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### Sketchy Etchings: Stories

Jeff Brewer

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**Sketchy Etchings: Stories**

**By Jeff Brewer**

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts  
in Creative Writing of the City College of the City University of New York

**Table of Contents:**

<b>Sketchy Etchings .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Sprouting Larva .....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Proportional Harmony .....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Air Hunger .....</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>The Impossible Dripping Heap .....</b>	<b>42</b>
<b>Scraping the Sky .....</b>	<b>50</b>
<b>Into the Surface .....</b>	<b>59</b>
<b>The Thanatologist .....</b>	<b>71</b>
<b>Rebirthing the Whole .....</b>	<b>89</b>

## Sketchy Etchings

This wasn't the first and only incident. It was one of many of their little stunts that started shortly after their mother ran away with the neighbor's wife.

I told my boys that thieving anything and everything in the neighborhood that reminded them of her wouldn't make things right, that littering the basement with the neighbors possessions wouldn't make her appear at the foot of their beds.

And after the neighborhood was picked clean, I told them that carving their mother's name into the windows of the neighbor's house wouldn't bring her back.

I even shrugged it off when the older one tried to cram the younger one in the freezer, after the older one said that the younger one needed to be preserved so when their mother came back, she would recognize him.

But when I walked in on the older one convincing the younger one to gulp toilet water to moisten his innards so when he curled back into the freezer he'd be properly preserved, I told them both she wasn't coming back, that she and the neighbor lady floated on over somewhere and that the only way she'd come back was if they gave me some peace and quiet so I could mold a figure of her out of the neighbors possessions, that I'd create a shrine so they could talk with her molding, as long as they left the neighbors alone.

You're not bringing her back are you, the older one asked.

Make her to look like a tree so we can climb her, the younger one said.

You're not bringing her back are you, the older one asked.

And after that, the older one stopped saying her name, stopped mentioning her in all regards, but the younger one kept asking about her as they both continued their little stunts.

But none of their incidents were as bad as this one.

It was the day of the one-year mark of their mother's departure, and I still hadn't completed the molding of her. I couldn't concentrate on her features, couldn't picture her—so I was in the basement, running my fingers over the thieved objects that lined the walls when I heard the shattering crash echo through the house.

When I made it to hallway I didn't know how to react. There they were, the younger one rocking in a pool of his own blood, the older one crumbling fragments of glass with the heel of his shoe while looking at the splayed fragments of the blood-clotted shards that covered the porch as the remaining glass swayed in the screen door before shattering on the floor.

There the younger one sat, dazed—his arm raised above his chest, blood dribbling and hanging from his elbow, the floor mat now soaking the blood—there he sat, puzzled—mumbling how the older one told him that he could float through the screen door if he leapt through hands first.

And with his eyes the older one said he hadn't a clue why the younger one was such an idiot.

And after I realized the younger one wouldn't bleed out, I told the older one to bandage his wrist up.

Then I told the older one that if he didn't stop telling the younger one he could jump through objects, or fold into freezers, I'd staple his lips to his nose using the

shattered glass—how can you whisper into the younger one’s ear with your lips sewn to your nose by a shard of glass?

We have names, the older one said as he began wrapping the younger one with a fresh towel, sliding the bloody mat that the younger one leaked all over toward me with the tip of his shoe.

So I told both of them that I didn’t care who did what and who told whom what he could or couldn’t do— none of this would bring their mother back, that bleeding out and freezing up doesn’t patch wounds, that what I needed from both of them was simply to keep it down while I was working so I could concentrate.

Are you’re working on her, the younger one asked.

Just sweep up these shards or I’ll split your lip, I said.

Is drinking whisky and staring at your screwdriver what you’re working on, the older one asked.

How do you suppose I finish molding her, finish anything for that matter, when all I do is clean up his blood, I asked the older one.

He just looked at me as the younger one winced.

My *tooph* hurts, the younger one gargled.

Perhaps if you sweep this mess up it’ll stop hurting, I said.

Mom knowed how to make it stop, the younger one said.

Well she’s not here, I said.

I’ll operate on it with the rifle, the older one said, firming his grip along a jagged chunk of glass, forming it like a pistol as he pointed it at the younger one.

I just did what I was told I could do is all, the younger one said, feeling at the piece of cloth that now secured his wrist.

If I see you even looking at that rifle, and if I catch you carving into his mouth, or pointing anything near his mouth, I'll replace your teeth with the neighbor's dogs, I told the older one. And another thing, I said to both of them—the neighbor's doghouse isn't an outhouse, just leave the man alone, this isn't his fault, this isn't any of their faults, and if he brings me another sack of your shit I swear I'll salt it and serve it for dinner.

But his tooth, just look, the older one said.

We can't afford another encounter with the neighbors—any of them—they didn't do this to us, and they'll lynch us if you pull another one of your stunts, I said.

But my *tooph* really hurts, the younger said.

You know the powers your brother always says you possess, I asked.

You mean the gills or the hammer fists, the younger one asked.

Well you ought to use them all in a productive way and get us some cardboard so I can patch up this gaping hole in the screen door, I said.

But the younger one just looked at the older one and the older one just pointed the jagged chunk of glass at his tooth, so I gave a look to the older one that suggested he put the chunk down, then I told both of them that if they weren't going to sweep up their mess they should run around the block or climb a tree, then go fetch a slab of cardboard already so I could finally get some work done and so the breeze wouldn't suck all the heat out the house.

After they went outside, and after I swept the glass and sponged the blood from the hallway, I watched them from the upstairs bathroom window as I cleaned the mat that

the younger one's wrist leaked blood on. There they ran, in and out of the window frame, the older one chasing the younger one in circles, slapping him with a large piece of cardboard they had found—the younger one defending himself by jabbing holes in the cardboard with what appeared to be a stick.

And as I turned away to slap the rung mat against the side of the tub, the sounds of the rifle firing shivered through me. Then shrieks from the younger one.

Then silence.

A bit of the younger one's blood still lingered on my fingertips as I ran down the stairs. I approached the kitchen window to see if I could spot the younger one curled up, or the older one splayed out, see if either was drenched in a pool of his own blood, but all I could see were remnants of shredded cardboard tangled in the grass that surrounded the rifle.

I rushed out back but they were still nowhere in sight. So I picked up the rifle and looked through scope, see if I could spot them in any of the neighbors' yards.

And I paused on the neighbor's window, as the older one's etching of their mother's name caught my eye—and that was before I heard some squealing from the front of the house, before I threw my arm through the loop, before I strapped the barrel around my shoulder, before I followed the loose strands of cardboard that led me out front.

There they were—the younger one shivering on the sidewalk, clutching his bandaged arm and bleeding from the mouth, the older one cackling and waving what was left of the cardboard. So I stepped over to them both, see if I could calm them before the neighbors saw anything.

I fell, *teeph* first, the younger one said.

It's teeth, you moron, the older one said.

It doesn't matter what they are, cause there all over the ground, I said.

I reached down and picked up a few, held them in my palm, showed them to the older one.

The younger one howled and the older one's eyes widened before he ran into the house.

The younger one's cries turned to a muffled scream, and he started to squirm, so I leaned down, careful to keep the barrel of the rifle away from him, and whispered how we'd put them back in.

With tears streaming off his cheeks, he grabbed my ankle, and I remained on a knee, teeth in one hand, and the rifle over my shoulder as the neighbors, one by one, began appearing on the sidewalk.

## **Sprouting Larva**

They're everywhere and she can't handle it anymore. Another day, another tooth—one after the next plopping out—there's one in her cereal, floating on top of the milk before sinking to the bottom of the bowl, and there's another crunching and jamming into her gums after she comes down on what she thinks is a Cheerio.

Now in the bathroom, after her father starts a bubble bath for her, she stands at the sink, alone, spitting shards of toothbone and blood into the water dripping from the sink faucet. She's horrified as each little chunk catches on the drain, by the blood that drips onto her pajamas, horrified by those pieces of her she flicks into that gurgling drain. Now her hand shakes at the toothbrush, those bristles will gouge what's left in her, perhaps push that one in the back that's hanging by a string of flesh up through her nose, perhaps it'll cut off her airway, drop her face first into the toilet water—so she sits down hard on the toilet seat, nearly squeezes herself into the toilet while she brushes her teeth by gulping and swirling a mouthful of toothpaste.

And with her fingers digging into her kneecaps, she watches the steam rise from the bath, watches the bathroom fill with a hot fog as spit and toothpaste cloud her mouth. So she separates her knees, and let's her spit and blood and toothpaste ripple her faint shadow reflecting into her mess she just left, splitting her reflection into parts, each part floating above her own filth. And now standing, she sees in her wavering toilet bowl reflection something slither along her lip, something crawling and hanging on her mouth, and now she's shaking and slapping herself, screaming with her mouth closed as she bites

her lower lip, screaming as one of her dangling canines falls from her mouth and into the toilet, screaming as she gums her lower lip and watches the spiked canine break the surface and claw toward her mess as some spittle slides down her chin.

She bites down harder on her sore gums, horrified at all this drool, wondering where it's coming from, the steam now making it hard for her to breathe, and she begins whimpering and snot is pouring out her nose as that spiked piece of her works its way through the layers of filth and settles at the bottom.

Her father, out in the hallway, sweeping the floor, sees the steam seeping from under the door, hears her muffled screams, honey, you alright in there, he says, and she's wading through the thick steam, as water slides down her and hangs onto the tip of her nose, her eyes now tickling, her hair dropping water onto her shoulders and down her back. Honey, he says, knocking on the door, and as she leans over to turn the faucet off, she tries to call back, but instead coughs to him, and when she does she hears her other canine drop into the soapsuds. Honey, he says as he knocks again, and when her snotty moans continue, he opens the door, swipes at the steam as he fans the room by swinging the door.

Now they're both standing there, she looking for her canine in the tub, and he looking at the whole mess in the toilet, this what you're screaming about, he says as he looks in there, looks kind of primordial, kind of like a swampy cane toad, you remember the cane toad, the one that secretes poison, well, he says, gently pinching her ear, anyway, looks like you did a fine job, there's nothing to cry about, he says as he overlooks the canine, and instead he sees the blood floating in the water—well, honey I

haven't heard of this happening to a girl at your age, I thought we had at least a few more years until things got like this, and he looks at his daughter, looks at her frightened little eyes, at her runny nose, looks back into the toilet, then back at her, well I see you got some blood on your shirt, he says as he wipes her nose with a piece of tissue, you must have nearly exploded, he says, and the girl just looks at him, frightened that if she opens her mouth a chunk of her will gouge him in the throat, it's all right, honey, its natural, why don't you climb in the tub and try to relax, I know its hard, but just try, he says as he pats her shoulder, then feels the tub water, and remember to turn this off when you get in there, all right sweetie, things are just changing is all, it'll be all right, he says as he leaves.

And the girl just stares into the bubbles, trying see that tooth. She's terrified to reach in there let alone sit in there, if she leaves a tooth craving frog like creature in the toilet there's no telling what she'll leave in the tub, no telling what its hungry for, so she just stands there, on the bathmat, stuck between these two worlds, between her mucky reflection and what ever it is under those bubbles waiting for whatever else it can dig out of her mouth, so she just stands there, breathing harder, watching the water rise as she now tiptoes out of the bathroom, shutting the door quietly, as to not awake what's pouring out of there.

Now she sits at the end of her bed, a hat resting in her lap, and she's terrified as she counts how many holes fill her mouth, terrified at the breeze that pushes the dust around in the sunlight that slips into the window. If she opens wide the dusty air could crumble

what's left in her mouth and those little bastards could fall either into the hat or into her stomach where they could stick into her and eat at her insides. So she looks at the ceiling and holds her breath, and with her lips tight and air seeping through her nostrils, her vision blurs, and maybe, just maybe, on the inside of her room, if the air is water then that's air leaking through the ceiling—all around, a big swelling pool of air hanging and spreading on the ceiling. It starts with a coin shaped blot and there the girl watches as the size increases, as it becomes something else, a combination of stains, at first it looks like a winged serpent, then, when drops start forming, the serpent melts into a pile of scattering spiders that begin dropping, one after another onto her bed.

Her father, now standing in the doorway, looking at the ground, a broom in his hand, tells her not to worry, its natural honey, he says rubbing his hand across his baldhead, at least they'll grow back. But she keeps her head cocked toward the ceiling, screaming with her mouth closed, terrified that the drops of spiders will turn into sea crabs once they soak into her bed, terrified at the thought of having to carve gills into herself once the room is filled with them.

You're like a butterfly is all, well, not yet, you're in your larval state is all, you'll grow them back stronger, bigger, and shiner than the toilet, her father says, but now her eyes are darting from him, to the window, and back to the ceiling, besides, he says its natural for us to lose a bit of ourselves, were always shedding skin, making earwax, it's all a cycle sweetie, were all larval at some point.

Now under her bed, the girl hugs her legs, and there she curls in the corner, trembling after she thinks to herself what will happen, how it will end. It's like breaking

out of your shell, she hears her father from the hallway, the sounds of the broom sliding across the floor, the drops, one after another, splashing onto her bed.

Today a larval, tomorrow they'll marvel, he says from the hallway, just think of it as a living cocoon stage, we all go through it, his voice echoing.

And with each sweep, with each drop, she thinks of butterflies, how they come from coughed up milky wool and vomit, how they soil themselves until they fall asleep and when they wake up they can fly, and how they have colorful wings that shine in the daylight.

She feels along her ribs, searching for that spot where her wings will grow, that spot where she believes the bone will sprout and connect to her new growing teeth that she knows will burst through her gums, growing larger and larger until her mouth can't house them, and she watches as her ribs will crawl up through her lips and hook into her jaw, hook and sink into her, shutting her for good and closing off her airways.

Her father standing in the doorway, didn't I tell you to turn that off up there, he says, wiggle on out of there so I can clean this up.

And under the bed she's surrounded by the lint in the bristles of the broom, each bristle moving independent of each other, each now inching toward her as her father begins sweeping at her, as he gently nudges her before trying to hook her out from under the bed.

Come on honey, it'll be all right, he says as he tries to move the bed, but she screams until he backs out of the room, stepping quickly, they're just teeth is all, he says as he walks down the hallway.

And he has terrifying thoughts of what it will be like when she hits that age, when everyday he'll have to tiptoe through things, when every day will have the potential of a tooth-loss level of drama, as he walks down in the kitchen, searching for buckets and bowls to soak up the water.

When he returns, he clangs the dishes together, his shoes now kicking at the base of the bed, as he begins spreading the dishes along the floor and on top of the mattress.

It's all too complex for the girl, how things will fall out and grow back, how she'll eventually shed away all her skin until she'll freeze with a scared and frightened look until she is a pile of hair and fingernails.

I can hear you yowling down stairs, her father says and she sees a large net working its way toward her, working until it wraps around her feet, up around her ankles, and she kicks, and the net pulls at her, and she squirms further into the corner, screaming with her mouth closed, until she finally slides out from under the bed.

Look what I found, a sweet net to catch my sweet blossoming butterfly, her father says as he hands her the net and grabs the hat that sits at her feet, throwing it on her head, and she now stomps down the hall, scraping the handle of the net along the trim, now letting the handle slide out of her hand as she walks outside.

Outside, there is a calm as the girl walks toward the stream that bends around the back of the house. She pulls the hat down to keep the sun out of her eyes and walks, her mouth still closed, and she shuffles her heels into the ground, her fingers still digging into her ribcage, now kicking at a few dandelions, now pulling at a few tree branches. She breathes

deeply, allowing a little air to pour into the gaps in her teeth.

And when she comes upon the stream, she sees a butterfly perched on a tree branch, the swirl colored wings fluttering, its little legs gripping onto the veins of a leaf. And she wants to grab it, wants to feel where those wings sprout out of, so she tiptoes toward it, her hands now raising slowly, but now she's scared that if she grabs at it, she'll crush it, so she swipes at it with her hat, reaching too slowly as the butterfly floats around her attempts, until she realizes she's dangerously close to the water's edge. And as she edges closer to the water she gives up swatting at the butterfly. There she stands, looking at the shadows under the water, then looking around, and she realizes the butterfly has slipped away, so she slaps her hat against her knee, throws it on the ground and kicks it before she dusts it off and puts it back on her head.

Now she kneels along the stream and looks at her wavy reflection, at how blurred her chin looks, how her hair sprouts out from under the hat, how the tips of her hair now are tickling her cheek. So she opens her mouth, looks at the holes, and sees herself old and colorless, old and grey, grey and wrinkled, wrinkled and scared.

And her hair continues tickling her, so she begins chewing on the ends. She takes the hat off to get a better look at herself. And when she brushes her hair away, she sees a butterfly wing tangled in her hair and pressed against her face.

Now picking up the hat, she sees the splattered remains of butterfly legs and innards that have stained the inside.

She's unsure if the taste in her mouth is of the dirt kicked around or if it's what she thinks it is, so she spits all over the place, spits into the water, and another tooth flies

out, breaking the surface where a fish swallows it before it can sink.

So she scrapes at her tongue, then scrapes out what's left in the hat and flings it into the dirt.

The wing is still tangled in her hair, so she picks it out, and as she's about to toss it into the water, something in it catches her, maybe its how her own hair strung itself into the wing or maybe it's how it looked in the light, and maybe she knows it will see the same ending as her tooth.

So she puts the wing in her mouth.

And in a figure eight motion, her spit and tongue work at dissolving the scales and hairs and the wing membranes, and as she swallows pieces and strands, she runs her fingers along her ribcage, wondering when the wing will sprout from her.

And when she begins back toward the house, she sees the tip of the chimney from where she stands, all those bricks building down into that aquarium, all those spiders and all those blooming sea crabs pinching apart her fathers baldhead, and so she instead walks along the banks of the stream, walking and watching the sea creatures under the surface, watching them scurry around, and she runs her fingers along her ribcage, runs her eyes under the surface of the water, searching for that fish that ate a piece of her, wondering when the wing will sprout out of her, wondering as she gums the inside of her cheek, gumming and searching for any signs of any little baby fish teeth floating to the surface.

### **Proportional Harmony**

Some say my deaf brother simply chooses not to listen. It is too strange to one day stop hearing. So they say he just doesn't listen because he's too slow to hear. Even when he started talking with his hands, they said he's too slow, he's at that age where his hands are too slow. Either way, I tell people he's just at that age, the one where he just asks questions for the sake of asking, that age where he doesn't even understand what question he's asking—what age is that? is a good question, he even asks that one from time to time—and when he asks how old he is, I tell him I gage his age based on the amount of diapers of his I changed, back when he crapped himself more than most kids his age did, in diaper years you're an old soul, I sign to him, and when he asks our sister how old an old soul is, all she does is flicker her middle fingers at him, one after the next, as he tries to keep up with the count, but he can't be that old, I say, I can't even count that high, I say. So I sign to him that according to our sister, you're the oldest little bitch she's ever heard of.

\*\*\*

Our sister isn't our sister. She's the neighbor. Our father says she's without fathering and since we're without mothering, it seems like a right fit, and besides it wouldn't hurt to have a motherly presence around. I tell him that she's younger than me. That I refuse to call her anything other than her name, and besides, she took all our clothes and covered them in mud. Our father says that's her way, is all. Then one day he brought her home a gift. He started making us her favorite meal. Started watching her favorite shows. And soon, they began communicating in whispers. At night, he's taken to storming into my room and giving her my blankets.

She doesn't have anything, he says, she's going to freeze.

\*\*\*

For whatever reason, our parents take away my brother's ability to ask questions by turning away when he darts his hands in their direction; our father just shuts his eyes and hums something or other under his breath; our mother just turns to the ceiling, stares blankly—and sometimes our father pretends to whisper something to our mother while nodding at him as our mother pushes her hair in front her face, and then our father just looks at the ceiling and groans when he hears my brother try to speak.

And he can see our father groaning, and if he's close enough to him he can feel the couch move a bit as my father lets out a heavy breath, but for the most part he just watches our father grimace whenever he asks a question, and I have seen it too, and at times I have plugged my ears when my father is burdened, just to watch his face tighten, his forehead wrinkle, his head fall back against the headrest on the couch, or against the top of the chair, and watch his chest fill with air before he holds it in, as if he's holding in

the weight of the question, as if every question that's asked of him has to reach into the depths of his lungs before he can consider its implications, that's how he sits on it, just holding it in until his head naturally tilts toward the ceiling, as if with every question, with anything that requires anything, its as if we're sinking him under some imaginary surface and he melts into the chair, in an act of conserving his energy, as we come to serve as the water that surrounds him, drowning him in some way and the ceiling represents the unobtainable surface, that rippling spot, that if he could just reach, he could perhaps breakthrough and climb out of this situation and into a new beginning.

But my brother and I smile, knowing that our father's new beginning, that place on the other side of the ceiling that he goes to, that place is my brother's room.

Up in the attic.

\* \* \*

But it was on this day, in my brother's room, that this all happens. I stand there and sign to my brother, asking him why he spends most of the time in the attic, he just stays up there, standing and staring out the window, barely breathing as he presses his lips against the glass. He signs that he can feel the tree branches tapping against the window. I tell him I'm not very impressed. And with each slap from the tree, the corner of his mouth lifts from the window as the mixture of spit and moisture drips from his chin. And he counts each tap by mouthing silent numbers, until the numbers turn into sounds that quite simply can't be considered numbers.

You're terrifying the neighbors, I sign and say to him, who wants to walk down the street and look up and see some freak pawing and drooling all over the window, but now he just keeps his back to me. And when he starts counting again, he signs something

about wanting to hear the wind rip the leaves from the trees, listen to water pour through the street drains, so I tell him to go stick his hand in the toilet and flush it, feel the movement of water getting sucked out of the bowl, and you'll get the idea.

But then I realize he doesn't see that I'm signing and screaming, he just keeps staring and mumbling garbled numbers, so I start stomping, and clapping, and he continues to ignore me, so I take my belt off, and I step toward him, and he turns and there I am looking like I'm coming down on him, so he curls on the floor, and I calm him, tell him I'm not going to strike him, no, I'm not going to do that, I'm just going to tie my belt to your belt, I sign to him, that way I don't have to jump around to get your attention, because if you want to hear what I'm saying you have to feel the floor shake when I stomp, so this way I can just tug on the belt when I need to tell you something, think of it like a tail, I say, on this day you grew a studded leather belt, I sign, and he asks me where tails come from, do they come from under the trees, he signs, sure, I sign, just answer me when I tug.

After I tie the belt, I tell him and sign that if you concentrate hard enough you can see the words before they slip out of people's mouths. After you have a handle on that we can work our way to grasp larger concepts, I sign.

But he's back at the window pressing and lifting his mouth to and from the glass, and as I sign to him he faces me while he presses his fingers against the window.

So I tell him how no one else in the family slows down their lip movements long enough to allow him to understand their speech patterns, so I remind him how I'll continue telling him things by swooping my hands at him, speak to him by tugging on the belt—gentle tugs, hard pulls, slithering movements, all telling him how he doesn't need to

worry about reading lips, that he can learn all he needs to know by watching how our sister flails her press-on finger nails at him, that he can figure out what our dad is saying by looking at how his eyes flicker around instead of softly settling on the person he is directing his thoughts at, and how he already knows that our mother always whimpers and cooks when she is disappointed, how she always stares into the lit end of her cigarette as smoke swirls from the ashtray.

There's a harmony to the chaos, a harmony, I sign, to him, just pay attention.

He just steps back from the window, his eyes back on the redwood that towers above the roof. I stand next to him, watching as he reaches for duct tape that rests on the dresser.

There's too much, he signs to me, if I wear eye patches, would that make things better? He asks, as he pulls a slab of tape from the roll.

Do you want everyone to think you're a freak? I tug to him.

He looks away, tearing a piece and attaching an end to the windowsill.

Do you feel the tension when you pull the tape? I tug to him, and he doesn't respond and now he's on the floor, and I'm pulling him in circles, and he's kicking at me.

There's a difference from when the roll just sits there to when it has a fresh piece of tape ready to be ripped, I sign, look at how the tape dangles, there's no tension after it's ripped.

But it's curling at the end, it's trying to find its way back to the roll, he signs.

There are strings attached to every situation, I sign and tug at the rope, and you just have to allow the moment to slow down in your mind, draw it out long enough so you can look at the roots of the situation.

With an eyebrow, he motions toward the redwood—asking me if its roots stretch under the house. He signs that he wants to hear the sounds of the tree branches swaying, that he can feel the tips of the pine needles digging under the shingles—so I tug to him that we should start with something simpler, how about you watch how I say things, and we'll communicate through the rope, I sign.

But he rips another piece of tape and continues signing and trying to jerk the rope from my hands, telling me how on certain nights he can feel the roots climbing toward the house, that he can smell the shavings from the shingles after they are scraped by the tree branches, that they are a force that is trying to crumple the house, scrunch it into shards, squeeze the sap out of the walls, reclaim the oak kitchen table, peel back the hardwood floors so the roots can burst through.

So I let go of the rope, and he just looks at me.

Then he reaches for the tape that dangles from the windowsill.

What are you gonna do? I sign.

Eye patches, he signs, as he bites the tape and begins to tear the pieces into smaller sections, so I can feel the place, he signs.

So I slap the tape from his hands. You want something less sticky, I ask by pointing at the tape and pressing my palms together.

He just looks at me and runs his eyebrow in between his fingers as he rips the tape with his teeth. So I grab the rope, and he begins to pluck his eyebrows, one hair at a time, and with each pluck I tug the rope, and before we know it, we are in a bit of a dance, me forcing him all over his room, him leaning away as he flicks his eyebrows to the floor, him gaping his mouth, silently showing his teeth until we crash into the dresser.

We pant on the floor as the door flies open. There in the doorway, an outline of our sister's figure leans to a side, her earring-studded finger nails flickering. Our father stands behind her, his eyes darting all over, his hands moving in an opposite directions.

I was just showing him some moves, I say.

Assholes, our sister says as she steps into the room and looks us down.

Our father remains in the hall, silently scolding us by just standing there and breathing heavily—I wish you would two would just stop upsetting your sister, he finally says.

After they leave, I turn and look at my brother. He huddles in the corner of the room, his fingers locked around his kneecaps, the rope jetting along his leg, one of his eyes patched with duct tape.

Does dad speak with an accent? He signs.

I can't understand him either, I sign.

He bends his letters backwards, and jumbles words—last week he called me a house can shit.

Was it a question?

He continues telling me how when he told our dad he didn't know what our dad meant, our dad told him that he needed to keep up even if it meant falling behind, that how our dad talks is how they talk in the real world.

He's a dick, I sign.

He interrupts by asking whether our sister waves obscenities that much or whether she is just constantly drying her nails.

It depends on the time of day.

I never know what they're thinking, is all, he signs.

So I explain how he should picture their qualities as parts of nature: our mom, with her constant tears, represents water; our dad, with his unpredictable loads of hot air, is wind; and our sister, with her wild temper represents fire.

Does that make you land? He asks.

That makes you land, I sign, and the thing about land is that water erases land, if land is exposed to it too much, and wind can knock down trees and rip the roofs of houses, in certain situations, and fire, well that will scare a mountainside for life if left unattended.

I don't know why they don't like me, he signs, sometimes I get the feeling that they would just like to lock the attic and leave me up here for good.

And I tell him that we should sit down, all of us, and allow my brother to ask the necessary questions of the family, an intervention of sorts, so they can understand how he feels

When will we do it? He signs.

We'll pop it on them when they're least expecting it, I sign.

That night, my brother waits until our family sleeps, waits until they breath hard in their sleep, then he runs his fingers over they're soft breaths—later claiming that he wanted to imagine what they were saying in their heads as they slept.

It is not until our sister wakes to find his fingers fluttering over her mouth that he finds himself attempting to deflect our father's signs. There, at the base of our sister's

bed, our shirtless dad wraps his arms around him, drags him into the hallway, and demands for a family meeting.

And there my brother sits, in the middle of the night, with the rest of the sleepy-eyed family circling around the table, motioning back to them that he wants to hear what it feels like to be scolded. As he sits and digs his fingers into the side of the chair, he looks through our father's hands as they swoop in front of his face. When my father stops for a moment to catch his breath, my brother signs back that the veins in our father's neck aren't enough, that our mother's furrowed brow just confuses him.

Our father signs and raises his voice—he says how he'll carve those perverted irises out of his skull and leave the retina and the rest of the eye dangling out of his socket for everyone else to see if my brother doesn't stop eyeing the family that way.

Our mother goes from sitting at the table, staring into her lit cigarette, to standing by the stove. She leaves the cigarette in the ashtray. She begins whipping up batches of drippy eggs, limp bacon, and soupy creamed corn biscuits, as she has been doing at all hours of the long nights for some time. She only says that after catching my brother performing what she sees as horrendous acts, she doesn't know what else to do. To the sounds of the whisks beating the yokes, she describes how some time ago she walked in on my brother touching himself as he held a picture of me while watching our sister undress.

Our father says they will stop signing to him, stop communicating on all levels, says that it is a harsh world out there, that it's harsher for a kid whose deficient—who lacks a sense of harmony with the rhythm of the world. And as the family looks him in the eye, my brother turns toward the dirt-smearred windowsills, and something in his eye,

something about the way he looks at the tree swaying, the same branches our mother looks through as the eggs pile up, the same ridged trunk that stretches beyond the roof, the same trunk that guides his thoughts. And he asks whether the remnants of the previous seasons intake of dust and insect buildup compile to form a crust on the windowsill, saying that if he squints hard enough he can count the number of ridges in the layers of filth and guess how long the build up has accumulated, how long its been since the house was cleaned.

And as our mother turns the faucet on and soaps her hands, our sister divulges how she saw the child spying on the father as he soaped himself in the shower.

I just shift in the chair and steal a drag of our mother's cigarette. My brother sits gripping the corner of the table. With his eyes, he tells me the floor is trembling, the handle on the cupboard shifting. And after our father brings the back of his hand down upon his cheek, my brother signs how he can feel the water rustling through the pipes in the walls of the house, he can see the pulsating membranes of the structure contorting and bending, ultimately drenching a family member through a line in the ceiling.

And then my brother shifts his glance from our sister—who now paces behind our father—to me sitting in silence at the other corner of the table. He looks at me for guidance. He watches the smoke curl from the tip of the cigarette as our sister's finger's ember about.

She screams that she doesn't know how to handle the rat child looking at her breasts as they begin to grow. My brother reaches to his voice box, imagining her vocal fluctuations, then reached for hers as our father slaps his hand while she explains how she senses him gazing at her every sore-nippled day with a certain intensity that causes her to

shudder and remain in her room most of time she's home. She lets the family know that before she went to bed the rat child rubbed the tips of his fingers together while claiming he could hear her expanding, that she felt as though he is always watching her, even when he isn't.

In tears, she explains how this was after she emerged from the shower, when the rat child signed to her that the house was the perfect representation of the universe, that he said he plans on running his fingers over nearly every inch of every wall, explaining how he will be able to hear the house trembling—how he visualizes it clutching and creaking until one day it will perhaps pop from an implosion. And all she could do was step back, stunned, as the towel slipped from her breasts and bunched next to her feet.

Our dad seethes, his mouth nearly froths. Our sister's eyes wet our dad's shoulder, her hand wrapping around his arm. Together the both of them tremble into a near panting frenzy. Our mom shatters a plate in the sink. She then splatters a bowl of creamed corn across the window, screaming that if the neighbors were to see this, the family would be ruined. I light another cigarette and take a drag. Our father hasn't even noticed or has stopped caring that I'm smoking.

I remind her that the our sister is our neighbor, I remind her of this as the morning light slips into the windows, as the family sits slump-shouldered. Then our mother wilts from exhaustion. She curls at the base of the oven. The knobs for the stove rest at the base of her head. Raw food drips from the scattered pans, through her hair and onto her shoulders. Our sister now rests her head on our father's shoulder. Her spittle moistens his shirt. Our father squints at the rays of sun that reflect through the splattered window. The

dark circles under his eyes press his cheeks into his chin and weigh his chin to his chest. He tries to stand up, but rests back into the chair where our sister curls under his arm.

My brother taps the table, timing each dripping piece of food with the tip of finger. He signs to me that he feels the food dripping from our mother's shoulder to the floor, the slight droplets that form a pool of lard and yoke. He winces as the cigarette smoke swirls around his eyes, swiping away at his stinging tears as he looks on at our sleepy eyed family members.

I light another cigarette, then crumple the pack and let it fall onto the table. And beneath the spiraling layers of smoke that settle above our heads, I continue blowing smoke rings at the end of the table. There we sit, my brother and I, looking across from each other, each wide awake, each looking at the scene. There we sit—each watching at our silent father and sister. And there we sit, I dragging from the cigarette, squeezing smoke rings from my lips, and he nodding his head to the one circle that seeps from my mouth, he tapping on the table as the ring pulsates and floats through the stale kitchen air, vibrating until it dissipates.

And with the room filled with smoke whirling around the plates of uncooked poultry and eggs, my brother walks over to the window, and he just looks over our passed out mother, looks out the closed window and with his knees he works himself onto our mother's shoulders, then onto the stove. He presses his lips against the window, against the splattered creamed corn and the morning dew.

## **Air Hunger**

The younger one's days of squinting into the ease of the glare, into the soft shine of the drawer knob, his parched lips wrinkled shut, his life in the drawer under the kitchen sink—the plunging syringes waiting to whistle through the tip of the needle, waiting to wheeze into his boney thigh, waiting to spray him with thoughts of contact paper sticking to his bare legs—the stacked pill bottles half filled with numbered pills: toe-sized, lab coated, hard on his holes—the chilled stethoscope imprinting heavy along his ribs, exposing cold memories of the hospital: steel metal plates shining, reflecting the shrinking and widening faces of doctors above the collars of the lab coats that tickle his lower back; his mother sitting next to him, swirling her silver ring along his clinched knuckles as slippery fingers slowly put things into him.

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Now the article in the drawer articulates how the younger one's lungs harvest a sludge that keeps him from thriving.

For the younger one, the whole room is a smudge. Standing in front of the drawer in the kitchen, he's drugged by the day's light that reflects against the drawer knob. So he sways toward his reflection in the knob. His mouth folds and stretches and shrinks into

his dimpled cheek and in the dimple he watches his face become lipless. In the shine of the knob, over his shoulder his brother's reflection—the older one—towers upside down in the doorway.

The older one, now standing next to the younger one, taps on the drawer knob and says, When this opens, you know what will happen.

The younger one sways away from the drawer, watches his mouth return in the knob as the older one says, The air has done this to you, that and what's in here, he says, tapping hard on the younger one's chest.

The younger one shivers as the older one slowly slides the drawer open. The younger one feels his chest tighten, the air inside harden, as the older one pinches the younger one on his elbow, he says, Those tears shaking out your face are dripping right back into you through the syringes that will stab you, so maybe if you stopped leaking all over the place, you wouldn't have to be refilled.

The older one holds the younger one from collapsing as he digs through the open drawer. He takes the stethoscope out and presses it against the younger one's useless ribs, then he presses a splintered tongue depressor against the younger one's soft teeth, against the roof of his mouth while he reaches in the drawer and grabs the article and throws it on the floor, points at it, That says your lungs are shit, he says, as he tries to rip the article with his shoe, that's pretty shitty of them, don't you think.

The father, now standing behind them, inches his fingers around the older one's neck, gently pats the younger one on the shoulder, and he tugs the stethoscope from the older one. He shoves the stethoscope and the tongue depressors into the drawer. He then slams

the drawer shut and tells the older one to quiet by snapping at him as he opens the drawer and takes pill bottles and needles out and sets them on the counter.

The father picks the article off the floor. He straightens the crumpled pages along the edge of the counter and starts reading it to the whimpering younger one who just stares into the metal drawer knob. The father stops a moment to say to the older one how the younger one's peak flow is under par, that with his shaking it's best not stick him with a needle, and that he needs him to loosen his mind up so he can work the pills into him—so the father starts humming, stops a moment and says to the older one, The sound of voices is calming for him, it eases both his shaking mouth and his tightened rear, he says.

Humming isn't the sound of a voice, it's the sound of machines, the older one says.

The father snaps his fingers at the older one.

You shouldn't read the article to him all the time, he barely knows that his face in the knob isn't his real face, the older one says.

The father snaps at the older one again and says, The problem is that you tell him what he doesn't remember, you tell him what he doesn't need to know, my humming focuses him to the truth, he says, See how he looks at the humidifier, that's what he knows.

The father snaps his fingers and turns the article to the older one, humming to the younger one, now pointing at a word, and in a hard whisper, he tells the older one, You're not helping out here, and he points at the article, saying to the older one, it's your antagonism that is worsening his Luekotrine levels.

No one understands what you're saying, the older one says, And he should be told things that he can understand, is all, and the thing about the humidifier is that it hums cool water, not hot breath, he says.

The father slides his finger down the page, holds his finger tip under another word, and he hard whispers to the older one, you're familial fits will broncospasmodically ruin him and us as a family.

That paper your holding is ruining us, that drawer, it's ruining us, the older one says, and he tells the father how his brother has stopped talking altogether, All he does is look at himself in that drawer knob, or draw pictures all over the windows or into the dusty table tops or on the dusty television, all he does is smear pictures of pill-headed beasts with large lab coats, or needle-headed pills with knuckles and toes and tails, he says.

And the father interrupts, Those dust particles are tiny bits of dead skin, and maybe if you were to wipe the death from the tables, it wouldn't climb into your brother's chest.

What he needs, the older one says, is to go outside and get some fresh air, is all, let him struggle it out some, he says.

And the father just snaps at the older one and hums to the younger one. So the older one starts snapping at the father and pointing to the living room.

He can't help but point to the living room.

There the mother is lining inhalers along the window ledge while thickening the air with cans of germ killing spray.

The older says, Maybe she could pull her weight some, maybe if she weren't too

busy bleaching the shadowed parts of the rooms she could to pay attention to the dusty countertops.

But the father snaps at the older one again, and the older one points at the mother again, so the father, with his heel, shoves the older one past the mother and out onto the porch, he says to the older one, Go run around for the day, and the older one says, she's bleaching the humidifier water, so what's that about, he says, and the father says, Make sure to inhale deeply when chasing tail pipes, and don't stop until you grab a bumper and when you grab onto one, be sure to hold on tightly.

\* \* \*

Out on the porch, the older one opens a window so he can hear the father's humming turn into one of his stories he tells as a way not to ruin the younger one, he listens to the father tell the younger one that the older one is filled with lies, and then he tells the younger one the truth about why he can't leave the house: he says how the poisonous outdoors could crawl under his skin, how the air out there could suck out the oxygen one limb at a time, shrink you down into a wheezy glob of meat, so that's why you must watch from the windows as the older one leaps off the porch or glides down the driveway on his bike, under that filthy aired sky, but remember, the father says, you should imagine what you would like to do by drawing how the older one rides or runs, and that you could sketch his shirt flapping, or how he ducks under those sycamores that line the street, or how he dodges branches and eventually dips into their arms until he blends into them and disappears.

\* \* \*

So the older one waits for the father to leave for work, waits and watches from behind a

tree until he sees the younger one standing at an upstairs window, an inhaler plugged into his mouth, his finger pressed against the window.

The older one motions for the younger one to open the window, and with every arm movement, with every step the older one takes, the younger one slides his finger across the window, the younger one tracing his steps—the older one walking in circles, watching the younger one's hand loop around terrain already drawn; the younger one stopping, holding his finger tip in a corner, the older one stepping out of the circle, toward the point, the younger one zigzagging to the opposite corner, the older one zigzagging, face first into a tree, tumbling into the ground, mudding his shirt.

So the older one climbs the gutter, stands on the roof, motioning with extended middle fingers, telling the younger one to unlock the window. Screws in the window frame hold the window shut. The older one had never noticed that before. The younger one wipes the smeared window, slowly draws the older one's middle fingered hands, so the older one speaks loader, tells him to open the window already.

The way the humidifier is set up the older one can see the humidified air swirling toward the younger one, it constantly wets the window, soaks streams of light that bathe through the younger one's wet window drawings. Everything he draws drips away after he draws it.

So the older one tells the younger one how, at night, the parents use to run vapor creams over the younger one's chest, how they would soak his throat with oils, lather him with lotions, to open his breathing channels for a bit before the mother would pour hot candle wax on his chest as a way to train his lungs to clinch right. He says, She'd hum and sway and circle you with long shafts of wax and sometimes she'd use a tambourine

as a way to sink into the undercurrents of your breathing, play your chest a jingle to spark it into humming out the wheeze.

The younger one doesn't say anything, lets the inhaler fall from his lips, so the older one flicks at the window tells him how he doesn't need that thing anyway, just hurry and open the window already, and while he waits, he watches the younger one sweat at it, and the older one reminds him how he has no memory of how the parents thought heartworms were trying to chew through your heart valves. Or how they thought you had a rare form of a worm that they expected to burst through your chest at any moment. How they thought that maybe the heat from the hardened candle wax would seal that beast inside so it would just wither away in there—and now he flicks at that window because the younger one's eyes are too focused on him and not the window—and he tells him how he doesn't remember how I was forced to go to bed without a mere hug or a handshake while they perched next to your bed, just waiting for you to gasp or wheeze or cough. He says, I was forced to steal glances from them as they were steely waiting and clutching each other, gasping at your natural ability to take a deep breath every now and then, gasping and waiting for your mouth to turn blue, waiting for you to seize up, or waiting for the head of one of those bloodsucking parasites to burst through your stupid ribs and chew clean through you.

Now the younger one is looking beyond the older one. The window is inched slightly open, hung there by the nails, and in the stream of air that breezes in he sees what he doesn't remember: coughing himself awake and clearing his throat as the shadowed figure of either the mother or father stood in the doorway. A sharp exhale screaming through a clogged nostril. Waking to the father's palm lightly pressing against his chest

before petting him asleep, or the mother's finger rubbing above his upper lip, scrambling around his nostrils, tapping and pinching, squeezing his airway shut until the room nearly bursts, until his eye nearly explodes and drips down his cheek, until he finally squeezes a stream of air by her fingers.

And then it happens: his eyelids sink and the humidified air inches toward him until it wraps around him and grabs at him—slow at first, then the constriction settles in as the heavy air hangs in and around his mouth, teasing him as he gasps and flops on the floor and pounds on the wall.

The older one's trying to jam the window open as the inhaler is just out of reach, and when the younger one starts struggling and pounding on the window, when the air leaves him and the blurry mother rushes into the room, the older one slides to the side of the window, out of sight. At first the older one thinks the younger one is trying to furiously kick air into his chest by flopping around, but then the older one realizes he's covering his eyes, slapping at the mother's fingers, his weak hands pushing her away as she slides an inhaler into him.

So the older one slides down the gutter, splitting his forehead on his way down. Blood trickles down his cheek as he stands on the porch for a while before quietly sitting outside the window that looks into the kitchen. There he dampens the blood with his dirt stained shirt as he looks into the kitchen.

There the younger stands, in front of the drawer, shaking into his reflection as the mother stands behind him. She places her hand on his shoulder, showing him how to breathe by raising her hands over her head before reaching into his mouth and pulling at his jaw. Then she opens the drawer, she hands him an inhaler before she puts it into his

mouth. And now he just stares at that syringe, as she lifts it from the drawer, as she squeezes a bit of air through the needle, as she pushes the air through his hair, and he shivers, and she smiles before she puts the syringe away, she motions how the pin prick would draw blood, how it would hurt more than having another pill placed in him, and she freezes her grin, showing him how to bare it, as she runs her other hand through his hair, shaking the pills, shrugging her shoulders as a way to let him know that he can wait until the father gets home from work to decide which one he'd prefer.

And as she places the pills and needles in the drawer, as she begins to prepare dinner, the younger one begins panting and wheezing. She listens to his chest as whatever is on the stove burns and smokes and he coughs himself into the dining room where he waits at the window.

And he's still standing there when the older one makes his way back into the house, there, looking out the window, he breathes in the fumes from the inhaler, as the older one opens the front door, home, breathing deeply, his cheeks flush, with mud stained elbows and his shirt damp with rain and grass swirling in the steam that lifts from his shoulders while blood trickles from his eyebrow.

And the younger one drops the inhaler and rushes over to him, and the mother dashes in, gasps and grabs the inhaler while rapidly approaching, and while pushing the older one out of the way, she digs her fingers into the younger one's chest, presses her ear against his ribs, works the inhaler in between his lips.

The older one stands there looking at him as blood slides down his face and drips onto the carpet.

So he takes the stethoscope and tongue depressors from the drawer, grabs the

article and offers to watch the younger one down in the basement so the mother can try to make something of whatever is burning on the stove. Down in the basement, the older one tells him that we're going to write a letter to all those doctors who treated him. The younger one just sits in front of the television as the older one spreads the depressors all over the floor. He swings the stethoscope over his head and the younger one just wheezes while listening to the footsteps creaking in the ceiling. So he pulls him off the couch, puts cushions on the floor, layers the couch cushions with toilet paper, tells him its an exam table.

Then he pins him onto the table by pressing my knees onto shoulders. The older one shifts his weight onto the younger one's chest, and he starts hacking and tries to scream as the older one jams the knob of the stethoscope against his chest, then he taps and digs the depressors into his ribcage, We're gonna get what's wrong out of there by writing a letter, he says.

So the older presses the depressor onto the chest of the younger one, spelling out, Dear Doctor: do you remember telling our mom that my brother's chest would have to be cracked open if she didn't do what you say? Do you remember saying how my brother's chest would have to be replaced with tubes and screwdrivers? Do you remember my mom saying that if you were to put a finger on her angel than she'd replace your bladder with a bag? Do you remember that look you had when you decided to let our parents walk out of your office with my brother's chest still together as long as they understood that if the mark in his chest was still there then you would carve out a piece of him? Do you remember laughing when I asked if the chilled thermometer lodged into my brother was the same warm one that you placed under his tongue or how you told my brother

how he was a natural, and how nice it would be if the animals down at the lab were this good natured?

The older one realizes that the younger one is trying to buck him off his chest, that he's unable to buck him from his chest, and before the younger one can buck the older one from his chest, the father's footsteps interrupt them, as he's now home from work and now he's calling for the younger one from the kitchen.

Now they're both standing next to the drawer, timing their short breathes to the father rattling the bottle of pills with one hand, pushing air through the syringe with his other hand, and he looks at the older one with that hard stare as he explains to the younger one how people in other countries sleep in drawers to save space, that they often dream of larger drawers, ones that look like the grey skies that hang outside the younger one's window, and that he needs to remember that if he were to walk out into those cloud covered skies filled with those airborne toxins, it'd be like walking into those drawer dweller's dreams, and no one wants to crush another's dreams, the father says, and besides, you'd frighten them into sucking all the air out of their sealed space, perhaps even ending the drawer dwelling civilization as we knew it, which, could, consequently end you too, he says.

The younger one looks at him puzzled, a bit frightened, and the older one is confused too as the father tells the younger one how that is why you should never open the drawer under the sink, that is why you should also never take anything out of here, no depressors, no stethoscopes, nothing, he says, even when you can't breathe, because a colony of those tiny folks have taken up residence in all those bottles and syringes, and if

you try to take matters into your own hands they might give you too much air, he says, and they also need the stethoscope to hear my van pulling into the driveway, because they're only willing to slip some of their air into you through my hands, and you have to understand that you have to allow them to get enough rest, because they do a lot of work once they're in you, he says, as he puts the syringe back into the drawer and twists the top of the bottle off.

The younger one is still confused, so he looks at his own reflection in the drawer handle as the father digs into the bottle. The younger one shivers at the thought that all those people his father just talked about are really all those laughing and shrinking doctors. And as their chuckles echo into the younger one, the older one asks the father how the doctors melted into these pills, or how they could shrink into all these bottles, and the father places some pills in the younger one's mouth and tells the younger one how you should just feel lucky they melt into things that can help you breathe, and he hands him a glass of water and says, you should try to get this down your throat, and try to imagine what it would be like if these horse pills were really a herd of Mustangs just waiting to be shoved into you so they could gallop and burst through your chest, and the mother scolds the father with a glare as the younger one feels the pills on his tongue block his airway. So the younger one hacks up the pills, and as the father picks them up from the floor, the younger one turns around and drops his pants, grabs his ankles, and there he waits for the pills, one by one, to be shoved inside him.

Well, the father says, as he slips the pills in, you should be lucky that these things disappear in you is what I'm getting at.

The father leaves the bottle of pills on the counter, washes his hands, as the family

sits at the diner table. There the younger one stares at the drawer, as the mother chops his meat. He stares as the father plops an ice cube into his glass of beer. He watches as the bubbles pick away at the cube as the father tells the mother how just because he can't breathe right doesn't mean that he can't slice his own meat. The younger one just stares at those pills as the older one asks if they can just chop the horse pills like the mother does to the meat, and the father says how doctors orders are doctors orders, so the pills will remain in full until they're placed in their proper place, and besides, the father says to the older one, you don't want ground horse meat clicking its heels through him, that's not right.

After dinner, as the older one and the mother slurp on a bowl of ice cream, the younger one stands by the drawer, trembling as the father's sandpaper textured hands slide down his lower back, one before dinner, one after, the father says—the whole family now silent—watching as the father's finger disappears into him.

The younger one sits back down at the table. The older one and the mother rewardingly smile at him as the ice cream dissolves into their mouths—his bowl rapidly turning into a creamy soup, the pill slowly dissolving, and the boy grimaces at that drawer, continually confused, wondering how the soup can melt in the mother's and the brother's mouths and in his bowl, and how the pills can dissolve in him and melt the air around him so the air can thin out and ease into him—and there he is wondering with all these things melting, how the article in the drawer can explain what hardens in his lungs but how it can't describe how all those shrinking doctors got crammed into those large pills.

### **The Impossible Dripping Heap**

Nag resurfaces outside my window as I'm having a bad time of it. He tells me that what I'm going through is all in my head. He wants to help, if I'll let him help. I tell him I'm finished, nearly finished. He asks if I am spreading sawdust across the floor again. I tell him I'm also molding mounds of sand in certain tender spots. He tells me that no one in his right mind should go this far for a nebulous drop of muck that refuses to drip from a ceiling. I tell him how there is a world in that hanging drop—an always in between tauntingly stagnant pit, it's angry and thirsting for something but deflated and finished with it all.

He tells me that I should focus on something simple, something I can grasp. I tell him I'm waiting for something simple—it's right here—and he says what I need is a little give and take. I tell him it's out of my hands. He tells me I have lost it. I tell him it's right here. I'm merely waiting for it to drip. He tells me that I'm merely imagining it.

Then he hacks yellow mouth foam onto the ground, smears it with the tip of his shoe, and tells me that it's funny I should mention things dripping because he has had an aching case of it for sometime—it's ticking up my spine, it's burning and tickling, it's everywhere, he says. He stretches his mouth wide, asks if I can see it, and I ask him how

he plans to help me and solve it. He says how he has never felt more alive, every orifice screams, he says, every time he goes to the bathroom he shivers from not being cold in as long as he can remember, you just have to learn to let go of it, he says.

I tell him that I just don't know, and he says that if I could only understand it than maybe I would understand. I tell him I probably wouldn't understand. He then says that if I help him through the window, he will help me understand it. He says I should have a taste of it. I tell him that I have decided to forgo the inevitable anguish of interactions, so when the drop finally drips, I say, I'm finished. How, I'm not sure. It is merely a matter of when. He then tells me to wait, to just wait—says if I can just hold off until he comes back than he'll help me learn how to handle a little give and take. I tell him that it's out of my grasp, and in the end, I have decided to let the drop decide when my end will arrive, and he says how he will hurry back.

The weight in the wait for the end aches—so I wait, sleep standing, crane necked, at the foot of my bed—It's in the weight of waking under light bulbs long spent, of nearly drowning on my tongue severed in sleep, of blood clots long since spilled into my beard—It's in the weight of standing in darkness, of inducing a dream not dreamt through a tear bursting tongue bite, further severing my tongue under the drop dripping onto my moist shoulder—it's everywhere—above the glow of a lit match under the above drop dripping and recoiling into a watermarked spiral stretching across the entire ceiling—it's everywhere—under the drop dripping into a stream running through my clotted beard, streaming into a blood puddle soaked into the sawdust and rising above the sole of my shoe.

There is relief: a gentle toe tap in the blood slush before testing the give and take of the tightening noosed curtain. There is the agony of interruption: Nag resurfacing. He's pushing someone in a wheelchair. He sees me through the window, and he tells me to wait, and I tell him I have been waiting and the drop finally dripped. Now it's merely a matter of how. He says to un-loop my neck so I can meet the man in the wheelchair. His son. Nag tells me that he thinks about me as if I were also his son. He then tells me not to worry. The wet bloody rag that covers his son's face is not his son's rag. The blood on the rag is not his son's blood, either. The potted vine plant in his lap is his son's, though. He says that his son is taking care of something, and what I need is to nourish myself by taking care of something, a little give and take, he says. I wipe blood from my beard. I tell him that I need a proper hook, something sturdier than this shoddy curtain rod. His son's nervous legs twitch under a waterlogged blanket. Nag straightens the plant, says that the vine comes with a hook and a rope for the pot to hang from. His son mumbles in agony and confusion as he shivers or convulses from the chest down. I rest my cheek on the damp windowsill and watch Nag's ruined fingers straighten the plant, tuck a necklaced whistle into the collar of his son's damp dressing gown, adjust the soaked stocking cap that holds the bloody rag over his son's face as Nag says that the blood on the rag is the only thing neglected here.

I tell Nag they disgust me.

There's something dripping, something has happened, Nag's son says.

Something is happening, Nag says.

It's unbearable, I say.

Nag says that if he could leave his son in one of my closets for a while maybe his son would stop complaining long enough for Nag to put everything in order. I remind him that I am actually living in a closet and that my closets are nothing more than a run down industrial sized washer and drier set. Shortly before I moved in, a tenant tried to cremate a three-legged dog in drier. The poor dead thing crashed around in there until its blood split through its stomach and splattered onto the circuits. Shorted it out. Burnt the room in half. Dog clumps still clog the lint filter. As for the washer, it's somehow hooked to a long since rotted septic tank. My most awful excrement would freshen the set.

Nag interrupts, says I would only have to wait for his son to whistle me. I tell him there's no room for his dripping heap of a son; I already have a near river leaking onto the foot of my bed. He says he needs to put things in order so that he can help me. Says his son will catch his death out here, you don't want that on your hands, he says. It's my time, I say. Nag's son says that there's something is dripping again. So I press my forehead against the windowsill and tell Nag that I have things to do, and that whether his son lives or dies is out of my hands. When I lift my head, I ask Nag where he is going, he says he will hurry back. His son, however, remains outside my window.

I decide to push Nag's son into my apartment after watching him cough and shake and moan for sometime. He continues to complain that there's something dripping. I tell him that from where he's sitting it's raining and where we are heading, well, it's just awful. He repeats that there's something dripping, so I tell him that he wouldn't understand, that if he could understand than maybe he'd understand, and he tells me that something is

happening. So I tell him that in a while he will be able to once again say that something has happened.

In my apartment, after sometime, Nag's son removes the bloody rag from his face. He is wearing dark glasses. He clears his throat onto the floor and asks if I'm curious to see his eyes, they have turned all white, he says. No, I say. Besides, I say, the light in here is terrible. He yawns, says that he wants to go bed then, and that he wants a fresh sheet. I tell him that I only have one sheet and right now it's hanging from the window. He asks what do I use to keep warm. The curtain, I say. I then tell him I have things to do.

He says that outside of my apartment is death, this, in here, is it. He then asks me for a painkiller. I look around my apartment for objects that would end me, and I tell him that it's time it ended and he confronts me about it. If it means misery, he says, take a look at me and talk about it. Then he asks why I don't kill him. I won't, I say. He asks me why not. I tell him I have only what it takes to finish myself. So he asks if I'll finish us. I tell him that I will finish myself, first. He says that my mere presence pollutes my apartment, and that he wants me to place him in front of the washer and drier, beside my bed. He says that he wants to be front and center when it begins. You mean when it ends, I say. Don't you know the end is in the beginning, he says, and why did you sludge up the floor, I'm sinking, he says. To soak up the stench, I say, when it ends. You mean when it begins, he says. Whenever it is that I'm finished, I say.

So he starts blowing his whistle, asks me when I'll get him a painkiller. Tells me there's some in the cupboard. I tell him I do not have a cupboard. Then I wheel him under the dripping spigot in the ceiling, tell him that the streaming drip needs to nourish his

plant, it needs to give a little, I say. He says for me to be quiet, that there will be no more conversation, no more words spoken until he gets his painkiller. He then interrupts the silence, says how there's something dripping, always the same spot. Perhaps it's a heart in the pot. It's finished, nearly finished, he says.

Why don't you tell me a story, he says as I re-noose the curtain. I tell him that my dying light is projected on the ceiling. He says he sees some naked give and take. So I let go of the curtain and show him, in the shadow of a lit match, how each watermarked spiral on the ceiling bends and bubbles the paint. Under another lit match, I show him how something is happening, the spiral is webbing down the walls. Watery veins have bulged spores under the paint. He tells me to scratch at the wall, peel back the paint. See if the spores have bloomed; get it started, he says. I tell him that this is my story, and they'll bloom when they bloom. He says that I'm no fun, and what I need is a little initiative. So I tell him that soon, the pot will overflow. The vines will vein my mattress, creep up the walls and blend with the spores. My pillow will quickly dissolve into a feathery sludge. My single blanket will turn gooey. The sawdust and sand on the floor will turn to a soup and start to rise.

That will do, he says—do I smell a dog, he says, it is coming from there? He points motions over his shoulder, at the washer and drier. Open it. Let it out, he says. There here is no dog, I say. You probably don't need to open it, then, he says. There is nothing, I say. Then open it! He says. Have you opened it? He asks, yes, I say as I open the washer. He then blows his whistle again, something just crawled across my foot, hold my hand, he says. That's the plant overflowing, I say. The plant has a hook, he says, why

don't you hang it in its rightful place and move me into the center of the room, I want to be in the right place when it begins.

I tell him I'll do so if he holds the curtain while I hang the hook. He asks me if it is time for his painkiller yet. Soon enough, I say. To my surprise he welcomes the bloody rag when I cover his face with it. Then I place the wound curtain on his head. He thanks me for the sheet. I stand on the arms of his wheelchair and screw the hook into the spot where the drip has been streaming. Do you know what it is, he asks. What is it? I ask. It always happens without me, he says as I string the noosed curtain to the wavering ceiling.

I awake at the foot of Nag's son, under a chunk of electrical wires and rusted water pipes that hang and shoot sparks and spray rust water onto the noosed curtain. Nag's son's shoe is floating in a pool of rust and blood soaked sawdust. His toes are tapping in a wake of rising water cresting along the clotted tip of my beard. I strained my shoulder in the fall. Lost a tooth. Planting soil clods my hair, which is twined in vines. Nag's son says something has happened. I begin to ask him if the mold spores are blooming, but I'm distracted by a noise coming from either the washer or drier. A voice is echoing and something is scraping against something. Teeth grinding down to the gums. A sharp edge digging through a bone. Something is happening, move me to the center of the room, Nag's son says.

In between the washer and drier a shapeless shaded mass scrapes something against the drier. I ask it if it has come for me. When the shaking stops, a voice echoes from the drier and a foot creeps out of the shade and lights a match with its toes. A woman's wet face glows above the lit tip of a match. A tooth of hers spits toward me. At

first, I think it's a match. How it doesn't singe onto the wet sawdust and how she tongues her gums under the flame of another lit match tells me otherwise. She sits, rain-drenched, her short sleeve shirt soaking her armless sockets. I ask her if she has come to finish me. She lights a cigarette with her toes, raises it to her lips, and continues tearing matches. I'm amazed that she can keep her cigarettes and matches dry. With an arched foot, she cups the flames. Then she flicks tiny bursts of fire toward me. Nag's son sits at the foot of the bed with his back facing her. He asks what's happening as she says something out the side of her mouth and blows smoke rings that lift through the room. How she pulses smoke rings. Each tight circle brims, vibrates, a floating target for another matched fireball to float through.

What is it, my pet? She says as she stands. She circles the drier, then climbs into the open washer and curls in.

Time for love? She asks as smoke rings circle out of the washer.

What's happening, Nag's son says.

I walk over and lift the lid of the drier. Nag has been in there for I don't know how long. He's laughing or crying. I close the lid on the drier. Nag's echoing voice asks the woman for a kiss. Laughter echoes from the washer and drier. Nag's son asks what's happening again. I tell him that something is taking its course—it must be nearly finished. It has to be nearly finished, I say as I close the lid on the washer.

He tells me not to speak anymore about it. It's time it ended. He lifts the bloody rag from his face and he tells me he'll help, if I'll let him help, just move me to center of the room, it's time it ended, he says. You mean it's time it began, I say.

Don't you know the beginning is in the end, he says.

### **Scraping the Sky**

There is a thud, a trembling screech, and desperate sounds of a creature startled on the ledge outside my window. Inside my top floor apartment, a six-floor walk up in Harlem, the ceiling shakes. There are scattering shrills above the wavering layer of black rot that cakes the flaking paint on my ceiling. The rot creeps down the walls, along the rusty door hinges, and covers the window latches. Until now the rot was the only barrier separating me from the creatures living in my ceiling. I'm not sure what these creatures are, really, but that is neither here nor there, because one has chewed its way out onto the ledge. And now that it's clawing and scratching or pecking at the window, which are perhaps the sounds of it dying against the glass, leads me to believe that it is only a matter of time before the rest of the creatures burst through what remains of my ceiling.

I'm not sure what to do, so I open the curtain, I'd open the window but the window requires tools to whittle through the rot, and I don't have tools. Instead, I rub my eyes and search the ledge for the animal, but all I see, elegantly suspended in the air, is a

sack of garbage floating by the window. How the plastic sack ripples reminds me of the night before, when, as I slid into my bed, there, through the curtain, I saw a fireball torching through the humid night from the melting building across the street. On the previous night, I went to the roof and smoked a cigarette while I watched the embers scattering up the walls as the firemen methodically and mechanically ripped apart anything in the building that was flammable. They saved the building by ripping it apart, really, and I just stood there and flicked my cigarette butt down onto the street as the firemen threw couches and chairs out the window. Then I leaned over the ledge and watched the furniture crash against the sidewalk. My cigarette butt landed behind a group of onlookers who stood in the middle of the street. They were shrouded in dark wool blankets. They clapped and cheered as end tables and couches split and shattered in front of them. I'm still not sure what they were excited about.

Now, as I watch this bag float outside my window, the steam pipe shoots steam and hisses and clangs and rattles while it spits onto the ceiling. Bubbles moisten the black rot. The pidgins—or are they rats? Raccoons?—in the ceiling are riled and scraping around, rolling what sounds like marbles along the tender ceiling. Everyday I wake up to dozens of these marbles rolling above me, and now that one of them has thudded onto the ledge the rest are soon to follow, and I'm busy looking for the one on the ledge, but the plastic bag is floating in the same place, just sitting there, suspended in a rippling motion, six floors up, and just as it begins to move on, garbage pours out of the bag, garbage pouring out of floating garbage, and I follow the piece that slips out as it falls down on the street where an echoing car alarm draws my tired eyes.

I press my forehead against the window and look down at the blinking lights of the erupting car. A group stands around the shattered remains of last night's fire. Someone stands near the bumper of the screaming car, patting the taillight just hard enough to keep the alarm continuous. The rest of the group leans against other cars. Someone taps on the building with shards of a burnt desk, while others imitate the yelps of the car alarm. The creature on the ledge is still nowhere to be seen so I slide my head against the glass before resting it on the windowsill. I rest on the stained paint until my alarm clock sounds, until I climb out of bed and shuffle to the kitchen so I can refresh yesterday's coffee, then head to the roof.

On the roof, I look out onto skyline. I had read somewhere that this island used to be a rippled, swampy landscape that has been shaved down and altered by people who expanded the landmass by stuffing garbage into the sea before piling buildings on the trash. Building up to the sky on a sea of spent light bulbs, on worn rubber, on shattered furniture, garbage that's stacked onto garbage, and now, the once plush natural landscape has been quarantined, reduced to manmade parks with nonnative trees. But this is why I came here, though, to New York, to escape nature, really. Too much open space can make you an idealist. It can make you delusional. It can make you believe in things that aren't there, things like the future. It can ruin you, really. What you need is hard daily truths in the face of stench. What you need is a constant heightened sensory overload to overwhelm the senses. Streets where the breeze carries urine mixed with rotten shrimp tails. Curdled tampons smeared under bus seats. Places within places where a single breath can trigger all sorts of bodily response activities that you thought weren't possible.

And that's why I moved here. I was living in Portland, and while house sitting in a very large house, I found myself trapped, due to a faulty doorknob, in a tiny bathroom that served as a giant litter box for the owner's very small cat. Soiled newspaper clung to the tiled floor. Sopping cardboard layered the bathtub. Crystallized magazines covered the sink and counter top. The cat purred comfortably in a cushioned, litterless liter box that sat next to the toilet. I tore at the faulty doorknob, slammed my limbs against the sealed window, but the more I moved, the more intense the wafts of urine became, so I ended up passing the time by taking long contemplative moments with each object in the medicine cabinet. I rearranged each object in various orders, from oldest to newest, from filthiest to the most shriveled, from hardest to glueyist, and whatever containers I found empty I filled with other liquids, and after what seemed days, I shifted my time to sitting on the toilet and petting this tiny cat who had emptied large amounts of urine on this otherwise pleasant bathroom.

After some more time, I peeled away a layer of a hardened magazine and began reading an article about a practice of rehabilitation directed primarily at New York inner city youth who had been caught up in street violence. These youth had been convicted of violent crimes and had never been outside of their neighborhood, never seen a patch of nature outside a public park—this article said how this program dropped these young criminals into cabins in the woods as a way to divorce them from their environments, seclude them and nip their criminal cycles, and what they found was these youths' first sublime experiences didn't occur in their tough ghetto environments, rather, their first terrifying experiences came while out in these cabins, while they were standing or sitting behind an open window, separated from their fears by a mesh screen. As they looked out

into the vast darkness of the woods, their minds became enmeshed with millions of tiny insects scurrying around, clicking and chirping, croaking and calling, all these sounds echoing through the darkness, the hum of night and the consistent rustle replacing the sudden car alarms, the jerking car horns, the gunshots that breakup the evenings gatherings, these youth were terrified by the lack of flickering lights, the absence of bass vibrating the windows, these youths were terrified of the active creeping calm within the dark forest, the unsettling stillness, the silence. These youth were utterly terrified of the dark.

After reading this article, something came over me—there was something about the intensity of the cat’s urine mixed with the cat’s purring that allowed for me to convince myself that I needed to reverse the logic of this article. I convinced myself that I needed to get away from the expansiveness of the Northwest, what I needed was less space, tighter living conditions, what I needed was for my feet to swell from the summer heat, what I needed was a stench to consistently fill my lungs in order to really feel what it was like to live.

And now I’m here, in Harlem, standing on my roof, looking down at the charred remains of the apartment across the street, and at this moment I realize that what I’m lacking is the calming presence of an animal to pet, something that will sit in my lap and not scratch at my window or through my ceiling, because every night when whatever is in my ceiling quiets, the night fills with car alarms and hollers with babies crying on the street corner until dawn, as the windows shake from too much bass down on the street, and because, really, the only animal I have come across was the raccoon at the entrance of Central

Park West, on 103 street, at the peak of day. The raccoon perched along the edge a garbage can, gripped and threw trash at the onlookers who intensely inched closer to take a picture as the raccoon stuffed its face with half eaten garbage. The people eagerly stepped closer. They pursed their lips as they snapped pictures of this hissing animal who began throwing chicken bones and soiled napkins at them with one hand while it crammed smashed beans into its mouth with the other—It's at this moment, on my roof, that I realize I need to seek out something of an experience in New York—at this moment, I choose to experience a museum exhibit because I had heard of one at the Guggenheim titled *I Want to Believe* that had images of violence and a separate or connected exhibit involving animals that I now realize I have to see, because there is something calming about taking in pictures of silent faces that are frozen in fear, there's something calming about having a moment with statues of animals in a temperature-controlled environment that will, I believe, settle my nerves.

When I arrive at the museum I stop just inside the entrance. A sweaty tourist yells at me in German as he pushes me off his bag that somehow happened under my foot. I just look at him and point toward the ceiling, motioning toward the animal exhibit that lines the spiral walkway. There, I say with a glance, and he walks the other way, so I head toward the walkway where wolves suspend from the ceiling.

The wolves are hook-hung, pulling a nonexistent sled, their frozen mouths clawing at the air, their malicious paws hanging above the onlookers' heads. At the end of the exhibit, on the top floor of the museum, a large slat of clear plastic blocks the wolves' path. But the wolves continue into the sheet, colliding and curling against the

barrier, curling and cresting against an inevitable barrier, their faces showing an aggressive confusion, their spines curving, each awkwardly struggling on the floor, twisting and desperately fighting to get back into line. When I get to the end of the exhibit, on the top floor, I turn to work my way back through, to take in more detail of these beasts, but the crowd is swelling and I realize I don't have it in me to fight my way back to the bottom floor, so I take the elevator and leave, not even looking at the exhibit on violence. I leave content, muttering to myself something as I walk across Central Park, along the northern edge of Jackie Onassis Reservoir. I stop and stare into the enameled water, into the still water of this manmade pond that strangely, in this light, looks plastic, or perhaps even granite. Tiny statues of turtles perch along the rocks that bleed into this painted surface. I'm amazed at how lifelike they look, how authentic their necks stretch toward the warmth of the sun, even though the sun is nowhere to be seen, and as I'm thinking about how the creator of the wolves could take a lesson from these utterly realistic moldings, a turtle statue drops from a boulder, plops into the water, its little feet inching out of its shell, its nose barely piercing the surface as another falls in, and another floatingly swims, and a few others simply turn their noses toward the clouds, taking in the warmth of the day from their seemingly frozen position on the rocks—dozens of them, part of the rocks at one moment, apart from the rocks at the next minute, piercing the surface by merely taking a step in one direction, and now I'm snapping my head around at passersby, wanting to grab a certain gentleman who is wearing a leopard print shirt, wanting to drag him to the fence so we can share this moment, but the man walks on before I can share this with him, and the more I stare at people, the faster they walk away, and I can't get the thought of these living turtles out of my head, can't help but

think that the wolves in the museum are busy writhing themselves from those hooks, and I want to turn back toward the museum to warn people of this before their throats are shredded, but instead I find myself running in the other direction, toward the subway, I'm not sure why I'm running, really, but now I'm running down the stairs to the subway just as it arrives and everyone in the first car piles out onto the platform, and I slip past them, and now I'm looking around in the car, realizing I'm the only one in the car, pausing a moment to take in this precious private moment, that this moment here, in this rattling subway car is the only time I have had an enclosed space to myself, devoid of marbles rolling, of steam hissing, of car alarms, in here there's just the consistent rattle of the subway, and at this moment, I take a deep breath, fill my lungs with that beautiful private moment, thinking about those tranquil floating turtles, their adorable little turtle legs calmly motoring through the water, wondering if they came to the city for the same reason I did, but as I shift to thinking about the wolves frothing their teeth around the jugulars of tourists, I taste something awful in the air, a rotten, putrid flavor, and I feel my eyes watering.

I look down. I'm standing in a fresh pool of vomit. The fluid inches around the soles of my shoes and now I'm pacing, leaving footprints all up and down the aisle, waiting for the next stop, thinking that if I go to the next car, I'll smear someone else's stomach bile all over the floor, ruining the day for others, so instead, I sit, careful not to breathe in or out of my nose, I sit, breathing into my shoulder, trying to cover my mouth with my sleeve, resolved to this moment as I slouch in the car until my stop, watching at each stop as the doors open and people take a step in, then quickly step back out, their

eyes piercing through the windows as they move on and I just sit there until I arrive at my subway stop.

Up on the street, I'm walking around with the sole of my shoes covered in vomit, walking, trying to find a single blade of grass, a little weed sprouting through the asphalt, a chunk of grass nestled against a sickly tree, something, anything to wipe my shoe on. What I find, outside my apartment, is the crisp remains of the burnt building across from my apartment. So I wipe my vomit crusted heel onto a burnt couch cushion, and against the burnt building, there, a man with a burnt piece of a desk taps it against the burnt building, he's timing his taps with how I'm wiping my shoe, looking me in eye, nodding at me, and I'm nodding at him, and he's looking up at my building, and now I'm looking up at my building, and above my window, under the awning, a pigeon emerges from out of the gaping hole that I have never noticed before, and as it flaps its wings, another pigeon swoops into the hole, and I'm smiling, saying to the man, "it's just a pigeon, a sweet pigeon, the rats aren't going to chew my eyes out," and he looks at me, continuing to tap the burnt wood against the burnt building, "that's a winged rat," he says, and I don't say anything for I don't know how long, long enough that I'm now sitting on the remains of a burnt couch, not looking at anything in particular, just smiling at the thought that pigeon beaks could be much sharper than rat teeth, then he asks me just what is it that I'm smiling at, and after a while, I tell him how I'm not really sure.

### **Into the Surface**

When I think of that day, out in the Cascades, somewhere along the Pacific Ring of Fire, around one of the presidential volcanoes, on that soft land of possible shifting tectonic plates, it was on one of those un-ordinarily thick aired hot nights of summer, in a groove of firs where we went off in search of the low hanging constellations to search for a purer sense of what it meant to really breathe deeply, to refresh what it meant to be alive in the sum of an seemingly infinite space, on this particular night, under these stars, thick pulses of smoke clouds belched from the mountainside, and we stood among the thin branched sage, in the crisp forest, it was in this blurry space, in this darkness, death revealed itself to us. And now when I think of our near ending and our unending, my hand trembles, my spine aches, and I think of how he'd want me not to make a scene.

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Now all everyone talks about is how he'd want it. This is how he'd want it, they say—and I think of this as I sit at my desk, trying to unclench my hand. He'd want it this way: my fingers gnarled and mashed around each other, locked into a sweaty mess, in this

way, I'm unable to write a single word that his parents asked me to write—We just can't have anybody else do it, was what his mother said before she slid me the note. Perhaps she knew he'd want me to become jittery and twisted while looking at her words she had jotted down on his celebration of life pamphlet—*Please be sure to include this: his name, the scholarship in his name, a line from one of his little poems in front of his name. Have fun. . .that's how he'd want you to tackle this having fun, he'd want you just to be yourself having fun.*

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I know he'd want me to pace with a hard step, hour after hour, really drive my heel into the floor and pace hard from my warped desk to the locked door, stopping to cool my clinched wrist against the cool window, and he'd want me to open and close the window with my limp knuckled hand so I can fill my room with just enough ripe air, then he'd want me to just stand there and wait, listen and wait for how he'd want his story told.

How I'm cupping what's left of him, he'd flash his crooked tooth just knowing how I'm holding what's left of him, how I'm turning what's left of him so I can put what's left of him into the right words—he'd know the exact moment when I turn him in the stream of rain-soaked light that leaks through the split blinds, he'd know when I cup my ear at just the right angle so I can hear his words in me, he'd want me to hear his words—don't be a bitch, he would say, why you gotta be a bitch.

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And after hours of this pacing, he'd want me to call his girlfriend and tell her about my crippling thoughts involving that day in the high desert, he'd want me to burden her about the rituals and splattered moths, and he'd want me to tell her what of him I have left, and

about how if I can just collect myself long enough, I'll be able to tie things up right by getting his story right.

But just as she answers the phone, she interrupts and says how ridiculous the billboard down at the park is, how what his parents did down at the park is just awful—she says, Why they bought the advertisement on the billboard is beyond me. She says, It absurdly announces how his name will be dedicated on a statue of him. She says, And what are you talking about, you're mumbling.

What you're talking about, I say.

You think this is how he wants it, she says.

I know he'd want us to go down there and have a look before everyone else turns it into a shrine, I say.

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I know he'd want me to be the first to see his odd memorial, and he'd want me not to wait until the rain let up, he'd want me to arrive before his girlfriend does, wait for her with the note from his mother tucked in the jacket pocket next to what's left of him so I can tell her how I desperately can't get at his story.

On the way to the park, the rain tapers into a drizzle and the rain drips off everything, the pine needles droop, the branches sag, and all I can think of is how I'll tell her about the high desert, how him and I stood at the foot of the reservoir in awe of the surrounding mountainside that had just been enveloped by forest fires: the charcoaled trees, the blackened hills, the smoke filled clouds—how his parents sat behind us sipping their morning beers, as they filled a cooler with more beer and ice and then loaded the boat, and how I stood knee deep in the water as he began wading further out. I watched

the water ripple up my thighs, watched the streams of gasoline sparkle and vein the water beneath the pulsing smoke clouds as he swam and plunged beneath the surface. He left air bubbles behind. Sometime later as I was spelling my name in the fuel water, he burst through the water. He was screaming about snagging on something under the surface, screaming that it was wrapped around his ankle and was trying to pull him under.

He hurried out of the water and dragged this thing behind him. He squirmed in the gravel, in the sand, as this shiny thing spun around his legs. As I ran out of the water, I looked over at his parents, who were laughing and clapping, so I held him down, untangled this thing from his leg, and with his eyes closed, he drove his heel into my shin as he screamed—get it off, get it off—and when he opened his eyes, he saw his reflection in stainless steel shell that I was holding as I tickled his stomach with the prongs of the plug. I scooped sludge from inside and flicked it on him. Then I flicked the rust coated on and off switch of the toaster, and he took a long hard look at himself before he kicked at me again, I told you not to where my shorts, he said. I heard another beer open, and his parents took first swills from their new beers. They cheered as they climbed into the boat, We'll see you guys in a couple of hours, try to control yourselves, his mother said as they pushed off the shore and sped into the water.

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When I make it down to the park I see his girlfriend standing at the base of the billboard. I know he'd want me to approach her delicately, he'd want me to tiptoe over to her and startle her a bit, like he would have done, and when I don't get a response, I know he'd want me to try until she flinched, but she just continues looking at the billboard, so I keep

nudging her as she mouths his saying which is painted above a printed version of his name.

This is bizarre, she says.

We'll he'd want it this way, I say.

You think he'd want his name all over the place, she says as she steps away from me.

He'd want things to be a bit strange, I say.

Straining my neck at this strange advertisement, I tell myself how he'd want my neck to cramp from staring at his words that stand out against the otherwise empty white background of the billboard—words I'm sure he didn't write or say—He didn't sign his name like that, I tell her, that's a stenciled print, his was much more of an angled scribble, somewhere between calligraphy and a standard cursive, I say.

She just stands there, Bizarre, she says, This is what's left, this is how he'll be remembered, on a sign, she says.

I can only think of how he'd want me to stand here with her, turn and tell her how I still have a piece of him with me, I still have a piece of him with me, I say.

We all do, she says pointing to the billboard, I wonder why they bought this, she says.

I mean a chunk of him, I say, I still have it with me.

And even with her half ignoring me, I know he'd want me to pull out the sack full of what's left of him.

But she just drops her arm, doesn't say anything, doesn't even look at me as I dangle what's left of him in her direction, she just stands there mouthing his words, You

know he lifted those words from a song, I say, now cupping what's left of him and sliding him back into my pocket, I'm not sure which one, though, I say.

Well, they are catchy, she says as she now turns to me and looks at my shoes. And besides, she says, he'd want it this way—Me and you standing in awe of him.

He wouldn't want it this way, not like this, I say.

He wouldn't want you wearing his shoes, she says.

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I remind her how we had this conversation about how he'd want it back in the hospital—when I stood next to his bed, pacing, as she sat next to the respirator and picked at her fingernails. Then she picked at his fingernails and she squeezed his heart monitor finger, He wouldn't want it this way, I said to her then as she leaned toward him and ran her fingertip along his arm, he wouldn't want to be crapping in bags and nearly choking on his tongue, he wouldn't want to be remembered this way—and I tell her how we never finished our conversation as we sat in the room with him, We were interrupted by the nurse, I say, I never got to finish what I wanted to tell you when we were sitting there, how you said that he'll go a virgin, that night after everyone else left, I say to her, how you said that he'll never feel your lips wrapping around him, I remember you saying that while you tugged on his catheter, I say, I remember my head was in you lap and we were timing our breathes with the machines.

I remember holding his hand, she says.

When you squeezed his pulse finger, I say, I wanted to tell you how he sucked on that finger and didn't wash it for the whole trip, it was the finger that had been inside you, I say, and when I tell her this she flinches and her shoulders twitch, and I tell her how for

the whole ride out to the desert, He took that finger out of his mouth long enough to rub it knuckle to nail under the tip of my nose, he'd catch me as I would inhale, I tell her, The smell of his spit clouded any other smells, the wrinkled tip of that finger left a sludge of residue in my nose, the whole trip—that finger, I tell her, as I reach for her hand.

That never happened, she says, pulling her hand away.

I still can't sleep because of it, I say, he'd wait until I'd nod off—

First of all, she says, him and I never got that far, and secondly, you and I never had that conversation.

What do you mean, I say to her,

First of all, she says, he didn't know what he was doing, it was like he was punching me down there, and secondly, all I remember was me and you sitting next to him, and your head was in my lap and you started telling me how lucky he was to have his hands at his side, and how horrible it would be to die with your hands pressed to your face because if your hands were frozen in that position, and nobody found you, then for the rest of your dead life your fingernails would grow and curl into your eye sockets, she says, Those are your words, fingernails growing and curling into your eye sockets.

Nothing has ever been more true, I say.

Thanks to you, that's how I remember him, she says, With finger nails bursting through his empty eye sockets.

That's not what happened, I say, and now I'm pacing from the billboard to her, And what do you mean, punching, I ask her.

Never mind, she says,

Now I'm walking back and forth for I don't know how long and I'm telling her that's how he'd want me to tell the story, That's how things should have went with you two, I say to her.

She just shrugs, But that's not what happened, she says, and she just looks at the billboard, and I'm speechless and she doesn't say anything, and I realize I'm walking in a circle, scratching at my eyebrow, pushing on my forehead with the heel of my palm.

And after a long silence, she finally turns to me, looks at me with a hard, thinking look—You're not wearing his pants, are you, do you think he'd want you wearing his pants, she says.

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I can feel her watching me walk, back and forth, and after another long silence between us, she finally says, You haven't even said his name, since, well . . . you only call him *he*, and I'm not his girlfriend any more, so you don't have to refer me to him, I'm my own person, she says.

I point to the billboard, his name doesn't really represent him anymore, I say.

Bizarre, isn't it, she says.

I tap my pocket, tapping what's left of him, and after another long silence, I pull the letter from his mother out from the pocket. I'm careful not to accidentally let what's left of him spill out as I hand the letter to her. As she opens the letter I begin to tell her how I can't get our trip to the high desert out of my head, I can't get how we'd wake up and smash moths with the stained tennis ball, I say, I can't get it out of my head, that's how we'd start the morning, by splattering them against the side of the cabin, I say, there under the porch light they'd linger, and there we'd explode them in their sleep, and now

all I see when I close my eyes is dozens of wings and legs dried upon antennas and moth innards.

She doesn't say anything, she just slowly sits on the wet grass and looks at the letter with that hard thinking look.

You know about some of our rituals, I say.

How you flooded the school, and that old church, she says without looking up from the letter.

So I tell her how we waited along the reservoir, surrounded by the burnt hills, and how strange it was to watch his father waterskiing under smoke clouds, a beer in his hand, in a body of water where we could see our reflection in the streaks of gasoline. And she doesn't say anything, so I tell her how we stood there, watching as his parents docked their boat on the other side of the water. And then he looked me, I say to her, looked at me with his finger in his mouth, and he told me how good you tasted. Then he told me how we were going start a new ritual, something he said he thought of after we had offed all the moths. I was facing the water and the whole time I was watching his parents—and then I became anxious, I can't say why, but it was something about how he said our new ritual, and as I watched the hills burn I felt something swirling along my spine, something was grabbing at me, and the sky become thicker, the air thicker, and I couldn't breathe, all I could do was bite my lip and cringe, and all I could do is curl my body into a ball along the rocky reservoir, nearly crapping myself in the fetal position as my breathing became quicker and shorter—and when I came to, I say to her, he stood over me while I shivered in a bush. Blood was pouring out of my mouth. And when I came to again we were down along the water, and I was soaked and suspended over an oil patch in the

water. I was draped over his knees, and my toes were digging into the bank, as he cupped water into my mouth, as he scooped out blood from my hair and splashed water on my lip. I was spitting out the gasoline water as he washed my chin. I grimaced from the stinging and gagged from the smell, and he chuckled and told me how a lady knocked me out with my own shoe after I appeared from out of the bush and wrapped my arms around her ankles, that I was telling this lady that the color schemes of the mountains were actually the forth dimension opening before us. I didn't remember. Still don't. I remember just staring into the rising and falling water as blood continued blotting my reflection, each drop forming terrifying images that sunk into my face.

But we were the only one's there, I say to her, there was no woman, nobody could have run through that space, It was a cruel psychopathic joke, I was his joke, I say to her.

She just sits in the wet grass, speechless, watching me, carefully, what do you think he did, she asks.

I don't know, I say.

I realize I've carved out a pathway from the billboard to where she now sits, so I tell her about the level of anxiety that has plagued me while trying to get his story right, People want to hear about how tragic it was, I say, about how much potential he had, but all I can think about is how there's just a feeling of cruel uncertainty, I tell her.

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I continue walking from her to the base of the billboard and I reach into my pocket and feel what's left of him. I tap my fingers along the pole of the billboard, now circling her as and I run my fingers along the bag as she runs her fingers over the wet

grass, and now I'm standing behind her and looking up at his words, digging my toe into the damp ground.

So I grab what's left of him, dangle him in front of her.

Tell me that's not what I think it is, she says,

I dig my fingers into the bag, blotting my finger with his remains.

I don't think anybody wants that, she says as she steps back, not even you, if you really think about it, she says, this is for him and you and me, me and you and him, I say, blotting my tongue with his ashes, nodding toward her as I scoop another finger full, this way, me and you, this is how he'd want it, I say, in honor of him, in awe . . . and now she's pacing around me, this isn't the way he'd want it, why don't we spread him somewhere, just the two of us, he'd want that, me and you spreading him somewhere, in awe of releasing him, just the two of us, she says.

And when I realize I'm losing little chunks of him onto the wet ground, I tell her to wait, just wait a minute, I say, he wouldn't want us losing our heads over this, I say, and as I lean down to pick up his pieces she runs toward the street corner, and when I look up she's sprinting, now standing next to a tree, watching me as I scavenge for his remains, watching as I slip and fall shoulder first into a muddy patch.

I'm kicking at the wet ground. I'm hunched over, my hand clinched around the tattered bag, a pang throbbing in my stomach—there I am, standing at the base of the billboard, mud covering my upper back. There she is on the phone, pacing on the sidewalk, making it look like she's not paying attention when I know she's paying attention. There I am crane necked toward the billboard, looking at all that white space

surrounding his quote, my neck aching, now turning to her, now turning back. Then I decide to grunt and heave my way to the top.

He'd want it this way, me stepping onto the platform, this way, pacing on the metal grated platform. Now I can't tell if she's hiding behind the tree or if she's long gone—this way, ripping at the bag with my teeth, this way, and I'm sure she's there as I am here, with my shirt off, leaving nothing but fingerprints all over the canvas, this way, I tip the bag into my mouth, and then the chunks rush to the back of my throat, and there's me coughing what's left of him all over the billboard, spitting his remains across his name.

Now she's bringing people down from the sidewalk, and they're all pointing at me, watching me smear the last of him all over his words, watching me pull up a section of the billboard, watching me pull and tug a corner up, they're watching and flinching while I'm cursing and searching for a matchbook, cursing and pacing after I can't find a matchbook, now cursing and rocking on my heels, now moaning and squatting as I watch what's left of him slide off his words and fall through the slits in the platform, as I now watch and chuckle as what's left of him sprinkles the shoulders of those who are calling at me from below.

**The Thanatologist (an excerpt)**

After the man left I was left trying to make sense of the situation. There I was, a well-respected lecturer, somewhat respected in my field of Thanatology, there I was, terrified at the thought that this man that I had both lectured on and wrote about was walking up my driveway to reclaim his story, to reclaim what I divulged about him, perhaps even take something of worth that belonged to me as a way to make up for the money I made off of him.

I remember both the man and the day quite clearly—that day when I was sitting at my desk, writing out my next lecture while both pawing at the army issued pistol that my father gave me—I weapon I hold not as a way to tempt myself to write more lively lectures, no, I hold it for basic protection, because the truth is, it is the living whom frighten me, it is the silent stares of my students that terrifies me, as they sit slump shouldered while I talk to them about their mortality, about the grief that they aren't ready to face, about how perhaps tomorrow each of them could stop breathing for some terrible reason—and on that day I was also listening to the droplets of water dripping and tapping against the window until the hum of the rain was interrupted by the fan belt

screeching from a passing car. I remember the anger I felt as the noise intensified, that hissing and squealing, that terrible piercing scream from under the hood, and I remember opening the blinds with the barrel of the pistol as the car stopped in front of my house.

And there he was—the man rolling down his window and looking toward my house—and I remember thinking, quite certainly, that I had seen this man somewhere, and that this wasn't the first time this man was altering my work schedule, and I remember thinking that if he were to get out of the car, I would consider pulling my unloaded army issued pistol on him if it meant he would climb back into his car and leave me alone while I was writing.

And as I heard the engine shut off, I swore to myself that I had seen this man's shiny baldhead somewhere, so I searched my filing cabinet for a folder full of a series of lectures. And there, in a folder, attached to a typed lecture, was a picture of the man I lectured about, the man who performed those unspeakable and heinous rituals and the base of Mt St Helens—the man who claimed he had to splay those farm animals in the manner he did so that the new bulging dome in the mountain, that seed of autism as I quoted him saying in my lecture, was just waiting to erupt the next wave of mercury into the skies of the Northwest, and as I referred to the article about how he thought draining those sacrificial creatures the way he did would reconfigure the composition of the mercury being released from the mountain into an environmentally safe release of gasses—and now here this man was sitting out in front of my house, but how did he find me here? I remember thinking that day, as I began unscrewing my light bulbs I suspected of having trace elements of mercury, perhaps I shouldn't have made all those claims about his sick fetishes, I remember thinking as I heard the car door slam, as my

hand trembled with his picture in it, as I stuffed a series of bulbs under the desk before I separated the blinds with the pistol so I could compare the picture to the man.

There he was stepping out of his car, digging his heels through the mud—there he was walking up the driveway, trudging through the puddle that swelled at the base of my driveway, his trench coat scraping across and hanging on to the puddle, soaking in the water that streamed down the driveway. So I closed the blinds and tightened my robe, cramming the pistol in my belt as I finished the residue of my espresso and started putting my lectures in drawers, stuffing my rare coin collection in between the cushions of the couch, turning on my phone and plugging in my landline. And when I went back to the blinds and saw that he was squinting toward the house as the rain cascaded off his baldhead, I realized I couldn't address this man in my shifty and disheveled state—how could I convince him to leave me alone wielding this pistol, looking half naked and sweaty, I remember thinking, perhaps if I rationalize with him, invite him in for a latte, we could talk this out, perhaps I could cut him a check, I remember thinking as I ran upstairs to change into some slacks, a clean shirt, and a sports jacket.

At the window in my bedroom, I looped my tie as I watched the rain shaking in the gutters, the cold rain, I remember thinking as I continued looping my tie, eventually it washed away this man's mark on Mt. St. Helens, and now it drips and slides down the trees, down the branches, down the rooftops, I remember thinking, I can't cut this man check, I remember thinking as I straightened the knot, what would I care if someone wrote my story, I remember thinking, I'd be honored if someone took an interest me, and as this man trundled toward the porch, I realized he was mudding my driveway, and at this point, I'm unsure why, I was cursing at him, about the kind of person that smears

mud on a driveway is the same person who would bleed out innocent animals in the name of the environment. So I continued watching this man as the water spilled from the gutters and onto the steps, and I stood there, pointing the pistol at the gutter, willing the water to sweep around this man, willing it to wash him away along with his footprints, I stood there watching this as he continued, step after step, toward my porch as the water continued past him, over his footprints, and into the rising street drains.

I have to get rid of him, I remember thinking, as I realized I had been pointing the pistol at him from the window, so I went to my closet, grabbed a steel toed boot, opened the window and contemplated throwing it at this man, and I remember thinking that if the tip even grazed his head he would perhaps leave, and I remember thinking this as I noticed the neighbors walking along the street, the neighbors now lifting their faces at me, as I hung out the window, my pistol pressed against the glass, my tie dangling out the window, my now water logged shoe above my head, and there they stood, staring like startled travelers as drops pelted their eyelids, as they shivered in that dense breeze that set the long wet pine needles drooping and made a soaked shuttering noise of all the debris of this drenched city, and they stopped for a moment, shook the rain from their shoulders, and raised their hands as if they were going to wave, before continuing on as if they realized that perhaps upon further analysis, I was someone they didn't know or care to greet. And so I ended up ducking back into the room, leaving the pistol on the bed as I slammed the heel of the boot against the side of the window, cursing loader and loader, angry at those neighbors for not asking me if I was in trouble, and now back at the window, the man stepped on the porch, and he moved out of sight, and I wasn't sure if it was my slamming that rattled the windowpane or if the shaking was from this man who

now pounded on the door, now pounded hard enough to vibrate the floor, hard enough to shake the moisture from the maple tree that draped across my shingles.

Downstairs, at the door, there he was on my porch as steam rose from the shoulders of his coat and water dripped at his heels. And there I was peering through the window watching him scrape his mud off on my porch and at this point I pressed my face against the window as I held the picture the picture of him and he was now motioning me to open the door, and when I finally opened the door, I crammed his picture in my jacket pocket and flinched as he extended an envelope in my direction.

Are you Ward Richard III?

That depends, I said.

You don't look much like your father, he said.

I haven't spoke to my father in fifteen years, I said.

This is from your father, he said, holding out the envelope.

Why couldn't he have brought this to me himself?

I'm his lawyer, he said.

So you're not Randal Rollins.

No, I'm here on behalf of your father.

Since when has my father had a lawyer?

The man just looked at me.

There are probably many things you don't know about your father, he said.

You're probably right, I said.

The man just looked at me.

There is no easy way to put this—your father is dead. He told me to give this to you after he died, he said.

I reached for the envelope.

It happened yesterday evening, we've been trying to reach you, he said.

We haven't spoken to each other for fifteen years, I said.

He didn't speak to anyone for fifteen years, he said.

How long did you know him for? I asked.

Fifteen years, he said.

Did he say anything to you? I asked.

I'm sorry for your loss. Also, he wanted you to perform his eulogy, the service is in three days, again, I'm really sorry for your loss, Mr. Richard.

But my father was an atheist, I said.

I'm sorry, he said.

The man began to say something, but I interrupted him and told him how it had been raining for a while. He continued talking, although the sound of his words we're drowned by the rain hitting the gutter. His mouth strangely opened and closed to the sound of the rain slapping against the gutter. So I wrote my number down on the envelope and handed it back to him.

But the man quickly handed me back the envelope, so I wrote my full name on it and handed it back to him. I watched his breath cloud and his mouth sound out different drumming rain patterns as I thought about how, from time to time, I would call my father and record his breathing. I would tell him about my life. The last time I called him I told him that I had finished my studies and that I had taken a position as a lecturer at the local

college. I also told him that if he ever wanted to see me lecture he could sit in on a class and listen. I told him that he would feel at home with my students as most of them never raised a hand, never asked a question and the only noise that would come from them was a clearing of a throat, the sliding of a chair, or the sounds of food crunching in their mouths, that he would be at home with their sleepy stares and their constant glances toward the clock.

The man handed me the envelope yet again, but I ignored his mouth and wrote down my address as I thought about how I had felt that I almost got a laugh from my father that one time, which I remember clearly, as I told him over the phone how the only way to get a student to pay attention was to put notes on an overhead and tell the class that what I was covering was either going to be on the midterm or the final exam. I had told him how the students would diligently write down everything, as if they were in the process of memorizing the words as they copied them down. So once a term I would place this phrase on the overhead—If you don't deal with death now, it will be the end of you—and once a term I would watch students not raise their hands. I would watch them record the phrase and every time there would be a certain smile from a few students, as if they knew they were just let in on one of life's little secrets. When I had told my father this I heard him exhale. At this moment, I knew, for certain, that he was paying attention on the other line.

But he stopped picking his phone up after I had told him how I was recording his calls and that I would be taking them into a colleague of mine who specializes in the breathing habits of mammals and other species. I had told him this man could determine how my father's breathing could be translated into a communicative language, that we

didn't need words if he didn't want to use them, that there are a vast number of people who communicate through other gestures. There was a long pause on the other line, for what seemed minutes, until the receiver quietly clicked.

Mr. Richard—I remember the man saying as he pushed the envelope back toward me, this is for you, it's from your father, and here's my card.

I then asked him if he would like to come in, that I could turn the espresso machine on and whip him up a latte—the trick is to keep the steamer just beneath the surface of the milk so it creates the foam, and I remember saying how the foam is the key, the billowing foam is the key, I remember saying as he was already walking towards his car.

After he climbed into his car, I thought about how my father always made me look ridiculous if for no other reason than to make me feel ridiculous. And this was another incident: How I stood on the porch as the man continued talking and how I drew pictures on the envelope that the man handed me of what my phone number would look like if the numbers weren't numbers. And after he stopped talking, how both of us stood there and watching the rain, and I remember thinking while standing there on the porch for a while, after he left, while scooping water that dripped from the gutter, wiping clean the man's smeared footprints while looking at the envelope that I couldn't bring myself to open, that perhaps during the silence I told the lawyer how my father told me how the garbage man left me in a can and how the garbage man was my real father and how, as a child, my father sat at the end of my bed and watched as I eagerly awaited the sound of truck lumbering to our house at sunrise so I could run out and greet the man that left me all

those years ago. That day I realized that a man covered in trash feels more comfortable wrapping his arms around other peoples' trash cans than he does other people's children. Perhaps that is why the lawyer felt more comfortable wiping mud on my porch rather than stepping inside for a latte.

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Inside, I paced throughout the house and turned the envelope between my fingers. I tilted it and holding it beneath the bulb in the kitchen. I looked at how the light reflected off the stamp. What can be said after fifteen years of silence that can't be expressed in the choice of a stamp? Fifteen years and an American flag stamp . . . Fifteen years.

As I stood at the kitchen window, looking at the stripped garden branches, out into the garden, now tapping the envelope against the windowsill, as rain fell into the soupy ground, I thought about my father sat next to the eyehole in the fence, back when I was seven or eight, or maybe when I was nine, at our old house.

There at our old house, my father stood on one side of the fence as the neighbors dog sat or stood on the other side—the dogs breath clouded through a hole in the fence and my father stuck cigarettes through so the dog could eat them. I watched this from the sandbox as I built droopy castles in sludge. My father turned away from the fence long enough to tell me that if I build in the wetlands I'll lose my property. I remember him saying this as my castles sunk while the dog scratched and ran along the fence. I carved out a mote and my father blew smoke through the hole in the fence. The dog began scratching harder at the fence and my father curled smoke rings in my direction, telling me that I should plant more trees around my property to make up for the smog that's inching through the rain, smog that will plague all the little people who didn't drown in

my mote that surrounds my faulty structures, I just sat me on the edge of the sandbox with sand dripping into my shirtsleeves and smoke inching toward me, with the dog whining on the other side of the fence and my father lighting another cigarette. I watched him press his lips to the hole, pulling back slightly, blowing smoke through the fence while looking at me out of the corner of eye as the dog's tongue flickered through the hole, lapping at the smoke as it whined, its tongue desperately inching closer to my father's mouth. And with this image appearing in my breath against the glass I realized that I had been chewing on the corner of the envelope, that I had been jamming the corner of the envelope into my gums for I really can't say how long, that the taste of paper mixed with my blood brought me out of this state.

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I'm not sure if these thoughts had any connection with me not opening the letter from my father or whether simply hearing about his death caused me to remember his thoughts, his theories, remember the words of this man who for no apparent reason woke up one day fifteen years ago and decided to stop talking, stop uttering, stop communicating other than through long heavy breaths.

I canceled my lectures for the day and sat at the window, tapping the envelope against my temple, running the edge through my hair, while I looked out at the clouds that inched toward the house, one by one, looking at the rain drenching the glass, and with drop after drop I remember tapping to the rhythm of the rain as it slapped against the window, as the water trickled down the glass, drop after drop, and I pressed my forehead against the glass to see the globs as they formed and shook before each slipped onto the ledge, drop after drop, before they gelled into little pools that swelled, before each pool

hung along the brink and lost its grip and fell onto the shingles. I watched as the water crept toward the gutter, and this continued for I don't know how long, as I counted to the fifteenth fallen drop under my breath—starting the process over with every fifteenth. One after the next—Fifteen years of silence, now an envelope, now I perform a eulogy for my atheist father, I should know this, I study this, how people grieve, how people deal with the passing of life, how throughout history different cultures held their processions. I should know this, get up in front of a group of people, say some kind words, some light hearted stories, something to lighten the mood then bring some emotional resonance to the situation. I should tell them that he was the ideal father, the man that shaped me into the scholar that I am today, that he sat up late at night and read stories and performed poems that ingrained within me my love of others, my passion for charity—other ideals they want to pass onto their children. Or I could tell them how on one occasion, which I remember quite clearly, he told me that I was to bury him under the rose thistles when his time came, if I was old enough, and if I was strong enough to drag his corpse from wherever he stopped living, and cram him into the ground, to fertilize the soil for next seasons crop of tomatoes. I could tell them how I remember asking him if tomatoes came from roses and him telling me that I was missing the point, and I could tell them how I told my father that eating a piece of fruit that came from the slime of his liver didn't sound appealing to me, and he painted a picture of worms crawling into any and all holes all over the body, as he pointed to his openings, saying that the worms will eat whatever is left over, that the worms determine what isn't garbage, what isn't waste, and that all we are after we live is leftovers—left over under ground—I remember him saying, and that the worms take care of what's left so we don't turn over to garbage.

I could tell them this.

I could tell them that this has a spiritual element and that rotting is wonderful and he would have it no other way. I can imagine their stern gestures. But who would show up to someone's funeral if you haven't spoke to anyone in fifteen years? Perhaps this is my father's final crude joke, to infect me with the thought of him as he infected me with his theories, vision.

\*

Do you know what kind of man my father was, I said as I imagined myself eulogizing at my father's funeral—here is a man who, one night, which I remember clearly, after I drove around and looked for him for hours—a six year old behind the wheel, using a splintered axe to control the peddles, balancing on a tool box to see over the steering wheel—and after I found him behind the grocery store, pinned in between the dumpster and the fence, eating something that was half caught under the wheel of the dumpster, and after I guided my father back into the truck, when we were on our way home I nearly slammed into a tree after the car hit something as we turned the corner to go back home. And when we stepped out of the car, there was my pet kitty, his head smashed into the asphalt, blood spouting from his head, his mouth frozen in a desperate growl, his tongue hanging out of his mouth and his eye dangling out the socket. And there's me shaking a flashlight, shining the light on my father scrapping a shovel under the cat—and there's the eye ball getting caught under the edge of the shovel and separating from the optic nerve then exploding under the pressure of the edge of metal scraping along asphalt, all this under the stream of my flashlight. There I was, in the shadows, swallowing my own vomit as my father lifted the cat from street, telling me that I need to pick up the

fragments but leave the blood, cause there's nothing we can do about that, I remember him saying, the rain would wash it away, I remember him saying, as I kneeled down, and stuffed my pockets with remnants of the cat's retina, a fragment of the cornea, and clump of fur, all dripping through my fingers, as the rain began dissipating the blood puddle.

I should have told the lawyer all of this just to see the look on his face as I gave him an idea about the silent man whom he knew for the past fifteen years—There we were, my father and I, at two in the morning, burying the cat in the back yard. I should have told the layer how I badly I shook as my father told me how kitties are a dime a dozen. And how he waited to tell me until after I scooped the pieces of the cat out of my pocket, after I flicked them into the shallow grave and held the speckled chink of retina up into the moonlight, he waited to tell me when I was starting to calm that I should have kept my eyes on the road.

And the next day, when I was sitting at the window, drawing pictures of my cat on the widow, in the steam that collected on the glass from another day of cloud cover and rain, pictures of the fragments that I still feel on my fingertips to this day, the feeling of a crushed eyeball, there is no simile that can capture the texture, the consistency of a thin cotton pocket separating my leg from eye fluid. And as I ran my fingers along the window, I felt a tickle at my ankle, felt a purr, and looking down, there was my kitty, looking up at me, sleepy-eyed, well rested and hungry. I shook. I stepped back, I felt the warmth of urine cloud the front of my pants, as a stream trickled down my leg, and there at my foot my kitty meowed, then pressed his nose against the stream of urine that collected at the top of sock. Now I was trembling, shaking once again, and I remember thinking that all those drawings on the window brought the kitty back to life, that I

somehow willed him back to my foot, that by burying him and stuffing what remained of him under my pillow, that from the eyeball I had regenerated the kitty by simply holding onto him brought him back.

And after I told my father this, he rushed out back, dug up what we thought was our cat, and when we found the carcass, he had me kneel down and scoop the dead kitty from the ground, then take it to the basement and wash its fur as best I could—I remember him not saying a word, him just standing there and watching me run my fingers through the fur, picking chunks of mud and blood from it until he pushed me aside and draped the cat over the side of the sink. Whose cat is this, I remember him saying, although we both knew we had seen the look alike around at times, so my father told me to stay inside while he disposed of it, and of course I ran to the window in the hallway and watched him tip toe down the driveway, concealing the cat as best he could before he tossed it in the neighbors' front yard. And for the rest of the night I stood at the widow as my cat rubbed his wet nose against my leg while I swirled what was left of the eyeball between my fingers.

I should have told the lawyer this, told him over a latte, but of course there wasn't enough time out there porch—I should have told him that the next morning I stood and looked out that window until I curled beneath the window ledge and passed out, waking only to find the cat still curled in the neighbors front yard. I should have told him that I stood for three days, scared to walk outside, frightened that someone had seen what I did, and I remember thinking that there they would be waiting so when I would walk out to check on the cat I would be apprehended, so I stood in the hallway, looking out the window for three days, watching as no one made an attempt to move the cat, until the

neighbor—Mrs. Brooner—finally walked out into her front lawn and knelt next to the cat, huddled the cat in her hands and held it under her breast before she looked around and took it inside her house.

\*

There are pieces of me in my lectures, remnants much like the cats that I pour into my work. And usually the rain provides a rhythm for my thoughts. I write my lectures best when the rain taps against the glass, when I can hear water dripping from the gutter. But now—as the rain slanted and switched directions, my thoughts were jumping. My focus was fractured. And my father's theories were trickling out of my head. From the window in my room, I held the envelope from my father, running the edge along my chin, inhaling the scent of paper as I watched my dripping portrait through the rain streaming down the glass.

\*

Downstairs, in my cabinet of lectures, behind the stacks of files, I pulled out a leather bound notebook, one of the two objects I own that belonged to my father—the other being the army issued revolver he claimed had belonged to someone of stature but was really an old neighbor's who used it to shoot rats. I hadn't returned to the notebook since I took the teaching position, and I hadn't thought of all the nicknames my father gave me—as some were more ambitious and complementary, others more cutting and degrading, but one, in particular caused me to perk up, as I knew when I heard it all those years ago that he was about to embark on a journey, all those years ago when he would mutter something about my role as the time tracker, he would stammer on regarding a

philosophical puzzle that was slipping into place, somewhere away from home, in some specific location, and I would run and grab my watch, set it, and document his departure.

All those years, all those puzzles, and even though I had them in front of me, even though the dates and the missions were documented in that notebook, they were all a patch work of misinformation, a log, resembling a timecard, something that I couldn't place in any linear continuum. They came back to me, at times, the specifics of each and the idea behind the missions an irretrievable underlying current, and what remains are impressions of the physical condition that my father would return in, the haggard, unshaven mumbling mess that would leave him speechless for days after returning. I told myself sometime ago that my father simply went on too many ventures, that he pushed his mind too far until his speech simply didn't return.

\*

That night, the lawyer called, asking me if the authorities had contacted me, and they had, because there was a lot of legalities that need clearing up.

I never asked you why you are so interested, I said to him.

We were friends, he said.

You never even had a conversation, I said

He was a good listener, the lawyer said.

How did you find him? I asked.

I didn't find him, he said.

I didn't say anything, I just breathed into the receiver.

He was found in what seems to be a shallow grave, the lawyer said.

I asked

What was he doing? I asked

He was found in a shallow grave, he said.

Was it foul play? I asked.

It doesn't seem so, it looks like he was digging his own grave, and he wasn't able to finish what he started, but that's why we're trying to get into the house to see if he left anything behind, any note, anything that can give us any answers, he said.

\*

After I hung up the phone, I'm not sure why, but I sat down and I thought about the lecture I would give if my father had taken me up on my offer and sat in on one of my classes.

Imagine yourself, I say to my students, imagine yourself as a 13<sup>th</sup> century housewife, imagine your husband dying a horrific death, say barbed with a pitchfork, or perhaps mauled by a combination of mountain goats and boars—and there you are a loving wife, mothering your husband's loot, churning some dairy products, or mixing some yams when you hear of the horrific accident, and imagine yourself crumbling next to your stove, or curling up on your hey strewn mattress, or unloading your tears on the man who delivered the news, imagine yourself tearing up as you press your face into his sweaty neck. Imagine what you would do . . . what would you do now, at this time, at this moment. . . now think about now that your husband died, you fall under the Suttee, a Hindu ritual that says that you, the widow, volunteer your life for his and lay next his stiff corpse where you watch his dead face until dirt covers you both until every breath you take is filled with dirt, and with every kicking scream more dirt is thrown onto you until you push yourself out of the grave only to have someone waiting there for you, pushing

you back into the ground where you belong, and behind that someone is another someone who is waiting for you with a baited torch, waiting for you to kick your way past the man who is pushing you back into the grave, so he, the torch holder, can follow you into the wilderness and light you on fire while the rest of the village cheers in your husbands honor, cheers as your dress melts onto your skin, and ask yourself, now, what you would be running from, what after all is worse, the eternal darkness, the silence, the cold darkness of the dirt, or the shadows that follow you, waiting for you to tire and collapse into a pile of cold leaves, waiting for you to come to terms with your end. . .

**REBIRTHING THE WHOLE**

FADE IN:

INT. APARTMENT - NIGHT

LUCY, 30's, sits in front of a bowl made of chicken wire.

The bowl is twice the size of Lucy and is nailed to the wall.

Stacks of newspaper surround her.

A Tupperware container filled with soapy water rests in between stacks of newspaper.

Lucy dips strips of newspaper into a bucket of soapy water.

She drapes a piece of the newspaper over the chicken wire structure.

EXT. APARTMENT HALLWAY - NIGHT

ROB, 30s, wearing a buttoned shirt, a tie, and khakis, stands outside the apartment door.

He holds his brief case as he smokes a cigarette.

He looks down the empty hallway.

He looks at the no smoking sign.

He takes a drag.

He puts his brief case down on the hallway floor.

Then he searches his pockets for his keys.

Rob and Lucy's neighbour, A WOMAN, in her 50s, exits her apartment.

WOMAN

You know there's no smoking in here.

She locks her door.

ROB

Please, just back off.

The woman puts her keys in her purse, and approaches Rob.

As she walks toward him, she continues to rummage through her purse.

WOMAN

Excuse me, what?

Rob takes a drag and exhales in her direction.

ROB

I think you heard me.

WOMAN

Excuse me, what'd you say?

ROB

I said I think you heard me.

WOMAN

The first time, what'd you say the first time?

Rob pauses long enough to notice a can of mace in her hand.

ROB

Easy.

The woman holds the mace like she's going to spray him.

WOMAN

Back off.

Rob backs off.

The woman continues to step toward Rob.

Her hand is shaking.

ROB

What do you want?

WOMAN

What everyone wants, a little respect, some decency, a little common fucking courtesy.

Rob continues to step away from the woman.

WOMAN

And that noise, all that hammering and slamming.

The woman twitches a bit.

ROB

Lady, I don't know.

The woman sprays him.

Rob falls to the floor.

She almost kicks him.

Then she takes his brief case and runs away.

Rob writhes on the floor.

He pounds on the wall in the hallway.

INT. APARTMENT - NIGHT

Lucy doesn't react to the sounds coming from the hallway.

She continues to shred newspaper into strips.

She continues to dip the strips in the soapy water

She continues to layer the chicken wire structure.

EXT. APARTMENT HALLWAY - NIGHT

Rob makes his way to his feet.

He finds his way to the front door.

His eyes remain closed.

He searches his pocket for his keys.

He rubs his eyes with his tie.

He searches for his briefcase by kneeling, and patting the floor.

He then pats his pockets.

ROB

Fuck!

He feels for the front door

When he finds it, he begins knocking.

INT. APARTMENT - NIGHT

At first, Lucy doesn't react to the sound of the knocking.

Then she looks at the door.

She runs her finger through the soapy water.

EXT. HALLWAY - NIGHT

Rob pounds on the door for some time.

Then he grabs the doorknob.

He jiggles it, and to his surprise it turns.

INT. APARTMENT - NIGHT

Lucy grabs a piece of newspaper.

She folds it and tears it as the door opens.

She soaks the newspaper in the soapy water as the door closes.

Rob stands inside the door.

He just stands there.

He faces Lucy's back as he rubs his eyes.

ROB

It burns.

Lucy continues shredding newspaper with her back toward Rob.

Rob's eyes remain closed as he continues to rub them.

LUCY

I know, I feel it too.

ROB

It came through the walls?

LUCY

It's all around us, Rob. It's floating in the ether, Rob.

Rob tries to open his eyes.

Lucy pulls the newspaper from the soapy bucket.

ROB

I don't, what?

Lucy places the newspaper on the structure.

She begins to shred more newspaper.

LUCY

Maybe if you opened your eyes once in a while, maybe if looked around a bit you'd see it.

ROB

Didn't you hear me out there pounding.

LUCY

I didn't know that was you.

ROB

Who the fuck did you think it was?

LUCY

If I ran out to check on every sound, I'd never get anything done, Rob. Is that what you want?

ROB

I was punching the wall for twenty minutes.

LUCY

What do you want me to say, Rob?

Lucy turns to face Rob.

Shards of newspaper are stuck to her.

She shakes the soapy water from her hands.

Rob sits against a wall.

His eyes begin to refocus.

He blinks rapidly.

LUCY

Were you crying?

ROB

No, I was sprayed.

She stops short of touching his face.

LUCY

That's just like you, Rob.

ROB

Like what? How?

LUCY

So out of touch.

Lucy walks back to the stacks of newspaper.

For the first time, Rob sees the chicken wire structure.

He focuses on the newspaper scattered through the apartment.

ROB

What have you done?

Lucy stands in front of the structure.

LUCY

I'm starting over, Rob.

ROB

Where did you get all this?

LUCY

Did you bring the paper clips?

Rob walks closer to the structure.

He shakes his head.

He widens his eyes.

ROB

What is this?

Lucy begins to shred more paper.

LUCY

I need more water.

Rob steps closer to the structure.

ROB

Is this a heart?

LUCY

I need more soap.

ROB

A paper Mache heart?

LUCY

The paper clips, Rob. I need the paper clips.

ROB

They're with my keys. This is. .  
.something.

LUCY

You attached them to your keys?  
Well, give me your keys.

ROB

No, they're with my keys, in my  
briefcase. The neighbour lady,  
she took them...How did you? When  
did you?

Lucy speeds up her process.

She begins making piles of shredded newspaper.

She begins dipping the newspaper into the empty bucket.

ROB

You built this today?

Lucy begins placing dried shreds of paper on the structure.

LUCY

How long has this been going on  
for, Rob?

ROB

That's another way to put it.  
Either way, it's something.

LUCY

What's it like, Rob. Is it love?  
Is she better? than me?

ROB

This doesn't make sense.

LUCY

That's just it, Rob.

ROB

It doesn't add up.

LUCY

You're redundant, Rob.

ROB

What are we even talking about?

LUCY

You fucking the neighbour.  
That's why you were crying in  
the hallway, that's it isn't it?

Lucy leaves the living room.

Rob steps back.

He trips on a hammer.

He tries to grab her arm.

He stumbles over a box of nails.

ROB

Where are you going? Wait?

LUCY

Fuck off!

Rob catches his balance in the doorway.

LUCY

That's enough.

Rob hears Lucy rummaging in the bedroom.

He turns and looks again at the structure.

ROB

Is it a womb? Are you building a  
womb?

Lucy returns with an armload of Rob's belongings.

Rob tries to block her path.

She kicks him in the shin.

Rob kneels to grab his shin.

Lucy heads for the front door.

LUCY

It's over Rob, we're done, you  
can go fuck yourself, after  
you're done with her.

ROB

Hold on, calm down a minute,  
what the fuck?

LUCY

Oh, I'm calm.

Lucy opens the front door.

She throws her armload of his belongings in the hallway.

ROB

Damn it, wait!

EXT. HALLWAY - NIGHT

Rob walks out.

He picks up a shirt and a shoe.

He turns toward the door.

Lucy slams it in his face.

He hears the door lock.

He reaches for the handle.

ROB

Come on, don't do this, not now.

Lucy doesn't respond.

Rob then reaches into his pocket.

He pulls out his pack of cigarettes.

He looks down the hallway.

He focuses on the neighbour's door.

He walks down the hallway.

He knocks on the neighbour's door.

He then sits in front of the neighbour's door.

He pulls a cigarette out of the pack.

He realizes that he doesn't have a lighter.

There he waits.