted choice of outfit, realizing bright orange shirt made me look like a pumpkin. Zipped up blue Members Only jacket to hide orange mess.

"Hey, there you are. Thought you'd forgotten or something," you said, smiling your stupidly straight teeth at me.

"No."

Ugh. Squeaky, squeaky voice.

You pressed through the crowd to the front of the bar; people split a path open for you. Like Moses parting a red sea of hessians and koozbanes. You passed me a pint glass full of piss-colored liquid, not a bit of head on top of it. You pushed away my hand, the one holding some wadded tip dollars.

"Nah, don't worry about it. You make me martinis every day. We're even."

"kay," I said, taking sip from sweating glass.

Bubbly carbonation seared throat. Reminded me of baking soda, bland and dry and bitter. There we sat, you and I, listening to Louis Armstrong rip-offs, a tone-deaf soloist, and a Rasta band who probably got the gig to fill up a time slot. No matter shitty music, I was ecstatic. The way your nose crinkled at each of the guitarist's screw-ups made me chuckle; I listened to your diatribe on dreadlocks. Now that I think about it, your demeanor was pretty damn pretentious, but I liked that you were entertained by pointing out the pitiful people around us.

If only had paid attention to that.

You clasped me on the shoulder, squeezing me slightly as you made your way out of the booth. I didn't want night to end. Feet wobbled a little, and I blinked my eyes furiously to adjust to street lights.

"That was so much fun. I'm glad you pointed that place out. Terrible music. God, it was so entertaining."

Your face lit up like you'd just won first prize at a science fair. Couldn't help but mimic your expression.

"Yeah, it was great."

Whether it was booze, excitement, or the fact that I had pretty much been fantasizing about touching you all night, something propelled me to move in close to you. Knowing full well I'd chicken out if I thought things over, I pressed my lips to yours.

And God, you tasted like vodka and cigarettes and sex.

And it had been forever since I had kissed someone like this.

And I couldn't stop hands from grabbing the nape of your neck.

And I wondered whether cut in mouth had healed and whether you would notice.

And -

"What the fuck are you doing?"

Eyes were still closed and mouth wide open like a codfish. All I noticed was air all around me and the slight sway of my body and you, gone.

"I just... I thought..."

I knew what I thought. I thought we'd go skipping off into the sunset, swirl around a flowery meadow singing "The Sound of Music," kiss and have little cartoon hearts circling around our bodies.

"What? You thought I was some sort of fucking faggot?"

"I -"

Didn't feel your right hook graze the bottom of my eye, didn't feel my body hit the pavement, didn't feel your dark blue sneaker kick me underneath my ribs. Your words crippled

me, were enough pain to have me panting on the ground wounded. Did you know that? Hit me, kick me, I don't care. Ripping my soul out my ass, now that hurt.

You reduced me to a wet puppy, shaking on the curb.

Now there you sit, surrounded by the people you met at the bar the first day, the ones you didn't feel comfortable with. You're scribbling away in your notebook, sipping the martini I was too chickenshit to bring you. Wonder why you come in here anymore, why you bother being near me when I'm far from anything you would ever want, something you despise.

You probably don't even care.

Wasn't so much as a blip on the radar for you. You look over at me briefly, roll your eyes, and leave. Wanna chase you down, scream and shake you, hurt you like you hurt me. Eyes sting through blackened slits you gave me. *Good riddance*, I want to say to you, *Hope a truck runs over your beautiful face*.

I'll have a clean glass for you tomorrow.

2.) Cardinal

IV

It is a wintry day where the steam from a dark roast coffee fogs the window. Wisps of smoke and frost condense on the glass, and the pane begins to cry. Tom wipes his finger across the beads of liquid, staring out of the smudge while balling up the condensation and dead skin between his thumb and forefinger. He spots the man and the red jacket he had so often rested his head on, years ago. He thinks the Christmas lights are tricking his eyes, so he blinks again and again... and again, and the picture does not dissipate.

A lifetime ago of loose tobacco and sweat and the sugary powder residue of doughnuts stashed in the right hand pocket; the scratching comfort of blended material sliding across the cheek like felt paper.

I

"You've eaten all the good ones again," Tom had said with a frown, taking a cream-filled long john from the box.

"Can't help myself. You know once I find something I like, I have to have it," the man had replied, wiggling his eyebrows at Tom.

That had been one of the many stolen nights. An evening of pastries and wine, of banter and sex. Tom had awoken the next morning to an empty apartment and a hastily scribbled note full of flimsy excuses and white lies. He had tried not to be hurt, to feel content in the night they had spent together. The man always came back, be it in a couple days or a couple months. Tom only had to wait patiently, to not push.

V

Brushing the moisture with his sweater sleeve, Tom breaks the line of clarity into a large peephole, hurriedly wiping his forearm against the cold surface to encapsulate the man's entire body. He holds his breath so as not to replace the veil over his view. The man in the bright jacket smiles on the side of the street, wistfully looking at a cardinal bobbing on the electric wire. Its talons hang to the metal. After moments of unsuccessful steadying, it breaks off into the foggy night.

VI

This is the look the man used to give Tom in the early morning hours after a night of warmth, a millennium of talking, living, being. This was the smile he did not allow to creep into his eyes; the look that said "I love you" and "goodbye" simultaneously.

II

"You know we can't go out together," the man had told Tom crossly.

The wine bottle was empty and the autumn air was sweet and calm.

"Come on, as friends. We could grab a drink. Enjoy the breeze. It's been so goddamn humid lately."

Tom's words, tinged with an inability to conceal his pleas, made the man look at Tom with pity and frustration.

"We can't do that, you know," the man said, in his tone of finality he often used when he felt Tom was expecting too much.

"No one'll say anything. Just a quick drink and a smoke?" Tom had detested himself for continuing to beg.

"You know who lives around here, and you sure as hell remember the last time we were out there together."

VII

Tom remembered that he had grown sick to his stomach with the thought of the one troubling night. The episode in question had involved a stolen kiss, caressing of hands, a night Tom had thought was, in a word, perfection. They had walked down the unlit alley, shoulder to shoulder, so entirely absorbed in one another not to notice Tom's brother following behind them. Tom still had the small, white scar under his left eye from the encounter. The incident created a lump in his throat, not only because the man had been hurt, but because Tom himself had once beaten up a kid for coming onto him. In some small way, Tom felt as if he were receiving some sort of cosmic justice for what he had done in the past.

III

"Why would you bring that up?" Tom asked the man in a small voice.

"You forget, sometimes, that we can't just be like that."

"I know we can't. But I love y-"

"I have to go," the man had said coldly.

"Come on. Stay. We'll stay in, alright? It was stupid to bring it up. I'm sorry, okay?"

The man shook his head and flicked the crumbs from the crimson coat. He slid the jacket over his lithe body and made for the door without doing up the buttons.

"Don't go. I'm... I'm sorry. You know I can be stupid," Tom yelled at the man's back.

The man merely turned away from the door for a moment, gave Tom one last look, and left. The man's eyes had been full of emotion that Tom had not been able to interpret. He had not known that would be the last time he would hear from him.

IX

The cardinal falls to the ground, feathers bent with frost. Tom watches as its layers spill

onto the pavement: red, crimson, blue, purple. The man's head turns away from the fallen bird, and looks into the cafe window. The men lock eyes on one another.

VIII

"Darling, what is it? You've been in your own little world for the past five minutes. What do you think we should bring to the Sunday social?" Tom's wife Leah chirps, touching his hand with a small tap. It is a tone she has used often, a sort of false twittering laced with annoyance and a hint of suspicion. That was her voice, as if she were trying to mask from herself what she knew somewhere in her subconscious mind.

Tom recoils at the soft, light touch.

Leah pulls her hand away with only a momentary glimpse of frustration peeking through her expression.

He wants the rough, callused fingertips; he longs for the strong, forceful grip.

Hardness of wood floors.

Impregnated air of smoke.

Sweetness of masculine sweat.

XI

"Darling?" She asks once more, this time the impatience with his distraction permeating her tone. She had stopped pretending just long enough to jar Tom from his thoughts.

"Nothing, dear. Sorry," he says, remembering himself, and sitting back down in his seat.

With a well-practiced grin and a kiss on Leah's forehead; her hands, miniscule; her lips, bowed and feminine.

I love you. Goodbye.

Leah offers Tom more sugar for his coffee. He watches her spoon the small lumps into his mug and he blinks back tears as the granules disappear and break into the dark brownish-black.

X

Tom turns his face to the window. The man is gone, and the red smudge of the cardinal has saturated the snow underneath. He breathes out, obscuring the window pane in feathery puffs of steam against ice.

3.) Bible Studies

Ephesians 5:22-24¹ or The Snap Snack Challenge

Leah is finishing the dishes from the night before, once more wiping and scraping off scraps that had cemented to the plates her husband had bought at Ikea years ago. The bits of hardened macaroni and cheese, smudges of dried ground beef, and the ever-present ring around a bowl of curdled milk left over from breakfast taunt her. She tackles them with a Brillo pad and slams each defeated dish into the washer. All she had asked was for them to soak them, to just *soak* them and make her life easier when she ultimately would have to face the pile of masticated remains in the morning. They had not managed to do that in the past year, save last Mother's Day. Leah, knowing this, does not understand why she expects a different result each morning.

Now that Caleb is starting his Junior year, and his seventeenth birthday is fast approaching, Leah feels that he should, at least, understand how to take care of himself. Not just himself, but others as well. She thinks she should have raised him better, and she wrinkles her nose and dumps the clumped Fruit Loop-laden milk into the trash can. As for her husband, she had given up Tom years ago. Every moment spent nagging or berating him had heightened the passive-aggressivity in which he used so tactfully.

"Could you please remember to pick up Caleb from practice?" she had asked last year when the church functions had nominated her head of social planning.

For the next week Caleb had waited ten, twenty, thirty minutes, until the coach finally rang the house with concern at having to spend his own time staying on the pitch until Tom found it in his own time to retrieve his son.

"You know, I wouldn't have expected to ask this from you, Mrs. Adams. I know y'all are busy and whatnot, but I've got a wife, too, and she ain't too happy about me takin' an extra half hour to get home. Ya know, hot dinner and all. So if you wouldn't mind..."

This led to Leah resuming chauffeuring duties the next week, and she had continued to do so ever since until Tom bought Caleb a car. It is a Ford Mustang that Tom had rationalized buying Caleb because "it's a Ghia notchback from the '80s, Leah. Newly renovated and I got a great deal on it." Tom had then proceeded to cancel his and Leah's annual retreat to Branson for the Followers of Christ conference to recuperate the cost.

¹ "Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the saviour of the body. Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in every thing."

The entirety of the dishwashing had ultimately fallen on her in a similar manner over five years ago, with the same amount of manipulative tact on Tom's part. It was how she had decided to forego her enrollment at the local university to pursue her duties at home. All was aided and supported by a weekly reminder via Pastor Bill's matrimony sermons: Leah should not expect to be a part of the manly duties that came with a career. Happy home, happy life, for both man and wife. She enjoyed the role, and held herself in high esteem, though she did not enjoy when Tom worsened himself in order to highlight his need for her.

"And he's still doing it, darn him," Leah muttered to the now-softened crud circling around in warm water smelling of soap and spoiled dairy. She then scanned the room to make sure she was alone.

Leah and Tom have not always been this way. There were times, at the beginning, that had filled her with joy and, she would concede, pretention. Tom had been chivalrous, charming, and as devout to the Word of God as she was. He had not, as others had, pushed intimacy on her. They would listen to music, go to coffee shops, fill calendars with prayer meetings, and attend Sunday church together. Leah wished for those days to return. They still joined in Sunday services and participated in church bake-offs, luncheons, ice cream socials; anything the Wichita Southern Baptist Church (North-East location, never the West branch) demanded, they delivered. These activities gave her something to concentrate on, and reassured her, at least on the periphery, that Tom and she were together: together as man and wife, as devout Christians, as a staple to the community in which they live.

"Leah?"

She unstopped the sink of stagnant water and turned around to see Tom standing in the doorway. She sighed and pushed the sweat from her brow.

"Hi darling, did you forget something?"

She fought through the tension of her voice, reciting 1 Corinthians 11:9 in her head: *Neither was the man created for the woman, but the woman for the man.*

"No, I tried to call but you didn't pick up."

"I'm sorry, I'm just finishing up the di-"

"Caleb's class is having an afternoon party, some sort of 'end-of-semester' thing. He told me yesterday but I must've forgotten to tell you."

"Okay," Leah said, retying her hair in a limp ponytail and turning to Tom.

"So, he needs to bring a snack and he doesn't want to stop at Walmart on their open lunch break."

"I've got it under control," Leah said with a smile and a determined nod.

"Alright, good."

Leah reached out to touch Tom's fingers, which had been twiddling incessantly on the countertop. He quickly removed them and gave a fluttering peck on her cheek.

"Goodbye, then," he said, his back already turned to the door.

She does not fixate on the abrupt manner in which her husband left. That is the way he is, and the way in which God made him. She focuses on the task at hand: to make the best, most scrumptious snack that will make both Tom and Caleb proud. This is her job, as God posits, and she will try her best to do right by Him.

Proverbs 6:25² or The Itchy Flannel Nightie

It has been three days since Leah went to the high school. Her heart has pounded in her chest to the point in which she logged on to Caleb's computer to look up symptoms of "heartbeat irregularity": she could have coronary artery disease, electrolyte imbalances, or injury from a heart attack. All of these made her uneasy, but did not explain the fatigue and overwhelming thoughts swimming through her head each night.

Tom turns the bedroom light off, and they sidle into their respective sides of the bed. Though it is the onset of summer, she is dressed in the flannel gown both Caleb and Tom had bought her last Mother's Day to replace the one they had given to her the year before. It is hot and sticky with Tom refusing to set the air conditioning on, even in the 80 degree heat of the night. She knows not to let her foot wander to his side of the bed, but has no desire to even try to convince herself to avoid trying tonight. She has been changed, and a spark in her has grown that she did not know could exist. It must be unnatural. It must be a sin. It is warm and troubling and cold and intensely calming. She rubs her thighs together to relieve the pressure that has spread from the thoughts, the thoughts of *him*.

"Leah, seriously, can you just settle it down? I'm trying to sleep," Tom grumbles to her.

She blushes in the darkness, not having realized the noise the comforter has made against the cotton sheets. The blood from her pelvis rushes to her cheeks, and she turns over on her side, forcing herself to be calm and to think about anything but that day. But that day will not leave her, and she stays awake in a half-dream state throughout the night.

Her cellophane-wrapped creations of no-bake cookies and peanut butter brittle had been displayed on a tray and carefully buckled into the passenger seat of the family van on her way to the auditorium. In only five hours she had pre-used her mother's recipes, had retrieved the

² "Do not desire her beauty in your heart, nor let her capture you with her eyelids."

multi-colored wrapping paper from Walmart, and had successfully hammered the hard brittle into caramelized pieces. She had recharged her cell phone and made sure that the home answering machine's light blinked green and ready to record. She would not make the mistake of troubling Tom to come home to reach her again.

"Hello Mrs. Adams," the home-room teacher said warmly as Leah walked through the doors, arms laden with treats. "Thank you for doing this on such short notice. I only told the class yesterday, but as we have a free period today, I think the kids deserve a break, don't you?"

"Yes, of course!" Leah had replied, spotting a table in which to set her masterpiece. She caught her loafer on the table's leg, and could see the tray begin to slip, spilling out of her hands.

"Hey, cuidado!" she heard a voice yell.

Peeking over the bright blue and yellow cellophane paper were two liquid brown eyes that were looking *at* her, not through her or to the left of her, but directly at her as if she were a person to be seen, not a convenience to be commanded. She almost lost her grip once more as the boy's tanned fingers brushed against her in an effort to move the tray onto the table. His hand was warm and calloused, and Leah's neck prickled from the contact. She had not been touched by anyone in so long a time as she could not remember.

"Mom, you okay?"

"Huh?" she had said, not being able to take her eyes off the dark brown gaze.

"Are you okay?"

Caleb's sharp tone brought her back to reality, to the slightly stale smell of teenage feet and Axe body spray; to the strain of fluorescent lighting and cheap plastic chairs and lemon-zested linoleum.

"Oh sure, Caleb, honey. Fine," Leah said, catching herself and hiding her embarrassment by fluffing the plastic on the package.

"Ugh, Mom, peanut brittle? Again?" Caleb rolled his eyes and looked for agreement from the room full of classmates.

"But it's your favorite, sweetie, right?" Leah asked. If this were the first time he had acted this way, she would have been hurt; but she was used to his dismissals, and only felt a twinge of regret that she had not made something else, that she had not succeeded.

"Mrs. Adams, it's great. C'mon Caleb, don't be such a dick – oh, sorry Mrs. Adams,"

Leah looked at the boy, avoiding his eyes by concentrating on the silver cross dangling from his darkened neck. She did not balk at his curse word. On the contrary, the use of the slang and the way in which the boy's lips formed the hard clicking sound at the end of the word

- a "kah" that shivered through her – cut through her disappointment and made a point in her navel jump into her chest.

"It's okay," she said, not being able to control the way the ends of her mouth kept pulling at her cheeks, upturning into a traitorous smile. "And call me Leah, please."

"Mom, that's so cheesy!"

"Leah it is. Jorge," he said, extending his hand for her to shake.

His palm is gritty and his grip is tight. She does not want it to end, and she breathes short and fast as his confident hands swipe the hair from her face after doing the dishes. She lets him touch her, stroke the back of her neck. She waits for him while he fumbles with the unused buttons of her flannel nightgown. She anticipates his contact as he –

"For all that is holy, Leah, will you just stop moving or go to the couch for the night? I have a meeting tomorrow morning and I don't want to look like I was dragged to Hell and back."

Matthew 5:27-30³ or The Facebook Infiltration

Caleb has forgotten to log out of his Facebook account. Normally, Leah does not bother herself with Caleb's technology, as she herself does not engage in social media. This is not only because Leah considers the interactions with the other ladies on the church's social board enough to fulfil her needs of human connection on a friendship platform, but also because she and Tom had agreed that there was no reason for her to have to communicate their personal life to "the world," as it were. She believes in this, though she does wonder if Tom may have his own account. Oftentimes, she will go into town, passing by the local Dillons or checking in at school functions when other town members congratulate her on something "Tom posted" or that "Tom tweeted" (albeit, it took her three months to understand that "tweet" was an electronic phrase and not, as she had perplexedly thought, similar to a chirp).

"That's his right," she would say aloud, consulting Timothy 2:12: *But I permit not a woman to teach, nor to have authority over the man, but to be in silence.*

Today, the screen glares at her as she tidies up Caleb's room, knowing not to tuck in his blankets too firmly for fear of dislodging the *Playboys* and *Maxims* she fears he has stashed between the mattress and the box spring. She found some under her own mattress two years ago, and had, after much consideration, confronted Tom with her discovery.

³ "You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to desire her has already committed adultery with her in his heart."

"They're not homosexual things, are they?" he had asked.

"No," she replied, embarrassed and disgusted that the issue of homosexuality, or any outside sexuality, for that matter, should be brought up in regards to their marriage.

"Then it's fine. And if Caleb someday has some, he's perfectly fine. He's a normal teenage boy. He doesn't have a girlfriend. He goes to church. He says his prayers and gets good grades and –"

"But-"

"Just leave me alone, Leah. And the boy, too."

So today she foregoes his sock drawer, his dressers, his mattress, his journal. The idea of searching his history for those XXX pornography sites constantly popping up in the earlier days of the internet washes through her, and she shakes the mouse to wake the computer screen. It glows brightly, illuminating her face. Jorge's smiling profile picture and his kind, bright eyes are staring back at her, plastered across Caleb's open Facebook messages. With bated breath, she wiggles the mouse and scrolls through the typed words. The exchange is a blur to her. Her heart beats in her ears and she looks over her shoulder to see if Caleb is there, even though she knows he is at school. Phrases such as *hey, dude, your mom's pretty hot* and *oh lay off, don't care if I have a gf, I still got your mom to call me Leah. Burn!* caused her to succumb to the prickling sensation she had felt before when the boy had looked her in the eyes.

"This is wrong," she said aloud, "this is just, not right."

Had not the devil tempted Eve from taking the fruit from the Garden of Eden? Had not it been the treachery of women that had driven the man into sin? Despite these questions bombarding her mind, she felt her hand touch the mouse, watched as if through a pair of magnifying glasses the arrow point to reply, felt her fingers type clumsily on the keyboard. And her love bursts forth from her hands, spanning the screen in an impromptu declaration.

Two sentences.

Two seconds.

Sent.

As she realized what she had done, she tried to retrieve the message. She pressed buttons, tried to clear the history (the only feature of the internet explorer she was familiar with), and logged Caleb out of his account. She took the plug from the back of the old Microsoft computer and banged it against the wall. Breathless and knuckles bleeding from flesh on metal, she ran from the room to the sanctity of her walk-in closet. There, she took the gilded cross from the hook that had hung on the wall since the Christening of their house seventeen years ago, and knelt down to God in prayer.

When Tom returned from work, he found her slumped on her knees fast asleep and snoring. She had forgotten to do the dishes.

Colossians 3:5-6⁴ or The Creation of Worthy Hamburgers

The weeks that followed the "incident," as Leah preferred to call it, she had stayed in the house, foregoing any outside endeavor that would have her make contact with anyone who might see her wrongdoings. For the first time in her life, she feigned sickness to avoid church. Tom did not refer any more to the day he found her, preferring to chalk up her condition to "that time in the month with women, and maybe even the, ya know, woman change thing that goes on." As for Caleb, Leah was surprised that he remained unchanged by whatever her transgressions may have caused. Sometimes she hoped he would lash out at her, call her a harlot, a bad mother, anything to make the message she had sent more tangible, that it had truly sent.

Today, however, she has convinced herself that her antics to cover up her mistake have, indeed, worked.

"Leah, Caleb needs you to go to the baseball pitch and give the guys some refreshments. Hotdogs or something. Whatever the guys usually eat," Tom says, spinning the keys to his car idly in his hand and looking at the emblem etched in the automatic entry keypad.

"I've got it under control," she replies in a confident voice, relieved to be of service once more in her ordained career.

"Alright then," Tom says, patting her head and turning to leave for work. She was relieved to see him walk out the door. This was now her domain.

She spends the day shopping at Wal-Mart, grabbing the best ground chuck and fresh-baked burger buns she can find. She splurges on all the condiments, avoiding the off-brand choices she might have normally purchased: Heinz relish, Hunt's ketchup, French's mustard, Vlasic kosher dill hamburger chips. At home, she forms each patty precisely into quarter-pound portions, weighing each one and basting them in A1 to settle in the flavor. She does not let her thoughts dwell on it, but she knows, somewhere, that she will see Jorge again. The perfection of sandwiches, however, is strictly based on her priorities, her duty to her family and to God. And God will have the refreshments most worthy of His name.

She pulls up to the high school batting area, the cages green and chipping with paint in

⁴ Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry.

need of replacement. The sky is clear and the sun is beating down hot and heavy. With careful arms, she carries the laden tray of food to the concession stand area. In the distance she hears the crack of a bat and a congratulatory "Whoop!" from the teammates. She places the tray on the picnic table, making sure each burger top is displayed upward and that the condiments are ready to be chosen by the boys.

"Hey Mrs. Adams, did'ya see the homer Caleb just hit?"

His voice is there, breathing shallow and thick behind her. She turns around to see his sweating brow and dust-strewn face.

"Ah, no. No, I guess I missed it," she says.

It is the two of them, alone, together. Jorge the catcher, the first one in. She feels elated and watches the small specks of the other boys following the progress of Caleb rounding the bases.

"You okay, Mrs. Adams?"

She cannot speak, because the others will be back soon, and she does not want the moment alone to end.

"Leah?" he asks.

"Sorry. Yes, Jorge?" she replies, her voice cracking from tears she is trying to hold back.

"These look great."

Leah watched his teeth gnash through the layers of bread and meat.

"N fanks fo de meffage," he said, his words muffled from his full mouth. He swallowed, grinning while wiping his face with a napkin.

"I was havin' a tough day and it was good to see some nice verses. Peter 4:8. I'll have to go back and read the whole passage. Caleb's lucky to have a mom like you."

4.) On the River's Edge

They were white in the sun and the country was brown and dry.

- Ernest Hemingway, "Hills Like White Elephants"

The bank of the Arkansas was patchy and parched. The night's rain had not erased the tracks of the drought. Indian Summer rays beat down on the clay dirt, a muddle of reds that stuck to the skin like white on rice. Jorge sat at the river bank, his crop-blistered feet dangling in its wake. A string was tied to a nearby branch of a dead cottonwood. It led to the water and disappeared below, weighed down by the contents of the other end.

"You're gonna get burnt layin' out like that," Anna said, breaking through the brittle brush.

"Nah, I don't burn, and I gotta get rid of the tan lines anyway, I s'pose."

He was leathery and deep brown from his hands to his shoulders. From his neckline to his hips, he was bronzed yet untouched by the summer's work. He rubbed his cropped black hair and took a deep breath in. It had been a week since he had spoken to Anna, and it had ended with him screaming and her throwing a platter of tamales at him.

"Been here long?" she asked.

"Just since finishin' up Jackson's stretch of land," he said, turning his back on the girl and pulling the string from the water. "Didn't think you'd turn up."

He tried to push down the pin-prickling sensation crawling through his body. This was the way she had always made him feel. Electrified. Terrified.

"Well, I did," she said simply, sitting near him. Not near enough to touch him.

Jorge stooped by the edge of the river and untied a Busch from the unsubmerged string.

"Want one? Unless-"

"Yeah, I want one."

He hesitated before handing her the cool aluminum. The tops popped in the silence, their fingers doing the talking. The two drank long and deep. Jorge kept his dark eyes open, as if to break his gaze from her would make her disappear again.

"Sure is nice," Anna said, closing her eyes.

"Don't think that's the word I'd be usin'."

He looked warily at the beer in her hand. Her small fingers tapped against the metal, and a smile danced around the corners of her mouth. He wondered how she was able to feel at peace, to seem irrevocably content when his world was being flattened like corn tortillas on

Sunday. The memory of his Yaya's strong, dark hands kneading the masa harina dough into form, rolling them into balls, and placing them between the metal slabs gave him a pang of homesickness. If she were still there, she might know what to do. She could curse to Dios with her deep, rumbling voice, but in the end it would have culminated with her arms embracing Jorge. He would have placed his head on top of her bony shoulder and breathe in her scent of incense and chili spice.

"Anyway, it's good to be outta class at least," Anna said, interrupting Jorge's thoughts. He blinked, squinting against the sun's white rays.

"Yeah, guess so."

"Nothin' to do. Just sittin' and bein'."

"I guess."

He did not want to express his anger at her supposition that he could just "sit and be." His body ached from the fieldwork, his arms were worn from baseball practices, and his head was impregnated by thoughts he could not grasp. There she sat, sipping in silence, and he tried to suppress the rising inclination to shake her, slap her, make her respond to him. Make her explain herself. Instead, he settled himself deeper into the prairie grass, digging his fingers into the coarse material.

Jorge snapped a stray blade of wheat from the ground and stuck the end in his mouth. He drank and chewed. The current of the river slid along lazily. Flies buzzed in the distance, feeding on garbage that had drifted out from the one traffic light town. His mother had called it the *aldea gringa* and had never warmed to the townspeople as she had never learned to speak English. Jorge often wondered why she had stayed there so long, why she had not forced his father back to Mexico sooner. Then again, Jorge was familiar with the benefits of working the farms, the rotation of sowing and harvesting, and the wages given for decent work. The sheriff and the two police officers had never bothered Jorge's parents about their eligibility to work in the United States, and his mother made special tamales for them. He supposed the department's blind eye to documents was due more to the fact that no gringo in their right mind would work the twelve hour days for under minimum wage; but his mother had rewarded the men nonetheless with her tightly bundled corn husks, always giving them away with a nod and a smile. This was the only interaction she had with the locals, preferring to socialize with the nearby *comunidad mexicana*.

The boy finished his beer and threw the empty can into the water. He watched it travel downstream as he fished out another.

"Me too, if ya got enough."

"I got enough."

He looked back at the girl.

"Guess that answers everything for me, then."

His hand tore the can from the plastic and he turned it around in his hand. He felt the cool droplets slide between his fingers. He wanted to throw it back into the river, to take Anna's hand and run away to three weeks ago when they were laughing and kissing on the river's edge.

"Guess it does," she responded coldly, holding out her hand to take the beer from him.

They sat in the clay, the powder caking their jeans and hands. Anna breathed slowly and calmly with the wind. Her brow was smooth and relaxed, not a worried wrinkle in place. Jorge fidgeted with the blade of wheat, biting down on it vigorously. He gnashed it in half and tossed it onto the ground. His father used to come home smelling of sweat, earth, and wheat, a thin golden brush sticking from his mouth. By the time he would take the piece from between his teeth, it would be cracked and moist, and he would toss it into the fire before taking off his cowboy boots. This ritual had calmed Jorge, and when he was old enough to help in the fields, he found himself mimicking his father. Now he repeated the gestures alone before lying on his bed and opening the window for the breeze to sweep through.

"Ya know, old man Jackson said he'd take me on full time after graduation," he said, trying to steer the conversation in a direction that might be favorable for him.

"Yeah, I heard."

"And with my mom and dad gone back to Ciudad Acuna, I got rightful claim to the house."

Ciudad Acuna. He enjoyed how the name rolled off his tongue like a dance. His parents would be working; his father tanning leather and his mother rolling tamales to sell. The cousins would be running throughout the yard, playing la gallinita ciega... though the last time he had been blindfolded was over ten years ago. He would not see children playing now. Not for quite some time now, it seemed.

"I seen that. You've been livin' there goin' on a year now already," Anna said in a tone that expressed annoyance at this seemingly redundant information.

"Just, ya know, I got things pretty good and set here, is all I'm sayin'."

The girl sipped her beer and looked off down the river.

"Looks like your can got itself stuck," she said, pointing to the aluminum tangled in the spawned moss of a tree root.

"How's about not changin' the subject on me."

"Just sayin'. We shouldn't leave it there."

This is how she had always been, not just when she was trying to avoid reality; explicitly divert the subject to something she had control over, something she could relate to. She reminded him of his Yaya, the way her eyes would pierce his. The eyes that said, "We're not going to talk about this. I'm in charge." It was a look that made Jorge's stomach drop and his blood pressure rise. But his Yaya was gone, his family had left, and now she was abandoning him, too. He remembered seeing that look the first time. She had glared at him over her calculus homework, daring him to challenge her answer to the teacher's problem. That was the stubborn look he had fallen in love with. It was the look that was now killing him from the inside out.

"No one gives a damn about this half-assed, dried up river," he said in a mumbled anger.

"Guess not."

The girl rifled through her pant pocket, extracting a silver flask. It flashed in the sun, and she flipped open the cap.

"Want some? Got it from grandpa's cabinet."

"Do ya really think ya should-"

"He won't notice. Hopped on the wagon again 'bout three months ago."

"That's not what I meant."

"I know."

The girl took a swig and gasped, shuddering before handing the flask to him.

"Tastes like iodine."

He coughed down the moonshine, eyes smarting. He was unable to stop the tears from falling. They traced wet, clean paths across his ruddy cheeks. He turned away and rubbed them clear with his forearm. The girl faced the river, pretending to take no notice of him. With the stimulus of the tears now refusing to stay put, Jorge tried to stifle the consuming homesickness pouring through him. Feeling like a child, all he could think of was the warm feeling of his mother's arms around his body; her embrace, the smell of the corn flour and charcoal. He spat into the weeds and dried his cheeks with the back of his arm.

"You don't gotta do this," he said in a small voice.

Anna took the flask from his hand and pressed the opening to her lips. He watched her drain the container.

"You know what it'll do to me?" he asked.

"Nothin'. It'll do *nothin'* to you."

"We could manage, ya know. Lots of people do it."

"I don't want to manage."

She did not want him. Her words rang hollow in Jorge's ears. This was not the way their little world worked. Any other girl would have been happy at his offerings, proud to have a boyfriend that would provide, would not leave.

"I'd be good, better than I have been," he pleaded. "We could go to that patch of prairie ya like so much. Start goin' back to church. I'd make ya dinners and keep a roof over your head."

"I don't want you to be better."

"What *do* ya want, then? 'Cause I'm done graspin' at straws here."

She picked up her beer and gulped.

"I want you to let me be."

"It's not just about you, ya know that? How can I let ya be?"

"Like I said, it's nothin' to do with you."

"How in God's name can ya say that to me?"

"It's just the way it is, is all."

"Let me be a part of this. Let me help ya."

"I don't want your kind of help."

He pressed his leg against hers, feeling her close to him. He went to take her hand in his, like he used to do so easily. She moved away and stood up to her feet. He grabbed for her hand once more, and caught it between the calluses of his fingers and palm. She tried to wriggle her small hand from his, but he held on tightly. Her gaze met his and the hatred burning in her stare made Jorge lose his grip. He had never seen such contempt, such disdain and disgust etched on a face as permanent as stone.

"Please?" he asked, his voice breaking mid-inquiry.

Anna touched her hands to her midriff and dusted off her shirt. Without looking back at Jorge, the girl walked down the embankment. She dislodged the trapped can from the brambles lining the shore. Her back stained crimson with dust, she left him alone in the October sun.

5.) Polaris

"And that right there, now look closely girls, that's the Big Dipper," my dad said jovially, pointing to the vast sky above us.

We were sprawled out in my grandparents' back yard, the lightning bugs twinkling around us, blinking ever so often to remind us that they were there. Aude, my mother, *la Femme de Paris*, had spread out a large patchwork quilt that smelled of mothballs and dust. The damp grass pressed into my back against the cloth, and I rolled over next to my dad to grow more comfortable. My eyes squinted furiously into the country sky as I tried to find the constellation he had discovered.

"I'm gonna be an astronaut," I said matter-of-factly, and was too young to decipher the grin on my dad's face.

At that time, I believed that he was responding in agreement to my profession of choice. Later, I would find that he was amused with the simplicity of my dreams. Dreams and days I could never hope to achieve.

"You know, Anna, you can be anything you want to be. Just look into the sky. There's that much up there, so much to do, and I know you'll be able to discover it all."

His words petted my ego, and I became lost in textbook pictures of the Milky Way and Jupiter's rings. In the close distance, my younger sister was devouring a bowl of strawberries we had picked from my grandmother's garden that day. Diverting my attention to her, I giggled as I saw a stream of sticky juice pour out of her mouth and onto her chin.

"Lysee, you're all messy," my little voice shouted across the line of familial bodies. Hurriedly dropping the berry stem into the bowl, she wiped her chubby, dimpled chin with the palm of her hand.

"And look right there," my dad continued, adjusting his large bottle-bottomed glasses and ignoring the interaction between my sister and me. "If you've found the Big Dipper you'll be able to see Mars. It's the red blinking star."

Forgetting my sister's soiled face, I turned back to the sky in search of the planet. The warm summer air flitted around my face, and my eyes began to water with its intensity. An edge of the blanket became dislodged, and Aude scrambled to pin it to the ground with a large rock from my grandmother's garden. A feeling of security rose up inside of my little chest, as I knew she had saved my dad's mother's blanket from the thrashing summer wind. The stone thudded on the ground, and Aude smiled as she sidled in between my dad and my sister, who had already succumbed to the temptation of sleep. Elyse's toddler chest rose up and down with

deep breathing, her mouth hanging open and her finger pulling on her belly button contentedly.

"Now this one," said my dad, his blue eyes flashing mysteriously in the dim light of the back porch, "this is your maman's star. Look over there, just right next to the Dipper. Brightest one in the sky."

"Jh-o-on," Aude said in her thick accent, stretching his name into three syllables while shoving his shoulder playfully with both hands, "zat's 'etoile polaire."

"Yep," he said with finality, "North star. That's the one."

They kissed briefly, Aude's body twisting to find my dad's face. I looked away, not ashamedly but somehow knowing, even as a child, that kisses were a private matter. I smiled to myself, placing my thumb over the large moon in the sky. I breathed in deeply, looking over at the sleeping body of my sister and the huddled forms of my dad and Aude, and wished that everyone would stay awake if only for another hour so that the night would never end. Taking initiative to make sure they knew I was awake, I shoved myself up from the pallet and ran to the back porch to grab the lightning bug jar we had filled earlier. I peered into the container, struggling to open the jam jar with my arm. Finally I felt the lid give way, and I laughed as I shook the glass, littering the sky with blinking green lights. It slipped out of my grasp, breaking on the brick pathway of the strawberry patch.

"Anna, what are you doing?" My dad asked, calling from where my family lay.

"Letting them out so I can catch more," I said, returning to the blanket with the broken jar in hand.

"Cherie, it's getting late. Come back 'ere and sit wiz your dad and me," Aude said, patting a space between the two of them and looking up at me expectantly.

"Alright," I said, rather put out that my plan had been foiled.

But the space did look comfortable, and I was sure that I could will myself to stay awake a little longer. Nestled between the two large bodies of my parents, my heart began to steady and I stared back into the sky. The stars had turned slightly, causing the Big Dipper to rotate to the right. I looked up, trying to find other constellations that my dad had not found. My eyes grew heavy, and I blinked forcibly in order to keep them open. The fear set in; the shiver of sleep, the beckoning of a darkness that I could not control. My eyes smarted with tears, and I closed them quickly so my parents would not notice.

"Here, Jon, take Elyse. We need to go now," Aude's voice called, clipped and cold. Her change in tone jarred me from my sleepy state.

"Kay," he replied, and I saw him look once more wistfully up at the stars before grabbing the sticky arms of my sister and hoisting her onto his barrel chest.

Her head lolled against his neck, and I looked at them walk away through the slits of my eyes. His retreating form wobbled right and left under the weight of my sleeping sister, and Aude's footprints crunched against the grassy ground. Though I had no way of knowing she would leave our family just a few days later, I felt a sense of loss. There was an uneasiness in the way she was walking away, in the way everything had gone perfectly that night without shouts or silent tension. The broken jar glittered on the ground, and I pressed my finger to its jagged edge. It slid against my skin, no deeper than a paper cut. I turned over to my side, looking at the indentures our bodies had made on the quilt. Wanting to feel as secure as it must feel to be carried by the warm and strong arms of my dad, I forced myself to go limp and feigned sleep, hiding the wound in my mouth.

"She must be out, too," I heard my dad's low voice say above me.

Shutting my eyelids tight, I could feel my heartbeat race against my ribs as I awaited his embrace. His large hands reached around me, cradling my left side to his torso. Holding my head in his palm, he walked steadily. My finger dropped from my mouth, the metallic taste of blood long gone from my tongue. Keeping myself completely still, I let him place me into the back seat, not moving while he stretched the belt buckle around my middle. The click of the buckle made me jump, and I hoped that I had grown immobile before they suspected that I was still awake.

"Zis was a good night," Aude said, her voice interrupting the peaceful silence of the gravel road against the van wheels.

"Yeah, it was," my dad agreed. I assumed that he was smiling, as the happiness seeped through his hushed tone.

My little ears had not detected the pleading, the desperation, the mask of calm that sometimes entangle themselves in an adult façade of contentment.

* * *

Ten years later, I stood at the lake's edge, my head whirring about from the copious amount of alcohol consumed earlier in the night. The smell of marijuana spilled through the air, the Kansas wind whipping the sickly sweet smell around my face. My feet touched the edge of the water, pebbles becoming lodged in between my toes. I grimaced at the pain, but did not retreat my feet from the beach's end. The slicing into my flesh was a reminder I was there; a sign I was still alive.

"Anna, what the hell are you doing? You coming in or not?" Elyse asked as her head bobbed in the distance, her body immersed in the murky, dark water.

"I'm coming. Calm down," I said testily, not sure why I was hesitating to join the crowd.

The water lapped cold against my feet, even though the summer day had been hot and humid. Pale faces turned to me, and I retreated from the edge, not wanting to feel their stares on my half-naked body. My stomach and face had become round and filled-out in my second year of college. I was not used to seeing my small frame with excess skin, and I had become foreign to myself.

I had become wary of academia, scared to return to my college classes that I had not been attending for over a month. Everything had changed since I decided to get rid of my problem. One day at the doctor's and I was free again. But I did not feel free. I felt as if I had abandoned someone, that I was repeating the same mistake Aude had made. Though I tried to convince myself the decision had been the best one for both me and this entity that I would never know.

Instead of becoming more secure, I was spiralling into insanity without a catalyst that I could face. Fear refused to let me look at my grades, and I spent my days and nights locked in my one bedroom apartment. I only socialized when former friends knocked on my door relentlessly, offering more alcohol in addition to the liter of vodka that had become a constant in my freezer door as way to escape the reality that had become my life. Elyse remained unaware by careful omission on my part and deep denial on hers... ever since she found me the day after the trip to the doctor, sprawled out in a damp, red pile on our bathroom floor with a pathetic pink lady Bic stuck in my wrist.

"Look, you're all messy," she had said, picking up the razor and washing my wound with a damp towel.

Sprinting wildly along the rocky beach, I stopped onto the boat dock and gauged the distance of the long, wooden plank. With one deep breath, I began to run again. My feet pounded against the rickety boards, pouncing on the edge of the dock. My legs propelled me forward, and my body flew out, cutting through the thick air. With one motion, I tucked my knees to my chest and rotated around. For a brief second I was upside-down, catching sight of the shore behind me.

I just want to let them out so I can catch more.

That's what I was. That's what I'd done. Maybe that's what Aude had done as well. She let us go. Let us out. Maybe it was a part of my being to throw things away. Perfectly decent things that would be replaced by similar ones, just so that the chase would not be over. So that life would keep going on without the tether of a jar. And jars can be smashed so easily. And jars hurt. And the things inside of them fly away.

I hit the cool water upright and my stomach turned as I sunk down into the depths of

the lake. I closed my eyes as the muddy water overwhelmed my sight. My arms pressed down against the pressure, and I felt myself ricochet until I hit the rocky bottom. With an upward thrust, I shot like a bullet up to the surface. My head broke free, and I gasped, gulping in the hot air around me.

"Bout time," a familiar voice said to my right.

I turned around to see the speaker, and saw my sister paddling toward me.

"Hey, 'Lyse, I just wanted to get into the water with style," I said shortly, swimming to meet her near the dock where I could touch.

"Yeah, yeah. Well, you took too long. Everyone's back on the shore. Let's go and you can get back in later," she said, already retreating to the beach.

"Okay," I replied, but I stayed stationary.

My thoughts were still heavy with the vodka churning against my pulse. Suddenly, fatigue overcame me, and I relaxed in the calm water, floating on my back. I looked up at the sky, stars visible without the nearby town's lights to mask them. My eyes slid subconsciously to the North Star, then to the Big Dipper. The sky spun around furiously, and the star and the constellation were lost in a haze of dizziness. I tried to steady my gaze, shaking my head to stop the swirling heaven above me. The smears of light trailing from the bright dots made me uneasy, and I ducked my head under the cool ripples. The darkness overcame me, making my heart beat in protestation to the finality it represented. My tears mixed with the tainted water of the local lake, and I was thankful that my eyes would not be red from crying. Not bothering to look back up at the sky I had once loved, I followed my sister to shore.

6.) The Impersonator

I cannot help but wonder at her intentions. Today the unveiling of her piece "Nudes in a Clothed World" only furthers my suspicion. The sculpting is too precise; the message too clear. There is no underlying tone or depth in strokes of the scalpel she has been cleaning off and disinfecting to mold the lump sitting in our kitchen for the past month. Why she needed to dip the worn metal in rubbing alcohol after each slice is lost on me. Maybe I cannot see her depth, her production of something mundane and certainly of the Expressionist era. Perhaps, as I had resolved many months ago, she is merely an impersonator with a well-worn mask of an artist.

"Oh, the Nude in a Clothed World!" our professor exclaims, clapping his ink-spotted hands together in a conjoined fist.

That is all that needs be said about her piece of art, if it can be deemed as such. I see the precision in which she cut the PVC-based Fimo clay. She still works extra hours at the bar down our street to pay for it, even though she very well knows that we are allowed expenditure in our tuition. We are also permitted to use the store closets and the clay provided to the college. She wrinkles her nose at it as if the Das or New Clay were offending her personally. I feel that she is not confident enough to work with materials that can be found at the local arts store. I see the hours she spent baking and priming and lacquering and... and I know she does this because she does not understand (or have the talent necessary) to work with more accessible media. The spindly limbs, of which I assume are limbs as I consult my knowledge on earlier Absurdist Expressionists, they bend and intersect. They play with one another in a defiant and, at the same time, docile relationship. I know she has stolen the congruency of linear angles and the subsequent breaking of these angles by others. She *must have*.

"Oh, yes. Yes, Iris, the Nude in a Clothed World. Excellent craftsmanship," our professor states yet again, squinting his beady little eyes to scrutinize her work.

I hand the professor a scribbled piece of paper with the title of my piece on it.

"This is the title I've ended up with," I say, watching as he folds the paper in half and puts it in his pocket.

"That's fine, Aude," he replies, and I reflect on his positive criticism of Iris' sculpture.

Craftmanship. She has made a craft. We are artists, and as such, should not be demoralized back to a craft versus an art, *l'art*. The professor surely cannot see that she has, assuredly, worked off of inspiration from Herbert Ferber and David Smith. No matter she does not use iron or steel, her tiny arms could not, most likely, be able to handle large sheets of

metal; No matter she has used another medium to identify with the Abstract Expressionists. I cannot be the only one to see it, the only one to understand what she is and what she is doing to the name of contemporary artists. At *l'Ecole des Beaux Arts*, this would have been noticed. Why I had left that establishment for this, for the manufactured American mendacity and lack of knowledge in regards to this world, the Art world, *le monde*, I ask myself every morning. Each breakfast pouring my bland oatmeal into a bowl, I wonder as I watch her lacquer the "piece" over and over, her little tool soaking in its ridiculous bath of isopropyl. I know she has not slept in almost a week. She sculpts, she bakes, she sculpts, she lacquers, she serves beers, she sculpts. *Repetez-le!*

"What do you think, Aude?" she asks me in the meek voice she often uses when looking for praise.

"It's, well, it's a nude in a clothed world, don't you think?" I reply, not wanting to open her up to criticism this early in the exhibition reveal.

"Yeah," she says back, warily peeking at the piece that is behind her back now and sliding her eyes towards our professor. "Maybe if I hadn't made it this abstract? If it were a bit clearer? I could have spent another week or so, I think, on getting it right."

"Maybe," I say quickly before the professor can speak, "maybe if the lines weren't so exact. If you used a different sort of clay or tried to, *je ne sais quoi*, make it a bit less Ferberesque?"

Being French has its advantages when disparaging art that comes up lacking is concerned. I do not slip in the phrases to impress, rather to express; to make both Iris and the professor understand that I came from a world-renowned school, and have art imbedded in the very fibers of my heritage.

"Sure," she says, "I'll think about that next time, although I really did think that using the PVC would help with the message. And you can see here, and here-" she points at the cuts her scalpel has made "- that the alcohol base makes a deeper, immediate cut as opposed to working with water. That ties back into the contradiction of the -"

"I'm not sure. But no, it's good. Really good. Well done, Iris. *Très bien!*" I say with as much flourish as possible.

The professor has given her a hug, a small peck on the cheek, and a wink. If I were not living with her and if I did not know her schedule, I would wonder if perhaps there was something going on between the two. Maybe she has had time to have an indiscretion or two with him while I was sleeping. Not that I would have an objection to that. It just seems more fair, on even ground, if the person critiquing your work has not been familiar with other facets

of your artistic abilities.

"Thanks," she whispers to me with a smile. "You know your opinion means so much to me. Isn't this exciting? I'm so nervous, aren't you?"

She holds out her champagne flute to me with a small giggle and a blush. I oblige her awaiting glass and clink it while looking her *dans les yeux*. They are squinted and unfocused without her normal set of bottle-bottom glasses. She is not a terrible person, not someone who I would object to having as an acquaintance or a colleague. That is the problem with her, to some extent. She is neither mean nor callous, yet she has a calculated way of constructing a disposition that convinces you to *think* she is neither. Perhaps in the middle of her exists a dormant sort of serpent just waiting to strike. I believe it is there. It has stricken me tonight.

"What about your work, though? Are you as crazy as me? Just even in the reveal. Completely scary!"

"Mmm," I say, swirling the dregs of my champagne and swiping a speck of dirt from its middle, "I'm fairly confident. You know, I've done this before, the entire unveiling and such, in Paris."

"Oh yes," she says with these tiny illuminated eyes permeated with what seems to be admiration.

If not art, she could transfer to the drama department and pursue a career on the stage. She almost has me convinced that she holds me above her. But this is the way that she orchestrates. It is the way that she operates and manipulates. She cannot be enamoured with my previous successes. Jealousy, perhaps, but appreciation, I cannot fathom.

"Well, then, I guess I will have my turn soon. I'm anticipating its opening," I say, trying to move about the room so as to stop her incessant stare.

"Oh yeah. You'll be great. I know it! And so secretive, too! You're probably sick of seeing my project. At least now we'll have the whole kitchen open for what it's supposed to be used for. I'll make us a cake or something to celebrate."

She follows me around the rest of the exhibit, posturing about the meaning of certain pieces and murmuring to me phrases like "oh dear, I'm not sure I get this one. Do you?" and "wow, look at the grafting work on this." I smile and nod at each declaration, adding my own forms of criticism when I deem appropriate. However, for all of the works we have seen tonight, I have not found another like hers that blatantly aggravates me from an artist's perspective. There are *les echecs*, the woefully painful attempts at creativity. There are the textbook passes, *l'habituel*. Nowhere are there other pieces such as Iris has created, a sort of muddle between the expected and the unexpected. Hers is a work that falsely emits intrigue,

and I cannot stop myself from thinking about the sculpted creature that has been taking up our apartment space. I have been living with a bastard and its mother ever since Iris had the idea to begin the mess of a creation.

"And now," the professor's squeaky voice squeals into the crowd of students and staff, "the final reveal of tonight's class of 1976 finalist presentations."

My heart is beating abnormally, and I can tell that my armpits have become moist and my cheeks are flushing with heat. Iris takes the empty flute from my hand and replaces it with another, giving me a light tap on the small of my back.

"It's gonna be great," she whispers. "I can't wait to see it."

"After the last candidate's work has been presented, please feel free to roam around as you wish and ask the aspiring artists any questions you may have. We're serving refreshments until nine, and afterwards we'll be meeting at the wine bar across the street for those who can join. If you find yourself in need of a taxi, please refer to..."

The professor's voice is falling in and out of recognizable perception to me. My hand grasping the glass is colder than the liquid sloshing against the flute's edges, and I am afraid that the room is becoming increasingly petit with each breath I take. Miniscule flashes of light pop behind my eyelids, and I realize I have closed my eyes. I cannot stop the swirling of the room, and I hold on to the only piece of matter keeping me tethered to consciousness.

"Aude? Aude, it's okay. Take some deep breaths. You'll be fine. Just fine."

Iris' voice penetrates the darkness, and I cannot help but feel disgusted as she wipes my brow of the cold sweat that has accumulated. She presses the napkin to my upper lip and my temples, and I find the darkness disappearing and my footing find itself once more. I am relieved to have remained standing on my feet.

"And here we have the work of Aude Guillot, who works in instillation art and has used the media of sugar cubes, plastic recycling, and model clay."

Iris is dotting my forehead yet again, muttering false sympathies of encouragement and feigned concern. I see the professor's hand over the white sheet covering up my installation, my piece, and I retain the grip on Iris' hand so as not to spill out of my heels onto the floor. I see this in moments of a second. It is as if the world has stopped its revolution, as if someone had filled the room up with a silicone gelatine that suspends actions and distorts hearing and sight. I am brought back to my last days at l'Ecole, the reveal of my first and last piece in their grand hall. I remember the look on the students' faces, their sheer admiration for my courage, their insistence that I discontinue there. I know it is because I am excessively talented, too much so for the mendacity of the courses, the rhetoric, the grinding notion of being at an art

school when most known artists of today have never attended anything of the sort and would, most likely, be disgusted by the very idea of such an establishment.

"The title of the piece is," the professor says, looking down at the card I had handed him, "A Clothed in a Nude's World."

My masterpiece was revealed. The real nature to what Iris' should have been. Yes, of course it is more crude, not nearly as precise or crafted, so to speak; but it is what I have been destined to create. Never mind that my conscious artistic mind did not imagine the concept until a few weeks of Iris working on her piece in our kitchen. This work is about the idea of stealing artistic merit, of being a *voleur* of the creative mind. They surely can see the importance my statement makes. My point has been made. My creation has shed the light on the imposters, those who have not a singular bone of inspiration or unconventional tendency in their bodies. It shows that-

"A Clothed in a Nude's World?" the professor repeats, looking questioningly at me.

I smile and try to shake off Iris' supporting grip. I then realize she has dropped my hand and the napkin at once, and is once more puncturing me with her eyes.

"Aude, why did you –"

I cut her off and I turn to the crowd, anticipating the staff's imminent gratification to me, the sole artist with individuality, *la maîtrise d'art, le chef du monde*, the original in a sea of banality.

7.) 320 Illinois Compiled Statute 20¹

Q.

A. Doing okay, thanks. Bit chilly outside though, isn't it?

Q.

A. Oh yeah. Very.

Q.

A. Just get started like that? Well, alright. You need to know I've been working hard on the breathing techniques we talked about last time. In and out three slow times. It's seemed to help a bit, but I still get those, well, those feelings we talked about last time.

Q.

A. Yeah, it's just, well, I was doing what you said, you know? Trying to take a bit of time for myself. But everything kept getting in the way. You know it's not any easier with the new baby home and everything, and I try to keep telling Jim that he needs to step up and be a daddy, that a baby shouldn't be raised by his young, too entirely too young, grandma. Ugh, that word. Grandma. I still can't get used to it yet, and I'm getting ready to have my fiftieth birthday and I can't believe this is the title everyone's going to be calling me, and I wonder if –

Q.

A. No, that's fine. I understand the interruption. Well, yeah, I find it funny in a very sad sort of way. Not in a "slap my knee and guffaw" type of funny, more so the type of funny where you have to tell yourself to laugh about it or else you're going to go off crying again, and with the baby crying all day, and my mom wandering around sticking her shoes in the freezer again and leaving the door open, and Jim not getting a job and sitting around in his basement room, smoking God only knows what, just makes me furious and lost and I just can't stand another trip to the store to buy yet more ground beef because the other has gone off, you know, re. my mom making a mess of the freezer. It's all of these things that just-

Q.

A. No, no, I do understand the interruptions. I do tend to ramble on. Well, I guess around the point in time that I went down to the basement to do as you said, you know, rekindle some of my own interests, is when I found that Jim had been putting out his cigarettes on my old pottery wheel, and the whole downstairs smelled like pot and cigarettes and, well, I don't look because I don't want to see what else he's gotten into. That's when I tried what you said. Three deep

¹ The Adult Protective Services Act

breaths, but I couldn't even breathe down there, not even in my own house!

Q.

A. I was going to do it. I'd planned on it beforehand, you know, like we talked about. Firm but loving hand, telling him that he needed to find another place to stay because overall it'd be better for him in the long run. But then he came back with the baby. I just, I don't know where the girl is, and to be quite honest, I don't even know if the baby is his. It has that sort of tinge around its fingers, darker than what Jim had when he was a baby. He won't even go to get a paternity test, because he refuses to get tested for anything. He seems to think I'm trying to trap him into admitting he's smoking drugs. Ha ha. Ah, there it is, you see? You have to laugh about these things.

Q.

A. Yeah, oh yeah. A baby girl. And she is lovely. Did I ever say she wasn't the most precious little thing? Although I do worry about it; you know what they say, druggie babies with foetal alcohol syndrome and all of that. And I worry that I don't have enough time to spend with it to actually see that it's alright. It's just, if my mom were gone it'd be easier. Or if the baby were gone it'd be easier, or if Jim were gone it'd be easier. There're too many people involved, you see? Is it just me? I can't do it all, and I have to do it all. Half the time my mom still thinks she's in England. Most of the time Jim's on another planet altogether, and I can't trust either one with the baby. And the baby, it's always colicky and shrieking, and Jim wasn't like that as a baby. He was so serene, calm all the time. I'd have to check to see if he was still breathing. With this one, no, it just screams and wails until I have to stop from Millie digging the dirty diapers out of the –

Q.

A. My mom. Mildred. She was as good as she could be to us, you know, growing up. But I'm the one that has to be good now, perfect as she was. It's alright, really, it's fine. It's just that she doesn't seem to know me most of the time. She thinks I'm one of her nurse friends from England back when she was in the war, and I play along as best I can. But I miss her, and then I start feeling, oh what is it? It's that jealous feeling we talked about before? The one with Jim and her and the way they just laugh the day away together, and when she talks to him I don't find anything that she's hidden or misplaced or eaten or –

Q.

A. Right. Breathing techniques. Yeah, I know, thanks for reminding me. Well, the crux of it is, I do get jealous. Sure I do. I mean look at them, the two of them talk to each other for hours on hours, and the last time I had an adult conversation was when I was trying to get the child

support check from Bill, and that was three years ago.

Q.

A. Yeah, it was a nasty split. But it's for the best. He'd only add to the mess of the house and I'd probably have to wonder if the baby was his or Jim's. He had a tendency to, well, he, he just got attracted to some of the girls Jim would bring around to the house.

Q.

A. How do you think? It made me feel horrible, like some fat old cow that had been sent out to pasture. I mean, I had a decent thing going with my art and all, but when Jim was born I decided to stay home and take care of him. Look how that turned out. It's one thing to turn your back on the things you're passionate about, but he became my job, and, by the look at my basement and the baby in my room, I didn't exactly make it to CEO.

Q.

A. I know, I know. My life doesn't have any power over the choices anyone else makes. I do say that to myself in the mirror. "Look, Iris, you don't have power over any of them," but sometimes I feel that I should, that if I don't then who the hell does? It's not just the baby and Jim, but also my mom's antics -

Q.

A. I can't do that. No, I promised her I wouldn't do that. She was good, and she still has some good in her, I have to think. So no, I've dug my grave and I'll lie in it. It just makes me furious sometimes when I see all those sappy stories à la Nicholas Sparks about families caring enough about their loved ones with Alzheimer's, caring so much that for a fleeting moment the person remembers who you are. It's crap. It's fairy-tale junk. That's what I have to say, or else maybe I'm just not doing good enough a job to deserve that sort of breakthrough.

Q.

A. Well, I'm not sure I do, you know. Because of what happened, that time. You know what I'm talking about? Do we have to go into it again?

Q.

A. No, you're right, I didn't do anything. But I wanted to. I mean, the laundry was piling up and I was dealing with Jim and giving him money for what I thought was going to be used for baby things. Right away, I should have known it would be spent on some new street drug or... you know he pawned off the bassinette I bought for him? One day it was there, the next it was gone. Just gone. And I should have tossed him out right then and there, instead of -

Q.

A. It's not an option. I'm not kicking him from the house. I have my reasons, okay? And even

if the baby isn't his, it's not like anyone else is going to take care of it. And if my mom gets worse, it's not like some nursing home is going to make sure she's better, that she's not trapped in some little room or something, sucking Jell-O through her teeth.

Q.

A. Oh no, I promise I'm not diverting or rationalizing anything. No sir, not at all. It's just that I need someone to understand that I can't do it all myself, but I can't just throw everyone out. Say goodbye and good riddance, because then what type of person would I be?

Q.

A. I don't care if a lot of people do it, it's never been something that I've seen myself doing.

Q.

A. That's why I'm here, you see. I'll make sure I'll be more fit to mentally deal with it all. That way nothing like the thoughts I'd been having will come back up. Sure, I'll have set-backs. I've had them already, you know. Just yesterday I...

Q.

A. I don't know if I want to talk about it, actually. It was just a moment of a thought of a second of a minute of a raging panic that I was able to eventually deal with. And I did, and now I'm here, and so it's fine.

Q.

A. I don't really want to be pressed about it.

Q.

A. Well yeah, you have a point. Yeah, yeah, I know it's a safe place here, and that it helps to let everything out.

Q.

A. There, three deep breaths. Okay, here it is, and now you can judge me and hate me and –

Q.

A. Three more, alright. No, I'm sorry. I really am, I just, it's hard for me to talk about these sorts of things.

Q.

A. Alright, well I'm sitting in the living room, feeding the baby after spending the whole day cleaning up after the three of them. This is after I tried to do what you suggested and went to get my ceramic wheel from the basement. So I'm there, rocking it and trying to feed it something that will inevitably come back up on my shirt and my hair in another hour. Then my mom teeters up the stairs from the basement and starts to go into the kitchen. I shout, "No, Mom, don't go in there right now! I just cleaned it up," but she doesn't listen to me. She's just

pacing around on the floor that I'd spent waxing up to my elbows, and I realize she's been digging around pulling up my flowers again, and –

Q.

A. Yeah, but it didn't work. I don't know how she does it, but she can climb over the fence and still get to them. And now I know I'm going to have to give her a bath but only if I can get the baby to drink its bottle and stop crying.

Q.

A. He's God only knows where. He wasn't at home, because I only go down to the basement when he hasn't locked himself up in there.

Q.

A. Well, the baby finally took to the bottle and I got it to stop crying. I put it in the crib upstairs in my room and then I tried to do the breathing technique you gave me. Continue repeating the mantra "I can't control it. I can't control it." But you know what? It made me more angry. I'm keeping the whole damn family together and if I can't control it no one else is going to. So I go into the kitchen to see what the damage is, and my mom's put the clean laundry along with one of the baby's soiled diapers into the refrigerator. Now, her hands are dirty from digging in the garden and there are prints all over the clothes I'd just spent the afternoon washing. I just, there're no words to explain what I was feeling then.

Q.

A. Alright, I'll try. Anger, but this type of anger that's been boiling in me ever since my mom got shipped to the States for me to deal with. Umm, sadness because my ceramic wheel isn't going to be salvageable, and Lord knows I won't have the money to replace it. Even if I did, what'd be the point? Because I don't have time to use it anyway. Disappointment that Jim hadn't shown up when he said he'd be there to help clean up and, let's see, the sort of self-reassuring feeling in that disappointment I knew would come. This inevitable feeling of being trapped and both loathing and being comfortable in this little trap. It's like those people with Stockholm syndrome, you know? That they're in their own misery enough that they start liking the placement of misery with the people causing the misery in the first place. It's this fuzzy, warm feeling I got when I saw the mess in the fridge that made me truly, really hate myself and everyone around me. I guess, to make a long story short, I felt hatred. Pure, true hatred.

Q.

A. I'm not sure that I, well... yeah, okay I did react to it. But at that point, your methods made everything escalate. If I hadn't had the time to think about all of these things... You see? You take away the empty laughter and what did you leave me with? A hollow pit.

Q.

A. I don't necessarily think I'm projecting. Not at all. I'm just trying to explain that these methods you have might have been a reason for my actions, is all.

Q.

A. Well, I feel terrible about it now. That's why I scheduled this appointment, you see. Well, I mean, I... with everything happening and this burning, boiling sensation I've tried to keep down. It just, it exploded.

Q.

A. I mean to say, in the way that I... I don't know if I can, well, have I explained to you my frame of mind? How I was that day? How I've had to deal with all of this, these three, day in and day out?

Q.

A. Then you'll understand, or you'll pretend to understand and then feel just as ashamed of me as I do of myself.

Q.

A. Okay, then. Well I took my mom by the shoulders, pushed her from the fridge, and reached where she'd stuffed it full of crap. So I took a handful and shoved the baby's dirty diaper in her face. All the greenish-brown gunge slathered on her face, and I thought "Well good, if she's put it all over the leftovers from lunch, it can be on her, too." She had just broken me, you know? And the culmination of this pent-up hate I described, it just – snap! – disappeared when I saw her have to experience just a taste of what I'm experiencing every single day. The baby, Jim, my mom, all of that hatred gone in one small action. I guess what I'm trying to say is, yeah, I shouldn't have done it, but if not that, then would I ever have gotten a piece of satisfaction? Am I supposed to go throughout life without any sort of happiness? So no, I didn't cry. I didn't cry. I laughed.

Q.

A. I laughed more than I had in my entire life put together. This bubble of anger had been burst, and I felt better immediately.

Q.

A. I cleaned her up, of course. What a question, really. Yeah, I cleaned her up, fed the baby again, made sure nothing was on fire in the basement and that the bed was made for when Jim decided to come back.

Q.

A. No, I don't agree, and that's not very constructive. I still have another ten minutes of your

time, and if you think I'm paying you for the full hour, I'll let you know right now I have no intention of doing so. I have mouths to feed and things to do. Taking this hour is the only thing I have outside of the house. Are you really going to take that away?

A.

Q. What do you mean?

A.

Q. They'd be taken away?

A.

Q. Okay, but then could I still come to talk to –

A.

A. No, I guess not.

8.) Visitors' Day

Will he remember last week's frivolity with his aluminium Benlow lighter and *The Instructions for American Servicemen in Britain*? I hope that he will, but I might be placing too much importance on the joke, on the encounter. Our interactions have been light-hearted, and I do not wish to become one of those girls chasing around the American boys for their candy or their chewing gum. I, however, am true to the cause and have assisted the USAAF station 590 to the utmost of my ability since 1941. I have not gone to an optometrist, I have only consumed vegetables from the victory garden, and I have gone without stockings for the past three years. No matter how often the other girls chase those American fighters, I will restrain myself. I say this as I am sitting in the middle of the floor, spreading my legs out in front of me whilst waving them in the air.

Most days I do not go to the trouble of browning my legs, as I have to pinch the liquid from the kitchens, but today he is coming to see me once more. Without my sister here to help me draw the line down the back of my calves with my worn eyeliner, I am forced to take a chance and hope that the line is straight and as resembling to stockings as I possibly can. I am sure that if one of the workers were to interrupt me, they would assume my insanity for attempting to create the illusion of the stockings by myself. I have tried many a time to connect with them, to fit in, but the nurses are condescending and often patronise me. I may not be as experienced as they are, but I do wish they would try to know me as a person and trust me as a professional.

"There, there, Mildred," they all say in the same aggravatingly patient tone, though I have told them countless times that I prefer Millie, "We don't need you to help us right now. Why don't you just take a break and rest. Maybe read your book, and we'll meet you for dinner."

They are one and the same, and I cannot remember their names because each nurse is another blanketed, similar rejection forcing me to fend for myself and work out my place. It was easier when my sister was here, when I was stationed in the town I was born, raised, and accustomed to. But he brings the light back in, and tells me to ignore the women and to be patient with them. For an American, he has a calm, soft-spoken sort of voice. Without him, I would surely have attempted to transfer back to my home in Surrey. Some days, it feels as if he is the only semblance of a human connection I am allowed to have.

He will be here shortly, and I am comforted by the rationing of my Tangee Natural. I have been wary and prudent in my use of the commodity of lipstick, and only wear it when he is there. A small source of pride is that I have not, as of yet, used enough to warrant a refill.

The days when he does not come to visit me, I walk about without a painted face, without tinted legs, without feeling self-conscious of the minute scratches on the lenses of my spectacles. I am not sure if my appearance matters to him, or that he would even notice my fervour with everything that must be on his mind. He flew out last week, and he will fly out again quite soon. These breaks, the rapid-paced moments, are all that we have together. I am not sure that he shares the same sentiment. Perhaps he is only coming to see poor, little Millie because of pity or out of a sort of ambivalence to the situation. Maybe he enjoys my company because I am one of the rare women workers at the base to deny presents and sweets, though sometimes I must force myself to keep my tongue silent.

I can feel my heart beating in my chest. Last night they flew back in from Nuremberg. I have heard that it was a terribly difficult raid, and that Brian was lucky to be coming back alive. There were several tear-stained faces at the base this morning, and I had to watch myself so as not to give way to a smile. Their losses are, of course, disastrously heart-breaking, but it is a challenge for me to feel both sadness for them and elation that Brian was saved. He should be here soon, and I wait with bated breath, checking over and over, and over in the mirror to make sure the pin curls have stayed put and that my cheeks remain pinched and rosy under the instruction of my forefingers and thumbs. There is a knock at the door and a wave from the narrow glass pane, and I get up from the bed to let him in.

"Hello, Millie," he says, his American accent cutting into words and his melodic voice swinging his words up and down as if on a park swing.

"Hiya, Brian," I reply, but my own timbre is shaking and soft. It takes effort to force my vocal chords to react.

"How are we today?"

"We're, well... ah, we're fine."

He takes an empty glass from the counter and fills it with the water jug. I should have asked him if he needed any refreshment, but his presence acts as a barrier breaking down the social etiquette my parents instilled in me.

"Cheers," I say when he slides the cool drink into my hand.

My grip quakes and I try to steady my grasp as I sit back down on the bed. He follows behind me and my cheeks prickle as the bed dips under his weight.

"How've you been doing?" he asks, turning his face to mine with genuine concern in his eyes.

"Oh, I've been just fine, but terribly, terribly worried for you. The others didn't want to speak about the raid, but I am so very happy that you were able to return. I was up all last night,

knowing that you were going to come see me and wondering about the safety of the aircrafts and, well, and the bombs! And here I am, safe and sound here, while you're flying that machine through attacks."

He looks at me with wide eyes, and then smooths the crumpled eiderdown.

"Yes, well, don't worry. Don't you worry a bit," he assures me in a calm voice. "I'm fine, and everyone else is good, too. I'm just glad you've been doing okay. Are you feeling tired or anything?"

"No, no! I'm just thrilled that you decided to come and see me. It's been a little while, hasn't it? I was thinking the other day about the pamphlet they gave you, and how droll you were with the entire concept of it. Do you remember the joke you told me?" I hope that he does, as it would serve as proof we were feeling a similar connection, a symbiotic attraction. His next words made me less confident that he felt any affection for me.

"I can't say I do. Which one are you talking about?"

"Oh you know, the one about the tea versus the coffee, and how you stood up and told the entire room of us Brits 'Now, I don't know about y'all, but I'll show you the best damn cup of tea this side of the Thames.' Do you remember that now?"

"Yeah, yeah, I sure do. Do you want some tea at all?"

And he remembers the night, the moment we shared. I am placated by this acknowledgment, and cannot halt a grin from playing with the sides of my mouth.

"Oh no, I'm fine. I haven't got a kettle in here anyway, but we could go and have a cuppa in the dining hall if you'd like?"

"No, that's fine. I don't really have all that much time, you see. I just wanted to see your face and say hello. Chat for a bit and make sure you're holding up okay," he says, glancing at his watch and smiling up at me.

"Perfectly, Brian, just swimmingly. The women still haven't warmed to me much, but I think they'll come around in time. We've talked about it before. I'm just going to give them space, make sure I'm relaxed and not nervous, and then, hopefully, they'll see the potential in me."

"You're doing great. Just keep being positive and everything'll be alright."

"Is that how you get through everything? I mean, the bombs and the fighting and the night flights and making sure the instruments are correct. I imagine there are so very many details in what you are doing for my country."

Once more, he gives me a long look, and I can feel his eyes staring straight into mine. He does so in an intense, searching way, as if attempting to read my mind or to touch the inner

parts of my soul.

"It's okay. How about you? Have you read anything good lately? Keeping yourself occupied?"

"It would be better if they let me work as much as I want to. I keep myself entertained, of course, but when an air strike like that happens and you're the only flying the mission, it's difficult to distract my mind. I tried doing a bit of crochet, but I fear I'm no good. You see, I don't have the steadiest of hands, and I really must fix the prescription in my spectacles if I'm to see anything at all."

He takes the spectacles from my eyes and glances at them, scrutinising each chip or scratch I have not been able to fix.

I am suddenly embarrassed by their condition, and feel as if he must have been staring at the flaws in the glass instead of the colours of my irises.

"Do you want me to talk to someone and see if we can get you an appointment?"

"Oh no, you're much too busy to be bothered by something as menial as getting my eyes checked. I'll take care of it later, but thank you so much for the gesture, dear. You truly are the sweetest man I know, Brian," I reply, taking them from his grasp and hurriedly tucking them into a pocket instead of putting them back on.

"Thank you," he says and his eyes shine with what seem to be the threatening of tears, "That means so much to me, I hope ya know. It really does."

He takes my hand into his, and he rubs small circles on the back of my knuckles. I savour the sensation of the goose pimples exploding from the skin of my right arm. His stature is strong and calm, and his eyes are the kindest I have ever seen.

"Brian?"

He does not answer me, but a small frown forms on his face. I wonder if he is wishing he had not touched me, or if I had done something wrong. Perhaps I should have moisturised my hands before he came, but he had never taken my hand in his before.

Where his touch was soft and direct, I am curious as to how my skin feels to him.

"Brian," I state, omitting the question.

We only live so long, we only have so many chances before they leave us. He could have perished last night, and I would have never been able to express my deep emotions for him. If he leaves today without me letting him know, I would never be able to forgive myself if something, God forbid, were to happen to him.

He clears his throat and blinks his eyes so furiously, the fleeting thought of his eyelids soaring off of his freckled face runs through my mind.

"Hmm?" he hums, and at least he is acknowledging me.

I believe he knows what I am going to say, as if I have already said it and do not need to repeat my feelings.

But I cannot allow the opportunity to pass me by, and if I lose him or scare him away after this confession, then at least I will have known that I tried, that I will live out the rest of my days without regret.

"Brian, I have certain, well, a certain tendency of warm feelings for you. I hope you know that."

"I have warm feelings for you, too... Millie" he says, not looking into my eyes, but rather continuing to draw soft, tiny circles around the back of my hand.

He drops my hand lightly on the bed and goes to refill my water glass.

"I know you're going to go back home when the war's over, but I guess what I, well, what I want to say is that, if you are interested in me, then I'm interested in you. I care so much about you and your wellbeing, and I think about you all the time."

"I think about you, too. For today, though, I think it's about time for me to leave," he says, and he shifts his weight in order to stand up from the bed.

And in this motion, I am not sure of it, but he seems like a different person. The stature is wrong, his arms are skinny and his hair is mussed, not smooth like Brian's always is.

"Leave?" I ask, still confused by the chameleon shift of my companion. Without the spectacles, my eyes must be playing tricks on me.

"It really is all going to be fine, you'll see, and I'll be back again soon."

In a last attempt to connect with him, I lunge my body forward. My lips are searching in the air to collide with his, but they do not brush his.

"Grandmo... Millie," he says, his palms on my shoulders and his eyes swimming with tears, "I need to go."

"What did you call me?"

"I just, I need to go, okay? But I'll be back next week. I promise."

Now my knuckles are papery and wrinkled, and my legs are smudged with orange spots from the iodine I had smuggled from the nurses.

"You're just going to leave me here like this? All alone? In this room?"

"I'll come back; I promise."

And he is not Brian. No, he cannot be. How could I have been mistaken?

"He promised. He promised and he didn't come back. He didn't come back!"

"I love you."

"You didn't come back."

9.) M'aidez

I.

And the fire is consuming him, the pathetically small dots zipping from the darkened sky. Red. Red. Orange. Yellow. Blue. Red. Red. Yellow. He watches them dive, no, not dive. They fall. Fall and dive, dive and fall. Each in a metal tomb lit up with flames. He can smell the gasoline drizzling from their engines. Can he smell it? Or does the presence of smoke create an illusion of scent? He is up, up, up, and they are down, down, to the ground swirling and swivelling, large hunks of metal and their puny pieces of flesh and bone not able to cope with the impact of such magnificent force. Humans are fragile, and Brian grabs onto the controls of his Supermarine Spitfire. A fitting name as the planes tumbling below him are engulfed in the colors, in the smoke, in the flames. Red. Red. Orange. Yellow. Brilliance at the ground until the fumes coil out and he can no longer see.

II.

"Baby, you were yelling again last night. Gave me a real fright. Are you okay?" Brian's wife says as she places a piping hot plate of poached eggs and crispy bacon in front of him.

"Yeah, sure. Don't you worry. Must've just been one of those nightmares. Can't remember it now."

He chuckles half-heartedly and sprinkles salt and pepper on his eggs so as not to meet his wife's gaze.

In reality, he is seeing the colors again. He sees them everywhere. Yellow. Yellow. Red. And the blinding white of the poached egg with the yellow threatening to peek out when he least expects it. He bursts the yolk with his knife, and the orange liquid envelops the sides of his plate.

"Baby?" his wife says.

"Hmph," he replies, stuffing the hot egg into his mouth and hoping she mistakes his tears for a burnt tongue.

III.

It is four nights in a row where he catches himself screaming. He wakes himself up to the sound, and, in effect, wakes their child as well. He knows this because it has now become a normal occurrence. His wife never mentions his outbursts when they first occur. She merely smiles at him, pats him on the arm, and puts on her slippers to pacify the boy in the other room. From the witching hour to dawn, she will sleep in the boy's bed, cradling his head and telling him everything will be alright. The boy.

Jack has been in the world for over six years, and yet he still clings to his mother almost every night. When Brian is not plagued with nightmares, his sleep is interrupted by Jack's tentative voice. It is an annoying, high-pitched little thing that makes Brian wish that Jack's balls would go on and drop so he would not have to hear it. The pitch is not necessarily whining; on the contrary, it is the passivity of the tone that bothers Brian.

"Momma, I'm sorry but I think I heard the monster again," he would say, not peeking more than a nose into their bedroom.

These were the nights that Brian dreaded the most. He would make eye contact with his son for only a moment, only long enough for him to know that he was the monster Jack was afraid of. And how could he help it? He just could not stop seeing the damn colors, stop experiencing the heat and the cold and the damp and the dry.

Tonight, he tries to fall back asleep while he listens to the patting noise of his wife traveling down the hallway to check on Jack. And Brian is alone in the bed. Alone in the room. He breathes in deeply and tries to suppress his resentment at the fact that he is the one who is scared of the monster, yet he is the one left to fend for himself.

Alone in a starry sea of illuminated Spitfires.

IV.

Brian's wife has stopped making him eggs. He cannot not say why he felt inclined to do it, but he can no longer stand the yolk and its shameless taunting. Never-ending, threatening to burst. He smashes the plate on the wall, and the oozing unborn would-be embryo slides down the new green wallpaper and onto the carpeted floor.

"What on earth's going on, baby?" the wife asks, in the same hushed, reserved tone that Jack uses when he is afraid of the monster.

"Nothing's going the fuck on, baby. Nothing. I just don't want your crap eggs is all."

He watches her hurry over to the wall with soap and water in hand, and he can see her fingers trembling as she cuts off the crying orange trail.

"I'm sorry, baby, I won't make them anymore, okay? Is that better?"

He does not respond, but rather watches the scene unfold before him.

She finishes scrubbing the wall, and Brian forces himself to avoid the stare of Jack. Jack runs from the table to his mother and back. Over and over again. He drags his blanket through the mess on the carpet, leaving a moist trail on the rug Brian has worked forty-plus hours a week to provide.

"Damn it, Jack, if you don't stop carrying that sissy blankey around in the filth that is this house, I swear I'm going to cut it to pieces."

To Brian's relief, Jack leaves the dining room and runs up the stairs to his room. He wishes it were not Sunday, and that the boy could be taken care of by teachers and be out of his hair for a day. Brian does not feel it is fair that the two days he has to relax is unequivocally spent with the monster-fearer.

"Baby, he's just trying to help his momma," his wife says, making her eyes soft and calm as she often does when she feels his mood shift.

"He should be trying to help his dad," Brian replies, and he stoops down to help his wife pick the shards of porcelain from the tufted carpeting.

V.

Red. Yellow. Blue. Blue. Yellow. Orange. The men are flying around him without their aircrafts. Flying? Falling. *M'aidez, m'aidez, Mayday!* They cry, and he can see their faces and their outstretched arms. Can he catch them? Can he put out the flames, the ever-growing flames that turn pilots into bombs? He snatches and grasps, but his hands must stay on the controls. He dips and he panics. Red. Red. Red. Red...

"Momma, I can hear the monster again."

The small voice is projected through the crack of the door, and Brian realizes he has perspired through his shirt and his underwear.

"The monster doesn't exist, Jack. Go to bed and leave your mom and me alone, for God's sake."

The little boy shuts the door quickly, and Brian hears his wife sigh through the darkness.

"I'm going to go make sure he gets to bed okay. He has a report on the Rocky Mountains tomorrow, and I don't want him to be too tired," his wife says, placing a tentative hand on Brian's shoulder and pecking his cheek.

"Go then. It's fine."

"Baby..."

"Make sure the boy's okay."

She squeezes his hand, and then puts on her slippers and makes her way down the hall to Jack's room. Brian tries to fall asleep, hugging himself with his arms crossed and trying to think of anything but the lonely, flying, falling men.

VI.

"Dad... daddy?" the little voice asks from the breakfast spread presented by Brian's wife.

"What, Jack?"

Brian's eyes feel as if small knives or shrapnel were attacking them, and he forces his

eyelids to stay open. This is the second week of the return of the night terrors, and he can gauge his patience weighing thin.

"Can, can you sign this paper? It's for the report, and we need our dads to sign so as we can go on the field trip."

"Okay, fine," Brian says, and he takes the paper from his son's hands, rummages in his pocket to twist open a pen, and scribbles an illegible signature on the page.

"Oh boy, thanks daddy," Jack says, and he beams at Brian.

"Just don't take the goddamn blankey. You know, son, you're getting a bit too old for that pansy stuff. Be like your old man, alright? A blanket wouldn't save me in the shit I've been through. Not one bit, ya hear?"

"Now, Brian, baby, it makes him feel better," the wife says, removing the eaten plates which had been void of any semblance of egg-like substances.

"Well, ya know, sometimes the world doesn't exist to make people feel better. He relies on that thing for too long, and the next thing ya know, he won't be able to cope with real life. He's almost seven. It's about time he starts acting his age."

"He's a good boy, baby," his wife says, shooting a glance at Jack, who has tucked the note into his pocket and who is trying to hide the blanket behind his back.

"He's a boy, that's the point. Not some little infant scared of the dark or monsters or God knows what. And I think it's about time you stop sleeping in his bed half the Goddamn time, too."

"Baby, calm down. Let me get you another coffee, okay? Jack, you get ready for school. You're going to be late for the bus if you keep dawdling like that," the wife says, tapping Jack on the back and hurrying to the kitchen to begin a second round from the percolator.

The blanket is abandoned on the floor, and Brian looks at the colors and the smudges. The grimy orange-red is tarnished by deep black stains. He gets up from the table and kicks the blanket into the hallway.

VII.

Red. Red. Orange. Blue. Black. Black. Red. Red. He sees the flesh being burnt off the falling bodies. The sinew and bone keeping the ligaments together is strikingly white. He watches as the skin-embers flutter away from the body. Ember, finger, thigh, hair. Blasts and bits of fiery light. Light and fire, and fireflies? Fire flies. Fire flies and flyers fall in fire and f-

"Baby, baby," he hears a voice say.

And pow! His fist is hitting flesh, and he wonders if the flesh will burn and flit in the wind. If the whiteness will be blackness, and if the scorching pain in his fingers will float away

with the rest of the men floating, floating, flying. But he is not in the air, in the sky, and his knuckles continue to scorch and writhe.

"Baby?" his wife says in a small voice.

He turns on the bedside lamp and he sees her cradling her jaw. A small drip of bright red glistens from her lips, and he has to look away because he feels the fear and the anger mounting at the ridiculous speck of color. Red. Red. White. No, he closes his eyes and shakes his head.

"Baby, are you okay?" she asks, in a mumbled voice from her covering the side of her mouth.

He feels disgusting. She is asking if he is okay, yet he busted her lip like some of the guys from the lodge, and she does not deserve it, not truly. She has stopped making his eggs, and has listened about not sleeping in Jack's room. Why did he do this? Well, is it his fault? Really his fault? It is the stupid nightmares, and he should not be held accountable for that. He is the head of the house. Everything they have is because of his work, his sweat, and if he wants to scream, be it day or night, it is his goddamn right to do so.

"I'm fine," he says, getting up to poke through the ice chest to give her a pack.

"Where are you going?" She asks.

"I'm going to take care of you, alright?"

He walks down the hallway, and he notices a door quickly close shut. It is the boy.

"Jack?" he calls, knocking on the door.

But it is his house, and he has paid for every screw and every splinter of wood. Why should he be knocking on his own door? He turns the knob and pushes, but cannot get through.

"Jack! Jack, open this door!"

He pounds and presses, and his eyes are popping with white lights and orange carpeting.

"Jack!"

Without thought, he backs up and kicks the door in with his bare foot. The knob had been secured by the desk chair his wife had procured from the town carpenter. It is now cracked and sideways on the ground.

"Jack," he says, seeing the boy swathed in his blanket like an old beggar in the gutters of Nuremburg.

Red. Orange. Black. Orange. Yellow.

Brian's hands are on the blanket, his breathing ragged and loud. He can feel the strain on his eyes, and he cannot explain the sheer need for him to destroy this, this thing, this *every* thing.

"Daddy, daddy," Jack cries out, but Brian is no longer a father, if he had been one at all.

Brian rips the blanket once, then twice. It is not enough. It persists, this urge. He runs to the bedroom, his wife still cowering on the bed, and he grabs the Benlow lighter he was given in Britain before the force flew to Nuremberg. He scrambles back down the hallway, and flicks the lighter to life. A tiny flame of salvation, and he smiles.

VIII.

"Red. Red. Orange. Yellow. Blue. Red. Red," he says in a passive, soothing voice as he regards the light of the Benlow.

He picks up the scraps of blanket and sets them ablaze, and rushes to the yard to retrieve the tank of propane from the shed. He sloshes the abhorrent liquid through the soiled carpet of the dining room. He saturates the yellow lampshades, the orange counter tops, the unassuming hallway carpet. He blankets the wooden doors in the fumes. Can he smell them? Is he just pretending to smell? Locking the front door, he leaves into the night, tossing the red metal container into the yard like a grenade. Behind him are the pinpricks of the illuminated windows. They are engulfed in the colors, in the smoke, in the flames. Red. Red. Orange. Yellow. Spitfire and falling and flying, consumed by the smoke of the tumbling men.

10.) Sympathy Peaches

I set my laden bag down on the side of the polished table. The weight had caused the muscles in my neck to knot. I rubbed my toes together inside the uncomfortable, non-slip loafers. The arches of my feet ached, and I could feel the pulse of my heart pounding in my heels.

"Another double shift?" the waiter asked, placing a carafe of wine in front of me, making the table wobble.

"Yeah," I replied, pausing to pour myself a glass.

The taste was bittersweet against my tongue, and my throat tingled at the cool wetness. I sighed, replacing the sips with another fill from the glass bottle.

"Six hours at the restaurant, six at the bar, and a ton of homework waiting at home."

I gulped down the liquid at the thought of the stack of papers lying neglected on my desk corner.

"That sucks," he said, adjusting his glasses. "'Bout the same for me, too, except, ya know, I got two more hours to go."

I nodded my head in empathy. Nothing more was to be said. He walked away from the table to the host station and pressed buttons on the automatic POS system.

This was my Friday ritual. It was the only place in the college town I felt comfortable. By breathing in the aroma of freshly baked bread, and after a few copious glasses of wine, I could trick myself into believing I was a distinguished middle-aged adult, a polished woman with very busy and important things to do during the day... instead of a dropout dreading to go home to her spun-out sister. Until an early twenty-something guy with a double-popped collar opened the door or a gaggle of sorority girls walked by with their "Delta-Delta-Delta" chant, I could live in the fantasy I had created without feeling repulsed and, I guess, jealous, that they seemingly had found something I hadn't. But tonight? Tonight I felt perfectly content in my element through the help of a shrieking kid. He was around eight; too old to be screaming bloody murder because his parents had chosen 715 olive tapenade instead of "Ronald Donald friiiiiiiiiies!"

* * *

And there she is again, sitting alone at the bar. She always has her pink notebook open, and keeps on that cute waitress outfit I've probably seen a million times in my life but still can't get enough of, and – and little Kingsley's being a complete, ridiculous asshole of a brat, and here she is staring at me with those big eyes. Is it bad to call your kid an asshole, even when

they're acting like one? I'm not gonna bring it up, though. Oh hell-to-effin'-no. Lenore would just give in with one of her old bullets in her arsenal. Her god-forsaken shrieking voice, questioning me all the time. "Oh Jack, it's not little King's fault. You're the one who gave him McDonald's instead of slapping together a lunch" or "Really, Jack, if you just spent more time with him he'd listen to you." Well, screw that. I've tried with him, I really have. If I'd taken to raising kids like my dad, little Kingsley's ass would be red and welted from the belt. Maybe he wouldn't like me much, but he sure as hell wouldn't be crying out for those cheap-ass fries when we're at a perfectly respectable (and hella pricey!) restaurant. It's not like he's one or two. He's freakin' six years old and should know better. Lenore'd say *I* should know better than to take him to a place like this.

* * *

Every Friday, at 10:05, I would sit at my usual table with a carafe of Sauvignon awaiting my arrival. By 10:30, my usual meal would be served on my placemat. At 11:00, my usual post-dinner cigarette would be rolled and my usual twenty percent tip would be left on the table. It was simple. It was predictable. It was my usual weekly hour of bliss.

It is a known cultural taboo to be a young okay-looking girl dining *alone* without the implication of having been stood up. This was a social contradiction I enjoy breaking. I feel more centered and relaxed alone in a room full of strangers. My body can rest before the trek home and what will most likely be a cleaning up of my sister's cigarette butts, half-eaten Hungry Man dinners, and the ominous pile of unpaid utility bills. I could, for once, be the customer rather than the alternative. I became "that girl," the one with the black button-up and pinstriped pants, the one with an apron brimming with crushed and sweaty dollar bills. The staff did not bother me, did not roll their eyes at being seated a one-top. They knew I was an insider, and that my gratuity held up accordingly.

"Thanks," I said to the waiter as he placed my usual in front of me.

"Sure. Just got fresh mozzarella made today, so it'll be extra good. Trevor made 'em."

"Great."

I cut the pizza pie with precision; eight perfect triangles begging to be consumed. The mozzarella and crumbled goat cheese melted together in small, beautiful strings. The steam rose from the plate, smelling of basil and love-tossed crust. I placed the first piece in my mouth. I had begun to salivate in anticipation, and I was rewarded for my patience by being thrown into a paradise of cream, ripened tomatoes and -

* * *

"Daddyyyyyyy, it's yuckyyyyyyy!"

I'd been watching Lizzie devour her pizza. The usual she gets every Friday night. It's amazing how she can make strings of cheese and marinara and dough look sexy. But it's not like I can really concentrate on that too much because meanwhile, little Kingsley's slathered his entire spaghetti bolognese on the floor, his own hair, and the shirt I ironed just for this Friday night occasion. I can't believe him. Seriously, here he is eating a dish (all pasta made in house and a kid's plate going in at around 9 bucks a plate!) and he just shits all over my evening. Never mind Lenore helping me clean him. Oh no. I'd better take initiative first. "I always do the cleaning when I get home, Jack. The least you can do is clean up after your son." *Your* son. I love how she only uses that word when he's done something awful. As if she hadn't begged for a kid. Begged me to reconsider. And here we are now, and I'm cleaning up the red-stained crap from the king's blonde hair... *her* color of hair... while she downs her second (8 dollar!) martini. Screw it Lenore. Yeah, I'll just wash up your child while we eat on what obviously you consider your money. Never mind the fact that I contribute too. Never mind that I haven't even touched her in 3 months, 5 days, and approximately 1.5 hours. That I don't talk about the fact that she dropped the gym and the "healthy-eating" lifestyle she was all into whenever I met her. What I wouldn't give just to pull a little Kingsley and slap the bolognese in her face and head over to meet lovely, peaceful Lizzie for a bit of dessert and a nightcap. It'd been a hell of a long time since I'd had a drink. What with crazy asshole Kingsley and lushy Lenore, there was enough to deal with without resorting to drink. Sometimes I wish I could.

* * *

The boy screamed, slathering his bright red dinner on the pristine oak floors I know the host had only polished a few hours ago. I managed to finish my prize after another fill of my cup and strategically placed earphones. I had to muffle the incessant screaming as I closed my eyes and indulged in the last, gooey bite. I rolled my cigarette after, wincing as I tapped my tired feet to the tune in my ear drowning out the child's protestation. As I licked the paper, the host tapped me on the shoulder.

* * *

And why shouldn't I? Why shouldn't I just indulge a bit? Lenore's now on her third cocktail, and I know within the next few minutes she'll be slurring her words a bit and opening up her mouth to say all the things I've imagined her saying, and then some. That's one thing for her. She has a way with words when she's criticizing me. Like poetry, some of it, really. *Look at Jack, fuck-ing stupid chubby hubby*. That was the little ditty that came two weeks ago when I didn't cut her off at 3 drinks. At least little Kingsley doesn't have the vocabulary yet to throw more than food my way. When that happens, I'll pull out what little hair I have left. Sometimes

I wonder why I decided to get married again. I'm too old to keep on doing this. I think I was too old to start being a dad, father, whatever it is that I am, too, come to that. I wish Lenore hadn't been so young, so perfect at the time. I should've just stayed a 3 time divorcé. Can't exactly do that again, although this time it might be me who gets a bit of spousal support out of the deal. - At least I can give Lizzie a little bit of appreciation tonight. Lenore's 3 deep into Grey Goose and she won't notice an extra bit on the tab. Just a little bit to let Lizzie know I'm there. Sometimes I wonder if she even knows who I am. Sorry sap that plans out my Kingsley-free Monday days to eat at her sports bar, that plans out my "Family Friday" nights to watch her jealously and oh-so-friggin'-pathetically longingly from the side of my eye. I wish I could just be someone else and join her.

* * *

Removing the music, I looked up and smiled at the host.

"For you, sweetie," she said, taking away the remains of my dinner and replacing it with another dish.

She bustled off to a ten party table before I could give my thanks. Instead, I winked and waved at the chefs in the open-framed kitchen. They often used me as a guinea pig for their new creations. Trevor looked questioningly at my gestures, but then smiled reservedly and continued barking orders to the staff. The dessert was decadent. A take on peach cobbler, it was encrusted in a flaky pastry; the oranges and reds of the peaches peeked out from under a blanket of hand-churned vanilla bean ice cream. Although my stomach squirmed in protest, already full and protruding, I was able to coax it into a few more bites.

* * *

She was eating it. No, I guess I shouldn't say eating... she was consuming the dessert I'd given her in such a way that put her pizza-eating to shame. The way her little lips pursed around the vanilla ice creamed spoon made me smile. I'm even happier than I had been on Monday when I slapped down my usual 25% tip to her. Lenore has gone sloshy. I've let her get onto her 5th (or maybe 6th? Quick calculation: $8 \times 5 = 40$ bucks, let's hope it's 5 not 6) martini. Honestly, I just don't give a flying fig right now. Little Kingsley has gone into his post-dinner food coma, and is now snoring into the destruction that was his (crazy ass expensive!) meal. I love seeing the smile on Lizzie's face. Maybe it pulls the corners of my own mouth or something. It's been a long time since I've looked in the mirror, and even freaking longer since I've tried to look at myself smiling. It's so forced, not quite right. But here, here I'm fine and I can just sit, watching her... kinda pretending that the king and the queen don't exist. That I'm not their court jester and that I'm sitting right next to Lizzie, helping her finish off her dessert

while taking a load off and talking about anything but Kingsley's alphabets or Lenore's "dick of a CEO."

* * *

"Hey," a man in his mid-forties sporting salt-and-pepper hair and a bulbous belly called to me.

"Yes?" I answered, noting the clash of his nautical tie against a bright green dress shirt that was smudged and splattered with bright red dots.

"Did'ja like the dessert?"

"Yeah," I said slowly, "Sure. It's very good. A new one on the menu, I think. I'd definitely recommend it."

"Well, I thought ya just looked so lonely over there. Thought that'd cheer ya up a bit."

"Thanks?" I said, turning my back to the man to hide my face. It had grown crimson in agitation with him and embarrassment that I had foolishly waved to the kitchen staff without any supposed reason.

"Not a problem," he replied to my back.

I slung my bag over my shoulder. I was shaken, not only by the man's misplaced sympathy, but also by the fervor he took in explaining his actions. I looked over to the populated side of the restaurant. The unmistakable neon sheen of his shirt glared against the muted colors of the surrounding decor. A woman, presumably his wife, was sitting stiff and taut with silence. Her pursed lips threatened to disappear completely, and her tight bun only emphasized the footprints Botox had left on her face. The child that had wreaked havoc on my hour clung to the bottom of the man's pant leg. He gnawed at the man's khakis, slobbering and gnashing his teeth; a bona fide ankle-biter. His wife rolled her eyes and swilled at the dregs of her cocktail as and the boy slapped at his father's knee.

* * *

I've actually done it. I've gone up to her like a bumbling idiot and I feel... elated. I can't even feel little Kingsley wrapped around my leg. Don't even want to do what I normally do and pry him off by doing the doggy-leg shake. No. She actually talked to me. Not as a customer, but as a person. I think she liked it. I think I've made her night. That's enough for me. Screw you, Lenore. I see her rolling her eyes at me like she usually does, and I'm pretty sure she'll have a few things to say to me on the ride back. She slapped her credit – our – credit card down on the table after looking at the bill and gave the devil's gaze to our waiter. This is why I keep cash stowed on me, because I know if she fills in the little credit area marked "gratuity" she'll plop down a drunkenly scrawled 1 dollar, or even worse, her little slash that says she didn't

forget to tip, she just doesn't want to. She's ordered yet another drink, and I guess I can sidle little Kingsley into his seat so she can finish. It's not for Lenore's benefit. Hell-efin'-no. It's so I can see Lizzie finish up and leave. Another moment looking at her is worth Lenore boozing it up a bit more. Besides, the damage is oh-so-done with her. Be it 4 or 7 or a million, it doesn't matter. She'll be as mean as a rattlesnake anyway and today is "My Effin' Family Friday." Little Kingsley got fed, Lenore got her belly full of top shelf vodka, and by God I'm gonna get my little bit of nourishment too. Just to see Lizzie walk out, happy. That'll be enough for me. That'll make the weekend bearable. And then after that, Monday'll make the week manageable, and then Friday'll come back around again. I can live that way.

* * *

I changed course from the door, pivoting back around to the host stand.

"Can I help you?" the host asked.

"Yeah, can I order the special dessert for the man in the green shirt over there? He looks so lonely."

Placing ten dollars in the girl's hand, I turned and pushed my way out the heavy door, content to be alone.

11.) The Opposite Is Desire

The whip slices the skin on your back, making you wonder if he has replaced the braided black leather for a blade. Your face flushes, and you teeter on the edge of consciousness. Nauseated and swallowing back bile, a slick gelatinous mass, you close your eyes and try not to count, be it one, two, or twenty. If you are not aware, you could make it to fifty. Fifty lashes: five hundred dollars. You have always depended on the kindness of strangers.

"17!" The stranger shouts, rubbing your manacled hands with his rough fingers.

You flinch as his nails brush against your skin, your shoulders, your stomach, your-

"No," you say pointedly, eyes still shut.

"It'll make you feel better. We still have a ways to go, you know."

"No," you repeat, your splayed legs shaking in their shackles, your wrists sparking with lack of circulation above your head.

"18!"

Perspiration tumbles down your forehead, mixing with the treacherous tears falling down your cheeks. You need the money. Think about the money. The rent. The debts. Think about -

"23!"

- about the slaves, the people who had not been paid for this. They had not been given the choice. Their masters with their cat-o-nines ripped flesh until their backs ran red. Not having a safe word to yell out when enough was enough. Never being able to say "no" and be heeded. This is your decision. You have agreed to this. And with each slash of the whip, you smile, knowing you are punishing yourself, and you feel relieved at each sharp impact.

Show me a person who hasn't known any sorrow and I'll show you a superficial.

"25!"

You wish you had whiskey to drown this down with. You had thought the numbness of your psyche would be enough of an anesthetic.

"27!"

Oh no, you think, oh no. The darkness presses on the sides of your eyes. Cold sweat brings goosebumps to the surface of your skin. Your head swirls, sagging. You open and close your eyelids. *Oh no, make it stop. Have to keep going or-*

"Hey!"

You feel a slight slap on your face, drenched with cold sweat.

"I can keep going," your voice says, though you are not in control of your words.

You open your eyes, and you are laid out on a white bed sheet laden sofa, your naked body wet and cold and hot and sick.

"I dunno. Whatcha think, man?"

The whip-wielder is a thirty-some-year old balding man named Sammy with a protruding belly. His name annoys you, and you wonder why a grown man would choose to go by "Sammy" instead of "Sam" or "Samuel." It bothers you that someone called Sammy could produce the amount of pain he had inflicted. You do not want to be hurt by a man with such an adolescent title.

Sammy looks to his cameraman, who is staring at you. You meet his gaze, hoping he will agree to let you continue. You have not finished the job. They do not have to pay you. They need fifty lashes.

"I can keep going," you repeat, stronger.

You attempt to sit up on the couch. The world threatens to spin out from under you.

"Nah," the cameraman says, shaking his head from the skinny sinews of his drooping neck and looking with troubled eyes at me.

"I promise I'm okay."

You take it for granted that I am in something that I want to get out of, you think.

"See?" Sammy says, stroking his dark goatee, "She's fine. She's just being a bit of a pansy bitch. Listen here, you wanna do a good job? You need to start behaving a bit better. Maybe let me relax you a bit."

"No," you say, as loudly as your shaking voice can, "No touching."

"Suit yourself. I've had others that can go up to a hundred with a bit of help."

"No," you repeat, getting up off the couch and trying not to think of the way your back had stuck to the cloth.

You walk back over to the shackles, and force your arms and legs back into a giant X shape, waiting for him to lock you back in.

"Alright," he says, "Ready to start again? Or are you going to keep wasting my time?"

"Ready," you say, shutting your eyes once more.

You hear the camera's shrill beep, feel the air move around you, then-

"28!"

Without warning, you are thrust into blackness, drowning in cutting cracks of whips and cold air against naked flesh.

"Nope, she's done, man," the cameraman says, passing a glass of water to you.

You are on the couch once more, and you struggle to take the cup in your shaking hand.

"I'm sorry," you whisper, defeated.

For all the pain you have endured throughout your life, a few lashes should not be enough to make you quit. Pain had never defeated you before, and having it triumph frightens you. The one factor in your life you could always control now controls you.

"Sorry doesn't really help us make a film, does it? We can't put this shit on the site," Sammy spats.

"Come on man, look at her. Stop with your bullshit already."

The cameraman takes the glass of water from you, handing you clothing. The underwear you had been asked to bring lay cut and ruined on the concrete basement floor. You regret bringing your expensive black bra; it had always been so comfortable. You had thought, at the beginning of the night, that you would buy a new one with a portion of your spoils. Now that you are not getting reimbursed, you feel as if you have let yet another valued possession go... for nothing.

"She's a big girl, right? You can handle it. Though I do give it to you, girl, you've given me more hell than any of the others."

"I'm not trying to give you hell," you say, although you are not sure you are convincing. You know as well as I do that a single girl, a girl alone in the world, has got to keep a firm hold on her emotions or she'll be lost.

Reaching behind your body with disgust, you tear the bandage hiding the large cursive L from the small of your back. At least any footage the cameraman had shot would not incriminate you entirely, not that you care. The way your life is going, you have decided to ignore it all. What were a few discrepancies when you do not care whether you live or die? You pull your jeans up over your naked hips, flinching as your shoulder blades retract against your raw back. After struggling with your sweatshirt, you are no longer disappointed at the destruction of the bra. Anything against your back feels as if it were a lit match.

"Right, then, you ready for me to drive you back?"

"Sure," you say, your body still shaking; the reality of what you have done frightens you.

You are not scared that you let a strange man drive you forty-five minutes away from your home, that you allowed him to tie you up in his secluded basement; you are not afraid that you agreed to a knife slipping against your thigh and the dimple of your chest, that you let the leather crack down on your body over, and over, and over again. You are scared because you

are not scared.

"Okay, then," Sammy says as you sidle into his red Mustang.

On the way to his basement, you had asked him what he did. He works in some sort of investment banking and lives in a duplex. *This*, he had added, *is my hobby. Not much money in it, but a bit of money and a bit of fun, you know.* You are now charming and appreciative, as you have learned to be. Men like this are easy to please. Stroke an ego; do not stroke anything else. You win. They lose.

The drive back is quiet. You try not to rest your back against the passenger seat. Each slight turn or brush of the sweatshirt creates another peel of burns, as if someone were pressing a hot poker to your flesh. First the cutting slice, now the burn.

It is, you think, *a bizarre sensation.* The sports car flashes against the dotted neon lights of the road. It smells of air freshener and leather polish. The scent nauseates you, and you try to breathe through your mouth in an attempt to hold the vomit at bay. Ruining the shoot would be a triumph compared to spoiling the whip-wielder's pristine beauty of a vehicle.

You count the dials on the dashboard. You watch the bugs smash their little bodies against the sheer windshield. You try to feel every break in your skin to make sure you are awake, wondering... hoping... that the whiskey bottle under your sink has a few dregs left.

"So, has anyone else chickened out of doing this?" you ask, trying to break the silence.

Part of you wonders if he will stop off the side of the unlit prairie highway to a dirt road and get what he has wanted all night. Most of you does not care. The first time you laid eyes on him you had thought, *that man is my executioner.*

"A couple tweakers, but they were crazy bitches. One was high as shit and couldn't even stand right. The other, well, she was my girlfriend, I guess."

"You guess?"

"Yeah, we started the site. I'm into this stuff, and she said she was, too. Ended up being a coke-head and a half, dabbling into meth and all that shit. What a fuckin' psycho."

"Sorry," you say. "Some girls are crazy."

"Amen to that," he says, and you are glad you have made him smile.

You drum your fingers to the rap music blaring from his speakers, and you roll down the window to light a cigarette as you look at the moon.

What a terrible life he must lead. Dating crack-whores, getting his kicks off of whipping women who need the money. He must not be happy. You can see it in his eyes; his eyes reflected in yours. Do you look as defeated as well? You both are the same, he and you. In different ways, maybe, but searching for something, anything, to ease your fitful minds. And

his friend. His friend takes pity on both of you, because he is behind the lens.

He seems grounded. He does not have that certain dead look in his gaze. He does not know who you are.

"Care if I put my feet on the seat? I want to look sideways and my back's killing me a bit," you ask, and kind eyes you have not seen the entirety of the night smile back at you.

"Sure, girl, just make sure to take your flip-flops off before."

You stare out of the car window, sucking on your cigarette and feeling the wind on your face. The night is clear and flawlessly warm, the end of an Indian summer. Stars wink at you, Mars illuminated and slightly red in the sky. You take a deep drag, and watch the smoke trail quickly behind the car as you exhale.

"Here we are," Sammy says.

"Yep," you say, throwing your third cigarette out of the window.

"Well, ya know, you've been a really good sport. A pain in the ass, but a good sport. Here's a hundred for you. And if ya can get yourself under control, we'll try shootin' you again. Sound good?"

He holds out a handful of twenties, and you snatch the money from his hand.

"Thanks, that's really nice of you. I'll let you know when I can, ah, muster up the courage again. Okay?"

"Alright. Take care."

How does it go? *You need somebody. And I need somebody, too.*

You slam the door of the car and waddle towards the entrance to your one bedroom apartment in a 1920s block building. You fumble for the keys in your pocket, open the door, and rush up the stairs to the apartment. The hallway air smells of age, of dust, of history. No longer caring about the pain, you run to the door, thrust the key into the hole, and open it up. The oblong living room greets you, full of your cigarette butts on the built-in bookcases and nothing else. You look at the pathetic picture: two chairs, a television and a stand. You have sold your piano, your couch, your computer. Your sister is the only one who tries to connect to you. But it is just you against the world. If no one will help, you will do it yourself.

"Laurel!" you yell, the ginger kitten clawing at your pant leg, "Not tonight. I think I've had enough, huh?"

You look around the room, and notice your book bag is ripped to shreds. He has left his mark on the debauched fabric.

"Laurel, you stupid cat," you say, kicking the unread and now ruined syllabus across the room in order to keep yourself from acting out on him. "Stupid."

He regards you with his bulbous yellow eyes. He mews, and you lie down on the barren living room ground.

"Come here, Laurel."

You curl into the fetal position and rip your sweatshirt over your head. The cool air feels soothing on your back, and you pet Laurel as he curls himself into the middle of you. You do not mind that his stray hairs have clung to your wounds. They tickle your back with the breeze from the open window.

"We've had this discussion before, Laur. I hate cats. You know that," you say, raking your fingers through his fluffy kitten fur as you resist the urge to sneeze.

"But you're not a cat, are you? No, you're a friend. Just a friend. One that can actually stand me, huh?"

Laurel's head strokes your arm, and you smile at him.

"Let's go to bed, okay?"

You pour a bath, making sure to leave the door open for Laurel to know you have not left him once more. The hot water in the bath both stings and softens, and you finally relax. You put your face down into the water, as you have done often, counting how long you can hold my breath until your chest burns.

17...18...23...25...27...

And men don't want anything they get too easy. But on the other hand, men lose interest quickly.

"Arrgghh!" you scream.

Laurel has jumped into the bathtub.

"Good God, Laur, come on."

He smacks at your face, then jumps daintily out of the old claw-footed tub.

"You're right. You're right. Stupid, huh?" you say, breathing in the air you had hoped to extinguish.

"Let's go to bed and get this crap day over with."

Plodding through the barren bedroom, you climb up into the single trundle bed, Laurel tucked under your arm.

"You at least like me, don't you?" you ask, turning on the ancient silver TV/VCR combo in the corner on the dresser and pressing the video tape into the slot.

Laurel scratches your arm with his claws, creating small beads of blood like a tramline route.

At least you don't have to do it with the pathetic pink Bic tonight.
"Thank you," you sigh, fading into sleep while Marlon Brando cries,
"Stella!"

12.) The Last Dinner

I'm not quite sure the exact date it was, the day my life changed. Changed. Morphed. Turned upside-down like that crazy scene in Willie Wonka where they're being dragged through that psychedelic tunnel. Is it monstrous, disgusting? Or is there some sort of ridiculous attraction to watching over and over again, seeing the vermin and colors for something other than what we're supposed to see them as? I don't know. I ramble on, but you see, it's hard to explain this fascination. This sheer repulsiveness I feel towards myself while at the same time wanting to hurl myself into the repulsivity (sp?... is it a word?) that I can't seem to shake.

Putting the dinner into the oven. The best, freshest basil and herbs I could find at the local farmer's market. I've spent all day defrosting and tenderizing, basting and marinating. Only the best ingredients. If not a photographer, maybe I should have considered becoming a chef.

I guess I don't need to explain my idolatry. I mean, it's not like anyone gives a flying fuck what I'm spending my free time on. I really don't care about them. No, not "them" as in the world, although I guess a case could be made for that. It's a sort of "them" in the people I work with, the lazy ass people swinging around files in the workroom. It's the "them" in all the crackheads and cokewhores I work with during my hobby. I call them that because that's what they call themselves. I call the people I work with "lazy ass people" because they often refer to themselves as such. "Cokewhore" is just another terminology for how someone does their job. Trust me. I've been around both worlds enough to know.

Xtremewhippingfilms.com is the domain name that I own, if that tells you anything about my little hobby. I guess it'll be back up on the market soon, or otherwise it'll be swallowed into the netherworld that is the internet for abandoned porn sites. It's crazy, though. I detest the cash/splif/rockbag hungry girls that traipse through the basement. I've never necessarily considered myself throughout my life someone who would end up running a semi-successful pornography fetish website. I was always into photography. Thought I'd be some sort of art-eeest(!) back in the day. How to expose the film in just the right light to blur the lines just enough to make you want it back in focus. Just enough darkness in the light areas to make you look twice at what you're seeing. But there's nothing artful about slapping water on a burnout in order for her to wake up and finish a scene that I'll have to cut in order to make it look like she could take it all the way through.

And baste and marinate and make sure the garlic is fresh and hasn't gone all old and shrivelled.

So in the middle of all this craptastic livelihood of marking, stamping, stapling files in the daytime making sure my tie stayed on straight while not cutting off the circulation to my ever-growing neckline and reviving streetwalkers to pose for my "grand ideas" (which in all reality have kind of dissipated into a pile of mp4 files the weird fetishists gorge themselves on when the wifey's are away) she came into the picture.

You never think love's gonna hit you when it does. It can come cracking down like a thunderbolt and all that severely clichéd and unveiled poetry spout off. But it does. It really does. I may not remember the exact date (as have since destroyed hard drive, hence why I have re-started this journal, though I guess if I'm writing this for myself a presumed audience would neither know nor care.) I guess I care. I like reliving it. Reliving that day. That amazing day slicing through the mendacity and the muck.

I'm eating my last meal now. Maybe that's why I've gotten all nostalgic. It's not like I'm going to read this again. Just typing it out makes me feel like, like everything actually happened. That it wasn't just this insane dream. You know the type. The type of dream that you're still unconscious for but it feels so real. So real that you don't want to wake up, because you know you're sleeping, but you just don't want it to end and you'd give anything to slide back into dreamland and forget that you know you're dreaming.

Raven. My Raven. The first time I saw her, it was like that thunderclap. The type of thing that washes over you, and you know you're never going to be the same person.

And I have to turn the stew and make sure that everything is evenly done and that no bits are sticking to the meat. Not overdone, because the poor beast that died for me to have my meal would be a waste if I got distracted for a second.

The online sex community is one that I was dragged into unwillingly... albeit happily. I remember the first porn site I stumbled on with about as much love as I remember the first time seeing Raven. It's as if anything and everything you could ever want, every desire, is there at your fingertips. One little click of the mouse, one small excursion onto the "meeting others" section of AOL or craigslist or what-have-you, leaves me sticky with sweat and painfully tight. There's that little voice in the back of the head saying that you're not supposed to be doing this, but that makes the intensity multiply an infinity-fold.

So I'm diddling around the sites, looking at the competition for ideas on how to better format the videos or how to keyword better to get more hits (because, after all, a hobby is only as great as the inner, hidden desire that others get as much out of it as you do) and she pops up. Not her face at first. No, it was her ankles.

I'm not one for podophilia normally, but that day I could see the appeal. They were

perfect. Little round balls attached to sinewy pale skin. And, I have to admit it, I kept touching the screen to see if I could reach through and touch the bone between the paper-thin skin of her feet. My other hand had inadvertently travelled down my sweatpants I still wore from my college days (I've become so grossly, terribly, without-an-excuse-for-it fat I haven't seen my dick in what seems like forever without the aid of a mirror and some tucking of hardened gut that disgusts me to touch). But that's the thing. I stopped there. She didn't deserve that, and she doesn't deserve that. She doesn't deserve me, but that's another matter altogether.

And the dinner seems to be ready. The aroma is ridiculously tantalizing and I'm typing this while I'm thinking about pulling it from the heat. I probably should. I should have it ready.

So it's not exactly a porn website, more so one of those 888-call-me-for-a-good-time sites geared towards the local clientele. And so I did. Well, I didn't call. I clicked open that small, little screen with the blinking cursor. It blinked and blinked and blinked at me until I wanted to tear my computer apart for throwing in my face the fact that I couldn't think of what to write to her. But I didn't. I took my time. I stared at that screen for what seemed like hours (but in all actuality was probably more like ten minutes). I've destroyed every saved file I had of our conversations, but they are engrained in my mind like I was typing them yesterday.

The feel of the keys on my presperating (sp? I should know this one. I do it enough.) fingers, the way I had to wipe off the keyboard twice before finishing my sad, little introduction.

Bboy1981: You have touched my soul. I know you're around here. Can I take you out for a drink?

"You have touched my soul"; I know you're thinking I'm a ridiculous, sappy sort of person. And I'd have agreed if every word weren't exactly true. The fact is, she replied. Not with any sort of "hey big boy, let me see what really touches your soul" but actually with something legitimate. You see, she'd seen my site and she was local and looking for a bit of extra cash.

RaAvInE: Hi u! I know a bit of ur work. Sure we can meet up :)U lookin for a ng for some work?

The way she answered me made my heart sink. No, I didn't want a new girl to work with. She didn't belong to that scummy caliber. I wanted her for myself, but if she wanted work I'd settle on her having a tasteful shoot with me and then, well, she could have all of my money, all of my effort, all of me if she wanted. If not, I'd keep the photos for myself and hope that I could "employ" her, if only to see her in the flesh again.

And now, writing this, my dinner's getting cold. I guess this is how people on death row

must feel. I'd be afraid to start the first bite. The beginning of the end, or so it must seem. Though not exactly. I had been eating this meal for the past month, portioning it out evenly, counting down the dinners until, ultimately, it would be gone.

I know this sounds melodramatic, but I have no other choice.

So here we are, exchanging message by message. They are tangible, entities of themselves in my mind.

RaAvInE: I <3 ur work! I know u said u wanted to be a director or photographer or something. Well u r! Don't think ur not! Smh

RaAvInE: When r we gonna meet up? I don't charge as much as u wanna pay, but I won't complain ;)

RaAvInE: Lets see how much u like my ankles, u r bad!!! Lol. I like talking 2 u!

Just a smattering of instances. If it had been any other girl, any other woman, I might say, I would have sneered at the lack of punctuation, the heavy emphasis of emoticons and the shortening of words. But with her, I found it adorably ironic. Something I began to cherish. She was willing to put her little <3 into mine, and no one had done that in quite some time. No one I cared to care about.

I still have her photos on my back wall. They're just small little snippets here and there that I had print-screened from my computer and tacked to the corkboard. That's how it started. With her ankles. After seeing all of her and looking through the long local catalogue of her profile, finding her Facebook page, and resorting to any effort (even, though I hate admitting, a PI who I paid an exuberant sum) to find just one more picture, my bedroom had become a sort of shrine to Raven and the perfection I saw. No matter the slight stretch marks on her stomach, the somewhat worn and placed expression on her face. Those were just battle scars. Proof of the person she was and how I idolized (and, for that matter, still idolize) the wholeness of her, piece by piece.

The fact that she has a daughter. That she wished to go to LA to try the porn sector out there. That she hates her parents (who live a mere 15 minutes away from us in a small town suburb). That her favorite color is this blue-ish purple that didn't have a name, but that she refers to as "raven black." I knew every part of her before we met. You know, this placed a lot of stress on me for the actual meeting (see aforementioned obesity and proclivity towards sweating).

So the meeting. I was sweating like a maniacal pig, and I had to wipe off the camera lenses twice before she came in because I kept twiddling with the dials and my stupid forehead rained down on the glass.

"Sammy?" she asked more than said as her little knuckles knocked on my front door.

"Coming!" I replied in a shrill voice.

It was very unbecoming and un-manly in my ears. I still wish I could change the way I had answered her lyrically low voice.

I must say, on seeing her face and her exposed ankles she was everything and more. Much more. I immediately felt dishevelled and unworthy. I had tried to iron my only collared shirt not affiliated with the hell of an office I work at on a daily basis.

The whole event is a blur to me. Even now, I can see, plain as day, the typed words she gave to me, the exchanges we had. I can remember the feeling of seeing her the first day on the screen, as if my heart had plunged to my groin and then leapt upward into my throat like an overzealous dolphin. I remember the feeling of the printed out photos between my fingers and the way my thumb had to press onto the tack until a circular impression was left on my doughy, wet skin. I still feel hot and overwhelmed with spinning, ecstatic nausea after recreating the time spent face-to-face with Raven. The sheets on my bed have had to be stripped and dried each morning. But I cannot recreate the sheer fullness, the impregnated satisfaction I must have felt when I was with her... truly with her.

It's funny she chose the word "raven" to describe the blue-purple she loves so much. I guess ironic in a sort of way, though I hate how people throw around the word "irony" as if they know what the hell they're talking about or if they've ever actually picked up a dictionary. You know, that blueish-purple? It's also the hue of the blood before it reaches oxidation. Everyone thinks that blood is inherently red to begin with. It takes a mixing to reality, to the outer world, that changes its color. But everyone always thinks of blood as red. I think of it as raven.

See, she wanted to leave. Leave for LA. Wanted my opinion on the matter. After five minutes with her, she wants to go away. Granted, I see it. A guy in his mid-twenties already balding, fatter than a Christmas ham. I'm not a reason for her to stay. That's why I knew, from the get-go, she wasn't like the other cokewhores. Them, just throw a little money their way and they'll stay. They'll do whatever you want them to do. They'll show their bits, be tied up, videoed, what-have-you. She's different. She's always been different.

It didn't make it easier. It doesn't make things easier.

So here I am, the walls still papered with her photos. With every small piece of her that I could get my eyes on. And it wasn't enough. And she's leaving me again. And the ankles are all that remain.

This is the last meal. Over a month of portioning things out and selling my things and

destroying my computer and living in the dark. Over a month of knowing that this is the moment that will inevitably come. And I've let her go cold.

I can't put her in the microwave.

Or re-heat her on the stovetop.

I can't consume her cold ankles.

I can't.

13.) AVN Adult Entertainment Expo

Interview: AVN Adult Entertainment Expo

Hard Rock Hotel and Casino

Las Vegas, NV, January 16th, 2013

Q.

A. Raven

Q.

A. Well, it used to be Ravine when I was starting out. Bit of a pun in the biz, right? But then I started gaining a bit of recognition and decided to change it to something more mysterious, something that would ring "interesting" to producers and such.

Q.

A. I've actually been told that quite often. Of course, the community is filled with college grads, quite smart people, you know. I guess I've always had an eloquent way of talking. For me, this is vital to creating the career I've been hoping to. The culmination of smarts, both street and book, as well as an open mind have helped me to look at the big picture. And I don't need a lawyer to look over the paperwork for me!

Q.

A. Law, originally. Mainly criminal. I wanted to go into defending those that may be misunderstood or under-represented. Give them a voice, so to speak. One of my favorite seminars was on criminal representation. Fascinating course.

Q.

A. Oh yes, quite passionate, of course! Although, you do realize, what I'm doing here isn't far off from all of that.

Q.

A. Well, what I mean by that is representing a population or those who have a sort of tendency for certain proclivities that may not be deemed socially acceptable. Now, I'm not saying that the pornography industry is akin to someone being prosecuted for a heinous crime they did, in fact commit. It's more of a commentary on the dichotomy between those in the porn industry who are misunderstood or demonized by the general public, as someone without money charged with a crime may be criminalized before the jury has even been chosen.

Q.

A. Sometimes, yes, I have to admit. The community in general oftentimes feels judged to a

certain extent. I don't necessarily blame the quasi-vanilla middle-class worker for feeling that way. I mean, it takes some out-of-the-box thinking to perform "Sex Queen Three- The Rise of the Raven-ous Cunt," or even to speak the title without having a pre-determined and societal influence to cringe at the very words that make it up. But that is the nature of the beast. Words are only words.

Q.

A. True, but you know, I find the word "cunt" non-invasive. Sure, if someone shouts it at me in a mean-spirited way, in order to tear me down, of course I'd take offense at it. But you see, in other cultures it may be less biting than it is here in America. And in context as well. Everything in context. I think watching the film, oh what was it? Something to do with D-day in France or something. Anyway, there's a sexy, well-meaning man who writes out the word to the love of his life. And it is beautiful. In that regard it is a beautiful word."

Q.

A. Not entirely within the title, but from my stand-point, it isn't necessarily dirty. It has a sort of poetic ring to it. And a shock factor, as per the societal predisposition to have an adverse reaction to the word itself. Would it be as shocking if we had titled it "Rise of the Raven-ous Vagina?" No, it wouldn't. And it wouldn't appeal as strongly. Porn is taboo and saying cunt is taboo, therefore they go hand-in-hand. They complement one another with no false advertising.

Q.

A. Mainly because it was entirely against the grain, honestly! No, there's no sob story, no "oh my parents abused me or my boyfriend didn't think I was sexy" type of scenario with me. To be frank, in the higher echelon of this world, that doesn't exist so much. You see, the damaged ones, they do it for money or drugs or recognition. The ones that make it to where I've made it, they're the ones that have their head on straight. This is a business, this is a calling. Those that use it for something else are damaged and only go so far... often to the detriment of their own mental stability.

Q.

A. Oh of course I have my off days. Hell, I have my off months. But I believe you'd be hard-pressed to find someone working the hours that we do and not find that every person, no matter what they've gone or settled into, be it selling staplers or waitressing or conducting as a CFO in a company, has an off day or week. It's the nature of humans working the same job day in and day out. At least I get to be a bit creative with what I do. It's never the same each time I take up a new opportunity.

Q.

A. Oh for a few years more, I'm certain of that. Granted I know there's an expiration date on what I do and what is appealing. Unless I wanted to pursue a more nuanced sort of project. Honestly I don't think, when the time comes, that I'll stretch myself out to be re-cast in a more Puma or Cougar-esque sort of role. No, I've been working on my own nest egg and am most confident that when I decide to retire, it will be to build up my own company.

Q.

A. Anything niche. I'm not sure if you're quite familiar with my work, but I treat each project as an extension of myself. In this way, I'll try to explain, I take pride in each film I've done. At the beginning, I was sloppy. – Yeah, sugar! Here ya go – Sorry about that, but I have a strong conviction: never refuse a fan. Anyway, I was focused on showing the world that I wasn't going to conform to their expectations of a bookish law student. I was doing it for reasons not necessarily pertaining to myself. That was the mistake I made, and it's the mistake many newcomers make.

Q.

A. Did I want to? Not necessarily. But I think deep down there is a small portion of each of us that feels the pull of notoriety. People know my stage name now, and of course it gives me pride, but I didn't set out for this sort of celebrity status. I've seen it throughout the years, and those that go into the business for popularity and fame are often those that were not interested in the porn industry in the first place. They think, "oh I'll just do this topless shoot and then I'll get my headshots around to some agents." They rationalize, "Just one more nude modelling page on the website and someone will discover me." This is the wrong way to pursue the career, you see. If you want to be a model or an actress, set yourself up in LA and try to do so. Don't diddle around on the internet being miserable and humiliated at a performance you keep trying to convince yourself is a stepping stone.

Q.

A. Many. Oh yes, I've seen many. You see, that's the difference between my happiness and their despair. I tried, at first, to take these lost people aside, tell them that their dreams will not come to fruition by getting into the industry, but it always fell on deaf ears. And then they couldn't deal with the emotional baggage of doing something they detested, and that's when quite a few turn to drugs or drink, or self-harm. – It's my personalized Fleshlight, honey. It's all Raven, baby! You can get them over at the table around the side. Thank you! – Anyway, we do have support groups throughout to make sure that if someone does need help, someone can get it. But you have to ask. You have to know you're deep in it already.

Q.

A. As I said, everyone has their off days, but ever since I made the decision to dedicate myself to this profession, there has only been one time that I regret. But even now, though I regret it, I wouldn't change it. And that's the difference between drowning yourself in depression and realizing that regret does not necessarily mean you should have acted differently.

Q.

A. My daughter, Jane. Amazing little bundle of squishy, wrinkled skin. She was supposed to be born in late April, but she stayed put until May tenth.

Q.

A. It's something I'm staunchly against. No medical interventions, and that includes any sort of surgery the other ladies may have done. I know, I know. I've seen that look before. See, I spend hours in the gym to get everything just right, and you know, the whole breast enhancement thing's been dying down, and it makes me glad I never got them. I guess I lucked out in the gene pool department with that one. I feel the same about tattoos. Never was that an option, and you see, I think it's better for business, honest!- Yeah, honey, yeah! I'll be around there tomorrow afternoon if ya can stick around, sugar!- I've seen research and I know, and believe, that the human was created to be a natural entity in and of itself, and that's what supports the beauty that I see in each individual, whether it be the birth of my daughter or the aging, left-swinging cock I have the fortune to work with.

Q.

A. Why should they be differentiated from? They're both natural. They're both human entities. They both represent the way in which humans can express and be and live. So no, I don't find anything contradictory in the comparison. We are all flesh and bone and whether it be a placenta-covered new-born or a pink-tipped imperfect erection or even a stretched-out labia, there is something beautiful and horrific about it when you take them for what they are.

Q.

A. She's not with me now. No, no. That's where a small part of the regret plays.

Q.

A. No, not at all. Granted, I know my career isn't exactly deemed appropriate for a child, there is no prostitution involved. I do not, nor ever have, partaken in anything drug-related. No, I merely felt as if I wouldn't make a good mother. Whether a lawyer or a porn star, a mother was never something I was supposed to be. I would've given her up, whichever choice in career I decided to have.

Q.

A. Because it takes complete selflessness. Are there mothers and fathers out there that are worse

than I would have been? Of course. But for me to truly succeed at being a mother, I would have to dedicate all of my time, my love, my mind to this little balled-up person. It wouldn't be fair, and I would have taken my failure out on her. It's the type of person I am.

Q.

A. Oh yes, there are quite a few here that have them, and I'm sure they do everything that they can. But you see, I'm a perfectionist. I can't have a child and be a mother. It just isn't feasible to the personality that I have, to the type of person that I am. I would have had to leave the industry, because a child shouldn't be raised around things they cannot comprehend. – That's right, baby. Over to the side and I'll be there in about an hour! - I would have felt the same if I were a devout Christian. Children can't understand it, and I wouldn't want to indoctrinate her into something she wouldn't be able to make her own choice on. And then there would have been her peers. Social conduct and expectations would have made her life a living hell. Not that that's an excuse to have left her, but it's undeniably there, you know.

Q.

A. Well, think about the curious twelve-year-old, the one who goes searching on the internet. Now, our movies are patented and have obtained copyrights and are not allowed to the under-18 public, but neither are major motion pictures that get illegally downloaded and copied. What kind of effect would that have on her social life? I couldn't protect her in that way.

Q.

A. She's with a loving, kind family. One that has no denominational beliefs and one that has her placed in the best home I could possibly find. The regret I have is that I am not the type of person to have had a child in the first place.

Q.

A. Oh no! No one from the industry. No, here we're quite professional. No, it was a bit of a mistake on my part. And I'm an intelligent person, but when the body wants what the body wants, whether you've forgotten to take your daily pill or not, well, it's biological, isn't it?

Q.

A. It never crossed my mind, honestly. I'm not against it in any degree, but personally, for me, it wasn't something I considered.

Q.

A. No, I couldn't have her stay with me. That was never a thought, except for when she was born.

Q.

A. It was the best day of my life.

Q.

A. Both.

Q.

A. I've thought about it a bit, but no, I won't be in contact with her. I have a closed adoptive agreement, and I prefer it that way. And as for law school, no I won't go back to that either.

Q.

A. Well, I believe, honestly, that I'm being the best mother I can be by letting her go. No child, no matter how highly I see the industry as family, wants a porn star for a mother. And I believe that I'm being the best defense attorney I can be by letting that go as well. You see, if the client is guilty, you're harming the victim. If the client is innocent, you're playing fast and loose with the fate of his or her life.

Q.

A. In all reality and clarity? Because I'd rather be fucking someone on the screen in my work time instead of fucking up someone in my personal time.

Q.

A. Not at all. I find it best to always be candid.

Q.

A. I'll be wrapping up around the other end of the room, if you're interested in any merchandise.

Q.

A. You may be surprised.

14.) Page Thirteen

She waits for the opportune moment, for the signs to align in what her Cosmo has told her are the behaviors to be watching for. She watches. She waits. Perhaps the touch you gave her on her arm was a movement towards something different and new. Maybe it was the way in which you and she signed the lease, by the way you said (she hoped) lovingly, "Don't worry about it. I'll have my parents co-sign for the two of us."

You bake her a cake on her birthday. Always the same: German chocolate with cream cheese frosting. It is her favorite. The same that she has been given every birthday since she first tried the delectable concoction at her foster mother's third wedding. You remember. That is one of the defining traits on the soulmate questionnaire in the older edition. A man's ability to remember and give presents on special occasions without prompting means that he is, in fact, in love with the woman of whom he is lavishing the attention on. That has been one sign from you that she can check off the list.

And the list is quite long.

You are attentive and caring. The night she had over-indulged, you dabbed her forehead as she heaved into the trash can. When she placed her head on the cold porcelain of the toilet, you were there to hold back her hair, murmuring "Oh honey, it'll be fine. It'll be okay." You give her lavish gifts for Christmas, making sure the wrapping is her preferred color. You are the only one who can discern her proclivity to dark burgundy as opposed to lighter raspberry. The color is particular, and you are the one who understands that is what she prefers. Each year another bouquet of nail polish that she is delighted to unwrap. She keeps the paper from the box, and hoards the bottles once their liquid is gone.

You stay in with her most nights, watching chick flicks and anything else that she fancies. You never complain about her choice in movie. When she asks you what you would prefer, you always answer, "Oh sweetie, it's your choice. You can choose. I don't really have anything in mind." When you leave to go on vacation with his family, you always bring her back memorabilia with her name inscribed on it. Last year it was Hawaii, and you gave her a tiny bottle with "Jane" printed on a small grain of rice. The bottle was warped to act as a magnifying glass, and she often wears it on a necklace when she feels as if she might forget her own name, or when she is in doubt about your relationship. To her observation, you are always thinking of her, and that checks three more categories off the Cosmo list now folded and scattered with ink splotches.

She has met your parents three, maybe four, times. They have always accepted her

company with grace and interest. She knows she has made a decent impression on them, and she has your mother's number in case of need. They send her little cards in the mail and tell her that they are happy she is watching over you. She is content that she has won over the parents. Your introduction of her to the parents crosses off another item on the list. A woman should always be wary of a potential beau who is not willing to introduce her to the family.

She clings to the words you have said to her, the type of phrases you repeats each day: "Jane, what would I do without you?" "Jane, you really understand me. You listen, you know?" "Jane, you're truly a lifesaver. How could I handle (insert problem here) if I was alone?" She knows that you depend on her, and treat her as an equal. Even more so, she sometimes believes from your words that she is the only entity, the sole factor, keeping you from berating yourself to the point of destruction. She knows that she, the Jane in your life, is the only person who stands by you.

And she feels comfortable and at ease scribbling another two points from the list. You open up to her, as a man who is in love with a woman only would. You depend on her and do not prescribe to the notion that men should be strong and stoic and emotionless. As per page twelve, your actions show that you trust her enough to express who you truly are. She is the keeper of your struggles, your problems with peers and your academic stress. Just as you hold her hair when she swears she is inches to death, she holds you when you are hurt, shaking, and crying. The dichotomy of the relationship, she believes, inherently proves the connection that you share.

She knows certain aspects about you, light secrets that you wish to hide from the rest of the world. She has told you the same secrets, of a sort, though you are more forthcoming than she. She understands, via page twenty-six, that she should open her mind and heart fully, but she cannot muster the courage to do so. "Jane, I talk about myself all the friggin' time. Do ya wanna talk about you a bit?" It is a line she has heard from you many times, and a line that she always responds with "No, Alex, everything's fine with me." *Everything's fine with me.* That is what she says because she cannot force herself to endanger the relationship you have built. One or two sentences for her, she supposes, will be catastrophic for the closeness she has struggled to create. She does not gamble on the slight percentage of chance that she could lose what she has already gained.

Now she smooths the crumpled piece of paper and flips it over to its other side. This is the section she dreads, the one that she knows will remain mark-free and isolated. Page thirteen hosts a list of questions about physical intimacy, and it is a page that makes her heart beat and her stomach churn uncomfortably. She feels the organs rage against her, as if hoping to thrash

through her flesh and leave her behind. The sensation is one she feels each day. When you come home after a day at work with your laughter and your smile, you envelop her in an embrace. Her skin prickles at your contact, and a warmth flushes her face and her thighs. She waits each day for this ritual, for the time that she can be engulfed in your smell: lavender detergent, designer eau de toilette, and the damp scent of dishwashing soap. It is *your* scent, and she bottles up the two seconds you allow her each day, and falls asleep with the memory of it in her nostrils.

You have spent six years together. Almost one third of her life has been consumed and consoled by you. She often thinks back on the time you went skinny dipping in the lake, the time you snuck into the R rated movie, the time you spun doughnuts on the country club green in your Jeep Cherokee. You and her are one, and always have been. When she first saw you, she knew. And she still knows today. She knows that you are meant to be together until the end of time. Soulmates, as per the *Cosmo* questionnaire four years ago. She had scored you a ten out of ten on being destined to be a part of one another's life forever. She still has that piece of magazine in her underwear drawer. She has never shown you the article, because it, alongside *Cosmo* page thirteen, has the power to kill everything she has worked to kindle.

And concerning page thirteen, she peeks at the first question and the immediate fear and breakout of sweat commences once more. Sexual intimacy 101 dictates that one must have had sexual intimacy in order to answer the questions. When she first read the article, she did not feel that "physical intimacy" was equivalent to "sexual intimacy," but that is what the writer had, by regarding the questions, meant. She does have physical intimacy with you. The most intimate times in her life have been experienced with you. She would forego the despicable encounter with her first kiss for a night laying on your chest: a sloppy, drooling, face-licking, arm-quaking disaster of a kiss versus listening to the rhythm of your torso raising and lowering her head in a comforting lull. There are nights where she pretends to be scared of an intruder or to be afflicted by a monstrous nightmare in order to be blanketed in the covers with you.

She has tried to kiss you once. When she fights the impulse to declare her love (with *Cosmo* questionnaires in hand as supportive proof) she thinks of that episode. She rationalizes that you were young, that you did not truly know one another as you do now, but the memory still cuts through her like steel and electricity and burning; it is, she surmises, similar to the tactility of a hot drink that scours the mouth, creating pockets of puffed fluid that inevitably warps the taste of anything consumed afterwards. The relationship had barely escaped the throes of that encounter, and Jane would much rather have you in any capacity rather than lose you.

You had been waiting outside of the venue for your Junior prom. You had gone together, as you had decided from first meeting that you were best friends and would, therefore, not place yourselves in the stressful position of asking other students to the events. Two homecomings, two proms, and a Sadie Hawkins dance created the unspoken agreement that you would, and still do, go to socials together. This was the first year she had subscribed to magazines, and she had gone through the prom pointers with great fervor.

Just as she does now. She often wonders why she pays attention, places her faith in these questionnaires, when her perception after the first survey had been disastrous.

You had been swaying and dancing outside of the venue, her in the dark dress she had worked all summer to afford, you with an orchid and baby's breathe boutonniere to match her corsage. You had bought the flowers yourself and you had driven through a fast-food window to get a hot fudge sundae before arriving at the dance. You had made the night a perfection by staying by her side, by pouring her punch, by refusing to dance at the high-amplified songs that made her self-conscious. She had leaned into you, taking in the stars and the alignment of her emotions to the Cosmo article. Her face hovered near yours, and she could see your wide staring eyes as hers closed. Her lips caught the fleshy side of your cheek, and you had said, "Hey, Jane, hey. I'm not... I can't. It's nothing with you. I just... no."

She picks herself up from the bed. The memory of that night has made her hands clammy and her neck damp. She thinks, "We were able to save it, right?" as she goes to the bathroom to apply a cold washcloth to her forehead. You are on a date tonight. It is something you have not done since you first went to college. She cannot forget the excited smile on your face, the strong hug you gave her, the grin she planted on her face to show that she is supportive. She understands that she should be ecstatic for her friend, that you finally have the confidence and the contentment to act on who you truly are. However, she is not able to reconcile her love for you with the person that you seem to be. She is the one who has been there for you, always, not some random person you met at work. She is the one who has turned a blind eye at you using the lacquer you buy her for Christmas, the one who skillfully ignores the Polaroid photos of you and another man at his parents' thirtieth anniversary party.

She takes page thirteen and scribbles through it. Letting the ink saturate the glossy paper, she takes solace in the obstruction of the title, of the questions, of the pictures of happy, laughing couples in the side lines. She tears the questionnaire apart, letting the scraps flit to the floor. It is not enough. She runs to the bathroom and searches for the large scissors you had bought when he decided to cut off your ponytail. They are sharp and cold. As she opens the blades, it is as if the utensil is smiling at her, willing to swallow her whole. She presses down

with her right hand, and she is surprised that she has not started to cry. She is empty, dry.

"Jane! Jane!" your familiar voice calls from the living room.

In her haste she had not heard the lock turn. She had not heard you come in.

"Ye- yeah?!" she yells back, hurriedly putting the scissors back in the drawer.

She runs to the living room, and she can feel the small incision pounding against her vein as her heart beats.

You stand there, bloodied and bruised and squinting from one eye.

"Alex?" She asks.

"He... he," You say, lunging forward and holding her tightly.

You smell of blood and beer and another man's cologne. Not yourself. Not you.

"Jane, what would I do without you?"

She sweeps your hair from the wounds. Without losing hold of your hand, she dampens a washcloth and presses it to your forehead.

"Oh, honey, it'll be fine. It'll be okay," she says.

She places you in your bed after making a cold compress and cleaning the cuts on your face. Tucking you into bed, she lays her head tenderly on your sore ribcage.

"Do ya wanna talk about you a bit?" she asks lightly as you adjust the ice pack and settle into a slow breathing, which will, as it always does, accompany you to the brink of sleep.

15.) Fragments

- 1). First Kiss (Alex)
- 2). Happy Birthday (Tom)
- 3). Sunday Service with a Sister (Leah)
- 4). Effects of the Minuteman Project (Jorge)
- 5). Life without Luvox (Anna)
- 6). Franglais (Aude)
- 7). Al Anon Step Work (Iris)
- 8). The Realization (Millie)
- 9). Importance (Brian)
- 10). The Divorcé (Jack)
- 11). Cat Food (Lizzie)
- 12). Hay Bales (Laura)
- 13). S/W/M Online Profile (Sammy)
- 14). The Execution of Richard Aaron Cobb (Raven)
- 15). Elephants (Jane)

1.) First Kiss

It's wetter than he'd expected. Her hands are shaking and his are trembling. He can feel his fingers chattering on the back of her shoulder. She tastes like watermelon Lip Lickers and double-buttered popcorn. Someone in the audience coughs, and he pulls away from her attacking mouth. His cheeks are moist from her jostling tongue, and he attempts to dry them with the back of his hand. She's smiling at the screen and takes a handful of kernels from the tub. Wiping her oily grip on the lap of her cut-offs, she reaches out to hold his sweating palm.

2.) Happy Birthday

You were supposed to be the game-changer, the person who should have opened the clouds, exposing a ray of angelic sunshine. You were supposed to make me a different person altogether. I hold you in my arms, and your tiny fingers wrap around one of mine. I feel overwhelmed with you, your wrinkled skin and your slick, bald head. I'm afraid of dropping you, afraid of touching you, afraid of *you*. You were guaranteed by our friends and family to make me an adult, a father, a man.

When I pass you back to your mother I'm relieved, and then disappointed that I feel relieved. You were guaranteed to make me proud, make me infatuated. They told me that. The nurse coos that you have my eyes, and as much as I search in the cloudy blue of yours, I can't spot a speck of green. You have your mother's eyes, and I'm disappointed.

You were supposed to create a sense of strength in me, you see. Every person I'd spoken to assured me I'd be secure with my newly created fatherhood. But I'm not, and you're still here, making me nervous, worried, cautious, alert.

Restlessly consumed by you.

3.) Sunday Service with a Sister

We know it's wrong to do, but we can't help ourselves. It's the ripple where the diaphragm convulses, and we avoid eye-contact.

We've done this too many times, and we don't want people to stare, to think that we're being disrespectful. It's not even something we can explain to others.

There is no one true catalyst that causes tears to stream down our faces and mouths to hurt from straightening. Can't help that we - we -

Maybe it's the way that the dark hairs jut from her chin. Or it's the way her jowls jiggle when she strains to reach a high note. We think, maybe, it's her voice itself, the way it shakes and wobbles, a whaaaalalalala whaaaalalala that is almost in cadence to our quivering shoulders.

And we catch one another looking back and forth from her to our knees. The fleeting second, just a glance, increases our fit. It hurts to repress it, and we cling to one another with eyes closed and hands clutched.

The altar-boy spills a little plastic communion cup into Mrs. Gibson's massive lap, and we start all over again.

4.) Effects of the Minuteman Project

Because it is 'Murica, and he is used to the presumption. He scrubs the dishes clean, using the retractable metal spout. The dried salsa sticks to the plates, and the swinging kitchen door opens briefly. He sees the diners with their light, sweating faces breaking tortilla chips, sopping up enchilada sauce with their unblemished fingers and slurping their margaritas through pursed lips. Though perhaps he imagines it, he sometimes feels their eyes on him, and he knows what they are thinking. They do not have to say it, because he has heard it many times before, *pero él es Americano como ellos*.¹

¹ "but he is American like them"

5.) Life without Luvox

Knock, knock, knock, knock. Swish-flick, swish-flick rub. Twice on the door and three times the key in the slot. Never rest the key in the lock. No, no, no, no. Turn the key three times and take it out of the lock. If the door is locked, there is a reason for it to be locked, meaning that danger awaits. An unlocked door means safety. No need to lock a door, no need to worry. The door stays open.

Make sure the keyboard is clean and disinfected. Clean keys click better, and the click, click of the keys is what makes work. Tap, tap, click, click, tap. Work that needs to be done. Work that should not be saved. Saved work means something might happen to the computer, that it is inevitable that the computer will break or be stolen. Do not save work except to desktop, and it shows confidence in the computer's function and existence. The file remains on the desktop.

Take a break from the work and have a cigarette, or four. Four cigarettes per day times a box of twenty equals one box every five days. 10 a.m. 2 p.m. 6 p.m. 10 p.m. Ten to ten in a beautiful arc of systematic perfection. Ignore calls and/or any other obligations if they interfere with the schedule. Beware of the rare day spent elsewhere, as full body panic will attack if one of these time periods are missed or foiled by another.

Because the presence of dead skin brings microscopic mites to the bed, full body cleansing must be carried out before bed. Lather, rinse, exfoliate, lather, exfoliate, lather, rinse. Sleeping in dead piles of sloughed off skin, and sharing a bed with flesh-eating invisible creatures do not lead to a good night's sleep. Count all mistakes made within the day in order to drift off.

Repeat, repeat, repeat, repeat, until breathing is an achievable feat and the heart has settled to a respectable 88 beats per minute.

6.) Franglais

When I am angry, I want food. When you look funny, it is a compliment. When I have thirty years today, wish me a happy birthday. When you miss me, I miss you. When he's a good one, I mean the wine. And please, when I ask for a medium steak, bring it to me rare.

7.) Al Anon Step Work

- 1.) I am powerless over it, but I still have power over him in a financial sense.
- 2.) No matter how much I try, my Higher Power does not seem to be listening to me, nor does he.
- 3.) I have turned myself over to the Power, but I wish he would turn himself over as well.
- 4.) I can fearlessly say that I am flawed, and that if I had been better, he would not be the way he is.
- 5.) I have admitted everything to the Power, to my psychologist, to my friends, my family, my church, my neighbors, and him, though he says it makes him feel guilty.
- 6.) Since I was young, I have been willing to have these defects removed.
- 7.) With that, removing a shortcoming seems somewhat oxymoronic.
- 8.) The list of those I have harmed consists of one name, him.
- 9.) After two tries at making amends with him and having his bedroom door shut in my face, I feel I am doing more harm than good.
- 10.) I am wrong; I am wrong; I am wrong.
- 11.) I pray to the Power that he will get better, that he will get a job, that he will move out of my house and take care of his responsibilities, but it has not been answered in the ten years I have asked.
- 12.) I carry this over to all mothers who have a junkie for a son and a pit in the stomach that I, that we, could have done better.

8.) The Realization

As the ice cream begins to melt in the oven, and you cannot, for the life of you, remember where you put the roast turkey.

9.) Importance

He has come to the understanding that the bubbling feeling he experiences each time his wife greets him after he finishes work is jealousy. The concept of such an emotion has evaded him for months. He should be content in his nine to five. He should feel pride and accomplishment at counting up the columns of numbers and solving an array of tidy mathematical problems. At lunch time, he joins his male colleagues at the restaurant down the street, and they enjoy comforting meals chosen from the menu, though they leave his palate lacking. He knows his wife provides cuisine leaps and bounds above what the restaurant has to offer. On Mondays and Fridays, they indulge in an afternoon cocktail before returning to the office. He has the choice of eat, the choice of drink, and the company of peers who guffaw and cheer at his wit.

Truly he does not do as many spreadsheets per day as he is capable of doing. It is an office policy to pace oneself, otherwise the corporate office may feel the need to raise quotas. He spends the days restraining himself, knowing that he has the rest of his life to get through the infinite leaflets and charts, the scrawling figures and graphs; yet every five o'clock chime leaves him empty inside, and he packs his carrier bag with the daily paper and bits of scraps to take home.

Sometimes he pretends that he has a deadline, or has an extra account from the boss. He sits in his armchair while his wife creates another inventive dinner. He blinks at the figures and plays at sorting them out. In reality, he is envious that she has the ability, the freedom, to construct something from her imagination, from her own whim and skill, while he sits in the chair and pretends to be important.

10.) The Divorcé

You don't mean to do it, because she really has been the love of your life. Sure, ups and downs, but more highs than lows. She's given you kids, completed the picture... and you just never pictured yourself that sort of person; but when the skin starts drooping and the wrinkles begin to sprout like angry, tawny spider webs on the crinkles of her eyes, you know the end is near.

11.) Cat Food

My sister left the lights on again, and she is nowhere to be found. Her cat has pissed on the carpet floor. He is glaring at me with his illuminated yellow eyes.

And she has not bought food... again.

I scrape my dinner remnants from a box and slide it into her cat's bowl. He continues to stare at me in, what I can only imagine, is both disgust and disappointment that I am here, and not her.

He does not allow me near him, so I do not allow him near me. I slide open the drawer where we keep our utility and rent cash. It is empty.

And her cat has turned his nose up at my leftovers, so I shoo him from the bowl.

I place it on the table and begin to eat.

12.) Hay Bales

We watch the farmers scoop the great, round masses. Over they turn, crunching grey prairie grass against golden spirals. Our backs are bronzed, our cherubic faces crowned with summer haircuts; hers is white as salt and mine is coppered brown and green from chlorine. The balers rumble off in their rusty metal cages, leaving our hearts beating in solitary anticipation.

"This row here, Liz-Liz," she shouts, commanding us through the prickly grass.

We sprint, our tiny bare feet weathered and tough. No need for her sandals or my sneakers. They lay abandoned at the back of our deck. Reaching the monstrous row of bale circles, I gaze in awe and trepidation. She runs ahead and taps the first bundle, scrutinizing its possibilities.

"Come on, Liz-Liz!" she cries, beckoning me with her skinny arms.

We touch the racked hay together, skimming our fingertips over the thin metal entrapments. Placing her hands at the middle of the bale, she envelops my bare, cracked heel in her hands and lifts me up. Without needing, or perhaps wanting, my aid, the muscles of her tiny biceps bulge as she flings her legs over and up.

We are at the precipice of the first in a long row.

"Watch out for the gaps when you jump," she says, pointing to the space between the bales. "Follow me, so's it's safe."

We leap, one after another, across the dormant wheels, and I do feel safe, watching her, following her.

13.) S/W/M¹ Online Profile

Me: M/B/F² Searching for: discrete chat with M/F/T³ any age, any race, S/G/B⁴ for conversation. . If you want to chat about work/kids/friends/relationships/etc. I'm open to that to. My stats: BBW,⁵ 40E,⁶ large hips and a nice behind ;) Online only!!! am a private person, and looking for someone to talk to and laugh with (lol.)⁷ tell me what your into,, and we can get a convo going. am open to vanilla⁸ talk. LIKES: light fetish aka dabbling in BDSM⁹ (dom¹⁰ major but can be switch and/or top from the bottom sub.)¹¹ am open to sugestions and am VERY openminded in anything a bit more OUT THERE (watersports¹² and scat¹³ etc.) cuz we'll be sticking to cyber. open to all and any person. I don't descriminate! If things go good, maybe we can shoot for a longterm cybership. No ads, pls.¹⁴

¹ Single white male

² Married black female

³ Male/female/trans

⁴ Straight/gay/bisexual

⁵ Big beautiful/black woman

⁶ Bra size (40 inch band, E cup size)

⁷ Laugh out loud

⁸ Non-fetish/normal

⁹ Bondage/domination/sadism/masochism

¹⁰ Dominant (sadist)

¹¹ Submissive that controls the encounter with a dominant

¹² Urine play

¹³ Fecal play

¹⁴ Please

14.) The Execution of Richard Aaron Cobb

The room is cold, quite a shock from the outside summer heat. The examining table is outstretched, empty handcuffs stiffly jutting towards the ceiling. They bring him in, and he shuffles forward, his legs and arms tied together. He is balding now, the tufts of hair from eleven years of imprisonment have thinned. It is as if a halo of dirty blonde hair crowns his head, with the shining bulb of his scalp creating the light.

His eyes are dull blue, or green, or grey. It is difficult to tell from the other side of the glass where we wait. He does not struggle when he is placed on the cot; his eyes open, always open. The mint-green fabric below the condemned man is covered by the bulk of his body. The doctor swabs his arms with alcohol and inserts the IV. I wonder why they bother sterilizing the equipment. The sodium thiopental will soon be flowing, and the man's eyes stare up to the imagined sky.

"Your last words?" the warden asks.

"Life is too short to harbor feelings of anger and pain. That's it, Warden."

And the drugs flow through.

And within seconds he is speaking again, and I feel the hair stick up from the back of my neck.

"Wow!" he says, staring at the warden, "That is great! That is awesome! Thank you fucking Warden!"

His drops his head once more on the gurney table with a dull thud of skull against material. For the first time, his head turns to the viewing window. His eyes stare at me, open, wide, and void; his mouth open in mild surprise.

15.) Elephants

We walk through the zoo gardens, hand-in-hand as we watch the bees flit around the dabs of purple, pink, and red lining the path. The sun shines in our eyes, and he shields me from its rays with his tall stature. I bask in the shadow he casts on me, careless and free to plod along. My mind is blank with happiness.

I see the pen close by; it is one that I have waited for. Never mind the exotic marmosets and boas, the colorful flamingos and surly crocodiles; this is what I have waited to see. My pulse beats uncomfortably in his hand. I clutch his palm so tightly, and I look down to see my grip is ghostly white. I have longed for them, dreamed of them, waited to touch them. The grey masses sway like smoke in the horizon.

I see them, now, growing closer and greater. Their heads sway from side to side as if saying *No, we don't want any visitors here. Let us be.* I want to barge in, a lonely stranger in their company.

We walk through the designated gateway, hand-in-hand, mine sweating with anticipation at the greatness of what we are to see. We give our salutations to the keeper, who lets us in with a beckoning wave of his hand. We are now at the crux of greatness, at the peak of all I have wanted. We are face to face with the fantastic creatures who think like us, live like us, die like us.

I watch as he sets his music player for them to hear. They listen, and their heads bob up to the tempo. One sets his trunk on the top of the railing, both sniffing me and keeping rhythm simultaneously. I bring my hand out slowly to touch him, and he allows me to touch him. Keeping in time, we perform a small, swaying dance. His eyes are deep and brown, so like mine.

We decide it is time to leave. We let them alone, to be by themselves as their surely 'no' shaking heads demand.

I look back. My dancing partner pierces me with his gaze, eyes glistening through his cage.

V. Narrative Perspectives in Practice

i. First-person Narration

The short fiction I construct in the first-person deviates from the particular form of first-person narration commonly associated with narrative empathy. That is to say, with first-person prose the common assumption is that the narrator is the empathetic character.³¹ Keen points out that "narrative theorists, novel critics, and reading specialists have already singled out a small set of narrative techniques – such as the use of first-person narration" amongst others, which are "devices supporting character identification, contributing to empathetic experiences" (Keen 2006, 213); however, Keen also suggests that designated narrative techniques are not guaranteed to evoke empathy. I take into account the writing technique of first-person narration as a device for alienation and unreliability, which could then invite empathy for a character in the story apart from the narrator. In "Polaris", I demonstrate the possibility of empathy for the narrator in first-person perspective. In my other pieces, I look to potentially alienating first-person narrators in "The Impersonator" and "The Last Dinner" to create, through writing technique, a possible disconnection from the narrator. In "Visitors' Day", I experiment with the creation of an unreliable narrator. By shaking trust, the writing might affect empathetic connection as well.³² Finally, I investigate the use of a first-person plural narration in both short-short stories, "Sunday Service with a Sister" and "Hay Bales", and an interchanging first-person plural and singular narration in "Elephants", to see how the use of the pronoun "we" can affect the perception of the characters.

Through first-person narration in "Polaris", the protagonist's (Anna's) emotions are expressed. The writing presents her point of view, both as a child and as a young adult. By using this type of narration in the creative writing, there is potential access to first-hand experiences, though these experiences might be perceived as artificial (as constructed through the writing technique). The prose introduces Anna's retrospection through her thoughts. For example, she states, "at that time, I believed that he was responding in agreement to my profession of choice. Later, I would find that he was amused with the simplicity of my dreams"

³¹ Keen considers David Lodge's suggestion that "the preference for first person narrative voice" is brought on by a state of uncertainty and that what Lodge refers to as "the single human voice, telling its own story, can seem the only authentic way of rendering consciousness" (Keen 2006, 220), though Keen states that this "single human voice" is not the only way that first-person narrative voice can be implemented, and that first-person narration is not definitively considered to evoke empathy.

³² Vera Nünning states that "the representation of [unreliable narrators'] strange ways of perceiving, interpreting and evaluating can be regarded as a means of de-familiarization" (Nünning 2015, 87). This de-familiarisation can distance the unreliable character.

(79). Here, through the first-person narration, child Anna and adult Anna both experience and narrate. Writing "I" instead of "she" could create a closer bond with the character, as the writing presents Anna's personal explanations.

Another aspect of a writer using first-person narration as a device to evoke empathy is the influence of the narrator's voice. In this way, information is gained about the narrator's relationships with other characters through the voice of the narrator. By using Anna's voice, the differing relationships she has with family members is signified.³³ Her mother is referred to by her first name, "Aude", whereas her father is called "my dad". This represents the emotional distance between Anna and her mother, and suggests a warmth between Anna and her father. This is further expanded upon with the name of her sister, Elyse, whom she often nicknames "Lysee" and "Lyse".³⁴ In the second part of the story, it becomes clear through the writing that her closest relationship is to her sister through their interaction and use of nicknames.

Finally, the correlation between the child Anna and the young adult Anna's experiences with a summer evening is represented through the use of the first-person narration. In this way, the emotions and senses of the night Anna has with her family intact can resonate through the piece. Because the experiences of the evening are represented through child Anna's voice, the prose shows what Anna has lost in the second part of the story. There is a difference of effect, therefore, between Anna's statements, "And jars can be smashed so easily. And jars hurt"(82), and a third-person narration, "And Anna thought that jars can be smashed so easily. She thought that jars hurt." In this case, there is a potential disconnection from the character when her opinions are stated in the third-person. The strength of her voice is represented by the writing technique of first-person narrative. Because of this representation, the writing might be able to create empathy with both the pleasure of a simple night and the elimination of this simplicity through the loss of naivety.

A second form of first-person narrative analysed in "II. Narrative Perspectives and Empathy in Short Fiction" is the use of an arguably alienating narrator in order to evoke the emotional response for another character or situation. Both "The Impersonator" and "The Last Dinner" experiment with the notion of an alienating protagonist, but do so in different ways. In

³³ This is similar to Saunders' story, "Sticks", in which the narrator refers to family in the light of his own perception of his relationships with both his sister and his father. As in "Sticks", Anna refers to her mother in a different tone than she refers to her sibling.

³⁴ Carol Bruess' anthropological study shows the positive correlation between nicknames and relationship closeness, and she states that "a relationship is a 'mini-culture' unto itself, reinforced by rituals such as nicknames and other private language" (Landau 2015). Therefore, the lack of connection between Anna and her mother suggests a lack of emotional connection.

creating these stories, I experiment with what may and may not be accepted to potentially foster an empathetic response to another aspect of the story. Discussed previously, the first-person narration can become alienating if the protagonist is not necessarily a moral character (as in "Semplica-Girl Diaries"); however, this is subjective in that individual experience leads to varying interpretations of texts. Therefore, the assumption of a character being moral is based on the writer's perspective and aims for the writing. Although the text is open to interpretation, the writer nonetheless has a perspective and aims, which she tries to express through the writing. In "The Impersonator", the writing presents the protagonist as potentially arrogant and condescending, whereas in "The Last Dinner", the protagonist is depicted as brash and as using harsh language.³⁵

In "The Impersonator", the fretful tone of Aude, the protagonist, is presented in the writing. The first-person narration permits me to represent Aude's self-questioning in a specific way, in this case in a constructed snide and sharp manner. This directness can also be present in third-person indirect discourse, however the use of the first-person accentuates the character's self-absorption and narcissism. The writing shows her precise train of thought, and could either become alienating by her forceful opinions or can lead to suspicion of the artist's intent. When she states, "Maybe I cannot see her depth, her production of something mundane and certainly of the expressionist era. Perhaps, as I had resolved many months ago, she is merely an impersonator" (84), this opens the choice to either believe Aude's supposition or to be wary of her perception. At this moment, it is conceivable that the narrator is reliable; however, as the story continues, her voice becomes more judgmental and she begins to attempt to convince herself of a truth that might be inexistent. She says, "I know she has stolen the congruency of linear angles and the subsequent breaking of these angles by others. She *must have*" (84). The placement of stress by italicising "must have" along with her statement, "I would wonder if perhaps there was something going on between the two" creates an air of tension. When the other artist, Iris, is introduced, I attempted to create a character that contrasts with Aude. Juxtaposed with Iris' timidity and humble personality, Aude's narrative voice could then be interpreted as overbearing.

When Aude's sculpture is revealed, her inner-monologue is interrupted by the art instructor's questions. Aude thinks, "My creation has shed the light on the imposters, those who have not a singular bone of inspiration or unconventional tendency in their bodies. It shows

³⁵ In "II. Narrative Perspectives and Empathy in Short Fiction", I argue that a writer can create distance through the protagonist's thoughts and opinions.

that -" (88), but before she is able to complete her thought, the instructor questions the title "A Clothed in a Nude's World". This is the only point in the story where Aude's thoughts and speech are interrupted. The narrative here expresses her detachment from the reality of the situation. She, in turn, does not let Iris speak, instead retreating to her perceived reality. My specific application of the first-person narration has the potential to alienate Aude's character, instead creating the possibility of empathy towards Iris and her situation. As Aude becomes identified as increasingly unreliable, Iris' feelings towards Aude's actions are expressed.

"The Last Dinner" takes the premise of writing a possibly alienating first-person narrator and uses it to create an unpleasant character (in relation to the writer's perspective). In this story, I explore the empathetic emotions of disgust and horror at a situation. The protagonist, Sammy, displays a first-person narration that is directed at someone, as he occasionally uses the "you" pronoun; however, he also is vague as to who the letter is for. He states, "I guess if I'm writing this for myself a presumed audience would neither know nor care" (121), yet he continues to attempt to justify his actions. In this way, I use first-person narration to create a secondary character that is either non-existent, a particular entity, or the reader him or herself. Jonathan Clark states, "a diary creates a need in the world for our own stories to be told, even if that need is invented. What emerges though, no matter how lonely the enterprise, is complete honesty, a naked intimacy that amounts, for a novelist, to *access*, to a full immersion into their creation's mind" (Clark 2016). Using the first-person narration through diary (as with "Semplica-Girl Diaries") can create an intimacy, even if this intimacy results in alienation. This writing technique could create a relationship with the narrator, and the writerly intent is to acknowledge the reader as a participant.

The story takes the epistolary form of a written diary entry, and Sammy's vocabulary, expressions, and spelling all contribute to the shaping of his character. He uses colloquial and vulgar phrases such as "cokewhore", "splif", "art-eest(!)" and "wifeys" which could be considered socially unacceptable, depending on varying backgrounds of both the writer and the reader. As a writer, I attempt to create a character whose language would be less than acceptable to a general American audience.³⁶ His misspellings and corrections of misspellings "presperating" and "repulsivity" show that he is aware of his mistakes, which implies that Sammy knows when he needs to be corrected and when he is doing wrong. Also, the inclusion of internet chat conversations portrays the way in which he interacts with Raven. Though he

³⁶ This might be connected to the FCC and curse words allowed on American television and throughout other forms of American media.

might normally "sneer" at punctuation errors, his embrace of Raven's typing suggests that he is willing to overlook certain incorrect actions when pertaining to her, stating "she was willing to put her little <3 into mine, and no one had done that in quite some time" (123). With the inclusion of the emoticon, Sammy has changed his opinion on online grammar and punctuation. Through these representations, the prose shows that Sammy is willing to break protocol.

By including questions like "Is it monstrous, disgusting?" and then attempting to justify his actions, Sammy's awareness of his actions is solidified. Even Sammy's description of himself - "I've become so grossly, terribly, without-an-excuse-for-it fat I haven't seen my dick in what seems like forever without the aid of a mirror and some tucking of hardened gut that disgusts me to touch" - (122) is implemented to deter empathising with him. Demeaning himself could dissuade empathy, although depending on the prior background of writer and reader, it could also elicit a connection as Sammy is being forthright and honest about his appearance.

The ultimate depths to which the narrator has broken away from societal expectations is revealed at the end of the story through Sammy's disappointment and distress that he has "let her gone cold". It is here where the first-person narration shows the self-involved nature of Sammy's mind. Instead of mourning the fact that Raven is dead, his last phrases are "I can't consume her cold ankles. I can't" (125).³⁷ The emphasis on "I" rings through, and Sammy's focus is on losing the part of Raven that led to his obsession. Once it is understood that Sammy has cannibalised Raven, the empathetic response could be towards the potential reader of the diary entries in the story.³⁸ Feelings of disgust or horror as an empathetic reaction to the situation are at the forefront of my creation of the story. It is also interesting to examine the possibility of disgust cultivating interest in the content of the story. Dadlez states that a "peculiar relation of dependency can exist between disgust and fascination" (Dadlez 2016, 56). Sammy's abhorrent actions could create a sense of fascination, and a connection to the story through experiencing the disgust of the journal-reader.

The reliability (or unreliability) of a narrator is not necessarily an indicator of possible empathetic connection in first-person narrative fiction. Aude is unreliable in "The Impersonator", and the writing indicates a possible struggle to empathise with her. Sammy is

³⁷ This carries on the theme of "The Semplica-Girl Diaries", in that both narrative characters in the first-person are ambivalent to the harm they have caused other characters.

³⁸ There are many questions relating to the epistolary format and identification. Janet Altman asks of epistolary text, "With whom does the reader identify – writer, addressee, or editor – and what are the determinants of reader identification?" (Altman 1982, 193). Because I have used the first-person narration to separate the narrator, the addressee would remain the most likely identifier, and as the addressee is unspecified, the writing format could place the reader in the position of the addressee.

reliable in "The Last Dinner", yet the writing's portrayal of the character and his voice/actions might hinder an empathetic connection. In "Visitors' Day", I experiment with the possibility of an empathetic connection with an unreliable narrator. In fact, the unreliability is used as the catalyst for potential empathy for both the narrator and the other character.

The use of first-person narrative in "Visitors' Day" delves into the emotions and the stream of consciousness of Mildred, the protagonist and narrator. The presumed time period is set with her mentioning the "rationing of my Tangee Natural" and "browning my legs", as well as multiple references to World War II. The writing does not give an indication that her narration is untrustworthy, and therefore encourages Mildred's statements and thoughts as reliable. Because of this, the dialogue and interactions between Mildred and 'Brian' could be taken at face value. This is imperative to the way that the story is written, as Mildred's perception (though it is false) is true to her. When the dialogue shows her conversation, the narration should be written as reliable in order to eventually feel empathy for the characters. Here, not only can empathy be felt for the narrator, but also for the grandson. I have implemented an unreliable first-person narrator who might be understood (emotionally), yet also have created an opportunity for an additional emotional attachment to the secondary character through writing choices.

It is not until Mildred ponders, "I am not sure of it, but he seems like a different person. The stature is wrong, his arms are skinny and his hair is mussed, not smooth like Brian's always is" (100), that the prose represents Mildred's confusion. When it is revealed that Mildred is the young man's grandmother, and that they are in a contemporary setting, the writing conveys a similar shock as Mildred has experienced. The recognition of her "papery and wrinkled" knuckles relays the reality of her situation through first-person observation writing technique. Also, the conversation between Mildred and her grandson can be reconsidered, knowing now that the grandson acted out the characterisation of Brian for his grandmother's benefit. The grandson's resolve and understanding of Mildred's condition, along with his compassionate actions, add another layer of emotion through the writing.

The final first-person narrative style employed is the first-person plural, which are present in my short-short stories "Sunday Service with a Sister", "Hay Bales", and "Elephants". In this case, I engage varying techniques (from an unwavering first-person plural narration, to a first-person singular focusing on the first-person plural pronoun, to an alternating first-person plural and singular structure). Each of these choices is used in constructing possibilities for writing empathy. These techniques have not been explored in depth, especially concerning the differences between first-person plural narration and first-person singular narration. By

experimenting with the varying narrative voices, I can identify multiple uses of first-person narration that relate to writing empathy for characters.

In "Sunday Service with a Sister", the narrator(s) could be considered a first-person plural voice through the writing. The thoughts and emotions of the characters referred to as "we" are fused, refusing individuality. Examples of this collectiveness are "we don't want people to stare" and "we think, maybe, it's her voice itself" (Sunday Service). Each time the narrator(s) refer to "we", the action or thought afterwards does not discriminate as to character. One outcome of this narrative voice is that the writing presents a collective narration. Perhaps it is easier to connect with and feel the inescapable convulsions of laughter if he or she experiences a sense of belonging within the narration through the writing of the piece. Throughout the short-short story, and ending with the last phrase "we start all over again" (140), first-person plural narrative is influential to perception. This represents an understanding of both the suppression of laughter and the struggle to do so.

"Hay Bales" implements the concept of the first-person plural narrator, yet deviates from the style used in "Sunday Service with a Sister" in that the narration is pointedly singular whilst referring to the plural "we". This is seen from the first paragraph as the narrator is identified: "Our backs are bronzed, or cherubic faces crowned with summer haircuts; hers is white as salt and mine is coppered brown and green from chlorine" (149). "Mine" is an indication that, whilst the two characters are experiencing a similar situation, there is limitation to the perception of only one of the characters. The narrator (Liz-Liz) can only assume what the other character is thinking and experiencing. Liz-Liz refers to the other character as "without needing, or perhaps wanting, my aid" and "feasibly scrutinizing its possibilities" (149). Both of these statements relay the narrator's uncertainty as to the other character's thoughts. Through this, Liz-Liz's perception of the other character (who remains unnamed though gendered, with her emotions and actions open to interpretation) is represented. The hay bales and the setting are not necessarily universally relatable, but the relationship between Liz-Liz and the other character, as sisters, may be. The writing shows Liz-Liz's feeling of safety (more than he or she might understand the other character's feeling of adventure or perhaps protectiveness) as the narrator's viewpoint and has been shut out from the other character's position.

Finally, "Elephants" has a pattern of first-person plural and singular perspectives, but is heavily weighted with a first-person singular narrative. I use the varying patterns of narration in order to show the eventual disconnection the protagonist has from his or her partner, and the possible empathetic reaction to the subject, the elephant. With this situation, I attempt to direct

empathy towards a character other than a human, and use both singular and plural first-person perspective as a way to break from the collective "we", thus transitioning into the singular "I".

The use of the repetitive phrases in every other paragraph, "We walk through the zoo gardens, hand-in-hand" and "We walk through the designated gateway, hand-in-hand" (152) shows the plurality of the narrator and his or her partner as well as the narrator's inclusion into the partner's group. Though the narrator's emotions are represented through his or her voice before seeing the elephant (e.g. I have longed for them, dreamed of them, waited to touch them) his or her thoughts always return to the plural "we"; however, after he or she interacts with the elephant, the first-person plural pronoun disappears. Instead, the similarities of the narrator and the elephant are introduced, as the narrator muses "His eyes are deep and brown, so like mine" (152). By this point, there exists a disconnection from the narrator's partner and a focus on the interaction between the narrator and the elephant. With the phrase "so like mine", there may be an empathetic response to the elephant, as the elephant becomes somewhat anthropomorphised. Finally, the last sentence does not focus on the first-person plural "we" that commences the story, but instead exhibits a first-person singular account of the narrator and the elephant. When the narrator states, "my dancing partner pierces me with his gaze, eyes glistening through his cage", the prose, having deviated from the collective pluralised viewpoint, has a greater ability to develop empathy not only for the elephant, but also for the narrator who is exhibiting empathy.

These stories explore various ways in which the first-person narrative perspective can influence empathy. Whether the narrator is meant to foster a connection with a character, or whether the narrator's negative traits can be used to influence a connection with another character apart from the narrator, the first-person perspective offers diverse possibilities for a writer's use in creating potential for empathy (through both character identification and character alienation). The reliability (or un-reliability) of the narrator is taken into account, and the first-person narration can create an opportunity to use an unreliable character that can foster an empathetic response either for the unreliable narrator or for another character within the story. Other styles of first-person narration are considered as well, such as plural narration and plural and singular narration. The use of "we" in these stories investigates the effect of the first-person plural, and therefore the possibility of a connection to a character and/or situation. This relates to Keen's observation examined in the Introduction that constructing an empathic character can rely on the capacity of the written text to create an open avenue in connection with a character.

ii. Second-person Narration

My choices in the second-person narrative fiction are influenced by Fludernik's list of techniques involving the second-person in writing to create empathy. These are: an epistolary, "you" as the protagonist, "you" as the narrator, and "you" as the audience. I have used and expanded on these techniques in my creation of second-person narratives in my creative writing. Additionally, I have included the possibility for referential slither and will discuss the effects that it can have on empathy.³⁹ "Dear Tom" is written in an epistolary format, with "you" referring directly to another character. Another form not mentioned by Fludernik is utilised in "Page Thirteen" in which, similar to the epistolary format, "you" is a specific character, whilst the narrator and protagonist is written in a third-person narrative form, "she". In "The Opposite Is Desire", the "you" character is both the protagonist and the narrator. I refer to three of my short-short stories that experiment with the second-person narrative form: "Life without Luvox", which is constructed in an imperative voice, omitting the pronoun "you", "The Realization", with "you" as the protagonist and/or as the audience, and "The Divorcé", whose protagonist is "you".

In "Dear Tom", the protagonist, Alex, shows an immediate emotional connection to Tom by addressing him directly. Because of the epistolary design of the piece, the narration lends itself to confronting Tom with emotions and thoughts that were not said aloud and could not be expressed due to the personality of the protagonist, and it is not known whether the letter was delivered or not. The second-person narrative creates the expression of Alex's feelings for Tom through the use of the "you" pronoun with phrases such as "you ruined me the day you walked through the door" (57), "You didn't *creep*, you dove" (57), and "You made me an obsessed creeper" (60). These three examples are instances of Alex addressing "you" (Tom) in regards to what Tom has done to affect Alex's behaviour. For example, by saying "you ruined me", the text shows the direct effect of Tom's actions on Alex's frame of mind.⁴⁰

The use of second-person narration to create gender neutrality in this piece works to hinder a preconceived bias towards the protagonist's sexuality. Due to a hegemonic of heteronormativity, there is an assumption that the protagonist is female throughout the text. As such, the reversal at the climax tests and expands the capacity for empathy. This builds upon Keen's

³⁹ The tendency for second-person narration to apply to the narrator, the character, and the reader simultaneously.

⁴⁰ This echoes Davis' "Selfish" in that the narrator interacts with the "you" character. For example, Davis writes "You must be very selfish" (Davis 2009b, 441) as an apparent instruction to the audience, where Alex communicates to Tom through his letter. In both cases, the referential slither can create a connection to the story.

discussion of ambassadorial strategic empathy, in that it might prove easier to empathise with a non-normative character if the character is firstly considered a part of a normative community.

The elision of gendered pronouns is never abandoned throughout the piece. It is only Tom's expletive remark, "What? You thought I was some sort of fucking faggot?" (61), that discloses Alex's true gender. In addition, this sentence reverses the second-person perspective briefly. In this case "you" refers to Alex, whilst "I" refers to Tom. This is written intentionally, as the accusatory tone attached to "you" (Tom) throughout the piece is thus transposed onto the "you" (Alex) of Tom's reactive outburst. The negative connotation of "you" in the work is represented, and having Alex referred to as "you" by Tom carries over the negativity of the pronoun. Tom feels angered and disgusted by Alex, not only through his vulgar phrases but also through the reversed use of "you". The ambiguity of pronoun relation reduces bias and opens a wider opportunity to empathise with Alex. The construction of Alex as a second-person narrator provides an outlet to experience Alex's emotions without the judgment or negative influence that could be caused by Alex's sexual or gender identification.

Similar to "Dear Tom", "Page Thirteen"'s protagonist, Jane, interacts with the "you" character. I use second- and third-person narrative to experiment with the emotional connections made possible by referring to the protagonist in the third-person whilst addressing the other character in the second-person. The construction is introduced in the sentence, "Perhaps the touch you gave her on her arm was a movement towards something different and new" (132). At this moment, the writing positions the belief that the "you" in the story could either be in relation to the reader or to a character. This can create a connection between the "you" character in a way in which "Dear Tom" does not, as Alex cast the "you" character in a negative light, which affects the degree to which the "you" character of Tom might be empathetic. This is an example of Jarmila Mildorf's statement that "*you*-narration in conversational storytelling does not address the point 'this is what happened' but rather 'this is what I think you felt and this is what it was like for me'" (Mildorf 2013: 190). "Page Thirteen" uses this construct in an attempt to show what the protagonist felt and how the "you" character has affected her.

The "you" character's name in "Page Thirteen" is not given until the third page of the story. By this point, an emotional connection may already exist with the "you" character. One example of this in the narrative is: "It is a line she has heard from you many times, and a line that she always responds with "'No, Alex, everything's fine with me.' *Everything's fine with me.* That is what she says because she cannot force herself to endanger the relationship you have

built" (133). Third-person narration is interrupted by first-person emphasis "me", and continues to include second-person plural "you" (referring to Jane and Alex). The jumble of perspective represents the conflict in Jane's mind and the complications of the inclusion of a definitive character, Alex.

Although Jane does not want to accept that Alex is, in fact, gay, the writing infers this conclusion. There are instances where Jane refuses to alter her impression of Alex, as she is the one who "turned a blind eye at you using the lacquer you buy her for Christmas, the one who skilfully ignores the polaroid photos of you and another man at his parents' thirtieth anniversary party" (135). As Alex's position is shown, and as Jane becomes a somewhat unreliable narrator, an empathetic response could be present with both Jane and Alex. This could vary in relation to personal experience (e.g. a person who has had feelings for someone who does not or cannot feel the same might empathise with Jane, whereas a person who has had a friend that does not wholly accept a platonic relationship might empathise with Alex).⁴¹

The crux of the emotional association comes both from Jane's decision to harm herself and from the attack on Alex. Jane is saved from her mental breakdown and skewed perception of the relationship by stepping away from her anguish to take care of Alex the way Alex has always taken care of her. Jane's denial is broken, as she thinks, "You smell of blood and beer and another man's cologne. Not yourself. Not you" (136). Alex is no longer the "you" she has been speaking of throughout the story (the "soulmate"). This is a turning point in the story, as Jane becomes what Alex needs (and perhaps thought) her to be, his friend, as she asks him the question he has asked her many times before, "Do ya wanna talk about you a bit?" (136), which shows that she has ended her perpetual state of thinking of Alex's actions only regarding herself. In this way, Jane can be empathised with (possibly with pride or relief) as it is shown through the text that Alex's character has Jane's support.

"The Opposite Is Desire" works with the more negative aspects of empathetic reaction. As stated in the introduction, empathy takes many forms and is not restricted to positive emotions (as with "The Last Dinner" and "The Impersonator"). In this story, I utilise an overdramatic situation (from my perspective) not commonly experienced by a general contemporary audience to see how an emotional response might be encouraged, or if the story suggests Keen's category of bounded strategic empathy, which could be problematic for writing an empathetic character. Bounded strategic empathy is defined by Keen as "a position of

⁴¹ As Meskin and Weinberg state, "we have emotional reactions to fictions because we are using our own belief box to model the beliefs of some other being" (Meskin and Weinberg 2003, 29).

'mutuality,' where the reader recognizes a shared experience" (Utell 2016, 157). Therefore, the unusual situation of the protagonist might be easier related to by others who have had a similar experience.

Writing in the second-person narrative and protagonist format can create a connection to the mind of the unnamed narrator. Through dialogue (both inner and spoken) the narrator's situation is presented. This is similar to Wallace's "Forever Overhead" in that the "you" voice is describing the protagonist. Both physical and emotional experiences of the characters are portrayed through the writing perspective, and therefore could create an emotional connection to the narrator. The question is whether the choice of narration and the use of the "you" form create the possibility for an empathetic connection, or if the subject matter and the closeness to the "you" character cause the story to become over-sensationalised, therefore causing a possible lack of empathy.⁴²

On the first page, the mentality of the protagonist rings through:

- about the slaves, the people who had not been paid for this. They had not been given the choice. Their masters with their cat-o-nines ripped flesh until their backs ran red. Not having a safe word to yell out when enough was enough. Never being able to say "no" and be heeded. This is your decision. You have agreed to this. And with each slash of the whip, you smile, knowing you are punishing yourself. (113)

On one hand, there might be a connection to the protagonist through the relentless second-person speech in the second part of the excerpt. The situation might not be one that is familiar, but a propensity to understand the emotions felt by the protagonist through the "you" identifier could be cultivated by this writing technique. On the other hand, the protagonist's talk of the "slaves", justifying her pain in relation to theirs, might alienate depending on one's background. This is a representation of writing over-identification through the protagonist's voice and personality. A judgment of the protagonist might exist (as the protagonist does not have a first-hand experience with slavery), therefore hindering a connection with the protagonist (e.g. the notion "she can't understand what slaves felt" might lead to "I can't understand what she feels"). Another instance of the protagonist trying to thinly empathise with a character is when she states, "What a terrible life [Sammy] must lead. Dating crack-whores, getting his kicks off of whipping women who need the money. He must not be happy. You can see it in his eyes; his eyes reflected in yours. Do you look as defeated as well? You both are the same, he and you" (117). Her connection with the man who has just whipped her, and her belief that they are the same, could show that she does not think highly of herself, but could also be read as a sort of

⁴² Davis' "Selfish" can sometimes have this same effect, referring to the use of "you" and over-empathising. The repetition of "you" could create an overbearing narrative, which could cause distance from the character.

victim complex.

The allusions to Blanche DuBois' character in *A Streetcar Named Desire* are an indicator of the theme and the characterisation of the protagonist. Empathy for Blanche may still be felt, though she has arguably caused many of her own problems, just as one might be able to feel empathy for the protagonist in "The Opposite Is Desire". The sentence, "You are scared because you are not scared" (116), signifies the protagonist's lack of self-respect or self-protection. The writing presents the depths of the protagonist's depression, and the second-person narration aids in the drive to understand the protagonist's frame of mind. The difficulty of relating to the protagonist is encapsulated by her question to Laurel, the cat: "You at least like me, don't you?" to which, in response, the cat "scratches your arm with his claws, creating small beads of blood like a tramline route" (118). The use of "you" in the dialogue is a representation of the protagonist's demand to the "you" in the narration: "You at least like me, don't you?" Then, the cat's response is blanketed in further self-pity, "At least you don't have to do it with the pathetic pink Bic tonight" (118), which could be seen as an over-empathetic characterisation of the protagonist.⁴³

The imperative voice in "Life without Luvox" is used as a commanding prose, mimicking the intensity of a person who has not been taking his or her anti-anxiety medication. The narration sets a tone of anxiety exemplified through repetition and imperative narration. Authoritative phrases such as "Turn the key" (142) and "Count all mistakes" (142) show the position where the protagonist has a lack of choice. The absence of the "you" pronoun leads to the possibility stress due to the pressing nature of the narrative voice, which could then spark an empathetic connection with the protagonist.

Another device used, which weighs on the second-person narrative form as well, is the repetition found in the short-short story. For example, the narration's imposing "Lather, rinse, exfoliate, lather, exfoliate, rinse, lather" (142), involves the ritualistic nature of the anxiety, and forces the involvement in a repetitive pattern similar to that which the protagonist feels. The theme of an authoritarian repetitive voice drives the understanding of the protagonist and could create empathetic prose with the inclusion of ongoing obsessive anxieties the protagonist experiences.⁴⁴ This is summed up by the last sentence, which dictates, "Repeat, repeat, repeat,

⁴³ I considered the difficulty of writing a possibly over-empathetic character in Davis' short work, "Selfish", which also included a second-person narrator. It seems that this form of second-person narration sometimes can result in over-empathetic characterisation by the writer.

⁴⁴ Repetition is also used in both Saunders' "Sticks" and Wallace's "A Radically Condensed History of Postindustrial Life", and it was mentioned that the repetition in short-short fiction is particularly significant as a tool, because the word count is limited; therefore, the repetition must signify an importance within the story.

repeat, until breathing is an achievable feat and the heart has settled to a respectable 88 beats per minute" (142). By the end of the short-short story, empathy could be felt for the protagonist through writing due to the narrative voice of the piece and through repetition and quick pace.

"The Realization" further explores the idea of second-person referential slither, as it is a piece that could be interpreted in various ways. The short-short reads: "As the ice cream begins to melt in the oven, and you cannot, for the life of you, remember where you put the roast turkey" (145). The rationale behind the construction of this story is to create different avenues for an empathetic connection. On one hand, the idea of losing or misplacing something could be identifiable, and could form an understanding and light-hearted empathy to a ridiculous situation. This could exist both through the "you" referring to the narrator, the protagonist, the audience, or all three. On the other hand, if the expanse of character development is taken into account (for example, having read both short stories "Visitors' Day" and "Illinois Compiled Statute 20") it could be realised that the protagonist of the short-short story is a woman who is battling Alzheimer's disease. If this is considered, then the tone of the short-short story changes.

Finally, "The Divorcé" uses a second-person narration that directly applies to the protagonist of the short-short story. The divorcé is the subject, whilst the narrator is speaking of the protagonist. This is apparent in the writing choices due to the interactions and assertions between and of the protagonist and his wife. In each case, the protagonist "you" is reacting and considering the situation he is in with his wife. The first sentence, "You don't mean to do it, because she really has been the love of your life" (147), begins the narrative by showing that the writing will depict the protagonist "you"'s point of view. The title of the piece has already introduced the theme, and so a wariness of the protagonist might exist from the beginning. This is exacerbated by the turning declaration, "but when the skin starts drooping and the wrinkles begin to sprout like angry, tawny spider webs on the crinkles of her eyes, you know the end is near" (147). Here, disgust and anger are the intended reactions (of the writer), as he has already stated his love for his wife, but he will not be with her anymore for superficial reasons.⁴⁵ The second-person writing represents the thoughts of the protagonist, and can create an emotional response in regards to the wife's position. Although she might not know the protagonist is considering divorce, the prose shows this.

The second-person narrative has been used throughout the creative writing

⁴⁵ This was discussed previously in Saunders' "The Semplica-Girl Diaries", in which the protagonist is unlikeable so that an empathetic response can be formed towards another character.

experimentation in multiple ways to experiment with form and writing empathetic characters. By constructing an epistolary format in "Dear Tom", and by utilising the second-person narration to create gender ambiguity, ambassadorial strategic empathy for Alex can be experienced given his struggles with Tom. "The Opposite Is Desire" expands on the notion that over-exaggeration of emotions or situations and over-empathy through the use of the second-person format can actually hinder an empathetic connection to a character, as discussed in "II. Narrative Perspectives and Empathy in Short Fiction". "Life without Luvox" stresses the second-person placement as the protagonist through the eyes of the narrator in order to experience emotions similar to those that the character is expressing. "The Realization" continues to explore the ways in which referential slither is present in second-person narration, and how a connection to a situation can exist through this slither (e.g. the reader could consider him or herself as the protagonist as well as simultaneously considering a character, an audience, or even a writer as the protagonist). Finally, "Divorcé" uses second-person narration to show the perspective of the protagonist (who is the "you" in the story). This insight into the mind of the protagonist can alienate the protagonist, in that the protagonist displays superficial and cold thoughts about his wife. Through the stories discussed, I have evaluated the various ways in which the second-person narrative form can be utilised by writers of short fiction to influence or hinder empathy for a character and/or situation. The second-person narrations utilise the concept of referential slither through various narrative voices to experiment with how the implementation of ambiguous voice can affect a writer's construction of a possible empathetic response.

iii. Third-person Narration

The third-person narrative form can be implemented to influence empathy in ways that differ from first- and second- narrative perspective. Though third-person narration has been considered to be potentially alienating, it does have the possibility of fostering empathy by being able to represent multiple characters' viewpoints (as in Saunders' "Tenth of December") and to avoid over-identification. As Keen states, "direct description of a character's emotional state or circumstances by a third-person narrator may produce empathy just as effectively as indirect implication of emotional states through actions and context" (Keen 2006, 218). She considers the third-person narration as a technique that can be as effective in empathy as first-person narration. The focal point here is that although third-person has been assumed to be less overtly empathetic, this is an assumption that remains questionable and unproved. For example, David Lodge states that first-person voice "is just as artful, or artificial, a method as writing

about a character in the third person" (Lodge 2012, 87). I explore how the third-person perspective holds the potential for writers to use the technique in creating empathy. Alongside direct description in third-person perspective, I focus on several ways that writers can use the third-person perspective to elicit an empathetic reaction, including using strings of dialogue, avoiding over-empathetic characterization, creating figural reflective narration, and exploring multiple devices (such as third-person narration and segmentation) in story perspective and format.

In "On the River's Edge", a third-person omniscient narration with a single protagonist is created. The writing only ever introduces the inner monologue and emotions of Jorge, and therefore the opinions and standpoint of Anna must be deduced without the aid of narrative voice. As Jorge's thoughts and, therefore, his side of the argument are represented, a connection with Jorge could be forged. Because of the third-person narration, this connection could be considered peripheral (e.g. the difference between writing, "His body ached from the fieldwork, his arms were worn from baseball practices, and his head was impregnated by thoughts he could not grasp" (75) and "Your body ached" or "my arms were worn"). If Jorge's character is not completely registered through the technique in the prose, the possibility to consider other viewpoints remains open.

Having large sections of dialogue threaded throughout a third-person narrative voice creates the possibility to become better immersed in the interactions of the two characters. This is due to being introduced to character voice and expression through the dialogue that does not exist within the narration. For example, the exchange between Jorge and Anna represents the actions of both characters that cannot necessarily be expressed in the third-person narration itself:

'Want some? Got it from grandpa's cabinet.'
'Do ya really think ya should-'
'He won't notice. Hopped on the wagon again 'bout three months ago.'
'That's not what I meant.'
'I know.' (77)

Without the introduction of the dialogue, only Jorge's thoughts are represented. The addition of the dialogue shows Anna's character as well as further delineating Jorge's character. Whereas this could be done with first- and/or second-person perspective and dialogue, here the third-person narration encourages the focus not only on Jorge's perspective, but also on Anna's actions, emotions, and thoughts through Jorge's and Anna's interactions (and perhaps the deciphering of Anna through Jorge's perspective).

The third-person narration also creates a narrative asymmetry between Jorge and Anna.

The writing follows the thought processes of Jorge, but Anna's situation can only be understood through the dialogue and through the eventual understanding of the couple's pregnancy. As mentioned previously, using a third-person narration with one protagonist can create a connection with that protagonist, but could also create distance from the character that might not be present in a first- or second-person narration (with the protagonist as the narrator). This is true in Wallace's "Suicide as a Sort of Present", whereby the narration encourages the association with the protagonist at the end of the piece. By implementing limited third-person narration in "On the River's Edge", the perspective of the protagonist is taken into account, but the secondary character is also introduced in a way that remains open. For example, when Anna says, "I want you to let me be" and "I don't want your kind of help", both the hurt and desperation that Jorge is feeling are shown, but also Anna's repulsion at Jorge's solution to their problem (being tied down to the small town, getting married, and being together) can be realised. Using third-person narration in this way creates an opening to consider both Jorge's and Anna's position on the matter, thus a potential understanding and commiseration with two differing perspectives on a problem.

"Importance" is a short-short story with a third-person perspective that focuses on one protagonist (similar to "On the River's Edge") yet the use of third-person narration is chosen for a differing effect. In "Importance", the protagonist is written as self-centred, which at first suggested a first-person narrative voice; however, upon reconsideration and re-writing of the piece, I have found the first-person narration to be overbearing, similar to the criticism of Davis' work by Hofstadter, discussed previously. The first-person voice has been replaced with a third-person perspective (e.g., the sentence "I have the choice of eat, the choice of drink, and the company of peers who guffaw and cheer at my wit" was replaced with "He has the choice of eat, the choice of drink..." (146)). The change of perspective helps to alleviate the issue of the character becoming unrelatable. As mentioned in previous chapters, the tendency for the character to be represented as overly compelling empathy can become cumbersome in creative writing construction.⁴⁶ Stressing the character's situation, in this case with a first-person narration, could become overbearing. I find that forcing an over-empathetic character through the use of first-person narration is not a conducive writing technique in relation to the potentiality of empathy with a character, and therefore use third-person in "Importance" to add distance to the protagonist's voice.

With the use of third-person, by the end of the story the character's daily routine has

⁴⁶ Mentioned in my discussion of Davis' "Selfish" and used in my short story "The Opposite Is Desire".

been expressed without being overly saturated in the mundane existence. It is this existence, which is touched on but not exaggerated, that could cause empathy for the character by the end of the story without creating an over-empathetic voice. Although the character has a job, friends, a salary, and a wife, he does not feel complete or important. The wife, who stays at home and has neither the job nor the colleagues that he has, is more accomplished and important in the mind of the protagonist. It is here where the character's dilemma is shown through the prose, and emotions can be understood through this particular application of third-person narration. The protagonist's struggle is revealed without the writing becoming saturated in the character's self-pity (which posed a possible outcome if using first-person perspective in this piece). An example of this is through the narration, which states "In reality, he is envious that she has the ability, the freedom, to construct something from her imagination, from her own whim and skill, while he sits in the chair and pretends to be important" (146). The sentence was originally written as "I am envious that she has... while I sit in the chair and pretend to be important". In the first draft with the first-person perspective, it becomes clear that the protagonist's voice teeters on over-exaggeration and self-pity, in the opinion of the writer. Instead, the focus is placed on the man's situation and a nuanced approach to the façade he presents not only on himself but on his wife. The protagonist is aware of his emotions, and knows of his shortcomings; however, placing the protagonist in a position to complain of his situation through the first-person perspective could possibly discourage an emotional connection.⁴⁷

By the end of the piece, the protagonist has confronted himself, and realises that he is "pretending" whereas his partner simply *is*. The third-person narration leads to the character's realization without forcing a commiseration with the character at the beginning; this is a possible forcefulness that could inhibit an empathetic reaction, and therefore might not create the possibility of character understanding by the conclusion of the work.

Another way in which I use third-person narrative is through the short-short story "First Kiss", which focuses on the sensations of one focal protagonist. Similarities exist in the way third-person is used in this piece as with Saunders' "Tenth of December". Often in third-person perspective writing, tone and vocabulary remain formal and unaffected by the characters within the story. This is not necessarily counter-productive in creating empathy, as seen in "Importance", where the narrative voice is unaffected by the protagonist; however, including

⁴⁷ This returns to Hofstadter's criticism of Davis and the use of over-identification leading to "over-empathy", which can lead to lessened identification and empathetic reaction to the writing.

vocabulary and references that are personally specific to the protagonist can be beneficial to fostering an attachment to a character. "First Kiss" explores Keen's unanswered question: "In third person fiction, does the use of a figural reflector, rather than an authorial (omniscient) narrator make any difference in readers' emotional responsiveness to situations and character?" (Keen 2007b, 98).⁴⁸

The characterization of the protagonist in "First Kiss" through writing technique is apparent from the first sentence. "It's wetter than he'd expected" (138) gives a glimpse of the protagonist's voice. The use of contractions and informal tone show that the narration is closely mirroring the protagonist's point-of-view. On first draft, I had written "It is wetter than he had expected". This, however, does not fully encompass the characterization of the protagonist nor the idea of creating a figural reflector in this particular narration. By allowing the narration to continue in third-person yet become influenced by the character, the experiences of the protagonist are shown without an over-saturation of the character. In this way, the character remains apart, yet there is a voyeuristic sense to the piece.

The sentence, "She tastes like watermelon Lip Lickers and double-buttered popcorn" (138) and the mentioning of "Jordaches" are reminiscent of the techniques used in "Tenth of December",⁴⁹ as the references are personal to the protagonist and the prose does not disclose their meaning by the narrator. Though the meanings of these references can be inferred, the narrative has remained within the scope of the protagonist's mind. As the narration and the protagonist have fused, there is no reason for the boy to explain to himself what the references and vocabulary mean. This could be potentially problematic in writing with empathy in mind (in that the references could be alienating). Therefore, care has been taken to remain aware of the contextual placement of the character's personal vocabulary. Having the girl "wiping her oily fingers on the lap of her Jordaches" (138) creates the inference that Jordaches are pants whereas "watermelon Lip Lickers" describes both the taste of the girl's lips and the product used on them. Utilising references that are personal to the protagonist creates a closeness to the character as the character becomes more tangible and solid throughout the narration.

In addition, sensory details are used by the narrative voice to create a tactile atmosphere. There are numerous examples of this, including "shaking", "moist", "oily", and "damp". Each

⁴⁸ The concept of a figural reflector (a third-person narration that uses vocabulary specific to a character) as opposed to an omniscient narrator was mentioned in "II. Narrative Perspectives and Empathy in Short Fiction" in regards to third-person narration and the use of characterisation to connect with the narrative voice and, therefore, the character.

⁴⁹ This has been explored in "II. Narrative Perspectives and Empathy in Short Fiction" with both characters' vocabulary that is expressed through narrative third-person voice, which can create a connection to a character through the authenticity of the character's perspective.

of these descriptions pertain to the protagonist, and it is his viewpoint alone that is the focus of the piece. Though the girl is the conflict of the story, the narration does not delve into her senses or actions where they do not directly affect the protagonist. In fact, the only sentence that applies solely to her, "She's smiling at the screen and takes a handful of kernels from the tub" (138) helps to accentuate the fact that she is oblivious to the aforementioned unpleasant sensations the protagonist is feeling. Here, the third-person narration shows the action of the girl through the eyes of the protagonist. This disconnect between the protagonist's uncomfortable position and the girl's unawareness opens the protagonist's character through the figural reflection of the third-person narration.

Finally, many of the stories in my collection consist of more than one literary device discussed in this thesis. In the case of "M'aidez", I apply both third-person narration and the segmented story format. Whilst creating these works, the segmented format tends to be constructed more coherently with third-person narration (three of the four stories written in segmented form are in third-person perspective). This is due, in part, to the flow of the segmented story, which becomes disjointed at times when using first- and second-person narration.⁵⁰ In "M'aidez", however, I focus on third-person narration as well as segmentation (instead of choosing third-person narration merely for its precision in segmented form).

The narrative voice in "M'aidez" teeters between narrative omniscience and figural reflection. Though the actions and emotions of the protagonist, Brian, are shown through the narrative voice, his thoughts and feelings are not completely represented. This balance of narrative voice and Brian's perception is achieved through the third-person narration of Brian's dreams and through the dialogue between himself and his wife.

Brian's dreams are narrated through a blur of actions and colours. The first few sentences immediately sets the tone of the depths of his mind:

And the fire is consuming him, the pathetically small dots zipping from the darkened sky. Red. Red. Orange. Yellow. Blue. Red. Red. Yellow. He watches them dive, no, not dive. They fall. Fall and dive, dive and fall. Each in a metal tomb lit up with flames. He can smell the gasoline drizzling from their engines. Can he smell it? Or does the presence of smoke create an illusion of scent? He is up, up, up, and they are down, down, to the ground swirling and swivelling. (101)

As seen in Saunders' "Tenth of December", the narrative voice lends itself to the point-of-view of the protagonist. The jumbled sentence structure such as "He watches them dive, no, not dive" and the repetition of "up, up, up" has the prose enveloping in the chaos of Brian's mentality.

⁵⁰ As Keen suggests, writing empathy can be impeded by "excess narrative levels" and "extremes of disorder", which I find prevalent when writing segmented stories in, for example, the second-person perspective.

The third-person narrative reflection is appropriate here in that there might be a subconscious, visceral reactions to the images that Brian exhibits. In the dreams, and throughout the story, Brian is disassociated from his life, and is consumed by the images in his nightmares. Likewise, the narration mirrors this disassociation by displaying Brian's thoughts without a more explicit perspective of Brian's mind-set (as could happen if first- or second-person narration were used). In this case, writing in the third-person perspective works to shield from Brian's inner depths, whilst still maintaining a connection with Brian through the details of his dreams.

The use of figural reflection continues throughout most of the story, though the reflection begins to waver by the end of the narrative. In this case, third-person narrative voice shows the characteristics of Brian, but does not necessarily show these in a way that allow an association with the character. Because of Brian's hallucinations, the character could be considered unreliable, and the narration expresses this through phrases that include his personal opinions. For example, the phrase "he just could not stop seeing the damn colors" (102) is wholly of the protagonist's perspective, and is narrated through third-person narration; however, the situation is not one to which many can relate (hallucinating colours and becoming wary of eggs). As his agitation progresses, the narrative voice continues to be influenced by Brian's character. This only changes at the last segment, when words such as "abhorrent liquid" and "unassuming hallway carpet" (106) are revealed. The narrative has turned against the protagonist, and Brian's actions are condoned by the third-person narrative voice refusing to reflect his opinions (as Brian would not find the gasoline abhorrent nor the carpet unassuming in this situation). Here, the third-person narration has the potential to create distance from the protagonist, thus creating empathetic emotions of horror and confusion that the wife and the child assumedly experience.

The segmentation of the story aids in the perception of Brian's detachment from reality. As with the third-person narrative form, there exists not only the distance between Brian and reality, but also Brian's fractured perception. Each of the segments represents fragments of his life, bouncing between conversations with his wife and the night terrors that plague him. The structure fluctuates between day and night, between Brian trying to cope with reality and the thoughts that consume him. In this way, the evened segmentation creates an expectation. This pattern is repeated throughout the story until the last segment. The section begins, "'Red. Red. Orange. Yellow. Blue. Red. Red,' he says in a passive, soothing voice as he regards the light of the Benlow" (106). The repetitive colours are present, as in the segments involving the nightmares; however, Brian's conscious and subconscious mind have merged to form a segment involving a protagonist who has finally emerged as the one he was trying to suppress.

This is represented through the use of the phrases in the nightmares, such as "Spitfire and falling and flying" and "Can he smell them? Is he just pretending to smell?" juxtaposed with active narration such as "he sloshes the abhorrent liquid", "he blankets the wooden doors", and "he saturates the yellow lampshades" (106). Having previous segments create a pattern of expectation leaves the last segment a muddled, chaotic representation of Brian's psychotic break. It is also significant that the only dialogue in the last segment is Brian's muttering of colours. In each other segment no dialogue is written between Brian and his wife and son. This, along with the aforementioned melange of delusion and action create a segment that represents Brian's frame-of-mind. The representation of Brian's psyche in the last segment influences the consideration of Brian's abhorrent actions and the shock that his family must be experiencing by the end of the piece.

Writing third-person narration has the potential to influence the creation of empathy through multiple styles of application. By connecting both with the protagonist and another character, a third-person perspective can create opportunity to experience two (or more) characters' emotions whilst remaining somewhat separated from the protagonist. This perspective can also aid in the avoidance of exaggerated construction of a character that might be present when using another narrative perspective (such as first-person narration with the protagonist as the narrator). Using third-person in creative writing can distance a character so that the created character avoids the propensity to be overbearing. As well, incorporating figural reflection in third-person narration allows a character's voice to be portrayed through the narration. With "M'aidez", for example, the narrator's thoughts are expressed, which can allow an emotional connection without a dominating voice, as might be the case in first-person narration. Finally, the construction of empathetic characters is not restricted to the application of only one device, and various tools (such as third-person perspective in segmented form) can be used simultaneously by creative writers to evoke an emotional response.

VI. Short Story Formats in Practice

i. Segmented Format

As discussed in "III. Short Fiction Formatting and Empathy", I implement several forms of segmentation within my short stories to explore the relationship between segmentation and empathy. Keen speaks of at least one way in which segmentation has this potential. She states that "elements of fiction have been supposed to contribute to readers' empathy, including... aspects of the discourse that slow readers' pace" (Keen 2006, 216). The slowing of pace can be applied to segmentation as a means of controlling pace. For example, with "M'aidez", the segmentation represents Brian's fractured perception, which allows the experience, to some extent, of the confusion that the protagonist feels. The pause between segments gives the opportunity to shift between the protagonist's reality and his dreams. The other segmented pieces turn to differing techniques and marks (e.g. roman numerals) to create an emotional impact whilst referring to Keen's idea of narrative pace. "Cardinal" has segments divided by roman numerals with the sections placed out of order numerically, "Sympathy Peaches" uses dinkuses to separate the narrative voice of two characters within the same story, and "Bible Studies" gives information within the segment titles that can affect the perception of a character's situation and actions.

Though "Cardinal" is only 1,178 words long, it has eleven different segments. This creates a quickened reading of each segment with pauses between each segment, punctuated by roman numerals. A similar technique, discussed in "III. Short Fiction Formatting and Empathy", is apparent in Saunders' "Escape from Spiderhead", where segments are separated with roman numerals and short segments are emotionally charged and abruptly cut off by the segmentation, giving time to consider the protagonist's interactions. "Cardinal", however, uses roman numerals to change the perception of Tom, the protagonist. Beginning the story with "IV" immediately shows that the story might not necessarily be in correct order, but that it can be read either numerically or as structurally represented on the page. By first reading the story as written, the expressive thoughts of the protagonist can be experienced, both with the present encounter and with the protagonist's memories. The structure of this segmented piece can be considered a type of anachrony.⁵¹ The segments placed in the past are written in past tense,

⁵¹ Keen states that "a broader view of order discovers what theorists call *anachronies*, or disturbances to chronology" and that "some kinds of psychological realism depend on representing a character's disorderly 'thoughts'" (Keen 2015a, 98). In "Cardinal", the protagonist's thoughts are followed through both past and present as he re-experiences memories and acts in the present.

whereas the segments in the present are written in the present tense. Because of this representation, the assumption could be made that the segments in past tense are Tom's recollections in the present. This gives the piece a structure that relies on Tom's psychological representation, as Tom is looking to his past within the present.

There is a connection to Tom through both the past and present segments, and taking into account the disordered numerals as separate emotional sections. I have written the piece through the use of contrasting phrases between the first segment (IV), "Wisps of smoke and frost condense on the glass, and the pane begins to cry" (63) and the fifth segment (II), "The wine bottle was empty and the autumn air was sweet and calm" (64). The segments not only separate the present from Tom's memories, but also lead to the possible employment of tense change that represents Tom's actions and thoughts. The segmentation creates a difference in tone within each segment, and the numeral break encourages pausing and considering the writing. Akin to the segmentation in "Escape from Spiderhead", where the breaks in narration represented the protagonist's breaks between chemically induced emotional states, the breaks in narration in "Cardinal" represent the breaks between what Tom is viewing and what he has acted on in the past.

The segmentation does create the possibility for the re-reading of the story in its numerical form. In this case, empathy could be affected when the story is read in a linear fashion. This is due to the Tom's past recollections not being experienced in his current setting. The connection to Tom's frame of mind could be lessened by the chronological reading of the story. For example, the first section (IV) states that Tom is thinking about "a lifetime ago of loose tobacco and sweat and the sugary powder residue of doughnuts" (63), the prose already shows in the second section (I), therefore, what Tom knows, that he has not seen the man in what seems like a lifetime ago. When the ordering of the story is linear, the prose structure is not the same in section I, as it is unknown that the two will end up apart by section IV. Likewise, in section XI, Tom's actions are not yet revealed when it is written "I love you. Goodbye" (65) until the following section (X). This creates suspense, and the implication is that Tom himself does not know whether he is going to act or not. Here, as with the previous sections when placed in original order (IV, I, V, VI, II, VII, III, IX, VIII, XI, X), there is a narratively emotional connection with Tom, which creates an empathetic link to the protagonist.

In "Sympathy Peaches" I implement dinkuses (asterisks as punctuation to separate segments) to shift between two differing points of view. Segmentation can create a narrative oscillation between two protagonists' voices with defined cut-off points, which can result in the consideration of two characters' differing viewpoints in a shared interaction. This creates the

possibility to explore the connection to characters through perspectival shifts and through each character's directly addressing the audience. The story is told in a linear format, with separate parts of the night narrated by Lizzie and Jack.

Lizzie's voice is the first encountered, and her opinion of the loud child at the next table is made clear with her characterization of the child as "too old to be screaming bloody murder because his parents had chosen 715 olive tapenade instead of 'Ronald Donald Friiiiiiiiiis!'" (107). This annoyance makes Lizzie feel better about her life, and she is written as addressing the audience directly: "But tonight? Tonight I felt perfectly content in my element through the help of a shrieking kid" (107). Her interaction relays Lizzie's perspective and immediately shows that the "shrieking kid" has played a part in Lizzie feeling secure in her own life. Her voice is contrasted in the second section with a shift of perspective to Jack. Though Lizzie and Jack have not interacted as of yet, Jack's own thoughts mirror Lizzie's in that they both are disrupted by the child, Kingsley, who is Jack's son. As with Lizzie's perspective, Jack also poses a question: "Is it bad to call your kid an asshole, even when they're acting like one?" (107-8). Used in this way, direct address creates a relationship with the two characters. Nathan Shank states that with direct address "the reader takes on not just sympathy with the narrator, but the mind-reading shared values of cognitive empathy" (Shank 2014, 205).⁵² Through the segmentation of the two perspectives within the first two segments, both characters are represented through their shifting inner dialogue within the written text.

The segments in this story show the shifts of narrative perspective, which also represents the relationship between the characters in that each character is limited in his or her own perspective. For example, the impact of Kingsley's tantrums on Lizzie's thought process is represented through the format of the piece. In Lizzie's second segment, she is thoroughly enjoying her pizza, describing herself as "being thrown into a paradise of cream, ripened tomatoes and -" (108) but her voice is interrupted by the segment break. The next segment begins, "Daddyyyyyyy, it's yuckyyyyyyy!" (108), which implies that Lizzie's thoughts of her dinner were cut off by Kingsley's outburst. Here, the segmentation is used to represent the congruency of both characters' evening. Jack's perspective has become intertwined with Lizzie's experience. By using the end of Lizzie's segment to segue into Jack's segment, both viewpoints are shown through the writing.

The duality of perspectives is helpful to the writer, in this case, in creating the

⁵² This claim is complimented by Keen's observation that "manipulations of narrative situation to channel perspective or person of the narration and representation of fictional characters' consciousness" can create empathy (Keen 2013, 9).

possibility for empathy. This point is discussed by Lydia Cooper, who states that "perspectival shifts [can] call our attention to characters' struggle toward 'goodness,' empathy and human connection (Cooper 2013, 105). Though Cooper is speaking of empathy to situations or persons in reality, this point can be used to explore empathy for a character through creative writing. For example, if told solely through Lizzie's perspective, the writing would only describe Jack as a man in his "mid-forties" with a "bulbous belly" sporting a "bright green dress shirt that was smudged and splattered with bright red dots" (111). The prose would also be limited to Lizzie's embarrassment and annoyance at being presumed to be lonely by the middle-aged man; however, since the writing includes Jack's perspective, his anticipation and sense of accomplishment can be felt, as after the encounter Jack states, "I've actually done it. I've gone up to her like a bumbling idiot and I feel... elated" (111). It is pertinent that his emotions be expressed directly after their conversation, because by doing so, it is seen that Jack did not mean to embarrass Lizzie. If only one perspective existed, however, there might exist an inclination to empathise with Lizzie instead of the middle-aged stranger. The driving factor of this connection, by the end of the story, is through Lizzie's reciprocation of the dessert. She states that Jack "looks so lonely" and that she is "content to be alone" (112). It could be argued that she is making a point that the concept of loneliness is not defined by being alone. As both sides of the incident are present through the writing technique of segmented perspectival shifts and direct address, Lizzie's defensiveness at being by herself and Jack's want for a positive human connection can be understood.

"Bible Studies" utilises titles to segment four different parts of the story. These consist of: "Ephesians 5:22-24⁵³ or The Snap Snack Challenge", "Proverbs 6:25⁵⁴ or The Itchy Flannel Nightie", "Matthew 5:27-30⁵⁵ or The Facebook Infiltration", and "Colossians 3:5-6⁵⁶ or The Creation of Worthy Hamburgers". The Bible verses are given in footnotes as it would not benefit the prose to deviate from the flow in order to search the Bible for the first part of the titles. As with Davis' "Mrs. D and Her Maids", the information in the titles gives identifiers to the personality of a character (in this case, the protagonist, Leah). By giving information on the protagonist at the beginning of each segment, Leah's mind-set, and the dichotomy of her life,

⁵³ "Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the saviour of the body. Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in every thing."

⁵⁴ "Do not desire her beauty in your heart, nor let her capture you with her eyelids."

⁵⁵ "You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to desire her has already committed adultery with her in his heart."

⁵⁶ "Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry."

are created within the text; there is a juxtaposition between the serious Bible verses and the trivial tasks Leah faces.

Many contradictions exist in Leah's opinions and actions that directly correlate to the verses at the beginning of each segment. The words "wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands" is contradicted by the narrative statement, "As for her husband, she had given up on Tom years ago" (66). The second part of the title refers to the mundane task at hand that Leah uses to restore her faith. She "focuses on the task at hand: to make the best, most scrumptious snack that will make both Tom and Caleb proud. This is her job, as God posits, and she will try her best to do right by Him" (68). Leah's contradictory thoughts about the Bible verse at hand are introduced, and then her attempt to compensate, somewhat irrationally, through her daily obligations is addressed. Because of the immersion into Leah's life through the writing, the prose displays her frame of mind. As in Davis' piece, where even though the reader may never have been a maid there still exists a relation to the characters; if a reader is not familiar with Leah's form of religion or with the Bible itself, he or she might understand Leah's viewpoint from the creative writing implementation of using segmentation and titles (both the Bible verse and the alternate title) as a frame of reference to Leah's inner struggle.⁵⁷ This theme of struggle and contradiction continues throughout the story, with each segment showing Leah's internal conflict and subsequent reaction. There is, for example, a contradiction between the second verse's command to let go of lustful desires and the way that Leah "rubs her thighs together to relieve the pressure that has spread from the thoughts" (68). The flannel nightgown, a piece of clothing that once represented the habitualness of her family (the "flannel gown both Caleb and Tom had bought her last Mother's Day to replace the one they had given to her the year before" (68), has been transformed into a fantastic object in her sexual desire.

The third title, tied to desire and the committing of adultery, is contrasted with Tom's own collection of pornographic magazines. The text alludes to a disjointed rationality between what Leah believes is wrong (her fantasising about Caleb's friend, Jorge) and what she will accept (Tom's *Playboys* and *Maxims*). When she acts on her curiosity and desire through Facebook, it culminates in a climax of her inner turmoil between her religion and her fascination with Jorge. The last segment title speaks of getting rid of "sexual immorality" and "lust", whereas Leah continues to fixate on Jorge and making perfect hamburgers for their possible meeting. As with the first three titles, the contrast between the Bible verse and the

⁵⁷ This was explored in "III. Short Fiction Formatting and Empathy", especially in reference to both Dadlez and Harrison and their observations on narrative cues and emotional perspective taking. The titles provide a narrative cue in seeing the contrast of Leah's situation, leading to a possible understanding of her emotional state.

Leah's mundane action have underlying symbolism of contradiction between her Biblical duties and her life as a housewife. Also, the writing depicts Leah's episode in the closet, and she might no longer wish to interact with Jorge; however, the obsession with the hamburgers shows that Leah is unable or unwilling to control her emotions concerning her feelings about her son's friend. This could cause a distance from the character, as the contradictions become greater and Leah does nothing to change her situation, depending on the interpretation of the text.

The ambiguity of the last Bible verse, which mimics the segmented titles, is important to the perception of the story. The verse Peter 4:8 is not referenced within the writing as it gives the choice of investigating the meaning of Leah's Facebook message. Even with the explanation of the verse (not included in the story), "Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins", the way in which Leah might act on Jorge's acceptance of the message is unclear. Through the titles, the writing shows that Leah often contradicts the verses by which she attempts to live her life. Leah's characterisation throughout the segments and their titles confront Leah's inner conflict. The ambiguity can further a connection to the story, and to Leah's emotions surrounding Jorge. For example, Leah could be moved by Jorge's statement that "Caleb's lucky to have a mom like you" (73) and might begin to think of him as a child instead of a love interest, or she could continue feeling amorous towards Jorge as she has no other passion in her life. Because of the contradictions in the titles and the subsequent content of the segments, there is an inherent open-endedness and possible assumption about the conclusion.

Through these four stories, segmentation is used to mimic the mind-sets of certain characters. This is accomplished through divisions of conscious versus subconscious thought in "M'aidez", non-linear numbering in "Cardinal", shifting of protagonist viewpoint in "Sympathy Peaches", and title construction in "Bible Studies". Each story represents different ways in which segmentation can be implemented to evoke empathy. Brian's shattered mental state and the effect of his nightmares are represented through the text, and the prose could suggest reflection on the continuing degradation of his perceptions. "Cardinal" introduces Tom's past and present observations in the order he thinks of them, not in a linear fashion (with the aid of roman numerals in non-numerical order). "Sympathy Peaches" relies on dinkuses to depict two differing points-of-view which can be taken into account when seeing two sides of one interaction, therefore opening the possibility of empathy for multiple characters through the writing technique. "Bible Studies" uses the titles of each segment as signposts to understand Leah's biblical references and her contradictory actions to justify her reactions to her life, both

through and in spite of her faith. The ambiguity of the last Bible verse drives the creative writing technique used to foster character connection, which is influenced by the segment titles and their implications in the story. Finally, through constant breaks, the segmented form is utilised to experiment with characterisation and empathy. The concept of experimenting with segmentation to evoke an emotional reaction, discussed in "III. Short Fiction Formatting and Empathy", can be related to Dadlez and Keen's observations of creative writing pace.⁵⁸

ii. Q&A Format

The two short stories that experiment with the Q&A format are "320 Illinois Statute 20" and "AVN Adult Entertainment Expo". Both use Wallace's (and subsequently Davis') technique of including only the voice of the respondent, leaving the questioner's dialogue void. In "320 Illinois Compiled Statute 20" the reactions of the questioner are gauged through the responses of the protagonist. This is similar to Wallace's "Brief Interview #20" in that facets of the questioner through the respondent's interactions with the questioner are shown, and can then evoke an empathetic reaction.⁵⁹ The identity of the questioner in "AVN Adult Entertainment Expo", however, is unclear. When looking at the form and writing empathy, I present two pieces that execute the format in differing ways.

From the beginning of "320 Illinois Compiled Statute 20", the footnoted title signals the theme of the story as revolving around the court system and the Adult Protective Services Act.⁶⁰ The title as well as the opening interaction suggest that the protagonist is in therapy:

Q.

A. Just get started like that? Well, alright. You need to know I've been working hard on the breathing techniques we talked about last time. In and out three slow times. It's seemed to help a bit, but I still get those, well, those feelings we talked about last time.

Q.

A. Yeah, it's just, well, I was doing what you said, you know? Trying to take a bit of time for myself. (88)

This exchange mentions breathing techniques, feelings, and taking the questioner's advice. This

⁵⁸ In "III. Short Fiction Formatting and Empathy", I point to Dadlez' remarks on contemplation and empathising with a character, which can be linked to segmentation. Keen speaks of pace in creative writing and its effect on empathy, which can be applied both to segmentation and short-short story formatting by slowing the pace of the piece.

⁵⁹ Aili Pettersson Pecker mentions the potential for empathy in the Q&A format stating, "*Brief Interviews* is also a collection focused on empathy. The hideous characters inhabiting the collection constantly appeal for empathy from fellow characters, narratees, and readers" (Pettersson Pecker 2014, 4). This appeal for empathy is expressed through the Q&A format in both Wallace's and my works by implementing blank questions.

⁶⁰ A link to the Act can be found here:

<<http://www.ilga.gov/legislation/ilcs/ilcs3.asp?ActID=1452&ChapterID=31>> (Illinois General Assembly, 2013).

sets up a continual back-and-forth between the protagonist and the questioner. As with Wallace's piece, the Q&A format here introduces only the protagonist's voice. The protagonist's situation and background are shown without being disrupted by another character's words. The exclusion of anything other than dialogue creates the opportunity to become involved in the conversation. As noted in "III. Short Fiction Formatting and Empathy", writing with blank responses often influences reader insertion into the piece.

There is a vulnerability to the respondent's character; for example, she questions the questioner multiple times, with self-doubting queries such as "But I miss her, and then I start feeling, oh what is it? It's that jealous feeling we talked about before?" (90) and "I can't just throw everyone out. Say goodbye and good riddance, because then what type of person would I be?" (92). In "III. Short Fiction Formatting and Empathy" I suggest that the blank space of the questioner can cause further involvement with the text.

Another technique used in the story is the questioner's tendency to cut off the respondent. This is done multiple times, and it helps to keep the writing engaging between the interactions of the two characters. In the exchange:

when she talks to him I don't find anything that she's hidden or misplaced or eaten
or –

Q.

A. Right. Breathing techniques (90).

the writing shows the overwhelming emotions of the protagonist through the cut-off rambling sentence and the reminder that she needs to breathe. The interruptions of the questioner not only highlight the emotional state of the protagonist, but also create an avenue to remain involved in the exchange. Again, if the reader has placed him or herself into the position of the questioner, he or she is then interacting with the protagonist, and therefore can connect with the emotions of the protagonist through the eyes of the therapist.

Finally, the crux of the story is encountered. The emotions of the protagonist are represented through the respondent's voice, situation, and the interruptions of the questioner, and this representation is tested when the nature of the respondent's actions are revealed. Here, the Q&A format can be used to signify the shift between what the protagonist believes will occur (continuing therapy) and what is imminent. When it is implied that the questioner is confronting the respondent about her actions, the nature of the exchange changes. In this last passage the role of the questioner and the respondent have been reversed:

A.

Q. What do you mean?

A.

Q. They'd be taken away?

A.

Q. Okay, but then could I still come to talk to –

A.

A. No, I guess not. (95)

The protagonist is now communicated through the Q. side, and the prose shows the questions she is asking. This shift in writing structure shows that the questioner is having a reaction to the actions of the protagonist. There exists a possible emotional attachment to the protagonist through the writing, as the protagonist's personality and her situation have been exposed, but emotions tied to the position of the therapist through the change in the dynamics of the Q&A format (by the questioner, in effect, becoming a respondent), can also be experienced.⁶¹

In the second Q&A story, "AVN Adult Entertainment Expo", problems arose in both subject matter and in questioner identity in creative writing construction. The issues of subject matter correlate to a similar protagonist portrayal in "The Last Dinner". Questioner identity breaks away from the format of both "Brief Interview #20" and "320 Illinois Compiled Statute 20" as little information is given about whom the questioner might be. Both the questionable actions and identity of the protagonist and the lack of a questioner identity could lead to the disassociation to a character.

As with the other Q&A stories, "AVN Adult Entertainment Expo" exposes the voice of the respondent. In this case, the subject matter is a pornography exposition in Nevada (indicated by the title). The protagonist's voice (Raven) is introduced, and the text familiarises her personality through the exchange. Where she seems confident in her career choice and her opinions, there is not enough interaction between the questioner and the respondent to delve into the possibility that she is hiding under the façade of personal success. For example, she states, "This is a business, this is a calling. Those that use it for something else are damaged and only go so far... often to the detriment of their own mental stability" (127), yet this is not necessarily reacted to by the questioner. This is in contrast to both "320 Illinois Compiled Statute 20" and "Brief Interview #20" in that some sort of emotional response from the questioner is alluded to by the blank Q.s and the subsequent responses as well as the inclusion of questioner interruptions. In this piece, the questioner could be anyone, and his or her character is never fleshed out. The lack of exchange between the questioner and the respondent influences detachment from both the respondent and the questioner (as there is little meaningful

⁶¹ Writing the emotional investment of both the questioner and the respondent is present in Wallace's works as well, and was discussed in detail in "Brief Interview #20". In "320 Illinois Compiled Statute 20" the questioner is a therapist and the speaker is a woman taking care of her elderly mother. As both characters are known, they have the potential of being related to in the crafting of the story.

interaction between the questioner and the respondent), which proves problematic in the creative application of the Q&A format in this case.

The protagonist reveals that she has given up her child when she replies, "No, I merely felt as if I wouldn't make a good mother. Whether a lawyer or a porn star, a mother was never something I was supposed to be. I would've given her up, whichever choice in career" (129). The fact that she had a child and gave her up for adoption, and is seemingly content in her choice, could cause judgment of the character. Because of the questioner's lack of characterisation, Raven's actions are the only ones represented. Keen states that, "sometimes the potential for character identification and readers' empathy *decreases* with sustained exposure to a particular figure's thoughts or voice" (Keen 2006, 219). Without the balancing characterisation of the questioner, over-exposure to the protagonist's thoughts occur. In addition, the possibility of exploring Raven's stance, to see if she is being honest with the questioner about her opinions, is not an option as the exchanges between the questioner and the protagonist remain on the surface (e.g. through Raven's answers, it is assumed that the questioner does not interrogate her fully on her choices). This is evident throughout the piece, one example being:

Don't diddle around on the internet being miserable and humiliated at a performance you keep trying to convince yourself is a stepping stone.

Q.

A. Many. Oh yes, I've seen many. You see, that's the difference between my happiness and their despair. (128)

There is no indication of the questioner's response to Raven's opinions. The lack of depth in the questions emphasises the anonymity and emptiness of the questioner's character. This void does not exist in either "320 Illinois Compiled Statute 20" (as the questioner reacts to the respondent's actions) or "Brief Interview #20" (as the respondent interacts vocally with the questioner, revealing parts of the questioner's character (e.g. her gender)).

By the time that Raven's choice to give up her child is revealed, the writing has not created an emotional investment in either the questioner or the respondent. As with "The Last Dinner", the negative actions of the protagonist could cause a disengagement from the character; however, with "AVN Adult Entertainment Expo" there is not enough information given from the text to form a connection with the questioner either. Keen touches on the concept of a covert narrator. She asks, "Does a covert narrator, who scarcely does more than provide cues about character's movements and speech, disinvite empathy for those characters, or invite readers to see the action with a greater sense of immediacy" (Keen 2006, 225). In response to Keen's question, it became difficult in "AVN Adult Entertainment Expo" to create

a connection to the questioner do to the questioner's covert nature. If the questioner in this piece is considered a narrator, he or she most certainly is covert, as he or she does not display any sort of identity (gender, religious affiliation, career, opinions, etc.). Given this observation, it is pertinent, in this case, to create a character who can be represented through his or her dialogue and to involve a questioner who will not only consist of blank questions, but who will also interact with the character if the writer intends for there to be a possible emotional connection. In this way, the covert nature of the questioner is not necessarily successful at creating a connection, whereas with "320 Illinois Compiled Statute 20" the writing technique allows more opportunities for connections as the questioner's occupation and stance are known.

Through experimentation with the Q&A format, I find that there is a specific correlation between the presented interactions between the questioner and the respondent and the possibility for creating empathy. Because this form expresses only one character's voice, the focus is often on this character, however the personality and emotions of the respondent can be enhanced by the questioner's supposed responses in ways that can be constructed on the page (e.g. an interrupting question or a switch of Q.s and A.s to symbolise a shift in character dynamic). With the inclusion of the questioner's actions and responses, it is less likely to become overwhelmed by the respondent's voice. It must be stressed that the character of the questioner, even though he or she is not necessarily represented by dialogue on the page, can be important in influencing empathy, in part because there can be an interaction with both the questioner and the respondent through the Q&A writing technique. This is seen in Wallace's work as both the questioner and the respondent's characters are expressed. In Davis' work, the focus relies on the respondent's experience, and the protagonist can be considered relatable, whereas in "AVN Adult Entertainment Expo, the protagonist is not necessarily a relatable or likeable character.

iii. Short-short Story Format

When writing short-short fiction concerning an empathetic response, I have implemented several forms of the short-short story. As stated previously, the brevity of the form can contribute to a writer drawing attention to characters and/or situations, relating to Dadlez' statement that the "degree of attentiveness could be characterized as instrumental in narrative empathy" (Dadlez 1997, 172) and the aforementioned tendency of short-short fiction

to "dramatize experience" and "evoke emotion" (Shapard 2012).⁶² This attentiveness can be achieved through pace. Seven short-short fiction pieces have been constructed to investigate this form. "Happy Birthday", "Cat Food", and "The Execution of Richard Aaron Cobb" focus on one particular event, the writing able to transport the subject into a specific moment in a character's life. Through actions and dialogue, "Effects of the Minuteman Project" and "Franglais" involve characters' struggles to assimilate to an American society that can be judgmental to foreigners. The final two short-short stories, "Al Anon Step Work" and "S/W/M Online Profile", both use varied forms ("Al Anon Step Work" as a list more so than a narrative, and "S/W/M Online Profile" as an online narrative with multiple footnotes) to express a character's thoughts and emotions.

"Happy Birthday" contains four paragraphs, with each paragraph crafted shorter than the previous. On the page, the form itself dwindles until only one sentence exists in the last paragraph. In this way, the structure itself serves as a representation of the dwindling security the protagonist feels. In addition, each paragraph could be read faster than the last due to the difference in length. This creates a sense of urgency, which is influenced by the opening tone of the protagonist. The repetition of "you were supposed to" shows an expectation of the protagonist that has not been fulfilled, and the effect of this is expressed through the continued repetition of "afraid". As with Saunders' "Sticks", repetition in a short-short story can be implemented for a precise purpose. I observed in "III. Short Fiction Formatting and Empathy" in regards to Saunders' work that repetition can often create a sense of pressure. This pressure builds with the repetition, which can then be emotionally interpreted through the repetitive reading and the swiftness of pace.

In the second paragraph, the protagonist states his emotions to his son (and, arguably, to an audience in general). He states, "I'm relieved, and then disappointed that I feel relieved" (139). A torrent of emotions is expressed from the protagonist as the protagonist is feeling them. He does not, for example, go into detail as to why he's relieved, or where his disappointment truly comes from. Instead, his voice never deviates from the expression of his emotions and actions. The protagonist here is directly represented through the admission of his emotions through the construction of the piece.

Continuing to express his feelings, the protagonist states in the third paragraph that his son is "making [him] nervous, worried, cautious, alert" (139). There is a difference in these

⁶² Previously discussed in "III. Short Fiction Formatting and Empathy", which explores the brevity of short-short fiction and its impact on attentiveness. As the pieces are compact, it can focus attention on pointed details within the short-short pieces.

emotions from paragraph two, as being "relieved" and "disappointed" do not have the same active connotation as "worried" or "alert", which is signified by the writer's word choice. Instead of being passive as he had been in previous paragraphs, the protagonist's emotions are now focused on his reactions to his baby. This differs from the accusatory tone of "you were supposed to" and being "afraid", exhibiting emotions of parental protection. The last sentence, "Restlessly consumed by you" (139), shows that the protagonist has become absorbed with the child to the point that no further paragraph is necessary.

The narrative voice, the repetition of phrases and words, and the funnelling paragraph structure are used in the short-short story to express the protagonist's frame of mind and his feelings towards the birth of his son. The text demonstrates the candour of the protagonist's emotions in a way that mirrors them. This is also expressed through the repetition that creates a sense of stress that is similar to the protagonist's own discomfort. Because of the short word count, the paragraph structure can be viewed on one page, and can be seen as a physical representation of the protagonist's thoughts eventually dwindling to only his child.

"Cat Food" is a short-short story that has a linear narrative form, and protagonist's conflict is introduced in the first sentence, "My sister left the lights on again, and she is nowhere to be found" (148). The first paragraph, made up of only three sentences, contains a mass of action: the narrator's sister left the lights on, cannot be found, and her cat has urinated on the floor and is glaring at the narrator. As with Saunders and Wallace's short-short fiction, care is taken, on a creative writing front, to include as much information as possible in a limited amount of words. This continues throughout the story, with each action being described by the narrator (e.g. scraping the dinner into the cat's bowl, looking into the drawer for money, etc.) so that a quick succession of actions is presented within the text.⁶³

The only time an emotional description is mentioned is in relation to the cat in the middle of the short-short story. The narrator believes that the cat feels both "disgust and disappointment" at him or her for being there instead of his or her sister. A theme throughout the story is the narrator's lack of emotion, which is represented by his or her formal language. In addition to this, it is not known whether the narrator is male or female, and the only emotions that are addressed are those of the cat. A narrator who considers a cat's emotions instead of his or her own, culminating in eating his or her dinner from the cat's bowl, shows the emotional

⁶³ The ideas of pace and speed are discussed in "III. Short Fiction Formatting and Empathy" regarding the brevity of short-short fiction format, its potential for attentiveness, and the opportunity to easily re-examine the story afterwards. The pace can affect emotions, and Keen states that "speedy reading may be a token of involvement in a character's fate, identification, and even empathy" (Keen 2007b, 94).

numbness and possible lack of self-worth the narrator feels. This could also be considered a type of broadcast strategic empathy in that most people, at one point or another, have felt depressed or have had low self-worth.⁶⁴ This broadcast empathy exists through the structure, the quick pace, and the action of the story. The physical actions that have led to the narrator's emotional disconnection are shown through the text, and therefore the narrator's detachment might be felt.

The short-short story, "The Execution of Richard Aaron Cobb" is based, in part, on verbatim dialogue taken from a death row inmate before his execution. All of the dialogue that is included in the story is from the Texas Execution Information Center, but the account of the execution itself and the viewpoint of the law student narrator are fictional.⁶⁵ The short-short form contributes to the writing of empathy in this case in that the sole event of the story is the execution. Through the eyes of the narrator, he or she focuses on his or her observations of Richard Aaron Cobb. This is pertinent to writing the representation of the protagonist's view to show the narrator's perspective of the execution. The brevity of the story allows the viewing of the execution through the perspective of the narrator in a limited amount of time so as to facilitate the absorption in the details of the execution.

Unlike "Cat Food", the narrator goes into great detail, using imagery such as "a halo of dirty blonde hair crowns his head, with the shining bulb of his scalp creating the light" (151) and describing his eyes as "dull blue, or green, or grey" (151). The writing allows the visualisation of the scene, down to the "mint-green" fabric of the cot. The event at hand is experienced through the perspective of the narrator without being interrupted or distracted by the narrator's personal characterisation. The only time the narrator's thoughts are included is when he or she thinks wryly, "I wonder why they bother sterilizing the equipment" (151). Here, the text reveals a glimmer of the narrator's personality.

There are two indirect interactions between Cobb and the narrator, and thus a potential reaction to the creative fiction. These interactions are aided by the short-short story format, in that they take place in the middle and at the end of the story, but it does not take an extended amount of time to reach the interactions due to the length of the piece as a whole. The first direct response of one character to another is when the narrator, after the injection is administered, "within seconds" "is speaking again" and states, "I feel the hair stick up from the back of my neck" (151). As Cobb has been viewed through the narrator's perspective, the

⁶⁴ Keen defines broadcast strategic empathy as "emphasiz[ing] common vulnerabilities and hopes through universalizing representations" (Keen 2006, 215).

⁶⁵ Dialogue can be found at: <<http://www.txexecutions.org/reports/496-Richard-Cobb.htm>> (Carson 2013).

narrator's physical reaction can be understood. The second interaction between the narrator and Richard Aaron Cobb is in the second-to-last paragraph, after Cobb has already been executed. The narrator states, "His eyes stare at me, open, wide, and void; his mouth is open in mild surprise" (151). The narrator is interacting with a man who has already died, and the final description is of a dead man's stare. Because of the details in the previous paragraphs, the executed man can be pictured, and his expression can be visualised through the descriptions from the narrator. Originally, the last line of the story involved the narrator dropping out of law school the next day; however, upon assessment of the short-short story and the intended writing effect (by keeping the focus on Cobb instead of the narrator), I believe that the abhorrence of the execution (and perhaps curiosity as to the reason for the execution) should be the aim, without the text force-feeding the narrator's opinion at the end. This echoes the response to postindustrial workers in Wallace's "A Radically Condensed History of Postindustrial Life". A writer or reader might have an opinion on the effects of postindustrialism, just as he or she might or might not agree with the death penalty, yet both stories represent situations in which a controversial topic is confronted in a concise form.

In the next two short-short stories, the idea of belonging in an American society has been thematised in two varying ways to procure empathy for the characters that are excluded. "Franglais" plays on the misconceptions of translations between French and English, and common mistakes that French speakers make when expressing themselves in English.⁶⁶ In this piece, empathy might be more difficult to achieve for the sole reason that unfamiliarity with French-English translation might cause confusion with the references. Keen's observations show that "the context of an audience matters; time and place and moment in history and socio-cultural position do as well..." and they "affect the level of control an author can exert on a reader's response" (Utell 2016, 157). By using the short-short format, however, it is possible to create the general atmosphere and meaning of the story and to convey emotions, yet empathy might be arguably more prevalent in audiences familiar with the story's references. This short-short story focuses on humour as an emotional avenue towards an empathic response, however because of certain references, the readership who could react empathetically may be lessened.

All of the references in "Franglais", apart from the last phrase, refer to errors found in French-English pronunciation and translation: "When I am angry, I want food. When you look funny, it is a compliment. When I have thirty years today, wish me a happy birthday. When

⁶⁶ Franglais defined as "French spoken or written with a large admixture of English words, especially those of American origin" (Random House Inc., 2016).

you miss me, I miss you. When he's a good one, I mean the wine" (143). "Hungry" is often pronounced "angry" by native French speakers, to "look funny" is a common mistranslation meant to mean that someone is an amusing person as well as "having" an age as opposed to being an age, "I miss you" contains "I" as the subject, whereas in French "you" would be the subject of the same phrase, and "he" could refer to an object in French, such as wine. Without knowing these references, the intention behind the narrative could still be apparent. The title is an amalgamation of "French" and "English", therefore the mistakes have an implication of multiple languages or translation.

The final phrase deviates from the rest of the short-short story, in that it refers to a cultural difference instead of a mistake in pronunciation or grammar. Throughout the story, the writing incorporates a particular pattern of the narrator's speech and the theme of the story. For example, there is not a significant difference thematically between confusing "you look funny" or mistranslating "I miss you". There is, however, a shift in the last phrase when the narrator states, "And please, when I ask for a medium steak, bring it to me rare" (143). This refers to a difference between French and American cultures. The humour in this is that, in this case, the word itself has two differing expected results. Because recognising the nature of the references is beneficial in connecting with the piece, this short-short story could be considered an example of bounded strategic empathy. Bounded empathy can be restrictive, however, as it may be difficult for the particular type of empathy to apply to a large audience. In "Franglais", if the narrator's issues with translations within the writing are accessible, there exists the possibility of seeing both the frustration and the humour in the narrator's predicament. This connection is based on background and familiarity with references and French culture.

"Franglais" varies from "Effects of the Minuteman Project" in that the latter takes a more serious tone by addressing the struggles of people considered to be foreign in American society. The Minuteman Project represent a subset of Americans who are adamantly against immigration, especially in protecting the Mexican border.⁶⁷ Keen states that "character identification often invites empathy, even when the character and reader differ from each other in all sorts of practical and obvious ways" (Keen 2007b, 70). By using a short snippet into a situation of a character, a comprehension of what that character is feeling could be present. This differs from "Franglais" in that the references that might be considered alienating, such as "the Minuteman project" or "'Murica" are detailed by the actions and thoughts of the

⁶⁷ In Arizona, the Minuteman Project "has stationed scores of men and women along the Mexican border in a controversial effort to track down undocumented immigrants. The Minutemen take their name from a militia group during the American Revolutionary War" (Goodman 2005).

protagonist.

The protagonist in the story could be considered what Keen refers to as a character inviting ambassadorial strategic empathy.⁶⁸ Through the narrative voice and the descriptions and thoughts of the protagonist, a connection can be formed to a particular person of a represented group, namely an American citizen with Mexican heritage. The concept of "Murica" is introduced, which has a negative connotation laced with ignorance and bigotry in the United States. Within the next few lines, the diners are viewed alongside the protagonist as "breaking", "sopping", and "slurping" their meals. This is an important point within the writing of the short-short story, in that the "light, sweating faces" are consuming the food in front of them. They are partaking in Mexican culture, and yet the protagonist has encountered judgment from the very people who devour his culture's cuisine. He, then, is left to clean the remains of what the pale-faced people have left for him. In only a few sentences, the hypocrisy of the diners and their attitude towards the protagonist is portrayed. This sets up openness to the protagonist's opinion near the end of the short-short story. As the position of the protagonist is understood in relation to the imagery of the diners, it might be easier to connect to the protagonist's voice through the prose.

The protagonist admits that "perhaps he imagines" the diners' eyes on him. This leads to recognition that the protagonist is trying to be somewhat objective in his own perceptions. However, when the protagonist "knows what they are thinking. They do not have to say it, because he has heard it many times before", this shows that the diners' presumed racist observations and opinions have been encountered by the protagonist multiple times, one reason why he might come to the conclusion that the diners are judging him. The last phrase, "*pero él es Americano como ellos*" (141) represents the protagonist embracing his heritage through Spanish.⁶⁹ He can be both American and guard his Mexican culture. Here, Spanish language is introduced in the writing, and is embedded in the mind-set of the protagonist in an ambassadorial fashion. The contrast between the diners and the protagonist, and the imagery and action used within a short period of time help to foster an emotional reaction. This emotional reaction is created through the short-short story's succinct representation of the protagonist as a character who could be considered empathetically ambassadorial.

The final two short-short stories use the concision of the form to experiment with differing structures within the stories (in effect, working in multiple formats) in order to evoke

⁶⁸ Defined by Keen as a type of empathy which "uses an 'ambassador,' a representative to the reader for a chosen group whose job is to cultivate empathy" (Utell 2016, 157).

⁶⁹ "but he is American like them"

an empathetic reaction. The first, "Al Anon Step Work", is structured to mimic the 12 step programme list of Al Anon.⁷⁰ In it, even if unfamiliar with the steps of the programme, the overall tone and scepticism of the protagonist are clear through the writing construct. The short-short story format has the flexibility for the entire story to be written as a list, which might grow tiresome with a longer text and might not necessarily be as direct as a short, twelve-pointed list containing one sentence a piece. The breaks of the story, which could technically be considered segmentation, also create an opportunity to pause after each step and take in what the protagonist has written down (through the written prose).

Within the first three steps, the protagonist's relationship with the addict is represented through the attitude the mother has taken when penning the list. For example, she states "my Higher Power does not seem to be listening to me, nor does he" and "I wish he would turn himself over as well" (144). The mother feels abandoned by her Higher Power and frustrated by her son's lack of participation. In the fourth step, the mother is feeling guilt over the way that her son turned out. The theme of guilt resides through the steps, and not only does the mother feel guilty, but she knows that she makes her son feel guilty. As the steps continue, the mother's emotions of guilt and frustration through her candid and sarcastic responses to the steps are shown through the text. For example, she states "removing a shortcoming seems somewhat oxymoronic" (144) in step seven, which shows that she is being sceptical of the steps and might not be taking them seriously, yet in the next step, she admits that she has only harmed one person, "him". The balance between the sarcastic and the serious creates an unsettled atmosphere.

By step ten, the mother has become completely sober to the fact that she blames herself for the way her son is. The repetition of "I am wrong; I am wrong; I am wrong" (144) drives home the obsessive nature of the mother's guilt. As with Saunders and Wallace's short-short stories, the repetition adds meaning to the work, and is more effective than stating "I am wrong" only once.⁷¹ Here, the repetition signifies the ceaseless, repeatedly defeated attitude that the mother is feeling. In the last step the relationship between the step worker and the addict is a mother and son relationship. This creates the opportunity to go back through the list and re-read the story from the viewpoint of a mother (instead of a friend, girlfriend, wife, etc.). Just as in Saunders' "Sticks", the story can be better understood emotionally on a second reading,

⁷⁰ Al Anon is defined as "a mutual support organization for the families and friends of alcoholics, especially those of members of Alcoholics Anonymous" (Stevenson 2010, 37). The twelve-step list was accessed through: < <http://www.al-anon.alateen.org/the-twelve-steps>> (Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters, Inc. 1996).

⁷¹ Also used in the short-short story, "Happy Birthday".

and the brevity of the short-short story lends itself to immediate re-reading. Finally, the last phrase "that I, that we, could have done better" contains a referential slither with the inclusion of "we". Is the mother referring to other mothers, to her son, or to the audience? This question influences the re-reading of the story, in that not only can the position of the protagonist be comprehended (that she is the mother of an addict), but also the emotions of the protagonist if the slither of "we" is taken into consideration (perhaps leading to the situation of the reference to "we" within the story) can be understood.⁷² Through the application of the short-short story in this case, it is possible to utilise segmentation in a list form to create a brief piece that can be re-read upon finishing.

Finally, "S/W/M Online Profile" plays with the format of an online dating or chatroom site. As with many of Wallace's works, footnotes are amply used. This creates the possibility for multiple ways to read the piece, and (as with "Al Anon Step Work") the propensity to re-read the work. The protagonist might alienate himself from the audience through his descriptions and interests and when pieces of the protagonist's psyche are shown a reaction of aversion or disbelief might be apparent through the text. There may be an empathetic reaction to a situation instead of to a specific character.⁷³

As the writing introduces the meanings of the online jargon, the type of person that the protagonist is portraying himself to be becomes clearer. The most important detail of the story, from a writer's perspective, is its title and the subsequent contradiction of the protagonist. The title refers to the profile as being a "S/W/M" or "single, white male" whereas the first description the protagonist gives of himself is "M/B/F" or "married, black female". By including the footnotes, the protagonist is unreliable from the beginning of the story. This leads to scepticism about whether anything the protagonist says can be trusted. These false self-characterisations can create distrust, and could cause disconnect from the protagonist.

The protagonist's profile becomes increasingly confusing by the third line, with a progression from being interested in "M/F/T" ("male, female, trans") and "S/G/B" ("straight, gay, bi") to lying about his bra size, to going into detail about "BDSM" ("bondage, domination, sadism, masochism"). By the end of the story, the protagonist says he is into anything "OUT THERE" (150) as he is not looking for someone in anything but the virtual world. If the prose has been vague about the fact that the protagonist is male, then upon the second reading, this can act as a clue for the protagonist never intending on showing himself as he has lied about

⁷² The idea of a connection to a character or situation through referential slither is discussed in "II. Narrative Perspectives and Empathy in Short Fiction" and "V. Narrative Perspectives in Practice".

⁷³ This is similar to "The Last Dinner".

who he is.

After reading the story a first time, the short-short story format encourages the re-reading of the story with the footnotes in mind. Additionally, because the entire story takes place on one page, the footnotes can act as a story within themselves. By processing only the footnotes, the progression of the protagonist's claims are represented through the writing. His contradiction is immediately shown, with "Single, white male" placed above "Married, black woman". His content becomes increasingly explicit, ending in "fecal play". The last footnote states "please", as if the protagonist is begging to have someone answer the profile, which is read differently than in the story, when the reference to "pls." is referring to advertisements. The effect is similar to reading the story in its entirety, in that the protagonist's lies and his abnormal interests are represented, and an emotional reaction to the protagonist's character can be seen.

All seven short-short stories involve techniques that can be used to influence empathy. This is related to the "flexibility" of the short-short story format, discussed in "III. Short Fiction Formatting and Empathy", in that Davis' short-short stories vary widely in structure and execution. This form is also an effective way to become immediately involved in the story. In the case of "Happy Birthday", "Cat Food", and "The Execution of Richard Aaron Cobb" an event is viewed that the protagonist experiences. In "Happy Birthday", repetition and direct voice are used to show the position of the protagonist. "Cat Food" uses broadcast strategic empathy by representing an alienated and depressed character, which therefore holds the potential to understand the alienation through the short passage and the detached sentences. The writing in "The Execution of Richard Aaron Cobb" transmits a realistic viewing of a death row inmate's execution, with a relation to the emotions that the protagonist feels through the brief look into the incident. "Effects of the Minuteman Project" focuses on ambassadorial strategic empathy, and the succinct actions and emotions of the protagonist might cause the consideration of the emotional context of his struggle, whereas "Franglais" holds the capacity for bounded strategic empathy in that the references included could appear alienating. This, however, is slightly curbed by the brevity of the story, so that if some of the references are not understood, an empathetic reaction could still exist as the references consist of a few sentences (as opposed to a standard-sized short story that would have references involved over multiple pages). "Al Anon Step Work" uses a list format to represent the protagonist's frame-of-mind to create an understanding about the conflict at hand. As with segmentation, the list creates pauses after each sentence, contributing to the contemplation of the protagonist's situation. "S/W/M Online Profile" plays with the format of the short-short story on the page, relying on footnotes

for full comprehension. This format allows the story to be written on one page, so that the work can be deciphered without footnotes, with footnotes, or only via the footnotes, which enables different readings and perhaps varying perception of the protagonist. Finally, the short-short story provides a flexible way for a writer to experiment with the piece's construction. These seven stories examine various ways in which the short-short story can be used to influence or hinder an empathetic reading.

VII. Conclusion

This creative thesis experiments with creative writing techniques that can influence empathy that have been utilised by contemporary American short fiction writers, including myself. Empathy has been specifically targeted, as an empathetic connection to a character and/or situation have been discussed by literary theorists and within writing theory, but exploring how a writer can implement various techniques in which to create an emotional response has not been explored in depth in regards to the perspectives and formats discussed. As a writer, this connection with narrative text is pertinent in creating works that can resonate with the reader.⁷⁴ The short story format is employed in both the critical analysis of Davis, Saunders, and Wallace and within my creative work due to its rise in literary reputation and its flexible structure in experimenting with a range of devices that can evoke empathy. The thesis offers readings of Lydia Davis, George Saunders, and David Foster Wallace. These authors are chosen because of their focus on the construction of empathy through characterisation through both narrative perspective and format, and for the critical reception they have received involving empathy in their works.⁷⁵

Suzanne Keen's observations on empathy are taken into account when considering empathy and creative writing, namely her work on narrative techniques such as questioning the effectiveness of narrative perspective in empathy. Keen's research stresses the importance of empathy for a character in order to foster altruism in interactions with others. Her research has influenced other narrative theorists' discussions of empathy, including Eva Dadlez and Mary-Catherine Harrison, with Dadlez focusing on perception towards outlying groups after connecting to an outlying character, and Harrison expanding on being able to connect with a character even if bias exists in order to connect to a minority group. Whilst these theorists argue for the importance of empathy through both engagement with writing technique in texts (Keen and Harrison) and engagement with others in their own lives (Keen, Dadlez, and Harrison), they have not discussed in depth how a writer can construct fiction that influences empathy nor fiction that can purposefully alienate a character. Writing theorists (such as Maybury and Morley) have touched on characterisation when creating an empathetic character, but have not focused on multiple uses of perspective and format in this creation. In my thesis, I identify specific writing techniques that can be used to create fictional characters and/or situations that

⁷⁴ Catherine Bush states: "It can be argued that empathy — the act of identifying with another, of imaginatively attempting to enter another consciousness — is at the heart of fiction's power" (Bush et al. 2007).

⁷⁵ The critical acknowledgment of empathy in all three authors' works have been discussed in the Introduction.

resonate empathetically. Keen points to specific literary aspects that have the potential to affect empathy: "narrative situation (including point of view and perspective)" and "aspects of the discourse that slow readers' pace" (Keen 2006, 216). Though there has been critical-literary discussion of empathy in regards to experiences with literature, little research exists on the use of writing tools in the construction of empathy. In my thesis, first-, second-, and third-person narration are researched through the consideration of narrative theorists and the analysis of Davis, Saunders, and Wallace's works. Varying story formats are also discussed, including structures that influence perspective (Q&A format) and forms that affect pace (short-short stories and segmented short stories). These tools have been incorporated in *Fragmented Perceptions: A Collection of Characters* to examine their effectiveness in inviting or disinviting empathy.

My collection of short stories is constructed based on the theoretical and literary analyses. The title of the collection, *Fragmented Perceptions: A Collection of Characters*, refers to the underlying theme of characters' personal perceptions as well as the writing techniques that can affect perceptions of the characters. Consisting of fourteen short stories and one collection of fifteen short-short stories, the pieces experiment with the narrative tools discussed: first-, second-, and third-person perspectives and segmented, Q&A, and short-short story formats. These stories experiment with applying these tools to influence the writing of characters and potential emotional reactions. Through writing the collection, I explore a multitude of ways perspectives and formats can be applied to affect perceptions of characters. The purpose of the creative work is to explore the possibilities of the specified writing techniques used in creating empathy through creative writing and short fiction.

In conclusion, the tools that I have researched and discussed can be used in various ways to represent an empathetic response to characters and situations through writing short fiction. By exploring techniques in *Fragmented Perceptions: A Collection of Characters*, the creative writing can influence a character's personality and/or situation (e.g. the fragmented perceptions of characters within the stories affecting perception of those characters). In order to cultivate empathy for a character, narrative perspective and format can be used, in a creative writing aspect, to influence the perception of both character and situation. It is the *way* in which a perspective or format is implemented that influences empathy, not necessarily the perspective or format itself. As Keen observes, "No one narrative technique assures readers that our empathetic reaction precisely catches the feelings embedded in the fictional characters" (Keen 2006, 222). Keen, Dadlez, and Harrison all state that empathy can lead to altruism in his or her interactions with others' experiences and/or situations; however, neither they nor creative

writing theorists focus on a writer's creation of fiction using various techniques of perspective and format to foster empathy. By approaching this thesis as a creative writer, I address specific narrative techniques that hold the possibility for empathy through my authorial perspective. Examining these techniques through creative practice has enabled me to identify varying applications of narrative perspectives and formats which then can then be implemented by other writers to influence an empathetic response to characters.

Overall, my research has helped me to understand the ways in which narrative perspective and format shape short fiction. As this thesis is from a writer's perspective, I believe that other writers could find my research and analysis useful when creating his or her own short fiction. Though keeping in mind that no one technique guarantees empathy, it could be beneficial for other writers to consider the techniques I have researched in their own works. I also intend to use my analyses in future writing class instruction (courses, workshops, etc.), and have already implemented facets of my research, such as narrative perspectives, whilst lecturing at the University of Lorraine and Sciences Po University (Nancy, France). The students have been receptive to considering the effects of perspective and format, and have been open to the findings in my short fiction experimentation. Finally, I will continue to pursue publishing opportunities for both the short stories and the analytical chapters, six of which have already been accepted for publication, and will continue to contribute to research in writing techniques and narrative empathy.⁷⁶

⁷⁶ These include: "Cardinal", "The Last Dinner", and "On the River's Edge" as well as analytical chapters entitled "Narrative Perspectives and Empathy in Contemporary Short Fiction", "Narrative Empathetic Writing Devices: A Study of Short Fiction Formatting", and "'Ouch! This Sure Herts!' Narrative Perspective and Reader Empathy in George Saunders' Short Fiction".

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