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What I expected (I must admit) would be a monochromatic group of undergraduate fiction turned out to be a collection of jewels. My compliments on the high quality of this fiction. Throughout these stories, the specific image ruled. Clarity reigned. Iconic elements were gracefully woven in with the mundane.

The story which I finally concluded was the winner is a seemingly slight narrative—"The Substitute"—which is not slight at all. The subtextual relationships of the characters are made clear by believable dialogue; the descriptive embellishments were selective sparkles of illumination. As the nightcrawlers' significance gradually becomes clear, the reader remembers the sprinkled water, the worms' blindness, the splitting in half. Had the final dialogue between the father and the old man been overplayed, the story could have collapsed; as it is, it rings of truth. The story is subtle, quiet, and powerful, and could hold its own in the professional arena.

Michael Jensen
The Johns Hopkins University Press
The Lantern 3

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Editor’s Note:

The Lantern congratulates Joe Catalfano on his prize-winning story “The Substitute.” Thank you to Michael Jensen of the Johns Hopkins University Press for making the difficult decision as judge. Congratulations also to Mark Peacock for his winning cover photograph “Naples Balcony.”

Thank you to all those who submitted. Personally, I would like to thank Dr. Jon Volkmer, Dr. Jena Osman, Jared Rakes, and the entire staff of The Lantern. Without their input and continued interest, this issue would not have been possible.

Jessica Demers
“C’mon, Adam,” a voice urged. “If we don’t leave soon, the fish are going to leave us.”
“Dad, just half an hour,” I begged. “Please. Scooby’s on next.”
“Adam, we haven’t even dug up the worms yet.”
“Can’t we just buy them?”
“Where’s the fun in that? Get dressed and meet me out back in ten minutes. I’ll start digging.”
I shoveled the rest of the Lucky Charms into my mouth wondering why I couldn’t have thirty minutes after waiting three weeks for my father to come around again. Shuffling into the hallway, I met Mom in her large, fuzzy pink nightgown.
“He on your nerves already?” she asked.
I shrugged my shoulders.
“Don’t let him get to you, you hear? Look what happened to me after twelve years with that man. I used to be thin with long, brown hair. Now look at me.”
My mother now stood before me, overweight with puffy gray bags under her eyes. Her short, wispy gray hair showed slight hints of brown dye from her failed revolt against age. What a change from the wedding pictures I saw her throwing into the cellar just a few weeks ago.
“Make sure you wear your old jeans,” she said with a barely audible wheeze. “Clothes don’t seem to last long in this family.”
“You see my hat?”
“Top of your closet.”
“You okay?”
“Yeah, I just can’t sleep lately. Allergies. I’ve had a bad week at work.”
“Do you want me to stay?”
“Go ahead, Adam. It’s only for the day. Have fun. I’ll be fine.”
“You’re sure?”
She turned her back towards me and began descending the stairs. “I’ll be fine. I’m just going to start the wash.”
I walked into the bathroom and splashed cold water on my face. Looking into the mirror, I checked for hints of hair on my chin and lip. I pulled a comb through my short hair to tame the wild strands in the back.
“Where the hell’s the goddamn shovel?” I heard my father yell downstairs. “Did you move it already? I swear, I can’t let anything alone
here for two minutes before you—"

"I didn’t touch your shovel," Mom replied. "Do you treat Laura like this? Do you talk to her like you talk to me?"

"No, because I can find everything I look for where I left it."

"You probably left it in your goddamn car if I know you."

The door slammed downstairs.

I grabbed my well-worn Red Sox baseball cap from my closet and descended the staircase. My father had given me this cap two years ago at my first baseball game, when he still lived with us. I will never forget the smell of popcorn, pretzels, and hot dogs. The cheers and excitement when Wade Boggs came to bat. My father had even bought me a large foam hand to wave when Boggs hit one out of the park to win the game in the ninth inning. Now he showed up every few weeks to put his time in with me.

From the kitchen, Mom glanced behind her shoulder towards the back door, then approached me. She hadn’t been acting like herself since I overheard her talk with my father on the phone three weeks ago. He had called to cancel his visit with me because his new son was born. Eric Robert Collier.

“If you need anything,” she said, “give me a call, okay?”

“I’ll be home in a few hours. Maybe we could go out for dinner tonight. Maybe catch that movie—"

“He has you ‘til eight tonight.”

I hugged her. “Maybe tomorrow then.”

“I have to work ‘til six, then I need to do the bills and income tax and...by the way, you’re on your own for dinner on Monday. I have the group.”

“We’ll work it out, Mom.”

“Yeah. We will. Be careful, okay?”

“Love you.”

“Ditto.”

I joined my father outside by the shed, around which Mom had planted a small garden when she was pregnant.

“Start digging here,” my father said, pointing to a spot a few feet from the lilac bush I had given Mom years ago for her birthday. None of the other plants I bought her had lasted so long, but we could count on the lilac to bloom every April.

“That’s too close to the lilac I gave Mom—"

“Just listen to me. Don’t ask any questions.” He turned his back to me and began walking towards the house, mumbling something about Mom. “I have to take care of some business with your mother before we leave, okay? Meet me in front when you’re done.”
Child support. It had to be. Either that or he wanted a beer.

After moving a few feet away from the lilac, I pushed the shovel into the hard earth as best I could, barely breaking the ground. The shovel refused to descend any further after kicking it with the sole of my sneaker. I then put all my weight on the handle until the earth moved in a huge clump. I broke up the mass with the shovel, revealing dozens of scattering nightcrawlers. Pulling out seven, I dropped them in the large Folgers can my father had left me. They squirmed and climbed over each other trying to scale the tin walls. I had read in an encyclopedia once that worms were blind. I wondered how it would feel to be blind, crawling through dirt all day feeling the earth close in around me while I searched for food to keep me alive.

"Almost finished?" my father yelled from the house.
"I'll be ready in a minute." I felt a brief chill run down my spine as I thought he might realize I disobeyed his instructions.
"That's my boy."

I shoveled another clump of earth and pulled four more worms, placing them gently in the can. As I put the plastic lid on them, I wondered if they could breathe. Grabbing a nearby stick, I poked three holes in the top and walked around to the car which my father was packing with the rods, tackle box, and cooler. Coors Light was his favorite. I remembered nights when he would stumble in the door past midnight, sway up the steps, and lean over me in bed to give me a sloppy, alcohol-reeking kiss on the forehead.

"Don't forget your lunch, Adam," Mom called from the house, holding a brown paper bag and a can of soda.
I ran up to meet her. "Where's Dad's?"
"He doesn't want lunch."
I gave her a kiss on the cheek. After all, I was eleven years old and should be outgrowing these things soon. "I'll see you in a few hours, okay?"

She forced a smile and nodded.
"C'mon, Adam," my father called from his new car. The engine kicked over with a purr. "We gotta get going. Our time's awastin'."

After I sat on the black leather passenger seat and adjusted the seat belt, my father took off my hat and brushed my hair around with his hand until it stuck up into the air again.
"Ready to shove off, captain?"
"Better buckle your seat belt, Dad."
"Your mom teach you that?"
I brushed my hair down with my fingers and returned my hat to
Listen, I’m sorry for talking down to you like that in the backyard, but the pressure had been getting to me lately. With work and... well, you know. The responsibility. You’re a man now. You understand.”

I nodded, although I was not sure if I did.

“I’d like you to meet Laura sometime. And your new brother. But it could be our little secret. Just between the big guys. It’s been over two years now and you still haven’t seen the new place. Laura’s really nice and very anxious to meet you. Wonderful personality. And your brother—he’s absolutely adorable. He looks very much like you.”

“Sure, Dad. Sounds great.”

We arrived at the lake at 7:12. After unpacking the car, we walked down a large wooded bank to the edge of the lake, which covered a large portion of the horizon. The sun was not too high over the lake, and the sparkles reflecting off the water barely made the two boats visible. My father dropped the tackle box and cooler on the stones.

“Sure gonna be a hot one today, son. How about a beer? Oh, that’s right. You’re not old enough yet.” He laughed. “Seriously though, you’ll be there sooner than you realize. Cherish these few years of your life, you hear me? Once you get my age, you realize how much you’re missing. I wouldn’t steer you wrong.”

Sometimes I wondered whether my dad really enjoyed this time with me, or whether he used it as an excuse to play the wise all-knowing seer who professed the meaning of life.

“Can you set up camp here, buddy, while I go make a quick phone call?” He didn’t even look at me. “I’ll be right back.” As he walked into the brush, my father removed the cellular phone from his pocket and began hitting buttons. “Hey, honey. Everything all right? How’s Eric? Sleeping—”

I had been fishing once before and had no idea where to begin. Opening the tackle box, I found dozens of strange-looking lures and objects: some feathery, some rubbery, some metallic, some plastic. Did it matter which one I used? Didn’t they all serve the same purpose: to snag a fish in the mouth?

After I removed the lid of the Folgers can, I saw the nightcrawlers moving more slowly than before. I wondered if they would die if I kept them in their tin prison, or if they would eventually discover a way out if I, their jailer, turned my head. I walked over to the lake, scooped some water into my cupped hand and dribbled it over the worms, who writhed in pleasure and began squirming once again.
“Good morning,” someone called from behind me. “Beautiful day for fishing.”

I turned around and saw an older man staring me down over small, wire-rimmed glasses. He wore a ragged pair of deep-blue jeans and a large, faded green T-shirt which, at one time, might have been filled with a body. His petite frame hunched slightly over as he approached me with a cautious step.

“You here alone, young man?” His voice was rough with age, yet somehow inviting.

“No, sir.”

“I couldn’t help but tell you was looking a little lost. Is your father with you?”

“Yessir. He said he’d be back in a few minutes.” I knew he wouldn’t and would make some excuse.

“That’s alright. Been fishing since six o’clock myself. Every Saturday six o’clock sharp for the past thirty years been fishing. You just get here?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Ever been here before?”

“No, sir.”

“I’d be delighted to give a fine young man like yourself a few pointers, since you’re beginning here. I’ve been fishing this here lake for ten years now. Know it inside and out like the back of my hand. And this here is a wonderful spot you picked, my boy. You got some good senses. Whatcha got in the can you’re holding so dear?”

I somehow felt protective of the nightcrawlers.

“It ain’t your piggy bank, is it?”

“No, sir. Just a few nightcrawlers.”

“Bait? Lemme see these babies.” I gave him the can, wondering how any living creature would like to be called bait. “Healthy boys, these guys. Look at ‘em roll over each other.”

“I’m Adam.”

“Gene. Pleasure’s mine.” He extended his hand to me and I shook it, surprised that his hand wasn’t much bigger than mine. The texture was like sandpaper. “You got a healthy grip in that hand, boy. Wanna cast one out?”

“Sure.”

He picked up my father’s rod and studied it. He pulled at the line and measured the size of the hook by his thumb. As he held his thumb in the air, I saw a huge scar running down it.

“Ripped one of these barbed hooks straight down this thumb.
Must have been a young man your age when it happened. Ripped it right open. Hurt like a...well, grab me one of them nightcrawlers of yours and I’ll teach you how to bait a hook.”

I picked up the can and counted the worms. All eleven present and accounted for. Although I didn’t know what I was looking for, I studied the behavior of each, hoping one would volunteer itself. One nightcrawler was being poked and climbed over by two others. I rescued the one under attack, scooped it, and held it up in my hand.

“That one your lucky guy?”

“Yessir.”

He grabbed the nightcrawler and began to twist it around the hook. “A common mistake people make is pulling the hook through the worm. You don’t wanna do that. Twist it good around the hook. Tie ‘em in a knot if you have to. Keep ‘em alive. Fish like to see their dinner squirm.”

I wondered what it must be like for the nightcrawler to have someone pick it up and manipulate its body around a cold metal object. Did worms have a brain? Did they have any idea what was happening? Sometimes, while I waited for Mom to come home from her second job, I watched late-night movies in which the prisoner was being led to the chamber to be put to death. Could worms lose hope too?

“Now you’re ready to cast, m’boy.” Gene stood in back of me and put the rod in my left hand. “Just like baseball: if you’re a righty, the glove’s on your left hand. You play any baseball?”

“Sometimes.”

“With your father?”

“We used to, but I’ve kinda outgrown it.” I lied.

“I see. You should have your left hand free to hold the reel.” Gene’s sandpaper hands held mine as I grasped the rod. “Then you pull it over your shoulder, and whip it out. Ready to try?”

“Yeah.”

“Cus I’m letting go now. You got it?” He released my hands as I held onto the rod with all my muscle. “Give ‘er a whirl.”

I whipped the line out over the water until I heard a faint plunk as the hook broke the surface a good distance away. My first official cast. “Whew-wee! Look at that arm. You have one mighty fine cast, Adam.” He smiled and gently patted me on the shoulder. “Now, hold the line here, so if a fish gets to tugging on that nightcrawler of yours, you’re gonna feel it. Then you reel ‘em in.”

“Like this?”

“Just like that. Don’t you wish for a big fish, y’hear. It’s bad luck. Then you get to telling stories like me.” He laughed, baring his yellowed teeth. “You have all the time in the world, son, and the years’ll keep getting
better so long as you’re kind to them. I’ve never been as happy as I am now. But then again, what do I know. Just an old coot.”

And then there was silence, interrupted only by the slight buzz of dragonflies hovering over the water. I wondered what the nightcrawler was doing on the hook at this instant, dropped into an arena with dozens of its predators. Were all the fish looking at it, toying with it, maybe swallowing a piece of it and spitting it back out? Were the fish fighting for it? Were two fish pulling on opposite ends and tearing it in half, leaving it with nothing? I once read that worms regenerate if cut in half.

“You think we could reel this line in and use one of them plastic things in the tackle box?” I asked.

“Why?”

“What’s the use in killing if rubber or plastic will do the same thing?” As these words left my mouth, I was thankful that my father, the avid hunter and fisherman, was not around to hear his son be so much like his mother.

“Sure you can. Whatever you want. Actually, I’ve been using worms for so long, I never thought of using anything else.” I began to pull the line in.

“Excuse me. What do you think you’re doing with my son?” My father stepped up to Gene and stared him down.

“Your kid was having some trouble and I couldn’t help but notice no one was with ‘em.”

“I’m with him. I’m his father.”

“Yes, he told me. But you disappeared and the kid was lost—”

“I was gone for five minutes. Adam’s fine on his own anyway. He’s a big boy now. Now I’d appreciate it if you leave.”

“Just being friendly. Just trying to help your boy. That’s what this world needs, y’know. A huge helping of friendliness without anyone getting scared over nothing.”

“Dad, Gene was just showing me how—”

“I’d like to be alone with my son, thank you.”

“You’ll be a fine fisherman someday, Adam,” Gene said. “You got one helluva arm on you—”

“Thank you. Now would you please leave?”

“And you, this earth ain’t some place to throw your kid around to fend for himself. The fish might get ‘em. May God be with you both. You’re on your way, m’boy.”

“I’ll work on that cast,” I said.

“I’m sure you will, son.”

“And maybe try those plastic worms sometime.”
“I will.”
He smiled, then walked away from us along the side of the lake. He turned back to wave at me before he disappeared over the bank.
“You all right?”
“I guess so.”
“What did I tell you about talking to strange people? Don’t you hear about the things that can happen? Didn’t I teach you better—”
When my father walked over to the cooler, I pushed the Folgers can over with my foot. The nightcrawlers fell out and crawled away in several directions. I didn’t want to hold them prisoner anymore. They had the same right as I did to escape the hook.
“You going to catch a big one for me today, Adam?”
“No, sir. A little one will do.”
Ah, poor old Uncle Bernabo, once the Lord of Milan,
He died in his cell, a plate of beans was his assassin.
An unhappy last supper, drowned in poison!
His nephew Giangaleazzo was to blame for the murder,
But most just blamed it on the times;
At least the city was kept in the family.

Then Giangaleazzo rubbed out the Scaligeri family,
As the Visconti snake slithered out from Milan.
Anthony Scaligeri, who stabbed his brother 26 times,
Jumped on a boat to escape his assassin,
All the while swearing oaths of bloody murder,
Boiling a vendetta that filled the air with poison.

Soon Giangaleazzo died, his soul filled with poison,
But his sons Giovanni and Filipppe saved the family.
In the struggle, you see, even Giovanni’s mother died by murder,
Strangled in Monza castle, just outside of Milan.
So Giovanni threw the lord of the castle to his favorite assassin:
His underfed Mastiff. But for him, once was too many times.

The great city bled, its steeples looking towards better times,
Where no clouds lurked ready to rain black poison
On unsuspecting children under the shadow of an assassin.
When Giovanni sought the comfort of the Holy Family
Seeking refuge from the storm in a chapel in Milan,
No confession could save him from his cleansing murder.

His brother Filipppe was more careful to guard against murder,
Raising walls and black curtains that saved him countless times.
The Ducal insignia again rose high in pride over Milan,
The Visconti snake again ready to strike, injecting poison
Into Padua and Verona; Carrara Scaligeri, and family.
The Count of Carmagnola proved an able general and assassin.

Perhaps too able, and so assassin turned target for assassin.
Carmagnola and Venice, Sforza and Milan, war and murder.
Soon, the Visconti snake crumpled and a new family,
The Sforza, rose in glory and hearkened to golden times,  
But poor old Uncle Bernabo, done in by poison,  
Would have only wept blood for his Milan.

And most would blame it on the times,  
Of princes and blood and honor and poison,  
Slaughtered ghosts whose wails echo for Sanguine Milan.
I was never very good at taking life seriously, so when I decided to end mine I couldn’t take that seriously either, it just didn’t seem to warrant any type of major attention. I knew it was going to happen, it felt inevitable to me, especially considering the recent events of my life, but I still couldn’t think about it without having a smile on my face and nearly bursting with uncontrollable laughter. Perhaps this points towards my psychotic tendencies, perhaps not.

In fact, the only real trouble I was having with my suicide, other than the method, was how to separate myself from the people I cared about so that there wouldn’t be a big mess to clean up. I guess I didn’t feel that it was right for me to end my life and have a lot of people troubled over it; well, maybe one or two for karma, but more than that was just too much for my mind to handle.

I didn’t have to worry about Michael anymore, he broke up with me last week. This is kind of a tricky point, though, because I don’t want it to seem like I’m ending my time on Earth because of him, for nothing could be farther from the truth. Actually, don’t you think that’s pretty arrogant of someone, to think that you could kill yourself because they broke up with you. I know it happens, but give me a little credit here. The only person that would cause me to kill myself is me, end of story.

My parents are a different story. I, being there only son, get along in very different ways with both of them, them being divorced. My dad is supportive of me, he’s just a little confused as to why I’m gay, and a little upset that the family line ends with me. That it’s going to end a bit sooner than he expected will also confuse him, but I think I can pry his fingers off me in good time.

My mom keeps quoting Dante’s *Inferno* at me to try and convince me how wrong I am. She must have lit over a thousand candles at the church for me, too. She isn’t dealing with my homosexuality very well, but, then again, neither do I at times. She’ll take my death very hard, and I still haven’t figured out a way to soften it for her yet.

The only other person I really have to worry about is Gillian, my best friend. That’s going to be weird, but maybe a way to detach myself from her will come to me when I’m in the bathroom or something. Or something.

When I was in class the other day, Twentieth Century American Literature, we were talking about Sylvia Plath, and suicide.
“Suicide just seems so cliché to me,” Will said, furrowing his eyebrows and scratching underneath one of his seventeen identical U-Conn baseball hats. “You gotta deal with the situation, not run away from it.”

“But what if it feels right, what if suicide is the only option for you, what if there is absolutely nothing in this world that is worth anything to you. You’d have to commit suicide, it would be silly not to.” That’s Jen talking. She’s a nice girl, really cute too. I love her because she is a true devil’s advocate, no matter what the discussion topic. She once spent fifteen minutes in a theology class arguing with a priest over the benefits of Hell, and actually got him to concede that it might not be such a terrible place. She cracks me up.

“I don’t know,” I began. That’s how I begin all of my statements in that class. It sounds like I don’t know what I’m talking about, but I say it anyway. Some people say umm, some repeat like a dozen times, I say I don’t know. “I think that if you do commit suicide, it should be in an interesting way, something that makes some sort of artistic statement, a final middle finger to the world. Sylvia did say that ‘Dying is an art, like everything else.’ No gas ovens or cars for me, I’d have to go with style.”

“And how would you kill yourself?” Jack asked. I don’t think Jack likes me very much. Oh well.

“I don’t know, maybe paint a yellow stripe down my body and lie in the middle of a runway.”

All of my friends began to laugh, while everyone else just stared at me.

And that’s where it solidified in my mind, sitting in a 200 level survey class talking about one of my favorite poets, thinking about suicide. It started to appeal to me because I figured I could never sustain an artistic work on canvas, but on myself ... yeah, I think it could work.

Actually, I knew that I could never really sustain an artistic work on canvas. I have my own exhibit in this tiny gallery down by Antique Row, off of Pine Street, but no one ever comes, and it depresses me terribly. I was so excited when the place was offered to me, but now I suspect it was just because the gallery owner wanted to fuck me. Now that I realize this I keep trying to defer his advances without appearing rude, so that my exhibit can stay open. I don’t want to piss him off, though, because if it closed I would just die.

Gillian and I were walking in the mall the other day, and I was impressing her with my gadar. Gadar, for all of you that don’t know, is the inherent gift of every gay man to know if someone else is gay. Radar—Gadar, get it? It’s really useful if you want to pick up people. Not that I’m
attractive enough to pick anyone up, but, you know, just in case.
Anyway, we sat down on a bench, resting our feet from the hours of shopping.

"Oh my God, would you look at the way that guy is dressed. The gray suit is nice, but a tan tie! With green stripes! He is so obviously gay, too." I turned to Gillian. "It’s people like him that give us stylish gay men a bad name."

"Come on, he doesn’t know he’s gay. That’s why he’s dressed like that. He’s trying to pull off the conservative look, but the tie was just calling to him."

"That’s all well and good, but if a tie calls to you at least have it match the outfit."

"Gillian looked at me and started to laugh. "So, what do you have in your exhibit?"

"Well, if you moved your lazy ass over then you would see. Let me think, what of my work have you seen. Oh, I know. Do you remember Complex? It’s the photo-realistic painting of a naked man bending over with a twinkie sticking out of his butt and another naked man leaning down about to take a bite out of it. The twinkie represents the synthetic nature of society, and it’s coupled with the idea of the pre-oedipal stage where the child is fascinated with his own shit, making him anal-retentive in later life. That’s why the twinkie is up his butt."

"Nooo, I don’t remember that one."

"Ah well, it is one of my better pieces. It took me forever to get the proportions right."

"I swear, I’ll come visit your exhibit. It sounds like your work needs to be seen and not explained."

"Maybe." I said. We sat in silence for a little bit. "We were talking about Sylvia Plath in class the other day."

"Oh really? She’s so cool. A shame about her death, though."

"Yeah." Pause. "If you were going to commit suicide, how would you do it?"

Gillian sat on the bench for a moment, thinking with her eyes closed. "I think that I would probably take a lot of pills and never wake up. And you?"

"I think that it would be neat to die in a pool full of Jell-O, like in that Pink Panther movie. Imagine it, diving into nine solid feet of quivering dessert, thrashing around for a bit, then just giving up and floating there like a giant piece of fruit."

Gillian looked over at me. "You’re a really odd boy, Jason."

"I know, but that’s why you love me."
I decided to deal with my mom first, it would probably be easier than anyone else. I drove the thirty five minutes out of the city to home, went inside, got a glass of milk, flipped through the mail, and walked out onto the back porch where my mom reclined in her chaise lounge, enjoying the afternoon sun ... at least for right now.


"Hello. What are you doing here?" My mother was never one for formalities.

"What, can’t I stop by my house and visit my mother? I just wanted to see if your hair had turned blue yet."

"Very funny. Do you need money?"

"For the love of God, Mom, no. I just stopped by."

"Well then, you can not take the name of the Lord in vain then, I tried to raise you with the proper respect, but all you do is blaspheme left and right."

"For Christ’s sake, Mom."

"Do you get some sort of sick enjoyment out of tormenting me? I don’t know what I did wrong when you were younger..."

"You didn’t do anything wrong. It’s just the way I am. I’m sorry, I was just teasing. Actually, I have something kind of important to tell you."

"What is it?"

"Michael and I broke up."

"You’ve finally realized the sins of your ways."

"No, I’m leaving for Europe with another man I met at a club. He’s really rich and liked how I danced."

"What! I can’t believe you. You can’t do this."

"Mom, I already said yes. I’m going. I just need to pick up my blanket from the attic."

"How can you do this? I never dropped you as a baby, you never fell down the stairs. What happened?"

"Nothing happened, Mom. It’s who I am and what I want to do."

"Well, then if you do this may God have mercy on your soul. If you ever come back then you will never come into this house again."

The fight progressed from there, and lasted for about two hours. I’m not going to Europe, but if I told my mom I was going to kill myself then she’d have every priest from here to Cleveland knocking on my door. Don’t get me wrong, I like priests a lot. A whole lot. There was this one priest I met at Woody’s in Center City...oh my! Isn’t that a horrible name for a gay club, though, Woody’s? I like priests for other reasons too. The dedication they have to their jobs is incredible. I don’t think I’ve ever been
that dedicated to my hair, let alone a way of life. But in this moment of my life, the last one, I just want to be alone.

I was sitting in the gallery the next day, and Herb had been hitting on me again. Herb owns the gallery and is a lecherous old thing of about fifty-two. He had been bothering me for about half an hour, and I just wanted him to go away. I had already explained one of my pieces, *Madonna and Wiener*, a piece I did for my mom of the Virgin erotically eating a hot-dog, and didn’t know what else to say. Of course, my mind wandered towards one particular subject.

“Herb,” I began, “if you were going to commit suicide, how would you?”

“I would never commit suicide. Life is too great.”

‘Really? I think that I’d like to take a lot of drugs, drugs that would make me completely incoherent to the world. Then sit in the back of my car with my walkman on, listening to something really relaxing, like Bach, or the Pet Shop Boys. Then get crushed into a tiny cube at the wrecking yard, and end up on someone’s desk as a paperweight. Knowing my luck, though, it would probably be the desk of my painting teacher. Bastard.”

Herb just looked at me, then walked back upstairs into his office. I breathed a sigh and walked outside to smoke a cigarette.

My dad is a robust man of forty-five, complete with flannel and a beard. He’s really cool, and I love him to death. Oops, bad choice of words. He is a contractor and spends his days yelling at high-school dropouts who are now building houses. Think about it: people that don’t complete high-school often work in factories, making things like cars, airplanes, things like that. It makes me laugh and restores my belief in the chaos of life.

I met him for lunch one day, out at the site of one of his new houses. It was huge! Really, really big! The front of the house looked like a giant sun-catcher, all glass and silver. They were putting the roof on when I walked up the mud path (driveway) to the house.

“Hey dad,” I called.

“Hey yourself. Give me a second.” He turned from me and barked a few more commands to his lackeys, then walked over to his truck, reached in, pulled out a bag, and beckoned me over. “Let’s eat behind the house. It’s quieter, and in the shade.”

We walked behind the house and sat down on a pile of lumber stacked against the back wall. He opened his bag and pulled out a sandwich. I opened mine and pulled out a carrot. He opened a soda as I opened my bottled water. He looked over at me and laughed. I smiled back.
"So, what's up? What brings you out here, far, far away from your studio?"
"Well, I kind of have some important news for you."
"Yeah, what is it?"
"I'm moving off the coast of India to become a prophet of Zoroaster."
"Oh."
I was confused. Normally when a child tells his parent that he's moving seventeen thousand miles away to adopt and ascetic way of life some sort of reaction is expected. Maybe I'd better try again.
"Dad?"
"Yes, son?"
"Did you hear me? I'm moving to India."
"I heard you."
What was going on here? He just sat there, calmly munching his turkey on wheat, gazing over the gravel and dirt to the woods.
"What do you think?"
"I think you're an idiot, Jason."
"Thanks, Dad. Are you upset?"
"Mildly, yes. But, you know me, I'm not going to stand in your way. I never have before and I don't think I ever will. Your life is your life."

We talked for a bit more, about my fictitious journey, my breakup, my painting, things like that. I told him I'd never be back. He said that he was sad, and asked if there was anything he could do for me. I told him no, I'd be OK. I felt really confused, and a little weird. He really cared for me, and in that instant I contemplated staying alive, then decided I didn't like the Bee-Gee's, and left.

I was looking at one of my paintings the other day, and thinking about the odd little moments of life. The painting was titled Pollock Fucked. It is an abstract piece I finished after I talked with my dad. While the paint was still wet my ex-boyfriend Michael came in, the only person to visit my exhibit. He just stood there, then pushed me against the canvas and... well... you know. I think Herb watched from his office.

Anyway, the painting got all screwed-up, no pun intended, but I kind of liked how the colors looked, and so I hung it this morning. It got me thinking about colors.

Do you know that the original Tin Man from The Wizard of Oz, when it was on Broadway, died of lead poisoning because of the paint they used on him? Imagine that, suffocating to death because your body was covered in an unwholesome silver paint. I wouldn't choose silver, I'd probably go in a nice Fuscia.
Gillian showed up at my door the following afternoon, and when I saw her I decided that I had to tell her that this was my last day to live. I’d talk with her, send her on her way, and die.

“Hi sweety,” she said, standing on her tip-toes and giving me a kiss on the cheek. I kissed her back and let her in. She strolled in and let her scarf fall to the floor. She was pretty short, but really attractive. My boyfriends always teased me that the one person they felt threatened most by was Gillian, a girl. I always told them that they were right.

“How’s the office?” I asked. Gillian works for the IRS, doing some bureaucratic thing that she doesn’t even really understand.

“It sucks, what else is new? I sit there, day in and day out, looking over small time delinquent tax criminals and dream of a house on the beach. Nothing ever changes. My boss has been hitting on me more and more, though, so I guess his divorce is going well. I don’t think I’m going to sleep with him again. He was just too...”

“Boring?” I helped out.

“Yeah. He hasn’t dated for twenty years, and I’m not in the mood for a drive-in and light petting.”

‘Aw, then what are we going to do tonight, baby?’ I pouted, poking her arm.

“Oh, you know I’ll always fuck you, sugar,” she teased. We looked at each other for a moment, then exploded in laughter. She has those silent giggles, where it looks like she’s having a fit, while I tend to rock back and forth. This time I rocked a little hard and fell on the ground. This only caused more quiet convulsions from my friend.

“Oh my.” I said, when I had recovered.

“So what’s new boy? I haven’t talked to you in a while.”

“Oh, not too much, except I’m going to commit suicide in a couple hours. I have everything ready, I just needed to talk to you.”

“Of course you are. Now, I thought that we could see that Mamet film at the Ritz, I hear it’s really good.”

“I can’t, I’m not going to be around tonight.”

“Oh. Well, how about tomorrow night?”

“Gillian, I’m not going to be around.”

“What, is Michael coming to take you away? Don’t get back together with him, he’s an asshole. And if you go away I’m going to be all sad and lonely.”

“Gillian...”

Gillian, who had been rummaging around in my refrigerator, stood up and looked over at me. “You’re serious?”
"Yes, damn it, I’m serious. I’m really fucking serious. I’m going to die today."

"Why?"

"Well, mainly because I’m tired of life, and I figure I’ve lived about as much as I want. I’m sick of dealing with other people’s shit. Herb closed the exhibit today and said that I was a pathetic artist. I’m frustrated with my painting. I can’t paint. I can’t. That’s a hard thing for me to deal with. It’s just that I don’t give a flying fuck about anything."

"That’s no reason to die."

"That’s the only reason to die. There is not one thing in this world that I want to live for. Nothing. I’ve tried and tried and tried some more, and nothing I do makes any difference."

"It makes a difference to me."

"What does, my horrendous artwork? I can’t do this anymore. I’m through. Who knows? Maybe I’m meant to die now and this is cosmically right."

"Did you talk to your parents?"

"Yeah, I told my mom that I was flying off to Europe with some guy, and my dad that I was becoming a monk in India. They both believed me. Can you believe that?"

"Of course I can believe that, you’re their son. They have to believe you. I’m just wondering why you told me."

"Oh, I figured you would handle this well, that you would accept what I was doing and not have some 800 number tattooed on my arm."

"How are you going to kill yourself? Do you own a gun?"

"No, a gun would be too messy. I have a much better way. I had a glass coffin made, completely airtight, and what I’m going to do is line it with my paintings, fill it with orchids, float it to the middle of the lake, seal it, suffocate on the floral odors, and sink to the bottom. My landlord knows I’m leaving, my parents think I’m going away, and school is over. This way is perfect, because there’s nothing left, and no one will realize that I’m gone. And, come on, doesn’t it sound like a beautiful way to die?"

"Jason, don’t die. Don’t leave me. I’m here."

Gillian took a deep breath. "Don’t kill yourself, Jason."

"Gillian, do you know what it’s like to live in pain every minute of everyday. To live in a world where you are stunted and blocked every way you turn. Everyone commits suicide, some people just do it slower. I cannot deal with this pain anymore. It hurts. It sucks. I’m through."

As I spoke I began to cry, and I clumped down along my kitchen wall and sobbed. Gillian walked over and knelt down beside me, tentatively reaching out and placing her hand on my shoulder. I jerked, then collapsed in her arms where she held me as I cried, and cried, and cried.
The uncautious undone by the seam of cheap fabric sewn through unmeticulously down by same oak I now have the queue I

with bradawl and mallet super highway super charged souped up something once had the planets waltzing in three four to a

charade outside the shopping mall (a strip) the district eroded I’m sorry I’ve stepped on your toe A STRIP!

to the bargain basement and surely low property taxes has resigned wait-
the the the where is Orion the club

ing like filling like stuffing the motion repeated and wholly unpostured
flirting by the coffee machine sickness of flying so I

sends signal to synapse the firing’s outrageous -ly off kilter
regrets but the banquet the beast and the bear uneaten

it seems that the gyroscopes are out of step the mothers have cataracts
it seems that the gyroscopes are out pescoat pescoat pescoat as cope

fashioned to dinner plates saucy like vaseline
smashing eyewear that won’t come clean.
Love is patient and kind...Love never gives up; and its faith, hope, and patience never fail

1 Corinthians 13: 4, 7

She hides her husband’s wallet as the soft sun rises over the hill. Different places for each new day, today a pillowcase, tomorrow behind the faded brown cushions of his favorite easy chair. The pillowcase idea didn’t work too well, for when they changed the pillowcases the housekeeping staff had a field day with the ones and tens mixed between the urine-stained sheets and dirty white towels. But she knows what she’s doing, knows that they’ll be coming to find it, stealing what little they have left. They’ve already taken the home, the quiet country house with its small garden out back, bordered by perennials that always manage to show up each spring. She doesn’t even remember planting them, that’s how ancient they must be, yet now for the first time in her life she’s missed their entrance in the days of early spring.

“You stole it, didn’t you?” Her teeth are clenched in wild fury as she screams across the room at the young nurse’s aid. “First off, we’re stuck in this place, and now you even need to steal from us.”

Tears welling up in her little beady eyes, blue as robin’s eggs, her husband used to say back in the courting days. They now show a pride beaten by impending age, killed by the host of suffering years. Reassured, both force and power put her back to bed. The force stops her actions, but it doesn’t stop the thinking, the nihilistic thoughts which batter her heated mind through each weary waking hour.

Every day is the same routine. She wakes early now, as the day’s first fiery rays pierce her thin curtains. An aid comes quickly, rushed as usual, the fake smile and chatter hitting her with a fresh wave of nausea.

“Good morning, honey, it’s time to rise and shine,” the honey-suckle voice pries apart the dream, as blankets are torn off. The cold air hits her like a wave and she finds herself sitting on her bed, slippers haphazardly thrown on, mind still in a fog.

“Where am I?” she wonders aloud. “I’ll start making breakfast for the boys, they’ve got a big day ahead of them, the poor things.”

“No, no, we’ve got your breakfast all made for you, just waiting after you wash up.” The aid’s voice jerks her back to reality. The whitewashed walls and cold tile floors remind her now of the fate she’s accepted. Washed, dressed, sat up in bed with a tray full of breakfast she
The Lantern

has no will to eat, little packs for salt and pepper, packages for jam and butter. Cellophane-sealed juice cups, plastic-capped coffee mugs. What's next, she silently wonders. Such a rush and now the full day, with nothing to do but sleep or die. But the slight snoring reminds her of the other piece of reality lying in the adjacent bed, laboring breaths between ticks of the clock.

Her husband sleeps on, his aid doesn't come till midmorning, for they know his sleeping patterns. Sleeping patterns, that's all they seem to have anymore, as though the thought of waking just makes them want to sleep a bit longer. And in this place who can blame you, sleep is the LSD for the old, the place where hallucinations are real and truer than reality.

He sleeps now and she watches his face, the gray mingled with black hair that once grew plentiful upon his head. Wrinkles run deep, more worry than smile, but his eyes still crinkle in the same funny way, like he's laughing at the best joke in the world. Finally it's time, his aid comes in, exhausted. She looks as though she should be sleeping here. He wakes, disillusioned, much like her, but confused longer.

It's brought in, the big monster, as he sometimes refers to it, a lift equipped with the power of lifting a man as big as he. She pretends she's asleep now, that his legs are whipped around, body hoisted up, suspended over the bed, and wheeled, hanging like a giant sack of potatoes, onto the toilet. She opens her eyes too quickly this time, to see a glimpse of him helplessly hanging there, catheter bag trailing, half-full with the night's wastes. They don't even bother to shut the door, as if their husbands are also woken up to this each morning.

His pride is gone, changed from the respected man he once was, an enterprising businessman from the high society north of Philadelphia. Now his soul is demoralized, and since souls were joined in marriage, she also can't help but feel the shame deep within her. The pain only known by those who watch their spouse painfully age, where walking is impossible and dressing a drudgery lasting at least half an hour.

He's dressed now, in the familiar brown slacks and yellow shirt that she remembers shopping for back in the Christmases of long ago. Rolled back, placed in the blue wheelchair, where he'll remain until the call for lunch. But now it's the quiet morning time together, at least an hour to spend napping or glancing through the paper, although not much of it makes sense anymore. She sits in his favorite brown chair and he in the wheelchair, battlers against a time-old battle. His hearing is not good and their talk is small, exchanging formalities, attempted muddles of memories at best. This morning is no different, good mornings spoken and inquiries of each other's sleep, after which the long silence lapses around them. He squints his wrinkled brow, thinking and looks up, looks right at her. She
grows still: is something wrong, why is he looking this way? It is then that she realizes, this face of his she has not seen since the days back on the porch of their old house, where they would sit on the swing, holding hands and glasses of fresh lemonade. It is a smile, and then he starts wheeling towards her, close as he can get to the faded brown chair. He leans out, breathing heavy now, but smiling with all his might. It is then she leans forward and hears, quite clearly, the soft words, “I love you,” before his tender kiss.
A general vagueness sidled up, (blue 8) sneezed on the ground (blue 4) and froze the world (blue 7) into easily sliceable sections. (red 7) Because of his unclarifying nature (red 6) no one held his hand (red SKIP) and he got no votes. (red 0) Then the lemmings were heard screaming (WILD DRAW FOUR) and general uneasiness was seen (yellow DRAW TWO) asking for a glass of cold root-beer. (yellow 3) Everybody prepared their bombshelters (yellow REVERSE) packing their children who couldn’t walk (yellow 5) in large boxes that had just enough air (yellow 0) to prevent asphyxiation (blue 0) when there is only one child per container; (blue 1) two children is not advisable. (blue DRAW TWO) The sneeze had given the sun the flu (blue 5) and it was unrecognizable when it recovered. (blue REVERSE) It had been stripped down to a cellophane wrapping (blue 6) that if torn would make Pandora feel guilty again. (WILD) Riots could emerge. (green SKIP) Mutations might occur. (green 1) You wouldn’t like it. (green REVERSE) Almost everything around us, dead. (green 6) Someone whispered a breath of hope, (red 6) that needed great concentration (red 3) and able skilled workers. (red 8) The children did not go ignored. (red DRAW TWO) Their multitude alone was alarming (WILD DRAW FOUR) but were very polite when not in conformation. (yellow 2) With strong mental stimulation, they ate nervously (yellow 4) as though they were preoccupied with something. (yellow 3) It was hard to think what they’d try next. (yellow DRAW TWO) They always thought they’d found the one thing (yellow 1) that would be unlike any other thing. (WILD) I didn’t think that was the point. (green 2)
We'd given up worrying about the sun in general, (green SKIP) UNO and the unpleasant vagueness had moved out of his parents' house, apparently solving the whole crisis. (green 1)
I had a feeling that breaking my nose on the sidewalk of downtown Santa Cruz was not the best way to ingratiate myself with the locals. When Kerri yanked me off the public transit bus, I thought I was going down for the count. Kerri had taken this route at least a hundred times and was practically out the door before the bus even stopped.

"C’mon, slow poke," she yelled.

"I’m not sure," I said, "but I think the beach will still be there ten minutes from now." Kerri stopped in mid-stride and looked at me with her head cocked to the left and a halfplayful, half annoyed expression on her face. I picked up the pace and caught up to her.

"Yes," she said once we were side by side, "but all the best spots will be taken. Besides, we still have much to do before you leave, foolish man."

"Like going to the No-Zone?"

"That’s right," she said, placing her hands on my shoulders and pushing me into a brisk walk. "So pick it up, buddy."

The No-Zone was a place that I was only familiar with from photographs and second-hand accounts. It was a little known tourist attraction just outside of Santa Cruz, which boasted that visitors could defy gravity. Kerri had been there, and I had seen a picture of her and a friend standing with a full body lean that was almost horizontal. Kerri never questioned how the No-Zone worked, she just said it was cool and that I would have to go there.

When we got to the beach, it was practically empty, except for a few die-hard volleyball players and scatterings of retirees. We opted for the quiet company of the retirees on account of Kerri having received unwanted attention from the volleyball players in the past. That didn’t surprise me. Kerri was an attractive girl, but she wasn’t the kind of girl who would be impressed by how adept you were at tattooing the word "Spalding" across someone’s chest with a well-placed spike.

I took my shirt off, hoping Kerri would notice the months of work I had put into my physique, figuring she wouldn’t.

"Whoa, snow blind!"

"Thanks," I said, "but it’s not eighty-six degrees in New Jersey right now." That got us talking about home and the mutual friends Kerri and I had hung out with before she transferred to UC Santa Cruz. We talked a lot about who’s doing what and who’s seeing who. We each told horror stories of previous relationships and reached the mutual understanding.
that each of us would prefer the companionship of a good dog to the ridiculous complications of the opposite sex.

When we left the beach, it was 2:30. My flight was scheduled to leave at eight o'clock the next morning.

“So, we’ll shower off and then head for the No-Zone, right?” I asked.

“Yeah. Wait,” Kerri said, “I promised Steve that we’d go see his band play this afternoon. We’ll go right after that.” I must have given a look of concern, because she followed up with “Don’t worry, Brian, we’ll get there.” I conceded on the terms that we would leave if the concert ran too long. I could never argue with her.

Halfway back to the bus station, Kerri spotted a flea market and had to browse for a while. We both loved the flea market, thrift store bargains. Our wardrobes were evidence of that. I with my usual polyester Joe Namath signature series shirts and Kerri with her mix-and-match style that always seemed to one-up whatever I was wearing. Concealing the bikini top and boxer shorts she had donned at the beach, Kerri now had on a pair of blue plaid pajama pants, a white button-down shirt, and a tan cowhide jacket lined with tassels. We walked the length of the flea market, which spanned several blocks, trying on old coats and hats. “So how’s this place work again?” I asked.

“What place?”

“The No-Zone.”

“I don’t know. You just stand there, and you can lean almost completely parallel to the ground without falling on your face.” Kerri was looking into a mirror as she tried on a brown top hat covered in imitation fur.

“It’s impossible. It’s got to be some kind of trick.”

“Nope.”

“Then what makes this place so special?”

“I don’t know. Look, Bri, you’ll see when you get there, OK?”

She turned to me wearing a black derby that had peacock feathers in the border. “What do you think?”

“Great.” We continued browsing and found a salesman whose prize item was a huge wooden rocking chair that had been fashioned into a human figure with an elephant’s head. We took turns rocking and agreed that it was the treasure of the flea market. I was afraid that if she could have engineered a means of transporting the man-elephant-chair to her room, Kerri would have bought it on the spot.

“You ready to go,” Kerri asked as she finished drying her light brown hair. Her hair was much longer than I remembered.
" Been ready, " I told her, sitting on the edge of her bed. Half an hour and a crammed car ride later, we arrived at the club where Steve’s band was scheduled to play. The term club was used loosely to describe this place. It had some cutey name like the Holy Moly or the Chili Willy or something. There was an odd array of customers, ranging from the multiple-piercing shock value appearance types to the khakis and a polo shirt crowd. What further segregated the audience was that across from the stage where the maximum age could have been not higher than thirteen, there was a bar area complete with pool table where the ages ranged from the recently twenty-one to the well beyond twenty-one. It looked like the most convenient daycare scenario ever conceived.

When the band came on, I shot a glance at Kerri, and she gave me her best “Sorry” smirk. The ages of the featured performers barely surpassed their immediate audience. Kerri bought us a couple of beers, and we sat at a side table with some of her friends trying to convince ourselves that the five dollar cover charge had been well spent. The highlight of the performance was the brawl that ensued after one of the band members got in the middle of a shouting match between two boys in the audience. A lanky young man with pink hair and a fashion sense that seemed to favor basic black shoved a squat fellow whose “South Central” and “Fuck You” tattoos hinted that he was no stranger to conflict. Several other audience members turned on the flamingo-headed adolescent and pursued him out of the club. The actual fight was short-lived and followed by a “can’t we all just get along” speech, trying to unify the crowd through the common bonds of rock music and skateboards.

“OK,” Kerri said, giving in to my anguished stare. “Let’s get out of here.”

We had to make a stop at a liquor store before returning to campus. Kerri explained that tonight was Murray’s birthday, and since tomorrow was mine and I’d be gone by morning, Kerri and her friends had planned a double celebration. Murray lived on the same hall as Kerri, and I thought he was a pretty good guy, despite his affinity for growing the world’s shoddiest facial hair.

“We can party for a little while and then head off to the No-Zone,” Kerri said, “Besides, it looks ever cooler at night.” I wasn’t one to question Kerri’s opinion, so I agreed. We started the night in Murray’s room, taking shots, one for each year. In no time at all we each had a good buzz going, and the No-Zone was the last thing on my mind. Murray and his roommate, John were getting rowdy and insisted that I go with them in search of some lonesome girls waiting for guys like us to show them a good time. Kerri said that she wanted to go talk to a few of her girlfriends but insisted that I return to her room so we could hang out together for
my last night in Santa Cruz.

After a few hours of dorm hopping and slurred conversations, I realized that I had just about finished the bottle of tequila that Murray’s hall had given him. I left Murray and John with a few young ladies and headed back for Kerri’s room. When I staggered into the doorway, the light was off, and Kerri was asleep on the floor next to her bed. I had slept on the floor the entire week, but there she was curled up under her comforter just inches from my feet. In my stupor, I groped for the solution to this dilemma. I could have easily picked her up and placed her in her bed if I were sober, but the thought of physical exertion with half a bottle of Jose Cuervo in my stomach wasn’t too appealing. Maybe this was her coy way of inviting a new level of intimacy into a relationship, a little voice inside my head said with some heavy slurring. I emptied the contents of my pockets onto her dresser, making just enough noise to seem accidental. Kerri didn’t move. I crept between Kerri and the bed, allowing my feet just to graze the comforter she was wrapped in.

Standing at Kerri’s feet, I swayed slightly, and my eyes began to adjust to the darkness of the room. As I stood over her, another voice chimed in, somewhat clearer than the first. Maybe she was just being nice, because she knew you’d be drunk and need a good night’s sleep. I opted to trust the later and climbed into bed.

The next morning I woke up just as Kerri was putting away her makeshift bed. She looked to me with a smile that seemed to echo disappointment.

“Didn’t find any chicks last night, huh?” she said jokingly. I just shook my head trying both to indicate the negative and expel the advice demons who were still swimming in my throbbing head. “Better get up, your flight leaves in no time.”

That’s what it felt like, no time. The ride to the airport, my drunken misadventures, the entire week with Kerri. Just before I entered my terminal, Kerri handed me a package.

“What’s this?” I asked.

“Just a little something for your b-day.” I opened the package to find the blue and white panel print polyester shirt I had been admiring one day while shopping with Kerri. I couldn’t believe she remembered which one I liked out of the hundreds we saw that day.

“Thanks, Ker, I love it.” She smiled, happy to see my approval. I hugged her and turned toward my gate. I turned back. “We never got to go to that weird No-Zone place,” I said.

“Don’t worry,” she said with the same smile she had this morning when she asked me if I had found any girls, “You’ll be back. You’ll see it.”
“Who the hell are they, godammit, to tell me what I can and can’t do? I should just drink up a healthy glass o’ their stinkin’ water and go shit right on the borough office lawn.” Gram’s gravelly voice bounced off the 1950’s furniture and the yard sale Carnival glass hiding in their nooks. “Goddamn politicians. I’ll go tell them what to do with their dirty water! And Jonce, would you quit playin’ those damn poker games o’ yours? The beepin’s driving me nigh well insane.”

“Now Ginny, hush up. There’s no need to get all worked up about this,” Grandpop drawled from his recliner. “All we have to do is berl it and skim the stuff off the top.”

Gram swung around so fast she almost dropped her Old Milwaukee. What the hell do we pay a sewage bill for? It’s their job to clean out all this shit, not ours.”

“Ginny, watch your language, for chrissakes! The kids are here.” John and Sera didn’t really mind. A twelve year old boy thought cuss words were the coolest things in the world, and Sera was fifteen and just pretending to be shocked. Besides, bacteria in the water was the most exciting thing that happened that summer, at least a thing worthy of Gram’s ire. She usually stomped the floorboards and barked at the rocking chair at least once a month, and they missed the lack of shows.

“Naw, Gram, I think you’re right. Those bastards should get what’s coming to ‘em,” said John. The grin on his face said it all. He only wanted to keep the fire lit—this was too much fun. His swearing didn’t help though. It gave Gram a reason to set her top spinning even faster, and Grandpop was the only one able to keep her from trying to tar and feather a Windsor Borough councilman.

Her arms flailed above her head and her wiry, iron gray hair stood on its ends, framing a pinched, stubborn face and a bulbous nose. Her eyes spit fire from behind her bifocals, and her small lips were pursed in disgust until another expletive spewed like Old Faithful. The slight paunch gained from too many Old Mil’s swelled against her short-sleeved polyester shirt and elastic-waisted pants, and as angry as she was, she resembled a troll about to gobble two unsuspecting children.

“Ginny, for the last time would you calm the hell down. Rock’s gonna be here soon with the chicken and you’ll have yourself so worked up you won’t be able to eat,” Grandpop said.

It didn’t matter what Grandpop said. Sera knew Gram would stew on this for days. She’d sit in her chair at the dining table, cradling an Old
Milwaukee and puffing on a More cigarette, devising grand schemes to bring down the horrible conspiracy of the crooked borough officials.

"You just go back to playin’ your damn video games, Jonce. I’ll be just fine to eat.” She eventually settled into her chair at the dining room table, grunting and shaking her head every few seconds and picking at the plastic lace table cover.

Then the local newspaper reporter, steno pad opened and pencil poised to scribble, followed on the heels of Sera’s dad and the smell of fresh fried chicken from Reliance. Gram might as well have shouted “Off with their heads,” Sera thought, as much as she was getting worked up about this. She was possibly the orneriest person Sera knew. She leapt out of her chair in the dining room and stormed into the living room, almost slipping on the shag rug thrown on the floor. Her eyes bugged out of her head and a sharp yell burst from her mouth. She was back to ranting about the water to the harried newsman in a fraction of a second.

“Hey, Gram, you should get on TV and drink the water, then poop all over the grass. That would be cool.” John laughed at his own brilliance, and the maniacal sparkle it fired in Gram’s eyes.

“John!” yelled Dad and Grandpop at once.

“What’d I do this time?”

“You know, John, that’s a damn good idea. I just might do it too. I said it earlier, and I’ll be damned if I’m not a woman of my word.” Gram, at full speed.

“For chrissakes, Ginny!” Grandpop finally shut off his video poker game. “Rick, call your brothers and sister and get ’em over here. Someone needs to calm her down.” The reporter just stood there looking bewildered. His pencil hadn’t even begun to move.

“Young man, can you get a news crew at the borough building day after tomorrow?” fired Gram.

“All right, Gram!” cheered John.

“Jesus, Mom! John, don’t encourage her,” cried Dad.

“Oh...sure, ma’am. We aren’t affiliated with a station but...”

“Ha! You see! I’m not the only one who thinks this is a crock of shit. I’ll get Pearl to organize a picket. We’ll show those damn politicians who’s in charge.”

“Ginny, would you please calm down! You’re makin’ a fool of yourself, woman.” At his wits’ end, Grandpop turned to the reporter. “Sir, I thank you for your time. I hope that’ll be all?”

“Uh...sure. I mean yessir, I suppose so. Sorry to inconvenience you. Take care, folks.” Sera never saw anyone bolt so quickly.

“Now, enough foolishness. It’s time to eat,” Grandpop said with the authority of a five-star general. Gram grumbled and shot darts at
Grandpop with her eyes, pretending to be settled enough to eat. Grandpop would not allow a single word to be said about the water.

“Sera, how’s your volunteer job going?” Grandpop asked.

“It’s cool. The girl I work with, Christy, is really nice, and it’s a lot of fun. I feel like I’m bringing a little bit of cheer to everybody, you know? I mean, they’re stuck in that drab little hospital room, all hooked up to IV’s and stuff. I don’t think they’re having much of a good time. But they always look a little happier when we bring flowers for them. All the people in the room are like, ‘Oh, what beautiful flowers,’ and stuff like that.”

“Shut up. You’re such a dork. Who cares about stupid flowers?” said John.

“You shut up, buttwipe. Nobody asked you. Anyway, the only floor I don’t like is the sixth floor. It was the old cancer wing and it smells like broccoli and pee.”

“Thanks, Sera. I think I just lost my appetite,” John said, still stuffing his mouth with chicken and tapping his feet on the floor.

Sera thought of her first day about a week ago. All the volunteers had to wear these powder blue vests, hospital issue, with photo tags and all. The flowers were all locked in a cabinet on the third floor, and they had to load them on a huge aluminum cart, organized by floor and room number, cataloguing each one as it was delivered. She remembered the first time she opened the walk-in cabinet. The smell of flowers inundated her, and she reveled in it. Mixed bouquets, beautiful roses in crystal vases, and small arrangements with little rattles in them for the maternity ward surrounded her. She and Christy, who was always snapping her bubble gun and twirling a piece of her permed blond hair around her index finger, made the rounds floor by floor, peeking in doors and reading cards for those who couldn’t. “If I can just make one person happier today, it will be enough,” Sera thought.

“What happens if somebody dies?” John snapped Sera’s attention back to the dinner table.

“Oh, we’re supposed to take them to the nurse’s station. The hospital forwards them to the family and stuff. It’s kind of weird when you walk into a room and the person isn’t there and it’s just some eerie empty bed. It creeps me out.”

After dinner, Grandpop and Dad moved to the front porch, one to smoke, the other to worry over his mother’s irascible behavior.

“Hey, Gram, are you really going to go on the news and drink the water?” John was fascinated with the idea of his grandmother shitting on a public lawn on the five o’clock news.

“You’re damn right I am, John. I’m not about to let those blue
suits get the best of me, no matter who tries to stop me.”

“Gram, why can’t you just say something really mean in the newspaper? You would still get your point across, and you wouldn’t be embarrassing yourself,” Sera said.

“Because it wouldn’t be the same. They would just think I was some crazy old lady spouting strange theories. I just want to leave my mark, that’s all.”

“Yeah, be quiet, Sera. Gram is just too cool for you, and you can’t handle it.”

Shut up, John. Who asked you, you little dweeb.”

Two days later, Rick, Sera, and John anxiously waited for the newscast. They never really knew what Gram would do. Most of it was just talk, but you still never knew. It was the first time Sera could ever remember them actually watching the news for something other than the weather or the latest sports scores. Sure enough, in the opening credits, there was a shot of Gram with a grin as wide as Texas and posing with her water glass raised high. The VCR was set to record, and Dad had popped some popcorn. Everyone had tried to stop her; everyone had failed. Even Grandpop couldn’t do anything, and he had promised not to play his video poker for a whole day. The only thing they could do was make jokes of their own about “Ginny’s escapade” on the borough office lawn.

The anchorwoman introduced the story, talking live to the reporter on the scene. They did a brief interview with Gram, and the lights of the ambulance on standby stroked their faces with red. Shouts from bystanders received a salute from Gram before she raised the glass to her lips and downed every last gulp.

Sera couldn’t believe she had actually done it. The station was wimping out, though. They weren’t waiting for biology to kick in to watch the revolt of Gram’s intestines. They promptly loaded her in the ambulance, and segued into the next story.

At the hospital, Gram was as feisty as ever. Her new cause was the conspiracy of hospital employees, and she yelled at every nurse that passed the doorway. She was let go the next day. Everything seemed normal, and the water had done nothing a little Maalox couldn’t fix.

Two days later, Gram was back in the hospital.

“Dad, what did she drink this time?” asked Sera.

“Don’t know. Pop just said she slipped on the shag rug and fell. Said she doesn’t look too good. I’m waiting for John to get his butt home so we can go see her.”

Gram’s eyes burned from her hospital pillow. “I hate this damn place. If they hook me up to one more machine, I’ll kick them in the face.”

An ugly purple bruise had blossomed across her forehead, but everyone
pretended to ignore it. The doctors came in to say nothing was abnormal in her blood work. She could go home.

Then the headaches started. Migraine-types ones that allowed Gram to do nothing more than sit in her chair and hold her head in her hands while the smoke from her cigarette swirled to the ceiling and the Old Mil got warm.

"Why don’t you go to the doctor, Mom?” asked Dad.

"I ain’t goin’ to some head shrinker for some trumped up Tylenol. It’s just a damn headache, boy. Somethin’s still shook up from my fall. Leave me the hell alone.”

Sera was worried when Gram tried to quit smoking. Something was wrong, and the headaches were getting worse. Gram couldn’t even play gin rummy with her anymore without grimacing to look at the cards. She was popping Tylenol and generic aspirin, and Grandpop just played his poker game. She fell again; this time the bruise colored her arm. Finally, she went to the doctor.

Cancer. That’s what Gram had. Her body was riddled with it, almost like she had stepped on a land mine and shrapnel had pummeled her body. The doctors found it in her lungs, lymph nodes, and two tumors in her brain. They found a third a week later. All of them were too networked to consider operation. They were giving her a year, tops, eight months if chemotherapy wasn’t a success.

Sera went to school and pretended nothing was wrong. No one guessed. When she finally told everyone Gram was dying, they were shocked. Questions like “How long have you known?” and “Why haven’t you said anything?” pricked her ears. She just shrugged her shoulders.

After each chemo session, Gram was weak and listless. When they went to visit, Sera washed her forehead with a damp cloth and told her about how school and her volunteer job were going, being careful not to smudge the grease lines drawn on her bald head for the radiation treatments. Everyone else mumbled and cooed like she was an overgrown baby. Sera figured Gram had lost enough dignity, and needed to keep whatever was left.

Her tantrums slid away; she hardly had the energy to ask for a glass of water. On the days between chemo treatments, she was a little better. She was able to walk with the shuffling gait of a zombie, her jaw slack and arms dangling at her sides. Her new hobby became sleepwalking, and she liked to fall down in the middle of the night and not remember it. These antics were marked by ugly purple bruises that swelled across her arms and head since the chemotherapy had thinned her blood. The Old Mil paunch dwindled, her eyes lost their fire, and she was no longer Sera’s
Standing in the hospital corridor, Sera saw Christy walk down the other wing. She hadn’t delivered flowers for two weeks. She couldn’t stand the smell anymore. It clawed at her brain and mocked the shell of diseased cells Sera’s Gram’s body had become. It was her turn to huddle in the hallways and corners of the room when the flowers were delivered or the nurses shoved pills down Gram’s throat. The smell of flowers was almost as bad as the fried-chicken-grease-mixed-with-roses smell of her aunt’s hand lotion.

The room was silent except for John; he was making fish noises with his mouth and pretending he didn’t care. He would snicker now and then, but no one knew why. Sera wanted to hug Gram, but the IV’s crossing her body made it impossible without dislodging something, causing the nurses to run at full speed with polyester swishes at the loss of a signal. She just sat and stared, waiting for Gram to jump out of the bed, laugh at them all and say how great a trick it was she pulled on them. Everyone else mumbled, waited and feared.

Sera, John and Dad left around midnight. John had soccer practice the next day, and Sera had promised the volunteer department she would deliver flowers. Sera longed to sleep and to forget. Her aunt had said she would call if anything happened; the doctors had it narrowed down to a day or two, maybe a week, until the cancer consumed her body. Sera wanted to rip the phone out of the wall. She didn’t know how long she could wait to say good-bye, if she could even do it at all.

“Dad, if she calls, can you wake me up too? I want to be there.”

“Are you sure, Sera? Watching someone die isn’t a pretty thing.”

“I’ve been watching her die for six months, Dad. I just want to hold her hand so she won’t be so afraid to go.”

Sera thought he was going to say no. He was biting the side of his cheek. “Okay, if it’s what you want. If I wake you up and you don’t want to go, I’ll understand. But you best get your clothes ready now. I know how long you take.”

Sera slid into her bed. The hum of the air conditioner was the best lullaby she could ask for. Sleep conquered her body, and she thanked it.

She woke with a start. The phone was by her head, silent. She stepped to her window; her dad’s car was gone. “Why didn’t he wake me up?” she thought. The phone ring pierced through the air conditioner’s humming haze. Sera grabbed it before it woke John.

“Dad?” she whispered.

“She’s gone, Sera. She went about five minutes ago. You
wouldn’t wake up when they called, so I thought it best to let you and John sleep. You needed it.” His voice started to crack, and they sat in silence for an eternity. “Better wake up your brother so you don’t have to be alone. I’ll be home in a while.”

“Dad, tell everyone I love them. I wanted to be there.”

“They know, Sera. John will take this hard, no matter how much he tried to pretend it didn’t bother him. Just be there for him ‘til I get home, okay?”

“Kay.” Sera hung up the phone and lost complete control. She shook John awake, and told him about Gram. Silent tears tracked down his face, and the sobs racked his body when Sera put her arms around him. She didn’t know what to do besides cry with him and smooth his hair. They both fell asleep.

Sera woke around noon. Her dad still wasn’t home, but it was getting late. She had to get back to the hospital to deliver flowers. She showered and hopped on the city bus. At the hospital, she slid the volunteer’s vest over her shirt, clipped on her name tag, and dug the smile out of her heart. Her turn to haunt the hallways and corners of the rooms was over, and she wondered if there would be any flowers forwarded to her Grandpop’s house. The smell of flowers in the cabinet crushed her senses. She was flying solo today, but there weren’t many to be delivered. “Might as well get done with this,” she thought. She walked up to the first room, peeked in the door, and plastered a smile across her face. “Mrs. Krupeman, I’ve got some flowers for you today. Would you like to read the card?”
“Hey can you hit track eleven,” I love this song....

well the satellite comes and goes we give each other all that we know

everything, gave everything...sometimes it isn’t enough, she never let me try and I never pushed hard enough....

In silence we still talk by the light of the stereo waltz

Her eyes, she looks at me, at me, in me, through me....I get lost there, she tells me everything, she tells me why. No more questions....

and will your rain down in your cinematic love truck

I drown in her, her rain. She encompasses me, I absorb her, I breathe her, every time I see her....I still hear her, I still taste her, god help me I still breathe her....

I want to hold you like nothing is gonna stop us

but I can’t, I can’t. You can’t hold onto the wind and she blows around me like nothing, like everything....

she comes to take me away

I touch her world, I see her world. It amazes me, she amazes me....

it’s all that I needed I don’t breathe another lover

It is enough, she is enough, I want to be enough...

“Dude, are you alive? The CD has been skipping for two minutes.”

“Oh, I guess I didn’t notice.”
I could tell you about currency and spirits, concoct anecdotes from the wine cellar, recount stories and weave them into something like truth. If you believe me, I still would have lied, for a lifetime cannot be contained in three sentences or three thousand, even if it were for sale. Probably you will not believe, the artifice will seem obvious to you, in which case the only spirits to find in these pages are those which intoxicate.

Like one of Poe’s more perverse protagonists, “I neither expect nor solicit belief,” but I too must unburden myself of this true account and confront my ghosts. And if you accept (as I do) the possibility that the course of human events is structured from the start, then perhaps the artifice existed in these episodes long before they were recorded, merely waiting to be excavated. And if you cannot, and see the artifice as mere invention, so much the better for the story I would tell.

In the domain where stories lie, some would walk at your side and speak in your own voice; others would stage an ambush to drag you to the one place you do not wish to see again. Some would meet you more than halfway to celebrate your greatest moments, and others you will never know, for stories can be elusive, arrogant creatures. My story can be described as a series of verbal photographs in which you, as viewer, are encouraged to alter the object of your gaze.

Clutter.

There is a piece of suburban property called 1308 Wilson Avenue, and beneath the century-old house standing on this plot is a gaping hole in the ground, which the occupants newly wed to it have renovated to the point of clutter. Sectional couches line the wood-paneled walls of the recreation room, above which hang framed Irish slogans and Budweiser mirrors, shelves of birthday cards and best daddy mugs, display cases stocked with a partial set of collector Jim Beam train cars. Used glass and wooden ashtrays have been left on the rectangular coffee table, square card table and four TV tables which further crowd the available space.

I cross the room, the plush orange carpeting tickling my bare feet, and climb the bar stool closest to the antique cash register my father loves, to leave a letter written on a piece of notebook paper with dotted lines for practicing penmanship.

DADDY (AND MOMMY)
YOU OWE ME $1.27 DOLLARS FROM WHEN I PUT MY MONEY
ON THE TABLE GIVE ME MY MONEY BY NOON O'CLOCK TOMORROW OR I WILL DISOWN YOU AND FIND NEW PARENTS DENNY

From the Top of the Staircase.
The world is gray. The cement box in the ground waits for someone to stumble on steps too steep for a boy's feet in the dark. Something is silhouetted at the base of the stairs, and a body waits to be pulled forward, to tumble down in a tangle of limbs and crack his head open before something gobbles him up. The dream is a moment suspended, toes reaching for the next step and touching nothing. The dream recurs years after first descending into the basement as it looked before renovations.

I wake to a bang two stories down and remember how Mommy and Daddy yelled when I showed them the toy gun I found under their bed.

Roses.
Two dozen long-stemmed red roses wrapped in pink cellophane, held in a gigantic hand at arm's length like a get-out-of-jail-free card, stand between my parents, whose eyes are swollen and glistening. Mommy's manicured hands cup the blossoms, which match the color of her nails.

Daddy turns on the jukebox which sits in the hallway between the recreation room and the bottom of the stairs, and they dance. They move slowly and out of rhythm at first, Mommy in her bathrobe, Daddy in a button-down shirt and her favorite tie. Soon they move faster, Daddy shouts the lyrics more than he sings them, Mommy wipes her cheeks, and I dance alone compulsively in my best impersonation of tap, hugging the bouquet of roses in my arms.

Against the Side of the Staircase.
A dusty wooden bookcase with five shelves stands opposite the jukebox. Song books and issues of magazines, some with names like Alfred Hitchcock and Reader's Digest, others without covers, are stacked on the two lowest shelves. The middle shelf holds intelligent novels in perfect condition, and above that are a collection of books with names like "How to Save Your Marriage" and "Making Love." Various medical journals and encyclopedias, volumes two through twenty, are lined up on the top shelf.

Behind the bookcase and to the right is a four-foot high door which opens to a cubbyhole under the stairs. Inside, a flashlight hangs
by a string to reveal a hoard of metal, plastic and paper: a gigantic Bell of
Pennsylvania toy truck and Matchbox cars complete with car wash; legos
of every size, shape and color and puzzle pieces which have escaped their
boxes; He-Man action figures and dozens of Transformers, including the
entire set of Constructicons; several issues of Penthouse that would
never be missed, and countless other dusted over objects with half-lives
too short to be clocked. I sit Indian-style in the middle of all the clutter with
Play-Doh stuck to the seat of my dungaree overalls and stare at the word
aardvark through black-framed spectacles.

Today I the day I refine into a bookworm.

My puppy, a Labrador retriever named Molly McGuire, scratches
at the door to be let in. Her tongue is rough against my face when I pick
her up. Outside, Mommy and Daddy are arguing about money again.

I put Mollie down, but she follows me past the recreation room
until I reach the door by the jukebox, when she runs away. She always
avoids remaining in the hallway. Usually, I only go into the heater room
when Mommy needs something we have run out of, but I can look through
the hole in the wall and see her move her hands through her hair. She is
angry because Daddy buys me too many things. He sits on the stool
behind the bar and pours himself a glass of beer, the kind that only grown­
ups can drink. When I am bored, I return to my cubbyhole, close the door
and read about Aaron, first high priest of the Hebrews,

It’s only a matter of time before I reach alcoholism.

Forever More.

New furniture from the last time Dad moved out fills what was
the recreation room. Dad lies under a rainbow afghan in the hospital bed
he bought after his fourth time in the intensive care unit, squinting at the
screen of the television lodged in the wall above the hole. Mom sits in the
L-Z-Boy with her arms at her sides, watching Dad watch television. I sit
on the couch with my hand on Mollie’s head. Mollie stares at a particular
spot in the hallway and growls.

Archie Bunker waves his hand in the air, slurring Edith back into
the kitchen, and Mom looks at Dad and asks, “Isn’t there anything in the
world that you want, Den?”

Dad has selective hearing that can erase you from his life on a
whim, and he knows how to use it. From his perspective, Mom hadn’t been
in the room for about ten minutes. He calls out, “Oh, Mollie, they’re all
crazy, Mollie, crazy.” The dog is preoccupied with her growling, but this
does not matter. Dad speaks to Mollie even when he is alone in the room.

“God, isn’t there anything that would make you happy?” No
response from Dad. “What do you want, Den?”
“Money!” Dad yells at the ceiling.
Mom’s lips blow up with exhaled air. “What else?”
“More money!”
“Besides that, Den.”
“More more money!”
I continue where Mom left off. “What besides more more money, Dad?”

Three mores are too much for Mom. She stands to scowl at him while I beg for more. At four mores I am standing beside the bed, looking down at his bloated face sideways and yelling over the dog’s barks. At five mores Mom yells, “How much more do I have to take, huh?” At six mores I almost smile with him before asking again, and at seven she is already halfway to the stairs.

“Besides more more more more more more more money?”
“Change!”
The house seems to settle then. Mom says to herself, “You said it,” as she marches up the stairs. Mollie crawls through the hallway to follow her. I shake my head like a pendulum and watch Dad’s face swell with laughter and tears in his eyes.
Several years pass before he gets his wish.

Change of Address.
The refrigerator door is ajar but the light is out. Inside I find one empty bottle of ketchup, one gallon of milk six months past expiration, one half of an unwrapped Italian hoagie that has seen better days and four six-packs of Budweiser.

It has been almost a year since Mom chose to lease an apartment on the other side of town, since my father threatened to kill her. I had to leave behind Mollie, who had grown into his cantankerous love, and Bailey, a Dalmatian pup with one brown eye and one blue. A couple of months later, my father had the dogs put to sleep. This is the first time in eight months I have visited 1308 Wilson Avenue or him.

I close the refrigerator door and survey the rest of the ground floor. A mound of unopened mail sits in the middle of the kitchen table. Ants crawl through the silverware drawer and across sticky counter tops marred with scorches. Several pieces of furniture are missing from the living room and dining room, which are otherwise undisturbed.

I move everything of personal value from my bedroom to the front door.
Downstairs, my father watches the Bundy’s on television in urine-stained pajamas. He doesn’t notice me until I am standing six feet away from him.
"Hey, what’s up, pal?"
He stands and holds out his hand to shake. His graying hair is disheveled and blotches cover most of his face. A few open cans of beer sit on the TV table by his bed, along with an ashtray and lighter, and two packs of Benson & Hedges 100s.
"Not much." I move away to sit on the couch. It’s covered in dog hair.
"Why’d you drop by."
"You can probably guess."
He sits on the bed again with hands supporting his lower back.
"Need money?"
"Nope."
He has no immediate response for that, so we sit like mute idiots on opposite sides of the room until he asks, "Why’d you drop by then, pal?"
"I just wanted to—"
"You sure you don’t need any money? I mean, you can’t be working up at school."
"I’m not going to college anymore. I dropped out last semester."
Actually, I am enrolled to take summer courses nearby before moving back to college in the fall. "And I have a job." He lies back and gets under the covers. "You would know that, Dad, if you had bothered—"
"Oh, Mollie—"
I am standing before the words are out of my mouth.
"Don’t do that, don’t ever do that!"
His eyes hang between his ceiling and his son. "What do you want." It is not a question.
"Fine. I didn’t bring a gift because you’ve already bought whatever you wanted. I didn’t get a card because you’d just complain there was no money in it, and I’m not giving money because I won’t add to your beer money, so I decided to show up. Happy Birthday."
He isn’t upset when he cries, he’s touched.
Three weeks later we take him to another plot of land, to leave him in another hole in the ground.

Three.
I count three people in the ninth cubicle of the intensive care unit of Delaware Valley Hospital before the morphine wears off, and three people after. I count three people in the corridor, and three people wait for the elevator. Three people walk out of the front lobby and through the parking lot. I climb into the back seat and Mom cannot drive, but I count three people.
I lose him tonight between the car and the apartment but find him in a vivid dream. A two-dimensional gray figure stands in the center of a black and white screen and stares at me. I cannot make out the details of his face, but I know that if I look away for an instant he will kill me. Ten minutes pass without a flicker of movement, then twenty. Red and blue lights flash in the distance. The gray figure has no expression to change. Police cars with tinted windows drive into the foreground and stop one by one until red and blue occupy the entire screen but do not obscure the gray figure. I want to turn away, but I also exist in two dimensions. Between flashes I discern movement before I see my father walk past the gray figure and off of the screen to stand at my side.

For the rest of the week, I fall asleep for about an hour at a time, slouching in the rocking chair or at the dining room table with an open book for a pillow, and only in daylight. When Mom sleeps at night, I unlock the front door and open all of the windows. I sit in the dining room with a carton of Camel Wides and the assigned reading for my classes, and I wait.

Excavating the Grave.

A month later, the day before Mom and I move back into the house on Wilson Avenue, we gut the basement. Mom says I should take anything I want before it is taken out with the rest of the garbage. I can’t look at the best daddy mugs, but I find the note I wrote to him and Mom in a box of papers by the cash register. We throw out the bottles of hard liquor and the wall hangings. Behind one of the beer mirrors is a little door in the wall.

“What’s this, Mom?”

She comes behind the bar and pulls on the latch. Old wine bottles are lined up in rows. She says, “I’d forgotten all about this, Den.”

“These were Dad’s?”

Mom picks up one of the bottles, wipes off the cobwebs with her free hand and says, “No. These belonged to the couple who lived here before us. This used to be a wine cellar.”

“They stored wine down here.”

“There were rotted wood racks all over the place and recesses in the walls when we first bought the house. I can’t be sure, but I think they made the stuff here.”

I look back at the hallway.

“I think they did. Not just wine either.” She points at the hole in the wall. “Right where that wall is, there used to be a sunken area in the floor, kind of like a basin. There was running water too, but the whole place smelled like stale beer.”
"What happened to the couple, Mom?"

She turns to look at me, trying to figure out why I’m asking. "Well, I don’t know, really. I guess it was just too much space for her to live here by herself after he died. We were just glad to find this house when we did. It was worth a lot more than we paid for it, really. A good buy. You all right, Den?"

I could tell you about currency and spirits, that money failed us or that alcohol killed my father. If you believe me, I still would have lied. A ghost lives on in the wine cellar, that much I do know, but how the ghost relates to my father’s death or to the wine maker who once labored where I now conclude this account, I cannot say. The ghost can be many things. He inhabits my dreams and occupies my work. Perhaps my father is the ghost, dead long before he died, wandering unthinking through the basement, his rational mind lost. Sometimes, it scared me to look him in the eyes, because part of him just could not look back anymore, and the part that could, I would have given just about anything not to see.
Ho’kah ti ahauel on serpent wings
By the river Xocol Ha
A blazing fire in a forest of kings.

In Menche Tinamit where the morning bird sings
U cab chan kina
Ho’kah ti ahauel on serpent wings.

With jaguar cloak and brilliant jade rings
Wrenched from the Maw of Xibalba
A blazing fire in a forest of kings.

Battle victories were his with glorious trappings
The star-dates carved in stella
Ho’kah ti ahauel on serpent wings.

And as the evening star faded into the darkness the jungle brings
Ghosts whispered his name, Xtzunum Balamna
A blazing fire in a forest of kings.

But now Yaxchilan is filled with forgotten things
By the river Usumacinta
Chum wan ti ahauel on serpent wings
A dying fire in a forest of kings.
Matt Klinger
Confined

7:59 my alarm clock screams as I put on track 19
only to hear the Ramones bark 1-2-3
December 7th says the Far Side
as I light one of my 20 class A cigarettes
pages 43-78 should have some meaning
of this I’m sure
and the dominant discourse isn’t controlling me
it’s these 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 digits that rule over one and all
and after all, Foucault was a bit insane himself, wasn’t he?
only 320 calories in my Kit-Kat breakfast
the professor drones on from 10:00-11:40
and I count the number of people wearing pants, not skirts
down 3 flights of 12 stairs in 27 seconds and a bit of sweat
off to Wawa where Marlboro Mediums are only $1.59+tx
yet they are unobtainable because apparently my 4-digit
pin number must be wrong since the screen asks
if I would like to select a lower amount?
I don’t think so...
back to 105 where I smash my calculator, dissect my phone
and unbalance my checkbook
I open up my mouth to scream but no one hears a sound
I yearn to rip the hair from my scalp
instead I shave it with the #1 attachment on the clippers
as the 8 or 9 pints of blood are all I have
even when sitting on the couch
while seeing that I can get aural sex from 18 year olds
for $1.95 a minute if I have a touch tone phone and a Visa
fool’s Gold card where the minimum payments far outweigh
my yearly $6 an hour earnings
a roll of the eyes and a shrug of the shoulders
and then to bed
only to do it all again tomorrow and the day after that and the day
after that....
Andrew Gerchak
Last Rites

My Valentine has hollow eyes.
The Crow, Book 4: Death

For the third night in a row, Jacob woke up screaming. He sat up quickly, head spinning. He pressed his palms against his temples and snaked his fingers up into his hair. He let his hands fall and felt the sweat-soaked sheets.

The red glowing numbers showed 3:06. He slid his legs out and explored the floor. He arched his back, feeling vertebrae crack. At the window, he pulled the blind.

The light of the moon illuminated the room. Jacob shivered, dropped to his knees, turned and faced three small wooden doors along the side of his bed. Over the years, Jacob had stuffed them with piles of old school books, clothing, games, newspapers, notebooks—except the door on the left. He opened it: two shoe boxes. He slid one out and removed the lid. He screamed, threw the box, and reached for the other. Inside was a pack of Marlboro lights, a black lighter, a shot glass, and a bottle of whiskey. He took the shot glass and stared at the picture of a horse that decorated its side for a moment, then discarded it. He clutched the half-empty bottle, twisted off the cap, and closed his eyes. It burned each time he swallowed, but he continued until he needed to stop for air. Now Jacob was what he needed to be. Jacob was calm.

Then he saw the first shoe box, turned on its side with papers bleeding out of it. Being calm was no longer good enough. Eventually Jacob was what he needed to be. Jacob was drunk.

Light pierced through Jacob’s sleep and stabbed his eyes. Squinting from the white shine and still cradling the bottle, he stumbled out of bed to pull down the blind. The beauty of the morning held him captive, and he flipped the metal latch and opened the window. He sat the whiskey down, rested his palms on the window sill, and stared at the neighbor’s hedges.

Jacob was smiling at the beauty of the outdoors when he turned his head, and felt nauseated: the first shoe box. He choked down the fluids that crept up his throat and took slow steps toward the box, avoiding direct eye contact with the spilled papers. The various papers were clustered close enough that Jacob could sweep them all back into the box. He held the lid tight as he returned the box to its place under the bed.
The ring of the phone sliced through the steamy bathroom air and jerked Jacob out of his midshower trance. He stepped out of the shower, dripping water all over the floor, and reached for the cordless phone that was resting on the laundry hamper.

"Hello?"

"Yes, is Jacob in the household?"

"You're talking to him."

"What, no witty response? I'm disappointed."

"Just not doing real well right now, Mike."

Michael laughed. "Why? What else did you do today other than sit around and wait for me to call?"

"Couldn't rest last night. I ended up sleeping all day. Just woke up and got in the shower so I could get the hell out of here tonight."

"You're sounding weird, even for you. What's up?"

"Do you know what today is?"

"Um, last time I checked it was Tuesday. But you know, I read somewhere once that drugs can make you forget stuff like that. Can you imagine? And I always thought they were good for me."

Michael laughed extensively. Silence responded. "Jake, you OK?"

"It's the 17th, Michael. The fucking 17th."

"Yeah, college boy, calendars are funny that way. Yesterday was the 16th, tomorrow is the 18th, so it kind of makes sense that today is...fuck. I'm sorry, man, I didn't realize."

"I did."

After a long silence Michael said, "Listen, Jake, I'm your fairy godfather, and it's my duty to take you away from this kind of shit. Can you meet me at quarter to eight?"

"What time is it now?"

"Just about seven, does that give you enough time?"

"Same place?"

"Of course, Jacob. No sense messing with tradition."

"I'll be there, and don't be late."

"Damn it! I always hit the curb!" Jacob cursed under his breath as he exited his '85 Celebrity. He took several steps on the Main Street sidewalk, ceased his profanities, then smiled. There was Michael, standing in front of the white brick bank, with a lit cigarette in his right hand, that silly white golf cap upon his head, and those inquisitive eyes staring out from behind his thick glasses.

When Jacob described Michael to others that had never met him,
he often recounted the days in high school where he played Santa Claus for the visiting nursery school children. His rounded jolly face, large build, charming smile, and lung bursting sense of humor all intertwined perfectly to fit into the character in the red suit. It often seemed that he was playing the role of Santa Claus with a sarcastic twist.

“Little trouble driving there, Jacob?” Michael said. Jacob’s only response was a one-sided smile and the extension of his middle finger. “That’s original,” Michael said. “It absolutely amazes me that you can be so clever and flip me off, but you still haven’t figured out the concept of time.”

Jacob took a step back and looked toward the sky at the time and temperature digital display atop the metal pole. The little orange-yellow dots showed 8:06 p.m. “So I’m a little late, you’ll live.”

“I don’t know, man. When you do shit like that...you hurt my feelings.” Michael rubbed his eyes repeatedly, feigning tears. “And when you hurt my feelings...I don’t share my goodies.”

“What’re we talking about here, boss?”

“Why don’t you just shut up and get in my car?”

“Boonie Cruise?” Jacob asked as they entered the vehicle.

“No,” Michael said, “I figured we’d just drive up to my house and chill out with my mom. I’m sure she won’t mind.”

“OK, stupid question.”

“Why don’t you just shut up...and smoke this?” Michael produced a fat, tightly rolled joint. As he handed it to Jacob, he warned, “But don’t spark it ‘til we get to the Boonie.”

The Boonie cruise was a sacred event in Kingsville. Participants, who usually ranged from fifteen to 21 years old, would pile into cars with all the assorted alcohol, drugs, and paraphernalia they could find and drive around the middle of nowhere back roads just outside of town, passing the cornfields, barns, and isolated houses with the immense grassy lawns, while enjoying their favorite mind-altering substances.

Once the houses became scattered, and more and more scarce, Jacob lit and took the first sweet hit from the joint, then passed it over to Michael. This ritual continued until the joint had nearly disappeared and Michael burned his fingers.

“Good to the last drop. Hey, Jake, why not roach that and pack a bowl? Chills is under your seat.”

“Man, you know I’m not a marijuana maintenance guy. I tell you every time we go out. I can’t pack it, I can’t roll it, I can’t even fix a joint if the cherry starts burning too far up one side. All I can do is smoke it.”

Michael smiled and said, “Don’t they teach you anything at that fancy college of yours? But don’t worry about it. Just roach that little guy
and we’ll head back to town.”

“What’s in town?”

“You’ll find out soon enough. Just kick back and enjoy yourself.”

“That,” Jacob said, “sounds like a plan. How are you feeling, big guy?”

“I’m pretty baked.”

“You’ve got to clarify your answer there, Mike.”

“Huh?”

“Is baked classified under stoned or high?”

“What’s the difference?”

“See, right now, I’m high. High is much better than stoned, in my opinion. High’s when you’re still coming up, everything’s beautiful, and anything even remotely funny makes you giggle like a little girl.”

“I don’t think I could ever do anything like a little girl,” Michael said.

“Stoned is the point when you cease to be a functioning member of the human race. Everything that you do, movements, speech, happens in slow motion, and even the most simple tasks become utterly impossible.”

“Like driving?” Michael said.

“When I’m high, only happy thoughts visit me, but when I’m stoned it’s so easy to slip into a black phase. You know, everything’s dark. Deep depression, morbid thoughts. Start thinking about shit that’s not healthy to think about.”

“Where’d you get this shit from?” Michael said as he squinted out the windshield.

Jacob smiled. “See, my fancy college taught me some stuff. So, how are you doing?”

“High, most certainly high. And you?”

“High, thank God.”

“Why? You don’t have to function or anything. Say, drive.”

“Just don’t feel like seeing or hearing any shit tonight,” Jacob mumbled.

“What’re you talking about? You shrooming?”

“I wish. Don’t want to talk about it now.”

“Oh,” was Michael’s only response, and he directed all of his attention on the road.

“You just going to sit there and stare at the sky, or are you going to get out and attempt to socialize?”

“Why are we here?” Jacob asked. The car was now resting in its
original parking space on Main Street. In front of the bank, a small crowd of teenagers had gathered.

"Now, my good friend, philosophers have debated that question for thousands of years, and no true answer has been found yet, but if you’re asking my opinion—to intoxicate our bloodstream and kill brain cells."

Jacob couldn’t help but smile. "You’re a bastard."

"I try." Michael exited the car and disappeared into the crowd. He returned several minutes later with two companions. Even through his fogged vision, Jacob could decipher the forms of Iris and October.

“What’s up, guys?” Jacob said.

“Jake, would you mind sliding into the back seat?” Michael asked. Jacob silently agreed to make the move.

Iris crawled into the back seat next to Jacob and greeted him with a forced smile and a look of concern in her eyes. Her dyed blond hair was pulled back and held in place with a white scrunchy. She clutched a tan backpack in front of her. He was the youngest in the car at 16, and most certainly the shortest and smallest. Iris had met Michael, Jacob, and October through her older brother who graduated with them just over a year ago. The guys all took a big brother attitude towards her and did their best to protect her from the usual scum, but Iris often reversed the roles and offered her talk-show-host-influenced psychology to all those around her. Iris’s eyes told Jacob that he was the newest victim of her psychoanalysis.

“What’s up, kiddo?” Jacob asked.

“Nothing,” she said, brushing off his question. “How are you doing?”

“Fine,” he responded.

“You sure? If you need to talk about...”

“I’m fine, “ Jacob snapped.

October thanked Jacob for surrendering shotgun. “Not a problem,” Jacob said. “I can fit my little self back here a hell of a lot easier than you can.”

Most people that knew October believed that his parents had chosen the perfect name for their son. Everything about the young man screamed Halloween. Constantly dressed in black, with a thick black goatee, and a beaten black cap pulled down over his haunting eyes, he appeared as if he just stepped out of a horror movie. His thoughts always scraped into the realm of the morbid, obsessing over death and demons and other dark thoughts. But contrary to popular opinion, October, as dark as his personality and his appearance seemed, was not an evil person.
In fact, to his friends, he was one of the most loyal and generous persons on the planet.

October said, “Why don’t we head out to Lonesome instead of a Boonie?”

“I thought we’d just smoke ‘til our eyes bled,” Michael said. “We can still do that,” October said as he reached into the back and took Iris’s bag. “But I figured we could take care of the inevitable cottonmouth at the same time.” He reached into the bag and removed a full bottle of peach schnapps, followed by a full bottle of vodka. “Compliments of yours truly. A bottle for the lady, and some vodka for my pal, Jake. I hope that can hold you over ‘til I get Chills packed.” The residents of the car thanked October, and he responded with, “That’s what friends are for. Now shut your mouths so I can take care of business.” October reached under the passenger seat and removed a translucent red bong, with a sticker on its neck of the face of a large-eyed alien below the word “Chills.”

Lonesome Road, commonly shortened to Lonesome, was a dirt road behind a farmhouse that the youth of Kingsville often visited when they became tired of driving circles on Boonie Cruises. The advantages of Lonesome included an end to gas-draining rides, plus an opportunity to get out of the car and enjoy the evening air. The stop also gave the driver some time to deal with his intoxication before stepping behind the wheel again.

“Oh shit,” Mike whispered. October looked up from his current task. “What’s up?” October looked around the car, then out the windshield. “Mike, what the fuck are you doing?” he said in a harsh whisper. “Why the hell didn’t you go the back way?”

“Maybe he won’t notice,” Mike said.

Michael and October’s voices carried into the back seat and Jacob looked up from his bottle of vodka. Iris quickly turned her attention to Jacob and observed his reaction to the scene that haunted his nights. The black tire marks had faded slightly since Jacob had been out this way the last time, but even the light of the headlights was enough to illuminate their path from the road, through a front yard, and to their destination point, a large tree about fifteen feet off the side of the road. Flowers, pictures, and various pieces of paper were clustered at the base of the tree.

Michael spoke. “Hey Jake, did you see The Simpsons yesterday?” Silence. “It was the one where Ralph gets a crush on Lisa.” More silence. “Any episode where Ralph talks rules.”

Jacob closed his eyes as Michael’s car drove past the tree. As
Jacob tightened his grip on the bottle he could have sworn he heard the scream of rubber on asphalt, followed by the sickening cry of twisting metal. He opened his eyes when he felt Iris’s hand gently touch his. Jacob pulled free of her touch and threw down several swallows of the harsh vodka.

“Easy there, boy,” October said as he handed Chills into the back seat. “You don’t want to spoil your dinner.” Jacob slowly reached out and took the plastic device. “Careful,” October warned as he grinned wickedly, “it’s loaded.”

By the time Michael pulled off the road on Lonesome all occupants were stoned and visibility inside the car was severely impaired by a thick fog. “Everybody out,” Michael said. On cue, the doors opened, releasing the scented cloud into the atmosphere.

A rotation of mythic proportions was established several minutes later. A newly packed Chills was passed around the circle, followed by the bottle of schnapps, and then the bottle of vodka. At any time, two people were drinking, one was smoking, and the other was attempting to grasp reality and waiting for the upcoming substance switch.

“Hey Jake,” October said, “I was out here with Kenny the other night, and he wanted to know when you want to get Falling Down Fast together again.”

Jacob shrugged his shoulders.

“I heard he got even better while he was at school,” Michael said. “You should hear the new solo he wrote for ‘Separate But Not Alone.’ It’s amazing,” October said. “Jake, he’s so pumped to play this summer. He’s probably going to give you a call this week.”

“I don’t know, maybe they should just find somebody else,” Jacob said.

“Shut up, man. They won’t exist without you,” October said. “Bullshit. They could find a million other vocalists better than me.”

“But not one that could write your lyrics,” October said. “I’ve got nothing left to write about.”

“Bullshit,” said October. “And anyway, Kenny already said he won’t play unless you have the mike.”

“Then he’s going to be waiting a long time,” Jacob said as he turned away and sucked out the insides of the bottle.

“Jacob, let’s be honest,” Michael said, “it would help you through this shit right now. You need the band.”

“I don’t need anything.”

“Now you’re lying. You told me last summer that you’ve never
felt as alive as when you guys jam,” Michael said.

Jacob looked up at the sky, then said, “Maybe I don’t want to feel alive.”

The bong was packed, smoked, then packed again as the contents of the bottles were rapidly consumed, until Michael said, “I’m done. I’m absolutely retarded.” The cycle quickly died.

October reached into his front pocket, removed and distributed cigarettes for all. As he lit his cigarette, then passed the lighter to Jacob, he asked, “Hey Jake, not to be a prick or anything, but are you all right?”

Jacob responded with a nod that convinced no one. “What’s wrong?” Michael asked.

“Nothing,” Jacob slurred. “I’m just fucking great.” With that, Jacob returned to the car and smoked his cigarette while staring at the car’s ceiling. Even sitting in the back seat of the car, Jacob could still hear Michael, October and Iris.

“What the fuck are we going to do with him?” Michael said.

“He’s a wreck right now. I figured getting him wasted would help out, but I think that’s just made everything worse.”

“I think that’s the problem,” October said. “I don’t think he was wasted more than six times all last summer without her being around.”

“OK, so I fucked up, but what do we do now?” Michael said.

“We’ve got to talk to him, make him get this out,” Iris chimed in, just before she turned away and unswallowed the contents of her stomach.

“No,” October responded, as he handed her a piece of gum.

“Well then what the hell are we going to do?” said Michael.

“Absolutely nothing more than be there for him when he needs us,” October said.

“He needs us now!” Iris said as she wiped the acidic remains from the corner of her mouth.

Michael whispered, “Guys, we’ve got to keep our voice down. He can probably hear us.”

October’s voice: “C’mon, guys, if he can’t hear us now, he’s at least figured out that we’re talking about him.”

Jacob refocused his attention from the ceiling to October.

“Let’s just get out of here and go back to town,” Michael said, then crawled into his car.

“October, we can’t just let this go,” Iris said.

“What else are we going to do? Think about it, do you have any idea what’s going on inside that kid’s head right now?”

“Yes! What kind of question is that?”

“No, you don’t. You don’t have a fucking clue! Michael and I
lost somebody that we partied with a lot, you lost a good friend that you had for a long time, but he’s in another realm altogether.”

Iris said, “You’re wrong, October.”

“Listen to me. At least she knew that you two were best friends. She knew that Michael and I liked to party with her. What did she know about Jacob? He didn’t drop that fucking wall long enough to let her know how he felt. That’s why he’s so messed up right now. He did so many shitty things to that girl last year, and now he feels like he’s the lowest form of life on the planet.”

“But they wrote to each other all the time he was at college.”

“How much of a real person went into those letters? Neither one of them were the kind of person that would put feelings down on paper. Probably just full of all these morbid quotes from NIN, Type O, drugs, sex, and stuff like that.”

“Well then, we’ve got to tell him that she cared about him and knew he cared too.”

“You can’t tell him that,” October said as he shook his head.

“Why not? She told me how much she missed him and couldn’t wait for him to get back from college.”

“Times like these, people just say shit to make him feel better. It can’t be like that. This is much deeper than that. You can’t tell him.”

“If I can’t, and I was close to her, then who can?”

October smiled, turned and walked back to the car and said, “She’s the only one.”

Jacob stared out the back window at the nothingness as Iris attempted to speak with him for the duration of the ride. “Jake, you really should talk about this. You can’t keep it all inside.”

“Watch me.”

“I know it’s not easy, but you’ve got to live your life again. She wouldn’t want you to be like this.”

“She’d love to watch me suffer. It would mean she won that little game.”

“Jake, you’ve got to talk about this. You’re still alive.”

“And that’s supposed to comfort me?”

“I just meant that you’re dealing much better than everyone thought you would.”

“What?”

“You know.” She hesitated, then continued. “Everyone kind of thought you’d be institutionalized... or dead by now.”

“What?”

“Even I thought you would have killed yourself.”
Jacob spun around to face Iris. “Would that make it all better? If I just fucking shot myself would it all go away? ‘Cause if that’s the case, then I’m fucking out of here!”

Iris’s lips began to tremble, and she turned away. “That’s not what I mean. I miss her too, you know.” The two sat in silence for the rest of the ride, with the exception of when Jacob spoke up several minutes later and asked Michael to take him back to his car.

“Are you sure that’s a good idea? You’re pretty wasted,” Michael said.

“I’m sure. There’s something I’ve got to take care of.”

“Oh my God, Jake! Don’t do it!” Iris squealed.

“Will you shut up? I’m not going to kill myself, I said I just have to take care of something.”

“Michael,” she said, “don’t take him back. He’s going to do something stupid.”

“Let’s be realistic,” October said in a clear deep voice. “We can’t always be watching the guy, so if he really wants to slit his wrists, he’s going to do it sooner or later, no matter if we take him back or not.” Iris began to cry, while Jacob stared at October, who then continued. “Besides, if he really wanted to kill himself, he would be dead by now.” He turned back and grinned at Jacob. “Take the man back, Michael.”

“I don’t know,” Michael stammered.

Before Jacob could respond, October said, “The guy said he needed to take care of something. Take him back to his car, now.”

Michael reluctantly agreed, even with Iris’s sobbing protests. The car pulled in the parking space next to Jacob’s, and October stepped out and moved the seat forward so that Jacob could get out of the back.

After stepping over a distraught Iris, who was mumbling something beyond comprehension, he exited the car and was face to face with October. October looked into his eyes, almost past his eyes, and then smiled and shook his hand. “You heard our entire conversation out on Lonesome, didn’t you?”

“Maybe,” Jacob replied.

“I thought so. Good luck, Jake.”

As the car pulled away, Jacob heard October say, “He’ll be fine, trust me.”

“I sure hope so,” Jacob said to himself as the car rolled away down the road and disappeared down Main Street. The drive home was going to be tough.

“One fucking month. One fucking month in Hell.” Jacob’s tumultuous evening had exhausted him, but he couldn’t stop now. He
needed to end this. Jacob slowly walked over to the far side of his bed and dropped to his knees. He placed his hand up against the wooden door on the far left. “C’mon Jake. You can do this. Face the fucking demon.” Jacob opened the door and stared at the two shoe boxes. He closed his eyes and felt out for the lighter box, and removed it.

The ’85 Celebrity pulled over along the side of the road, and Jacob stepped out, cradling the shoe box and a white candle. He walked over and dropped to his knees at the base of the tree. He set the candle in the rip in the grass left from the tire and lit the wick.

Jacob gently lifted the cardboard lid, exposing a pile of papers topped off with a small photograph. He lifted the picture to his eyes. Tears began to form at the corners of his eyes as he stared at the blond-haired angel with the devil in her eyes. He sat the picture down at his side and removed a newspaper clipping.

Claudia Rice, 16, Accident Victim

The tears began to flow steadily as Jacob stared at the flat statement. He swallowed hard, and then continued to the stack of letters at the bottom of the box. Half the letters were addressed from Jacob to Claudia, and the other half from Claudia to Jacob. The latter half was presented to him by Claudia’s mother several days after the accident. Jacob went through the letters in their original order, crying more and more with each page he turned.

With tears dancing in his eyes, Jacob reached into the very bottom of the shoe box and removed a single piece of freshly folded notebook paper. “This is it,” he said aloud. “Claudia,” Jacob said as he stared into the flickering flame of the candle, “I know you can hear me. I just wanted to read this letter to you...something I should have written a long time ago.” He swallowed hard, unfolded, and began to read the note out loud:

Claudia,

It has taken a great deal of time for me to sit down and write this letter, but I always did have trouble taking care of the important stuff. I don’t really have a clue as to how I should write this letter, because I’ve got so many things to pen down, so I’m just going to write as my mind goes.

I never got a chance to say goodbye. But, when I think about it, no one ever really gets a chance to say goodbye, so I guess I can deal with that. What’s really devouring me is that I didn’t get the chance to blow off all the facades and tell you how I really feel.
I never got the chance to tell you that you were more to me than just a toy. I never got the chance to tell you how much I thought about you while I was at college. I know how un-me this is going to sound, but I even thought about doing things right. I mean, just for one night, take you out, dinner and a movie, and then spend the night together without intoxication or arguments or games. Just once, and after we both vomited, we could go back to the way things were.

Not a day goes by that I don’t think about you. I miss you like hell. It is slowly consuming my every thought, which was why I had to write this letter to you. I need to finish the story the letters told.

Claudia, there are so many things that I want to put down on this paper, but I could write this letter until I died, so I’m going to do my best to end our written correspondence. Considering so much of our letters were made up of quotes, I guess it would be fitting to throw some in here. I know I’m cheating by recycling ones we’ve already used, but I’m almost out of ammo.

“without you, without you everything falls apart without you, it’s not as much fun to pick up the pieces”

—NIN “The Perfect Drug”

One day, my visit here will be over, and then... I’m not sure what else I can say without babbling, so I’ll end this. I miss you so fucking bad. But one day, I will see you again, and that thought lets me sleep at night. So I guess this is it. Farewell my angel, my demon goddess, my vampire, my Claudia.

Sleep with angels.

Love,
Your Desolate Angel

Jacob coughed, releasing all the pressure that had built up in his chest. Jacob held the note above the candle, letting it catch ablaze, holding the flaming paper until all was consumed and his fingers were burned. As the final puffs of smoke were swallowed up by the branches of the tree, he whispered the word “Goodbye.”

“This a private party?”

Jacob jumped to his feet, wiping his eyes. “October, how the fuck
"did you get here?"

"I had Michael drop me off after we took you to your car. I knew you’d be coming out here some time tonight." October walked closer to him.

"What if I didn’t show?"

"Jake, it’s the 17th, I knew you were going to be here." Jacob turned his back to October. "Don’t get so surprised, man. This is a big step for you, especially if that’s what I think it is," he said pointing to the shoe box. "Those the letters?" Jacob nodded. "You finish them yet?" Jacob made no response, so October walked around to the front of him.

"I remember when Mom found those letters," Jacob said. "She freaked. I almost got kicked out of the house."

October put his arm around his friend. "Jake, nobody really understood exactly what was going on between you two, except you and Claudia. I mean, we knew you guys were partying together a lot, but I don’t think your true feelings were exposed until after the accident."

"We didn’t even know what was going on last summer. It was like free fall. We knew we were going to hit the ground, but the rush made it worthwhile. But it was more than just that. I didn’t even get a chance to see her. When I was at school I was planning on coming back this summer, letting her know how I felt. Treat her more like a person than I did last summer when we were just getting wrecked and hooking up. I got home that Sunday night, and she... the next Friday night was the accident. Damn it, if I would have just gone out that night..."

"You can’t start throwing ifs around, Jake. I don’t want to be your therapist or anything, because I know this is something that you’ve got to work out alone, but I just want you to know that if you need anything, I’m here."

Jacob went back to the box and removed the final letter Claudia sent to him. He began to cry uncontrollably, but then abruptly stopped. He turned to October, one tear still hanging from the corner of his left eye, and he smiled.

"What is it?"

Jacob raised the letter to his eyes and began to read:

I won’t leave until you stop running from yourself.
I want to own everything.
I want the perfect life.
I want something I can never have.
I think you want it, too.

Miss you.
Be happy.
“What’s that?” October said.
“The ending of her last letter.” Jacob smiled. “It’s perfect. She
knows.”
The two embraced. “Let’s get out of here, Jake. The diner still
open?”
“Twenty-four hours, boss.”
“Let’s go, my treat,” October said.
Jacob packed the letters back into the shoe box and took one last
look at Claudia’s picture. He flashed her beautiful face a one-sided smile.
And just before he blew out the candle, he could have sworn that
she smiled back at him.
Larry Santucci
Ekphrasis from *Ursinus Campus In Snow*¹

with fanned-out wet-wood, what could have swept away the
winter-pool, a contest characterized in song, in
sweet hum, unripened swaying melody

the pillar stands
stroke over stroke that annuls the artistry
dulls the

woman and child mock overcast sky over drawn
woman tells unsightly blemish on her reflection face
   “i’ll cover you up.”
woman spreads out a roll of the american spirit—first colors to
penetrate our
limited spectrum—and cuts a scarf and a shawl
   one for appearance
   two for the show

like chant unheard—faint, damp, overblown—
some heat, to rouse her husband from his sleep
she sips in silent discussion as the simple slender hand rouses the
chimes and she is
made vulnerable to inherent role related pains
   her role, her child, her dove-like hands and pretty blue eyes

there is never a day unkept, left on plate, under fingernail, un-savored,
   lining up and piling up and over
steel basin

¹(1960, water color) by Sydney Quinn
A hut: 1.1. real

1.1.1. conjure

the dark. or

I see long lines o' keep seeing backwards

And the town lays dormant in the shadows

created, stirred, moved, changed by the irregular, a sun goodby...
What if I were a word in this very poem
whose first line you’re reading now?
I know you can’t see me!
Can you feel my inky presence
all around you, no apparent origin,
but you cannot do anything because
I caught you in so tightly
you cannot free yourself.

Oh, the things I could do to you...
Ha! I could bite your finger
which you lay upon me, following the lines,
tickling my letters, caressing my shapes!
Can you believe I could jump
and brush against your parted lips
whispering my name unknowingly,
as if it were just another word?—go ahead, smile!
I could climb your curls resting on the margins of the paper,
and sneak into your thoughts,
and you will go around all day
repeating this damn word stuck in your mind.
Right this instant, I could crawl inside
the sleeve of your tie-dye shirt,
hide between the hairs of your tanned arm,
and pinch you so hard, you would need to touch
the spot with your other hand.

While you’re reading these lines closely, carefully,
searching for deep meanings and revolutionary ideas,
I could make you
frown your arched eyebrows, cry your green eyes out,
scratch your bald chin, lick your chapped lips,
munch on your three-day fingernails,
and bite your mango-flavored tongue,
wondering what is it about this poem
that makes you go “hmmm...?”
I'm standing on the corner of Hyde and Lombard in San Francisco staring through the window of a Laundromat. I've been hiking up and down these streets for most of the day, hoping to find what most people love about this city. The rainy season winds rush around the corner and I hug my cardigan closer. There's an older couple doing laundry behind the glass. They have a routine. She hands him the wet sheets and pillowcases and he puts them in the dryer. They repeat these motions until one is empty and the other is full.

I lift my head until I see the two apartment windows above. Both have flower pots on their sills but the petals have been blown off by the winds and only bent stems jut from the rim of the clay. One of the windows is open a little and I hear a Joni Mitchell record playing behind it. The record player skips on a song my mother and I used to sing during long car rides. She lets it repeat itself for a few seconds and then sets the needle on the next song. She found Doug's record player yesterday under a pile of old records while she was cleaning the storage area under the eaves. He said we could look through the apartment if we needed something and when someone tells my mother she can look, she cleans.

My mother called me two days before winter break and asked me to join her. "Melissa, you know how I hate flying by myself. This is something that affects you too. If I move out there, you might want to go to Berkeley."

She's been looking for a new place to live since my father died. She says the house has too many bad memories. "Mom, I need to do work over break. I don't want a vacation."

"This isn't a vacation. The house is on the market and Doug sent me the classified section. I bought a round trip ticket but I'm going sell the return trip when I'm out there. And Doug needs us to watch his apartment until he gets back from vacation." Doug was a friend of my father who lived with us for a year when I was two. We haven't seen him since he moved out because he wanted to avoid my father. They worked together in the kitchen of a country club and when Doug needed a place to stay, my father offered our spare bedroom. My mother and Doug became close and she says I called him "Daddy" because my father was never around.

"Last week you said we were moving to Montreal to be near Grandpere. I love being around everybody up there and we never get to see them."
"I know, I know. But I can’t be taken care of like that. I won’t have my freedom. This is different. I’ll only be staying with Doug for a couple of months until I can get on my feet."

"OK, but I’m serious, Mom. No trolley tours, no giant trees, no Alcatraz?"

"I promise. And Melissa, the ticket will be your Christmas present."

A trolley bell rings behind me and I dig in my pocket for Doug’s keys. It’s a Barbie key chain. Doug has Barbie everything. My mother says he’s in touch with his inner child.

I walk to the left of the Laundromat window and unlock the door and walk up the carpeted stairs to Doug’s apartment. The door is open and my mother is sitting at the dining room table searching the classified section for a job. She’s a fragile woman. If I tap her on the shoulder to wake her from a nap, she shouts from the pain. Her hair is cut short to her head and tinted red with Henna.

Sasha and D.C. lounge under her chair, licking their paws. Doug has lived in this apartment since he moved out here sixteen years ago. The floor is covered with a rust-colored shag carpet and yarn hook tapestries hang from the wood paneling.

When I place the Barbie keys on the hook by the fridge, my mother puts the newspaper down and says, "Mel, where have you been? I wanted to pick up some champagne for tonight."

"Why didn’t you?" I walk over to her chair and pick up D.C. He claws at me and whines. "You devil cat."

"I didn’t want to go by myself. Where were you? Don’t you know Doug’s coming back this afternoon?" Doug has been in Mexico for the past two weeks. We’ve fed his cats and watered his plants, but haven’t seen him yet. "I wonder if he still has a beard."

"Didn’t he send you a gif of himself after you e-mailed him?" After my father died, my mother used a searcher on the Internet to locate Doug. When he moved out, he didn’t leave an address and he never wrote us. My mother says something happened between Doug and my father that made him leave. When she e-mailed him, she told him my father was dead and he wrote back. She didn’t tell him that she divorced my father before he died. She didn’t tell him that she married again. She married a man who locked me in a closet when I was a senior in high school because I wouldn’t tell him my SAT score. She didn’t tell him that she divorced again. That her second husband threatened that she would lose every finger on her right hand if she didn’t return his sofa. She doesn’t count the second marriage because it embarrasses her. Sometimes she doesn’t consider herself anything other than a widow.
“What’s a gif? I just gave him my e-mail number. Honey, do me a favor and put on the kettle for me.” She picks up a red marker and searches the paper again.

I find matches in the silverware drawer. The kettle is already full and on its burner. I light the stove with a match and look through cabinets for a mug but only find wine bottles and powdered cheese sauce packets. “Where are the mugs?”

She looks up from the paper and bites the end of the pen instead of her fingernails. “Oh, I only found one. It’s in the dish drain.” I set the mug on the counter and take the milk out of the fridge. The kettle shrieks and I pour the tea and walk into the dining room. “Thanks. Did you put honey in it?”

I nod and sit in the chair across from my mother, separated by a plastic pot of African violets. I can only see wisps of her hair behind the flowers.

My mother coughs and says, “I need to buy different tea. This is horrible.” She continues to talk about trivial things, switching from one subject to another. I use the same responses I use with my grandmother. Every few seconds I nod, or “mhm” and she doesn’t know I’m not listening. I can’t handle the rambling and it’s worse when I find myself doing it.

The ceiling fan above the table blows on the petals of the flowers and I pick up one that fell from the plant. Fifteen minutes after I was born, my father rushed into the delivery room and handed my mother a potted plant. Violets. Price tagged, plastic-potted plants from the local grocery store might have represented love for my father.

My mother stands up with her tea and smoothes the creases on her skirt. She looks at her watch and says, “He’ll be home soon. We should start dinner.”

“Oh, good. Are you going to wear a nice dress?”

“Mom, I didn’t bring any dresses. I didn’t know this would be such a big deal.”

“It’s not, but don’t you want to look nice?” She doesn’t buy me clothes anymore because we argue over what I should wear. We would stand in department store dressing rooms for hours while I tried on her turtlenecks, cardigans and stirrup pants and cringed.

“I won’t be a slob. I promise.”

She walks into the kitchen and fills a large pot with water. I walk down the hallway and into the sitting room. My mother took the guest bedroom and I sleep on a couch. One wall in the room is an entertainment center with a large t.v. and speakers. It is a quiet room, which helps me
prepare for next semester. Last night I fell asleep watching a Japanese news program.

I find some clothes in my suitcase, change, and join my mother in the kitchen. “Is this OK, Mom?” I place my hands on my hips and tease her by strutting around the kitchen.

“It’s fine. Help me. We have to hurry.”

Two hours later, as I am setting the table, I hear footsteps on the stairs leading to the apartment. Before I can say anything to my mother, the door is open and a large, bearded man is smiling at me. “Hello, you must be Melissa. I’m Doug.” He extends his hand and I shake it.

“Hi. Nice to meet...well, see you again.”

He smiles at this and takes a deep breath. “I’ll never get used to those stairs. Everything in California is uphill.” He rubs his belly. “You’d think I would be thin by now.”

My mother walks out of the kitchen and smiles. “It’s been a long time, hasn’t it?” She reaches out to him and they hug. “A ghost from your past.”

He holds her from him by the shoulders and says, “A pleasant one.” They laugh and hug again.

I wriggle strands of carpeting between my toes and look around the apartment for something to do. We carry in his luggage and sit down to dinner. My mother talks about the great vegetables she found at the grocery store for her ratatouille and how it tastes so much better here than at home.

Doug sips his wine and says, “You’ll like it here. How about we visit the wineries tomorrow?”

My mother nods as she chews. When she finishes, she looks at me and says, “Mel, what do you think?”

“Um, sure.”

We continue eating and my mother and Doug talk about me when I was little and how much fun they had living together. When we finish, Doug walks into the kitchen and tilts his head to avoid the top of the door frame. I follow my mother into the kitchen. She hooks her arm through Doug’s and they face me. Doug has a large frame and my mother looks like a girl next to him. She turns her smile between the two of us and says, “So who’s doing the dishes?”

Doug volunteers himself for washing dishes and suggests that I dry so my mother can relax for a while. We fill the sink with hot water and suds and he passes the wet dishes to me and I place them in the drain. After a few minutes, he brings his hands out of the water and dries them on a towel. He looks at me and says, “You know, I’m sorry about your dad. How are you and your mom holding up? She hasn’t mentioned much at all.”
I shrug my shoulders and say, “We’re doing all right.”

“Well, I’m just glad I got the chance to see both of you again.” He places one of his massive palms on my head and pats it.

When we finish in the kitchen, we walk into the dining room and sit on either side of my mother at the table. My mother looks at Doug and says, “Do you feel like going for a walk? You have such beautiful weather here.”

Doug nods and says, “Sure, let’s go. Mel, do you want to come?” My mother loses her smile and looks at me, “Don’t you have a lot of studying to do?”

“Yeah. I need to do work tonight if I’m going to the wineries tomorrow.”

Her smile returns and she says, “Good luck, honey,” as they walk out the door. I walk down the hallway and into the sitting room. I try to concentrate on calculus and physics, but after a few hours, I turn on the t.v. and wait to fall asleep.

I wake to someone knocking on the bedroom door. “Yeah?” The alarm clock says it’s 7:30. “Come in.”

My mother walks into the room wearing shorts and a T-shirt. “Do you want to go for a run? It’s a beautiful day.”

I pull the comforter over my head. “No. No, Mom, I’m tired.” “Mel, a walk. How about a walk. Come on.” She tugs at the comforter.

I sit up and say, “All right. Just give me a minute.” She smiles and shuts the door on her way out. I fumble through my suitcase and find something to wear. I get dressed and walk down the hallway. My mother is pouring a cup of tea. I look around me and ask, “Where’s Doug?”

“He had to run to work for a few hours. He’ll be back for lunch. Do you want tea? Doug showed me where he keeps the mugs.” I shake my head. She picks up her mug and says, “Let’s go then.” We walk out the door and down the steps. When we reach the sidewalk, we turn right and she says, “I just want a little air. Once around the block is fine.” She walks fast, pausing only to sip from the mug.

We walk in silence until we reach the first intersection and the mug is empty. After making the first turn, she looks at me and says, “Mel, did you notice anything odd about Doug?”

“No. I don’t remember him from before. Why? What’s wrong?” She walks slower. “It’s just that...” She lowers her voice and continues. “He’s gay.” She cringes at the word but recovers and looks at me for a response.

“Is that bad?”

“He didn’t tell me. He sent me classifieds and postcards and...”
I stop walking and look at her. “You came out here because you wanted something from him, didn’t you?” She waves me away with her free hand. “You didn’t want to move to California. You wanted to rekindle something. Mom…”

She shrugs her shoulders and continues to walk. “Mel, we were in love back then. And if I didn’t have you, I would have run away with him. Now it’s too late.”

The crack in the sidewalk below me is littered with cigarette butts. We turn right onto the street running parallel to Doug’s. “Mom, I don’t think it has anything to do with time. Be glad you didn’t run away with him because now you’d be blaming yourself because he’s gay.”

We walk for a while and she doesn’t respond until we make another right turn. She shakes her head and says, “No. Everything would have been different if I left with him.”

I can’t say anything to her. I don’t want to be like her with men. She sees them buying her jewelry and taking her out to dinner but she misses their addictions and abusive behavior until after they marry each other because the men stop buying jewelry after marriage. So she divorces them and searches for someone to buy her flowers. We walk around the corner and my mother reaches for the apartment keys in her pocket. She says, “I’m just glad I didn’t sell the return plane ticket.”

“What about the house? Isn’t it for sale?”

“Yeah, but I’ll just take it off. Or I could call Grandpere about living up there. You’d like that wouldn’t you? The university is good.” She finds the key and walks to the door.

I stay where I am on the sidewalk and say, “I’ll be up in a minute.” She unlocks the door and walks up the stairs.

I’m standing on the corner of Hyde and Lombard streets in San Francisco staring through the window of a Laundromat. My mother came here to be part of a Laundromat couple.
Dennis Cormac McCarthy
Wh-?

what should we talk about when you speak of somethings separate from your meanings and I see something-elses as stand-ins for obstruction and call them novel names that others never heard but still pretend to know by some other means?
or something else, I laugh a belly-laugh at you when you mean to remind me that I am reminiscent of another time in space where silhouettes abound when notions run amok.

you and I outlive another separate senseless day punctuated with periods of restlessness and the occasional affair that we invent for ourselves as mere acquaintances to speak a lie or two or nothing to, and nothing more than the times that trip the failed evacuation of the same old we define.

may be you are in some way understanding, may be you cannot afford to sacrifice the profane for want of sacrilege or what we say or mean to say or say we mean may be you cannot see a time when space decides what will become of us or will be willed for us or come to be for us or else bewilder us a distant go-between.

or else no matter what is inbetween the two of us Confucius cannot say to conclude the search for solutions aren’t forthcoming from the restless rant of a cross-word puzzle book and I have to ask myself if I should may be ask if may be we should ask ourselves and one another why.

is this the close encounter we can never hope to find?
thoughts run amok and together or not
I have to ask and need to know
if you already know that the restlessness cries
through the belly-laugh that we revel and rot
in the backwash of time that our secrets we hide
in our belly-buttons that we gain weight
and cannot will ourselves to see
the worlds inside ourselves that frame
the little nothings that comprise
event horizons and nothing more
and so I have to beg the question
wh-?
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