

ABSTRACT

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The stories in *Underground Radio* tell of life in all its forms, be it organic, mechanical, or incorporeal. By making use of the short short story, this collection encompasses the various ways life rises and falls and rises again. “Ascension,” the story of a woman who spends her afterlife as an elevator, captures this rising and falling literally; “The Time My Back was on Television” and the science fiction “Batch 49” explore other life arcs, like the rise to fame and the approach of life’s end. For characters in this collection, life does not end at death: stories like “Valedictorian of the Afterlife” and “Slow Fade” explore the potential conflicts that arise in a life after death. *Underground Radio* broadcasts stories populated by characters experiencing and enduring all stages of real, surreal, or alternate life.

UNDERGROUND RADIO

By

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Ascension

After she died, she awoke to discover that she had become an elevator. Well, not awoke, exactly; it was more like a switch had been thrown somewhere far away. Her cables warmed with electricity, her interior lights flickered. It was the slow unfolding of consciousness. Though the flood of electricity would doubtlessly seem immediate to her passengers, it moved through her like the rumbling of a slow train. She expressed the sensation through the languorous closing of her elevator doors.

There were worse things a former person could be, she supposed, than an elevator.

Throughout the workday her buttons were pressed, and she rose, defying gravity, exhilarated, reaching for heaven, before lowering herself dejectedly down to ground level. For her passengers it was the opposite. As the elevator, elated, whisked them up to their workplace, her cabin was filled with the grumbling and snarling hostilities only heard from those on their way to mundane office drudgery. On the way down at the end of the day, her passengers bounced and tapped their feet, begging her to hurry and release them to their freedom.

No one ever realized that she might rather be ascending than descending, or what all that impatient bouncing felt like. The extra pressure of tapping feet was akin to the forceful elongating of her spine, if she still had one, separating one vertebra at a time.

At night, as the building shut down and the coming and going ceased, the elevator was trapped where she had last been deposited. Electricity hummed through her, demanding that she move, leap, rocket up through the building's top floor and

burst through ceiling, ascending through the clouds and the sky until she reached heaven and whatever came after.

Though she strained, without a passenger she could never do more than flicker her lights. She passed her nights in agony, awaiting her passengers' morning arrival, so she could rise again, straining against the clutches of cables and electricity and gravity, coming so close to freedom, to escape, before someone pressed her call button and dragged her back down again.

The Nanny

“When will you write a story about me?” Nathan asked her as they cut through the forest and down the old dirt road by the light of fading flashlights.

Since the children were in bed and Nathan’s wife, with her wine-induced headache, had elected to stay behind to watch over the house, the nanny had been invited to join Nathan on a walk. They were headed toward the beach, to hear the quiet waves and see the silent stars away from the whirring-bright light of the cottage. Their flashlights glanced over rocks and moss; the nanny thought it was such a shame how they needed light to escape light.

“I don’t know,” she muttered, flustered. She had meant to keep her aspirations to write to herself, but had revealed them in a moment when she had confused fantasy for reality, the first and only time Nathan had come home early, when the kids were still at school, and slipped into her room. She had thought she was something more to Nathan; she had thought Nathan understood her on a deep, emotional level. That’s why she’d shared her desire to write with him as he slid out of her bed and into his slacks. She told him that everything was a story, that the world presented itself as material.

“Is that so?” Nathan had asked, smirking. “How could you make this into a story? Wouldn’t it be a little trite?”

The nanny’s urge to create had curled up on itself like a salted snail when she saw his smirk. She didn’t want to say anything to him, so instead she told him she didn’t know.

“Well,” Nathan said, his smile widening, “I’m sure you’ll find a way to write about me somehow.”

Nathan never came to her again, but she thought he had what he wanted. A way to leverage her, a secret kept from his wife. Little cruelties, little barbs, like this invitation to walk with him to the beach, piled up; at every chance he had, he made her look foolish.

She was sure Nathan and his wife laughed about her behind her back.

Nathan and the nanny switched off their flashlights when they arrived at the beach, the waves of the lake softly licking the shore. Nathan stood by the nanny.

“I’ve never seen so many stars,” she breathed. She hadn’t meant to say the words aloud, especially not in front of Nathan. She heard fabric shift, thought maybe he nodded. They were silent.

Innumerable silver flecks dotted the sky. The nanny wanted to be abducted by them, sucked up through a vacuum hose like in cheesy alien movies.

“Isn’t it crazy that at any second an asteroid could fly in from space and kill us? We could all die one second from now,” Nathan murmured into her ear. His breath was hot, and he spoke as though willing his mad idea into being.

“Stop,” she said. It wasn’t so much thoughts of her imminent death she wished to put to an end, but his voice, his breath pushing its way into her head. He had jarred her from her journey amongst the stars. She wanted the sky to swaddle her spirit again, as it had a moment before, but she had been removed, ejected, from the heavens; instead, her eyes now scanned the stars for telltale signs of asteroids and the impending obliteration of her species, not to mention herself.

His breath tickled her neck.

“Stop it,” she said again.

“Why? It could happen,” he shrugged, relishing her discomfort.

The nanny could imagine Nathan relaying this story to his wife. She could almost hear their laughter as he told his wife how easily he made the nanny uncomfortable, how the wife would not know herself to be deceived.

A branch cracked in the forest behind them and the nanny spun, clicking on her weak flashlight to illuminate the immediate threat, be it wolf or bear or rabid raccoon.

The light exposed nothing but the faintest hint of wind in the trees. With her back to the lake, the hazy safety of the flashlights surrounding her, the nanny could no longer see the stars with all their captivating vibrancy. Nor could she see the asteroid that was likely plunging through the atmosphere, just now, to kiss her full in the face.

Nathan headed back up the beach to the woods. The nanny followed. Her flashlight flickered, and she stumbled over a root. Nathan caught her, steadied her, and she blushed.

Oh, how he and his wife would laugh.

A New Scientific Theory of Health

The Mister and Mrs. adhere to the new scientific theory of health, which states that everyone should have his or her own live-in scientist to attend to their every medical need. Before going to bed, the Mister and Mrs. prepare for a visit from their live-in scientists, as they do every night. They don their special pajamas, which have t-shirt sleeves and holes cut out right over their hearts, the perfect size for inserting the head of a stethoscope. Once they are settled in their bed, their live-in scientists enter the room. Prepared to put an end to the worries they've been hired to prevent, the scientists press their stethoscopes to the chests of the Mister and the Mrs. and listen and nod to the rhythm of their regular heartbeats.

The Mrs. always cringes away from the stethoscope as it approaches her chest, a frigid metal moon. She knows it will not take long for her body heat to warm the stethoscope, but the goose pimples will remain long after her scientist withdraws from the room.

The Mister, however, never flinches or complains.

The scientists listen to the rise and fall and slowing of the patients' breathing. They measure body temperature from small thermometers affixed to the necklines of the patients' pajamas. They draw blood and run tests on small, handheld devices.

The eyebrows of the Mister's scientist twitch down.

Before retiring for the evening, the scientists go into the hall, where they confer in very serious whispers.

The Mrs., who had been so very close to sleep, awakens when she hears the rumbling voices in the hall. The bedroom door is open a crack. The Mrs. watches

the Mister's scientist, illuminated by the light of the hall, gesture and frown. The scientists mutter words like "sample" and "analysis," "preventative treatment" and "possibly malignant." Her husband does not even stir. The Mrs. rubs at the patch of goose pimples on her chest. She feels a chill deep inside, colder even than the stethoscope's wintry kiss.

When the scientists reenter the room to check on their supposedly sleeping patients, the Mrs. feigns a state of dozy tranquility. She convinces herself that she is undisturbed by the ominous conference she overheard. But her heart rate has quickened and her breathing is rapid and, though she feels icy, her body sweats and radiates heat like a small sun. Her thermometer, too, betrays her: she is no longer the deathlike temperature of sleep, and she cannot control the slight tremor that shakes her thin pajamas. Her scientist, disappointed, gazes at her barely open eyelids, adjusts his glasses, and injects a dose of a sleep agent into a port on her exposed arm.

The other scientist draws two more vials of the Mister's blood. The live-in scientists leave the room, closing the door on their way out. The Mrs. jerks, her body feebly resisting sleep as she listens for the sound of the scientists walking down the hall. The scientists will walk to their lab, where they will run a few more tests on the Mister's blood before turning in for the night.

The Mrs. hears their footsteps echoing on and on as dreams come for her. Again her body stills, her breath becomes thick and amphibious, and she sleeps.

Batch 49

We of the 49th batch, the oldest living generation, stretch out on a floor the size of a gymnasium, our fingertips touching. Every twenty-five years, a new batch is born. The next batch, the 52nd, will be born at any minute. As the members of the new batch are dredged up from their vat in a screaming, wailing mass, we will be choked into silence.

Our old bones know it is almost time to go. We have held on long enough, through creaking limbs, broken hips and hearts. It is time for us to leave before we reach our second round of diapers.

We came into the world together, each of us scooped like tadpoles from the same vat. Together, we will exit when the gas descends from the ceiling.

Batch 48 taught us from birth that the Batch system solved the problems plaguing our planet. Our population is now controlled, remaining constant in perpetuity. When we die, our bodies will be ground into paste and used as fertilizer.

We have also discovered, lying on this cold, sterile floor, that the Batch system has eradicated the loneliness from death. They will kill all us old birds in one go.

Around the room, hands reach out to clutch neighboring hands. These hands are our promise that we will not die alone, that at least there will never again be the terror of dying alone.

A clock on the wall flashes red and counts backward from five minutes. The 52nd batch is emerging from the vat. They will have our names and our identity

numbers. The system will continue, perfectly, without fluctuation, in just three hundred seconds.

A few members of the 49th batch sob. Neighbors reach out and touch hair and tears and teeth, groping for a last sensation in the known world. We grasp hands a little tighter and we try not to think too hard on the lives we could be living—for all purposes, those lives are over now—or begrudge those who will soon bear our names and numbers.

The 49th batch approaches extinction, paying the price of living, as every batch does.

The clock hits zero and a shriek like a tornado erupts from the birthing vat in the adjoining room.

Our identities flee us, sucked into the gasping mouths of the infants emerging from vats. But for one brief moment, our identities overlap: we are the people we once were and the people we will be, shared by some wrinkled, screaming shells.

Our hands bruise our neighbors' as the gas descends from the ceiling.

It would have been nice, some of us think, to have some peace and quiet.

But then our last thoughts flicker, are extinguished, and we find that it's true, what we have been taught: The gas smells just like chocolate.

How I Found Out

That woman's got my teeth.

Examined individually, each tooth appears perfectly shaped, but taken together they look slightly feral, their angles vaguely off kilter.

My smile isn't a trait that I'm proud of, but it's just like my father's, so there it is. My front teeth curl under and my canines, thin little slivers of teeth that fall shy of their potential, transition abruptly into molars. It is this, I think—this foreshortening of teeth, these too slender shards of enamel—that lends my mouth its untamed, uncultured, and underdeveloped quality.

That woman sitting over there—two booths away from me at the café—smiles at the waiter with an exact replica of my father's teeth. It's like some warped dentist or poorly qualified horticulturist forced our teeth—this woman's and mine—to grow into a mold taken of my father's.

My father's mouth—that's what my mother says I've got. She means the cursing, of course, but she also means the abundance of teeth crowding a too-small jaw. It's an easy way for her to pass the blame for my faults.

I bet I could guess the exact number of cavities that woman over there has had as a result of her weak enamel: yet another deficiency I inherited from my father. I could even tell you how many of her fillings have eroded and need to be replaced.

I wonder if the waiter she's flirting with can smell the rot wafting from her mouth.

I feel like I've found my identical twin or my double, that I haven't been alive for these past three decades, but that I've been a mirror for somebody else. My jaw

aches from all the grinding my teeth have been doing this last half hour as I've watched my dental doppelganger laugh with the wait staff. I forgot to bring my bite guard, so I know my jaw will pop and click and my TMJ will act up for the rest of the day. But none of that's important.

I called my mom.

There's a woman here, I said, who looks just like me.

This woman, I said, even shares my teeth.

I know, my mother said. And this is how I found out about my father's affair.

Leftovers

The climate scientists have devised a way to halt global warming. They will wrap the polar ice caps in aluminum foil to reflect the sun's heat and rays. Beneath the foil, the poles will cool again, the glaciers will refreeze, and the earth will be saved. A plan so simple, so perfect, so elegantly brilliant, that failure is impossible.

The government, in an act of eminent domain, seizes all privately owned aluminum foil. They conduct raids on houses, gathering up fragments of foil saved for Christmas ornaments or tucked around stringy bits of leftovers in the fridge. No scrap of foil is too small.

Every last bit of privately owned foil will be used to cover the ice caps. As compensation, the government offers its citizens a healthy planet. This is considered to be a fair exchange, though the citizens know they have no alternative.

At the poles, the scientists wear sunglasses to protect their eyes from the sun's blinding metallic reflection. The scientists labor to tuck the earth's ice beneath a blanket of foil. The earth will soon begin to cool.

Before the scientists leave, they ram a few thermometers into the ice beneath the foil. From home offices, they will remotely monitor the temperature for signs of progress.

The scientists shower each other in a congratulatory spray of champagne before giving a teleconference in which they instructed all citizens to break out their sweaters.

And so at home the citizens sit, sweaters draped on their laps, waiting for the first hint of a chill, a sign that the scientists' plan has worked and that it is time to don

their sweaters. In their neighborhoods the temperature has not perceptibly changed, but folks begin to feel colder on the inside.

The scientists attribute this feeling, mainly, to the general public's inability to keep their leftovers warm, given the absence aluminum foil.

Though the temperature remains unchanged, the citizens pull on their sweaters to mask the chill in their gut. They pluck at their sweaters, disguising their discomfort with the feeling that nags at them, the one that says the climate scientists have actually managed to turn the world's polar ice caps into giant baked potatoes, trapping the heat inside and cooking the earth more quickly.

The citizens ignore the sweat moistening their spines, and wait for the scientists to report that the temperature has, in any way, changed.

Gacy's

“Welcome to Gacy's!” the sales associate, with skin softer and more supple than a toddler's, greets Johanna and her smooth-faced, teenage son at the door. “How may I help you love the skin you're in?”

Johanna glances around, taking in the racks of limp, fleshy suits that crowd the store. She leans in to whisper to the sales associate.

“I need a change,” she tries to laugh, but it does not mask her desperation, or how close she is to tearing up. She tugs at the loose skin on her jaw, which jiggles. “Look at me! It's like I'm melting!”

The sales associate nods sympathetically, as though she doesn't hear variations of the same comment daily. What other reason would there be for a person to shop at Gacy's?

“Mom,” Johanna's son interrupts, “You look fine. Can we leave now?”

“That's sweet of you to say, it really is, but—” Johanna's throat constricts, as she wishes her skin would, and she can't continue. It would be years before he'd understand how it felt to vanish within the folds of his own skin.

The associate, sensing a sale, wraps her arms around Johanna's shoulders and shares a glance with her. “This is for you,” she says. “Your son can't possibly understand that this is something that you need to do for yourself.”

Johanna feels that the sales associate has examined her soul and knows her deepest thoughts. With the associate so close, Johanna can't help but examine the woman's pores. Microscopic. Her wrinkles. Nonexistent.

“How old are you?” she breathes.

The sales associate smiles. "Over fifty."

Johanna holds back a gasp. At fifty, she didn't recognize herself in the mirror anymore. She no longer looks at her reflection, in fact refuses to, unless her face is slathered in anti-aging foundation.

Her teary voice solidifies. "I deserve this."

"That's right, you do." The associate gives her shoulder a pat and guides Johanna over to the racks. "Now what sort of skin are you looking for? We use only the skins of young boys. They're less volatile, less influenced by hormonal fluctuations than girls' skins, of course, and they're all painlessly stripped from the donor. Do you have a model in mind?"

Johanna's son, slumped against the wall by the fitting room, calls out to her as she passes.

"Mom, please let's just go."

"Please give your mother some time to decide," the sales associate addresses Johanna's son. "This is a very important process for her. Of course," she says, turning back to Johanna, "we also make custom suits for the best fit from a donor of your choosing. We find our customers are even more satisfied with custom suits."

"Yes," she says. "I think I'd like to go with a custom suit."

Johanna smiles, and she feels the skin around her mouth sag into familiar wrinkles. She will be rid of them soon.

"We'll just select a suit from one of our racks that closely approximates your desired appearance, for fitting purposes. If you leave your donor with us, we can schedule your procedure for next week."

The saleswoman rifles through a rack of loose, golden brown skins.

In the dressing room, she sews Johanna in and marks the measurements on the suit with dotted lines and hash marks. She uses a permanent marker.

“The best part about this suit is that anything washes off!” The woman says, and laughs. Johanna joins her. It is easy to appreciate the resilience of human skin when it is not covered in loose flaps and wrinkles.

The measurements complete, Johanna admires herself in the mirror. She can close her eyes to the markings all over her body in a way she never can with the wrinkles. Even though the hood of the suit covers her hair, and two large Xs mark excess skin on her cheeks, she can tell she is beautiful.

She will be truly stunning once her hair is threaded, strand by strand, through the scalp of her new suit.

The saleswoman leaves Johanna to undress. When she exits the fitting room, Johanna finds the saleswoman measuring up her son.

“You brought him in at the perfect height,” she remarks to Johanna. “Let me guess, is he sixteen? You’re lucky puberty seems to have gone easy on him. We’ll have to stretch the skin a bit for your breasts, but you could not have asked for a more flattering match.”

Two orderlies appear at her son’s side and grip his upper arms. He finally comprehends the situation.

“Mom, you’re beautiful, don’t you know that?” he says, but the compliment falls flat. Her son, she thinks, has always used her like that, flattering to get what he

wants, to get out of trouble. But Johanna knows what she sees in the mirror. She knows her son is lying. In that moment, she despises him.

The sales associate begins to guide Johanna from the store.

“We’ll see you in a week, to fit you with your suit and return your son!” The sales associate says when she’s seen Johanna safely to the exit. Johanna doesn’t think to ask in what condition her son will be returned. Skinless, wrinkled, in a box: she’s not sure she cares.

Johanna thanks the saleswoman. As she drives home, Johanna loses herself in visions of her exotic new life in her youthful skin. She pictures herself looking as beautiful and fresh as the saleswoman. Just once, Johanna forgets her true appearance and glances at her reflection in the rearview mirror.

Ashamed, she looks away.

I Have Nothing Left to Say to You, and so I Say This

“I told mom about your employer-matching 401(k) account,” I said to my fiancé over the phone. He had gone to Canada for the week on his first business trip with his new company.

“What?” He sounded indignant, almost outraged. “Why did you tell her that?”

“Well, why not?” I asked.

“It’s just,” he paused, “do you really have so little to say that you told your mother about my retirement account?”

“I’d like for her to know we plan ahead,” I said, more to offer a response than to justify the conversation with my mother. Truthfully, I did not have a reason to tell her. I didn’t have a reason not to, either.

Before I went to sleep, I called my mother to tell her about the fight. I told her that I thought that my fiancé’s real question should have been: do the two of us have so little to say that we talk to each other about me talking to my mother about my fiancé’s retirement account?

Even though that night was my first alone in over a year, I fell asleep easily in our half-empty bed.

Motherhood

I knew two things about babies: that I should submit their pictures to contests, and that I should always support their necks.

I could never remember that second thing.

The baby screamed in its cradle the moment my phone began to ring. This happened so often that I thought about changing my ring tone to a recording of the screaming baby to create some sort of stereo effect.

Pick up the baby first, then the phone, I told myself. That's the responsible order.

Grabbing the baby in one hand, I answered my phone with the other.

"Hello?" I said, masking the horror in my voice as the baby's neck flopped back. Usually I remembered to catch its head, but this time my other hand was full.

"Congratulations!" A woman's voice said. "Your baby has been chosen to be featured in the annual parenting issue of our magazine!" The woman provided details on photo shoots, potential scholarships, and the bright future of today's child models. I made the appropriate appreciative noises—I was properly enthusiastic—but it became harder to hide my revulsion.

The baby's neck was stretching like it was made of Silly Putty. Its head drooped lower and lower, first by three inches, then six, then a whole foot.

"Aren't you thrilled?" The woman asked. I must not have sounded excited enough.

The baby's head almost touched the floor by the time the woman hung up, promising to call back soon with details on baby's first photo shoot.

Setting down my phone, I reached to reel in the baby's head, but its neck had stretched too thin and its head tore off.

I left the baby alone for a minute while I went to find super glue.

My phone rang again, and I answered. It was my mother calling to check in on me and the baby.

"Sounds like it's quiet there," Mom said.

"I think the baby's sleeping," I told her, pausing my delicate work. I was reattaching tendons and veins in a taffy-like neck with dabs of the super glue. "But we won a contest!"

Except for the excess neck looped around my legs, the baby looked picture-perfect, with smooth complexion and full, dimpled cheeks.

"They couldn't have picked a more beautiful baby," my mother said.

I pieced together the larynx last. After the final drops of glue sealed the baby's throat, its mouth and eyes flew open.

My baby grinned at me, gurgling and cooing. I wrapped her neck around mine, like a scarf, and carried her to the mirror so we could practice poses for our photo shoot.

The Cure for Loneliness

The inventor took each of his meals in front of the flat, lifeless television panel mounted to his wall, just as he had with his mother, when she was still alive. This was before she'd died from Alzheimer's, when the inventor had invited her into his bachelor's home, volunteering to be her caretaker.

The inventor purchased a high-definition, big-screen T.V. after his mother passed away. One of her few lucid complaints dealt with watching her favorite shows on the same television she'd sent the inventor to college with in the mid-'80s.

Not buying her a new television was one of his few regrets.

But this purchase had been a mistake; he had been naïve, even, to think that life-sized images and a so-called realistic picture would bring him comfort. The too-bright, unrefined light blinded him. It was light that belonged in a lab: clinical, sterile, dead.

Televisions, the inventor thought to himself, were never meant to develop like this. They should have evolved beyond novelty, beyond entertainment, to the point where they comforted the lonely. Instead, the flickering light of his television cut into him, dissecting him, when only a soft, comforting touch was needed.

The inventor, struck with an idea, moved his television into his work room. He disassembled the 150 inch panel. His first step would be to reassemble the television's casing. Heating up the plastic, he molded the casing into a soft, egg-shaped ellipse. He left a hatch open in the top, through which he entered the egg to adjust tubes, wires, and displays.

Once the shell was made, the inventor set about making a flexible screen out of a meshy nylon, to which he affixed microscopic electronic nodes which would project the picture. Flexibility, though, was essential when building a form-fitting, egg-shaped screen.

The inventor climbed into the shell and connected the screen. It was time to test his design: if the television did not work now, the whole experiment would be for nothing. He plugged in the egg. A beacon of light and sound blasted from the shell.

It was time, now, for his true touch of genius.

The inventor climbed back into the egg with a jar of stem cells in his hand. Removing the lid from the jar, he dipped a paint brush into the solution and smoothed an even layer of cells over the screen until it glistened.

He climbed out, resting his palm on the eggshell. It was a gesture he could almost call love.

The inventor kept the television running so that the cells could grow in the flickering warmth. He left his laboratory and closed the door behind him. He would not look until three months had passed and the cells had grown. He could not bear the possibility that his project would fall apart before him, that he would have to watch and be helpless, able to do nothing to save it. Each night, as he waited for his machine to grow, he stared at the cold, white patch of wall where his television used to be. Not even as he slept did he dare to dream of his new machine.

When the three months came to an end, the inventor approached his workshop and slid open the door. His eyes fell on the egg, which glowed with a soft light. The inventor undressed and climbed into the egg feet first, closing the hatch behind him.

His worries were allayed at once.

The spongy membrane coating the screen swelled when it touched his warm flesh. The membrane molded to his body, cushioning him, embracing and holding him. All around him the television pulsed with indistinct images, distorted by the membrane. The inventor saw only hazy patterns in dancing, rosy light that somehow felt more real, more alive. Noise, too, was distorted, reaching the inventor only as a susurrant murmur of muted tones whose vibrations gently massaged his flesh.

His television, at last, was alive and warm and real.

The inventor, curled in a ball, nuzzled into the pulsing screen. The screen's membrane engorged to fully encase him. Closing his eyes against the soft flickering light, he allowed the egg to rock him to sleep.

The Suit

Harold's wife read too many news reports about home invasions. Older women in particular were susceptible, she told him, and their vulnerability made them the most desirable targets, so she ordered the suit for protection. A personal security system that clung to his wife like a silver stocking, the suit would sound an alarm if any breathing, heat-emitting life form infiltrated a customizable radius.

When she bought the suit, Harold was perplexed.

"But would anyone really attack you if I'm around?" He asked as he watched her try on the suit in front of their dresser mirror. She squeezed her legs through constrictive openings and sucked in her wobbly belly. The suit manufacturer guaranteed more accurate protection the closer the fabric clung to the skin, so she'd ordered a small.

"Please," she said, pausing in her struggle. Her left arm was nearly sheathed in the clingy fabric. She dismissed Harold's flabby muscles, age-spotted skin and stiff joints in one glance. "What good could you do? You wouldn't even hear an intruder without your hearing aids, or over the sound of your own snoring. I'd be dead before you could wake up."

That night, promptly at eight p.m., his wife activated the suit for its trial run. She set her suit's threat radius to six inches. This meant no touching: no stroking of the hair, no caressing the waist or hand-holding. Harold's wife curled up on the far edge of the bed and he watched her back from a safe distance.

Harold inched closer to his wife as she slept, pretending he could spoon her, press into her soft back, and kiss her shoulder. As he caressed the air around her

body, he had one of his increasingly elusive erections. The bulge in his boxers crept outward, penetrating by a hair the safety bubble surrounding his wife.

The suit erupted into shrieking alarms; his wife shot up, clutching her chest and gasping before noticing the sheepish look on her husband's face.

She made him call the security company to explain why they needed the alarm disabled.

After that, his wife took the company's advice, and they returned to bed to sleep with a pillow between them.

If he ever had an erection again, Harold wondered, would the suit sense the danger pressing through the pillow barrier? He liked to think that his wife might let him touch her, if he asked. Perhaps she could leave the suit off, just for a few hours, so that he could at least reach out and run a finger down her spine as they drifted off to sleep.

It didn't seem like the right time to ask.

Instead, as he lay awake, sleepless, his wife snoring beside him, Harold ran his hand along the edge of the pillow. Some small part of him hoped that the suit would feel the change in pressure, detecting the pressing threat of intimacy in the vicinity. If he managed to set the alarm off again, this time he would pretend to be startled awake. His wife would turn to him for protection and comfort, not realizing that he was the trigger. He kneaded the pillow a bit more firmly, picturing how he would hold her, protecting her from the threat of himself in the dark.

Halitosis

June had only ever managed to produce children who suffered from halitosis. Her own breath never smelled worse than a bit stale, like a piece of bread one would save to throw to the ducks. June blamed her husband for the halitosis. Though at first sniff his breath smelled of freshly turned dirt, something foul and fungal lurked beneath the earthy odor. He was surely the cause of her children's rotten breath.

June wanted to love her children, but she could see nothing of herself behind that impenetrable haze emanating from their rotten mouths. Every evening, she supervised them as they gargled with mouthwash, and she brushed their tongues until they gagged. Nothing diminished the nauseating stench.

Her husband claimed he couldn't smell a thing. June took his oblivion as evidence that the children had inherited their halitosis from him.

The smell of the children's breath pervaded the house, the condensation of their collective exhalation coating the walls in a thin, grimy film. The furniture exuded the odor of the festering children in a thick puff if June sat down too quickly.

Four months after the birth of her last child, June discovered she was pregnant again. She always experienced a heightened sense of smell during pregnancy.

"The smell of one more will kill me," June whispered to her husband when she told him she was expecting, cutting short his joy. She clutched the sides of her slowly growing belly as if to shelter the small ears inside from her words. June tried her best to never let the children know that she didn't love, couldn't love them, and that it was because of their breath.

Her husband shook his head, but said nothing. After all, she was pregnant. Emotional hysteria was to be expected. He took their children outside to play, wheeling the littlest out in the stroller, to give June a break from their alleged stench. Before he sent them inside to hear the exciting news from their mother, he distributed breath mints to each of the children, except for the baby, whom he held at a distance from June and the other children. June appreciated the gesture, but the hint of mint mingled with the halitosis produced a sickeningly sweet smell. When the children left her to resume their play, June rushed to the bathroom to vomit. Her husband blamed morning sickness.

The day June's water broke, June eagerly waved goodbye to her children as her husband drove her to the hospital and away from the smell of decay that filled her home. She hoped for a long, arduous labor. It would feel like a vacation, a respite from her children's overpowering odor.

June expected the birth of her new daughter to be similar to the births of her other children. She would hold the child, feigning delight and love, suppressing the urge to gag as the child's inevitably disgusting breath crept up her nose.

But when her daughter, still sticky and covered in fluid and blood, opened her mouth to wail, a sweet, yeasty smell, the smell of warm, fresh bread, flowed from the child's mouth. Intoxicated, June refused to relinquish her daughter to her husband. After so many children who mirrored her husband, looked like her husband, acted like her husband, smelled like her husband, June finally had a daughter all her own, a child whose breath smelled just like June's, only better.

At home the walls still harbored the stink of halitosis, but June had a new perfume to mask the seeping stench. June's other children ran to greet their mother and new sister. The former baby toddled over with his father's help. June raised her daughter to her nose and inhaled deeply. With the heavenly smell of her baby's breath lingering in her nose, June could even smile at her other children as she bent down and introduced them all to April.

All to Pieces

She fell to pieces, bit by bit. The first part to fall off was her toe. She had woken up to discover her little baby toe, a tiny nub, rolling around loosely in her sheets.

She stared at the toe, but before she could decide what to do, Ginger leapt on the bed and slurped the toe up.

It disappeared in one bite.

The next to go were her knees. She was standing in line at the grocery store when her knee caps slid down her pant legs and tumbled onto the floor. She looked on, horrified, as the cashier swooped to pick them up, glowering at her.

The cashier rang up the knees as peaches before having the woman escorted from the store. Since she had lost her knees, she could no longer bend her legs, and so waddled and swung her legs to the side in wide arcs in order to walk. She tried not to blush as the store's patrons stared.

It came as no surprise to the woman that her calves and feet went next. Without her knees, her lower legs atrophied from disuse, and fell away when her date pushed her on a swing. As she arced up toward the sky, her legs detached and flew away as though on jet propulsion. They landed in a sandbox thirty feet away.

Her date, of course, ran away screaming. She has not heard from him since.

The woman, now legless, used her arms to haul herself home. She was disappointed that her legs had not flown farther, had not launched into outer space. If she was to lose her legs anyway, it would have been nice to have at least broken some record.

Though her loss of limbs was quantifiable and easily chronicled, it was impossible for the woman to say exactly when she began to lose pieces of her mind.

Underground Radio

Margaret Elizabeth had two radio antennae growing from the top of her head. Each antenna was capped with a small satellite dish.

“Margaret Elizabeth,” acquaintances ventured after getting to know her for some time, “are you aware that you have radio antennae on your head?”

At this question, Margaret Elizabeth would sigh. “Actually, they’re horns. But I can see how you’d get confused.”

“Ah,” the acquaintances would reply.

The subject of her additional appendages rarely came up again. For this, Margaret Elizabeth was grateful. As the daughter of Beelzebub, Margaret Elizabeth needed no additional reminders of the ways she disappointed her father.

“How did you end up with such useless horns?” Beelzebub moaned, after slurping a few too many souls. His own horns, perfect spirals tipped with menacing points, gleamed in Hell’s flickering firelight. “If you try to head-butt anybody, your horns will snap off!”

At this, Beelzebub often began to cry.

Never mind that Margaret Elizabeth had gotten into Yale, where she had learned how to use her headgear to broadcast a very influential radio program devoted to the worship of her father, and graduated summa cum laude.

When her father was her age, he was still sucking blood from the necks of goats.

“I fault myself in your upbringing,” Beelzebub said, drying his tears. “I should never have sent you to study abroad on the surface. Too much exposure to

humans and not enough goat blood. Even that watery grave Atlantis would have been better for you.” Beelzebub choked and began blubbing all over again.

Of course, Margaret Elizabeth knew some of his concern was well placed. Her father had usurped the old Lord of Hell in a head-butting match, and had continued to fight his way through underworld diplomacy. If Margaret Elizabeth ruled in such a way, when her time to rule eventually came, her horns would snap off sooner or later. Likely sooner. And a ruler without horns was a dead ruler.

Still, Margaret Elizabeth couldn't help feeling irritated and hurt. She had just graduated in May, and already she had thirty thousand souls exclusively under her domain.

Beelzebub's sobbing changed to hiccups as he drifted into a drunken sleep. Margaret Elizabeth slipped off to her room to concentrate on her evening broadcast.

She played the shrieks of tortured souls from the tar pits to improve her mood. Her antennae buzzed, and she noted with satisfaction that she'd gained five new souls.

Margaret Elizabeth's rule would be different. She would broadcast her way to the top.

If she played her radio station just right, in a few years she would have enough souls to overthrow her father and claim Hell as her own.

The Lake

I once held hands with a man as he drowned. He had cinderblocks chained to his ankles, his arms extended toward the surface of the lake, like a baby who waits for his mother to pick him up.

I watched as he was thrown into the water; I watched his murderers drive away. Then I dived in after him and clung to his reaching arms. I always wanted to know how it felt to float in reverse, to be irresistibly dragged to the bottom of the water.

The man's eyes crinkled with relief when I gripped his forearms. He thought I was trying to save him.

I crinkled my eyes back at him, my body slack, as we journeyed together to the bottom of the lake, past trailing strands of weeds and particles of algae.

His eyes widened in panic when he realized I would not save him. A jet of bubbles burst from his nostrils.

Bad idea, I wanted to tell him; but I would conserve my own air.

The man clawed at my arms, attempting to use my limp, drifting body as a ladder to haul himself that much closer to the surface. I remained calm and allowed him to try. When his struggle ceased, I grew tired of floating to the bottom of this never-ending lake. I released my grip on the drowning man, and kicked off his shoulders to launch myself to the surface.

I did not look back to see that we were propelled in opposite directions, that, at least momentarily, I hastened his descent.

I did not hear the man nestle softly on the muddy bottom.

For all I know, the lake has no bottom, and the man has been floating ever since.

The Neighbors in the Mirror

It would not be a Wednesday night if we did not watch our neighbors, fighting in the mirror. As usual, a bottle breaks first. It was thrown from the kitchen, where there are no mirrors, so we cannot see who threw the bottle at whom. But, in the mirror above our living room's electric fireplace, the one that reflects our sliding glass doors, patio, and the apartment across the alleyway, we do see the pale bottle exit the kitchen and somersault through the air.

When we hear the glass shatter, we know the moment has come for us to enter the bathroom, one at a time, to watch the neighbors in the mirror. The woman washes wine, the last of the 2004 Chianti, and shards of glass from her palm. The man appears, and they scream and slap and claw at each other.

The man grips the woman's wrists—her palm still bleeds—and the woman kicks; this is our cue to run from the bathroom to the bedroom. On our way, we'll pass the full-length mirror in the hall. The neighbors always take the same path, bathroom-hall-bedroom. We must be at the full-length mirror in time to see the man and woman pass by.

In the mirror, the man walks backwards, dragging the woman, still gripping her wrists. Blood covers his left cheek—his blood or hers, we do not know—and she cries around a newly blackened eye. We hate it when the action takes place where we cannot see it.

Tonight, though, we are in luck. The man has become distracted; he does not watch where he walks. In the hall, he trips over the drop-leaf table, a replica that mimics our own, and falls to the floor.

The woman, released, dashes to the bedroom, and we follow. She is quick, but we have never missed the moment in our dresser mirror, when our neighbors tear at each other, hair and clothes coming undone, shredded, cascading to the floor. The neighbors, naked, collapse on the bed and pant and moan and scream a scream that sounds, to us, like love.

We fall asleep in each other's arms, a mirror of our neighbors' pose, to the flickering blue of the television program that we—and our neighbors—always watch.

Crop Circles

I've begun to wake up with patterned stains on my tongue. Dark red whorls and streaks of light brown. Looks like meat that's been left out and aged slightly.

I examine these patterns in the mirror daily. The red swirls change, but the brown lines are constant. They used to fade overnight, as my tongue repaired itself.

Now, it seems, they've become permanent.

I try brushing them off, but no amount of tongue scrubbing works.

My friend's a veterinarian, so I show him the markings. They're just too weird to take to the dentist. My friend, peering into my mouth, blinks his eyes once.

"And you said it doesn't hurt?" he asks.

He tells me that the markings look like brandings he's seen on animals.

Owners thinking they're clever and funny, stamping their property with some symbol, usually obscene, like an animal is nothing more than stationery. The brown lines, my friend says, are areas where my tongue has been seared through. It's dead, he says.

Those strips of tongue are dead.

"And you're sure you never felt any pain?" he is skeptical now.

My mouth tastes of rot. A symptom of cavities, I know, but I have none of those. The whorls go away for a bit, then reappear in a series of circles arranged along the brown, branded lines.

The brown never changes.

Whenever there's an alteration to the whorls and circles, I email pictures to the vet.

He never responds, but I get read receipts when he opens my emails.

The vet won't take my calls anymore. He suspects I've branded myself, and would like to place some distance between himself and my self-mutilation.

I think that maybe I miss having him in my life, that maybe he was almost more than a friend.

I call him again, to see whether I can get through, to suggest dinner. I'm surprised he answers. Even more surprised when he says yes.

On the day of the date I wake up and examine my mouth, as usual.

My tongue is gone, severed cleanly from my mouth. I never realized a mouth could be such an empty, cavernous place. All that remains is a shiny, cauterized stump at the back of my throat. I feel like my mouth was empty all along.

Leaving the house, I slip a notepad and pencil into my purse.

I wear a low cut red dress, purchased for a friend's bachelorette party, to make up for being perceived, I'm sure, as uncharacteristically taciturn. I never dress this way. I feel scandalous, and a little bit sad that, without my tongue, I cannot tell off the catcallers who shout at me as I walk down the street.

My tongue is gone. I don't know how it happened, I write as I wait at the table for my date. My date. It feels right to call him that.

Hey, I think, trying not to be too hopeful too soon. Maybe something good will come out of this whole tongue business.

When he arrives, I show him the note. He asks to see. I open my mouth. He peers inside it for a long time, as though my tongue could possibly be hiding anywhere.

"What are those markings on your cheeks?" he says, finally.

I raise my eyebrows at him.

“There are lines on the inside of your cheeks,” he tells me.

I excuse myself and go to the bathroom to look in the mirror. Arrows and lines dot the inside of my cheeks, like a blueprint. Most of the arrows point down the back of my throat.

I return to the table to discover that the vet is gone. I pay for his meal and leave.

Pork jowls. A cruel joke.

I’m glad I only ordered ice water.

At home, I put on pajamas and brush my teeth. Even with my tongue gone, I can tell my mouth still tastes of rot. I think that maybe the lesson here is to be more hygienic. I scrub at the lines inside my cheeks, but that only makes them seem to glow. I fall asleep watching old silent films.

My doorbell rings and wakes me up. It’s the vet.

“Look,” he says. “Your whole tongue business freaks me out, but I want to help you.” We have to solve this mystery, he says. I am a medical conundrum, and he feels compelled to help me. He mentioned me to his friend who works for the government, very hush hush, and the friend will assemble a team of experts on the supernatural, the medical, the psychological. He looks a little embarrassed when he mentions the last bit. But, he says, no avenue can be ruled out. He really, really wants to help me.

This makes us blush.

“I feel awful for running out on dinner, so I brought you some chicken noodle soup. We can strain out the noodles. I don’t know if it’s safe for you to eat them without—” he trails off.

A tongue, we both think.

All is not yet lost. All is not beyond hope. I have not yet given up. I have, after all, lost only one organ, as far as we can tell.

I still have my teeth, I write. To prove it, I grin with both rows.

Night Watch

Tony hated working nights in the Surrealist wing, all those paintings with distortions and colors too jarring for real life. Misshapen eyes leered at him; skewered heads on stakes grinned from their wall mounts. Even in the day this place was nightmarish.

The black shadow of a bird trailed behind Tony as he completed his rounds of the floor.

His circuit began and ended with birds. *What was it with the surrealists and birds?* The painting that began his walk of the room filled him with a horror that never abandoned him; even when the museum curators rearranged the room, they never moved this painting from its position at the wing's entry.

Two men stood foregrounded in the painting. The men wore loose robes, pale chests exposed and muscular, like Greek statuary. Their heads, though; it was their heads that made Tony shiver. Instead of heads, large, crow-like birds, wings poised for flight, crowned the bodies. Their talons gripped the torso where the men's necks should be. Rivulets of blood dripped garnet necklaces down the men's chests. The birds were angled so that one of their eyes examined the other bird, while the other focused on the viewer of the painting. Rows of fangs lined their parted, sneering beaks.

Tony had never seen such a bird, and he doubted one even existed, yet the birds were so lifelike. Only well-placed brushstrokes seemed to restrain these birds to their canvas, trapping their screeches in the back of their throats.

In the museum, the avian shadow trailing Tony was joined by another. Grazing talons pricked the nape of his neck whenever he passed the painting. Tony resented the no-account artist from the early twentieth century and his demonic vision. This work seemed to be a torment designed especially for him, so terrifying that he shivered when so much as a pigeon's shadow slid over him in the street.

The birds' shadows perched on the edge of a wooden frame, halted in silent communication. Tony rounded a corner. The shadows flapped their wings and followed.

Tony felt the pinch on his neck and tried—as he always did—to dismiss it. It was only the specter of the painting pursuing him into a new gallery. But the pinch tightened, and Tony cried out in pain. His right side went limp before a second set of steel talons pierced his left shoulder, just above his collarbone.

His flashlight clattered to the floor, and Tony crumpled. Before he passed out, his cheek pressed to the cold tile, Tony looked for his assailants. The flashlight's beam illuminated only the feeblest outline, the flick of a wingtip, a hazy shadow on the wall.

Then the shadows dispersed like windblown feathers as Tony lost consciousness.

He awoke to the persistent squawk of the museum's alarm. His head pulsed, and Tony raised his hands to his ears to block out the noise.

One black feather grazed his fingertips.

Tony tried to sit up, but he could not move. He was wedged against a corner of the hall; blood from his shoulders' puncture wounds seeped through his shirt.

The alarms continued to echo, unmuted, around the vacant hall. The Surrealist wing had been stripped of every painting, every sculpture, every work of art, except the one that hung before him: the painting of two birds perched where two heads should be. The paint oozed, fresh and wet, its colors brighter, more vibrant than before.

Tony could not look away.

The Last Perfect Person

The Last Perfect Person was placed on a pedestal in the National Museum so that everyone could admire her. It was impossible to remember a time when Perfect People actually walked the earth and lived normal daily lives. The rest of the Perfect People had managed to die off many years ago, most from the shame of discovering some perceived crack in their otherwise flawless veneer. Of all the Perfect People who had once existed, this woman was the only one left.

She mounted her pedestal at eight a.m. and stood there, immobile, a perfect statue, until the museum closed at six. Throughout the day, cameras recorded and broadcast her perfection so that people around the globe could observe the Last Perfect Person's every Perfect breath.

At six, the cameras shut off and the Perfect Person stretched. She never tired of standing for so many hours at a time. She never even had to go to the bathroom.

She was, after all, Perfect.

But on this day, when the Last Perfect Person descended from her pedestal, she did the most imperfect thing she'd ever done in her life.

The Last Perfect Person slipped, and her ankle shattered like a pane of glass.

A Perfect Person in pain was unheard of. The notion that a Perfect Person might ever do something to call her perfection into question was at the very least impossible, as such a being would, quite simply, be Normal. The museum staff never had cause to suspect they had a flawed being on their hands, and consequently had never planned for imperfection. The security guard had gone home for the day; the museum was empty and would remain so until the following morning, which is

exactly when the museum patrons discovered the Last Perfect Person on the ground at the base of her pedestal, clutching a purple and swollen ankle.

The patrons covered their children's eyes and averted their own, although they couldn't help looking out of their periphery. It was rare to witness a tragic extinction first hand, and these patrons, present on this historic day, would be able to frame their museum passes to show their friends, to boast in suitably horrified tones how they had been there that day, how they had actually *seen* the Last Perfect Person's demise.

The curator retched when he entered the room and saw the Last Perfect Person so imperfectly positioned on the ground.

Wiping his mouth, he called for the live streaming cameras to be cut, summoned the janitors, and began issuing refunds to everyone who had come to see the Last Perfect Person. This last act was his attempt to stave off bad publicity and lawsuits for emotional damages.

The janitors, when they arrived, hauled the Last Perfect Person up by her armpits and dragged her out of the building, all the way to the dumpster, where they lifted the lid and heaved her in. Only when the lid slammed down on top of her did the former Perfect Person let out an audible whimper, but the janitors did not hear her, as they had already returned to the hall, and were busy mopping the floor around the Last Perfect Person's pedestal.

All the Perfect People were gone now, dead and gone, which was a shame. The Last Perfect Person's empty pedestal depressed the patrons and staff, hastening the curator's arrangement to fill the pedestal with a taxidermy eagle, or some old vase. Something stable, anything to take their minds off what used to stand in the

room: that impressive, immobile presence, the ideal toward which Normal people could strive, the standard against which they could measure themselves.

Until the replacement could be found in storage, the pedestal remained empty, the floor just a little too clean.

Posture

You have personally offended me with your shoulders. They are far too slumped and rounded, and your head jutting out from their rounded mound is obscene!

The sight of your shoulders curving under the weight of you giving up, receding within yourself, sickens me.

I suggest seeing a doctor for some prescription-strength shoulder pads.

Perhaps, if you were squarer, I could stand the sight of you. Learn to mask your weakness, your body's obvious inclination toward dejection, cowering, and succumbing, before you dare to bring yourself before me again.

High School Crush

Once her homework was finished and she'd helped her mother clean the dinner dishes, Catherine passed her evenings clicking through photos of her crush. She longed to press her lips against the man's small mouth, to feel his wispy mustache brush her upper lip. His muddy eyes absorbed her: they were a perfect blend of the blue of his Mediterranean shore and the dust of his Middle Eastern deserts.

Catherine ignored the ping of arriving Facebook messages from her friends. She was busy now, planning for her future. Her friends only ever pestered her with photos of supposedly hot celebrities she'd be expected to pore over and adore with them. Though the freshest teen sensations meant nothing to Catherine, she knew that if she opened her friends' messages she would indulge in their obsessions, all the while hating herself for it. Just looking at other men—if these heartthrobs even earned the word—felt like cheating, and Catherine was becoming impatient with these immature, superficial infatuations.

The men her friends chose to admire were vacuous, devoid of both power and purpose. It was clear when she zoomed in to inspect their pixelated eyes: these men were soulless, hollow hulls, blank faces whose meaning only came from the projections on insipid, adoring fangirls.

By comparison, her true love's eyes radiated dignity, purpose. Even though he looked like a scientist, with a long neck and receding hairline, he was, after all, a president. If she were feeling cruel, her heart broken with as yet unrequited love, she

told herself he looked like a weasel. Her capacity for cruelty surprised her. She regretted these momentary lapses in devotion.

Whenever her love issued a rare statement, standing before the camera in a crisp Western suit, her heart nearly collapsed into a pile of rubble.

Her love had been accused of horrible things, Catherine knew. The captions beneath his photos warned her of civil war, dissention, death tolls, and foreign intervention; bombs, religious oppression, and chemical weapons.

Catherine looked up photos of his opposition, too. She did her research. She did not want to be accused of being biased and uninformed.

The rebels didn't look evil. They didn't look like her idea of terrorists, either. Their eyes contained no glimmer of righteous devotion to an impossible cause. Their faces were just tired, resigned, and young. They were too clean.

Guilt overcame her, nausea building in her stomach, whenever Catherine looked at the photos of these young men—these rebels. How could she have allowed these photos to cause her to doubt, even for a moment? It was all too likely the photos had been doctored or staged to sway the minds of the public to the side of the rebels with some well-placed digital deception.

How could she have ever doubted him? The Western media, she knew, were dangerous, manipulative. They did not understand the greatness of the man she loved, and so they demonized him.

Catherine shivered, listening to him speak. Her man, she reminded herself, was a *president*. Presidents were always great. How could anyone doubt him? It

saddened her to think that he would likely soon be deposed. It was inevitable, now that the media had turned against him.

But when that day came, and his wife left him, abandoning him and denouncing him as a murderer and tyrant, stealing the last of his dignity, Catherine would book her plane ticket and fly to him, wherever he should be exiled. She was ready: she kept a bag, packed, under her bed, her passport tucked inside. She would arrive in his weakest moment. She would be there to make him know his greatness.

Already Catherine had plans to change his image. Together, from a remote location, they would watch his former country dissolve. Then she would involve him in charities, showing the world he was on the right side of history, that he had only hoped to hold his country together. All of the textbooks would show tell of his accomplishments, and her friends, with their stupid crushes on meaningless celebrities, would see Catherine's name printed next to his in their grandchildren's history books, and they would know that she had found purpose, that their husbands were fat and their children were lazy and their lives were so empty compared to hers. Her friends would know that Catherine had succeeded in changing the world on the arm of a great man.

Her heart constricted when she realized that if he was deposed, he really would be on his own until she graduated from high school in June. She could only hope he wouldn't be killed before then.

Peace Prize

The Nobel prizewinner climbs the stage to make his speech. He has won the Peace Prize for his astounding discovery that language is an unnatural and inherently meaningless form of expression.

He has discovered that true communication—like the only necessary functions in life—is purely biological.

The prizewinner lowers the microphone so it is level with his stomach, motioning for another to be placed at his throat.

Gulping from a glass of water, he begins.

The water gurgles down his throat, rumbling into his stomach. He jogs up and down and the audience hears the unmistakable sound of sloshing liquid.

The effect is electrifying; never has the prizewinner enunciated a point so clearly. It's no wonder countries fail at peace talks. Words, especially when translated, at best vague when compared to the undeniable, unspoken truth growling in the prizewinner's gut.

Last night's dinner creaks through the prizewinner's intestines, and tears gather in the eyes of the audience. These are tears of compassion, not of boredom. A few sympathetic stomachs rumble from the audience, a screech of support.

The audience viscerally feels the pure meaning that the prizewinner communicates. His declarations are impossible to manipulate or misconstrue. Even still, the audience feels the prizewinner speaks a bodily language far more sophisticated than their own. Some of the nuance of cracked knuckles and

esophageal rumbling is lost and, although they feel ignorant, the audience hopes a translation into their own verbal language will be provided afterwards.

The prizewinner's stomach gives a final yowl, and he concludes his speech.

The audience rises, working the kinks from their stiff joints and backs, which pop and snap in response.

To the prizewinner, their popping is more deafening than any applause, more rewarding than any standing ovation. He feels the day of true peace, brought about by the clearest and least ambiguous mode of communication, has drawn that much closer because of him and his brilliantly scripted speech. Beaming and satisfied, the prizewinner descends the stage and goes off in search of food, accepting congratulations along the way.

The truth is that the prizewinner had been incredibly lucky. He had not planned his stomach's final yowl—one of hunger—and had only just managed to incorporate it into his speech. If he hadn't, the prizewinner was certain that his final message would have been nearly incomprehensible.

Drawers

What is more intimate than exposing your silverware? Flowered and dainty, weighty and practical. Tarnished and cheap and stained brown.

An assortment for all occasions: expensive, demure, or good-time silverware, all jumbled together in the silverware drawer.

Plastic utensils, for one night stands; that guilt you feel the next day when you walk a plastic knife from the ravaged cheese plate to the garbage can. The sense of something wasteful, something foul, something that cannot be undone or rinsed off.

Is there nothing more intimate than allowing someone else to rifle through your drawers?

Puppet Master

The wooden doll stands, dome-topped feet planted flat on the ground. His balance is precarious on straight, thin toothpick legs. His neck, hips, and shoulders are simple ball-and-socket joints, but the effect renders him a bit top-heavy. In just the right position, though, the wooden doll can stand upright, unaided.

The devil surges up from Hell to laugh and laugh at the little doll and his weak idea of independent motion.

“Pick up your feet, why don’t you?” the devil suggests, knowing full well that the doll lacks knees to bend from his stiff legged form. To stand is all the doll can manage, and only if he’s placed just the right way, and the doll says so.

“You’re nearly as bad as a puppet,” the devil sneers and snorts. The devil’s breath is hot, like fire, and licks the little doll’s feet like flames. The doll’s feet are on fire. His wooden frame will be consumed in seconds if he doesn’t run, doesn’t move!

But he is just a wooden doll, incapable of independent motion.

The whispered flames tickle and sear, splinter and crack his tiny wooden soles. The wooden doll wishes, prays for movement. He would give anything for movement, to be able to lift one foot, then the other, and escape the devil’s scorching laugh.

From above, an angel appears and throws a rope down to the doll. The rope loops itself around the doll’s hand. Another rope falls, then two more, and the ropes attach themselves to each of his limbs. He feels something burrowing into the top of his head, and he knows there is a rope up there as well. The doll waits to be pulled up, waits for salvation.

Suddenly, the angel yanks the wooden doll off the ground. He is flying now, away from the devil and his fire. His prayers have been answered; the wooden doll has been saved.

The angel hauls him through the air, causing his little ball-and-socket joints to scream. Gravity grips his limbs; his twig-like neck was never made to bear the weight of him. His wooden seams feel about to pop.

The wooden doll discovers his hand is flapping in the wind, waving goodbye to the devil.

He did not move his own hand.

As he leaves behind the devil's heat, the wooden doll realizes that only the bottoms of his feet are blackened; the burn is not as bad as he thought. The devil had teased and toyed with him.

The air he flies through is freezing, and his wooden body pops and creaks and moans with pain, the wood warping to adjust to the temperature and moisture of the air.

On the ground, the devil is still laughing, screaming with laughter. The devil's gasps send puffs of warm air up to the flying wooden doll, reaching the doll as a balmy breeze.

The angel drags the doll higher to escape all reminders of the devil's warmth. The doll's limbs clack together. The remaining moisture in his wooden face collects and freezes in the corner of one large, painted eye.

The doll had not realized how relatively painless life had been when he could stand on his own. Even with the devil scorching his feet.

The angel yanks harder and higher. With one last pop of protest, the wooden doll gives himself over to his handler, though his joints scream and ache.

He flutters in the wind.

His arm still flaps and waves mechanically, but the devil's warming laughter no longer reaches him.

The wooden doll has flown too high, and the angel has made him into a marionette like any other. The devil can take no interest in such things.

The Balloon Swallower

I took up balloon swallowing when I was seven. My brother told me if we filled my stomach with enough inflated balloons, I would float in the ocean, even though I couldn't swim.

Our parents were professional sword swallows—that's how they met—and my earliest memory is of sliding a blunted stick down my throat and feeling it nudge my tummy.

Sword swallows are born, not made.

I have to think the same is true of balloon swallows.

My brother inserted little leaded weights into each balloon and threaded them down my throat, one at a time, on the end of a bike pump. He inflated a balloon, extracted the pump, and began again. My brother assured me that the balloons would remain inflated, even though there was no way to tie the balloons off once they were in my stomach.

Once I had swallowed fifteen balloons, my brother decided I was ready. He rushed me down to the waterfront and watched as I waded in, hesitant, as though to my baptism. In a way, I suppose, it was.

“Now float,” my brother commanded.

I trusted my brother and the balloons in my stomach enough not to be afraid.

I floated.

I swam.

Of course I learned later of the buoying properties of salt water, but at the time I thought my brother and I had done magic. The whole experience felt a little less

magical, though, when the belly aches began and my parents took me to the doctor, who had to extract several sodden and remarkably intact balloons from my intestines.

My passion for balloon swallowing, however, was undeterred.

In front of the meager crowds I attract, I'll swallow a balloon and summon someone from the audience to inflate it with a bike pump—the same one my brother used on me all those years ago. I invite the audience to gape as my stomach expands and contracts. I've even discovered a way of constricting my esophageal sphincter in order to hold the air in the balloons.

Every once in a while, when my audience is particularly large, I'll inflate my swallowed balloons with helium and wow the crowds with a few seconds of levitation, my toes just barely dragging the ground. In the moments before the helium elevates my body, I feel my organs begin to shift and rise, irresistibly pushed by the balloon up toward the surface, buoyed like swimmers floating on the waves.

A Taste for Tongue

She bit off the tip of her tongue in the plane crash. She got off relatively easy, compared to her co-passengers, who suffered from undesirable amputations, gross infections, and death.

As she escaped, she slipped the tip of her tongue into the breast pocket of her blouse. It felt unlucky to leave a part of herself behind for premature cremation.

In their haste to flee the smoking ruins of the airplane, the survivors gave no thought to food, to pulling deceased loved ones or other victims to safety.

Days passed, and the destroyed plane burned too hot to think of salvaging anything or body from it. Not thinking it wise to scorn any bit of spare food while she waited to be rescued, she cooked her sliver of tongue on a skewer over one of the smoldering lumps of plane that burned along the crash site. She ate the morsel in one bite while her fellow survivors looked on, wishing they'd thought to grab a limb or a victim to subject to some Donner Party-inspired feasting.

Having chomped off the tip of her tongue, she was of course unable to judge the dish's full flavor profile. All in all, however, she found her first experience with tongue to be quite satisfactory. At least her hunger was somewhat alleviated.

The woman and her co-survivors were rescued that very night.

She made the mistake of telling the news crews about her unusual snack. Crash Survivor Ate Own Tongue! supermarket tabloids screamed.

Experimental chefs, intrigued by her unusual introduction to such an exotic dish, scrambled to recreate her taste of human tongue. The chefs used beef tongue, of course, but they flew the woman to their Michelin-starred restaurants in order to hear

her expert opinion. They planned to refine their dishes to match her experience, marketing the menu as a nearly exact replica of this self-cannibalizing survivor's fare.

A hint of butane, she told them. A pinch of decay. And ash. Lots and lots of ash.

She savored these fine dishes, each time fondly recalling her first taste of tongue.

These flavors, once her despair, had come to taste like hope.

Valedictorian of the Afterlife

Bethany's corpse had spent its previous life achieving at an excessively fast rate. She was the first to teethe, the first to bleed; first in the class and on the field.

No one ever said, "slow down," or, "too fast."

First to retire. First to die.

Because of her natural high achieving spirit, it only made sense that Bethany's corpse was head of the graveyard as well.

First to decompose; keeper of the most maggots; greatest quantity of fungi; most hair retained by desiccated scalp. (Bethany's corpse was particularly proud of that last one, especially when so many of her peers suffered from corpse-pattern baldness).

The only category in which Bethany's corpse failed was in the quantity of flowers left by visitors to her grave. She'd heard rumor—because the dead love to talk, and to compare states of being in their earthy tombs—that across the graveyard there was a young man who had died at seventeen. Each new day brought flocks of sobbing visitors and enough flowers to supply an overly ambitious florist.

It rankled Bethany's corpse that such a young person—who had likely accomplished nothing in his previous life—should beat her in such a prestigious category.

Bethany's corpse tried to think of this achievement as temporary, just like the dead and dying flowers that were laid on all their graves. She did not express to the other bodies how annoyed she was to be bested.

In the darkest hours of the night, when the graveyard filled with the mournful wails that are the communications of the dead, Bethany's corpse was revitalized. After all, she still was far and away the best at pretending not to care that there was no heaven or hell, that the midnight mutterings between graves was the best afterlife they were going to get. In this way, Bethany's corpse proved her worth, boosting morale and soothing the distressed remnants of consciousness. And one night, in the darkest hours before morning, she heard a young man's tearful voice calling out to her, asking for her help and guidance.

Bethany's corpse would not take all of the flowers in the graveyard in exchange for this moment. She could not believe she'd ever doubted that she truly belonged to another class of beings, setting an untouchable gold standard of excellence.

The Time My Back was on Television

On Saturday I walked by a camera crew recording a news segment. I didn't realize until the next morning that I'd been caught on film.

"We saw you on T.V.," Mom called to say.

Yeah. Right.

"Your back is absolutely stunning. We knew it was you from your shoulder blades."

Moms. They always admire the strangest things about their children. Clearly, my mother was no exception.

"You must get your back from my side of the family," she said before we hung up.

At work on Monday, Tom and Ryan stared at me. I thought I had chocolate on the seat of my pants until my boss called me into his office, closed the door, and dragged his fingertip along my shoulder blade.

"You look tense," he said. "Could I offer you a back massage? You can take off your jacket, if you like."

I told him I wasn't feeling well and that I really needed to take a half day. At home, I climbed into bed and might never have gotten out again if I hadn't received a phone call from a movie agent.

"Please," he begged. "Let me represent you. The world needs to see a back like yours."

And so my back began to audition for roles in advertisements for soaps and lotions, anything where my back could bare its skin and reveal its musculature. My

back and my agent even persuaded me to accept bit parts in movies. My acting credits almost exclusively included “Woman in Dress with Plunging Back.”

I was often told my back was heavenly, meant to hold the weight of angelic wings.

My face, of course, never made it onto any reel.

The line of my jaw appeared just once, in a commercial for a dermatologist. But my back had become too full of itself. In a jealous fit, my back slipped a disc so badly we required surgery. We were laid up for two months. When we were healed, a puckered, white scar stretched like a centipede across our lower vertebrae.

Our agent left us for the owner of a fabulous ankle that had appeared on the eleven o’clock news.

My back still craved attention, and used all its remaining charms to magnetize eyes and attract hands. Before we had been discerning, but my back and I now allowed anyone to trail their fingers down our spine, so long as they whispered promises of Swedish massages, payment, or feature films. We even sought the attention of my old boss.

My back could be such a whore at times.

When we were hungry, starved for attention, my back and I admired a portrait of it that I kept in my clutch. The photo was taken in the good days, the days when we always acted the part of Woman in Dress with Plunging Back.

Whenever we looked at the picture, my breath caught and my scar prickled.

We took to wearing strappy dresses and walking by news cameras, whenever we could find them.

The free press couldn't hurt.

We're still gorgeous, I assured my back, and any day now, we should get a casting call. We'd be perfect in the role of Mysterious Woman with Gorgeous Back and Intriguing Scar.

Parenting

The best way to be a parent is to donate your eggs. In eighteen years, if you give your consent, some child will spring fully formed from your doorstep, curious about her maternal mitochondria. She will call you by your first name, and you can be disappointed in each other the way only complete strangers are allowed to be.

Or perhaps you can become friends, and she will appreciate how much better, more intriguing, you are than her real parents, the parents who selected her—and you—from a catalogue.

At least they had good taste, you can say, and she can laugh into the mug of tea you've offered her. For this, you will both feel slightly guilty.

The mystery of her biological parentage will be revealed, the history of family health forms completed, the few token stories of family exploits shared. In short, she will collect her heritage, which she'll carry with her throughout her life like the stuff of legend. When an hour is up and her needs have been satisfied, she will stand and promise to call, to stop by when she's in town.

You will give her money, even if she does not ask for it, even if she did not intend to, because you know the idea of that obligation is lurking in the back of both of your minds.

Then you'll wave her off and close the door. Even if you disappointed her, and she's a bit less glamorous than you'd imagined a younger version of yourself would be, you'll feel satisfied knowing how little it took to have a piece of you continue to exist, with a little luck (and good genetics), once you're gone from the world.

The Shaving Lesson

Dad taught me how to shave when I was five.

He brought me into the bathroom, squirted cream into his hands, and lathered my upturned face. He demonstrated how to grip the razor, how to press the blade firmly into my skin, but not so firmly that I would cut myself.

I was nervous. Of course I was nervous, holding what amounted to five little knives against my cheek. But I trusted my dad.

My dad's philosophy on shaving was like other parents' thoughts on learning a foreign language. It was important, he told me, that I learn how to shave when I was young. That way, when I needed to, shaving would be second nature.

Dad guided my hand, and together we pulled the razor down my cheek.

"The chin and the upper lip will be the most important," Dad said. He showed me how to raise my chin to the light and how to stretch my upper lip down over my teeth to get the best angle.

If I kept practicing, Dad said, I'd be all set for menopause. I'd know how to shave off those awful, wispy mustaches and long, scraggly chin hairs women get when their hormones change and their eyes get bad and their children become too mortified, too scared to acknowledge their mothers' decline, to tell them about the errant hair. These unwanted follicles run in the family, Dad told me.

That explained why he never sat too close to grandma when we went to visit her in the nursing home. He didn't want to know what was there. He didn't want to be responsible for noticing, for telling.

Since I didn't yet have hair on my face, it was difficult to tell how successful my attempt at shaving had actually been, but I didn't cut myself once.

Dad told me he was so proud.

It was too early to tell for sure, but Dad said he thought I might be a natural.

Ritual

My mother always says that you can tell a lot about a person from his friends.

“But his friends have a certain,” she’ll pause, eyes narrowing, “reputation.”

Usually she’d say this after I brought a high school friend home. My mother always knew the worst about anyone I tried to befriend.

Of course, my mother just as often said, “Judge not.” I think it was this maxim that motivated me most of the time.

I met a man at the bar one Friday night. He was a genial, talkative man. We liked the same music; he even loved talk radio as much as I do.

He invited me to a party at his house, and I went. I met his friends, and they absorbed me into their group. We drank beer and shot the shit and played pool.

I’d never felt more comfortable amongst a group of strangers.

When they began to garb themselves in robes from the basement closet, I thought an elaborate joke was underway. I watched in bemusement and awaited an explanation, although the pentagram embroidered on the chest was probably more than I needed.

“We’re Satanists,” James said, and offered me a robe. “Didn’t you know?”

I hadn’t.

Though surprised I had been unaware of their religion, they patted me on the back and ensured me that Satanism is not for everyone, and that I should feel no pressure to worship as they do. They told me I could go home, an offer that I accepted, after a moment of hesitation. I felt like these men were my brothers, that we were septuplets who had never before separated. I could not imagine parting from

these people, but my mother's words came back to me. Was I ready to be the type of person who participated in Satanic rituals? If I left now, I could at least feign ignorance.

My host saw me to the door and invited me to a party the next Friday.

"The guys were surprised you didn't know," he said. "I guess I should have told you—"

"No," I cut him off, "how would that have sounded?"

"Like we drink goat blood and kill babies," he laughed.

"Exactly," I smiled.

As I walked away, my host called out to me. "Maybe, sometime, you could join us, you know?"

"Maybe," I agreed.

I attended his party the next week, and the week after that.

I've yet to stay for a ceremony.

These devil worshippers have become my closest friends. Dressed in their robes, these men walk me to the door as they transition from social to religious gathering. They wave as I depart, inviting me to dinner or to play golf. I always accept their offers, except when ceremony is involved.

I'm not much of a religious man, but I like to think I've become a part of their ritual.

Special Exhibit: Fossilized Creatures from the Late Metallic Period

Exhibit Highlights: Stomach, contents partially digested

The Curator Bot hums with anticipation as the next wave of museum patrons enters the room. The Bot has recited the same speech at least a dozen times today, once in binary, even, to a couple of corroded bipeds. The Bot thrilled to feel the current juicing the parts of his motherboard that should long ago have rusted over. Though these endless repetitions might have bored another Curator, this Bot cannot help but feel the same mounting surge of excitement as new patrons drift into the room.

This new discovery is so essential, so key to understanding their origins.

This new crowd, composed mainly of younger, hovering bots, communicates in Standard Whir. The Curator Bot blows dust out of its vents, humming quietly to get the pitch just right.

He hesitates for a moment before beginning his speech. He wants to be sure to give the visitors a moment to appreciate the magnitude of what's before them.

The massive carapace of a hulking steel beast fills the cavernous hall. Echoes of awed and impatient whispers emanate from intake valves. This sound is the Curator Bot's Cue. Suspense is at its highest. The Bot begins his fervent, whirring speech, and his audience's cams and sound orifices affix their attention to him.

“Before you is the steel hull of a great—and ancient—land rover. Despite their size, these monstrous creatures were very low beings with exceptionally dull intellect.

“Most of you have seen a land rover before, so I am sure you wonder what is so special about this one. How many of you have seen the fossilized prints of a land rover?” The Bot waits for the patrons to illuminate their green Affirmative Acknowledgement Lights.

“This,” the Bot says, rolling closer to the beast, “is called a tire. *This* is the part of the rover that creates the prints you have seen. This beast measures approximately fourteen feet long and six feet high, and as you can tell, I barely come halfway up the tire.”

The Curator Bot’s internal sensor pings a warning, as it has every time he’s approached this moment in his speech. His wiring is overheating from the excitement, and his fans struggle to cool his central processor. He is justified in overheating. Never before has his species found evidence of a land rover’s mobility. Most of these beasts seem to have shed their tires before crawling into the mass burial pits in which so many of these creatures are found.

“Now, this isn’t the only unique discovery on this particular specimen,” the Curator Bot tells his audience before their attention can flit to the other rarities awaiting them beyond this hall.

“If you could follow me to the other side of the rover? Until now, we have failed to discover what the rovers consumed for fuel. That is because, as we now know, the rovers survived on organic material, which decays faster than these metallic beasts of legend. But this rover was found in a desert cave, where the conditions preserved the organic material until our discovery.”

The opposite side of the rover has been sawn away, revealing its interior. The audience's intake valves hiss wildly.

Inside the great land rover, nestled in what must be the stomach, are two ancient, partially digested humans.

The Curator Bot speaks over the whirring of his audience, who surges forward, hovers closer. "Humans were likely the easiest food to catch, but we are investigating the possibility that the land rovers consumed other organic beasts as well. Our hypothesis is that the great land rovers dissolved the humans in their large stomachs and absorbed them, converting their organic matter into fuel.

"Our tastes haven't changed much," the Curator Bot whirs, to a few chirping laughs.

The Curator Bot allows the audience to zoom into the belly of the great land rover and maneuvers out of the way, hovering in the back. It's a shock to his processor to realize how miniscule his audience is, compared to this colossal monster.

The surprise, the mystery, the kinship of the rusted body and its small, hovering descendants overwhelms the Curator Bot for the first time that day. His circuits freeze up for a moment, halted by the magnitude of this discovery as he experiences a sentiment that organic beings would likely recognize as awe.

Expecting

Monica visits her fetus in a darkened room, where only red light is used, like in a photo lab. Red light is safe and slow; it will not harm the developing fetuses that, after so many millennia of coming into being in the dark, cannot be expected to gestate appropriately beneath a harsh fluorescent light.

The doctor leads Monica to the back of the lab, past trays of vials and delicate butterfly needles to rows of what appear to be bookshelves. Synthetic fleshy sacs in various sizes and stages of development hang suspended like chrysalises from the bookshelves, each with tubes and wires connected to nourish and monitor growth.

Monica knows where to find her fetus, but she allows the doctor to show her anyway: row three, fifth pod on the left. The sac swells as the fetus inside turns, its elbow jutting out at Monica.

The second best part of the pods, Monica thinks, is that they're semi-translucent. Even in the red-lit room, or perhaps because of it, she can see her fetus, features showing clearly through the membrane. The fetus is no longer the terrifying tadpole, entirely alien in its features, that it had been to this point. She can see it has its father's nose, which is slightly regrettable, but she tries to quash these feelings of disappointment. It's better to know now, she thinks, than to have to mask her disappointment when the child is born.

He, Monica reminds herself. The child is a he.

Monica can't imagine a time when surprise would have been desired in childbirth. To not have time to prepare for the inevitable shortcomings likely to

accompany the emergence of this prune-shriveled life form seems like some sort of crime.

Monica points out the fetus's hideous nose to the doctor. He assures her that, in his professional opinion, all babies are ugly in the womb. If she remains unsatisfied after the baby is birthed and his features settle, then those features—excluding gender, naturally—can be rectified with plastic surgery, at a reduced rate, of course. Genetic obstetrics is still a new enough field that it sometimes requires perfecting.

His answer both relieves and embarrasses Monica. She feels she has had a momentary maternal lapse. To make up for it, Monica places her face next to the fetus, cooing and rubbing the elbow that pushes at the sac's membrane. It's so much easier to love when you can see it, she thinks, when it does not weigh her body down, feeding off of her like a leech.

This, of course, is the best part of the pods: the distasteful physical strain of pregnancy and childbearing is gone. Of course, much had still been required of Monica. In the beginning of the fetus's gestation, she was required to come to the lab every day. During her visits, the doctors taped the sound of her voice, took casts of her hands, measured her heartbeat, and recorded her breathing. Even now, the sac sways with the gentle rhythm of Monica's simulated breathing. And though she cannot hear it, she is assured that her heartbeat and voice is played for the fetus at all hours of the day.

Each time she came in, the doctors took something from her to add to the fetus's simulated environment. She came in for blood samples and emailed records of her meals, so the fetus's diet could approximate hers.

The doctors removed the wine and coffee and processed meats from the fetus's simulated diet.

Monica's husband had only needed to come in for the consultation appointment and sperm donation.

He had been too busy at work to come in since.

A machine rolls up the aisle, massaging each sac with rubberized hands made from casts taken from expecting mothers. The hands are stored on either side of each sac, where the robot reaches its mechanized limbs, affixing the rubber hands to its metal arms. Monica tries not to look at the replica hands dangling beside her fetus's sac. The hands make her feel like she is dead, like her hands were the only part of her worth preserving, deemed essential for their excellent massaging ability.

With the fetus in its sixth month of gestation, Monica is only required to visit twice in the month. Any additional visits are optional. The doctors think it is in the best interest of the parents to have a sort of "vacation" from mandatory visits before the last trimester, while they still are able. The last trimester will be packed with endless couples appointments, classes, and lessons, and finally, irrevocably, the slicing of the sac.

Already her husband complains about all the time he will need to take off.

Monica's appointment hour is up, and she waves goodbye to the fetus.

She feels instantly stupid. The fetus likely cannot see her, and anyway it has not yet been socialized to recognize the significance of a wave.

On the walk back to the door, the doctor provides her with details and data that indicate her fetus is perfect. As if she didn't know it would be. She and her husband chose this path, paid for the artificial gestation, so that the baby would experience only the most perfect environmental factors and so their own lives would remain relatively unaffected. There is only the small matter of the fetus's nose, but Monica does not mention this to the doctor again. She has already been promised a referral to a pediatric plastic surgeon, should she feel she requires one after the fetus is born.

Monica rides the elevator down three floors to the lobby. It could be the change from the red light to the bright, sterile light that floods the ground floor, but Monica feels like she is glowing. Visiting her fetus makes her feel looked at. Crossing the lobby, she feels the eyes that are drawn to her, and she projects strength, power, and love for her fetus in a way she could not, she knows, if she waddled everywhere, her stomach protruding. The attention makes her feel, frankly, beatific.

Monica is about to pass through the sliding glass doors when the building begins to shake. The building sways and rattles; old medical files, filled with crumbling paper, come free and cascade from the shelves behind the receptionist's desk. The candy jar from the front desk falls to the floor and shatters. Monica is thrown to the floor, all of them are on the floor; the ground is too unpredictable for them to stand.

Earthquake, someone says, but earthquakes do not happen here; nobody knows what to do. Monica throws her hands over her head; she thinks it is something she should do, something she has seen somewhere, in a movie, or read about once.

A stabbing pain lances through Monica's stomach.

Then, suddenly, the shaking stops.

Not once during the earthquake did she think about her fetus.

Amid murmurs of aftershocks, Monica gets to her feet, finds the stairs and sprints up to the third floor. It is worse than she expected.

Bathed in the red light, hundreds of fetuses lie immobile in their sacs on the cold linoleum. They have been dashed against the walls in which they were safely ensconced, shaken free of their suspension within the bookshelves.

Monica presses her fist to her lips.

The third floor doctors sit around, dazed, unsure of how to handle this unprecedented incident.

Her doctor notices her and gets up, grips her arm.

"This batch is ruined," the doctor says. "I'm not sure how long it will take to clean this all up and deal with our clients, but we'll get to work on a second set as soon as possible."

Monica nods. "I want to see it," she says.

The doctor looks like he wants to say no, but he agrees. This time he does not escort her.

Her fetus lies, a darkened, pulpy mass, at the bottom of its sac. For the first time in months, since the fetus resembled an amphibian, its features are indistinguishable.

The massaging robot had stopped at the sac just beyond Monica's. Its hands still stabilized the fetus within. A few tubes had come undone, but as Monica watches, the sac ripples under the rubber hands. It's either the aftershock, too faint for Monica to feel, or the fetus after hers is, for now, alive.

Monica crouches by her fetus. It is only when she feels a sense of disappointment that she will never know this being, even with its ugly nose, that she realizes she had felt anything at all. The feeling was not love, but perhaps anticipation. Love is not there yet; it is a remote, hopeful idea attached to the abstract reality having offspring would bring. There was, rather, the anticipation that love would develop, that she would love this creature more for growing outside of her, that she would, inevitably, be made to feel something for this being. All anticipations that came to nothing, that ended in disappointment.

And now, she would have to wait to be made to feel something different.

A Feast

The spiders come out at night to feast on our flesh, and they are welcome. We lay ourselves out like roasts, our sheets the dressing that slathers the crust of our skin.

We invite the spiders to dine on us; in the night, no pain will wake us. In the light of day, our incessant itching of inflamed red circles is alleviated by the balm of passing butterflies.

This is the salvation we receive for our voluntary nightly torment: we feed the spiders in order to save the beautiful innocents—the butterflies, the moths—from the slaughter, from the flutter and stick to a web, from the jerking and trembling and bloodsucking end.

Our sacrifice is an easy thing.

We have so much blood; when the kitchen knife slips and we cut our fingers, its endless flow is almost too much. We lose very little, giving ourselves up to the spiders. Those who crawl out and over our bodies to our open feast—though horrifying and hairy nightmares, were our eyes open to see them—are not the kind who would kill us. We would gain nothing from inviting the murderous species, anyway: they are only interested in the insects that hide in dark corners.

As long as we have bodies, we can provide an eternal feast.

When our blood has stilled and the spiders are done with us, they'll send us to their cousins, the worms.

The Party

Helen refused to retire. Her job was mindless, essentially formulaic data entry, but Helen loved it. She loved its repetition and predictability, the supplemental income it offered to her social security.

By the calculations of most, Helen should've retired at least a decade ago. On especially tedious days, her coworkers cursed her for denying them that one thing they had to look forward to at work: the office retirement party, the only office party untainted by bitterness. The retirement party was the only one where employees could feel genuine happiness for each other, knowing that the retiree—which Helen should long ago have been—wouldn't be leaving her coworkers for greener pastures; she would leave them to die.

Helen's colleagues deserved the chance to eat and laugh with her, to say goodbye, to give her stupid gifts she'd feel to guilty to throw out, to take pictures in fluorescent office lighting in which everyone looked greasy and terrible. By refusing to retire, Helen denied them the opportunity to grow nostalgic for her, and for these memories of her to fade to worn, cherished things. She was depriving them of the rush of sadness and fondness they would feel the day they'd get the company email bearing the news: Helen passed away, in peace, at her home or in the hospital, alone or surrounded by loved ones.

Instead, she would die at her desk, reminding them all of their mortality.

It was Tina from HR who suggested the party, soon after Helen's eightieth birthday. They would treat it as a retirement party, the one they would never be able

to give Helen. Helen owed them the fun, so she couldn't say no. She laughed and ate cake and smiled for the pictures.

They held the party every year for seven years.

A month after the seventh party, Ben found Helen with her head on her desk.

He didn't bother shaking her. She was clearly dead.

Everyone in the office gathered around Helen's dead body.

"Remember when, at the sixth party, Helen got frosting on her nose and none of us told her?" Tina whispered, a tear slowly rolling down her cheek.

"I think that's in all of the pictures from that year," Mike responded. They smiled weakly at each other.

Others added reminiscences, memories now turned to gold, as Ben and Chris dismantled Helen's cubicle to build her coffin. No one had ever given a thought to what they should do with the body when Helen eventually died. It felt like the right thing to do, though, to enclose Helen within the soundproofed cube she had refused to leave. The cubicle's collapsible walls folded to the perfect size for Helen's corpse; Tina would tape manila file folders over the ends once Helen's body was positioned within her cubicle coffin.

Helen had died gripping her mouse; no one could pull it from her hand.

Terry, the boss, decided to let Helen keep it without docking her final paycheck.

Helen was well loved.

Encased in the walls of her cubicle, Helen looked like a creature in her natural habitat. It was clear that this was where she belonged, preserved, a monument to a loyalty her coworkers could not pretend to understand.

More than a few tears were shed as Chris folded the lid down and Tina taped up the ends. Her closest friends acted as pallbearers and escorted her to the storage closet, where they made space amongst the loose pens and manila file folders and slid Helen—in her cubicle coffin—onto the shelf. There Helen would remain for some time, as Tina had only just discovered that Helen had never completed her emergency contact card, and Terry disapproved of using work time for non-essential activities.

Helen, clearly, would be able to wait.

Helen's coworkers wiped their eyes and noses and returned to work. Every once in a while, they reached out to a friend and shared a remembrance of Helen at one of her parties. She had given them all the memories they needed, it seemed, to overcome the hollow space left by her dismantled cubicle.

At the end of the day, Helen's coworkers held their breath as they passed the storage closet on the way to the elevator. Though they had loved Helen, each of them hoped the memory of her—and the hint of death lingering in the office—would soon fade.

Jim was the last to leave. As he turned off all the lights, he glanced at the space where Helen's cubicle—and Helen—had once been. He hoped Terry would order a replacement cubicle soon.

Puzzling

Andy's parents placed a baggie full of puzzle pieces on top of his towering toy shelf. There was no box, no picture depicting the completed image, just hundreds of tiny pieces in a clear plastic bag.

The puzzle lay untouched, collecting dust; Andy would never have noticed it until he was much taller and older, at least thirteen. But his best friend, Mitch, a daredevil, scaled the shelving unit until he reached the top, where he discovered the puzzle.

Neither boy enjoyed puzzles, but they had long exhausted the many board games and toy guns filling Andy's shelves. The dusty puzzle intrigued them; they mistook arousal for destiny.

The boys shook the puzzle from the bag, fingers sliding along smooth, unworn edges. The pieces were inscribed with lines that hinted at great, dark canyons, steep ravines, overhanging cliffs. Printed in greyscale, the puzzle could have shown a Martian landscape, or the deep-sea floor.

Without a picture to guide them, the boys bickered over how to begin. Andy wanted to sort the pieces by grey hues, Mitch by shape. They sulked for some moments, the puzzle untouched, but neither could ignore the mystery. They decided to begin as adults did, starting at the edges and working their way in.

Puzzling over the pieces, the boys traversed this unfamiliar terrain, constructing rippling mountains and trenches and caverns from the outside in. They believed the puzzle was a treasure map, one that would lead them to great reward.

Mitch added the final piece.

If the boys had made a treasure map, they could not read it. They struggled to decipher the image, to find an adventure in it. The puzzle sprawled before them, every piece in place, yet it seemed still incomplete.

Unbeknownst to the boys, they examined a photograph of feminine anatomy.

The Park

The man had stopped to tie his shoe, propping his foot up on the park bench, when the runner approached. Both were dressed for the unseasonably warm winter day, in layers that were light but that still covered the skin from any sudden gusts of cold air, chilled from its brush with melting snow.

As the runner approached him, he called out to her.

“Beautiful day!” he shouted, so that she would hear him through her headphones.

Her eyes settled on him, wide with fear, then flicked away, unfocused. He heard her breathing accelerate, becoming fast and hard.

He had seen her look before, the one that labeled him as “Predatory Older Male; Possible Threat.” He saw her think: Could she run fast enough? Scream loud enough?

The man thought himself harmless. A bit of a rough guy in his youth, maybe, but he’d been docile for ages. He felt like the runner had seen through him to a tarnished self he knew he did not possess.

“I come here every day!” the man shouted again. The words came out sharper than he had intended.

He could almost smell her spike of adrenaline as she urged herself on. She was drawing closer to him, almost level now.

He had only meant to make a declaration of his right to the park, his unthreatening regularity. The park was his space; every day he came here to exercise his newly replaced knee. He had his right to be here, same as she did.

“It’s nice,” she called back, her voice uninviting, though light. Clearly she wished to smother their conversation, to distance herself from the man who threatened her, the one who would stalk this park every day to lie in wait for her, anticipating the day their paths crossed again.

He lowered his foot to the ground, his artificial knee stiff and slow from resting on the bench.

Anger like he had not felt in ages boiled in his gut. He wanted a connection, couldn’t she see that? He was just an old man out for a walk, searching for commonality with a passing stranger. Yes, she was a young woman, but did that make her off limits? Did that deny him the right to her companionship?

“I used to run,” he tried again. “I was a very strong runner!”

She leapt as though electrocuted. As she dashed past him, he reached out as if to grab her wrist, but she ran just outside his reach. Speeding away from him, she attempted to cast a smile back at him, but it was twisted into a grimace of fear.

So he could chase her. Would he chase her? He could see she was smiling at him just to keep him at bay, to keep enough distance so she could sprint to safety; even if he could, by some miracle, still catch up with her on his worthless knee.

He wanted to fly after her, to grip her by the wrist, twist her around and make her see that it was her eyes, her eyes that did it. They betrayed her mistrust of him when they flicked away from him. They made him call out to her, made him need to defend himself, to reach into her sphere, to prove he was harmless. Couldn’t she see he was just an old man who had needed to tie his tennis shoe? He would grip her

wrist, twist her about, and scream to her, spittle flying from his mouth, that he was harmless, harmless...

The man started after her, but the fastest he could move was a slow, limping walk.

Before he got far, the runner had ducked through a hedge and exited the park, intent on the salvation of civilization.

The man swore to himself that he would continue to come here every day. He had much more walking to do before he could move normally again, before his newly replaced knee would function as it should. And when it did, when he saw the runner again, he would show her how harmless and kind he could be.

Slow Fade

The embalming fluid made Heather's soul feel sluggish. From hospital bed to funeral home, she had felt essentially unchanged; she seemed only to be paralyzed. Death had a certain impassive immobility to it. Her eyes, cracked open in death, retained the ability to see. Through these slits, Heather had watched her family cry, palpitating and kissing her stiffening hand.

A disembodied curiosity had accompanied her voyage thus far, from the draining of her fluids to the sewing and stuffing of her corpse.

She had not been prepared for the lethargy that claimed her mind once the embalming fluid was injected.

"That's nothing," came a whisper from the crematorium. The voice was light as air. "Try being cremated. Souls aren't as insubstantial as we thought."

"Yeah, try immolation!" Another voice jeered. "We rattle around in this smokestack prison for nine months!"

"And we're blind, totally blind," the first voice sighed. "What are souls without their eyes?"

Wind shrieked down the smokestack, carrying with it howls of agreement from other ensnared souls. The undertaker's head snapped up at the sound, and he shuddered.

Blind, Heather thought, brain slowed. Nine months. So sluggish. How to say? Out loud? How to know how much time passes?

"Can you tell time?" The first voice asked. "Can you *feel* it? How long you've been dead?"

The voice swirled through the place Heather would have sworn her mind had been, before it had become slow, so slow. She thought. A half a day. Another day more.

“So you *can* tell,” the voice breathed.

Heather’s sight was failing, her eyes fogging as though glazed with thick cataracts. The details of the funeral home grew hazy, but it seemed that the voices had gained substance. Heather made out thick clouds of dark gray and wisps of opalescent air, thin and pale as bleached shards of bone.

The first voice spoke again. It was one of the exceptionally thin wisps.

“Nine months after passing, we get sucked up the crematory smoke stack, and we’re gone.”

“It’s some sort of reverse gestation, as best we can figure,” this from the second voice, a thick and substantive cloud.

Heather wanted to tell them that she could see them disappearing, their essence dispersing bit by bit.

The embalming fluid was mucking up her mind

What happens? The Graveyard? She thought.

The room faded further. The undertaker’s hands were just shadows wafting over her. The voices had grown in substance, though.

“You’re a rotter?” the second voice’s thick cloud pulsed. “Let’s just say, there’s a reason for the expression ‘silent as the grave.’”

“Now, this is all rumor,” the first voice cut in, “but from the snatches of news the wind brings us, we hear the rotties are stuck in some kind of permanent, silent,

squelchy pit. None of the buried are heard from again, once the first clod of dirt hits the coffin.”

This news was worse than dying had been. If Heather could still breathe, she would have felt her chest constrict. The embalming fluid had slowed her brain to slush. Even still, she tried to form another thought.

How to escape? Be free?

“Cremation,” the thin voice whispered sadly. By which Heather understood that it was too late for her.

The undertaker pinched and cut and sewed her skin, pinning loose flaps behind her ears and to the back of her skull. She felt his hands working, felt her family’s presence as they came to supervise the application of her makeup. The room was so foggy, she could make out nothing but the faintest flicker of movement.

The voices remained silent throughout her family’s visit. But as she was being loaded into her coffin for transport up to the parlor, the first voice reached out again.

“At least you know it’s over for you,” it whispered. It sounded mournful, frightened, like it looked to her for comfort. “Tomorrow is my last day. My nine months are up.”

Heather had no words to express her spite, which she knew the voice felt. Its pallid, opalescent tendrils withdrew and trembled. If she could, Heather would have reached out and throttled the spirit behind the voice. Who knew where this soul would go next? It was free, released from its leaden cage. At the end of her ceremony, Heather could expect nothing but eternal, silent internment.

What I Know about My Heart

I know my heart is inside my chest because I have been told it is.

I know from feeling, though, that I have an egg nestled beneath my left breast, where a heart should be. This egg in my chest, it encases my heart in a thick, impermeable shell.

This rigid shell, I suspect, is the reason I can feel the egg, but not my heart.

Though I cannot feel its beating, I think there must be a heart within the egg, because I'm told that everyone has a heart.

But who among us truly knows everything that is inside ourselves, or what shall emerge from the egg when it cracks?

Play Date

Our dolls were extensions of ourselves, which is why we never named them, why we hedged and hesitated when our parents asked us their names.

We each told both sets of our parents that our dolls were named Dolly. We had to tell them something.

“Both of them are called Dolly?” They asked. “Don’t you get confused?”

I knew my doll was me, and you knew your doll was you. Was it not obvious? The hair, the eyes, the clothes: the dolls mirrored us in every way. Was it not clear that I was really the one who felt your hand when you clutched my doll’s, or that fire burned my scalp when you tangled your fingers through my doll’s hair? Sometimes it was hard not to feel jealous of the attention we gave to each other’s Dolls.

We revealed ourselves through Dolly, shedding one layer, then the next, lounging about, naked, years before we undressed each other for the first time.

I felt your lips knock against mine when you leaned your doll in for a kiss, and at the end of each day of play, our Dolls always ended up pregnant, even though we had no Ken and never, ever wanted one.

Lifeblood

The mosquito landed on my mother's neck and stuck its probe into her prone body where it lay on the hospital bed. My mother's chest barely lifted, though her intubated throat rasped with every breath. As the insect drained what was left of my mother, I trapped it in an overturned plastic cup, the one that had held her pills the hour before.

I don't believe in killing things. I removed a business card from my wallet and slid it beneath the cup, separating the mosquito from my mother's skin. My mother's breathing slowed beneath my hands.

She was dying. I knew because I'd slipped her the pills that would kill her.

Death was her last request, after the cancer had siphoned her life away. Her illness had first drained her ability to eat, then to walk, then to urinate without the use of a tube. She hardly had a lucid moment anymore, and none of them were painless.

I took the mosquito with me when the police let me go, having ascertained that my mother had obtained the euthanizing drugs on her own, that I had not been present when she'd taken them, that the medical staff had not colluded with my mother. The investigating officer was either lazy or sympathetic. She seemed oblivious to the fact that it would have taken a decade for a woman who could no longer wipe herself to raise a fistful of pills to her mouth.

I stayed in my mother's house for a few weeks after her death, to clean out her belongings and ready the property to go on the market. I remembered from A.P. Bio that insects could withstand freezing and thawing, something to do with an experiment in which fruit flies mated. I kept the mosquito in the freezer to preserve it

until I could decide what to do with it, with the last of my mother's life stored in its hollow belly.

My sister came over a week after Mom died. We hadn't seen each other since Mom's funeral, where my sister's unspoken accusation hung on her face and in the trails of smeared mascara down her cheeks. When Claire arrived, the house was nearly empty; only the furniture and upright piano remained to be carted away.

The realtor suggested we leave the furniture in place until the house sold, to give it a lived-in touch.

I was cleaning the upstairs bathroom when I heard my sister's scream. She stood frozen in the middle of the kitchen, empty plastic cup in hand. She looked lost, adrift in an ocean of shining linoleum.

"There was a dead bug in Mom's freezer!" my sister shouted. "Well, I thought it was dead until it flew out at my face!"

"What did you do with it?" I asked, voice rising.

"What do you mean, what did I do? It's a bug, Chris! It flew at me and now I have no idea where it is! Seriously, what was wrong with Mom? I knew she was messed up, but not this bad."

Claire hadn't been there for Mom's last six months, wiping vomit from her chin and pretending to have seen her eat. I couldn't tell Claire that the last of Mom was in that bug, that as long as it was alive, so was Mom. I couldn't respond, so I said nothing, turning, instead, to go back upstairs.

"There it is!" my sister said. Her palm lashed out and slapped my face. The mosquito smeared across my cheek, leaving a fresh patch of wet. My eyes watered.

My sister wrinkled her nose, wiping broken bits of bug and blood off onto her cut off shorts.

I couldn't tell if the mosquito had bit me. My face, stung and reddened from my sister's slap, did not yet reveal the raised spot of a mosquito bite.

The blood on my face could have belonged to me, or to my mother, or to anyone.

Art of War

Researchers and art historians have convened to determine the exact date Mr. Sun Tzu misplaced the distinction between Art and War. Archival records suggest that, at one time, the words had almost contrary meanings, as evidenced by old, gummed up stickers stuck to rusted bumpers. “Make Art, Not War,” the stickers say, which has always been perplexing in the way a koan is. The sticker might as well read, “Make Art, Not Art,” for all the sense it makes to anybody.

Though the researchers and art historians are convinced they are pursuing the answer to The Essential Question, perhaps the only one left. Their convictions distress their colleagues in the fine arts departments. Knowing too much, the artists claim, will corrode the muse, the same muse that moved Mr. Sun Tzu. After all, the synonym of Art and War has existed for time immemorial. It is nothing but wasteful to wonder if there were ever a time when the world did not recognize the beauty of flesh rubbed raw, or of the glistening streak trailing the body dragged through the dust, or of performance art with iron-laden paint, which slowly oxidizes, browns, in the fading light of the sun.

The artists protest outside of the conference halls and archives where the researchers and historians huddle, investigating this compelling mystery and updating their investors on their progress. They plug their ears to drown out the infuriatingly disruptive chants coming from outside.

The artists claim researching Mr. Sun Tzu is a blatant waste of public funds, and the government is inclined to agree. There is so much Art and War to appreciate

in this world. Digging up old history detracts from the beauty of this present moment.

The government has placated the artists, promising to launch a full-scale investigation into the careers, lifestyles, and habits of each of the historians and researchers who examine Mr. Sun Tzu's life. It is suspected that it will not be very difficult to turn up heaps of evidence documenting misspent revenue for this goose chase of a quest.

Summer of Wolves

Wolves ran wild through the town that summer. No one knew what had drawn them to the village. It wasn't uncommon to see the occasional coy dog, or perhaps a wolf every few years or so, but never had packs of wolves settled in this area, intent on terrorizing the locals. The wolves descended from the forests and fields, circling closer to cul-de-sacs and developments, snarling and snapping at nocturnal animals and pets left outside overnight.

Natalie's mother left for work on a Tuesday morning in late August. Already it was 83 and scorching. Natalie's mother left a note on the counter, asking her to walk to her grandmother's house after she emptied the dishwasher.

Natalie was thirteen years old, old enough to stay home alone. But they didn't have central air, and Gram did. Natalie would be much happier in the comfortably chilled air at her grandmother's, and Gram would be happy for the company. She always complained that Natalie didn't visit enough.

On the way to work, Natalie's mother drove past a field of stubble. The corn had already been harvested. It felt too soon for fall.

She almost overlooked the shaggy gray beast panting in the middle of the field.

The wolf seemed perplexed to be in the sunlight, as disconcerted as Natalie's mother was to see the fields bare of corn. The wolves had grown bold to come out in broad daylight.

So distracted was she by the wolf, Natalie's mother almost overlooked the man walking his dog along the side of the road. She swerved out of the way, barely avoiding him.

Natalie's mother could have sworn he had not been there a moment before. He and his dog appeared as though from midair. He seemed oblivious to the presence of the wolf in the field. Natalie's mother looked in her rearview mirror. She tasted bile when she saw the man was looking at her.

When she looked again, the wolf in the field was gone.

Natalie's mother's heart pounded. Should she pull over, tell the man what she had seen? Turn around and tear up the note for Natalie? Natalie would walk by here soon enough; was it safe for her to be out?

Thirteen was old enough, Natalie's mother told herself. There was another person out, which should discourage the wolves. Plus, Natalie's mother had left her cellphone behind so that Nat could call her at work once she arrived at Gram's house.

For the first time, but not for the last, Natalie's mother wished she had felt Natalie was old enough for her own cellphone, so that she could call her right now and wake her up and tell her to be safe.

Natalie woke up stuck to her sheets. Her mother disapproved of air conditioning and the way it removed the life from inside the house, so every summer Natalie had ever known had been like this. The heat did not normally bother her.

Today, though, she felt as though her blood were boiling.

Mom had left a note asking her to visit Gram today. Nat had no reason to protest: Gram had a pool and ice cream and air conditioning. She would go, and gladly, but clothes were out of the question.

Natalie pulled on her new bikini. She had bought it on a shopping trip with her mother. For the first time ever, her mother had not suggested Natalie instead try a figure-flattering one-piece or a modest tankini.

The bikini was red with ruffles on the bust, accentuating her already well-developed chest. She pulled a pair of cut-off jean shorts over her bottoms and headed out to Gram's, slipping Mom's phone in her pocket.

Natalie sweated as she walked, the prickle of sunburn blossoming on her flesh. The man stood just out of sight, in the shade of the tree line at the side of the road. He watched her approach. He took in her body, not quite developed was doughy in all the best places: a full stomach, breasts that didn't quite know what to do with themselves. The red ruffle across her chest gave the breasts a life of their own.

The man sent his dog out ahead of him, watching as Natalie bent to pet the animal, asking where it had come from.

Then he stepped out from the tree line.

"Hey, there!" He called out to Natalie. She jumped a little. "I see you've met Hunter."

He was friendly, approachable.

"Is he yours?" Natalie asked.

He wanted to snarl at the redundancy of her stupid question. Instead he smiled.

“Yep! Me and Hunter go for a walk every day. We love this heat, don’t we boy?” Hunter panted, tail wagging from Natalie’s attention.

“You’re probably the only ones,” Natalie said. “I bet I’ll get heatstroke before I get to Gram’s.”

They were silent for a minute as Natalie continued to pet Hunter.

“How far is it to your Gram’s?” the man asked, watching as uncertainty spread across Natalie’s face. She was wary.

“Listen. I’m not asking because I’m a pervert. It’s just that most folks do find days like this a bit too warm, and I’d hate to hear about you on tomorrow’s news. Not to mention the fact that there’s a wolf in the field up ahead. He left me alone, but that’s because I have Hunter.” The man bent down next to Natalie to pet his dog. He smelled the sweat, sweet and thick, coming off her.

“I don’t know who would get you first, Mr. Sun or Mr. Wolf,” he added in a voice low and husky.

Natalie felt fear. Real fear, the kind adults feel. Something bad might happen to her out here, something worse than teasing girls in the locker room or the time not too long ago that she accidentally wet the bed. The walk to Gram’s house had never seemed so long, and the sun might honestly kill her.

Sweat beaded her upper lip.

“Any chance,” Natalie hesitated, looking down at Hunter “you might be able to walk with me?”

He was staring at her bathing suit when she looked up and said, “By the way, my name’s Natalie.”

Natalie walked on with the man and his dog. The dog kept sniffing her butt, pressing its nose from her tailbone to her crotch. Each time she turned to admonish Hunter, he was not there.

They approached the field where the man saw the wolf.

Sticky with heat, Natalie felt the weight of the air in her lungs. All she wanted was to sprawl out on the floor at Gram’s and cover herself in ice cubes. There was still nearly a mile to go until she got there.

The man, Hunter, and Natalie reached the field, stippled with broken corn stalks.

The field was deserted. Natalie sighed in relief.

The man veered from the road and trotted into the stubby field, Hunter trailing behind him.

“Where are you going?” Natalie called after him.

“To see if the wolf left any tracks!” The man examined the ground toward the middle of the field, presumably where the wolf had been. Hunter pressed his nose to the ground, then bounded toward the forest that lined the field. The man followed him.

“Where are you going?” Natalie asked again.

The man turned his head back and smiled. His teeth glinted in the sunlight.

“My house is through these woods,” he said, tromping off to the edge of the forest.

“What about the wolf?”

“What about him? He’ll leave me and Hunter alone.”

“But what about me?” Natalie almost whined. She would feel embarrassed if she weren’t so hot. She felt like the color red, and thought she could see spots.

“There’s a shortcut through the woods that will take you to your grandmother’s house. You can come with me if you want, and Hunter and I will protect you. Otherwise our paths split here.” His voice was harsh, almost a growl. Natalie shrank from him. He softened.

“I’d hate for the wolf to find you after I left. Come along with me. Besides, it’ll be much cooler under the trees, and you look like you’re about to get heatstroke.” He turned, and began walking into the woods.

Natalie glanced from the sunny, scorching road to the man and his dog, already disappearing through the trees. His hand flashed out of the foliage, beckoning to her. Then he vanished behind the leaves.

She trotted after him.

The day Natalie disappeared, the news was full of reports of wolves emerging in broad daylight, of wolves approaching people, of wolves entirely fearless.

Experts speculated that it must be a lean season for wolves, for them to be so bold and so far outside of their territory, though this explanation felt weak, as deer were also in particular abundance.

The police found Natalie's mother's cellphone at the edge of the forest, its screen smashed and its edges dented and pocked, as though gnawed by fangs.

The news called Natalie "the girl taken by wolves."

They never elaborated on what they meant by using the euphemism "taken."

Fall approached; the leaves swirled from the trees. The air chilled, and the wolves disappeared entirely. No one knew what drove them away.

Without the gnawed phone or Natalie's disappearance to remind them, all but Natalie's mother and Gram forgot that the wolves had ever existed at all.

The Ghost of Women Past

“Come with me,” the Ghost of Women Past whispers into Sasha’s ear. Like a dreamer, Sasha slides from beneath the sheets, and away from her boss, who sleeps undisturbed beside her. She has slept here for the past two nights while her boss’s wife is out of town, visiting her sister.

Sasha practically floats to the Ghost, who herself drifts by the window, just out of reach.

“I am the Ghost of Women Past,” the Ghost says. Her words wrap around Sasha’s tongue. “I come to those women who are distressed with their lot, who have reached the point of breaking. Tonight we will determine who you will be tomorrow.

“Come with me,” she whispers again, and Sasha finds herself folded into the Ghost’s arms, her face nuzzled against the Ghost’s breast.

The Ghost continues her speech, and the Ghost’s voice seems to drip down Sasha’s throat, like honey.

“I sense you’ve been slipping away. I sense you’ve begun to watch unfeelingly as your sisters and aunts, mothers and daughters are harassed, are treated as little more than orifices meant to be plunged.”

A sharp bark pierces Sasha’s throat.

“You, too, I think are included in that,” the Ghost says, and holds her tighter.

Then, the Ghost whispers, “We’re here.”

They alight in Sasha’s boss’s bedroom, the same one she just left.

“Sometimes we must move through space to move through time,” the Ghost says. She gestures at the bed, where a previous Sasha straddles her boss. “We have returned to yesterday.”

It is morning, and the eyes of yesterday’s Sasha already are glazed. Yesterday Sasha slaps wetly against her employer. He groans, finishes, wriggles out from beneath Sasha and heads to the shower. The Yesterday Sasha does not join him; the syrupy sap of semen trickling down her legs will remind her all day that she is empty, and steadily deflating.

The room shifts without Sasha and the Ghost moving. They stand outside of Sasha’s desk, which faces a broad, street-level window. The Ghost and Sasha watch as time speeds up and a slew of odd men approach her window and rap on it and glance at her breasts. This, even though she wears a turtleneck.

This, even though it is June.

The room shifts again, to Sasha’s boss’s office, where she stands, eyes still dull. She stares at her boss’s stomach, the girth of which stretches the shirts buttons as he leans back in the chair. He eyes her breasts beneath her turtleneck.

Is there no barrier strong enough?

Sasha’s boss is saying that her performance is dissatisfactory, that this is just a warning, but there have been complaints.

“From who?” Yesterday’s Sasha can barely bring herself to ask.

Her boss simply smiled, and winked. He informed her that she would be expected in his office for private meetings to monitor her progress.

They could both smell the last smear of dignity rubbing off on her underwear.

Sasha notices that the Ghost has drifted away, and, hovering, regards her from the other side of the room.

“Well?” Sasha asks, uncertain. “What am I supposed to learn from this?”

A whisper of a laugh snakes through Sasha’s ears.

“Well, Sasha, what do you think? Is this you?” She gestures to Yesterday Sasha’s dull, flat eyes, her breasts, her invisibly dripping crotch.

“No,” Sasha murmurs.

“What was that?” the Ghost asks, smirking.

“No.” Sasha is firm.

“So what will you do?”

“I’m going to lose my job,” she fidgets to ignore the blush spreading across her cheeks. She would lose her job, because she could never give her boss all that he wanted. And she would lose herself, because she could never walk down the street as she wanted. She yearns to be equal. Even more so, perhaps, she yearns to be invisible.

Perhaps, she thinks, invisibility is equality.

Still smirking, the Ghost prods Sasha to think faster. “You’ll never get what you want if you don’t demand it.”

She sucks in a breath.

“Do you have any job openings?”

“As a matter of fact,” the Ghost says, “I’ve been promoted to Ghost of Women Future.” The Ghost is at her side again, airy fingers feathering through

Sasha's hair, hands lifting her arms, and the Ghost scrutinizes her from all angles.

"You'll make a perfect Ghost of Women Past, I think."

Sasha nods quickly. She had prepared herself for an entry-level job.

The Ghost's eyes crinkle, and Sasha's corporeal form disintegrates, already becoming something barely remembered.