

ORDERLY DECAY: STORIES

BY SYDNEY EMERSON

A SENIOR COMPREHENSIVE PROJECT IN CREATIVE WRITING

SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AT ALLEGHENY COLLEGE

BY SYDNEY EMERSON

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR A BACHELOR OF ARTS DEGREE

DECEMBER 2, 2022

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Professor Bakken _____

Professor Caballero _____

I hereby recognize and pledge to fulfill my responsibilities as defined in the Honor Code and to maintain the integrity of both myself and the college community as a whole.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Sydney Elisabeth Emerson", written over a horizontal line.

Sydney Elisabeth Emerson

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PREFACE

We are so used to writers describing in detail the agony that their craft brings them. They want to do anything else; they cannot control the harmful impulse. They sit down at a desk and their hand, acting independently, slices open a vein and squeezes its contents into an inkwell. They suffer so we may read, crucified by their own novels and poems.

There is no more insufferable approach to writing.

First, I must dispel some writerly myths: I do not see myself as a tragic hero, nor a whimpering, compulsive creature. I do not remember the first time I ever read a book, and I have no plans to talk about how I've been writing stories ever since I learned my alphabet. I do not labor under any delusion that this life chose me. I have chosen it, again and again.

There is no doubt that writing this collection is the hardest thing I've ever done—intellectually, physically, emotionally. But I do not believe in martyrdom and holiness in the workplace; a crown of thorns has no place in an academic setting. Writing is an existential decision that I make every day, and if I was truly miserable while writing fiction the way that

some writers claim to be, I would've become a history major a long time ago and left the world of make-believe behind.

I keep returning to Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus* and then resisting the urge to write about it, turned off by the tinge of a pity-party the initial comparison contains. I am sure that many writers would love to compare themselves to such a figure: tortured for his convictions, engaged in an act of gloomy-yet-sexy futility, doomed to an endless cycle of repetition and revision. I've heard it all before—that art is suffering, that recovery means the loss of creativity—but I don't buy it. Sisyphus is not a pathetic figure and I am not merely slogging through a senior project to earn a degree. Pity and a piece of paper are not a good reason to do anything. So, I resisted thinking about writing as my own personal boulder lest I lean too far over the precipice of cliché and find myself in a pit of English-major Ouroboroi with their heads cleanly inserted into their own sphincters.

But the visual of the rock, the hill, and the straining body is striking—especially when paired with a craft anecdote from George Saunders. He writes about the period of time he spent trying to be Hemingway, generating Serious Story after Serious Story to no avail. It was only when he gave up and descended “Hemingway Mountain” that he discovered “Saunders Mountain”: a “little shit-hill” that was all his (*A Swim in a Pond in the Rain* 108). Ironically, I had been trying to roll my boulder up Saunders Mountain, among others. But I am not George Saunders, nor do I want to be. I love his writing—its wit, its kindness, its strangeness—but I could not and would not write it myself in good faith.

Camus wrote, “I'm filled with a desire for clarity and meaning within a world and condition that offers neither” (51). I must generate clarity and meaning for myself, eke out some small corner of the world to call my own, quiet and fulfilling. I knew at the start of this semester

that writing was a part of my corner. I did not know what role it played or how far it could take me. By August, I developed two goals for my collection, neither of which particularly had anything to do with craft: one, to discover just how important the practice of writing was to my life, and two, to write a collection of brand-new material—no revisions, no rewrites, and no pre-planning. I wrestled with the question of authenticity all summer, continuously writing painfully derivative stories, smacked in the face by the fact that I so often change myself to please others that I had all but forgotten who I was. This collection needed to change that.

So, when I began writing in August, I was forced to scramble up the little shit-hill known as Emerson Mountain with no equipment, no helmet, and no map. I climbed the base while straddling a fissure, one foot wearing a clown shoe and the other a loafer. I was an “awkward, in-between thing,” as Zadie Smith describes Eliza Doolittle (3). I lurched to the left and wrote irrevocably silly stuff. I lurched to the right and wrote pretentious Serious Stories burdened by their own thematic importance. I couldn’t find a way to split the difference. I wanted to be taken seriously; I wanted to entertain people. I couldn’t figure out how someone like Vonnegut managed to do both. The answer, of course, is that he had his own boulder that he pushed up his own mountains, both of which were entirely different from my own. There is no use in comparison or imitation, only a careful study of technique and philosophy.

I began to find my footing once I focused purely on what felt good to write in the moment. None of the stories that made it into the final draft of this collection were planned earlier than August. Some were not planned at all—I sat down at my laptop and stopped typing once they were done. I do not indulge in the fantasy of divine inspiration; there was no hand of God or stroke of genius that guided me the way movies and autobiographies would have us believe. No, my ideas came along once I stopped grasping for them, and the rest fell in line soon

after. Once I relaxed into the rhythm of climbing my shit-hill, I found the landscape to be especially friendly. In other words—Max Weber’s to be exact— “Both work and passion, and especially both together, can entice an idea. Ideas come in their own good time, not when we want them” (9). I do not see myself as inspired or tireless, particularly, but rather open to the possibility of ideas and willing to guide them along, should they make themselves known. This, so far, has been the most effective approach to writing I’ve taken. This works.

PAIN AND PATTERNS

Creation does not happen independent of all other circumstances—this is important to understand. It can be a balm and a distraction, but the generative process is profoundly affected by the well-being of the body doing the generating. Illness and pain, conversely, are iterative states. Elaine Scarry writes: “While pain is a state remarkable for being wholly without objects, the imagination is remarkable for being the only state that is wholly its objects” (162). In short, pain is all action and imagination is all results. They exist in opposition to one another, and few imaginations successfully capture and translate pain. My best attempt to do so is the pattern story.

I have pain—chronic physical pain. Incurable. I manage pain: prescriptions, diet, gentle exercise, heat, rest. I have pain—chronic mental pain. Treatable. I manage pain: prescriptions, routines, more exercise, therapy. I have pain—chronic physical pain. You get the idea. This is my pattern, day after day: feel, manage; manage, feel. Somewhere in between, I read and write and attend classes and work and socialize. Sometimes there is no in-between and I have to make do with bare bones. Lately, the in-between has become even more scarce. It has made me predisposed to write a collection full of pattern stories.

Saunders describes the pattern story as a way of making a reader hone in on expectations: “The repetition of a pattern makes us anticipate continued repetitions of that pattern, which, in turn, focuses our expectations, and puts us into a tighter relationship with the writer” (*A Swim in a Pond in the Rain* 149). A pattern attunes the reader to the most minute of variabilities, and that is where the landmine of theme is buried. To an extent, I believe he is correct—in a traditional pattern story this is the exact function of the form. In my own writing, however, I find that I am instead fascinated by the condition of stuckness: the extent to which it is often man-made, the natural circumstances that make people freeze and settle, the routines in which human lives so often tend to operate. We are terrible at breaking cycles; in this respect, we are our own worst enemies. A mother inherits body image issues from her mother, which she unwittingly passes down to her daughter. A man never travels outside the boundaries of his county, despite having the means to do so, because he has been taught that the world consists only of what he can see from his stationary position. We refuse, again and again, to examine our lives and choices. We subscribe to fate. A pattern story is a great device to explore this condition.

When writing “Stone River,” I took my cues from Saunders’s essay on Chekhov’s “The Darling” and his own short story, “Pastoralia.” Interestingly, in this story, Saunders breaks his own craft rules and observations for how a pattern story should behave. Though he writes that a pattern story should offer the reader interesting variations on the established norm, he ends every day within the story the same way:

Daily Partner Performance Evaluation Form: “Do I note any attitudinal difficulties? I do not. How do I rate my partner overall? Very good. Are there any Situations which require Mediation?

There are not.

I fax it in. (“Pastoralia” 4, 5, 9, 24, 25, 34, 46)

This repetition does not signal a lack of character or plot development, nor does it eliminate the possibility of variation within the story. Instead, the continued repetition serves as an excellent foil to the protagonist’s arc. Though he deals with increasing interpersonal tension, he refuses to file a different report, escalating the tension between him and his partner Janet as well as the tension between him and his boss until the escalation spills over into a cathartic variation—ultimately the climax of the story.

In “Stone River,” the town has surrendered to the pattern story. The reader should see these people with the power to escape the daily horror of their lives and grow increasingly upset that they do almost nothing in retaliation. They have private moments of rebellion—Paul’s cathartic drive up Hawk Hill being a prime example—but the acquiescence remains. Nietzsche wrote, “Once you are awake, you shall remain awake eternally” (327). Deep down, both the characters and the reader know this. The characters, save for Paul, choose to remain asleep. The reader, in tracing the pattern, now faces the same choice: eyes open or eyes shut?

ABSURD LOGIC

Speculative fiction goes hand-in-hand with pattern stories, which focus on the absurdity of repetition, the human desperation for order where there is none. Camus wrote, “Kafka expresses tragedy by the everyday and the absurd by the logical,” a two-part formula which works especially well in speculative pattern stories (127). In the case of Kafka, the painful emotional core of his story “The Metamorphosis” is contained in its pattern: the unblinking continuation of daily life outside of the room where Gregor Samsa lies transformed and trapped. Its confrontation of the absurd is contained by the story’s immediate diegetic acceptance of Gregor’s

transformation, regardless of his family's and his own acceptance, starting in the first line and never stopping: "One morning, upon awakening from agitated dreams, Gregor Samsa found himself, in his bed, transformed into a monstrous vermin" (117). The key to a masterful speculative story lies in its normalization of the irregular and, conversely, its isolation from—or escalation of—the banal.

When writing "Heroine is Made" and "Heroine Remains," I took a cue from Kafka to transform my own emotions—specifically, my lingering anger from a Title IX case last spring. The whole experience felt like a satire: the incident happened in my dorm building, so I was offered a "safe room" to move into alone, which made me feel even less safe. I go on long walks to reduce anxiety and was asked to stop doing so, which made me more anxious. The offender was moved to only working in public buildings, not residential, which put me on edge in class and at work. I felt helpless, trapped. I seethed with anger, knowing that there were people all around me who never had to consider the possibility of being stalked and harassed while doing Sunday morning laundry, who never had to glance over their shoulders while unlocking their apartment door or spend sunrise to sunset in a public corner of the library so they could run for help if approached by a certain individual. How absurd.

During those few weeks, I felt a kind of impotent rage at my own existence as a woman that I had never experienced before and have not experienced since. I felt trapped in my own body, one that I did not choose, one which now felt like a crime scene. I wanted to bury it. I wanted to destroy it. I wanted to take up less space and divert the eyes of anyone who dared to look at me. This terror at my existence in my own body was the most excruciating self-awareness I had ever felt. It is not something I can face head-on—not well, at least.

So I turned to the speculative. In my “Heroine” pieces, the narrator is a fictional protagonist and knows it; this was necessary to establish right away, just like Gregor Samsa’s transformation, as it creates the logic of the story’s universe. Absurdity accomplished. As for the pattern, the narrator is trapped in two relentless cycles: first, being written and rewritten by a self-serving author, and second, being brought before an English class every year for criticism. Unlike the pattern of “Stone River,” this cycle is inescapable no matter how much she attempts to do so, similar to Gregor’s captivity and metamorphosis. It does not matter if the protagonist fights against the cycle in which she’s trapped or complies to it; it remains the same either way. Her self-awareness is key to the story—it is both a small victory and a terrible burden. The “Heroine” pieces are the full realization of my interest in the pattern story not as a way to train the reader but instead as an exploration of how it feels to be powerless in the face of an absurd, malicious cycle.

UTTER NONSENSE AND SPECULATION

In my speculative fiction, I try to present a third option between Camus’s existential options of suicide or taking a boulder of absurdity right to the face. Or, rather, I offer an alternative method to handle the boulder; I provide a map that leads you to the same destination along a more easily navigable route. This strategy is literally defined as nonsense: politically or socially important themes wrapped up in a paradoxically funny, entertaining, or engaging package. I first learned of nonsense—the artistic theory, that is—while conducting research for my J-term puppetry class. (Try to write a more liberal-arts-student-y sentence—I dare you.)

The tradition of nonsense in literature and art “resists and even openly rejects elements of logic and linearity [and] opens up the possibility for unconventional artistic forms, innovative

aesthetic styles, and irreverent—often subversive—cultural interpretations” (Abate 590-1). In similar ways, speculative fiction attempts to wrap ideas about what it means to be human or to live in this world—both the natural and man-made—in an alternative package, whether that be an invented society, an alien planet, or an otherworldly perspective. It recognizes that there are corners of the human experience and psyche that are not realistic and therefore are poorly served by realism. It reaches across genres and tones to coerce us into deeper thought and exploration of our own consciousness.

Of the speculative, Saunders agrees: “‘Realism’ exploits this fondness of ours for consensus reality...but a story can also be truthful if it declines consensus reality—if things happen in it that don’t and could never happen in the real world” (*A Swim in a Pond in the Rain* 277). In the case of “The Haunting of the Wilsons by Me and That Bitch Todd,” I attempted to confront two essential challenges of human life—one, that we do not choose to be born, and two, that once we are born, we often surrender to a particular current of consensus reality and spend our lives forgetting to live. These two subjects are hard to approach and even harder to describe. Nonsense is the perfect approach.

It is a move similar to that which Gwen E. Kirby employs throughout her collection *Shit Cassandra Saw*, particularly in her story “Here Preached His Last,” where a slut-shaming ghost of a puritan minister haunts a woman engaged in an extramarital affair—or, as she puts it, “fucking my neighbor Karl” (53). The serious questions of the story—the fickle nature of human affection, the tattered boundaries between good and evil, the shame and pressure that society puts on the female body—go down easily when coupled with the humor of the narrator’s interactions with the ghost of Reverend Whitefield:

Whore, the ghost whispers, and damn, he knows what gets me off. *Whore whore whore*. I come so hard I get a foot cramp and Karl says *fuck yeah*. He can't see George. Karl lacks imagination. It's one of his best qualities. (Kirby 53)

Kirby's deft use of nonsense in her speculative fiction is her version of what Saunders calls "gas stations": "anything that inclines the reader to keep going...bursts of honesty, wit, powerful language, humor; a pithy description of a thing in the world that makes us really see it, a swath of dialogue that pulls us through it via its internal rhythm" (*A Swim in a Pond in the Rain* 162). In "The Haunting," my gas station of choice is humor, as well, which works to both mask and enhance its more serious elements. It is a story that works against the grain of realism with its intense speculative bend and pushes through the tough philosophical conversations that often suffer when stripped to their core in a classroom. Some ideas are easier to express in metaphor, humor, or utter nonsense—this is one of the many reasons why fiction is wonderful.

WHAT DO I KNOW?

"Write what you know."

Some attribute that saying to Twain—but then, everybody attributes everything to Twain. Often, we take it to mean that we should only write of the exact experiences which we have lived. There is, of course, a word for this concept already: "nonfiction." This collection explores such circumstances as weathering a messy divorce, caring for a dying parent, grieving a child, haunting a house after falling victim to a murder-suicide, and being self-aware as the protagonist of a classic novel. I have experienced none of these things. It is impossible for me to experience about half of these things and still possess the ability to write. The beauty of fiction—reading fiction, but especially writing fiction—is that it is one of the few practices that enables us to

probe the dusty corners of any given life or experience. It is the ultimate intellectual and emotional exercise.

Plato wanted to banish the poets from his republic because they did not speak the truth—instead, they corrupted the youth with their false tongues. In the modern sentiment of “write what you know,” the same argument is ignited: authors may not invent; fiction may not be fictive. Round and round we go, fighting over who is entitled to which story and, along the way, leaving the true value of fiction in the dust. Of a writer’s so-called deceitful tendencies, Zadie Smith writes, “Being many-voiced may be a complicated gift for a president, but in poets it is a pure delight in need of neither defense nor explanation” (12). Bottom line: a writer’s instinct to inhabit a life different from their own is neither immoral nor dishonest. It is an earnest attempt to spend time in another mind, another heart.

“Write what you know,” to me, can and should only be applied to the emotional core of stories, and even then in moderation. It was a useful side entrance into this collection. When drafting the first story I successfully completed, “Six Love Letters to my Mailman,” I identified an emotion in my own life I wished to explore further—all-consuming obsession with somebody who is, for one reason or another, unattainable—and transferred it to a character with a life wholly different from my own. I wrote what I knew, and yet I didn’t. I shapeshifted and I remained myself. Fiction is all a contradiction in this way and has the wonderfully shocking effect of making you look at yourself and your emotions from the outside. It makes you examine your neuroses under a microscope. Ouch.

When I began writing “Six Love Letters,” it came out wrong, like the two stories before it. Cara Blue Adams’s collection *You Never Get it Back*, especially her story “The Foothills of Tucson,” provided a useful framework, with its understated-yet-gorgeous voice and ability to

make a split second last for pages and a year last for a single sentence. “The Foothills of Tucson” explores the meandering path of the narrator’s mind as she moves to a new home and reflects on a past relationship. Adams’s language is subdued and, in this particular piece, the past keeps encroaching on the present. She speaks directly to her ex throughout the entire story, the memories of their relationship as convoluted as both her feelings and the mechanisms of her mind:

I argued with him and finally, tired and disgusted and having gotten nowhere, turned away. But I kept thinking, Sovereign. You mean sovereign nations. I thought of the time you meant to say “Scandinavian” and you said “Scandivian” instead and, realizing your mistake, began an impromptu lecture about the Scandivians...I don’t know what made it so funny. Probably the glee on your face. That and the PBS tone your voice adopted, the slightly nasal quality. (Adams 56-7).

When you’re left alone—by circumstances or by choice—your mind has more time to wander, and wander it will. It is the mundane moments, Adams proposes to us in “The Foothills of Tucson,” that linger the longest. They are the memories that sneak up and ambush you when you have your back turned for one second, when you finally think you’re safe. This is the thesis—or one of the theses, at least—of “Six Love Letters,” which I tried to express using similar craft moves: somersaulting prose, a first-person narration directed toward a particular person, and importantly, seemingly benign details and memories that populate the narrator’s world. It is the mark of a rich narrator, I think, to dip into a deep well of daily banality. That is what makes us human; that is what, try as we might, peppers adult life: cooking breakfast, cleaning litter boxes, washing dishes, getting the mail. All simple. All quiet. All breeding grounds for love, grief, and memory.

HOLDING MY BREATH

This collection, in the end, became an even balance of humor and beauty. I struggled between the two before finally realizing I could combine both, and the relief I felt when this dawned on me was cathartic. I think—I *hope*—that this balance is my voice, but right now, I try not to limit myself to one path. I do not want to place boundaries on what I can or should write.

For moments of comedy, especially in first-person narrations, I looked to the Russian tradition of *skaz*, upon which Saunders and Kirby often rely: “[*skaz*] surrender[s] to our natural mode of expression, flawed though it may be, and ...[creates] a poetic rarefication of that (inefficient) form of expression” (*A Swim in a Pond in the Rain* 288). I did not try to have economical syntax in “The Haunting” or “Six Love Letters,” nor did I spend my time painstakingly crafting figurative language or worrying about proper grammar. That is not the point of these stories; their informality is a poetic form in itself.

For introspective stories that required a more deft use of description, particularly “Stone River” and “A Protagonist Responds,” I turned to the example of Maggie O’Farrell’s *Hamnet*:

She would like to spin the wheel backwards, unmake the skein of Hamnet’s death, his boyhood, his infancy, his birth, right back until the moment she and her husband cleaved together in that bed to create the twins. She would like to unspool it all, render it all back down to raw fleece, to find her way back, to that moment, and she would stand up, she would turn up her face to the stars, to the heavens, to the moon, and appeal to them to change what lay in wait for him, to plead with them to devise a different outcome for him, please, please. (O’Farrell 241)

There's something in O'Farrell's language that knocks the wind out of you: a whirling emotionality and yet a careful starkness. It asks the reader to glance between the lines, to insert themselves into the story and see what they discover on their own. It is smart. In its thrift, there is generosity—it leaps one step ahead of the reader and trusts that they have the capacity to keep pace. They do not need spoon-fed.

When it comes to voice and pacing, Matthew Salesses prefers to think in terms of breath and its subsequent control: accelerating and decelerating breath, variations of a regular pattern, and certain “keys or measures” that particular genres and audiences demand (92). O'Farrell's breath is slow and steady. She is contemplative; she knows how to linger. And yet, she does not go so far as to strap an oxygen mask onto the reader's face. This is a fine line to walk, especially in prose, when the balance between what is said and what is implied becomes all the more delicate and important.

In contrast, I wanted the breath of the “Heroine” pieces to feel more like an interval workout—quick and gasping at times, with dedicated spaces for the reader to regain a stable rhythm. This breath is the most important part of a pattern story, especially a flash fiction piece, where the pattern must be established and subsequently repeated in a very tight amount of space. This is tough to convey in language alone. It must rely on structure, and therefore breath, to fill in the gaps that words alone cannot.

A BOULDER ON A SHIT-HILL

I've learned plenty about writing during the process of creating this collection, though it was not my original goal. I'm assured of my craft choices and have come out of this experience a much stronger writer. That's great—it's exciting to feel. But the most important changes are private and

small: the feeling of developing an editorial rapport with someone without convincing myself I'm a burden, the way my voice can now pour onto a page without my worrying that it's not funny or intelligent or serious enough to touch readers, the feeling of holding this collection in my hands and knowing I love everything in it.

So here I am, reporting live from the top of my own little shit-hill, resting for a moment while my boulder rolls back down to the base. I wrote seven stories, five of which made it into this collection, equal parts pleasure and pain—or rather, pleasurable pain. This collection is bookended by a story split in two: “Heroine is Made” and “Heroine Remains,” the former all tenderness and the latter pure anguish. In between, there is “Six Love Letters to my Mailman,” which establishes my split voice, “Stone River,” my longest and most meditative story, and “The Haunting of the Wilsons by Me and That Bitch Todd,” my most humorous story, building to a crescendo, a meta-climax built from the combined stories, a mountaintop for the reader to discover.

Edgar Allan Poe wrote of short stories, “During the hour of perusal the soul of the reader is at the writer’s control. There are no external or extrinsic influences — resulting from weariness or interruption” (1). The power of the writer, the power of creation, was the most unexpected discovery of writing this collection for me. I sent my stories to my trusted readers and watched as I seized their thought processes and emotions via Google Docs. I could make them laugh. I could make them cry. I could make them come find me in my comp cube to gently ask what the *fuck* is wrong with me.

I regularly question why it is that I choose to do this with my time and energy. Sure, I think I’m good at it, but that’s not an excuse. If it’s purely to manipulate others’ emotions, mission accomplished, but I should probably seek therapy. I have a compulsion to create, but I

could just as easily be a lawyer who paints in her spare time or a plumber who builds birdhouses on the side. Why this?

I was not comfortable calling myself a writer until about a month ago, then something changed. Why now?

And how, against all odds, in that precious in-between time, did I manage to scale a whole mountain?

The answer to all three questions: it seems like the gravity is different at the top of my shit-hill. My boulder is, lighter. It rolls down the hill slower. It's still a strenuous climb, to be sure, but something is different now—"the struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart" (Camus 123). I'm doing this because it's a climb that I find rewarding, which is a very rare thing indeed, and I like how I feel at the summit. That's enough for me—at the end of the day, at the top of the shit-hill, that has to be enough.

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I am afraid to own a Body—
I am afraid to own a Soul—
Profound—precarious Property—
Possession, not optional—

Double Estate—entailed at pleasure
Upon an unsuspecting Heir—
Duke in a moment of Deathlessness
And God, for a Frontier.

-Emily Dickinson

HEROINE IS MADE

My Big God made me with terror in his soul, struck by visions of blood and roses and honey-scented love. He wanted me but couldn't have me, and so He molded a near-perfect replica, paper nearly bending to his will, language almost capturing the awe. Some days I fear He resents me, the way He violently strikes the page, crumbling me and throwing me across the room and pulling me back, wrinkled and barely alive, with His murmured prayers of adoration.

He makes me race through fields in storms and soaks me in turbulent rains until my clothes cling to my skin. My hair is wild and messy but I am no banshee—I am a dear civilized creature frozen in the amber of revelry. My Big God strokes my cheek. I lean in and blush. I collect bouquets of daisies and blow dandelion-seed wishes into the wind. When I walk back toward my home, I am so lost in my pure thoughts that I don't notice the man on the path. Funny; he looks like Him—younger and thinner, but speaks with the same sugared tongue. He tells me that I don't know how beautiful I am—that's what makes me beautiful. He smiles at my

unkempt state and offers me his coat. We walk home together and in spite of myself I am gone, forever kept. It's that simple kind of love. I adore him so.

My Big God disappears for days, weeks—I do not know—and I wait, patient and frozen, scanning the sky for a sign, for weather, for anything. Then I am yanked from my field and put in bed to waste.

I was never in a field; there are no fields. My constitution would never allow it. There is no man, either—just doctors and priests and brothers and father. They pray over me and poke me and whisper *not much longer now*. I wear a nightgown and a maid brushes my long hair every morning with a silver comb. I cough delicately into handkerchiefs and shiver and refuse food. I am small, a bird. Sometimes my cracked lips cry out for the Lord. Sometimes they cry out for Him, too, though I scarcely remember who He is, only that I've done something to deserve this, that I am a metaphor, that this is all I've ever been meant for and I should never have thought otherwise.

One day I look particularly beautiful in my big, empty bed and I see Him—He's a doctor from out of town, now, sweeping and scientific and particular. He has new ideas; in fact, he's a genius. He can save me. He touches my forehead to feel my temperature and says he has the remedy. I sit up and kiss him. Then he goes away and I wait in bed, throat tightening, eyes shriveling, blood drying. I am petrified. My Big God is gone, even though I pray.

Then I am pulled away again. I am a holy woman sinning. I abandon virtue, for I am far too beautiful, He says, to condemn myself to a life in the shadows. Oh, but what a great sacrifice it is! To crush one's beauty like a flower, to sequester it behind yards of fabric and vows of poverty. That makes me all the more exciting, all the more lively. A young priest arrives and it's Him. He catches my eye immediately and we have the forbidden run of one another and I'm

wicked, evil, a temptress. *Murderer*, he calls me. *Satan*. *She-Devil*. I carelessly destroy his perfection; he is helpless against my wiles. I must be punished. I must be cast away, soaked in sin, destroying, infecting—

My Big God turns a new leaf, opens fresh ink, and I am no more than an urchin. I have never heard of sickness or health, Heaven or Hell, saints or demons. I speak with great difficulty, but He is generous and loving. He teaches me to read and wash. He will save me, I know, and sure enough, He's there. He takes my hand and asks if I am grateful. *Of course*, I say. I know nothing more.

I am forged by ink in a racing heart, scratched mercilessly into existence and left to decay. Neither too tall nor too short, too plain or too breathtaking, I exhale restraint: I am virtuous and brave, sexy and chaste, teasing and pulling and joking and laughing and crying and fighting my own battles until I wilt into His arms to be carried away from the scene of the crime.

SIX LOVE LETTERS TO MY MAILMAN

Dear Hot Mailman,

Dad's house reeks of cancer right now, so I open the kitchen window for some fresh air and there you are with your mail bag and those blue uniform shorts that look bad on everyone who wears them. How do they look so good on you? It's a hot morning and you have been walking all over town; I can tell because you're just the right amount of sweaty and your polo shirt is clinging to your shoulders.

I guess they switched your route because this is the first time I've noticed you. I'm sure I'd have noticed the world's most gorgeous mailman had we crossed paths before. Neither snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom of night stays this courier from bringing me to swift completion, if you know what I mean.

So I burn the bacon and the kitchen is full of smoke and it sets the smoke alarm off and I have to grab the cat-shit broom and swat at the ceiling over and over again as I find the off button. The racket wakes Dad, asleep in the living room, and then he's yelling choice words at

me, the bacon, the cats, and God, asking the Almighty why he can't have an adult daughter who could cook—is that too much to ask?—and I yell to him that he isn't helping, but a dying man can say whatever he damn well pleases. I say for the hundredth time this month that I'm packing up my shit and leaving. He says I won't follow through, that I never follow through—that even if I tried I wouldn't get very far before turning back. He says it's always a matter of time before I turn back.

I like to think you'd like my sister Jen. You both have the same purposeful walk: back straight, arms pumping, quick to smile. She's a real Type A in denial, always writing me emails about Mercury being in retrograde and where to get a good deal on sage to burn and how our lives exist in seasons and tides, bossing me around and telling me to go with the flow at the same time. She says that in this season—this cruel season—I need to live in the moment and dwell in my pain. Then she mailed me a box of rocks and crystals, which I use as a paperweight for Dad's bills, and a daily planner filled with motivational quotes. She writes to me that I need to take one moment of every day to do something purely for myself as an act of love. She just read an article in the newspaper about the burden on caretakers, how they never think of themselves, and worries that I'm not selfish enough. Dad would disagree. So I test out the new vibrator I ordered online in a bout of horniness-fueled insomnia thinking of you and come so fast that my legs shoot out from under me like a baby giraffe and I bang my head on the edge of the tub. I tell myself that this is an act of love.

Love,

Angela Coles, 18 Chestnut St.

Dear Hot Mailman,

I make Dad's breakfast early and then bring the rejected scrambled eggs out to the front porch for myself along with an old Faulkner novel. I've been planning this for about a week. It's not an easy task, choosing which book to be casually discovered reading. Too trashy, you're ruined. Too pretentious, you're inaccessible. And then there's the matter of choosing where to sit, how to sit, what to wear.

I know exactly how it will go, step by step. I've thought about it while watching TV with Dad and doing laundry at night. You will walk up and see me sitting on the front steps, so engrossed in my book that I haven't noticed you (of course I've noticed you) and say hi as you hand over the mail—bills, a Halloween card from Aunt Margaret, election pamphlets. I will say hi back, aloof yet friendly, a polite customer. You'll make small talk: mention how the cool weather is finally here and ask what I'm reading. I'll show you the cover—noncommittal, nearly embarrassed to be caught lounging in the sun and reading when there are dishes to do. You will say that you read that one once, a long time ago—maybe it was in high school. You didn't get it, but you thought the words were pretty. You thought the part where the mom's coffin falls into the river was funny. I'll grin and ask, "Why don't you read it again?" and "Did you know that William Faulkner was once a mailman too?" I think you'll like that. Coincidence smacks of perfection, and perfect people love perfect things. As you leave, I'll try hard not to stare at your ass but sneak a glance anyway.

So here I am, Wednesday morning, paperback and cold, gelatinous eggs in tow. I see you down the road. You're wearing a jacket; the wind is getting chillier. I try to read, but end up scanning the same sentence over and over again, starting and restarting between glances of you: *Beneath the quilt she is no more than a bundle of rotten sticks.* You stop to pet the German

Shepherd next door. He jumps up and puts his massive paws on your shoulders. You laugh.

Beneath the quilt she is no more than a bundle of rotten sticks. You rifle around in your bag until you find your prize: a dog treat. Of course you carry dog treats on you. That is so perfect.

Beneath the quilt she is no more than a bundle of rotten sticks. I've never seen anyone like you: handsome yet bashful, friendly yet assertive. You charm everyone in your path. I used to wish I could be like that. *Beneath the quilt she—*

Dad shouts from inside. He has to shit. I yell at him to hold it and forcefully return to my page. He yells back sure thing, but I'll be the one to clean up the mess. I tell him that I'm renting a car this afternoon and going back home. He screams that I don't have one of those anymore. I throw my book into the yard and tell him to crap his pants for all I care, I'll let him die in a mound of his own shit and laugh. You turn to see what the noise is. I run inside. Pathetic.

Here's my problem: I can't imagine you doing anything but delivering mail, like how kids think their teacher lives at school and never goes out to the bar, gets wasted on tequila shots, and fucks the vice principal in the backseat of his Nissan. If only it were that simple. I want to grab the next fourth-grader I see off the sidewalk and blow their mind: *Kid, your teacher Mr. Coles used to have a nice life until he slept with Tammy at the Christmas party and kept the house but none of the furniture and he can barely cook for himself and wears the same polo shirt again and again until he's forced to wash it. He kept the dog and the car and texts me once a week. He is not a robot, nor is he a god. He is a man—a smelly, horny man with student debt who gave your whole class an A on their long division worksheets because he was too preoccupied in his love nest to bother correcting them.*

I don't want you to think Dad's always been like this—it's the cancer or the treatment or something. The yelling is a recent development. We enjoyed a typical array of dysfunction for

over thirty years: soccer games and dinner table arguments, time-out chairs and trips to the ER. Dad can't walk himself to the toilet anymore. I move him into his wheelchair and then transfer him to the can in our well-negotiated shuffle. We do not make eye contact. Neither one of us wants to acknowledge that the other is here, that I'm shimmying down his pants and waiting outside the door while he strains to take a dump. When I was a kid, he used to read me that book *Everyone Poops* as I learned to go use a toilet instead of a Pull-Up. On our good days, I chant that through the door like a mantra and it makes him laugh. On our bad days—today—I sit in the hallway and wait for the flush to summon me back.

It's strange—I can't picture you taking a shit, or even eating a pizza or picking out underwear in the morning. Logic tells me that you do all these things; instinct says that you are reborn uncorrupted every morning—no sensations set your nerves alight, your guts do not twist when you see me the way mine do for you. You materialize in your windbreaker, bag packed with letters. You photosynthesize. You dissolve.

Love,

Angela

—

Dear Hot, Kind Mailman,

Monday morning and I have resolved to preserve you as nothing more than another deposit in the spank bank. Dad is watching some pundit yell about climate hoaxes at full volume and I'm on hold with the newspaper because the crossword has a typo. The litter boxes haven't been cleaned. I need to fold my underwear. That is, of course, when you knock on the door and I answer in all my morning breath glory. I have never once begged God to immediately smite me from this earth until that moment—not when Robbie Edelstein let go of me during teen night at

the roller rink and I ate shit, not when I had to go to the ER for accidentally drinking perfume in college, not even when Tammy the Slutty Principal showed up to watch me move out. But when you see me, tits akimbo, in my BOOKWORMS READING COMPETITION 1998 shirt, I begin a mental prayer for a swift and painless demise.

And so it's time for our first full conversation. You have a certified package that requires my signature. The instinct to make a joke about your certified package struggles below the surface of my mortification.

It's the first time I really see you up close, as I sign your clipboard. I can't take you in all at once; I get each feature independent of the other like one of those reconstructed sketches of serial killers. You've got a crooked bridge of your nose and surprisingly full lips. A mole on your cheekbone. Sun damage near your hairline. A wedding band. Two ears, probably. I have two ears, too. That's a good start.

I sign my name—Angelaa Cooles, apparently. You ask if I am having a good day. I panic and say no, thank you, then close the door, clutching the package, imagining all the other ways that could've gone. I spend so long planning for every interaction; I run the conversations in my head over and over again, every direction they could take, every funny thing I can say, every fact about myself that I need others to know for reasons beyond my understanding. But it never makes a dent. They're always unpredictable. You are no exception.

The package is addressed to Mrs. Brian Coles. I knew it was coming—yesterday he called and said something about Tammy and babies and moving on with our lives, how we've been apart long enough and should make it legitimate. He said he doesn't like to waste time. I thought of the past ten years and couldn't help but disagree.

He doesn't know about you, and yet some base part of me can't help but think that he's engineered all of this to torture me: the new object of my affections delivering the packet that will cleave me from my marriage. Of course he doesn't know about you—what would I tell him? *Well, Bri, while you were settling into your new life, I was busy doing more important things, like having masturbatory fantasies about fucking the mailman during his lunch break in Dad's laundry room. He's a better lover than you ever were. He never asks me about ass stuff. I think this separation has done us both a lot of good.*

I don't mean to insult you, to make you *just* the mailman; he never possessed my mind the way you do. It numbs the sting, thinking about you in bed and in the shower. I find myself lying awake at night thinking about what the holidays would be like with you on my arm. You'd be polite yet warm to my family—you'd drink beer and joke around with Dad and play hide-and-seek with Emily and Henry. We'd sit around the fire at night and tell embarrassing stories. I'd pretend to blush, but I like it. I like you knowing. I like knowing you.

Love,

Angie

—

Hot Mailman,

Are both of your parents still alive? Do you want them to be?

I'm starting to think that those are the first two questions everyone should answer on their dating profile. It would save me from a lot of mommy-issue dorks and psychos with a romantic streak. Well? Are they?

There have been more envelopes addressed to me than ever; you've been packing them all into the mailbox with expert precision. They're fascinating specimens of genre, sympathy

cards. Nobody lies through their teeth more readily than in one of those flowers-and-crosses cardstock monstrosities. *He was a kind, generous man. Always attended church. Always put a smile on my face.* Brian even sent one. Tammy signed it, too. They wrote that my father was a blessing in their lives (Plural? Really?) and that they hoped I would visit Cleveland soon. Polite destruction is an art, and I have to hand it to them.

We all have parents, which means you are no exception. You seem like the nuclear family type. Donna Reed mom, Dick Van Dyke dad, a sister and a brother all in a shag-carpeted house. They probably gave you a horrific haircut or two in the kitchen and put you in time-out when you broke a window playing baseball. You spent your allowance at the ice cream truck and read comics in a treehouse. Only something as perfect as that could have produced something like you.

I want to see your baby pictures—God only knows why. Is that every woman’s instinct after a certain period of infatuation? To calculate how cute her babies would be? To do the genetic math? I need to know you more; I can’t stay at this distance. I want to know what you look like when you sleep and when you’re stumbling around making coffee illuminated by the first rays of the morning. I want you when you have the flu and need me to bring you more Kleenex and when you’re drunk and when you’re taking the trash out and raking leaves. I want you to see me at my ugliest, too, and like me anyway.

That’s my sin—I always need more and more. I never stay satisfied with occasional glances or cocktail party conversation or monthly emails that linger in my inbox, opened and reopened at night after a drink too many. It’s not enough to know you think of me—have you ever thought of me?—or to live on the scraps of a single conversation alone. I am a stray dog. If you feed me on the back porch, I will return to beg for more.

I'm sorry I'm not being funny or charming. I want so badly for you to think of me that way: smiling, witty, wise. But Jen's coming tomorrow and I'm cooking for the wake and cleaning out the house and the cat has run off and I'm fresh out of that personality that makes people fall in love. Forgive me for my self-pity. Forgive me for it all. You didn't ask for this; you're just a mailman doing your job and I'm a woman on the fucking brink timing a single Amazon delivery daily this week to ensure you'll be here to ask me how I'm doing so I can lie through my teeth.

See you soon,

Angela

—

Hot Mailman,

Jen has sent another package and it's finally supposed to come today—charms, self-help books, pictures of Emily and Henry in their Halloween costumes. She's been sending me daily updates of the tracking information, trying to get me excited about it. A few days ago, we spoke on the phone, ostensibly to plan the Great Move. She complained about how slow the postal service has been lately, how everything always gets lost and even if your mail makes it to its destination it'll take about forty years and show up broken in half. She said that she might as well send it by Pony Express, and some disjointed joke about mailmen and reverse cowgirl knocked around in my head before dissolving. It wasn't worth the effort.

I asked her where her peace and love was now, or if it didn't apply to the post office. She scoffed, then asked me why *that* was the thing I decided to care about today. Don't I have better things to do right now? I said that she's always so quick to preach kindness and forgiveness and then the first to bitch and moan and that maybe once she should think about what's actually

going on in other people's lives. She said that if I had this amount of passion and enthusiasm a year ago then maybe I'd still be in Cleveland. I hung up on her.

She texted the next day with a breezy apology and a promise to come for Thanksgiving to help me move out, and so today I sit and wait for my mail, watching brown leaves relinquish their grip on life and float down to clog the gutters that I'll never be able to clean on my own.

Your van pulls in down by the corner, right on time. A short and squat woman hops down, dwarfed by Jen's package, and the only coherent thought I can form is that you are usually much taller.

It's only after she struggles up the front way with the giant box and drops it at my feet that I fully register the situation. I ram the box inside with my foot—it's right at home in the city of cardboard I've created—and kick it too hard with my big toe, which was already sticking out of the hole in my sock. That's when I start to cry and punch things and stomp and truly frighten the living daylights out of the cat that's inexplicably home again and also mine. I yell at the box and the hordes of tchotchkes that I need to pack. I yell at Jen for living so fucking far away and at Dad for dying and the cat for existing and you for leaving me, just like Brian, though now I'm the one in an empty house. It's the first time I've heard my own voice today. You don't need to know that and I need to get a goddamn grip. You're the mailman. The fucking mailman. You come and go just like everybody else and if I was better I would move on in my life like a normal person. And then I know why I'm so easy to leave behind. Why I always only ever make it to the edge of an impression; why I never get past the first step. At the end of the day I will burn these letters or use them to spit out old gum or learn origami if I'm feeling ambitious and you will finish your postal route and go home.

Home, where I can't bear to think of you being. Where you are yourself, a person I will never know. I do not want your existence to reach outside of my own. You had a wedding. You watched your children be born, held them in their first moments, took them to preschool and the zoo. You are human and whole; I am an alien unable to keep her cover. You have more people who populate your days than I do—to me, you are a constant presence, a permanent fixture; to you, I am part of the background noise, the set dressing. I'm filled to the brim with other people's lives and have nothing of my own to give away.

Tell me what I'm supposed to do with all of this. I know Brian's Chinese order from the place around the corner from our first apartment. I know that Jen buys new socks every six months and folds them like little dumplings. I know how much Dad's coffee cost and which brand of gum he chewed. I know that you wear string bracelets that your kids have made at summer camp. What can I possibly do with any of that?

Sorry,

Angela

—

Hey,

Jen'll be here later this afternoon, family and turkey packed into their minivan. She's made all these plans for us to watch Charlie Brown and bake pie and make letters to Santa with the kids. When we talked last, I said it was a bit too early for Christmas. She said I don't get a say in the matter, not when the kids have been singing Frosty the Snowman for a month already.

I've never liked the holidays, so tell me why this year I am mourning for Thankgivings and Christmases past. There's something about that feeling that I long for: driving through the

dark autumn evening and returning to a warm, bright home hand-in-hand with someone I love. I'm sure that must have happened once—I don't know why else I'd pine for it.

Mother, father, sisters and their families all happy under one roof, at peace for a week at least. Instead, we're a ragged group of five people, one ancient cat and two urns gathering for a final dinner on the table Dad bought for Mom after we broke the old one with a childhood tabletop dance party.

And so I am getting the moving van today since it'll take a miracle for me to break away from Jen's schedule for the next three days. I walk into the shop and there you are, standing behind the counter. They gave you a red polo here. It looks good on you. You notice me and smile, then ask how I'm holding up.

I tell you that I've finished packing up the house. Obviously I've finished, otherwise I wouldn't be getting a moving van. I say that, too, and clumsily slip in the fact that I've missed your mail-carrying expertise. The new lady always folds up the letters. They have better hours here, you say, and of course they do—mail carrying isn't your life. I tell you about Jen and the kids and how we're baking pecan pie even though we hate it because Dad loved it and how we know we look crazy baking a pie for a dead man. You always make eggnog at Christmas for your Grandma even though she passed fifteen years ago, you say, and pecan pie is delicious. Then you finish running my credit card and hand over the keys and I leave with a foreign calm in my stomach.

In three days I'll finish loading up the van, save for the uneaten, slightly-stale pecan pie. I'll leave it at the front desk with your coworker on my way out of town—you took the weekend off to spend time with your family. I'll leave no message, no note. I'll keep you in my back pocket for emergencies, think of you from time to time when I'm once again weak and hideous.

I drive around, looking at the nearly-bare trees like bundles of bones stuck into the ground, a few final, shriveled leaves still clinging. I pass by the post office one, two, three times before I finally pull into the parking lot, then spend five minutes trying to get my pen's ink to warm up, alternating between holding it against the vents and sitting on it. Finally, it loosens up and I spell my name right this time—Angela Joy Coles—over and over next to every sticky-note SIGN HERE arrow. I even pay to have it overnighted to Cleveland.

By the time I get back to the house, Jen's blue minivan is in the driveway and she's pissed because she forgot her key and they've been waiting in the car for half an hour and Henry really has to pee. I unlock the door and he sprints upstairs, action figures in tow. Emily runs into the house, too—she's cold. Greg lugs their bags up the steps, refusing my offers of help, and Jen presses a neat stack of mail into my hands: bills, a magazine, and some coupons addressed to Dale Hart or Current Resident.

-Angela

STONE RIVER

Stone River was at its best during the funerals, and come February, the town was itching for one. In the soft mornings of December and the crisp blue nights of January, the town laid still, holding its breath and waiting for the inevitable. Sure as a bumper rusts, there'd be a boy gone soon. When word spread that Andy Simmons had gone into the woods and blown himself up, they could all rest easy.

The valley was never quiet. Every morning, the powerhouses met the dawn with piercing, sputtering shots like a thousand backfiring trucks. Then the oilfields would join in, the pumpjacks squealing on their fulcrums, tankers rattling on their tracks, whistles blaring, barkers howling, packs of ravenous wolves. Stone River didn't need a symphony; it had a private orchestra, discordant and unholy. When Andy Simmons went up, he pierced the dissonance with a clean cannon shot that slammed across the bare hills and echoed off the frozen, unyielding ground. It shook the clouds, birch-bark wisps in a sea of violet, and hung low and heavy over the valley. Up on Hawk Hill, a thick stream of smoke erupted and rose toward heaven, jet-black and

heavy with occasional streaks of pale gray when leaves and twigs surrendered to the heat. In town, Paul Baker was working on the steel roof of his service station—it never fastened, not completely, no matter how much he pounded it down. The sheet metal began to quake with the invisible impact of the explosion, and Paul looked to the horizon, where the mingling white-hot flames and smoke met the light, damp snow, sending a skunk-like mass up into the sky above town. He did the math and wondered if this time it was his boy he'd be bringing home.

Tom came by in his muddy pickup a few minutes later and Paul settled into his well-worn divot on the passenger side. "Roof's not stayin' put again," he said, rubbing his sandpaper hands together by the vent on the dash.

"Why didn't you get John to do it?"

Paul laughed. "You seen his prices? I went down there last year and I says to him, 'John, give me a good deal on the roof,' I says, 'and I'll fix that muffler on your truck.' And then he says that a broken muffler isn't worth a whole roof. Says I'm tryin' to rip him off, that he'll need me to do the muffler and the bumper and replace the headlights to boot. So I'll do it by myself, I says, and better than him and cheaper than him, too."

"He'll catch hell for that. I've heard that truck of his."

The lone road out of the hills cut through town quick and clean like a knife through a buck's belly. Down by the river, the refinery marked the center of the bowl, the flattest land the valley could muster, and it burst from the ground in a metal thicket, surrounded by brown, oily slush. They made their way down the winter-worn roads, the arthritic suspension on Tom's truck no match for the salty pockmarks. The rhythm of the ride was familiar by now, the dips and curves, the conversation, the cold; when a boy went off into the trees or below the river or down a ditch, Paul and Tom would close the beer joint and service station to go clean up the aftermath.

It was better for Auggie Johnson down at the station to send them out than the volunteers at the refinery—they worked for themselves and didn't have to punch out. He'd just called Tom to say that Phil Peterson had seen Carl Simmons's boy walking into his woods about two hours ago. Then he heard the explosion. Tom and Paul's services were surely required.

The road got thinner and emptier as it climbed up toward the town line. Out in the sticks, the car radio dropped into static and the only sounds were bird calls, falling trees, and the steady *put-put-put* of the powerhouses. Snow muffled everything—it insulated the world, hid secrets. When it melted, it left frozen percussion in its wake, an ear-splitting resonance. Gravel roads were rounds of artillery. Woodpeckers fired loaded pistols.

Tom parked in the long dirt driveway of Peterson's cabin and the men began to follow the acrid smell of burning oil and hair. Even then, it took them half an hour to find the spot; the fire had put itself out and the smoke had dissipated into a thin cigarette stream, hidden by mist and sugar maples and hemlock. Andy'd gone real far back to climb on one the oil tanks that peppered the hills and tried to stretch his eyes beyond the valley. When he discovered that the hills were impossibly high, impenetrable walls, he must've gotten bored (as boys do) and started flicking matches across the forest.

Everyone in town knew better than to bring a flame near oil itself. Their dads worked at the refinery and whispered tales of scorched limbs and hair as bedtime stories; they were shooed away from the slicks that floated on top of the river, warned away from going swimming in the mosquito haze of summer. But the oil fumes, snakes in the grass, vented out the top of the tanks. It only took a spark to snag invisible death and send the whole thing up.

The tank was busted open and empty—a fresh-hatched egg with a rusted shell. Oil seeped into the snow. Andy had landed on the gnarled roots of a walnut tree twenty yards away, neck

broken. He looked smaller now, Paul thought, a winter fawn crumpled on the shoulder of the road: thin, all bone and thatch, nose in the air and legs askew, red-hot raw blisters where heat and oil touched flesh. He built a snowman with Paul's boy Jim once. They stole all of the carrots in the fridge to use as facial features and limbs. Andy stayed for dinner that night. Chicken soup. Rose kept apologizing—it was missing a few ingredients. He shut the scene away in his mind's lockbox, full of apple-cheeked young ones he'd peeled from the ground.

Auggie dragged his bad knees up the hill soon after and declared the death the way he ordered coffee after a long, cold night patrol. He leaned against the tree and puffed on his pipe while Tom and Paul wrapped Andy up to carry him off the hill. Paul reset the broken neck, then took off one of his flannel overshirts and tied it under Andy's chin to keep his work intact. Back in the driveway, they laid the boy's body down in the backseat of the truck. When they rode back downhill into the cascading twilight, all the windows down to keep the body as cold as possible, the church bell rang twelve times, once for every year of Andy's life, each clang piercing the ice-dark evening. The river sang a dirge on nights like these; it never froze over—always churning, always cutting, always flowing away, away, away. The lights of the refinery made it look like a city in miniature, Paul thought, remembering moonless nights in his youth when, from his father's car, he would squint and imagine the blinking towers and still-burning flames were New York or Chicago—distant, rangy names. Though enclosed by what his set of encyclopedias called mountains ("They're just big, old hills," his father used to say, shaking his head woefully at the misinformation), Paul could not fathom the cities' heights, their closeness and bite. He could not imagine living in a never-ending refinery, all metal and no grass, all light and no stars.

By the time Tom ground the truck to a stop in front of the Simmons home, the Women's Club was on the front porch waiting. They bowed their heads as Paul and Tom carried the body into the house, then followed them into the kitchen, where they had laid the boy on the table. There the women would undress and wash him—behind the ears, around the eyes, under his dirty child's fingernails, then down the slender arms and legs, taking extra care around the neck—before wrapping him in a clean sheet. They would pray over him and dress him in white; they would fill his pockets and hands with rosemary, thyme, and lavender. For the next two days, they would take turns sitting up with the family, cooking and mourning and singing. Their husbands would build a coffin. Everybody did their part in Stone River.

The moon had risen high and bright when Paul finally returned home. The phone tree had run its course—Rose was baking bread to take over for the family and Jim was sitting at the kitchen table reading his history textbook.

"You get him back, Dad?" he asked, nose still buried in the chapter about Jefferson. Outside, the winter frost whispered to the window panes.

Three days later, a steel wool afternoon descended upon the valley. There was no snow or wind, only biting, penetrating cold, the weather's final respects for the fallen. Inside the old stone church, Paul's family filed into their pew, joining Tom, Rita, and their boy Greg.

Reverend Gray gave the sermon and Carl Simmons read a eulogy. The six Junior Pallbearers stood to carry the coffin. Rose and Rita's hearts swelled with pride; their boys were chosen Head Pallbearers this year. They looked mature and handsome.

The town processed out of the church and into the cemetery, through the stone arch and down to The Field—hundreds of uniform stones clustered around a craggy conglomerate that

read OUR BOYS. At the graveside, Jim recited the tradition: Isaiah McLaughlin drilled his first well a month after he finished settling the valley. Soon after, the river took his twin sons. He found them by this very bend, purple and icy. With no clergy or church in the valley, he laid them to rest himself at the foot of The Field's boulder. He etched the words into the boulder with brute force and an anguished hand, then built the old church out of the very river rocks that snagged his sons' shirts and held them below the rushing surface, sentencing them to a life of hard frost and wind.

As Andy was lowered into the ground, the town sang a hymn, the steady, frigid chatter of the Stone River keeping time. The choir was forlorn and full—they drowned out the noise of the hills with their song. The mourners made their way back to the high school cafeteria for coffee and sandwiches. The kids dawdled, throwing snowballs at one another. The captain of the football team asked the girl who borrowed his jacket to come out with him on Friday. Paul wondered if his shipment of lugs had arrived at the service station.

When Paul was a boy, things almost changed. He remembered gathering in the church, walking in there with his hand in his father's. He must've been about five or six years old and had a vague sense that something was wrong—he never ran wild and free through the wilderness like Peter Pan or the Boxcar Children. He felt no fear, not out of duty or bravery or some sort of juvenile strength, but was rather preoccupied with the important fixations of childhood: toy soldiers, penny candies, and jacks.

Paul and his father sat in the hard, straight-backed pew and he watched as the adults took turns standing at the altar and raging against the valley. Against the river. Against God. Their generation was going to be the one to break the cycle, they said. They could save themselves.

That night, they demolished Stone River like a condemned house and rebuilt it for the sake of their sons: curfews, fences, streetlamps, and chaperones. Paul spent three years shuttled between school and home, home and school. It was in the time before the public park—in summer, they would gather at Carroll Field, enclosed by a ten-foot-tall fence, to play football and cowboys. Play outside the field was prohibited. Nobody wanted to go beyond the boundary, anyhow.

For a while, it worked well enough. There were a few accidents, but there were accidents everywhere—Stone River was right at par. When a boy turned up at school missing an eye or sliced off his finger during arts and crafts, the teachers knew well to clean him up and move on without so much as a peep. Then, on a clear September day marred by the haze of the refinery, Robbie Scanlan climbed an apple tree just outside Carroll Field to show Paul and Tom how high he could go. They watched him stretch his sapling limbs through the branches and slip, then tumble. Paul's heart seized. Robbie's stopped.

The men came to take Robbie away. They brought him to the church and put him immediately in a pine box. The Women's Club did not wash his body. He was not dressed in white. There were no stories and hymns for the boy. His empty desk in the middle of the classroom began to develop its own retaliatory center of gravity. The teacher had it removed.

Two weeks later, little Mikey Smith came home covered in dirt from playing Dog Kennel with the other boys and needed a bath. His mother drew the water and went downstairs to finish peeling potatoes. When she returned, he was floating face-down. She tried in vain to massage life back into his soggy body, petting his soft blond puppy-dog hair, rubbing his birdlike freckled back. She breathed into his lungs for half an hour before collapsing on the floor in a heap, Paul's father said, shaking his head as he read the newspaper the next morning. The town buried him quickly and plainly, too. They would put all this pain in the past where it belonged.

Stone River made coffee and stoked morning fires. Kids walked to school. The refinery ground to life; the powerhouses spittled *put-put-put* day and night; the barkers bellowed at the sun. Then, a week later, an orange light punched through the late morning with the intensity of an eclipse. The elementary school had caught fire. The blaze roared throughout the entire day as children stumbled out its doors and windows, choking and sputtering, their faces smudged with soot and throats crackling like lava. By afternoon, the roof caved and the walls crumbled. Left to sift through the ashes, the volunteers found nineteen boys curled together in the wreckage and plenty more alive but scathed. Paul's left eye was licked by flames; the tender burn scars would never fade. Tom, who sat next to him, lost his left foot to dark, angry burns. Their fathers found them together under a desk, hand in hand, Paul crying for help and Tom faint from pain.

There was a mass funeral the next weekend, nineteen coffins in a row on the football field with Robbie and Mikey, pine boxes exhumed and slightly dirty, on the end. The message was clear: they were not to be left out. Paul waited with his dad for two hours to lay roses on the fifty-yard line, his eye packed with cotton bandages and a patch that made him look like Captain Hook. Tom wobbled through the line on his new crutches.

Reverend Gray gave the sermon. The boys' fathers read eulogies. Twenty-one coffins were carried to The Field by one hundred and twenty-six honorary Junior Pallbearers. There was no snow for snowballs, so Paul resorted to picking at the hard ground until his nails were caked with dirt. Some teenagers were caught kissing in the coat closet. Paul remembered the ham sandwiches he ate in the high school cafeteria, made by the women's club. They sent some extras home with his father.

Stone River laid down its weapons, white flag in hand. They gathered in the church again, this time speaking in hushed tones, afraid of the vengeful God listening. The costs were

too high. Bloody and raw, tail tucked between its legs, the town tore down its protections, lifted the curfew, and waited for the world to right itself. The deaths regulated. The system tightened.

Undeterred, Paul's father continued to wage a private war. He was not convinced that Paul had seen the last of the back of danger, and with nothing left for them in town, he plotted their escape—a move to Detroit, far away and bustling. The night after Paul's eleventh birthday, he packed their lives up in the Oldsmobile and began the slow climb out of the valley. Wedged into the passenger seat with the photo albums and his father's toolbox, Paul watched the city lights of the refinery shrink and finally disappear behind the trees and wondered how much brighter Detroit was going to be.

The top of Hawk Hill marked the town line. Crawling upwards, Paul, who'd never traveled that far before, was surprised that it looked like any other regular patch of woods—pines, black cherries, a bed of crushed-up leaves and ferns peeking out of the ground. At night, guided only by headlights, he felt like a little kid again, afraid of everything looming tall in the darkness. The trees looked wrong devoid of color, some devil's facsimile of nature; the flowers were suddenly stitched of cloth and plastic. Every animal was a figment of the imagination or otherwise a poor replica, a cheap taxidermy.

Paul's father had shown him photos of Detroit to try and get him excited—it was all concrete and metal, light and brick. Prosperity. Factories. No trees. No wild river, only a calm strait. No danger. The crest of the hill approached with a finality, and yet the landscape remained the same. Stone River was no different than the rest of the world, and for a brief, wild moment, Paul entertained the thought that it was the same. Then a fox with a mouse in its jaws ran into the middle of the road and his father swerved to avoid it.

The night went blindingly bright then pitch-black with the quick brilliance of an eclipse. His father was on his left, his blind side, in the driver's seat. Paul could not remember his last sight of him upright and breathing, only the hot white flash. Later in life, he probed his mind for that memory, sure that he must have instinctively turned to preserve one last image of his father whole, clean, and blinking. And yet the picture never emerged. Somewhere in the glare, Paul remembered, there was a roar, growing distant. It must have been his father; Paul was thrown from the car.

When he dared to lift his gaze from the dirt, the Oldsmobile was stamped up off the shoulder of the road, straddling the hilltop, and his father was burning in the wreckage like the devil. The fox ran off into the woods—whether it was leaving to die or to feast, Paul did not know. He tugged a photo album from the wreck and ran back down the hill chased by the tree branches reaching out in the wind, threatening to grab him and toss him back into the wreck, too. He staggered into town with the bleach-stained dawn at his heels. Tom's family woke to a shivering, scraped-up boy clutching a book on their doorstep asking them to call the police. They made him their second son by noon.

Stone River was not without mercy and Paul learned to be grateful for its small graces. He and Tom stayed back from fighting—bum eye and bum leg—and worked overtime at the refinery instead. They went to dances at the Y and collected scrap metal. Paul married Rose. Tom married Rita. They had sons of their own and knew better than to try and shield them from nature. They knew better than to stretch beyond their reach.

It was a month after Andy Simmons that the next boy was taken—a real March day, rain and fog giving way to clear skies and sun. Paul got the call from Auggie a little while after school let

out—Peter Reid was crushed by a 200-ton locomotive while horsing around on the tracks down on Elm Road. Paul rubbed his grease-streaked face with his hand and sighed. It was about time. About right. Rose was a Reid; Jack was her brother and Peter her nephew. They always came over for Thanksgiving, and when the boys were young, they would watch the parade on the television together and play ball in the backyard until dinner. Peter had a good arm and always tired his cousin out. He was patient—always willing to be the catcher, always willing to help Jim correct his form. Rose never had a problem putting Jim down for bed those nights.

Baker and Reid boys had managed to be spared for a long time—it was one of the first things Paul and Rose talked about on their very first date; he had lost a great-uncle long before his father was born; the Reids couldn't remember the last time they lost a boy. And so they fell victim to the worst sin of all: hope. As every year passed unmarred, they clung onto the silent belief that somehow, through sheer force of will and a bit of luck, they would be spared. In a cruel world, they would be the exception. They would make it through unscathed. Paul had never considered that the lack of deaths in their families might not be a sign of luck, but rather an indication that their number was up. They were due.

As Paul helped Tom disentangle the body from the tracks, he thought of when they were young and used to put pennies on the same route. The trains carrying coal and oil would flatten the coins like pancakes and they'd scrape them off the tracks and keep them in jars in their bedrooms. His father used to hate it, used to complain viciously about it, boys wasting money—good money, never mind how little—like that. Tom's mother tearfully screamed at them when she heard that was how they were spending their weekends—she had once heard that a train could strike a penny wrong and shoot it out like a bullet. She lay awake at night with visions of a burning, bloody hole through her son's forehead.

They wrapped up the body and had it at the Reids' home within half an hour. The wind whipped into the cab of the truck through all of the open windows and tousled Paul's hair—he'd need a haircut before the funeral. The Women's Club was there waiting. Rose joined them, too, even though she had done her duty years ago. There was some debate the next day about whether Peter was truly one of the boys—it could very well have been a suicide. After all, they couldn't remember the last time a boy was taken by a train. The historical society consulted their records and found that Wally Dixon was struck down on the tracks in 1912. They ruled Peter's death acceptable. Paul was sure he should be relieved.

Reverend Gray gave the sermon and Jack Reid read a eulogy. Rose wiped tears from her eyes and Paul held her limp hand. The Junior Pallbearers carried the coffin down to The Field. As Peter was lowered into the ground, Jim recited the tradition. He seemed to be hurrying, looking at the sky too much, looking at the grass, anywhere but the stone bearing his cousin's name and the box containing his body—the same arms he used to wrestle with, the same eyes that would read *The Hardy Boys* at sleepovers, the same mouth that laughed like a goose and devoured Rose's apple pie. The Stone River flowed freer now that the world had thawed. It joined in the song, no longer a metronome but rather a rhythm section, low and steady, thrumming, pulsing.

They made their way back to the high school cafeteria for coffee and sandwiches. The kids took turns kicking a stone down the road. The teenagers chattered about the prom. Paul wondered if that new radiator hose had arrived at the service station.

Tom's family sat with Paul's. Rose intently stirred milk into her coffee with a little wooden stick, occasionally glancing across the room toward her brother and sister-in-law.

"You can go over," Paul said.

“You get Jim his new glove yet?” She kept swirling her coffee-cup vortex.

“I’ll go down to Clayton’s and get it tomorrow.”

“He needs time to break it in.”

“I’ll get it tomorrow, Rose.” Paul stopped her spinning with his hand. She looked over at Jim, sitting in the corner with the other boys but staring vacantly at the ceiling. He nibbled on his fingernails like a rabbit grazing. He’d done that since he was little, a nervous habit. Nothing Paul or Rose tried could keep him from it.

“They’re only this age once,” she said, then stood up to refill her brother’s cup.

A week after the funeral, Jim had his first baseball practice and Paul went down to the field with Tom to watch the boys pitch. The coaches needed to find someone who could fill Peter’s shoes. The men sat on the tailgate of the truck, beers in hand, and debated the boys’ potential, arguing about their choices for the starting lineup. Jim had a decent southpaw—nothing he’d make a career of, but enough to be proud. Greg could hit a homer if he followed through better. (They’d work on that at home.) They had a chance against the boys from East Stone River this year if they got their heads in the game—they had more boys, and they were older, too.

Tom dropped Paul at home, and when he went upstairs, he found his bedroom covered in feathers, as if a bird was killed and plucked on his mattress. Rose was sitting in the corner, methodically separating feathers one by one, all of their pillows slit open and lying lifeless on the ground.

“There was an angel crown in Jim’s pillow,” she said, calmly separating every individual fiber. She pointed over at the bed, where an interlocked disc of feathers, quills pointed inward, rested innocuously. Eternal sleep.

“How’d you find it?”

“I felt it,” she said simply, never looking up, never straying from her project.

Paul took the crown to the backyard and burnt it in the metal fire ring with some old newspaper and leaves, the white smoke billowing up into the treetops. Jim came home from practice and walked over to warm his hands over the fire. He asked Paul to be his catcher for an hour after dinner. Paul caught himself just before suggesting that he ask Peter to come over and play.

“Tell you what—go get my glove and we’ll play right now.”

Rose was spending more time over at her brother’s house, more time cooking and cleaning for them while they tread the waters of grief. She left a casserole in the fridge with instructions for Paul to reheat it. It wasn’t as good after sitting all day—Paul took Jim out for burgers after practice instead. He made sure the house was clean; he washed the dirt out of Jim’s uniform and hung it on the line to dry. Under orders from Rose, he secretly examined Jim’s pillow every night. Nothing so far.

On a Saturday night, he read the newspaper while Jim watched *Gunsmoke*. Matt Dillon had to amputate an old man’s leg and the surgery went south. He sat waiting for the old man to die of gangrene, sipping coffee and staring into the distance with those handsome, weather-worn eyes. There was nothing left for the good Marshal to do but bide his time and comfort the old man’s grieving daughter.

Spring break arrived faster than anticipated. Eager to get out on the field for the day, Jim got up early and left for his paper route before the sun came up. The melting snow exposed bloated

raccoons and possums on the side of the road, delighting the newly-returned crows. Crocuses burst from the hard ground, unaware that they would soon be cut down by late snow and frost.

Jim stopped at the service station to deliver Paul's newspaper and a styrofoam cup of coffee from the drugstore. He found him deep under the hood of a Chevy, tinkering with the motor, and slid off his bike before leaning it against the building. His sneaker was untied. Rose always worried about that—she said that his laces would get tangled in the chains of his bike one day and they would chew up his foot before he could stop it from happening. He set the coffee and newspaper down on the ground and kicked his foot up against the building to get his shoe to eye-level. There would be no foot injuries today, not with a game later. The sole of his sneaker made contact with the metal siding and it seemed like the whole building shook. Above, there was a roar like thunder, despite the blue skies. Still fiddling with the car, Paul wondered if a powerhouse or pumpjack had broken up in the hills or, God forbid, another oil tank exploded. He stood up quickly to look around the hills and smacked his head off the inside of the car's hood, groaning in pain. When he finally removed himself from inside the car, skull throbbing, he saw Jim lying on top of his bike by the door of the service station, a sheet of steel from the roof on top of him. A thin river of blood trickled down his head and across his vacant eyes, mingling with the spilled coffee on the asphalt. He still looked at his father. Surely, Paul thought, surely he was still here.

He ripped the sheet metal off his son and threw it across the parking lot. It struck the Chevy and left a dent in the side. He sat on the ground, cradling Jim's head in his lap, remembering all those hours of colic, all the bouncing and whispering and soothing. Paul remembered how he used to lie on the couch with Jim on his chest, falling asleep to the sound of his heartbeat, and how, once he was sure the baby wouldn't wake, he'd begin the complicated

maneuver of putting him to bed, lifting with his thighs and bending at an awkward angle to keep his midsection steady, holding him tight with one arm as he propelled off the couch with the other, praying the movement was swift enough to be unnoticeable, that Jim would stay peaceful and quiet, sighing and breathing heavily, until he was in the bassinet. Paul used to creep up the stairs oh-so-carefully. He'd wait seconds between each step, so scared to jostle the boy, afraid of the creaky floorboards ruining all his efforts.

That was the funny part, though: no matter how tired Paul was, once Jim was put down in the crib, Paul could not help but continue to sit there, to pull up the rocking chair and watch him sleep by the moonlight filtering in the nursery window for hours, watching his chest rise and fall, assured that he was still breathing—still sleeping, and sleeping soundly, at that.

Auggie and Tom arrived a few minutes later; somebody had driven by and called to report the scene. Auggie declared the death and left it to Paul to tell Rose. He bent down and clapped Paul on the shoulder. "Sorry it had to be you this time," he said.

Paul rode home in the passenger seat of Tom's car. His face was dry but streaked; tracks ran through the fine layer of grime on his cheeks. Tom pulled over in front of the house, said he'd wait in the car as long as he needed to, told Paul to come get him when the time was right. He and Auggie didn't call the Women's Club yet. They didn't want to scare Rose.

Paul got out without a word and walked up the front steps, each one creaking under his weight. He felt heavier, slower; he was being drawn back to the car. A part of him lay dead. In the distance, the church bells began to toll. They would ring thirteen times; Jim's fourteenth birthday was still two months off. Rose always made him a chocolate cake. That's all he ever wanted, all thirteen times: chocolate cake. She'd let him have it for dinner on his birthday. Might

as well, she always said. Might as well be happy when you can be happy. What's the harm in having cake for dinner once a year?

The twelfth bell faded, ringing its final tones around the valley, and the other mechanical sounds of Stone River began to regain their airspace, however briefly. Tom's truck idled loudly. It needed work. When the thirteenth bell tolled, Paul opened the door. Rose was standing in the entryway, holding a dish towel. He did not need to say anything, did not need to look at her or even move. She had been listening to the bells and wasted no time running out the door and down to the curb. Tom leapt out of the car on his one good leg and caught her just before she leapt into the road.

A few days later, Reverend Gray gave the sermon and Paul read a eulogy. Rose did not bother with the tears in her eyes. The Junior Pallbearers, now with a newly-chosen Head Pallbearer, carried his coffin to the graveyard and Greg recited the tradition—he was the eldest now. The River seemed overfilled, violent—it rushed and sloshed onto its banks with a ferocity. Somehow it reminded Paul of Jim, how he used to take off running as a toddler, how he and Rose would both pretend that they couldn't catch him, that he was too fast.

The town gathered in the high school cafeteria for sandwiches and coffee; Tom and Rita were the ones casting hesitant, cursory glances. The kids played tag. Teenagers talked about graduation. Paul could not think of the service station anymore.

It was a terrible late April day, the kind that Stone River received in abundance. A steady stream of cold rain fell from the ashy sky. Even by the stove, it chilled to the core. It made Paul's bones

feel like they were going to splinter. His fingers cracked and bled as he worked on John Bailey's bumper.

At lunch, Paul knocked off early and drove through the downpour to Tom's beer joint for fish fry and a Straub. By three o'clock, Tom had knocked off early, too, and joined him at the bottom of a bottle on the other side of the bar. They talked about gas prices and baseball and broken water tanks and furnaces, then religion and politics and family. They worried about their wives and their parents' souls and told one another about it until what little sunlight filtered through the clouds was gone and the street lights flickered to life.

Paul inched his truck through the ankle-deep water on the roads, the driving rain working harder than his wipers. He drove past his service station and his house, windows aglow in the gloom, and the tracks on Elm Road; past the church and the cemetery, past the high school. He drove past Peterson's driveway and the woods that concealed the remains of the busted-up oil tank in its buds, then ground the truck to a halt at the very top of Hawk Hill just before the town line. He slid out of the driver's seat and slammed the squeaky door shut and stood in the rain until he was soaked to the skin. There was a dead racoon on the centerline. Its body showed no sign of corruption. It could very well be sleeping.

He began to walk toward the town line, bracing himself for impact and fire, begging for the vision of his father to finally come before his eyes, desperate for any sort of sign, any sort of memory, a confirmation from the river or from God, whoever came first, that there was something more to all of this. Then he felt his feet carrying him across the threshold and downhill.

Paul turned back toward Stone River and screamed, full-bodied and feral: teeth bared, tears and spit mingling with the fat raindrops on his face, hair plastered to his head. He climbed

back into the truck, drenching the seat. The steering column was locked, and as he stomped on the brake and turned the key over and over until the truck growled to life, he continued to roar.

About a month later, Ben Campbell was struck by fireworks during the Fourth of July celebration in Matthews Park. Paul and Tom were already there. They'd scraped together their families to drink beer and grill burgers.

Auggie Johnson asked them to take care of it, and though Paul's heart protested, he found himself walking across the park with Tom, wrapping up the body, and carrying it down the street to the Campbell home. Ben's weight was like Jim, and his hair, too. Jim was born with a mop of dark hair. The doctor had never seen that much on an infant. It was wild, too. Paul had learned to swaddle Jim before he was born; he and Rose practiced on one of her old dolls that her mom gave to her. They made sure that his arms were secure, that he would sleep well and without interruption.

The Women's Club swaddled Ben in white. He would sleep well, too.

A few days later, Reverend Gray gave the sermon and Frank Campbell read a eulogy. Rose twisted her handkerchief into a tight, thin rope. The Junior Pallbearers carried the coffin to the cemetery and Greg recited the tradition. All that Paul could hear was the insistent gush of the river, taking, taking, taking. He swore he could smell the stench of the bloodstained ground—no amount of prayers and herbs could get rid of it. There was a groan that whipped through the air—the cry of impotent protection, the helplessness of bound hands in the face of tragedy—while the Stone River, at a fever pitch, competed with the insistent creaking and screaming and sputtering of the valley in the summer twilight. It was alive, not with crickets and

the chirping of birds, but the cruel mechanics of an impossible, cursed heartbeat. No more. No more. No more.

It was quiet at night without *Gunsmoke* and the radio. Rose never knew how much food to make anymore; they were bringing enough leftovers to her brother and to Tom to keep the families fed for weeks. Paul tried to go to the baseball game—Greg was pitching—but left during the second inning.

He got home and found Rose sitting on the floor outside of Jim's bedroom. They hadn't set foot in there; she had closed the door after she picked out his final outfit and it never crossed her mind to open it again. Paul had no reason to look in there; some animal instinct in his gut told him that to open the door would be to loose a flood, to fill the world—or at least his own—with something so pure and strong that there would be no survivors. He sat next to his wife and put his hand on her knees. She leaned back, her head making contact with the wall with a soft thud, and together they waited in the dark night, the walls impossibly tall and the door unreachable for an hour. Paul wanted desperately to turn back the years like a clockwinder, to coax the mechanics of the universe into submission the way he repaired a motor or replaced brakes, all to have thirteen more years, even the same thirteen again and again. He did not care about variation; he did not care for new memories. He would take it all once more, all the same, the cloth diapers and scraped knees and unruly hair that he threatened to shave off the squirming boy's head more than once in a fit of rage. He'd take the rain and the valley and the dark trees. He'd take the weight of all the boys he carried so carefully yet mindlessly, he'd shoulder them all again and lie them in front of their parents just to carry his own sleeping son from the car to bed one more time, to brush the lock of hair away from his forehead and pull the quilt around him

tight. He was made of you and me, Paul thought, and what a terrible thing it is to watch your creations bleed.

“You could’ve been a mechanic anywhere,” she whispered.

“And you could’ve married anyone.”

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The wet green leaves of summer refused to light. Paul sat on the banks of the river, flicking the matches that he found in Jim’s nightstand next to a pack of bubblegum. He’d given in that night, after Rose had gone to bed early. At midnight, it would be Jim’s birthday. Would have been. Was. The bed was made, sheets pulled tight and smooth; Paul was sure Rose had done that—Jim never saw any value in making his bed.

He looked through the dresser and the nightstand and the chest at the foot of the bed, sorted through the toys and baseball cards until he landed on his prize. Books of matches used to go missing around the house all the time. Paul pretended not to notice. Mischief was to be expected.

He struck the last match and held it until the flame burnt the stick down into an ashen stub, burning the tips of his fingers. He remembered what it was like to touch fire all those years ago in the elementary school, to be chased and consumed—the heat overwhelming one side of his head, the angry flames boring into his eye socket, the tight crackle of his own seared flesh. It was a unique experience, feeling yourself be engulfed. As a child, Paul fought tooth and nail. His father always used to tell him “you can’t hide from fire”—he did not want his son to burn up in a closet waiting for the flames to leave him alone. Paul never understood what that meant; he never knew that his father wanted him to run to safety. Instead, it was a forecast. The fire will come. You cannot keep yourself from it. It will always find you anyway. It will take you

eventually. Try to close the door. Try to close your eyes. It will not hide you from what is destined to be yours.

Paul peeled open a new book of matches. The full moon hung bright and low over the river, reflecting in the iridescent surface like a milky-white blind eye—always looking, never seeing. The trees stood tall, dark, and uncanny in the nighttime. They did not protect; they were guards. They kept everything in line, unyielding and stoic. Always present. The valley was unusually silent—Paul strained his ears for the familiar sound of the powerhouses. They were met with quiet. No groans or squeals up in the hills. No barkers. No *put-put-put*. All that remained was the fizzle of the matches and the low hum of the river as it lazily continued along its path. Still, so still.

Paul struck all of the matches at once. They rushed to light immediately, a child-size torch in the night. He stood, all on his own now—not a child running back into town, legs carrying him independent of his mind; not a man carrying boy after boy off of hills and away from train tracks and out of water back home. The river goes where the water flows, away from here and out into oceans.

He dropped the matches into the river and watched as the flames spread—unnaturally fast, catching the surface quicker than lightning, illuminating the whole night and revealing once more the landscape in an unnatural orange glow. You can't hide from fire. He dipped his left leg below the surface, feeling at once the same bite that Tom felt on his lost foot in school all those years ago. Tom had tried to escape, but got trapped; Paul was, too. They burned together, two boys holding hands and waiting, waiting, waiting for the inevitable. Paul pitched himself forward until he was burning like his father, like Andy and Ben, like the nineteen boys in the school and the flare stack at the refinery. Eternal. Blinding.

THE HAUNTING OF THE WILSONS BY ME AND THAT BITCH TODD

The other night I wailed extra loud because there was a storm and I wanted to make sure that the Wilsons heard me over the thunder. I glided through the walls and really let loose. At one point, my wailing was so convincing that Nick, the husband, thought he had left a window cracked open somewhere in the house and spent half an hour making sure that there wasn't any rain getting in. I've gotten really good at wailing—even Mark, our Spiritual Service Coordinator, thinks so. Before I parted, I was a silent crier—I did a lot of quiet weeping in the shower or the car, unsure why the tears were falling in the first place. After I parted, though, I learned that the key to executing a good wail is intention. It's one of the first things they teach you in the Seminar. I've been practicing ever since, and it's gotten so good that when Nick went back to bed he told Jamie that he could've sworn he heard wind coming in, that he was sure he felt a draft when he was up.

Todd sat on top of the kitchen counter and played with a paring knife while I did all of this. He's very uncreative, Todd, which is likely why the idea to commit a murder-suicide

occurred to him rather than, I don't know, one of those saving-our-marriage vacations in paradise that you always see in the tabloids. Nope. Instead of treating me like a queen in a Hawaiian honeymoon suite he went with blowing both our brains out over the anniversary cake I made. It's the easy way out; saves a lot of money and time on a plane. But, then, I guess he took the uncreative route in marrying me, too—first girlfriend, right out of college, armed with a stable career track and hot for somebody to share a mortgage with. He didn't ask me to marry him; he asked "why don't we get married?" Swoon. He plays with the knife because our Spiritual Service Coordinator recommended in his last Performance Review that Todd engage in more violent hauntings. After the meeting, Todd asked me what that meant and I said that he should mess around with sharp objects more and break some stuff.

Todd told me that the wailing was pretty cool while twiddling the paring knife. Careful, I said, those things are dangerous—next thing you know you'll be peeling potatoes. He said he didn't understand, then asked me if we've ever gotten Nick and Jamie to get out of bed before, which, in theory and on average, we should be doing at least once a month. My wailing has gotten both Nick and Jamie out of bed a collective three times. His knife skills, on the other hand, I said, leave much to be desired. By way of another apology, Todd asked me if I was enjoying what he likes to call our "second act." I told him that he should go fuck himself, except wait, ghosts can't fuck anything, even themselves. Then I asked if he's enjoying his second act as a celestial eunuch. In response, he wimpily underhand-tossed the knife at me and it clattered on the tile at my feet. He said sorry about that, too.

Todd, you dumbass, I said, we can't haunt too much in one night. He said sorry again and I told him that I've had it up to here with his sorrys and his shitty excuses for work. He said what work? We don't get paid and we can't get fired, how is this work? I asked him where else he was

planning on going because—oh, that’s right—there is nowhere else, and that was when Nick showed up in his moose-printed boxers holding his old lacrosse stick and caught a glimpse of our marital spat before Todd and I both made ourselves invisible, leaving behind only the paring knife on the floor.

We’ve been at it about four months now, haunting the Wilsons. Back when we were first sent to the house together there were some “adjustment problems,” as Mark, our Spiritual Service Coordinator, liked to say—mainly, I remained unconvinced that you can’t kill a ghost and tried every possible way to murder Todd back into living or send him to a Hell that evidently doesn’t exist. After one particular incident involving fire and holy water, Mark asked me what I was trying to do, if I was trying to exact punishment or revenge on Todd. He reminded me that there is no good or bad, especially now that we’ve parted. I said to Mark that I understood that, I’ve actually always understood that, but understanding doesn’t make all of this any less annoying, and also he should try getting murdered by his spouse on his anniversary and then tell me how he fucking feels about punishment and revenge. Mark, of course, said nothing. Mark says very little.

Instead, he wrote me a negative Performance Review and sent it off to the Archive to be filed away. In the Performance Review, he said that I was making inefficient use of haunting time by succumbing to the distractions of personal matters. In future, he wrote, I should remember appropriate workplace behavior and try to check my baggage at the door until my Designated Personal Hour. He told me that he hoped the next Performance Review he wrote would be more flattering and then melted into a puddle and disappeared into the ether.

There is no punishment for a negative Performance Review, just as there is no reward for a positive one. There is no good or bad; this you must remember, this you can’t

forget—especially when Mark says it to you any chance he gets. All you have is Your File in the Archive, the closest thing we’ve got to something like Heaven.

I always assumed I was going to Heaven. Not to blow myself or anything, but I never really did anything too wrong. I prayed when I remembered, usually about the Bills making it to the playoffs or for a new snowblower, but it was praying all the same. I put change in the Salvation Army buckets at Christmas. I didn’t covet my neighbor’s wife or dishonor my parents or anything like that. Sure, I took the Lord’s name in vain plenty, but I worked hard and minded my own business. I moved through the months with few complaints and fewer mishaps. Add in that ringer of an anniversary cake I made for Todd, and Saint Peter would’ve let me through those pearly gates with a firm pat on the ass.

That cake was a beauty. I brought it out after dinner with candles in it and everything. That’s when Todd pulled the gun on me and I barely had time to get my “what the *fuck*” out before he put a bullet through my brain and left me with an eternal mouthful of frosting. Then I parted. I assume that someone found us eventually and called the police to cart us away. I didn’t watch any of it, which was probably for the best. I can’t even think about them taking crime scene photos without wanting to die again. I never liked it when Todd took a picture of me sleeping in the car or on a plane. I was always on guard, trying to make myself shrink to invisibility—sucking in my stomach and clenching my jaw and sitting with the posture that made my boobs look best, the way those teen magazines taught me in seventh grade. I was sensitive about my side profile and midsection. I often thought about my body, limp with sleep or death, drool or blood pooling, being watched by others. When the real thing happened and they came to gawk, the greatest blessing was the parting.

After the parting, of course, was the news that there were no Special Places. No Heaven, no Hell. There is only Spiritual Service or The Great Nothing, and neither you nor your works decide where you end up. We were both prime candidates for Service. Once I parted, I arrived in the Waiting Room. Todd sat across from me and both of us had giant holes in our heads—me in my forehead and him through his mouth and out the top. I told him he was a fucking dick, murdering me like that on our anniversary, and he said sorry. I said sorry doesn't even *begin* to cover it and reached for his throat even though killing him probably wouldn't fix anything now and that's when they split us up to begin our intake: forms, ectoplasm samples, clothing exchange, mandatory trainings, and the like. We were informed that we would be haunting our old house in Buffalo together.

The new couple that moved in are fine, but I sometimes worry for their well-being, since they willingly bought the grisly murder-suicide house. They feel the need to justify their risky purchase to anybody who will listen, afraid that they stepped too far out of the bounds of what is considered sane and lucid. They tell all their friends who come over for dinner that the price was a steal and, with a nervous laugh, insist that they don't believe in ghosts anyway. Privately, they worry they'll go to Hell for ripping up the carpet with blood speckled on it. They have a baby that stares at me all the time, too. Babies can do that, you know—see us. It's something about their brains being jelly. When I get bored I like to go watch the baby taking her nap or play peekaboo with her. She gets a kick out of it, anyway. I always thought I'd be a good mom after I was done raising Todd.

When we were processed, they put me in this poofy Princess Di wedding dress. Todd got to wear a black trench coat—which is ironic considering that in life he mostly wore tacky superhero t-shirts. They covered him in blood, more blood than he arrived in, and told him he

looked scary and handsome. Then, we signed the contracts: I am to haunt every night and one day a week. I am to wander the halls slowly. I am to weep or wail at least three times a night. I am not to move the Residents' furniture or personal belongings. I am not to scare or harm them. I am only to creep them out; to send shivers down their spines. Todd gets to knock stuff over and cackle. He also gets to slam doors and stomp around. Once, at my suggestion, he got special dispensation to draw on the foggy mirror after Jamie got out of the shower. He drew a frowny face—it actually freaked her out. Every week, usually Wednesdays, we reenact the killing at the dining room table.

After the paring knife incident, we had a huge fiasco on our hands. You really fucked it this time, Todd, I said, as we both laid low in the attic and listened to Nick and Jamie talking through the vents. They had turned all the lights on in the house and Nick was blubbering about how he knows what he saw and how we looked so awful, so terrifying, so very much like those photos that they put on the news a year ago, only worse. Jamie pets his hair and she tells him that it was all just a dream—didn't he used to sleepwalk as a kid? It was probably just that.

I can't believe you, I said to Todd. All they ask us to do is put our heads down and we get the hard work done. If we can't do this one thing right, what else are we supposed to do for the rest of eternity? We're here, like it or not, for the rest of forever, Todd, and I'd like to at least turn around our Performance Reviews sometime between now and the end of it all. Todd told me that he thought when we both turned translucent he'd be able to see the giant stick up my ass, but it seems like it's still hiding from him. I said that I'd take the stick up my ass over his dinky little walnut brain any day. Then we both remembered it was Wednesday and made the executive decision to call off the murder-suicide reenactment for the night.

Sometimes, during my Designated Personal Hour, I really get in the weeds and start wondering why we got married in the first place. Sure, Todd asked me, but that's not a good excuse. Is that all it really takes for me? A lukewarm hunk of man served up on a tin foil platter? I wish we were like those famous couples, like the Presleys or Sinatra and Gardner, who fought viciously and loved even harder. But mostly we just fought and shared a kitchen for ten years. Once in a while I get cocky and think he must've tricked me or something, since there's no way I'd be paying that little attention to something that big. Then, my Designated Personal Hour ends and I go back to wailing.

The morning after the big fiasco, I was sure we'd catch hell for our sloppy work. Mark is always saying that the worst thing we can do to ourselves is appear left and right to our Residents. That's for special occasions; you have to be really particular with when you do it. Otherwise, your haunting loses all efficacy and your work's been for nothing. Everything you've been doing day in and day out to keep the Service's good name alive, for nothing. All the Performance Reviews and Seminars, for nothing. What a waste of time. What a waste of resources. In other words: don't be an apparition slut.

We were getting ready to haunt the house for the day when Mark reconstituted himself out of thin air and told us that our work has really improved—that knife-throwing trick of Todd's really seems to have kept the haunting right on track. I pointed out that it's not like paring knives are all that scary, and really he just did it because I annoyed him, and also I thought we were trying our best to be choosy with our apparitions, but Mark said that a thrown knife coupled with a split-second corporeal sighting was an absolute work of genius on Todd's part. I asked what he thought of the wailing and he said that it was fine but that I could add a smidge more anguish to the undertone. Then he melted into a puddle and disappeared into the ether.

I spent the rest of the day working on my wail while Todd fucked around with a fistful of steak knives and rearranged the baby's stuffed animals. I told him that he might as well stop fiddling with the knives if he's not going to use them. Todd said that Mark wanted me to take a page out of his book, not the other way around, and that I should just shut up and keep whining like a baby. I said that I'm not ripping pages out of the book that I wrote, regardless of whether it belongs to him or not, and then he said that I never make any sense and went off to mope in the attic. That's new. Well, the attic part, anyway. The moping, not so much.

Before the parting, his mope den of choice was in the basement. He used to have his Man Cave down there: the stained La-Z-Boy his grandma gave him when we moved into the house, his mini fridge from college filled with Bud Light, and the TV where he watched golf when he didn't want to take the trash out or look me in the eyes. When I felt the same, I would lie flat on the kitchen floor and think about all of the old spices in the spice cabinet. I thought about how infrequently my turmeric saw the light of day. I bought it for a reason at some point, years ago, for some recipe I never made again. Now I look at it once a year, maybe, if I bother to shuffle the jars around enough to expose it to daylight. It hid—it hid and it weighed on my mind in those quiet idiotic moments of lying on the tile floor that I hadn't bothered to scrub in months. What would I make that even had turmeric in it? What use did Todd and I have for that?

Nick and Jamie always cooked dinner together when they got home from work. The night after the paring knife incident, they couldn't find any of the steak knives so they ended up cutting their chicken with butter knives. They ate on the couch and watched TV while the baby played in her bouncy seat. I waved hi at the baby. The baby waved hi back at me. To Nick and Jamie, this looked like the baby was waving hi at nothing, and they thought it was cute that she was practicing her waving and told her that she's a very friendly little girl. Then Todd decided he was

bored and unplugged the TV and knocked one of their wedding photos off the wall and Jamie screamed, finally convinced that maybe Nick did see something in the kitchen last night. They called it a night early—they were both tired and it was making them imagine things—and they went to bed, where they discovered that all of their steak knives were under their covers, just where I had left them after Todd finally gave them up. That was the final straw for Nick. He decided they should text those college friends that make YouTube videos about ghost hunting and ask them to come and take a look over the weekend, just to be safe, even if Jamie didn't think they needed to. Jamie didn't protest anymore, not since she almost got a steak knife to the ass in her own master bedroom. They slept on an air mattress on the nursery floor that night instead, telling themselves that they just wanted to be closer to the baby, that's all.

We lived in that house for seven years but we never got around to decorating the master bedroom. Todd had no eye for design but assumed that I did, so he left the task to me, and I had better things to do like making sure the bills were paid and our car was inspected, so I left the task to my mysterious and almost certainly preoccupied future self. We hung nothing on the walls. It took a year and a Peeping Tom incident down the block for me to hang the curtains, and even then, I really dragged my feet. I figured nobody was seeing the bedroom other than us, and what did we care if it looked worthy of those home and garden shows? We had a bed for sleeping and a floor for walking and sometimes there was an AC unit in the summer if we got our shit together. Todd never said anything about it and I never spent enough time there to care. We went in, we slept, we got up, and we left. End of story. The room did its job.

The next morning, Mark summoned us back to the Waiting Room for an emergency training—he hadn't expected that we would need that Seminar for at least three more years, if not more, which he made a point of telling me over and over. Todd just liked the compliments.

Did you hear what Mark said, babe? he asked me, smiling like a doofus. He said look what happens when we team up, and when I didn't respond, he took a long walk off a short pier and said to me that maybe things turned out for the best after all, that we never worked this well before our parting. I punched him in the balls and he reminded me that neither of us has a nervous system anymore so that did nothing, and I reminded him that, much like his many clumsy attempts at reconciliation, it's the thought that counts. Then Mark pulled up a PowerPoint Presentation called THE DOS AND DON'TS OF INTERACTING WITH PARANORMAL INVESTIGATORS.

Ghost hunters are a nuisance, Mark said. They can't do anything to actually harm or destroy us (we are facts of the universe, we are something more than living, we are something less than dead) but they can find us and be annoying as hell. Naturally, there are guidelines, and it's important we stick to them. We may toy with the ghost hunters. We may make sounds. Todd may knock stuff over. Todd may throw things. Todd may cause electrical problems with their equipment and scratch their arms through their clothing. I may wail. Then he melted into a puddle and disappeared into the ether and we were back in the house in Buffalo.

The ghost hunters showed up just before sunset in one of those white kidnapper vans, which they parked on the curb. They spent half an hour unloading equipment into the house while Jamie fed the baby and put her to bed, then they turned the cameras on. Todd and I stayed in the attic the whole time. That's what Mark told us to do—tease a little, make them wait.

One of the ghost hunters, some beefy guy with a dyed black mohawk, immediately said that he was receiving some spiritual communication, which I thought was funny because neither one of us was trying to talk to him. Todd didn't get it. He asked me if there was another ghost in the house that Mark hadn't told us about. No, Todd, you idiot, I said—they're fakers. He's

always had trouble noticing when somebody's faking. Todd turned as red as a ghost can turn and said that he was not as stupid as I thought he was and that I really need to give him more credit. After all, he was the one who drove this haunting across the finish line. He was the one who threw the knife. All I do all day is walk around and cry, and that if he'd known that killing me meant listening to my god-awful wailing for eternity then maybe he would've just called up that divorce lawyer instead. Now, wait just a fucking minute, I said. You mean to tell me that you chose killing both of us over calling a divorce lawyer? He realized what he said and began to blubber and backpedal but it was too late, I was already prepared to try to kill him all over again with a renewed vengeance. That's when the ghost hunt began.

The ghost hunters had moved into the basement because they heard reports that Todd used to spend most of his time down there. They turned on their radio communication tool, which meant that business called, regardless of what new dumb fucking thing Todd said to me. He went downstairs and began saying smarter things instead, things like *kill* and *stab* and *blood*. The ghost hunters shrieked at their discovery—there *was* a spirit here after all. I went to the master bedroom and began to wail. When nobody noticed, I wailed louder. They stayed downstairs—Todd had begun to make one of their flashlights turn on and off.

The acoustics in this house were pretty terrible, especially with a bunch of people in it. When I lived here, there was no way I'd hear wailing between floors. They just needed to hear me better, so I moved to the top of the staircase and wailed from there, but Todd had manifested a cold pocket on their infrared camera and they were all freaking out about that little blue spot on the screen. I could just see Todd's face from the top of the stairs. He was flipping me off. So I stomped down the stairs and wailed even louder, then stomped up the stairs and into the baby's

room and wailed in the baby's face, which woke her up, and then both of us were wailing and everybody came running upstairs to see what was the matter.

That's when I found myself back in the Waiting Room, alone this time, sitting across a table from Mark. He said that he should've known better than to give me a positive Performance Review, that there's always a catch after he gives one. He said that he worried that my ego had gotten too large and now I was going about this all wrong, I was breaking all the rules and fighting with Todd for no good reason. I told him that, on the contrary, I think that there is a very good reason for me to fight with Todd right now. Mark suggested that the best Mediation would be to go back and apologize to Todd, then finish out the ghost hunting session as a cooperative team.

But I don't think I need to, I said. Very rarely do I ever actually need to apologize. I was thrown into existence, into Spiritual Service, by that tweeby t-shirt-wearing fuck with a handgun and some great invisible meter that decides whether my soul gets to keep on going or be flung unceremoniously into The Great Nothing. Mark, don't you understand what it's like to be hurled by a slingshot into a life or half-life or death or whatever this is without any choice or half a clue what's going on? A place where you don't make the rules, much less understand them, and where there seems to be no justification for anything that goes on? Do you know what it's like to be free and captive at the same time? To have the whole wide world open to you but people around every corner convincing you that it isn't so? I accept that I'm dead, that's fine, I said. It happens to the best of us. But this is not death. I thought I understood it all, Mark, don't you get that? I have always done what I've been told to do. I've always written the birthday cards and played the Christmas music and taken the vitamins. For what? To get into Heaven? To win at a game that nobody's playing? I lost a life I never had, I told Mark, and now I'm here, doing the

same shit. This is not living and this is not *not* living. So tell me what it is. Tell me why I'm here and why you're across the desk and how I get out.

Mark said that there is no good or bad, no punishment or reward, no being or not-being, no connection or isolation. Then he melted into a puddle and dissolved into the ether and I was back in Buffalo in the nursery, where Nick was bouncing the baby up and down and Todd was making the music box on the dresser play all on its own, much to the amazement of the ghost hunters.

The black-mohawk ghost hunter yelled that any spirit in the room should reveal themselves right now, then called out to Todd, the violent spirit who haunts this threshold, and commanded him to go back to Hell where he belongs. I wish he would, I thought. I wish we could. I wish I could tell you what it's like to play hide and seek with your life, to be trapped in your body long after it has become fertilizer. And I wish I could make you feel it all the way I've felt it. I wish.

I knocked some diapers off the dresser to make them all turn toward me then looked at Todd. He did not look back; he saw. I wailed, without anguish or desperation, without sadness. I wailed and saw, too—I saw the Archive and The Great Nothing and Mark and the ether—and then I materialized before them all, before the ghost hunters and Nick and Jamie and the baby, and they wailed back at my full corporeal apparition.

HEROINE REMAINS

I am not a woman, they say—I am some mangled anomaly, twisted to fit His gaze, contorted for pleasure. They wrench my limbs and inspect them. They peer down my throat; they measure my thighs. I look for my Big God but He's still hiding—He hasn't been around in so long I can scarcely remember him. He pushed me off the cliff into all their grasping, greedy hands and disappeared; He left me as bait; He bred me and led me to the butcher, collected the change, and ran.

I am constructed with economy of flesh. I take up all the pages and yet no space; my skin is translucent and my eyes clear as a spring morning. They say this is my greatest sin—how unwilling I am to spread out, how I refuse to claim my own territory, to plant a flag into the dirt and dig in my heels. They do not see themselves in me, they protest, as they tighten their cores and push out their chests, carrying plastic bags of almonds in their bags, sipping sparkling water when their stomachs growl, staring into mirrors and begging for absolution. I am a bad example,

terribly unrelatable. Their Big God is more cunning than mine; He hides his seams, He fills in the cracks.

They bring out calipers and tapes and splay me naked on the chalkboard until no surface has gone untouched. I used to cry out. I used to pray for forgiveness, to be taken back to anywhere else, but this is not like the pages. No, it is something worse, something sinister, something real—more real than He could ever control. He didn't hear anyway. He wanted this. They rock me side to side and cut locks of my hair to keep in their wallets or else to burn in effigy on library lawns. The boys say I'm asking for it. The girls say I'm begging for it to stop. Somewhere in the carnage they swap opinions until they're nothing more than a wolf pack barking and tearing me apart while the professor guides their snapping jaws.

I used to beg and recede into the past and wait until it was over but years went by and then decades and centuries, and I filled with mildew; I became fragile and sensitive to sunlight. I'm disinterred from the shelf once a year by a man who means well, who fancies himself a Little God in a heaven of ivory towers and book jackets, who wears glasses with no prescription and loves to say "intentional fallacy." He used to pray to me and hope that I would speak back. Now, he slams me on the desk, shoves me under his arm, rips me open to blow their minds every November and tells me to pray back. He wants me. He cannot have me. He tells them that I'm unrealistic, unattainable, and that's what makes me so beguiling, so beautiful.

He says I'm a work of art, licks his chops, and then sharpens his teeth for the next feast.

I try to bite back, I try to scream, but the words always come out the same. I am a beetle forever trapped on my glittering back, naturalists crowding to inspect my abdomen for imperfections. The magnifying glass burns and I try to make myself beautiful for them, try to twist myself in new ways, to make myself more woman, to make myself more man, but all I ever

get are the same complaints. I should be gracious. I should take it in my stride. If my Big God were here, I think He would tell me that—I was made to be seen. I was made to be scrutinized.

Angel, He says. *Demon*. *Beauty*. *Devil*. *Whore*.

I want to die but I am immortal. I want to change but I am old as Earth—older, even. They do not relent. They grow bigger and louder and more powerful with each day, with each page, with each word, and trample me beneath their feet. They want me to die. They want me to live. They trap me in a circle of salt and then summon me back. They bleed me and then shock my heart into rhythm.

How mindlessly He made me. With every slice of His pen I bear the brutality He couldn't shoulder Himself. How cruel to build a legacy. How selfish. How violent.

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