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Arizhio: Tales of Glorious Manifest Destiny

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ARIZHIO:
TALES OF GLORIOUS MANIFEST DESTINY

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of English
Western Kentucky University
Bowling Green, Kentucky

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

By
Clinton Craig

August 2017
ARIZHIO:
TALES OF GLORIOUS MANIFEST DESTINY

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and SJG, LG-R, and even PEZ
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The story “Arizhio” first appeared in Tammy. “Goldwater” was in a glimpse of.

The author should note that Eliot, Shakespeare, Carver, Barthelme, Palahniuk, Murakami, Orwell, Conrad, Saunders, Marcus, DeLillo, Dali, Hemingway, Kafka, Nabokov, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman all [unknowingly] had a hand in writing these stories.

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This is a book of short stories with a critical introduction. In theme, the stories seek to find the border between the Midwest and the Southwest of America by focusing on Ohio and Arizona. Some of the stories seek to exemplify “experimental” fiction, while the critical introduction seeks to define “experimental.” In addition, the introduction theorizes about the role of setting in linking collections and characterization.
Introduction

I once made a chili that I named “Texizona,” and entered it in a contest. Its name was a nod to my Texan mother’s recipe (refried beans being imperative), and the spices and peppers of Arizona that I grew up with. Perhaps a more proper name for it would have been “Oh-Texizona,” as the guy who taught me to make chili\(^1\) was from Cincinnati. It got second place in the contest.

Before you read my book, it is important to know how to pronounce its title, *Arizhio* (air-ih-z-eye-oh). The first two syllables are pronounced the same as the first two syllables of the name of my home-state, Arizona. Nasalliness on the “air” of the first syllable should be embraced here, as should the American tendency to put as little effort as possible into enunciating vowels for the second syllable. IO should be pronounced the same as the last two syllables of Ohio, a state I’ve visited briefly. The last two syllables are also a homonym for the common American pronunciation of the innermost Galilean moon of Jupiter. “Arizhio” being an amalgam of the names of two states, it makes sense that at the edges of the word, it takes on the linguistic defaults of the landscapes it represents. However, things change in the middle of the word where the Z of Arizona and the H of Ohio meet.

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\(^1\) Brandon Cox, my boss at my longest held job: cook at a vegetarian restaurant. His secret ingredient was peanut butter.
The ZH in Arizhio should be pronounced like the S in “treasure,” a soft Z, a sound rare and mostly alien in American dialect. It is when you get to the border of two things where elements are smashed together to create something that is independent of its parents. Borders are a landscape for discovery, exploration. This book seeks to learn what can be found on the border between Arizona and Ohio, two settings that have no geographical business joining together.

In this collection, setting is the defining factor that I have chosen to link the stories together. In one way or another, all of these stories take place in Arizona, Ohio, or both. If Arizona feels more real to the reader than Ohio, that is because Arizona is more real to me. In Arizhio, Ohio is where reality bends most.²

As story writers, we can give great power to setting. Even if it is “background,” setting is filtered through our characters. In turn, setting is a reflection or echo of the characters that inhabit it. In Winesburg, Ohio, Sherwood Anderson tells the story of Doctor Reefy, “a very curious story… delicious like the apples that grow in Winesburg” (11). He goes on:

In the fall one walks in the orchards and the ground is hard with frost underfoot. The apples have been taken from the trees by the pickers… On the trees are only a few gnarled apples that the pickers have rejected. They look like the knuckles of Doctor Reefy’s hands… Into a little round place at the side of the apple has been gathered all of its sweetness. One runs from tree to tree over the frosted ground

² I was inspired and fascinated by Ben Marcus’ setting of Ohio in Notable American Women, especially considering that he, like me, had never lived in Ohio. His Ohio is as surreal as his characters, as fragmented as his plot, as bursting with potential as his syntax. I can only guess that he chose a place he’d never lived to help aid him in his endeavor to write to his best abilities. I chose Ohio as a blank canvas, as void as the Illinois soybean fields I drove past to get to my (brief) Indiana home. It was a foil to my deserts and mountains that I have known and loved well, both in physicality and in my imagination.
picking the gnarled, twisted apples and filling his pockets with them. Only the few know the sweetness of the twisted apples. (11)

Here, Anderson’s apple metaphor works on several levels, and each layer seeks to build the characters of Winesburg through the setting, who themselves construct the setting through their viewpoint. The sweet part of apple could align with:

1) Part of Reefy as compared to the majority of Reefy.
2) All of Reefy as compared to the rest of the town.
3) All of Winesburg as compared to the rest of Ohio.

In each case, the peculiar twisted apples of Winesburg construct the setting physically, and the attitude of the townspeople, the designated “one” of the narration, and the narrator construct their relationship with Doctor Reefy as a mirror to the twisted apples. In *Winesburg, Ohio*, Anderson masters the interplay between the construction of setting and character through this and many other metaphors.³

Though I am not sure if I have constructed any metaphors as sophisticated as Anderson’s, I learned from him the ways setting can reflect a character’s state of mind. In the story “1984,” I used this technique: “Outside, what’s left of plants, shrubs, burn, and I breathe in the refuse of all of it, everything, disintegrating into grayness. Into desert.” Here, the dissolution of Ohio into smoking desert reflects the trajectory of Laura’s life. At the most terrible moment of her life, she finds herself on the border of Arizona and Ohio.

With each of these stories, concerned as I was with the fictional Arizonas and Ohios, I was trying to do something with borders. That sounds banal. I’ll try again. With each of these stories, I was attempting to mix a few ingredients (characters, setting, plot)

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³ Hands, cornfields, shadows, and (of course) religion are all terribly important in constructing the town and townspeople of Winesburg.
and filter them through [language] to the reader in a way that the end product (story) would be something, if not brand new, at least a story that only I could tell. You might say that with each story, I was experimenting.

Ben Marcus, though he doesn’t seem to care much for the term itself, does great work defining experimental fiction in his essay response to Jonathan Franzen’s ode to conformity and capitalism. Marcus speaks of “the possibility of syntax as a way to structure sense and feeling, packing experience into language, leveraging grammar as a medium for the making of art” (“Why Experimental Fiction” 40). This idea infers that emotion is as nuanced as language, and the near infinite possible combinations of language and manipulations of syntax are necessary to express the depth of human feeling. Marcus’ writing displays the ways we can bend the rules of language to instill emotion: “I turned my back on him and walked hard and straight into the deepest Ohio. My house gained size behind me as I retreated, staining the ground in a clear, thick shadow at my feet, the distant horizon ahead of me breaking into smaller and softer pieces as I approached it” (Notable 166). Why would the house gain size as the narrator walks further from it? How can a shadow be clear and thick? How can a horizon break into small, soft pieces? What matters is that the images, unrestrained by the “real,”

4 An essay (Franzen’s) that need not be cited or referenced except for the purposes of derision, something that Marcus has already accomplished sufficiently (while still managing to be self-effacing) in “Why Experimental Fiction Threatens to Destroy Publishing, Jonathan Franzen, and Life as We Know It.”
5 Perhaps a reference to a childhood home exerting a more and more recognizable effect on the former inhabitant as he moves further away from it in life.
6 Shadows are without volume, so thickness isn’t a “normal” attribute associated with them. Perhaps some metaphorical shadows are denser than others, though. The feeling evoked here is one of being smothered in the shadow of the enlarged house.
7 When the only way to go seems fuzzy or broken, full of uncertainty, but we sure as hell aren’t turning back.
8 These are, of course, my own subjective interpretations of Marcus’ language. They are the feelings evoked in me as I read this passage. I don’t know what Marcus’ intentions were, and divining those intentions aren’t necessarily imperative to feeling emotion when reading.
bring forth subjective and powerful emotions if the audience is receptive to the experience.

The titular story of my collection, “Arizhio,” represents the deepest delving into the possibility of language that I have achieved. It was the story in which I was most willing (and capable) of letting go of the rules of language in order to achieve a more accurate (to me) evocation of emotion (again, to me). For example, “Gravity can push as well as pull. With all the blank space and tumble-weeds, Sal could be in one room in Sedona, Frida in a room in Scottsdale, and only silence and gulfs of shining sand between. Pilgrims come and go, and it was time to go. The desert is the best place in the world to lose something. Communication is key.” Writing this way, I got a story that I have called the most autobiographical piece of fiction I’ve written so far. It could be that we experiment in fiction simply to find our truth.

Despite how appealing Marcus’ description of language as infinitely capable of expression is to him (and me), he writes of how “experimentalists, postmodernists, antirealists” (“Why Experimental Fiction” 41) are being mostly ignored in the capitalistic side of today’s authorship. Franzen would say that the experimentalist has broken a contract with the reader, and maybe that is true for a certain kind of reader. However, I love Marcus’ observation that:

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9 All I will say of the “meaning” of this passage is that it is clear to me and that I hope that you (as a reader) find something in it that clicks, whatever it is. I would never tell you that you’re wrong.
10 In a conversation at White Squirrel with Rebecca Brown and Katharine Haake.
11 I’m still not entirely sure what “postmodernism” is (Meaning is illusion? The universe provides no meaning? Meaning is a human construct? We can still have meaning, but we just have to make it ourselves?), but it is the authors that have been labeled postmodern, such as Saunders, DeLillo, Barthelme, and Nabokov whom I admire most. I would be flattered if my work was also thought of as postmodern.
12 Reality seems an interesting thing to be against, though I think it would be a losing battle.
It is arguably sublime when a text creates in us desires we did not know we had, and then enlarges those desires without seeming desperate to please us. In fact, it’s prose that actually doesn’t worry about us, and I don’t find that ungracious, because novel writing is not diplomacy. It’s a hunger for something unknown, the belief that the world and its doings have yet to be fully explored. (“Why Experimental Fiction” 48)

Not worrying about the reader works on a few different levels. The author seeks to satisfy something inside him or herself, independent of audience. Yet, the author recognizes that he or she does not need to worry about the reader coming to a “right” answer. The reader finding their own satisfaction is enough. Is there even a “right answer” in a postmodern world?

Is it unpleasant finding that one must make one’s own meaning? It can be disconcerting, but also exhilarating. Marcus says:

[M]aybe some of us happen to think and feel in language, and have been led into intense sensations because of its original deployment on the page. Some of us have felt dizzy elation when language has pushed at its limits. Some of us feel relief when we read this kind of writing, because it proves there is always more to think and feel, always another mind to engage and enter, always intensities we did not know existed. (“Why Experimental Fiction” 51)

I have felt this relief upon finding stories that I did not know were possible. I have felt this relief on the rare occasion when I have written a story that I did not know was possible. These stories require the ability to abandon expectations on the turn of a semicolon.
Perhaps the essence of experimentalism comes in subverting expectations. Lisa Zunshine writes about our “collective past history as readers” (271) being instrumental in connecting description in fiction to emotional resonance in the reader. This idea provides a shortcut to conveying meaning, Zunshine’s example being that in Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*, the context of Clarissa Dalloway’s dinner party explains Peter Walsh’s trembling as excitement rather than Parkinson’s disease. With my work, I have attempted to tap into readers’ collective past history consciously to provide new possibilities of emotional resonance by subverting expectations. The story in my collection which most overtly attempts this is “Bug Fortress with Dad.” Perhaps the reader might think that he or she is reading a “certain kind of story” at different parts as layers of Lizzie’s memories are revealed. Perhaps the story that is being interpreted changes as it goes on. I can only hope that the reader will go along with Lizzie willingly and enjoy any subversion of expectations that may result. I enjoyed taking that ride myself as I wrote the story, and Lizzie continued to surprise me as the story went on.

Does one have to be “original” to be experimental? The most experimental story in this collection is probably “Goldwater.” I wrote “Goldwater” at the same time as I was reading “The Yellow Wallpaper” by Charlotte Perkins Gilman. I was inspired by her character’s interior reality, a reality that she was so sure was true, yet was told constantly was simply a product of hysteria. It reminded me of subjective realities brought forth by the 2016 election. I don’t know how Gilman would feel about my appropriation of her

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13 I wrote this story the morning after observing a spider in my bathroom spinning her egg sack. I wondered if she knew the inevitability of her children breaking free and consuming her. I thought of how the female spider will consume the male after impregnation to build strength for incubating the eggs. I thought about the great sacrifices these animals make for reproduction, and how paltry are the sacrifices humans make in comparison.
work, but it was done with great respect and a feeling of urgency spurred by the current political situation (of alternative facts, egocentrism, and rejection of logic) in the United States.

Stories like “The Yellow Wallpaper,” which form my notion of tradition in writing, provide for me a foundation upon which to experiment. There can be no “experimental” writing without knowledge of what comes before, and for T. S. Eliot, the dead writers are “that which we know” (46), noting that an author’s work is a kind “archæological reconstruction” (42). He writes:

[W]hat happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the whole existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new. (44-45)

I have embraced the idea that my work cannot exist in a vacuum, but is rather the direct result of all the reading that I have ever done, all the language that I have ever heard spoken. “A Game of Chess,” which takes its title from one of the sections of Eliot’s “Wasteland,” owes its life in large part to Eliot, but also of course to Shakespeare’s King Lear. In many of these stories, I have felt that I have been writing in conversation with authors I admire, using my work to help myself understand theirs. Shakespeare is first among these authors, with stories like “Regarding Horny Hank” in conversation with
Much Ado about Nothing and “Tell Penny” as my answer to Hamlet’s most famous soliloquy.

Of course, the canon has changed significantly since Eliot wrote “Tradition and the Individual Talent.”\textsuperscript{14} Not only have there been added a variety of new voices to literature,\textsuperscript{15} but reader response theory has called into question how we read the texts that form our writerly context. Norman Holland writes,

The unity we find in literary texts is impregnated with the identity that finds that unity. This is simply to say that my reading of a certain literary work will differ from yours or his or hers. As readers, each of us will bring different kinds of external information to bear. Each will seek out the particular themes that concern him. Each will have different ways of making the text into an experience with a coherence and significance that satisfies. (123)

Different readings of the “canon” create different experiences in interpreting “tradition,” and the new traditions we uphold and subvert are relative to subjective visions of what is traditional.

Eliot’s search for objectivity which inspired the New Critics seems to be the desire to brand “\textit{significant} emotion, emotion which has its life in the poem and not the history of the poet” (53). However, one might find emotion in a text that another misses. Obscure pieces of text can spur nothing in one reader and for another become a source of profound inspiration. I find significant emotion in the plight of the character Andy in George Saunders’ “Exhortation,” an unobtrusive little story in the middle of the

\textsuperscript{14} Eliot's emphasis on authorial maleness and the primacy of the literature of Europe stands out. Thankfully, the canon isn’t 100% white and male any more.\textsuperscript{15} So many that I think of “canon” as entirely subjective and individual. I have a particular set of canonical authors and texts in my mind, and I fully expect others to choose their own.
collection *Tenth of December*. Written in the form a memo from Todd Birnie (divisional director of an unnamed firm in charge of performing an undescribed, though sinister, task) re: “*March Performance Stats*” (83), Andy indirectly becomes the focus of the story/memo. Todd writes of Andy,

> No matter how disconsolate and sort of withdrawn he gets (and I think we’ve all noticed that he’s gotten pretty disconsolate and withdrawn since October), you will not find me closely monitoring his numbers, although as for others I cannot speak, others may be monitoring that troubling falloff in Andy’s numbers, although really I hope they’re not, that would not be so fair, and believe me, if I get wind of it, I will definitely let Andy know, and if Andy’s too depressed to hear me, I’ll call Janice at home. (87)

This story, along with several other texts,\(^\text{16}\) made possible the final story in this collection, “*Regarding Horny Hank.*”

The stories in this collection represent my best effort in creating something within the bounds of literary tradition, yet pushing at the edges to find new space. I have, to end on that old cliché, written the book I have always wanted to read. I hope you find a few stories in this collection you really like.

Clinton Craig

June, 2017

\(^{16}\) The film *Drop Dead Fred*, the Barthelme story “*The School,*** Notable American Women*, and others.
Works Cited


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Bug Fortress with Dad

Everyone’s old man is a big joke these days, but I don’t mind the weekends I visit mine.

Mom straightens my blouse on the sidewalk outside Dad’s tall apartment building. She makes sure I have my bath towel, my change of clothes. She checks my vitamins. She knows the kinds of things I eat at Dad’s. My dad lives on the twenty-second floor, and you can see the whole city from his windows. Mom trusts me to ride the elevator up alone. I think it hurts her too much to see Dad now.

She says, “Take care of him, Lizzy,” and touches my cheek. If she’s going to cry, I know she will wait until I’m gone. I say bye.

Riding an elevator is really no problem at all for me. You just have to push the right button. I stand on my toe-tips, push twenty-two. I used to push them all, back when Dad lived with us, because he would get a kick out of that, but that just makes it take forever to get where you’re going.

I get to Dad’s door and go knock-knock, but when the handle clicks open there’s no one behind it. The door creaks wide.

I yell, “Who’s there?” Dad always makes me finish jokes. Mom says he has no sense of humor anymore.
Dad’s face comes from behind the front door where I knew he was hiding. He has his goofy grin and his tie is wrapped around his forehead. He’s got this funny gap in his teeth that always makes me smile. I can’t help but giggle as he comes around and hugs me. “Daddy!”

First is breakfast, which Dad always lets me make. I think he likes the way I do it. I put lots of sugar in our Cheerios, so that the bottom of the bowl is like syrup. We sit at his kitchen bar on stools and slurp the cereal and sweet milk. He slurps louder, so I do too, but then Dad slurps the loudest, and I can’t top that, so we’re both giggling.

Dad loves blanket forts. He’s the best at building them too. We take some couch cushions and stack them on the floor. Dad reaches high in his closet for the extra blankets and we start building. I have this game I invented called Bug Fortress. I taught Dad how to play and he’s really good. I’m the bug and I get to be inside the castle. Then the giant tries to get inside, but I don’t let him because I’m the bug. The giant has to be convincing, but it’s hard because the bug is supposed to be stubborn. So I say, “No you mean old giant you, you can’t come inside my fortress.”

Dad huffs and stomps. I hear him beat his chest. He’s a spectacular giant.

Then he roars and knocks the fort to pieces. I roll around inside the blanket and cushions and I know I’m safe because I’m the bug. I can hide. No one can tickle me, even when my castle breaks.

On weekends, after lunch is story time, so I get out my Dad’s favorite book, Ten Little Indians by Robert Louis Stevenson. I mean, I like the book too, but Dad loves telling this story. I open the book to the first page and Dad points at the picture of the
Chief and smiles that crooked grin. He pulls his tie around his forehead, pats his mouth while ululating, goes, “Wah wah wah wah.”

I know my dad isn’t politically correct, but I love him.

Dad is getting good at sounding out his words too. He points to the word LITTLE. He says, “ee-uhl.” He points to the word INDIAN. He says, “Een-iuhn.” He points to the word SCALPED. He says, “ow.”

Dad is working on his consonants. He’s ok with L’s and N’s. The sharper sounds, P’s, T’s, C’s, are too hard. But I think he will learn. He’s already so much better at reading.

Dad loses interest in the Indians. He wants to go back in his blanket fort. I understand. Reading is hard for him and draining. I leave the book and go into the fort with him to play Bug Fortress.

Last week I took my old man to school to meet my class. He’s such a goofball, I thought Miss Laurie and the other kids would get a kick out of him. The other kids all had dads with them too. It was “Take Your Dad to School Day” again.

All the dads were standing in front of Miss Laurie’s class, and I couldn’t wait to tell them about the new firetruck Mom got my dad for his birthday this year, but then Julianne’s dad walked in with his clown shoes and curly rainbow wig and hit Maria’s little brown dad in the face with a banana cream pie. Miss Laurie had to hold Maria’s dad’s hand and walk him down the hall to the bathroom to rinse whipped cream and banana chunks out of his beard. While she was gone, Julianne’s dad walked around the
classroom mumbling and handing out plastic flowers. Everyone laughed. Julianne is very popular.

Dad stood with his back to the chalkboard, holding his red firetruck to his chest with both hands. I wanted to give him a hug. He is shy around other dads.

Miss Laurie lined up all the dads against the back wall to do the growth chart to see how much our dads have changed over the last year. Maria’s little brown dad had gotten even smaller. Miss Laurie said that’s normal for a man of his age. He shouldn’t feel bad. Julianne’s dad’s chart marks were all over the place, because he brought in a different wig every year and insisted that Miss Laurie mark it at the top of the fake hair. Dad stood straight with his back against the wall. His marks were the same every year, six-foot-one.

Miss Laurie said, “Good job, Mr. Peters.” My cheeks flushed pink, I was so proud of him.

Miss Laurie said it was time to read, so I got *Ten Little Indians* out of my backpack. She went around the classroom to check the progress the dads were making.

“Uh uss ee-uhl Een-iuhn uh uff.”

Miss Laurie beamed like the sun. “You’re getting so much better, Mr. Peters.”

Dad moved his tie up around his forehead and went, “Wah wah wah wah.”

Miss Laurie laughed and gently put the tie back around Dad’s neck. “Try working on his R’s for next year, Lizzy,” she said. She booped his nose and moved on to Benny’s fat dad who was trying to sound out *Shark Attack* by Charles Dickens. I love Miss Laurie.

It was lunch time, so Miss Laurie led us all to the cafeteria. The dads sat in the center with their milk cartons and trays of Sloppy-Joes. The teachers and students stood
off to the side taking notes. I wrote down, *Today Dad puts French fries in his sandwich. He doesn’t seem to like the chocolate milk. Next time, strawberry?*

Then Julianne’s dumb dad threw a cup of coleslaw at Marc’s effeminate dad and Marc’s effeminate dad threw a Sloppy-Joe that hit Carol’s strong dad. French fries and greasy tomatoey beef started raining throughout the cafeteria. Dads were hooting and hollering. Dad sat with his tray above his head to shield him from the escalating food fight. Teachers scribbled furiously. I wrote, *Next time, a raincoat?*

After lunch, Principal Weiss took all the dads outside and hosed them down. It was still warm enough. Principal Weiss set the dads in the field to run around and dry. I watched from the window as Miss Laurie read story time, *Lolita* by E. B. White. Dad sat on the grass as the other dads played. He was rolling his firetruck back and forth by himself. Then Maria’s little dad sat beside him. Dad looked up and smiled. He showed Maria’s dad his truck. Maria’s dad played with it, and Dad put his tie around his head. I decided to talk to Maria about arranging a play-date.

After playtime, the damp dads came back into the classroom. They were flushed and exerted. We all moved the desks to the edges of the classroom and Miss Laurie got out the mats and blankets. She turned down the lights. It was nap time.

I lay on the mat holding the blanket to my body. Dad held his firetruck and made silly faces. I tried to stifle the giggles because everyone was trying to sleep. Dad wore himself out though. He started to drift off. I reached out and tucked a tuft of hair behind his ear.

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Dr. O’Leary visits us sometimes. She takes care of Dad most days, but still has to come and help on the weekends. I can’t do everything. I can’t bathe Dad. Dr. O’Leary says, “Someday you’ll be old enough to bathe your dad,” but I don’t want to be. It seems weird for a daughter to bathe her dad.

Dr. O’Leary takes Dad’s temperature with a long glass thermometer. He sits on his stool at his kitchen bar, his hands in his lap as she writes down the results on her clipboard. She frowns. He’s a little high today.

Dr. O’Leary has black hair tied back so tightly in a ponytail that I don’t know how she blinks. Her glasses magnify her black eyes such that this effect is exacerbated. When she looks at me, I want to hide in Dad’s blanket fort. But she’s not mean. And she’s young for a doctor. She might be very pretty. She says, “Don’t you want to be a doctor when you grow up?”

Dr. O’Leary takes Dad into the bathroom. He doesn’t like baths. I hear some moaning and some puffing. I think Dad might be crying. I do not look forward to when I have to bathe him. I don’t want to hurt Dad. When Dr. O’Leary comes out of the bathroom, she looks perfect. She hands me two pills and tells me Dad has to take them after dinner. I think I will make Spaghetti-O’s. I’m still not very good at scrambled eggs yet. Dr. O’Leary leaves, and Dad is solemn and lethargic until dinner. He sits on the floor and looks at the yellow carpet. I turn on the television and find SpongeBob, his favorite, but he doesn’t look up.

My friend at school, Jimmy, is afraid of becoming a dad someday. He’s seen what happens.
Mr. Smith used to be the mailman. He walked through the neighborhoods in his shorts, even when it rained, with his blue bag of letters (or bills, as Mom says). He was a little pudgy and had a red mustache and would whistle “Yankee-Doodle-Dandy” as he walked around.

Mr. Smith and Jimmy’s mom got married. Jimmy told me he really wanted to be the best man, but Mr. Smith told him he couldn’t, not yet, but someday he’d be someone’s best man if he didn’t rush into a marriage and kids, that is. Jimmy was the ring bearer at the wedding. Mr. Smith’s friend, Bill, was the best man. Bill was the manager at Costco.

Mom made me go to the dumb wedding. Jimmy walked down the aisle with the little box that held the rings. He knelt and gave the rings to his mother and Mr. Smith. Jimmy’s mom put on her ring and kissed Mr. Smith. Mr. Smith put on the ring and shoved cake in her face.

Mr. Smith became a stepdad, and even then there was a change. All he wanted to do was sit on the couch and watch professional wrestling. He drank beer. Jimmy told me all about it. Jimmy hates professional wrestling, but I can understand why Jimmy’s stepdad likes it. It’s a show about a bunch of dads. They jump around in their underwear and roughhouse each other. It’s dangerous, I know, but Mom says it’s a good outlet for all the extra energy dads can have. They need to put that crazy energy somewhere, so they jump off tables and hit each other with chairs. They grab and grunt. They seem free, even in a headlock.

Mr. Smith couldn’t be a mailman anymore.
Mr. Smith got worse when Jimmy’s half-sister, Sara, was born. Then Mr. Smith decided that he would become a professional wrestler. He made himself a cape out of a bedsheets and a Mexican luchador mask out of a dirty pair of briefs. It was gross, and Jimmy was embarrassed, but I think Mr. Smith is happy now. When I walk by their house, I see Mr. Smith in his outfit jumping off his roof and onto a mattress in the yard. He does elbow drops on his friend, Bill, who has recently also become a dad, and body slams him onto the springs. Mr. Smith still whistles “Yankee-Doodle-Dandy” while wrestling with Bill, though the key is strange and discordant.

Jimmy laughs about his stepdad. He makes jokes about the homoeroticism of professional wrestling. When he laughs, his eyes don’t change. That’s how I know he’s afraid.

Once, Jimmy and I kissed behind the slide during recess. I’d never kissed anyone before. I guess I like Jimmy. Afterward, Jimmy pushed me to the ground. He kicked sand at me and hissed. He said, “Don’t come anywhere near me you fucking cunt.”

My hands were scraped. I kissed the scratches and tasted sand and a little blood. It stung, but I forgave Jimmy. I understand, really I do. It must be scary growing up and thinking about becoming a dad someday.

Dr. O’Leary comes back after dinner. She takes care of all the dads in the building. She makes sure I’ve given Dad the pills. I have.

Dr. O’Leary sits next to Dad on the couch. She smooths his hair. His back is straight and he doesn’t move.
Dr. O’Leary puts the helmet on Dad. She drops the visor that covers his eyes. I don’t know what he is seeing, but his hands shake.

Dr. O’Leary says, “You are within. You are without.” She reads from index cards. She is disinterested. She smokes a cigarette, flicks the ashes onto the carpet. Dad isn’t moaning yet. She is calm and perfect. Her hair is dark and pretty. Dad reaches out in front of him toward something that isn’t there.

Dr. O’Leary says, “The peace is you.”

I wait for her to leave.

My weekend with dad is almost over. It’s time to put him in bed. Mom will pick me up tomorrow and I’ll have to go back to school and see Miss Laurie and stupid Julianne and Jimmy. I help my dad into his bed. He points to the living room. Now he wants story time again.

“Shhhh, Dad. It’s time for sleeping.”

I lie in bed. I pull cotton and wool around myself. I am safe from Dr. O’Leary. I am safe from Jimmy. I am safe from Miss Laurie. I am a bug.

Most people I talk to say they wish they’d knew their dad from before they were born. I guess it’s natural to wonder how your parents were when they were young. But I’m not worried about how Dad was. I love him just the way he is.

I think I would rather have known Mom before him. In pictures, her eyes look less tired. She smiles mysteries. In one, I keep it in my phone and look at it under covers in the dark, Mom kneels in her cheerleading uniform and looks directly into the lens, cat-like, so that I don’t know if she will demand love from or try to pounce on and kill the
photographer. Her blond locks curl whereas mine are bristly straw. She went to college for developmental psychology, so she could work with dads and help them. She could have been anything, but she chose to be my mother instead.

I wake in the night to find he is not in his bed. He has learned to open the safety barrier. I am proud of him despite the danger this bodes.

My father sits in the center of the living room, only the light of the stars and moon shining through his apartment window illuminating him. He weeps. I hear the stop and start of his throat. As I cross my legs and sit next to him, I see tears dripping off those sculpted cheekbones. His face shines in silver light.

I think he is depressed about what has happened to him. He misses his job; he was an architect before I was born. I think he longs for thoughts that he once remembered, thoughts that did not end with a bowl of sugary Cheerios or SpongeBob. I infer this as he only speaks in vowels and huffs.

My father reaches through the night and touches my forehead. His hand is dry and warm. My father smiles crookedly, like a baby. He is sad, yes, but also I sense gratitude in him. Pride. He longs for the spark that once designed buildings and played football in high school and won my mother’s love, but he knows it is gone. He is happy to have made me.

“We are all sad sometimes,” I tell him. “It’s okay, Dad.”
The blizzard left that morning and the sun was out for the first time, melting into mud and water the dirty slush that surrounded the cabin. I watched from a window, drinking the last of the whiskey with soda water. The whiskey was out. Four days since Jane had gone out, or five? At the Grand Canyon, we’d been arguing and we argued all the way back to the cabin outside Williams, Arizona. She’d stayed at the cabin long enough to pack her clothes and feminine products—left. Jane was wearing blue; I stayed, drank, slept awhile.

The snow had started, piling around the cabin high enough that I couldn’t open the door if I’d wanted to, leaving me with only half a window’s worth to watch the outside world turn to powder and ice, leaving me with a supply of firewood and whiskey which I would have to ration for a period of time—I knew not how long. The wood hadn’t lasted the full duration. Until now, the whiskey had: thank God.

Jane and I weren’t married in that I’d never put a diamond or a gold band on her finger. If I had, it wouldn’t have changed anything. Still, it felt like a divorce to me, having lived with Jane for ten years, most of that time indefinitely engaged. The relationship, which had been the second longest of Jane’s life, was the longest of my life. She’d said, “You’re turning into my fucking ex-husband, and I’m not going to wait around to get as tired of your shit as I was of his.”
Our argument, the beginning of which I cannot remember, settled on the gifts I’d gotten her sister Judy, her father Bob, and her aunt Carla, for Christmas. I’d given Judy a scarf, Bob socks, Carla a scarf. And our lovemaking had become like my gift giving, as disinterested and obligatory as a psychiatrist prescribing Prozac. We had been trying for a while, but I guess now we were beyond trying or didn’t want to try anymore.

I pressed open the door of the cabin, it screeching against the wet wooden walkway, and looked out to the new melting world of white and brown, saw the distant, still-capped mountains. The San Francisco Peaks, Jane had called them. “San Francisco is a city in California, not Arizona,” I’d said, and she’d told me names aren’t exclusive to single ideas or things, words not bound to the object they signify.

The mountains were old giants, sleeping through their names or lack of names, uncaring of names. I wanted to move forward; I wanted to see the mountains up close; I wanted to stand on them.

I went into the cabin and put on my boots, my coat, my hat. I remembered my sunglasses because snowy days in the Rockies aren’t like Ohio. There could be white everywhere, but cloudless, and the reflecting sunlight could leave you squinting, seeing spots. The sun was out today. I walked through the mud and snow, looking for the trail to the frozen creek; I’d walked there alone a week before, before the canyon and the fight. I found the trail in the pines, snow falling in abrupt bursts from the limbs of the pines, icicles dripping from the needles of the pines, and I was enclosed by the green of pines.

You might not picture Arizona like this; I hadn’t. Had I bothered trying to picture it?
I’m not a planner and hadn’t thought about how I would get out of this melting countryside, Jane having taken our rental car. My ex-almost-wife hadn’t thought about that either. The lease on the cabin had run out sometime during the blizzard, and soon, after flight delays and vacation corrections, the next Midwestern couple would arrive to take over the property for a week of enjoying the sylvan pleasures of mountains and winter sunlight.

The sunlight slipped through the branches, silvering the path in front of me.

We had gotten together toward the end of Jane’s marriage. We were working together on the campaign of a not so famous politician for whom her husband was campaign manager. His name was Brad (the husband, not the politician) and on our rides through Ohio suburbs and wheat-fields, Jane talked about him, mostly complaints about his domestic propaganda. She cared nothing for politics and I cared nothing for politics and we were weary of the travelling, coordinating events, meeting people who loved our candidate, meeting people who hated our candidate, pretending he had a chance to win. She told me once that the candidate had touched her ass right in front of Brad and Brad had pretended not to see and she knew right then that if the candidate had asked him, Brad would have asked her to, so she was done with Brad and politics and campaigns.

We made love for the first time on the night of the election, a landslide in favor of the opposition, and she said during climax, “I’m not even registered to vote.”

It was just going to be an affair—something to help her end things with Brad—but the divorce papers came and we stayed together.

I rounded the trail’s last corner and saw sheets of broken ice floating in the creek like porcelain carved jagged. I reached in and pulled out a hand-sized shard of ice, bit off
a crunchy chunk, chewed the earthy water. Somewhere above me, a raven squawked from the pines. I held the rest of the ice shard in my hand until it melted through the hot numbness, cold water falling through my fingers and running off my wrist. Nothing smells more like decay than the thawing of winter, a world melting into filth and life.

Moisture dripped onto my hands from above, but I felt nothing, so it had to be snowmelt from the trees around me.

I will get better; I will be better.

I am not yet old.
A Game of Chess

During mid-morning social hour, which follows Jell-O and precedes tea, Abe passed out little paper cups to the patients in the common room. He held the dozen or so cups on a tray like a waiter, some filled with pills, some with water. His hands shook as he passed out the cups. Abe was younger than some of the patients, but older and balder than quite a few, and to an outside eye, it was only his uniform, a white polo tucked into white pants held up by a black leather belt, that separated him from the residents of Three Rivers Retirement Home. They shuffled around in their off-white gowns, some with floral print, some with cartoon characters, settling into their usual spots.

Smells of bleach, rodent urine, orange Metamucil, and hot chocolate floated through the room. Along the window sills, deformed and blotchily painted ceramic ashtrays and mugs made by arthritic hands framed the view of the green fields outside.

Abe handed two cups to Loren, the professor Emeritus of Shakespearian studies, who was standing in the middle of the room. Loren gulped the pills and water. His eyes darted, alive behind the magnifying lenses of his glasses. Decades of chalk residue crusted the frames. On one lens, someone had scratched a large “F,” on the other a “U.” Loren had once worn a tweed coat with leather elbow patches over his gown, but someone had stolen it and tried to flush it down a toilet. His jowls shook as he cleared his
throat in preparation for his daily lecture, and the squeaking of a rusty metal hamster wheel echoed behind his voice.

“The central question of Lear, the old boy’s masterpiece, is whether or not the king is in fact a man more sinned against than sinning as he claims. It is the weighing of morality that defines—”

As Loren imparted his monologue, the patients set about their individual routines. Patty watched Loren, her mouth moving silently, in unison with his monologue. She gripped the rails of her walker, the tennis balls at the bottom set firmly on the hard tile. Whenever Loren said, “sin,” he made the sign of the cross, and Patty kept up with his genuflections as best she could without losing her balance.

Others stared into space, knitted, stitched, read, smacked dominoes, but the chessboard was claimed, as it was every morning, by Maria.

Maria looked as thin and delicate as a bolt of silk. She ate Jell-O every morning but skipped dinner, except for the chicken on Thursdays. Everyone assumed Maria was Russian because the last name in her file ended in an “evna” and no one at Three Rivers could pronounce the rest. She’d never spoken, and everyone wondered if it was because she only spoke Russian or because she didn’t want to speak or couldn’t speak at all. Every morning she’d sit in the cushiony purple chair near the window in front of the chessboard and look out the window until someone challenged her. No one knew exactly what she looked at outside, but the thing that everyone knew was that Maria was the best at chess. Today, as was most often the case, Bob was the one to scoot a short stool in front of the white pieces and move a pawn. Maria did not look at the board, dedicating
only peripheral vision to the game, but responded in kind, moving a black pawn toward the center.

Loren continued, “If one looks to performances of the play, one might find answers to this problem of the sin equation. In the sympathetic performance of Laurence Olivier, for example, we clearly have a man beaten down by the responsibilities of his station and the horrors of the world. He is a man more sinned against than sinning. Yet, if we look at Paul Scofield as Lear, a performance defined by madness, rage, and debasement, the audience might not believe Lear’s assertion on—”

Loren paced around the center of the room as he lectured, making eye contact with anyone who would look at him, which was mostly only Patty. When Loren’s benevolent gaze washed over her, she would grip her walker tighter and mumble his words. Loren’s pace took him to the wire cage of Beatrice the hamster, the mascot of Three Rivers’ common room. He reached through the top hatch and scooped her out. She’d been brought in by Abe the previous fall and Loren had named her. She sat passively in Loren’s left hand, her nose convulsing in vigorous movements as he stroked her with his thumb.

“—catharsis through prayer. God is accosted throughout, but God is unnecessary in the world of Lear. This is not a play of godliness or godlessness, it is—”

Bob was trying a new strategy. He’d brought out a knight and a bishop to try and counter the control of the board’s center that Maria’s black pieces would inevitably try to take. His queen remained in starting position for Bob to deploy later. Bob had been trying to beat Maria for the last two years. He’d asked his daughter to bring him new books on chess every time she visited, and he read them at night before falling asleep. He knew
that white attacks and black responds, yet in games he played against Maria, his attacks failed and soon he was on the backfoot against her assault. Maria always set out the black pieces in front of her. No one at Three Rivers had ever beaten her.

“—must analyze the text solely. To look at the performances of an Olivier or a Scofield, which represent individual interpretations of the play by directors and actors, is quite simply to cheat—”

Bob set traps and Maria gracefully avoided them. They were progressing toward mid-game and Bob could see that his new strategy wasn’t going to work. He’d have to think of something else, request another book. Maria moved her king’s knight two spaces left, two spaces advancing. It was an illegal move. The proper thing to do would be to point out the mistake and require a different move, yet this set Maria’s knight in position to be taken by Bob’s pawn, a devastating trade. Bob looked up at Maria, who continued to gaze out the window, and then back at the board. He took her knight with his pawn. Maria took Bob’s pawn with a pawn.

“—that a performance, which amounts to genius interpreting genius, becomes in itself an artifact worthy of scholarly interpretation. What runs through Olivier’s frantic mind as he surveys his kingdom and subjects in the play’s opening scene? We have only his eyes, fraught with mystery, to give us guidance—”

Bob wasn’t bad at chess. He studied obsessively, practiced on his iPad, and for the last two years, without knowing it, had played against a former grandmaster. The mistake that led to the loss of Maria’s knight was significant and Bob took a snowballing advantage. Maria lost a pawn, then a bishop. She was down a few pieces and Bob brought out his queen.
Abe walked by carrying his tray of medication. When he glanced at the chessboard, he stopped and whistled softly.

“—self-serving, vile, bastard—”

As Abe hovered and Bob took deliberate trembling moves, Maria looked outside. The spring sun was out with only a few clouds in the sky, a welcome deliverance from the long grayness of the winter. The squirrels roamed under the oaks and sycamores, looking for acorns, just beginning to add fat to their winter leanness. Ohio in the spring was the same as Ukraine. Back then, spring had meant that Maria could go outside, her father would take her, and they would walk among the tall yellow grass and talk about everything but chess. In winter, when her father set the coffee boiling and sliced up a sausage for them to share cold, they played chess, Maria always white and Sergey always black, playing all day without noticing the movement of the sun. They’d spend the whole day on one game, sometimes taking hours to make a single move. Maria had never beaten her father. In the evening, when Sergey would tuck her in, they would discuss the game, move by move. “You’re so stingy with your queen, Maria. You have to let her out.”

The Communists came for her father. She hid, but they found her too. They put her in a crumbling school. Then: replacement. Her father was replaced with three sterner fathers: Marx, Lenin, Stalin. They emptied her mind of images of her father’s golden wheat fields, replaced them with images of golden wheat fields owned by the masses. She never saw Sergey again.

While in school, Maria won a game of chess for the first time in her life. Two guards sat in the mess hall, which was shared by the students, a board in between them. The rat-faced guard looked smug while the fat guard contemplated a move. Maria walked...
up holding her bowl of cabbage water and without asking moved a black knight. The fat guard protested, but his opponent said, “Let her go Mikhail, maybe she will be more of a challenge than you.” In seven moves, Maria checkmated the rat-faced guard. Later, she checkmated every guard in the school. Within a week, the Communists transferred Maria to another program.

In the new school, she ate cabbage, not just the water, and meat once a week. Tutors worked with her on chess, but she checkmated most of the tutors. She played in tournaments: first against boys from Russia, Poland, East Germany, then against boys from New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, then against men from everywhere. Balding bespectacled men would sit across from her and curse in languages she did not understand. She played chess for the Communists until she was twenty-four.

At a tournament in New York, between her first and second matches, Maria went to the bathroom. There was a small window. She climbed up, opened the window, and fell into the streets of New York.

“—he is not entirely innocent. His equation admits guilt; that is a given. Yet what is his crime? Dividing the kingdom? Banishing Cordelia? These are acts done with purpose by a man who must bear the burden of power one last time. The outcome may be disaster and chaos, but these states of being were not the king’s goals. Therefore, can we not see that the greatest sin of all committed by King Lear is that of ignorance of the future? Of this sin, my friends, we are all guilty, as we cannot foresee with perfect clarity the effects of our—”

The chessboard was chaos. Following Bob’s slow, unsure moves, Maria’s had become steadily sharper and more decisive. She was down to a rook, a handful of pawns,
and her queen and king. She slammed her moves onto the board, and all the pieces shook in the aftermath. Her face remained as it always had, distracted by life outside the window, betraying nothing.

“For next class read ‘The Wasteland.’ We will discuss Eliot’s allusions to Learian imagery—”

Following Maria’s last move, Abe gasped. He could see that it was over. Bob looked up at Maria, and then back at the board. His hand shook more than he could ever remember it shaking as he moved his queen diagonally, directly in front of Maria’s king, a space protected by his rook. A soft word passed through the lips of a man for the first time in the five years since Maria had come to Three Rivers (it had also never passed through a woman’s lips, for that matter since, when she beat you, Maria would simply sigh and place her hand under her chin and continue to look out the window):

“Checkmate.”

Maria turned her head. She looked at the board, her face twisting. It was wrong; it was all wrong. The black king checkmated was all the wrongness of her life on the board in front of her. The moan had started and she was suddenly screaming, shrieking, “PIGS! PIGS! PIGS!” (though it was in Russian, so they all didn’t know what she was screaming).

As the shrieks swelled, everyone looked up at Maria and Bob. Loren squeezed Beatrice too hard, and in response she sunk her long front teeth into the webbing between his thumb and forefinger. Loren yelped, dropped Beatrice and backed away. Finally, Maria ran out of breath and the screams, filled with anguish and pain, tapered into nothing. After it was gone, the squeals and soft gurgling of Beatrice became audible.
Loren watched the hamster, adjusted his glasses, pinched the small bleeding spot on his hand. Beatrice twitched on her back and made her gurgle-squeak noise. Something was broken inside the animal.

Abe gathered a pile of napkins from the hot chocolate station and wrapped them carefully around Beatrice’s twitching body. He lifted her up and took her with him to the closet. At the bottom of the closet was an old ammo box containing Three Rivers Retirement Home’s small collection of tools. The minor day-to-day maintenances were Abe’s responsibility.

Loren said, soft, feeble, “Wait.”

Abe looked at Loren. There was nothing he could do for him.

Abe had bags under his eyes. He barely slept anymore. He had worked at Three Rivers for thirty years; the first twenty-nine he’d been married to Laura. Laura was gone. He missed the rituals of being married. Twenty-nine years they’d gone to bed at the same time, woken up at the same time. Abe would make the coffee and Laura would make the eggs. They’d sit across from each other, talk about how they thought their day would go. Now, at night in his home, Abe lay in bed in the dark, waiting for sleep to come, and as it grew closer he’d reach across the bed looking for his wife’s hand, and when he found only emptiness, he’d startle into consciousness. In the morning, he made coffee, but rarely ate breakfast.

That morning, Abe had tried to make Laura’s eggs. Before he met her, he preferred scrambled, dry. But Laura could fry an egg crispy on the outside, leaving the yolk-y middle, not exactly runny, but creamy. Abe’s attempt this morning left the center yellow and watery. Abe had taken a bite and gagged at the richness. The hot yolk ran
down his chin and he wiped it away with the tablecloth. When he left the house for his truck, Abe smelled pollen and noticed the green of grass and leaves for the first time. It was the first true day of spring, Laura’s favorite time of year. Doubling over in the driveway, he retched coffee and the bite of egg.

Abe held Beatrice in his left hand, and with his right sifted through the Phillips head screwdrivers and crescent wrenches until he found the hammer. He felt the weak quiver of the bundle of napkins. All the patients watched as he took the hammer and small white parcel into the next room. There was a “bang,” a pause, then a “BANG!” Abe walked back into the common room, put the hammer into the ammo box, grabbed another handful of napkins and left.

Later that day, Loren sat in the purple chair after Maria had retired to her room. He looked out the window as Abe dug a hole. Abe knelt, hollowing out a tract of earth with a gardening trowel. Loren saw him drop a little red clump of napkins into the hole and cover it up with mud. Abe rose, muddy stains on the knees of his white pants, and dropped the trowel.

That was the last day Loren lectured. On the rare occasions he came to social hour, he sat in a plastic chair near Beatrice’s cage. No one had gotten rid of it, or even thrown out the bedding. The musty scent of hamster urine faded into the background of Three Rivers’ cacophony of smells. Most days Loren stayed in bed. Patty would walk by his room, leaning against the tennis balls of her walker, her lips mouthing silent lectures on *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, and *King Lear*. Once, from the darkness of his room, a little light reflecting off the lenses of his glasses so that only the carved “F” and “U” were visible,
the silhouette of the professor Emeritus shouted, “What do you want!? I don’t have it anymore, I don’t have anything! It’s gone!”

Bob sat in the purple chair and played chess. They flipped a coin to see who would play the white pieces or the black. He defeated everyone who challenged him, yelled “Checkmate!” He grew lazy and stopped reading books. There was no threat to his dominance.

Maria Karlvladjoevna never left her room again. No one visited.

One day, after Jell-O and before tea, during mid-morning social hour, Abe walked into the common room. He held a small ceramic bowl, one small dip in the lip. He placed it on the windowsill and it wobbled before settling into place. The cup of pills he held was his own. One was for hip pain, one for headaches, one to make it all blurry enough that he could coast. Abe swallowed the pills dry, he could still do that. Abe wore a gown, off-white, with little pictures of Daffy Duck in various states of antics patterned on it. In one, Daffy held a huge mallet, poised to pulverize the head of Bugs Bunny.

Loren was there, sitting next to the empty hamster cage. Patty stood next to him. Bob played chess, staring out the window as the summer sun baked the grass of Ohio fields.

Abe sat down on the couch. He was home.
The House

My wife has a story for me. She’s been quiet for the last hour, gathering her thoughts while I drive. I recognize this carefulness with words as the influence of her father, about whom, I know, the story will be. Once, long ago when we were only dating, she told me her father took her and her sisters to the park, but they could not play with any of the white children on any of the slides or swings. Rodney sat with his daughters around him on a park bench and they watched everyone else play. He would point out when a boy pushed someone or a girl cut in line for the monkey bars and say, *Now, what did that kid do wrong?* They watched and answered. As a child, my wife never once sat on a swing.

She sits in the passenger seat of our white Civic as I drive us along the 40, heading east, out of Arizona. We’re in the highlands, stunted shrubs and sparse yellow grass spreading toward the horizon. Behind us, mountains, pale and dimming. Ahead of us, a small town, either Winslow or Holbrook, blending its shabbiness into the tufted, gray desert.

My wife looks ahead, her dark brown eyes focused on the highway stretching forever in front of us. She holds her purse in her lap, but hasn’t opened it. She clears her throat, and I rouse myself out of my thoughts, which had strayed to that Eagles song with
“standing on a corner” in it, which I’ve always hated. As my wife begins to speak, I glance at the gas gage to make sure that I don’t lose track of our fuel.

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“This all began, as far as I can say, with my father’s father. We called him Papa Charles. He came home to Cincinnati from Korea and married my Grandma Renee. They had five kids: Rodney, Karen, Mark, Toby, and aunt Patty, in that order. But when they were just starting out, before any of the kids, they lived with Grandma Renee’s parents, the Cobbs.

“Papa Charles started building a house out of cinderblock out near the woods. It took a year; he built it half in the summer and half in the winter. My dad always said that the cinderblocks kept in heat year-round. Hot in the winter, blazing in the summer. That little house was a furnace.

“I saw the house once. My dad always loved to talk about it and he took us there when I was nine and we were visiting his Cincinnati family. It was a little gray square, like the cinderblocks it was made of. It had one tiny window in the front, the kitchen, I think, and an A-frame roof. The red front door was in the exact center. It looked like something a child would draw.

“From the stories my dad had told me, I’d expected something bigger. Even nine-year-old me could see that this was more of a playhouse than something fit for my dad and his two sisters and two brothers. No one lived there anymore, but we didn’t go inside. I imagined it was something like the Bucket household from Charlie and the Chocolate Factory.
“But there was space around it. The little gray square sat suspended in green. On either side, you could have fit a decent sized house with an adequate yard. Behind it, the back yard sloped downhill toward a line of trees, dense and barrier-like. There were neighbors, but their remoteness made me think that my dad must have grown up in isolation from anyone other than his siblings and parents.

“By the time the house was finished in the winter, Grandma Renee was pregnant. While the last coat of gray paint was still dripping, Papa Charles drove down to the Cobb house and said, ‘Renee, the house is done. Time to go home.’ As he held her hand and walked her up the front steps, she took a look in the house and saw a rough wooden floor and no furniture. The house was done, but there was nowhere to sit or sleep. She sent him out right away to buy a bed.

“Renee stayed behind. The inside of the house was simple, a T-shaped wall dividing into three rooms: a bathroom, a bedroom, and the kitchen, which would also function as the living room. She’d brought a few household items from the Cobb house and started sweeping the splintery floorboards. This wasn’t a house to go barefoot inside.

“Papa Charles returned an hour later with a twin bed. He’d always been frugal, but a twin bed for two adults must have seemed crazy to Renee. Still, she didn’t complain, because you couldn’t complain in Papa Charles’ house. At night, Charles and his pregnant wife squeezed into the little twin bed, their lone piece of furniture, their only extravagance.

“Charles cultivated the weeds that make burrs in the grassy fields around the house. The neighbor kids lived some ways away, but still he didn’t want them playing in his yard. No one in that neighborhood had shoes back then, so it was a good trick. When
my dad, sisters, and I visited decades later, the field was still populated with this legacy of burrs. Even for my feet, toughened by running after the ice cream man on Phoenix concrete, walking barefoot in that grass was agony.

“And Charles had a guard-dog, a yellow mutt named Dwight. He chained the dog to a post out front, another deterrent to any possible trespasser. He fed the dog gunpowder to make it crazy. I can only imagine that it worked.

“Rodney was born. He being the first boy, and Renee being the woman she was, my dad was never allowed to touch the floor. She always carried him; cousins have confirmed this. Maybe it started as a way to protect him from the splinters of the wood floor and the burrs in the yard, but I think there was more to it. Renee dressed Rodney in all white. He was pure. Clean. Her baby boy. For the first three years of his life, he slept in between Charles and Renee in the little twin bed.

“Karen was born next, and my dad says she ruined everything. I don’t really know what that means, but I do know people in my family call her K. K. (Krazy Karen). As a little girl, Papa Charles would take her on long walks with their insane yellow dog. The burrs in the yard never seemed to faze her. When she’d get a splinter, she wouldn’t cry, would pull it out dispassionately and drop the bloody point of wood back on the floor. Whenever you’d see Renee and the kids, Rodney would be in her arms, and Karen on the floor. When she was born, Papa Charles and Renee bought a new bed, a queen, and moved the twin into the living room. The kids shared the old bed.

“My dad says that Karen became heavily addicted to cocaine in the eighties.

“The family grew, and each new kid added his or her body to the twin in the living room. By then, the little house had collected a few more pieces of furniture: a small
table with a few chairs. It was the biggest table they could fit in the house, but still, they had to eat breakfast in shifts. First, Papa Charles and Rodney. Then the younger children. Then Renee.

“There’s a story my Dad likes to tell. He says it’s why he doesn’t like water. If you mention water, he’ll start talking about it. The way he tells the story goes like this:

“I was six, and Mama and Papa had K. K. and me in the back yard doing a picnic. It took a couple blankets on the ground to protect from the burrs. Old Dwight was in the front yard howling his crazy ass off like always. It must have been April because the trees were getting their green back in them. Squirrels were out again, so that means the foxes were out getting fat on them. I saw one of them foxes out near the trees, and I wandered off the blanket real quiet toward it. I must have been wearing my first pair of shoes ever, and it felt good to be on my own feet. Mama and Papa must have been scolding K. K. about something, probably for being such a bitch like she always was, because I got away without them noticing. That fox didn’t notice me yet either, so I just kept on creeping down that hill at him, quiet as I could. And then he noticed me and got all tense-like. I froze and so did he. A second later, in a flash of orange, the fox jumped into the woods with barely the sound of leaves and twigs under his little black feet. And I just started after him. I was off; you couldn’t have caught me. I heard behind me Mama saying, “Rodney! Where are you going, boy?” But I was just going for that little orange devil and into the trees, and then I heard, more frantic this time, “Rodney! Get back!” But by then, I was in the woods, running through old dead leaves and mud, and the branches were scratching up my nice white shirt and pants. But I didn’t care. For some reason, I just wanted that fox so bad. I was tripping on my undone shoelaces, and dirtying up my
whole body, but it didn’t matter. And then I saw the old creek back there at the bottom of
the hill, and the fox was in it, just paddling along with his doggy little feet, trying to get
to the other side away from me coming after him. And I said, I remember this, “No you
don’t, you cracker fox!” And I jumped splashing into that creek after him, into the muddy
brown water. Girls, let me tell you, there’s never been colder water than that Cincinnati
creek. And silly me, I didn’t even realize I didn’t know how to swim, so I was just
thrashing around the mud, trying to stay above the water, probably freezing to death,
feeling like my chest was encased in a block of ice so that I could barely even breathe in
when I got my mouth into the air. But I was not panicking, mind you, because your dad
does not panic. I was really just angry with that fox. I could see him standing on the far
side of the creek’s shore, just staring at me like a smug little cracker. But he got away,
and I never saw him again, so I guess he gets to be smug. As I tried to splash my way out
of the creek, and I didn’t know if I needed to go forward after that devil or back toward
home, I heard Mama coming down into the woods after me. She was wailing and holding
her chest, her sun hat lost somewhere behind her. She got down into the mud and pulled
me out. I was shivering and cold, so she just held me tight as she could, getting mud all
over herself as she carried me up the hill, back toward home. When we got out of the
woods, I could already see that Papa was taking off his belt and I knew what was coming,
but Mama just said, “No, Charlie,” and kept on going. She took me into the house and
drew a hot bath. All my muddy clothes splattered into a pile on the bathroom floor and she
dunked me into the water. I don’t think I’d ever been so dirty in my life. She just kept
washing the water over my body, saying, “Sweet boy, sweet boy. Gotta get you clean,
sweet boy.” Eventually, I stopped shivering. Mama let out that muddy water and drew
another clean bath to wash me in. She did it again and again until the water came out clear. I was warm and happy, and I guess by then, I’d forgotten all about that little orange fox. The mud had dried on Mama’s dress, and it would stain. She’d still wear it around the house on Saturdays, but she wasn’t going to wear it outside anymore. That set of clothes and shoes that I’d been wearing, Mama tried to get them white again, but they were going to be brown forever. She had to throw them out, made Papa go and buy new ones.”

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My wife is quiet for a few minutes. I look at the gas gage. We still have half a tank. I think we’ll probably make it to Gallup, New Mexico before I have to fill up again. My wife takes a drink of coffee from a Styrofoam cup. It must be cold by now. She decides to finish the story.

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“My dad first told this story to my sisters and me when we saw that old house on the Cincinnati trip. We’d been in the car for a week because on the way, we’d broken down in Sayre, Oklahoma. At one point, my father had demanded that my mother use some of our travel money to go to a laundromat while he haggled with the mechanic. My mother had taken my sisters and I and spent the money at McDonald’s instead. We ate hamburgers and French fries while my mom watched us. She looked concerned. Our clothes had begun to smell, but we were happy. Dad didn’t have much to say to my mother for the rest of the trip.

“He told the story of the fox and the creek, looking pointedly at my mother in some places. He said, ‘Mama was so embarrassed for anyone to see her kids in dirty
clothes. After I got them all stained in the mud, she would never, *never* have allowed me to be seen in that outfit again.’

“My dad’s family eventually left Cincinnati. The factory closed, and Charles looked for work out west. He moved his family to Phoenix, Arizona. They got a house that was a little bigger, but on a smaller plot of dry, brown land. Charles tried, but couldn’t get the burrs to grow.

“My dad says that’s where the family drifted apart. Without the house to enclose them, the tight-knit ball of yarn that was the family unit unwound. Karen moved out at fourteen. Mark and Toby left together. My dad stayed behind in the Phoenix house through his year in college before dropping out. Aunt Patty eventually moved to Seattle, got a PhD, and no one has seen her since.

“He blames leaving Cincinnati on everything, but he’s not always sentimental. At least in Phoenix, there weren’t any creeks to fall into. And he prefers the western introversion to the fake-friendliness of places like Ohio. He likes to say, ‘Those eastern Negroes don’t have any class.’”

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It takes me a while to realize that my wife has finished her story. She simply trails off and looks out the window. I wait several minutes, but she doesn’t seem to have any more to say. It’s not that I’m disappointed, but maybe I had been expecting more.

Outside, the sun is setting behind us, and I drive into a steadily darkening horizon. We’re moving out of gray highlands and into brown, dry desert. The shrubs and grass are gone. Hairy cacti dot the ground. The 40 is a very straight road.
Soon, we’ll leave Arizona, where my wife was born, where we both grew up, where we met and fell in love. We’ll pass into New Mexico, then Texas, Oklahoma. We will cross an imaginary border that begins somewhere around Missouri, into a place where people are allegedly friendlier, the grass greener, the summers endless. We’re moving to the Midwest, a place my wife grew up knowing as a site of nostalgia. Neither of us had particularly happy childhoods.

We’re thinking of starting a family.
Connie Freeman woke one morning, following a strange dream she vaguely remembered. After her four-minute shower, she tried to remember the dream while blow-drying her hair. She thought it had something to do with books, or was it dieting? She stepped onto her bathroom scale and read 111 pounds. Perhaps she would take only an apple for lunch. After putting on her smart suit pants and purple blouse, she stood in the hallway of her apartment, checking herself in the mirror, looking for imperfections. Her mind continued to wander to the dream that had woken her. There had been a command to it. She was supposed to do something, and perhaps it was important. She shrugged her shoulders and smiled at herself in the mirror, practicing for her boss. Before she left her apartment, she took an apple out of the refrigerator and put it into her purse, which she thought was too large for someone her age, then adjusted the two coffee table books, one on the lochs of Scotland and the other on papier-mâché, so that they appeared more inviting. She thought she might have company tonight.

Connie was the type of woman that people called mousy. Her mousy brown hair. Her mousy personality. Quiet as a mouse. She did not think of herself this way, but she was aware that others did. Outside, clouds hid the sun and half-covered the rest of the sky, making for a balmy humid morning. On her train ride to work Connie thought about insurance.
Singer and Associates was a small office connected to other offices in a business
down town. When she arrived at the office fifteen minutes until open, she was the
first person there as usual. The humidity did not follow Connie inside, but the office felt
chokingly hot. The windowless room was a bit like a closet that opened into three other
closets and a tiny bathroom. Like every other office Connie had worked in, it smelled
faintly of spilt coffee and packing peanuts. The receptionist’s desk was closest to the
front door and by that, the coffee station. On the left and right sides of the room, the
secretaries’ desks sat next to the office doors to each of the secretaries’ bosses. They were
staggered so that there would be enough space to navigate through to the back room, to
which Connie now went. The mainframe room held the office’s server that stored all the
important insurance files that Singer and Associates handled. It was such important
information that Connie carried a backup hard drive, called the tape, that stored a copy of
all the information from the mainframe in case the building burned down. After taking
the tape out of her purse, she plugged it in so that it could record the new information of
the day. She switched the air conditioning on so that the office could be cool by the time
her boss came in. Then she went to the coffee station to start a pot of coffee, which was
technically the receptionist’s job, but Connie did not want to wait for her to show up.

The rest of Singer and Associates trickled in as Connie got to work on the
Reynolds account. First was Dara, the other secretary who said good morning and then
would not say anything else to Connie for the rest of the day, then Richard, Singer and
Associates’ other agent (and Dara’s boss). Richard went into his office, telling Dara that
as soon as the receptionist showed up to send her in. When she did come in at 9:12,
Richard opened his office door and told her to get in there. She did and came out five
minutes later, her mascara running. Then Bob Singer came in and remarked that it was good that Connie was getting a head start on the Reynolds account, and Connie told him it should be finished by the end of the week. She smiled for him, but he did not seem to notice. He took a cup of coffee into his office and shut the door, leaving the three women in the main room, quiet except for the hum of the secretaries’ typing and the weepy receptionist blowing her nose.

The phone rang at 9:30, as Connie knew it would. The receptionist cleared her throat and answered “Singer and Associates.” After a pause, “Oh. Hold on. Let me transfer you.” She pressed a button on the phone and dropped the receiver like it was something rotten. Looking up at Connie, she said, “That Mertz woman again.”

Connie picked up the phone and said, “Hello again Mrs. Mertz. This is Connie. How are you doing this morning?” She continued skimming through the Reynolds account while she talked.

The old woman on the line answered, “Yes. Hello. Hello, Connie. I’m just calling again because I have my payment scheduled for automatic withdrawal for the fifteenth. And it’s already the seventeenth and it hasn’t come out yet.” Her plaintive voice creaked and paused between words as if she were carefully rationing them out.

Connie said, “Certainly Mrs. Mertz, I can see how that would be inconvenient. However, it is your insurance provider who is late in taking the payment. I will contact them for you if you like?” At the moment, Connie was working on the cover sheet for the Reynolds account. She had to search through the insurance policy and glean all of the important information, such as rates, premiums, deductibles, and scheduled items, and compile them into one easily digestible summary.
“That would be fine, dear,” Mrs. Mertz said. “It’s just that back when I was paying quarterly, I could just send off my payments in checks and I didn’t have to worry about them taking money out of my bank.”

“Yes,” Connie said, “but once you switched to paying monthly your insurance company mandated automatic withdrawals.” The sticking point with cover sheets was that each insurance company placed its information in different places throughout their policies. Within each company, the same information was always in the same place, however, no two companies could agree on a standard. Connie had memorized most of the formats for the big insurance companies; however, Sam Reynolds was her and Bob’s only client who used this particular company.

Mrs. Mertz continued, “Yes, dear, I know. It would just be good if I could pay monthly and still pay with checks. Then I wouldn’t have to worry. But I understand. Rules. I also had a question about Rossi and Bill.”

“And how are your cats, Mrs. Mertz?” Connie asked. Sam Reynolds of Reynolds’ Pharmacies was doing well. His first pharmacy had been lucrative enough that now he was opening another location on the other side of town, and Singer and Associates was handling the insurance for the new store. Connie had stopped into the original pharmacy occasionally, at many different hours of the day, to buy a bottle of orange juice or lipstick or some aspirin for the office, but the store was usually empty. Sam Reynolds also owned the horseracing track north of town.

“Well, bless her heart, little Rossi still isn’t walking well. She turns sixteen in October. But the veterinarian has her on a new wet food and hopefully that will perk her right up. As for Bill, I hardly see much of him. He loves to hide in the laundry room and
behind the dresser in the guest bedroom. He does come out at night, though, sometimes, and I hear him. We celebrated his tenth just this July. We don’t know his real birth date since we adopted him, but we’ve always liked having his birthday in July.”

“That sounds lovely Mrs. Mertz. You had a question about your cats?” Connie was writing a note to herself to call Sam Reynolds and to ask him if he wanted to add employee life insurance to his policy, since it was tax deductible.

“Oh. Yes. Well, I just wanted to make sure that Rossi and Bill would be covered. I have been smoking again. I know I’m not supposed to, but it helps to pass the time. It’s just that I fall asleep sometimes without realizing it and I wanted to make sure my cats are covered in case I burn the house down.”

Connie lowered her voice so that Dara and the receptionist could not hear. “Now Mrs. Mertz, as I’ve told you, you shouldn’t tell me that you’re smoking, because I wouldn’t want to have to add it to your health insurance policy. It would make your rate go up. And as for your cats, they are fully covered, even if your house burns down.”

Connie smiled triumphantly as she found the block of information she had been looking for in the Reynolds policy and began typing it into her cover sheet.

“Well, thank you dear. That’s good to hear. I suppose I’ll let you get to work now.”

“Take care Mrs. Mertz, and have a lovely day.”

Mrs. Mertz ended the conversation as she did every morning. “Thank you, dear, and please, call me Olivia.”

“Good-bye Olivia,” Connie hung up. She then called Olivia Mertz’s insurance provider to confirm that the payment would be withdrawn that afternoon.
Connie made several other calls about the Reynolds account, solidifying the important details of the policy. It was Connie’s day to walk the three blocks to the post office and pick up the mail, so she did, and dropped the pile of letters off at the receptionist’s desk so that the receptionist could sort them into piles of commercial, accounts, junk, and one pile each for Bob’s and Richard’s personal mail. At lunchtime, Richard went out and the receptionist made sure to appear busy sorting mail until he left the office. Dara loudly finished typing something and left for lunch. The receptionist followed a minute later. Connie stayed at her desk to continue working and ate her apple. Bob had also remained behind in his office. He called Connie in to ask her about her progress on the Reynolds account.

Bob was a tall man and had a large chin that stuck out a bit. He had one of those chin clefts that look great on movie stars. His brilliant blue eyes still sparkled in the right light, though now he wore steel framed glasses with huge lenses. Because his ever slicked back hair had begun to thin on top, and he regularly dyed it black to keep the gray out, Connie thought that he was not nearly as handsome now as he had probably once been. Still, he carried with him at all times the near megalomaniacal self-confidence that all ex high school quarterbacks seem to have. Connie had seen him in action with clients, always smiling, doing nearly all the talking. While selling insurance, Bob was all charisma, always able to talk about the big game that his male clients’ had seen the night before, always knowing the perfect complement for his female clients’ purse. In the office, however, Bob mostly sat pensive at his desk and frowned and scowled. Connie knew he preferred to be “on the field,” taking prospective clients to bars and golf courses.
Bob had pictures of his wife and son on his desk. In one, his wife, Linda, looked solemnly into the camera, posed so that Connie thought she was trying hard to be sexy. In another, taken at least ten years before, Bob was throwing a football in the yard to his son, Bobby. He was looking at it when Connie walked in. Bob said that he had to go out and meet with a client. He said he also had to go and meet Linda for lunch to talk about Bobby. The kid had gotten another DUI and the university was thinking about revoking his scholarship. They had already suspended him from the football team following the first incident. Connie said she was sorry to hear that things were going so hard for him. Bob said that the damned kid, he just needed to understand that there are responsibilities that go with being the quarterback. He also asked Connie if she remembered that they were to have dinner together to discuss work and she said yes, of course. Bob said good, that he would pick her up from the office after work, and left.

The rest of the workday passed uneventfully. Dara came back from lunch first, and the receptionist arrived breathlessly just before Richard. At one point the women spent an hour and a half in unspoken standoff after Richard used the bathroom. Richard lived at home with his wife and three daughters, so in what he probably thought a justified act of rebellious defiance, he never put down the toilet seat at work. Worse still, he aimed erratically. No one wanted to be the next to use the bathroom after him and therefore take on the responsibility of cleaning up after him, so the three of them held their bladders late into the afternoon. Finally, Dara sighed extravagantly and went to the bathroom, which Connie thought was only fair since she was Richard’s secretary after all. As soon as she came out the receptionist jumped out of her seat, paying no attention to Dara’s glare. Connie waited a few minutes so as not to seem too obvious.
Later, Richard came out of his office and asked Connie, “Is he in there?”

Connie said, “I’m sorry, no. He’s meeting with a client this afternoon.”

Richard went back into his office to grab his briefcase and left, muttering under his breath. Shortly after, Dara turned off her monitor, filed away some papers into her desk, and breezed out without a word. It was eleven minutes until five and the receptionist, her eyebrows arched in expectation, stared at Connie.

“You can go,” Connie said, and the receptionist thanked her on her way out the door.

Connie poured out the dregs of the coffee into the bathroom sink and started a fresh pot. She thought she would do some extra work on the Reynolds account and surprise Bob. Half way through the pot of coffee she was nearly finished with the whole project and Bob called her office phone. She answered and Bob seemed surprised she was still there. It was almost eight and the sun had very nearly set. He apologized for keeping her waiting and she said that it was alright, that she hadn’t even noticed the time. That she’d just been doing the crossword and listening to the radio, what she would have been doing at home anyway, because she knew the dinner meeting was important. He said he’d be there to pick her up shortly and hung up.

Connie put the final touches on the policy and the cover sheet of the Reynolds account and placed the finished project in a purple binder, leaving it on Bob’s desk. She retrieved the tape and turned off the office lights. Sitting in the dark in her chair, clutching her purse close to her body, she waited for Bob to come and take her to the restaurant. She heard a car horn honk and walked out, locking the door behind her. Bob sat in his black Buick and Connie got in. Bob said that he hoped he hadn’t kept her
waiting and when he talked she faintly smelled whiskey. She said no and smiled, but he was already looking in the rear-view, backing out.

The restaurant had been decorated with a Western theme. The hostess seated them at a table below a wall-mounted saddle, detailed with silver and encrusted with turquoise stones. Connie thought the whole thing was strange and out of place. When the waiter came by she ordered water, but Bob insisted she have wine, so she ordered the Chardonnay. Bob ordered a beer and sat and waited for the drinks to come. He complimented her purse, but Connie said that she hated it. It was an old lady purse. She explained that she had had to get it though, because she needed something big enough to carry the tape back and forth to the office. Bob said he understood and the waiter arrived with their drinks and asked them if they were ready to order dinner. Connie ordered the chicken, Bob, the steak. They sipped their drinks and waited. Connie thought Bob was about to say something or ask a question, but then his cell phone rang and he answered it.

“Hello…Hi Linda…I know I was supposed to stop by at lunch. It’s been a busy day…I’ll talk to Bobby…I will. Believe me…Sorry Lin, I’m having Chinese tonight. It’s the Reynolds account. I have to have it finished by the end of the week…I can’t just give it over to the secretary. There’s a lot of details that need my touch…I’m worried about Bobby too…” (At this point the food came and Connie started eating. She was quite hungry.) “What do you want to talk about Lin? Wait, don’t answer that yet. We’ll talk this weekend. I promise…I just have a lot of work to get to tonight…Late…Bye.”

Cutting into his steak, Bob asked Connie about her progress on the Reynolds account. She thought that maybe talking about work made Bob think what he’d said to his wife was less of a lie. She told him it was coming along well and would be finished
on schedule. Bob spent the rest of the meal talking about the vision he’d had for the company when he and Richard founded it and where it was going now. Connie had another glass of Chardonnay and Bob had two more beers. On the drive to her apartment, Connie thought maybe she should drive, but really, Bob drove perfectly, even after drinks.

Bob pulled into the parking garage of her apartment building and the two of them sat in the car in silence. Bob leaned over and kissed Connie. She could have stopped him then, but she decided not to. The air conditioning had not been on in the car. He kept kissing her, and she kissed him back, both fighting for air in the suffocating heat amid the kiss. When they parted, Bob’s steel frame glasses were slightly askew and Connie reached out and corrected them. They got out of his car and she led him up the four flights of stairs to her apartment. They stopped in the hallway in front of the door to Connie’s apartment. Bob was kissing her still. She had one arm around him while the other felt around in her purse for the keys. Indoors, it was as if the building had been set to bake, and he was already sweating on her. She opened the door, and they went straight into the bedroom, Bob undressing her on the way.

She almost came once, but then he did and it was over. He asked her if she had finished. She said yes, of course she had.

After, she let him hold her for a while. He was trying to tell her he was in love with her. He said he wanted to leave Linda and marry her. Now that Bobby was moved out and in college, they didn’t have anything in common anymore, anyway. Connie said he was being irrational and that wasn’t like him. He asked Connie then if she loved him and she said she didn’t know, but probably. He asked her if she wanted him to leave
Linda for her and she said that that sounded like a mean thing to do to Linda. Bob held her more tightly and said that her indifference made him want her even more. He said he knew how that sounded, that men always wanted what they could not have and Connie said she didn’t think that was true. She said that men simply wanted and wanted, and having was something else entirely. Whenever they had something, they used it up, depleted, and then they wanted again. She said that’s how it had been with Linda and that’s how it would be with her.

Bob held Connie awhile longer and did not say anything else. They listened to the outside through Connie’s open bedroom window. Connie heard the rhythmic rattle of the train going by and knew that it was either the last or second last of the night. Far off, a police siren faded, and somewhere close by a car horn honked. Probably some guy picking up a girl, Connie thought. Abruptly, Bob got up and began to dress. He explained that Linda would be wondering where he was and Connie said that of course she understood. Bob began to talk about the next day of work, that he would need the Reynolds account on his desk by lunch, that, really, Mr. Reynolds had been a top, loyal client and they owed it to him to do a good job. Connie agreed.

Bob finished dressing and left the room. He did not look back, but from her bed Connie saw him stop in front of the hall mirror and straighten his tie. She heard the front door open and shut. Hugging her pillow, she curled into fetal position. The apartment had finally begun to cool and the evaporating sweat, which had mostly been Bob’s, felt great on her skin. Goosepimples puckered along the backs of her arms and calves. Connie looked over at the nightstand and noticed Bob had left his glasses.
She picked them up and walked naked over to the open window. Looking down, she saw Bob’s black Buick pulling out of the car garage. She thought of calling his cell phone to let him know about the glasses, but then he would have to park again and climb the stairs. She figured it would be easier for her to bring them to work in the morning. Connie took the steel frame glasses into the hallway and stood in front of the mirror. The house was dark except for the hall light and the clothes that Bob had taken off her lay strewn about on the carpet of her hallway and living room. She tried on Bob’s glasses. Surprisingly, the prescription was rather weak. At first, her nude reflection blurred, but then it came into sharp focus. Looking at herself in the now cool air of the apartment, her small brown nipples stood painfully erect. She rubbed them gently, trying to relax them. She thought she liked the way she looked in Bob’s glasses and thought she might get an eye exam after her next paycheck. Not steel frames like these, however, and certainly ones with smaller lenses.

Looking in the mirror in her boss’s glasses, Connie put on her best Bob impression. She scowled and tried to stick out her chin, but her face broke into a smile and she was laughing. Then she stamped about in her apartment, saying in her deepest voice, “I’m Bob Singer. I’m Bob Singer. Did you finish?”

Connie fell laughing onto her sofa. It was warm, genuine laughter and she was quite pleased with herself. She sat awhile, enjoying the cool silence of the apartment that followed such a hot day. She tried to remember the dream she had woke from that morning, but it had gone. She wondered about dreams and whether she would remember them once she fell asleep. Perhaps, dreaming, she would become a different person,
wiser, who remembered every dream she had ever had, but even so, what’s the use in that?

She picked up her coffee table book about papier-mâché and flipped through the familiar pages. She looked at some of the designs and thought that maybe she would do that one this weekend, though she probably would not. She read some of the descriptions, trying to get used to the glasses. Her head began to hurt a bit, but she kept reading.

Sometimes Connie Freeman would sit and think about eternity. Not in any religious sense, because she had given that up years ago. But she would think about time going on forever and wonder how a life could be a fraction of infinity. She would think about a million years from now, or a billion, how there would be nothing left of her and nothing that remembered her, or any other person. The atomic material that made up her neurons and memories would scatter through the universe or condense into the core of a star. Nothing terrified her more. What would it feel like to have not existed for that long, and would it be like being asleep? She supposed it would not be different from the billions of years before she existed which also stretched the other direction into eternity and that would make her feel worse. She would feel as if an icicle had been jammed into her stomach and up into her chest, her heart barely beating and everything cold. A coffee table book was a good thing to have, because she could flip through the pages and think about things like papier-mâché instead.
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In the desert, cactuses dot the dirt of the brown expanse. Some cactuses are jumping cacti and they will stab into you and burn like jalapeno sauce if you get too close. Both of the spellings cactuses and cacti are considered correct, but best to be consistent. In one place, a mountain, surrounded by stunted mint-green bushes, appears broken in half. Look off the jagged edge into the dusty horizon painted purple, orange, pink. Find Jesus and buy a taco from him, and some pickled vegetables. The swans birth elephants. The giraffe goes up in flames. The thousand-year-old statues fuck. The desert is a real place made of dirt and sparse succulents, denoted as desert by the measurement of annual rainfall.

The desert is a landscape that was invented by the great Ohio painter, Salvador Dali. Salvador Dali was born in Toledo, Ohio in 1964. Tired of the cold gray climate of his homeland, Sal, as his friends called him, started painting the sun closer to the earth. Around that time, the early eighties, Sal grew his mustache out. First he went for a Sam Elliot kind of thing, a mouth covering brush of black like a horse’s cropped tail, but his good friend, the cobbler Ernest Hemingway, convinced him to grease it into two shining points. The first time Sal painted a dead tree crucifying other leafless boughs, the concept
of salvation was invented. That’s where the word “sal”vation comes from. After painting a brown setting of sand and dirt and broken dead plants, the forests of the American West thinned, the ocean receded, and Arizona was born. Sal put his father’s clock, an old Birge & Fuller, into his oven, melting it into a pasty thing, and poured it over his canvas. This was the first time someone from Ohio discovered time travel. The liquefied Birge & Fuller melted time and earth, wormholing Sal, Ernie, and Barry Goldwater back into some other blander time, where Sal became the famous Spanish painter, Salvador Dali.

Oil paint, the dark energy of Sal’s universe, mashed sand, cactus, and armadillo into the draped canvased landscape. East-West movements of sand-storms caused massive changes in atmospheric circulation felt globally. Matter scattered randomly throughout space: one central clump surrounded by emptiness, or galaxies, with the galaxies themselves scattered about randomly. Space-time was not yet ready for a new godling, expanding faster and with consciousness, lacking a sense of responsibility. Across the asteroid belt, the large gaseous outer settlements grew increasingly remote from the sun’s warmth, and what was Sal to say to these bodies, left out of the heat, he hogging the light for the baby boomers of westward expansion? Sal put down his brushes, cast aside childish art. Much of his work has continued principally through the synthesis of minerals in the laboratory, such as the invention of Ajoite, locality at Ajo, Pima County, Arizona.
The desert was once covered by an ocean and fish shit. The fish shit is still there, fertilizing the soil, so that the world’s best sentient bananas can be grown. Also, there’s whale bones. When the ocean evaporated, some whales learned to fly, evolving antigravity techniques. The species of long legged elephants that had existed for eons in what was the Ohio Sea, continued to thrive in what became the Sonoran Desert after Sal obliterated salt-water. As Ohioans and Hoosiers moved west in horse drawn wagons, they were struck by the oddly sweet smell of rotting fish. Also discovered in the new desert were statues of misshapen people in various pensive postures, showing that this had probably been the site of the long lost civilization of Atlantis. Little known fact: the people of Atlantis emigrated from Georgia to the Sea of Ohio after the great peach and peanut famine of 667 B. C. The smell of fish feces still blows on the western wind, improving the scent of a warm Cleveland day.

Sal’s triploblastic vision of the desert divided like Dante’s Inferno, but more concisely. Three layers of hell was enough, really. One for flora, one for fauna, one for Middle Westerners. The politically correct wanted a reservation for the desert people that existed before manifest destiny. The Goldwater Doctrine stated that there were no previous inhabitants, no human ones anyway. Guilted, Sal painted a reservation, an insolvent bruise of squalor, a novel ring of hell yet to be mined of brokenness.
The desert is the world’s number one exporter of methamphetamine. A little bit of the brown desert dust mixes into every batch, leading to the distinct sepia tint of Arizona meth. Meth was a thing also invented by Salvador Dali’s paintbrush, painting the little crystals into the fragments of broken phallic columns and statues. He invented it to give the locals something to do with their free time now that there was no shade or beach. Sal and Ernie sold the new product to biker gangs and politicians at a 300% mark-up price over the cost of oil paints and canvas. The novel *Breaking Bad* is based loosely on the lives of Salvador Dali and Ernest Hemingway, the latter’s attempt to break out of the business of shoe making and into the business of autobiographical fiction. Little known fact: unmelted Arizona meth tastes just like root beer flavored rock candy. The influx of Ohioan money into the Arizona economy as a result of meth sales turned the city of Sedona into the new American Wall Street. The only meth in the world that can compete with desert meth is the humid green meth made in the jungles of Vietnam.

Ernie could tell you about Vietnam. Though he was only five years old, he convinced an Army recruiter that he was eighteen so he could join the Vietnam war as an ambulance driver. Ever try to drive an ambulance through Vietnam jungle? Let alone as a toddler still sucking thumbs and hobbled by hang ups about mother dressing him in girl’s clothes. Ernie wrecked the thing and was badly injured, but not in any way that threatened his
masculinity at all ever. He began to think of war as the most noble topic of art and tried to convince Sal to paint it. Sal was much more interested in crucifixion.

&

When Sal and Ernie strangled the meth market, their nemesis Barry Goldwater began his political rise. The creation of Arizona allowed for a new land that needed representation in the senate, thus giving Barry Goldwater the pretense needed to seize power. Barry Goldwater, originally and secretly from Akron, became a proud Phoenician on the day the desert was invented, but hated the summers. Barry Goldwater rose to the rank of President of the new land of Arizhio and declared war on the rest of the world. War resulted in no less than eleven nuclear missiles detonated in the Arizona desert. The fallout of nuclear war infused within the dust, inhaled greedily by locals, lining their pulsing insides with delicious cancer. Cancer became communicable when mixed with meth and smoked through a whalebone pipe. The desert is a place where you are seventy times more likely to catch cancer than any other communicable disease.

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Towns rose in the desert under the brush of Sal: Show Low, Strawberry, Paris. Sal moved west and explored debaucheries. The first thing he did was jump into a taxi and instruct the driver to take him to Paris’s best whorehouses: Le Chabanais, the One Two Two, Le Panier flueri. Vaulted ceilings, baroque furnishings, a Chinese room, and mirrored walls
set a tone of panoptic self-assuredness. Among the most lubrious apparatuses was the King of England’s adjustable armchair. Sal waited in line forty hours for the elevator to that one. He paid the courtesy charge to bring his cell-phone so he could show pictures to Ernie.

The desert is a place where Sal’s heart was divided into two substantial fragments so that in the future it might be refractioned in other landscapes. His heart was divided like the eggshell that birthed the sun when he told the great Mexican painter Frida Kahlo that he really liked her, a lot, and she told him she’d rather date a fucking cactus. In an act of revenge, Sal painted Frida’s eyebrows together. She got the message, and at some point learned to love the idealism of his brushstrokes. They were married on the border of Arizona and Ohio by their mutual good friend, the human frogman Diego Rivera.

The desert of Sal’s universe redeemed all the sins of the old new world. The emptiness became a symbol for the purification of American acts of cannibalism. Wagons raced westward into joyous virtue, placing the racers’ intimacy on the heroes’ proscenium. Let tenderness be weathered—like a farm wagon—with gilt wheels or no wheels at all. Gravity can push as well as pull. With all the blank space and tumble-weeds, Sal could be in one room in Sedona, Frida in a room in Scottsdale, and only silence and gulfs of
shining sand between. Pilgrims come and go, and it was time to go. The desert is the best place in the world to lose something. Communication is key.

Sal went home to Toledo. His heart shards were further subdivided in the Middle West when he fell briefly and powerfully in love with another woman and broke his marriage vows. It seemed like a good idea at the time, or rather no idea at all. After sex, he trembled on his couch and the other woman said from the bed, “I dreamed that you were tearing your skin and limbs off,” and the plasticized pieces of Sal’s heart disintegrated. He looked down to see an arm on the floor, a pile of flesh, a pool of blood reflecting a unibrowed swan.

Sal dragged his crumbling body west along the Ohio River. He pulled at veins and skin flaps, left them along the banks for turtles. He lost all of his hair, even his mustaches. Macaws picked at his sinews, and he didn’t have the heart to shoo them (as it was, after all, ground to smoke). The trees thinned, shortened into bushy stumps. The elevation increased. The river reduced to trickle. At night, the clear sky couldn’t hold heat, and Sal, without even the flesh of his body to warm himself, steamed the heat of his life into the stars that he had painted. Except for the screaming that comes with self-mortification, the night was peaceful as Sal entered the desert highlands. A few campfires in the
distance, the smell of roasting javelina. The river gone. Organs failing. Blood dried to crust. Sal toiled and toiled into the west and then, like a million flaming giraffes, the sun burst over the mountains of the desert, and Frida rode toward him at the head of a horde of long-legged elephants. In her hands, she carried a jewel encrusted box of gold, a small crown on top. In the box, a heart made of fire, acrylic, and blood. Sal fell to what were once his knees. He became a heap of what was left. He looked up, cried to his former love, who held the heart, her eyebrows a bold line, unwavering.

\&

The desert is a place where Sal lost all of his virginities, one at a time. His first virginity was lost at the age of thirteen to his best friend Ernie after resolving a wager hinging on a game of Battleship. He lost another virginity to the King of England’s adjustable armchair. Sal lost the rest of his virginities to the love of his life, the great Mexican painter Frida Kahlo. Virginity is something one can lose, therefore, more virginities might be discovered in the future. Arizhio is a frontier for the discovery of new virginities.

\&

Wait a minute. Let me start over.
1984

Killing someone with your car teaches you two things:

First, the radio doesn’t stop playing when you hit them. You look ahead after checking the mirror, then flash of flesh and hair, blue jeans and mauve tank top, red sneakers, I remember those, and panic hits you in the spine as all your neck muscles clench like a bear trap and you’re trying trying to brake, but it’s way too late for that and you haven’t gotten brake replacements in a couple years and

THUNK

and there’s a crack in your windshield with a few of her blond hairs stuck in it.

Second, you don’t get to pick the song that’s playing. I was listening to “Jump” by Van Halen when I killed Sara Jackson. Well, maybe you get to choose the song if you do it on purpose. In my case, the cops ruled it a suicide by stepping into traffic.

Not that I love hair metal or anything. I used to call it butt-rock back in high school, as in it will rock your butt off, right, sneering behind a cloud of pot smoke, listening to In Utero in my red flannel and ripped fishnets, wishing that it rained in Youngstown like it does in Seattle.

Later, I go to the music store, and ask the guy at the counter with a bone through his nose what Van Halen album had “Jump” on it. He doesn’t know either, but looks it up on his phone. I leave with an album called 1984.
In my office at home I close the door and unwrap the CD. There’s an old pot of coffee, so I press the button to start it heating again. It smells like stomach acid.

Track two is “Jump.” It’s the synth riff I remember from that day, the up-beat keyboarding that’s just so inspirational. It was playing as I went for my customary drive around town after working. I’d clicked on the radio in my ’93 Sentra to the only station I ever have it on, the hard rock station, not that this song was particularly hard, but there aren’t a lot of choices in Youngstown. I drove past the fireworks store with the gigantic paint-cracked Uncle Sam to

*I get up, and nothing gets me down*

and maybe I wasn’t paying enough attention, because I almost didn’t stop at that stop sign. And I was going again and maybe nodding my head a little to

*I’ve seen the toughest all around*

because, hey, it’s catchy. And maybe I’d heard this song before because I was mouthing

*You’ve got to ro-oh-oooll with punches*

looking in the mirror and when I looked up again and all I saw is all this blond hair like David Lee Roth

*to get to what’s real*

and I was stomping my brake pedal and hearing the screech of brakes I was supposed to replace last year

*Can’t you see me standing here? I got my back against—*

and my car was stopped, but it was too late.
A minute later, I was sitting on the curb, watching blood run down the gutter and the keyboard solo to “Jump” was still playing. People stood around with their hands over their mouths. A cop was saying to me, “Ma’am, ma’am, please stop crying.”

I was mouthing, go ahead and jump, between puffs on my inhaler. The cop had his hand on my shoulder and was holding a breathalyzer. He said he needed to run the test.

* 

I run my fingers across my appendicitis scar, occasionally lifting my hips off the chair. I touch and sigh. The trick is to not overstimulate. You don’t want them to finish and go back to their emails or office job or whatever.

You’d be surprised how many guys get off on scars. Men (and women too, for all I know) pay $1.98 per minute to watch and type in my chatroom. I name my chatroom things like, “Scarred Slut with Hairy Pussy,” or “Girl With Glasses Tattoos and Scars.” Whatever gets the clicks.

They ask me to use my inhaler, enjoying the sight of my lips around the blue plastic.

The money was better when I was in my twenties, but the advantage to doing this as long as I have is that I have a loyal core following, subscribers who have been with me long enough to become chat moderators. If someone starts spamming anything racist or violent, one of the mods will ban them from chat. But they still get to watch, and the credit card is still ticking.

And they love it when I answer their questions:
DatDickXXX: ScarSlut, why you no call me? Private chat????
I say, out loud to the audience: “But I’m here for everyone.”

SixtyNine69: Check out my dick pics on Reddit, ScarSlut.

I say, “What’s Reddit?” They love naivety, the idea that they are more worldly and experienced than me.

YourDad84: Tell us a secret.

“I killed a girl once. With my car. It was an accident, but I haven’t stopped thinking about it for the last ten years.”

You wouldn’t believe the uptick in clicks I got after that.

*

There’s a car I see around town sometimes: a brown/gold 2003 Taurus. The color is awful, and the body of that model of car, in a vain attempt to look early-2000s futuristic, curves in places it should not. This one is hard to miss: I first noticed it due to the decal that covers the entire back windshield. It reads:

*In Loving Memory of My Daughter*  
*Sara F. Jackson*  
*May 1, 1984-May 30, 2004*  
*Killed by a Drunk Driver*

I hear a little about Tim Jackson. He and his wife divorced shortly after Sara stepped in front of my car. He’s lived alone ever since. He gets drunk at Cattleman’s sometimes, was once thrown out onto the street crying. He works at the computer repair shop, is apparently pretty good with hardware. I see him driving around town with his blond mustache and that epitaph for a back windshield. Sometimes I think he just goes for drives to remind anyone who will see of what was taken from him.
And I wasn’t drunk. The breathalyzer test ran 0.0. The decal is hard to miss, but as I said, I hate looking at Tauruses. The reason I noticed it the first time was that I saw, “May 1, 1984.” It’s the day I was born. Sara Jackson and I have the same exact birthdate.

I suppose that I might point out that we are/were both Tauruses as well.

*

I research suicide, ways to do it in Ohio. I’ve always thought the best way would be to drive off a cliff, but Ohio lacks mountain ranges, so I type in the search bar, *best cliffs to drive off*, and then add, *Pennsylvania*. What you get when you type that in is cliff diving and bungie jumping locales. Though there is a video link of a BMW skidding and tumbling down a red desert mountain. The best places to do it seem to all be in Arizona. But one search result, “scenic drive in Bethlehem, PA,” seems promising.

I should have known mainstream methods wouldn’t be conducive to my research; our country still has conservative, religious views on suicide, but further digging led me to this thing called Reddit, and a subforum of people writing about their need to kill themselves and asking for suggested methods. I’ve been talking to a guy for a while who calls himself Blair.

Blair48: So… why kill yourself?
Laura51: That’s not really why I’m here.
Blair48: Are you sure?

Blair is helpful. He sends me links to pictures of dirt roads without barriers overlooking miles of western Pennsylvania forest.

Blair48: I’ve been out there. It’s gorgeous.
Laura51: I’d like to see it. For research.
Blair48: I have a story about that place.
Laura51: Yeah?

Blair48: Once, walking around a bend in a forest path, I startled a squirrel absorbed in cracking an acorn. It ran into the woods, and immediately a hawk swooped down to where the squirrel was. I must have scared the squirrel just before the bird got there. I swear, the hawk looked up at me like, WTF bro?

Laura51: LOL.

Blair48: Maybe I could take you sometime and show you around.

You could drive out there, watch the sun set over trees and cliffs. You could breathe air far away from rust belt factories. And you could drive off alone, serene and at one with yourself.

I don’t know if Sara Jackson had a car to drive out to Pennsylvania or not, but that seems a better way to do it than jumping in front of my fucking car.

*

After my post-researching drive, I come home and do my other job.

Lately though, I haven’t been as involved. I type with Blair about Pennsylvania on a separate screen while working. I tell him about Sara Jackson. He is sympathetic.

The chatroom is revolting.

DatDickXXX: Cant see scar while you typing
FukYuImAsian: Look at camera
RealEstateAce72: Stop ruining my fucking lunch break you slut.
SixtyNine69: She’s looking at my pics right now, guys.

YourDad84: Kill yourself.

I ban everyone in the room from chatting, but they still stick around.

Blair and I talk about meeting. He also lives in the Midwest, but won’t tell me where exactly. He says Youngstown isn’t a terrible drive for him. I look at the angry silence of my chatroom. I can’t remember the last time I talked to anyone without being in character. I agree to meet Blair at Cattleman’s on Friday.

*

My computer has a virus so I drive to the computer repair shop and park in the dirt lot. Tim Jackson’s gold/brown Taurus is parked close to the door, proclaiming his daughter’s former existence to all who drive past.

I know this is a bad idea, but it’s the only computer repair shop in town, and I don’t have time to drive to Columbus. I need this thing fixed immediately. Already my subscribers are wondering where I am, poking their dicks into new chatrooms, forgetting about ScarSlut. Regularity is key to my target demographic.

And I’m meeting Blair in a few hours.

I walk into the shop. Tim Jackson stands behind the counter and looks up from his computer screen. He begins to smile, but his blond mustache twitches into a flash of anger as he recognizes me.

“What?” It’s barely a question.

“My computer is broken. I think it’s a virus.”

“Watching a lot of internet porn?”

“Look. I need it fixed. Can you do that?”

“That’s my fucking job.”
“Whatever. I need it.”

He grunts and starts filling out a slip. He puts the laptop under the counter and goes back to his computer screen.

I say, “So it’ll be ready tomorrow?”

“That’s what I said.”

As I turn to leave, I hear him muttering under his breath something like, drunk whore or whatever.

*

No work to do, no way to write, I drive around town. Sara Fucking Jackson. I’m pretty goddamned sure that’s what the F stands for. Why’d she choose me? My car is tiny. Surely a semi out on the interstate would have been a surer way. And I was driving in a forty-five zone, so death really was about fifty/fifty. Probably would have lived if her temple hadn’t slammed into my windshield just right. She was so desperate to off herself that she couldn’t walk an extra ten minutes to make sure?

And then I wonder, as I always do: was she just crossing the street, on her way to the Marathon to buy cigarettes or a Hershey’s bar? Had I drifted too far into my own thoughts, checking my mirror, mouthing Van Halen?

Here’s what I know:

1. It was apparent from the Marilyn Manson and Sylvia Plath quotes on her Myspace page (which still exists) that Sara was depressed. Home for the summer from college, the last thing she posted was a short story about a vampire choking a high-school girl until she came.
2. Cops found a note in her back pocket with “I’M SORRY” scrawled on it. Due to the jagged Sharpie strokes, the note was obviously written by someone experiencing high amounts of distress.

I park in front of Uncle Sam’s Fireworks Store. The giant sheet aluminum statue grins in his red, white, and blue suit that has always looked to me like pajamas. The top hat thrusts into the cloudless sky as Sam surveys all of Youngstown.

Paint chips off the elbow joints of the statue as he raises his arm to remove the hat. Uncle Sam’s eyes roll in his head and focus on me. A few flecks of patriotic paint fall away as he bends toward me. I hear metallic scrapes as the statue, alive and groaning, flexes its rusty muscles. His grin is gone, in its place a piteous frown.

“Hello Laura. Why are you crying?”

I open my sunroof. “Because I killed someone.”

“Laura, do you know how many we had to kill?”

“This was pointless.”

“The best deaths are.”

“What can I do? How can I move on?”

The metal screeches and bends as Sam points to me again. His lips curve into an almost smile, something that seems like a look of stern encouragement. “Laura, I want you… to enjoy your evening. Don’t you have a date?”

I go into the store and buy a bag of fireworks.

*Cattleman’s smells like smoke and the dust of AARP members. Right away, I need a puff of my inhaler. I look around, only seeing geezers in foam trucker hats and*
waitresses in short skirts and black shirts. No one here matches Blair’s description, so I sit at the bar and order a shot.

The jukebox clicks into place and starts a new song with an upbeat synth riff.

“Jump,” by Van Halen.

Someone sits at the bar next to me. I look up to a blond mustache above a mouth pressed into a solemn thin line. Tim. He holds two bourbon shots and puts one in front of me.

“Laura, right? I want to apologize for earlier.”

I keep looking for Blair. I don’t say anything.

He continues, “Look, it’s been hard. Ten years. And we’ve never had a face-to-face.”

He drinks his shot and orders us a couple beers. “That okay?” he asks. His face is washed in lunatic credulity; the music is just the right pitch.

I still don’t see Blair. I say, “Sure,” and drink the bourbon before the beer arrives.

“I just miss my girls. Sara’s gone, of course, and then Carol left. It seems almost the old-fashioned way. A kid dies and all the other relationships fall apart.”

“It fucked up my life too, you know.”

He looks at me, and for a moment his face is hard again. But his eyes melt into true sympathy. “There is no ear at the key-hole to death,” he says.

“What?” I’m starting to feel sick, but I want to hear what he’s saying. It really has been a long time since I’ve had a conversation with a person in person.

“I’m saying I get it. Actions have consequences and most are negative. I see your pain.”
And I see his. My face is hot and I imagine it must be some shade of red. He touches my hand and I feel something slipping away from me.

“But the past is alterable,” he says. “Or maybe it isn’t.”

Van Halen plays and plays and plays. The room spins in blurs of synth and neon light. I think, Tim, we’ve shared so much. And I think, Jesus, is the length of one song enough time for me to decide to sleep with this guy? And, Fuck, how much have I had to drink?

Spinning, and I’m saying something to the mustache. When I finally get my eyes to lock on Tim’s face, he’s expressionless.

“Had a bit too much to drink?”

I’m trying to say something, but my mouth isn’t working.

“Don’t worry. I’ll take you home.”

*  

Beyond the miles of cornfields, the corn syrup factory wafts plumes into the purpling sky. With the windows down, I smell the sugar fumes from the backseat of the car. The hot air feels bitter, like yellow bile, blowing on the skin of my bare arms. My neck and back ache, twisted into crazy directions, my chin sore from resting on the door’s cup holder, but I can just see between the front seats to know that we’re driving into the remnants of sunset. West.

“Mhhmmmnnnnnhmmm.” For a second I hope that my inhaler is in my pocket.

Survival instinct and struggling. More attempts at smeared, muffled speech. My breathing quickens and already I can feel the blockage, like my lungs can’t inflate, like they’re being hugged into suffocation from the inside. I’ve never been able to rely on my
nose for anything good, especially breathing, but now it’s all I have, all I am, trying to get corn syrup-tainted oxygen into blood.

“You sound like a lawnmower.”

Between the seats, I see a hand holding my inhaler.

On the dashboard is a suction mounted Cleveland Indians bobble head. The car engine vibrates as the head nods. I watch the grinning Indian and breathe. He encourages me as the breaths become longer, deeper. I picture a diamond, base to base, breath to breath.

“You understand what it is to no longer have a thing dear to you?”

I look toward the rearview mirror, searching for a face, eyes, mustache, but all I see is the reflection of a number: 1984.

“Maybe you were driving and saw a squirrel. Maybe you swerved. Maybe the squirrel survived and fucked and made more of itself. Maybe.”

The cornfields thin. The air cools. I force in breaths.

“Maybe there’s a whole genetic line of squirrels in Ohio that owes its existence to your perceptiveness.”

I can feel the car driving up an incline. Beyond the bobbling mascot, the horizon fills with the dark outline of hills or mountains. Rising elevation, deeper breaths. I wait for the nosebleed, hoping it doesn’t come.

“Probably not so good from a Darwinistic point of view. I can admit that.”

Red metallic taste of iron in the back of my throat, a wet, sticky drip off of my chin and onto my chest like a stream of corn syrup. I feel the blood rolling along my
chest. When it reaches my stomach, I resist the urge to vomit. There’s no place for it to go.

“I mean, now there’s a bunch of squirrels out there that don’t realize that walking across the street for another acorn can get them killed.”

Outside, what’s left of plants, shrubs, burn, and I breathe in the refuse of all of it, everything, disintegrating into grayness. Into desert.

“But say you didn’t notice the squirrel. Say you smooshed it under your tire. Now it’s gone, and you’re the one going around town fucking and making more of yourself.”

The horizon is bright, like a great fire, but it can’t be the sun because it just set.

“Now there’s a genetic line that goes around murdering without even knowing what they’re doing.”

We’re still hurtling west, and I’m breathing and burning and bleeding.

“That’s how we as a species go from predators to casual killers.”

It’s getting bad again.

“I have a secret to tell you.”

*

Next afternoon, I wake up in my bed remembering the last words I heard Tim Jackson speak: “I can’t do it. I just can’t do it.” He was crying, hunkering in a pool of his clothes and limp genitals. He was covered in what was either red desert dirt or bedroom dust.

I drive to the computer repair shop to pick up my laptop. Tim stands behind the counter. He’s shaved his mustache. He doesn’t look at me, but disappears into the back.
When he brings me my computer, he doesn’t say anything or look up, just runs my credit card. I leave.

I drive west while ordered rows of corn and soy beans disappear into the horizon. I see the corn syrup factory, but I don’t see any mountains or desert. I don’t see any fire or charred plants.

*

At home, I use my cell phone as a weak flashlight in the dark. It casts a bluish light over my ottoman and shoes. I think of the fish-creatures that were our ancestors a billion years ago groping in blue-black water with their newly formed multicellular muscles. They began eyes, one at a time, and discovered the sun somewhere above the murk. Creationists love to cite eyes, the complexity of the human organs and the inexplicability of sensibility, as proof of intelligent design. Eyes can’t form in a vacuum. But it makes sense to me. Eons of striving toward the light, wading through black depths until they turned blue, then yellow, then green. We have only ever tried to get closer to the sun.

Sweeping the light of the cell phone over my living room, I find the entrance to the kitchen. I fill a glass of tap water and drink. The blinds are closed, so it is just as dark as anywhere. I wonder if billions of years from now our sensations might be reconstructed, watched on an alien television screen. I wonder if future beings might see our frail perception and imagine our perpetual darkness. I wonder how close to the sun they will be.

I reach into the kitchen drawer and pull out one of the fireworks I bought. It’s in a cardboard box with an Uncle Sam logo on it. The picture of Sam looks at me with
concern. “Now Laura, don’t do anything I wouldn’t do. I want you… to live a full and complete life.”

I take the bomb out of the box and throw the cardboard in the trash. The outside feels papery and oily, yet grainy as if it had been dipped in gunpowder. At one side the paper twists and ends around a wiry fuse.

I take a cigarette lighter out of my pocket and light the fuse, dropping the bomb into my dry sink. It sputters and sparks, filling my kitchen with orange flashes.

Outside, Ohio is damp and greening.

The fuse burns down. When the flame lights the powder inside, will it explode in purple or white? Will it detonate in a hollow explosion or will it fire like a machine gun ripping off rounds or will it wheeze like a balloon slowly letting out air? Will it will fizzle into nothing?

I await the bursting flame or silence.

“Sam, I want to put you at ease. Nothing gets me down.”

There’s still so much more to do. I need to research the cliffs of Pennsylvania. I’ll be here awhile.
Goldwater

"...was never intended to drive people crazy, but to save people from being driven crazy, + it worked."—Charlotte Perkins Gilman
Today,
protestors howl in the grimy rain
as I wait in line for monthly rations. 1 lb.
whole meat, 3 coffee filters. They throw leeches as
the unemployed drip in the queue. The signs read
FEEL SHAME.

We feel it for them + they approve of us. Leeches pool around
our feet, puddling + drowning. The line barely moves. The man
in front of me does not pull the leeches from his skin + they suck
his nutrients. He doesn’t have many nutrients, it seems, colorless skin
sagging off his bones, but the leeches don’t care. They suck + suck
away. I say, | | Sir, the leeches have you. | | He turns, a brown
teethed smile, says, | | Don’t worry, I’ll get back whatever they take
from me. | | + plops a leech into his mouth. I have never tried
eating the vermin, that would be too far gone. It is so
interesting to watch, developments. I will tell my wife I
dropped one of the coffee filters in the rain. I will
sweeten the news by making her a cup
that is 33% stronger than
usual
JOIN US for a celebration of
UNITY.
Troop 73-
Columbus:
A march for patriotism.

THE LEADER sees fit.

My son is beautiful in his uniform, the fringe on his little epaulets riffing in the Middle Western breeze, blond hair glinting in the desert sun. He marches lockstep among the other 9-year-olds as they carry the wooden rifle in the crook of his boney, boy elbow. Cheers and confetti rained from hands of the State CEOs enthroned on top of the Wall. The day is warm and cloudless, but my son shows no sign of fit.
sweating, like the other clam-pitted boys. He beams his shy smile at his mother and me as Troop 73-Columbus passes the crowd of reserved, proud parents on 9th Street. I watch his straight back, the rise and fall of his small black boots as a foot goes out from the crowd to tangle in his. He falls on his face without a yelp. The other boys pay no attention, march on, trampling my son’s legs back.

They smile at their parents. My son pushes himself to his feet, glances a real smile at his mother and me, blood and a broken front tooth. When he rejoins the marchers, straight back and lockstep strikes once again, the other parents nod and murmur approval. My son is perfect, he’s everything the State wants him to be.
I need to buy a small dog. Not just any dog, but a medium-sized one. Too big or too small will make fun of his diminutive pet. Jim's the neighbor boy's name, he makes fun of my son often. The way he slides down the blue plastic slide in our back yard. I've seen it.

PROS: Offers companionship
CONs: Stays skinny

NAME:
Color: Black + White
Type: Cocker Spaniel (2)
Doc FOR SALE

ADVERTISEMENT

Price: I lb. Whale meat OBO

WEIGHT: Skinny
His name was Shadow. He was a boy until my father shot him.

I think I'll get my son a cocker spaniel because I used to love one when I was young. I'm not sure if you slid down. It looks weird.

Report Suspicious

The Leader is Punishable as Contract and Selling of Advertising Agency

The Barry Coldwater Transactions
There is a dearth of structure, a rebelliousness of rule, that is a continuous aggravation to a standard mind. These are the thoughts that break us: the Leader warned of them. You think you have mastered it until it tramples upon you, and you wonder what is my purpose in our grand mechanics? You begin to get cynical. You do, not me, never me. I talk w/ my boss. He tells me | | Mitch, you are tred. Go home. Rest | |
MEMORANDUM ETIQUETTE

1) Memos should not exceed 50 words.
2) Use standard abbreviations.
3) Be concise and get to the point! (We all have work to do)
4) Memos are not an excuse, nor the proper forum, to complain. (Take all concerns to your supervisor in person)

FAILURE TO CONFORM TO PROPER MEMORANDUM ETIQUETTE CAN RESULT IN REBUKTIONING!

Certainly, the darkness in your eyes, lack of fiber in your muscles. I know you are concerned for your son. We are all concerned for your son. This can lead to doubts, doubting the Leader’s plan, I know. We have all felt doubts. From time to time. It is normal to doubt. Yes, it is certainly normal to doubt, though I do not admit to doubting.

Nor should you. I would never ask you to admit to doubting. It is simply a normal reaction to your son.

Yes, it is normal. Quite normal. I should rest. So we went, my boss + ___round + round + round___+ found consensus. I am tired. I must rest. Concern for my son does not = doubt. Agreed. I am taking some time off.

USING MEMORANDUM PAPER FOR ANY PURPOSE OTHER THAN OFFICE COMMUNICATION IS PUNISHABLE AS THE LEADER SEES FIT.
Barry Goldwater Elementary School
Report Card: Fall, 19

While watching television, a knock @ the door. My wife looks @ me and says, "Who could that be?" | | perfectly, w/o expression, performing surprised-yet-pleased hostess-role.

Bruising:  9.5/10
Crying:    4/10 (generous) "I am expecting no one.
Tattling:  N/A  My son keeps eyes on television, his favorite show, The Explosions (mushroom clouds, fiery bursts, cars engulfed, an elephant doused in kerosene + lit, etc.)
Air of superiority:  9/10 Flyng whales barging into skyscrapers.
Stamina:   8/10
Reported satisfaction:  7/10 (generous) "Hello, I am Dr. O'Leary."
Math:      
Science:   ✔ ✔ "Hello, Dr. O'Leary": parent-role-unison-response
English:   "She carries a manila envelope. Her hair tied back into tight black pony-tail She smiles"

Temperament: Satisfactory "What a privilege! What extravagance!"

Overall Assessment: Unsatisfactory professional-yet-concerned-role.

I am here to drop off your son’s report card. This is not to alarm you, I don’t want to alarm you. I simply thought it would be best if I spoke to you in person.

Your son is on the verge of the satisfactory/unsatisfactory

Parent Signature: Mitchell Brown

Date: __________
margin, however, we @ the school are quite confident we can press your son a little harder + place him firmly in the functioning satisfactorily category. I personally believe that he is having the hardest time making the adjustment from 3rd to 4th grade function. As you know—do you know, Mr. Burns? Did you perform his function during your elementary?

| No, ma'am. | performed the function of invisible-underfoot-unacknowledged. |

| Ah, I see, Mr. Burns. Still, a function akin to your son's, so perhaps you can offer guidance. As I was saying, he is still behaving as if he were a 3rd grader, showing no regard for his peers. Perhaps he inherited a bit of your stoicism, did he not? Perhaps, Mr. Burns? Well, the 4th grade is the time for your son to break out of the shell he's been in + just let it out. He will feel better if he does, + all of his peers will certainly feel better as well. + On another note, your former role, you should be interested to know, was discontinued years ago. Too dangerous; the performers would dissociate, lose themselves in doubt, doubt in themselves, doubt in the Leader. But they are all listed, I assure you those who formerly held that role you described. It is good to see they didn't all turn out rotten! Haha! |

| She hands me a paper, but takes the envelope w/ her. I eye enviously the blank, yellow face of the envelope, cradled in Dr. O'Leary's hand as she walks away from our door toward her car. |

| For use in the rating of students at Barry Goldwater Elementary Any overgenerous scoring is punishable as THE LEADER sees fit. |
Lost Dog

Please help

name: Shadow II

Warren

There is a single monkey unstain to this paper, a thing no one
marks but myself, 1 thing that is that it devours as the light
wanes. It's hard to attain this warming stamped construction paper. We
are out of蜡。Two weeks until we get more. I will not reac

@ one corner—but it hurts my teeth. Not for

Call Bo Burns

555-5747
555-5717
555-5977
555-5477
555-5977
555-5777
nourishment, that is not its function. I will have to find something else. The neighbor boy, Jim, has a new dog. A black + white cocker spaniel. He calls it Weirdjunk, + plays w/ it in his back yard. He throws rocks + the dog returns them.
He throws Weirdjunk w/ a branch, says "take that, shithead," as my son watches from atop his blue plastic slide. He is uneasy w/ reinterpretation, but recognizes the importance of Pros: functioning. Does he hope for functioning for himself? It cannot be.
The dog returns to Jim for throwing every time. Jim's laughter fills the backyard, reaches my son who watches, tighten, the dog-boy catharsis play out. @ night, Jim ties the dog to a
Cons: post + it whines. I watch at the kitchen window from within my family's increasing hunger.

I worry for my son, too much loss of blood can
Aberrations: lead to iron deficiency.
I need my job back. I call my boss.

Hello, Mitch."

Hello."

To what do I owe the pleasure, Mitch?"

I feel much better. I would like to return to work."

Grade Recommendation:

Return to work here?"

Yes, please. I feel much better."

That is great news, Mitch, I am so glad to hear that. I really am. I am so glad to hear that you are feeling better, if anyone I know deserves to feel better, it is certainly you. You perform such an important father-role. How has your father-role progressed since you began your rest period?"

[CONTINUED]
Grading notes
Class: est

Pros:
Shows a good understanding of role/purpose/function, endurance personal
vision, neutrality of expression.

Cons:
Two dimensional, lacks sunlight.

Grades: Good
I had hoped you would delve deeper into that role. We all did. Not that you didn’t
function well here. + as for that, I’m sorry to say that your
function here is no longer available. We all had to tighten up a little since you
left us, + now we have all accustomed ourselves to
our new, tighter functions here. It is sad, I know I am
sad for you.

Thank you for your sadness for me. I feel it.

You’re very welcome, Mitch.

Aberrations:
Through the other children produced art perfunctorily, finishing early
(recommended), student took entire five minutes allotted for recreational
function. Performed creation of art mindfully and with effort. Also of
note is the presence of a (possibly) unauthorized companion animal. Make
a note to check with the parents.

Grade Recommendation:
Despite normal amount of aberration, art achieves no level of offense.
Recommended student receive highest possible grade per function.

I have heard those stories as well.

Thank you for all of your years @
our firm, Mitch, they have been positive years.
May the State reinterpret you favorably.
Today I bring home meat.
It is greasy, stringy.
My wife prepares it in the oven and places cuts on plates in front of us. My son, wife, and I partake.

My son, far too thin to perform his function at school, eats. I hope that the meat will help. He needs fat, muscle to cushion his bones. He doesn't look up. Outside, we hear a howl. The neighbor boy, Jim, is crying.

My wife looks at me with something like approval.

Bo Burns
Today, the He speaks to us in the town square. I perch my son on my shoulders so he can see His face. I hold my wife's hand, huddled together amidst the swollen crowd, so many musty faces pointed upward toward that kind, white face. Today, he is angry, and that is just what we require. He is wise. He shouts

| | THE ENEMY | |

pictures of the
THE ENEMY come to our minds.
We picture the face of
THE ENEMY, our individual version of it,
choosing our subjective enemy. The crowd, myself, my wife, my son, on my shoulders, boil the hate.
All those asphyxiated
eyes and wobbling
screech w/ anguish!

I wonder whose
Next to me, she
making pigeon-foot lines @ the corners, tightens the blackness around her.
She doesn’t move her mouth. I never close my eyes. I need not visualize.

I lock up + up, into the His face, watch the
black frame glasses magnify his eyes as he watches us back.

OFFICIAL
PROPAGANDA OF
ARIZHIO

Destroying or otherwise
defacing this paper is a crime
against THE STATE, and as
such is punishable as
THIS LEADER sees
fit.
I hope I am beyond judgment. Death moved on, already a nonfactor in the life of my son. A statue in the desert w/ arms broken off, covered in salt. I have so carefully kept my wife away from me, away from my thoughts, & she has done the same. It is really admirable how well she keeps her thoughts from me. Dr. O’Leary would give her a 10/10. I see her face, unmoving when our son comes home, blood dripping from his eye. She lifts the towel from drying the dishes, knees, & wipes him clean, the red & the black of dirt smear his cheek, stain mouth is a line, the towel. Her w/out possibility of smile. She just is, her & our son can see that, & I can see that. We exist to bring our son into the world, consummate, & now the world’s interpretation of our son is no longer up to us. He was recreated into an object of derision, the class wimp, punching bag, so it is exorted, so it is done. He functions. He is. He brings joy to the world by sponging pain, just as my wife performs her function, wipes the pain away. Just as I perform father-role-protector-provider-occupational function. I see his face, so like his mother’s, now clean from the daily bloodling, & he too sets his
mouth in a line. He is determined to be the best he can be. I want to tell him, but I can’t, of the past. I want to tell him there was a time we didn’t live on whole meat (± other meat). There was a time when the fish people existed, when the sun was not the separation between Molallé West + desert. I want to tell him there was a time when he wouldn’t have been designated his fate upon birth when he could have functioned in any way he could fight for—interpreted himself. I want to tell him there was a time when we weren’t wrong to feel the way we do, in our hearts, when we had hearts that hurt + we could say my heart hurts + there would be a cure, pharmaceutical or social. I remember those times, before, because I lived them, but now they are gone. My son looks up @ me + my wife looks @ me. None of our faces move, none of our thoughts escape. I can’t tell him. He asks if he can watch television + I say yes.
A Hitler Story

1.

We were all looking for Hitler. It started at one of those political debates when Candidate B (senator from Arizona) said of Candidate A (congressman from Ohio), “Folks, my opponent is pretty much Hitler.” The crowd went wild, waving pennants and chanting, “No Hitler, No Way!” What was Candidate A to say to that? “No, you’re Hitler.”? How would that have sounded? Candidate B won the election and became President X. People marched, rallied, and spray painted, excited that we were finally going to confront this Hitler problem. We were going to drag Hitler out from whatever rock he was hiding under in Afghanistan or Korea and draw and quarter that asshole. Finally, we had an anti-Hitler president after eight years of what must have been (we now realized) pro-Hitler appeasement. President X promised us an iron-clad policy of doubling down on the notion that we would find and ultimately deal with our Hitler problem. Turns out though, that Hitler was harder to find than we all thought he would be.

2.

The president opened our eyes. Obviously, the college professors were Hitler. We rounded up as many of those smug assholes as we could and marched them right into the
middle of town. Bunch of geezers with elbow patches and regrets, the younger ones with ironic tattoos, all of them spouting some nonsense about Heidegger and Nietzsche—of course they had been Hitler all along. That was one Hitler problem we felt more than willing to take care of, and take care of it we did. We tore off their patches, did a bonfire of their graduation robes (silly looking effeminate garbage anyway). We slapped their faces and made them laser off those tattoos. We removed their eyes. We didn’t feel the satisfaction that we thought we would, though, and we couldn’t shake those thoughts that Hitler might still be somewhere out there laughing at us.

3.

Maybe it was the children that were Hitler. That was a new thought. We knew it didn’t make sense from a timeline perspective, Hitler being big back in the 30s and 40s and this generation being very recent, but we all had to admit that something was off with the new generation. Quite frankly, the new generation was not up to snuff. We’d try to tell them that Hitler was out there, but did they listen? Hell no. Dating websites, social media websites, catfishing, and (of course) ironic tattoos were all the new generation cared about. We knew that these were “Hitler-like tendencies,” but had to figure out the notion of when one went from displaying “Hitler-like tendencies” to crossing over the threshold into being Hitler. Exhausted after the whole college professor ordeal, we decided to be lenient with the new generation. We kept our eyes on them though, constantly unsettled by their lackadaisical behavior and deficient drive, always on the lookout for new “Hitler-like tendencies.”
4. Around then, it was time for another election cycle, and Candidate A made a comeback by insinuating that the president was Hitler. We had to admit that we didn’t know how to feel about that one. It was a new world with new insights into the identity/nature/metaphysics of Hitler. We felt, though, that we needed to take this new information seriously, to at least give it a run around in our minds before we tossed it out. President X looked hurt during the debates; he didn’t have his old swagger. His hair and cheeks hung more limply than usual and his eyes watered a little during commercial breaks. Candidate B (for in this election he had switched over from A to B) seized on the new weakness and declared in even deeper tones, “President = Hitler.” We all went wild for that stuff—we have to face that. We called it Hitlerglass, and in a few short months the old president was out and we had a New President X. We all agreed, New President X was an upgrade, at least in the anti-Hitler department.

5. We went into Afghanistan and Korea looking for Hitler. We figured, if Hitler was going to be anywhere, it would be one of the two. So we had a couple more wars, and it wasn’t that big a deal, if we’re going to be honest about it. We dropped some bombs, blew up some caves, ruined some weddings. And yeah, we deployed some troops on the ground—what of it? We did what we had to do in the face of a world that was becoming more and more Hitlerized as the days went on, and it was worth it. After all the dust settled—and there was a lot of dust—we did face a new Hitler-related dilemma. Though we’d wiped two Hitler-sympathizing populations away, we couldn’t be sure whether or
not we got Hitler himself. All that was left of Afghanistan and Korea was a lot of dust and some blown up wedding cake.

6.

As a result of the new Hitler wars, we decided to attribute the new death toll numbers to Hitler. Hitler’s numbers went up so far that he even surpassed his rival, old Joe Stalin. We’d never thought Hitler would catch old Joe in the numbers department, and we had to admit that we were rather impressed with Hitler. We grinned at each other, a little foolishly and sheepishly, just amazed at Hitler’s new accomplishment. We knew that Hitler would be somewhere out there smiling with the knowledge that he had beaten old Joe, that the new history books would have to reflect that Hitler was the champion in the death toll numbers category. And, dutiful as we were, we had the school teachers and the [reformed] college professors edit the history books to include Hitler’s new numbers. The New York Stock Exchange even knocked old Joe Stalin down a peg to replace him with Hitler. Those who had invested in Hitler won big. Hitler was big. It was a new world, and we just had to face the fact that Hitler was a part of it.

7.

We began to wonder if we were Hitler. It was a radical thought, one we hadn’t prepared for, but we knew we had to face it. We all took a good look in the mirror, searched for any physical characteristics of Hitler. Were blue eyes and blond hair signs of Hitlerness, or was it dark hair and dark eyes? We didn’t really know as the rules to this whole Hitler thing hadn’t been nailed down yet. Still though, it was time for some soul-
searching, and if we were ever to rid the world of Hitler once and for all, we had to be willing to find the Hitler even in ourselves. We went down to the ice cream parlor and just sat down with a root beer float, sipping and wondering about Hitler. The ice cream parlor played that good old fashioned music, scratchy from the record player, the kind of music we celebrated with way back when we beat Hitler the first time (we thought it would be once and for all back then, but Hitler is a cockroach). The ice cream melted and the root beer floats got all creamy, and that good old music just played and played, but that didn’t help us with the Hitler situation. Ice cream and Hitler, it seemed, didn’t mix. So we decided then and there, in that ice cream parlor with the good old scratchy music, that we were not and never would be Hitler. But at this point, we had to admit that we were tired—tired of the whole Hitler thing and beginning to wonder if we would ever find him.

8.

Well, we found Hitler. Turns out, he was holed up in a retirement home in Sun City, Arizona all along. He doddered around the halls most days, giving offensive salutes to the staff and complaining about the green Jell-O. Hitler preferred the red Jell-O, proclaiming its superiority every Red Jell-O Tuesday, and pouting in his room on Green Jell-O Saturday. Aggressive Jell-O preferences were probably what gave away the whole hiding in a retirement home ruse. We grabbed him by his ratty gray cardigan and pulled him into the driveway, pinned him up to a saguaro for the world to see. The news media showed up to report to the nation, thrilled that there was now tangible evidence that they were not, in fact, Hitler. Teachers stood by, crossing out and revising lines in history
books to reflect Hitler’s new capture date. Schoolchildren lined up to slap Hitler’s face. Lots of folks wanted a crack at Hitler, and all of them got a turn. We dragged him off to trial and the judge convicted the old man of being Hitler, so now he’s been in Maricopa County Prison ever since.

9.

Don’t get us wrong, we were all excited to have finally solved the Hitler problem. New President X was flushed with joy, his crowds exultant. Whether you like New President X or not, you have to admit, he sure did find Hitler and deal with him. It’s a new election cycle coming up, and it seems like New President X is going to win big. We don’t mind; we don’t even think of him as the “New” President X anymore. We guess he’s done a good enough job stopping Hitler to deserve another term. But we’ve been hearing old Joe Stalin is making a comeback now that Hitler’s out of the picture. Old Joe Stalin isn’t very happy that Hitler passed him in the numbers department. We know he’s out there somewhere, he’s got to be, just waiting for his moment to make a comeback so he can fly by Hitler’s new fantastic numbers. And, we all have to admit, there’s nothing Hitler can do about it. Hitler’s just going to have to sit behind those bars in Maricopa County Prison and wait while old Joe gets back to work.
Tell Penny I'm Sorry/I Love Her

It was just after the last play of the game. Dan was on his hands and knees breathing hard and searching the faces in the crowd, but they kept turning away toward the exits. He saw his dad turn and leave. He looked for one face in particular, but it wasn't there.

Still in his pads and jersey, Dan went for the exit too, ignoring his coach and his teammates and Mendoza saying, “Shit Daniel, I shoulda had that. Shit man, really sorry.” He ignored the celebration on the North High sidelines, the other team hoisting the star safety, Damion Willis, onto their shoulders. He didn't see Penny anywhere, so he started to run through the parking lot, ignoring the people yelling and booing and the fact that he could hardly breathe. Someone threw a Styrofoam soda cup full of ice at him and Dan heard, “You suck, Hull!” The ice cubes bounced off his shoulder pads, and he kept running and trying to breathe. Cars honked as he ran toward Penny's house, but he didn't see her. He made it to her street and saw her walking by herself in the dark.

Dan gasped out her name and she stopped, but didn't look back, waiting until Dan caught up. They walked together, but Dan couldn't say anything because he was catching his breath and Penny didn't say anything. They walked until they made it to Penny's house and sat down together on the sidewalk in the dark. Dan took long breaths, tried to control his breathing. Penny looked up at the moon and put her arm around him. He
leaned his head on her shoulder. Dan kept trying to breathe, but the air kept coming out and in and out, and it seemed like too much was coming out every time and not enough was coming in. Penny looked at the moon and held him for several minutes until Dan got his breathing under control and his heartbeat slowed to normal. No one drove by. Penny smoothed his hair out of his face. Dan sat up and looked at Penny. She looked at Dan and kissed him.

They waited until the headlights washed over them. The car parked and Penny’s parents stepped out. Her mother looked over at the two of them sitting on the sidewalk together and frowned and went inside. Penny’s father walked over and knelt by Dan and put his hand on his shoulder pad.

“Hell of a ball game, Dan. You did all you could. Played a hell of a game, though. You’ll get ‘em next time.”

“Thanks Mr. Barth.”

Mr. Barth smiled at Dan and Penny and patted Dan on the shoulder again. He went inside. Penny got up and followed Mr. Barth into the house. Dan stood up and walked home.

Dan’s father didn't really have anything left to say. Dan was a senior, so that had been his last football game. On the last play of the game, if Dan had been able to get a touchdown, his team would have won. It had ended with the other team’s star safety, Damion Willis, intercepting Dan’s pass.

Dan’s mother had mashed potatoes and pork chops on the table. “Oh good Danny, you're home.”
Dan sat down at the table in his Central High football uniform and started eating the cold mashed potatoes. His father sat across from him and looked at his food. They ate in silence.

In the remaining months of their senior year, Dan spent as much time with Penny as he could. Penny sent out her college applications. She decided on Arizona. Dan didn't apply.

"Tucson isn't very far from here," Dan said. "I can visit you all the time."

"I know," Penny said.

"I just have to get a job."

"I know." She closed the book she was reading.

That summer, Dan got a job at the carwash, and Penny got ready to move to Tucson. In August, Penny moved to Tucson, and Dan got a second job at the dealership. He sold a few cars, so he had a little money. He saved for a truck so he could drive to Tucson.

He called Penny and tried to talk about the future, but she seemed busy. She told him about classes. Dan talked about selling cars, but he didn't like his job much. Sometimes Penny picked up, and sometimes she didn't.

Dan decided he needed to make a better effort, so he quit his job and enrolled at the community college in some English classes and communication. He wanted to coach football. He got decent grades, he thought. At home in the evening, he thought about Penny and called her sometimes. He told her that he was studying Whitman, and she said
that was nice. He still worked a few evenings at the carwash and gave the money to his mother. His father sat in the TV room and watched football.

Dan waited all year for Penny to come home for the summer. Dan went to her house to ask about her, and Penny's mother said she had gone to Europe for the summer with her boyfriend.

Dan didn't re-enroll at the community college. Getting his job back at the dealership and picking up some evenings at the carwash, he saved money and bought an old truck to work on. He rode his bike to work. Sometimes he drank. On holidays, he and his mother and father would eat together. His mother would look up and smile and his father looked at his plate or a wall. After, his father would go into the TV room and Dan would hug his mother and leave.

A few years later, on a Mother's Day, Dan Hull's father looked up from his plate and said: "That safety got drafted to the pros. Third round, but still pretty good. He'll be playing in Dallas."

Dan Hull sold cars and washed cars and thought about Penny and the game. Years later, he called up Mendoza.

“Hey Albert. Was that pass too low?”

“... Daniel?”

“Albert. That pass. It was too low, right?”

Albert Mendoza lived in Phoenix and worked for the newspaper. When Dan called him, Mendoza drove down for the weekend and they went out to Picacho Peak in the desert like they had in high school. In the fall, the desert was cool. They looked at the
mountains and talked about old games and laughed. After several beers, Dan asked about that one game and that one play.

“Remember that game?”

“Which?”

“You know the one.”

“Yeah, I remember.”

“Fucking Willis.”

“Don't worry about it. No matter what else happened, you were great.”

“Fucking Willis.”

“Don't worry about it.”

“I remember that play. They sent those two linebackers at me. Got around that first one. Then the other one almost had me. Just knocked off my helmet, though.”

“Everyone thought he had you, Daniel. We couldn't believe you got away from that guy.”

“He didn't get me, though, did he? Just got my helmet is all.”

“Yeah.”

“He did me a favor. Without my helmet, I could see the field so good. I knew that I could run it in or throw to you in the corner. It was just Coach Martin, though, you know? He told me at the start of the game, ‘Don't try to run it. Willis hits too hard and leads with his helmet.’”

“He always did that. Still does, in Dallas.”

“I don't watch football anymore. But, hell. I passed it.”

“Yeah.”
“That pass. Was it too low, Albert?”

“What?”

“That pass. I threw it too low and Willis picked it off. Bastard ran it all the way back. I threw it too low?”

“I really don't remember.”

Dan looked at the ground, his mouth open, holding a bottle in one hand. He was trying to remember that game, that play.

Albert said, “Let's get out of here,” and drove Dan home and then back to Phoenix.

Dan heard Penny and her boyfriend were doing great. They graduated. He went to law school. They moved to Yuma. He set up a practice. They got married. They vacationed in Europe.

Dan tried to make it work with a few other women. First Lauren, then Maria for a while. It didn’t work out.

Sometimes Penny would come back into town to visit, but Dan didn’t know about it until after it happened. One time he did. He was walking by Penny's house and her father was mowing the lawn. When he saw Dan, he cut the engine and said, "Hi there Dan, you must be here to see Penny. She just got in from Tucson." Penny's father got confused sometimes.

"Penny lives in Yuma, Mr. Barth."

"That so? Well, she's in there for you."

"I can't stay Mr. Barth. I gotta go."
Penny's father had always liked Dan. His memory was going, and sometimes it went back to when Dan and Penny were dating.

Dan didn't see Penny that time. But a few years later he did when her father died. Dan didn't go to the funeral. At the dealership, he saw the line of cars creeping by. The black hearse led, and then Penny's mom's Hyundai. Dan saw Penny in the back seat, her eyes covered by huge black sunglasses. It must have been the lawyer next to her.

Dan probably could have gotten the day off, gone to the service. He was a family friend, and Mr. Barth had liked him. Dan had liked Mr. Barth as well.

After the dealership closed, Dan stayed late. He grabbed a bucket and sponge and started washing the dusty cars. The streetlights came on, and it was just enough light for Dan to see by, so he kept washing the cars. Several thousand crickets made their noise, and that was all Dan heard while he worked. Early in the dark morning, Dan finished the last car, his hands wrinkled and raw. He felt tired, but pretty satisfied. When the sun came up, the cars would look better than they had in years. He biked home.

Dan was ready to go to sleep, but when he opened his front door, Penny was sitting on his couch, her mascara streaking and smearing down her cheeks. Lines around her eyes, hair not as golden as he remembered, Penny looked a lot older than the last time he'd seen her. The TV wasn't on, but she stared at it, wide awake.

“Why the hell weren't you at the funeral.”

“I had to work. I'm sorry. I'm really sorry for your loss.”

“Bastard.”

Dan stood in the doorway. He wanted to apologize again, but he was too tired.
Penny didn’t look away from the blank TV. Her voice cracked. "He kept asking about you. Toward the end. Richard was right there and he kept asking 'Where's Dan? Dan should be here.' I tried to tell him I was married to Richard, not you, but he couldn't accept it. He said he knew that we'd end up together. Had always known. So I finally just said that you were on your way.”

“I'm sorry.”

“Sit down.”

Dan sat next to Penny on the couch, but they didn't talk. She leaned over and hugged him around the chest and started crying. Dan let his arm fall around her and held her shoulder in his hand, his skin still wrinkled from washing the cars. Penny cried for a while. Sometimes the sobs came out of her so hard that Dan felt them vibrate through his body and she hit him over and over on his chest enough to bruise. After a while, the crying receded. Then he was sure she had fallen asleep. The sun started to show through the blinds and Dan held her to him and looked at her face. He tried to stay awake, wanted to touch her hair, but he was too tired. Hours later, he woke up and she was gone.

Dan rode his bike home from the car lot and sat on his porch and thought about football. He opened the cooler and pulled out a beer. The sun sank, bursting streaks of orange and pink over the mountains while on the other side of the sky a dark blotch of purple formed in opposition. The darkness claimed more and more territory. When the sun was gone, the crickets started up. It had been a warm day for November, but the night was cooling off. Dan put on a red flannel shirt. Thinking about the Championship Game, Dan drank a few more beers. He had worked the whole day without really being at the car
lot, because he was back in the game in his mind. It was seventeen years to the day after that game. He thought it was a date that his father also remembered, and Dan wondered what his father thought about that day. He had been seventeen. Now he was thirty-four.

He stood, walked into his yard, and picked up a couple rocks. With the streetlight, it was just bright enough to see the Dawson’s cat across the street on their porch. Dan sat down again and put the rocks on the porch next to his foot. Dan had been a hell of a marksman in practice. He would line up soda cans on the back side of the end zone and hit them from thirty yards out, then forty. Games were always different, with people trying to tackle him, and then his accuracy was average.

Gripping a rock, Dan looked at the cat across the street and narrowed his eyes. He held his breath, wound back and launched the rock toward the cat. He missed wide by a yard, and the rock knocked in a loud thump against the Dawson’s house. The cat ran off with its tail in the air, and Dan felt sudden shame. He was glad he had missed. He opened another beer and picked up another rock.

Dan drank and remembered when he’d first met Penny. Never Penelope--Penny. Her family had just moved to town from Ohio, and Dan said that was a hell of a place to move from to the middle of Arizona desert. She said she loved the mountains. They talked about school and Dan found out that Penny loved English class and Walt Whitman. Dan lied and said he’d really liked Hemingway and The Old Man and the Sea. It was the only book he’d read that year, and he’d only read that one because it was so short. Penny said that it was a beautiful book.
Dan asked her if they could hang out again sometime, and Penny said sure. Later that night, Dan walked around the dark town for a few more hours before he went home and couldn’t sleep.

Dan picked up another rock. Missing the cat made him want to hit something even harder. He took aim at the Dawson’s front door knob. He tossed the rock across the street and it slammed against the door. Missed high by a few feet, but at least he’d hit the door. Mendoza could have come down with that.

The light turned on in the Dawson’s bedroom. Dan bolted out of his chair. He shut himself inside his house and looked through the door hole. Jim Dawson was walking across the street toward Dan’s house.

Dan turned his back against the door and slid down to sit. He waited a few seconds, controlling his breathing, and the knock came. Jim’s knocks rumbled through his body, punching the breath out of Dan’s chest. He tried to breathe in, but he did not want to make a sound, so the breath came slow. Then Jim knocked again and the breath was gone. Jim was shouting something about the police. He heard Jim kicking over his ice chest and the ice and beers spilling over his porch. The knocking and shouting stopped while Dan sat there trying to breathe.

Had the game ruined his life? If he could go back and fix things, he would not have ended up throwing rocks at cats and doorknobs. Dan waited for the police, wondering how that authoritative knock would feel vibrating through his back and chest. He thought about the things he could have done on that pass play, if he could have just gotten it a little higher, Mendoza could have come down with it and they would have
been celebrating after. Penny would have seen the whole thing. Dan waited, but the police did not come. Hours passed.

Dan pulled a shoe box from his closet, taking out the note that he had written days earlier. He took out the .38 Special revolver in its nylon clip-on holster. He slipped it out and opened it to see the five rounds that had been loaded for years. He put the pistol back into the holster and clipped it onto his belt. Dan walked to his front door and looked through the hole. The Dawson’s house was dark. The ice that Jim had knocked over had melted, and his porch was wet. Dan gathered the three bottles of beer that were left unbroken and sat them in the passenger seat of his truck. There was no one on the road in the town as Dan drove north to the desert.

Dan drove until he got to Picacho Peak in the mountains. He made a left on a dirt road, and a few miles beyond that, he found the area he was looking for and stopped. He could see the dull glow of the town to the south and shivered because it was now cold. Dan was glad he wore the red flannel.

Dan looked in the toolbox on the back of his truck and pulled out the flashlight. He turned it on and held it in his teeth, tasting sweat and oil. He found his old flint kit from scouts. Holding the flashlight, he went around looking for small pieces of wood and a little grass. There were lots of branches from the stunted desert bushes. He piled the branches and some grass into a rock ring fire pit that someone had built and left. Scratching some sparks into the pile with the flint, he got the grass to catch. He blew on the small flames, and they spread. The branches started to catch. Dan dropped in some grass and some more substantial pieces of wood and watched the grass flare up. He
listened to the hiss. The substantial pieces caught and the fire grew. Dan reached out his hands and warmed them.

Dan grabbed the beers and started drinking them. He looked at the fire and listened to it crack. The fire was enough. It felt good and the beers felt good. He finished two and opened the third and thought about nothing for awhile.

Dan pulled the pistol out of his hostler and held it, the metal cold in his hand. His father had given him the gun and holster when he was sixteen. Dan had just been named starting quarterback for Central High. It had been a little over a year before the Regional Championship game of 1994. On the day his father had given him the gun, they went into the desert to shoot. His father brought his own .45, a box of .45 bullets, and a box of .38 bullets. They shot beer bottles and rocks for over an hour. They traded guns and shot each other’s guns for few turns. Dan liked shooting his father’s .45, but it kicked hard and made him nervous. He preferred the .38 and told his father he loved his new gun. His father said, “I’m damn proud of you, Danny.”

Dan hit two bottles and his father hit four. He could remember the sound of the bottles exploding. Nothing in his life had ever sounded so satisfying. His father had not let him have a beer, but he did let him have a swig of one his. His mouth crunched in sourness and bitterness, his heart beating hard.

Everything was dark and cold except for the moon and Dan’s fading campfire. He held the pistol and looked at it. He had not shot since that day. The bullets were old, but he assumed they would still fire. He set his half-full beer bottle away from the pit and stood up an empty bottle next to his campfire. Dan walked several paces south, careful not to trip on a cactus. He turned and faced the empty bottle, his back toward the glow of
town. He pointed the pistol and aimed down the sight, but he could not keep the bead on
the bottle. His hand shook. He kept trying, the campfire burning dull light onto the bottle,
but he couldn't. Dan looked down at the .38 again and put it back in the holster.

Dan picked up a rock. The river rock felt good and smooth in his hands, the oval
of it. He looked up at the bottle again, his mouth set in a white line of concentration. Dan
aimed and tossed the rock. The bottle shattered with a satisfying crash. Dan exhaled.

The campfire was down to a few orange embers. It crackled sporadically and gave
off a tapering plume. Dan took the letter out of his pocket and unfolded it. He did not
read it, but looked at the last line and tore that part off. He dropped the rest in the embers.
There were no flames, but it smoked and turned brown, then black. It became frail and
fell to pieces, tiny specks of orange glowing at the edges where it burned apart. He could
read the piece he’d torn off by the light of the moon. It said, “Tell Penny I’m sorry.” It
fell into the fire pit, but it didn’t burn. The embers had cooled. He did not think it would
matter, leaving that bit of the note undestroyed. It had no context.

He emptied the half-full beer into the pit. It hissed and died and he stamped it
with his boot. He got into his truck and drove back into town. There were no cars on the
road that night. He made it home and went to sleep.

Dan Hull would never do what it was he thought he might do the night he drove
into the desert seventeen years after the Regional Championship Game. He would never
touch the .38 again, except for the day he would take it to the pawnshop to sell for fifty
dollars. Dan Hull would have kept living.

Maybe he would have quit his job at the car lot and become a groundskeeper.
Maybe he would have met a woman in a bar and they would go home together one night,
and it would be comfortable enough that they would not leave each other. Maybe he would have had a kid uninterested in football and Dan would not know how to relate to him. He would have never forgotten Penny, and would always feel empty when he thought of her. He would have never been exactly happy, always wondering how his life could be if he could go back to the Southern Arizona High School Football Regional Championship Game and get that touchdown, but Dan Hull would have continued to live his life with the hope that it was more noble to keep going forward.

*   *   *

It was just before the last play of the game. Dan said go, and they crashed together.

When Dan escaped from the linebacker, losing his helmet, he glimpsed the end zone and knew he had two options. One glance at the left corner, he decided the tight end, Mendoza, was too well defended. Straight ahead, he saw green grass and the stands with his school’s fans screaming. He had already made up his mind. He pushed his foot into the grass and took off toward the end zone, protecting the football with his right hand.

The other team’s safety, Damion Willis, never saw that Dan had lost his helmet. When he played, Willis only ever saw the quarterback’s eyes. At first, Willis thought that the quarterback was going to pass to the back corner, but then he saw the eyes of the quarterback focus into determined tunnel vision. Willis took off at full sprint at the quarterback, knowing he had to move as fast as he could, that he was the only one that could get there in time and save the game while the quarterback, looking ever forward, crossed the four-yard line, then the three. At the two, he vaulted forward, stretching,
holding the football in front of him. The safety collided with him at full speed, the crown of his helmet striking Dan's temple.

The line judge’s whistle screeched and he signaled. Half of the crowd cheered and the other half groaned until they all saw the blood standing out against the white of a jersey and the green grass. The stands gasped into nervous silence. Willis stood and looked down. The star safety’s mouth hung open at the sight of the blood and the spastic shaking of the quarterback’s arms and legs. Central High’s coach sprinted onto the field and knelt by his quarterback. Dan’s father frantically tried to move through the crowd that now stood like statues. The quarterback’s girlfriend, Penny, stood so still she may not have had a heartbeat. She thought then that she would have given anything, made any sacrifice for the possibility that Dan would be safe and whole and holding her again. The coach signaled for the paramedic, who was already on his way with the stretcher, and then signaled at a more furious pace to let him know to hurry up.

The paramedic shined a flashlight in Dan’s eyes and asked him if he knew his name and the year, but Dan could not answer because he did not hear him with his brain swelling against the crack in his skull and the crack beginning to grow and splinter while his arms and legs shook in spasms against the straps that held him down and Dan could not see or feel and did not know what he was saying, but what he was saying was, “Tell Penny I love her tell Penny I love her tell Penny I tell Penny tell Penny tell Penny tell. Tell Pe
ari-
Cards Again

I went to the bar. It was a dusty bar, the kind where the geezers showed up, not the college students. But it was quiet on Sunday mornings, good for watching football. I was going to watch a football game, the Cardinals and the 49ers, but was our quarterback healthy? Not today. “Our” quarterback was the Cardinals’ quarterback. I like the Cardinals. Not that I don’t appreciate a good back-up. The back-up quarterback had played decently last week. Nothing spectacular; it had been the kind of game where the quarterback hands off and makes short passes, ends up taking a knee in victory formation several times at the end to kill the clock. I was looking forward to seeing what he’d do this week. I brought a book to read during commercials and a pen and notebook to write down some ideas about the Hemingway paper I needed to write for class the next day. I needed to get to work on the paper, but I hate to miss a Cardinals game. I walked into the bar and sat down at my usual table. I looked up at the television and the game was just starting.

It took a long time for the waitress to show up at my table. She did, and I ordered a beer. It took a long time again and then she brought me the beer. It was a bitter house-brewed IPA, my favorite beer in Flagstaff. The game was in the second quarter by the time I got my beer. The score was already 3-7. The goddamn 49ers were ahead. It looked
like the Cardinals' defense couldn’t stop them. I finished my beer and waited for the waitress to come back so I could order another.

During a commercial I was reading Faulkner when Jason showed up. Jason manages the coffee shop across the street from the bar. His beard has a decent amount of gray in it, more than you’d expect for someone in his early thirties. He walked into the bar and I didn't notice at first because I was reading Faulkner. I don't really like Faulkner. I looked up and saw the big red bird logo on the same Cardinals sweatshirt he’d worn every week this season.

I said, "Hey, I didn't think you'd show up."

"How's it going? How's the game going?"

"Niners are winning. But we have the ball. You bring your cards?"

"Yeah, I always have a deck with me."

He dealt out a hand and we started playing. The Cardinals lost the ball and then fell behind a little bit more. The waitress showed up and we both ordered drinks. Jason had just showed up at the bar, but he was already ahead of me in drinks. I could tell by the way he played his cards. He played recklessly, but in this particular game it advantaged him. He took a big lead and then kept making more and more reckless gambles. They all paid off, so he ended up winning big. I paid him.

"Good game, Jason."

"Yeah. It's about time I got one off of you."

"Another?"

"Yeah, I have time for one more."
Jason dealt out another hand and we started a game. I was into the game and the Cardinals were still losing, but I tried really hard. I was in the middle of playing and Christie showed up. Christie’s short and blond and like a big sister to me. She loves to flirt with waitresses.

"Hey guys, how's the game?"

"Bad," I said.

The waitress came over and Christie ordered a pitcher of mimosas ("I’d love a pitcher of mimosas, darling"). I ordered another beer and Jason had another gin and tonic.

The game was intense. Christie didn't know how to play, so she kept asking Jason and me questions. The game was getting complicated. I thought Jason was winning, but I thought I might be able to pull ahead. I was playing really tight.

The waitress came back. She took more orders from Jason and Christie. They asked me if I wanted to go in on a pitcher.

"No, I better not. I have to write this paper today. About Hemingway. I shouldn't drink too much because I have to write about *The Sun Also Rises.*"

Jason asked, "What's the point in that?"

"I don't know. Getting a grade, I guess."

"What's a grade for?"

"For the paper I write about Hemingway."

"That sounds terrible."

"It's not too bad. It's a really good book. I like Hemingway."

"Never read him."

"You should. You'd like him."
"Dunno about that."

"No, you would. *The Sun Also Rises* is great."

"What's so great about it."

I poured myself another mimosa from the pitcher. "It's great. It's about the reconstruction of morality after everything you've believed in is torn down."

"That sounds terrible."

"It's great. All these people. They were in the war. The war happened, so they had to find something else."

Christie asked, "What do they find?"

"They drink a lot. And they look around a lot. But mostly they go for what feels good."

The Cardinals were playing pretty hard. After the 49ers scored on their first two possessions, the Cardinals' defense really tightened up. They played a lot better and they stopped the 49ers from scoring. We watched the 49ers come really close. They made it all the way to the five-yard line. Then the Cardinals pushed them back and sacked the quarterback. It made me happy to see the 49ers quarterback get sacked. At half-time the score of the game was 6-14. The Cardinals were losing, but the game was tightening up.

I started paying more attention to my card game with Jason. It was still really close. During half-time, I was able to make good decisions in our game. Then his girlfriend showed up. Michelle is quiet, with frumpy brown hair, and I don’t know her very well. I’m not sure if there is a personality there to get to know.

"Hi," she said to Jason. "Cards again."

"Yeah. I won the first game."
"Good. How much longer on this one?"

"Not too much longer. We're playing pretty fast. It's half-time."

"I can go and come back?"

"No, there's no need for that. This one is almost over. Order a drink."

The waitress came over and Christie, Jason, Michelle, and I ordered a round.

"I got this round," Jason said. He was happy because he had won the first game and he thought he was winning this one. He didn't really care about football.

Christie kept asking about how to play and Michelle kept asking when it would be over. I tightened up my play and the card game was over. It ended and Jason and I counted up our score. I had barely won.

"Good games man."

"Jeez, I can't believe you got that one."

"Yeah, it was pretty close. You smashed me in the first one."

"Oh well. I can't believe you got that one though."

"Yeah, it was close."

"Another round?"

"I better not. I have to write that paper and all."

"Say, I'm out of funds. Can I pay you for that game next time?"

"Sure."

Michelle said, "I thought we were going to go soon."

"Ah well. Damn, I thought I had that one. At least I won that first one! See you later Jack, see you Christie!"
Jason and Michelle left. Christie and I watched the football game. The second half had just started. We talked about football and the waitress came back.

"Another round?"

"I better not."

Christie said, "I'll have a pitcher of mimosas."

We watched the game and the Cardinals got back in it. I told Christie about the other night.

"The other night was crazy."

"Tristan's party?"

"Yeah." It had been Tristan's birthday. Christie and Tristan didn't get along, so Christie hadn't been invited. "It was pretty fun."

"Did you drink a lot?"

"Not as much as some people."

"Yeah? Who drank the most?"

"Well, Jason. But he doesn't count. He always drinks the most."

Then Kim showed up. Kim is an old man, not a young girl like his name makes him sound. He was named after some racist Victorian novel, he likes to tell people. He did have a young girl with him. Shannon. Christie introduced me to Shannon. She had her hair tied back in a bun and wore a lot of make-up. She smiled at me and shook my hand. I smiled back.

After that, we mostly watched the game. Kim was from Ohio, and a big Browns fan, but he’d lived in Flagstaff long enough to build a tolerance for the Cardinals. So we
watched the game and rooted on the Cardinals. Whenever we would say something, Kim would lean forward and say, "Huh?" He could never hear anything the first time.

The back-up quarterback played as well as he could have. He took a lot of hits. After one of the hits, his head slammed down against the ground, and I thought that was it for him. But he got back up and kept playing. The next play, he took another big hit, right after passing the ball, and I thought that was it for him. But he got up again and scored another touchdown. He was starting to play better than the 49ers quarterback.

The game progressed, and the defense held, and the back-up kept getting hit and making plays. The Cardinals took the lead. Kim kept saying, "Huh?" and I would look up and Shannon would look away. Close to the end, the waitress showed up again. Christie asked if I wanted another pitcher.

"I better not. I have to write that paper."

"Come on. It's just Hemingway."

"You're right. It is Hemingway. I'll go in on another pitcher."

We watched the rest of the game. Christie, Kim, Shannon, and I cheered every time the back-up made a play. It came down to an offensive series where the back-up kept downing the ball to kill the time. Then on fourth down the Cardinals kicked a field goal to go up by nine and give the 49ers the ball back with only 30 seconds left. That wasn't enough time to do anything, so the Cardinals won. I was really happy. I hate the 49ers.

"Another one?"

"Hell yeah."
A little while later Christie was getting up to leave. Kim and Shannon were getting up to leave. By then one of Shannon's friends had showed up. They were going to go to Café Rendezvous.

"Huh?" Kim said.

"It's called Rendezvous," Shannon said.

"What's Rendezvous?" he asked.

"It's a bar. They have absinthe there."

"Alright, I'll go."

"You want to go?" Shannon was asking me.

"No, I better not. I need to write that paper."

"What's it about?"

"It's about what do you do when you realize there isn't any God."

"Well what do you do when you realize there isn't any God?"

"You go to bars and bull-fights. You try to latch on to things that make you feel. Like the bull-fights. Some people try to go to church, but that doesn't work for others."

"Well, we should go." Kim and Christie and Shannon and Shannon’s friend were standing. They were ready to go.

"Sure you don't want to go to Rendezvous?"

"Yeah."

They were gone. I sat down and finished my last beer. The sun was getting low in the sky and shining through the window onto my table.

I picked up the Faulkner book and looked at the words without really reading them. I started watching the next football game without really watching it. I didn’t know
the names of any of the players. It would be another week until the Cardinals would play again.

The waitress came over again and asked if I wanted anything. I asked for a glass of water. She came back several minutes later with a glass of water. She did not look very happy to be bringing me a glass of water. Sometimes I looked at the football game and sometimes at the Faulkner. Beads of water began to condense on the outside of the glass. I drank some water. I left a watery print of my hand on the glass.

A couple came in. The bar was full, all the tables taken. They walked over to me. He said, “Are you going to be much longer?”

“I can go.”

“It’s okay. I mean. We can wait. Or we can join you.”

“I was just leaving.”

“I’m sorry. There’s just nowhere else.”

“That’s fine. I’m done.”

I packed up the Faulkner book and got up from the table. The couple sat down. I left the wet glass of melting ice at the table. They sat down and looked at the menu and started talking. He pushed the glass to the end of the table. It was their table now. I looked up at the football game again.

“I was just leaving,” I said.

I left.
Mr. Mark

I don’t really know where to start this story, but I guess I’ll start it the last time I heard a thump from Mr. Mark’s apartment. He lived above me and I always heard shuffling and bumping and random banging up there and it was always happening at 1am or 3am or whenever I’m trying to sleep. If it was a little more rhythmic, I could guess what it was, but it was not, and besides, Mr. Mark was both a shut-in and an asshole. Not the type to get girls (or guys).

So it was 1:03 am and there was a screeeech-thump from my ceiling which caused my eyeballs to snap open and my jaw to grind. I got up and grabbed the baseball bat I lean next to my bed because I don’t live on the nice side of town and you never know. I banged back. Knocking the fat end of the bat on the ceiling, I yelled up there at Mr. Mark,

“What the hell, jackass?! Some of us sleep at night. Some of us have jobs [purely rhetorical; I had been unemployed for months]. Shut the hell up and shut up whatever is making that noise before I freaking report you!”

I stood there for a minute in the dark apartment, sometimes pacing around in my socks and pajama bottoms. It was quiet. Good. Mr. Mark never responded to my banging in response to his banging, but sometimes he obliged when I told him to shut the fuck up. I pulled the cord hanging from the middle of the ceiling and clicked on the lightbulb.
When my eyes adjusted and I stopped seeing spots, I went over to the whiteboard I keep in the corner, next to the kitchen, five feet from my bed. The whiteboard was labeled, “Shutting Up That Asshole Mr. Mark,” and had tallies on either side, the left side labeled “Successes,” and the right side labeled “Failures.” There were twice as many failures as successes, sure. It felt satisfying tallying up a success that night.

My theory was that he had a cat. Which would be a hell of a thing because cats aren’t allowed in the building. But that son of a bitch would keep a cat in that apartment. Not like he ever let anyone inside, and when he left, he was always careful not to open the door wide enough for anyone to see in. When I thought about the possibility of a stupid cat up there, kept illegally, running around at night, I ground my molars together til I figured they were about to make sparks. I wanted to squeeze the fucking thing, and twist it, and make it stop with these early morning knock-aroinds.

“You think I don’t want a cat? I’d love a cat. But they aren’t allowed here. And some rules you gotta follow. Like the rules that keep your downstairs neighbor from having a fucked sleep schedule. But sure, a cat, something to hang out with and let watch you live your life. I can see the appeal. I’d get one, I really would, but it’s against the rules.”

And what the hell kind of name is Mr. Mark anyway? Like he was affecting a casual formality by adding a mister to his first name? Or was Mark really his last name? Once I’d gone up there and looked through his mail to see if he was Mark Something or Something Mark. Every water bill and cable bill and junk letter from Evangelical Church of Revelation or whatever was addressed the same way, to “Mr. Mark.”
I used to see him weekly, always wearing that long gray coat, always hairy on his face and temples with the crown of his head bald and greasy looking. He walked down the street pushing the rusty shopping cart he kept behind the building full of soda cans. He emptied two or three trash bags of these soda cans, they were always the cheap store brand versions of cola and strawberry soda, into the cart and he pushed them down the sidewalk, the one creaky wheel wobbling and scraping. I saw him disappear around the corner toward the recycling plant and then show up again hours later with a small brown grocery bag in his cart next to a few cases of soda.

I watched him make this round trip all the time, sitting on the bus stop bench across the street next to the liquor store. I held a brown paper bag too, but it didn’t have groceries in it. I thought of stealing that grocery cart and tossing it in the river. But I said to myself, “I might hate your guts Mr. Mark. But I’m not fucking with your livelihood and the livelihood of that stupid cat.” Because morals are important.

So that night, back in my apartment I lay back in bed and looked up at the ceiling with my bat still in my hands. All night I waited for Mr. Mark or that cat to make a noise so I could get up and bang back, but nothing happened. It was quiet, and I must have fallen asleep sometime.

Next day was the day Mr. Mark usually left the apartment for his round trip to cash in cans and go shopping. I sat on the bench and waited for a glimpse, but he never came. First time in years I didn’t see that shambling hairy hermit. By the time the 6 o’clock bus rolled by (the bus driver glared at me as he passed; he knew not to stop for me by now though), I figured I’d go and check on the old timer. I walked up the stairs to the second floor of the building and knocked on Mr. Mark’s door. It wasn’t shut all the way
though and opened up. The apartment was dark and smelled like shat-on rancid beef and old sugar.

“Mr. Mark?”

I fumbled along the wall for a light switch and clicked it on. He was hanging from a rope tied to a water pipe running along his ceiling. His eyes and tongue bulged from his face. His death grin showed a mouth full of brown soda-rotten teeth. Underneath him, a stool was overturned on the ground. His pants were on, so I assumed it wasn’t an accident.

The stench and the filth of the place made me gag, but I guess I just wanted to cut the old man down. He was pathetic and quiet up there with piles of old cans all over the studio apartment. I walked to the sink and opened a drawer looking for a knife. There wasn’t anything metal in there though, just an assortment of black and white and tan plastic-ware and a few teabags. Then I heard some rustling of cans and a soft “meow.”

Among the strewn about cans, a few feet next to Mr. Mark’s bathroom door, I saw the cat’s yellow eyes. It was as skinny and black as one of those African kids in the commercials asking you for a quarter a day. I knelt down and looked into the cat’s eyes.

“Here, kitty,” I said, “here, kitty kitty.”
The invitation arrived three hours before the party was going to start. There was a game attached, a murder mystery. Setting: an archaeological dig site in Egypt. It was my first invite to one of Katy’s parties in over a year, and its last-minutedness told me that her first choice had backed out. Katy’s message read, “You’ll be playing Hamilton, the playboy Shakespearian actor. Dress the part!”

Thinking about Katy’s request to “dress the part,” I wondered how Shakespearian actors dressed, especially the “playboy” ones. I threw on clothes that had always made me feel like I was wearing a costume anyway: black slacks, a white button-down shirt, and my only tie (black). I was dressed for a funeral.

At Katy’s house, her partner Rachel, opened the door wearing an Indiana Jones outfit. She showed me the prop whip she kept in the leather satchel resting on her left hip. “I’m the British archaeologist,” she said. “Who are you supposed to be?”

“I’m the actor.”

“Well, I hope you know how to act like an actor because you don’t look like one.”

I was the first to arrive, so I helped Rachel make falafel. I heard Katy yell out from the bedroom down the hall, “Hey, is that our Hamilton?”

“Uh. Yeah,” I said, “Hamilton here. The philandering Shakespearian actor.”
She laughed. “Work on that charisma, Ham. You’ve got a lot of ladies to woo tonight.”

I pressed the sandy falafel into balls and looked around the house. Katy and Rachel had decorated it like a pharaoh’s tomb: cotton cobwebs tangled with plastic spiders in every corner, bowls full of chocolate coins wrapped in gold foil, and a mannequin draped in toilet paper waited near the French doors leading to the patio. The room smelled of burning incense. They were going for an Oriental ambience.

On the table there were eight envelopes with character names on them. I found the one marked “Hamilton.” Underneath, there was another name in parentheses scratched out. Under that was my name.

Before I could open my envelope and read about my part, Katy stepped into the kitchen. She wore plastic revolvers on her slim, boyish hips in the kind of holsters found in the toy aisle of the dollar store. She had smeared a black eye-liner mustache on her upper lip. Snakeskin boots and a sombrero finished the look.

I asked, “What’s a cowboy doing in Egypt?”

“I’m a railroad tycoon. Is that how a Shakespearean actor dresses?”

“We are the music makers, and we are the dreamers of dreams.”

“Well, at least you can quote Shakespeare.”

I decided not to correct her.

Other characters eventually showed up. A couple arrived: The World Traveler in some outfit that made her look like an eccentric; The German Prospector in what looked like a Boy Scout uniform, speaking in an affected accent. They took a seat and poured
some wine. We introduced ourselves and talked a bit, fading between our characters and ourselves. I took a sip of wine, enjoyed the dry bitterness of the red.

Melinda, one of Rachel’s friends I had met once before, entered the party area dressed as the Professor. She walked over to Rachel and said, “I thought you said Rob was going to be here?”

“He couldn’t make it. I’ll hook you guys up next time.”

Melinda glanced over at me as I drank wine at the table. She and Rachel whispered and laughed together.

Another couple rounded out the cast: The boyfriend played the part of the General, wearing militaristic medals, a blue Air Force coat, and a sword and scabbard in his belt. A Teddy Roosevelt looking hat gave his costume an old-timey flare. He carried a half-empty whiskey bottle, switched it to his left when he shook my hand. His girlfriend was the Heiress, wearing a ruffled black ball gown. It was tacky, but in a good way. Their dogs followed them into the house, a black and white Boston terrier and a yellow mutt. They jumped all over everything, the inevitable underfoot fauna of Flagstaff social gatherings.

Katy sat us down around the kitchen table and handed out the envelopes. For effect, the game came with a CD that played eerie sounds and music. Imitation lightning strikes, insects droning, and an occasional muffled laugh poured from the speakers. Rachel got out more glasses and distributed wine. The General said, “No thanks,” and took a long pull from his whiskey.
Katy stood. “Alright, here’s the situation. There’s been a murder, and we’re all suspects. We have to stay in character and read the clues, and eventually we’ll all decide who killed the guy. From now on, we stay in character!”

Looking at my description, it turned out that Hamilton was having an affair with the Heiress. She looked up from reading across the table, laughed, and said, “Oh, my!” The General frowned at her character sheet, and she said, “You’re not supposed to see my card,” but she pointed out the startling detail to him anyway.

The General looked at me, frowned again, took another drink of whiskey and muttered, “I should have that part. She’s my girlfriend.” His hands had begun to shake, sloshing around what was left in the bottle.

The game progressed by rounds, giving each of us enough information to start implicating the others in the murder, while also giving information that was supposed to be privileged to the individual that read it. Most of my rounds involved Hamilton’s affair with the Heiress. Whenever the conversation steered to that subject, the General frowned, muttered, and drank.

We took a break outside for wine and pot. The World Traveler and the German Prospector were showing off some of their props, she a colorful hat and shiny jacket, he a foam mining pick. The General, not to be left out, gestured in the direction of the scabbard jammed into his belt. “This is what I slay with,” pulling out the sword to show everyone. It was a real scimitar. Sharp. Not a prop. I watched the moonlight reflect off the blade as it swayed and slashed in the cool air. The General shifted his stance, his feet unsteady.

“Want to hold it?” He held the blade out to me, not the handle.
“No thanks.”

He held out the almost finished whiskey bottle with the other hand. Shook it at me.

“No thanks.”

“Pff.”

I heard the glass backdoor slide open. I didn’t look. “Rachel’s finished dinner,” the Heiress said.

The eight of us sat around the cleared game table. The meal Rachel had prepared was delicious: lamb sausages cooked perfectly, falafel with cucumber sauce, and well-salted salad, mostly comprised of deep red tomatoes tart with vinegar. I thanked Rachel for cooking the sausages, knowing that she was a vegetarian. She smiled and raised her wine glass.

A few moments later, the General stood, placed one leg on his chair, pirate style, held his dinner sausage out of his zipper, and shouted, “The only thing more dangerous than my sword!” The yellow mutt ran up and snatched it. Everyone laughed. I poured another glass of wine.

Dinner finished and we got back to the game. We were all silly from the drinking and the pot, but the General was having more difficulty staying in character. He tilted in his chair and the Heiress helped him with his lines. Sometimes he stood and pulled out his sword again, but she got him to sit down. He told a joke and laughter filled the air. I sipped my wine and watched.

The conversation soon focused on implicating the Heiress.

“Oh my,” she said, “well I never, I couldn’t have, I was…”
“Oh yeah?” the General questioned. “What were you?”

I knew from the character card that she and Hamilton had been in the midst of their affair during the accused moment. As the game dictated, I needed to stand up for her.

“Personally, I can vouch for the innocence of the Heiress. She could not have been in the ballroom at nine o’clock. The two of us were, shall we say, indisposed in the linen closet.”

Everyone laughed. Satisfied, the conversation started to turn toward implicating the German Prospector. The Heiress cooed, “Oh thank you, my Hamilton.”

I winked and smiled slyly, “I’ll always be there for you, baby.”

The General fumed, put down his bottle. “You don’t call her baby. You. Don’t call her baby.”

Everyone tried not to look at the General and me. He glared from the opposite corner of the table, his head unsteady on his fat neck, beady gray eyes trying to focus. He grimaced.

I looked back, my face stiff. The wine had suddenly cut. The pot had cut. I was completely sober. I glanced at the sword in his belt, his hand on the hilt.

The General looked away, made some jokes:

“What’s the difference between having sex with a straight girl and having sex with a lesbian?”

“What?”

“Dunno, but I’d love to find out.”

Laughs.
“What’s the difference between sex and rape?”

“What?”

“Whether or not she remembers it the next morning.”

Laughs.

Everyone laughed in increasing volume and quantity, as if by doing so they could sand off the nervous edge of the evening. I wasn’t laughing. I was done laughing. Nothing was funny anymore. I stole a glance toward the front door. I watched the General, his gaze set on the table, but he didn’t look back. He was out of jokes. He never touched the sword on his hip again.

Gradually as the other partygoers drifted away from the game and into conversations about work, tattoos, and dogs, the laughter became less forced and shrill, more natural. On either side of me, Melinda and the German Prospector faced opposite directions, absorbed in conversations with other partygoers. I stared at my empty wine glass. An image came to mind of a silvery fish flopping in dry sand, Moses having parted the Red Sea.

Because it was the end of the night, and there didn’t seem any way around it, we eventually made our way toward the end of the game.

It was time to decide who did it. People made their final arguments. The General roused himself to enough coherence to put together a case. He was convincing. He cobbled together enough votes to indict the guilty. They pointed. The General grinned in his triumph, expelling whiskey fumes and hate.

They had decided that I was the murderer.
Regarding Horny Hank

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Johns,

While it is not my intention to alarm you in any way as to the academic performance of young William, I am deeply saddened to have to write you re: a disturbing trend that I have noticed, that indeed many here at the school have noticed, and that is that your son’s imaginary friend, an entity upon which William has bestowed the most unfortunate moniker, “Horny Hank,” a nickname objectionable in its own fashion that has caused many problems at the school (I’ll get to that), has, through much methodology, captured, so to speak, to turn that phrase, the imaginations of many students here at our beloved Frank Lloyd Wright Elementary School (go Fightin’ Keystones!).

Again, I would like to stress the notion that William is an excellent performer in a vast majority of his subjects, providing an exemplary role model for his fellow fifth graders. William leads his class in archery, hitting seven bull’s eyes out of eight in the last exam, and even going so far as to serve his instructor, Ms. Laurie Ross, in the role of teaching assistant, yielding tangible results (for instance, the newfound accuracy of both Peters twins, good for them). This excellence on the performative and academic side of William’s permanent record leads me to feel the absolute necessity in contacting you
about the distraction that his new imaginary friend, the aforementioned Horny Hank, has become.

And what a distraction, indeed! For example, Ms. Laurie Ross has explained to me, and many other of my fellow educators and administrators, during the meeting that prompted in us the necessity to contact you, William’s parents, that same meeting in which a vote was taken ultimately determining unanimously that I would be the one most appropriate to contact you, a particular incident of distraction, which also serves as the origin of Horny Hank’s intrusion upon our educational facilities. The students were taking a spelling test. While the class was attempting to spell “perfidious” (a word I admittedly just had to look up myself, as it has been far too many years since I took a fifth-grade spelling test), students and Ms. Laurie Ross became aware, most abruptly, of a loud, prolonged presence, both odious and odorous, a, shall we say expulsion (forgive me for using the word in this context, I assure you it carries no threat to your son). As all students in the class turned, some pinching their noses, toward the source of this “presence” in the center of the room, where I am told your son sits during lecture in room 305, young William looked up from spelling “perfidious” (and I am told he spelled it correctly, another outstanding mark) and said, “Wasn’t me. Horny Hank is here and he ate burritos for lunch.”

If only Horny Hank had died there, dissipated back into the æther, the simple construction of a boy looking to avoid embarrassment. But, as the crafting of this letter must have no doubt spelled out for you, Mr. and Mrs. Johns, Horny Hank is very much alive, still haunting Frank Lloyd Wright Elementary School (Keystones, hurrah!).
William blamed further outbursts on Horny Hank. If Susan Wayne’s pencil sharpener went missing, William claimed Horny Hank had stolen it. If William felt the need to shout an obscenity in the middle of silent sustained reading, it was because Horny Hank had pinched his bottom. If a food fight broke out in the cafeteria, Horny Hank had instigated it. If a student returned to class from recess with clothes and hair disheveled, it was because Horny Hank had “roughed ‘em up.”

Other students have gotten in on the delusion (or cult?) of Horny Hank. It seems this is the figure around which they have chosen to rally, a new student mascot, if you will (though how could we ever replace Archie the Keystone?). Roger the goldfish, Ms. Laurie Ross’ class mascot went missing, and when an investigation was suggested by the faculty, students responded by chanting, “Hor-ny Hank! He’s our Man! Fry them goldfish—in—a—pan!”

And fashions have changed. Students are wearing less and less. Despite the school’s policy against spaghetti straps, girls began to show up in these scandalous tank tops. Bra straps and tan lines are now apparent. The prolific exposure of skin can only be a distraction, especially to our young students, just coming to terms with the confused hormones wreaking havoc within their fragile bodies. When questioned about changes in wardrobe, many students have replied that they want to impress that “dreamy” Horny Hank.

More disturbing yet are the pictures being produced in art class that William attributes to Horny Hank: pictures of men and women performing sex acts on animals, such as dogs, porcupines, and even a blue whale. What’s worse in these pictures are the dull, smudgy lines of the pencil sketches, lacking definition, or even character
development in the picture’s subjects. Sure, a sex act is occurring upon a sea mammal’s blow hole, but how do the parties feel about this? I can assure you, if Horny Hank were a student at our school, Ms. Laurie Ross would have no choice but to fail him in art.

A classmate of William, young Sally Ann aged eleven, has become pregnant, and I’m afraid we have the newfound obsession with sexuality brought about by Horny Hank to blame for this twist. It will be a hard pregnancy for one as young as Sally A., we can all see that quite clearly, but there is reason to believe that this particular situation will be harder on her than we would have expected. Looking into Sally A.’s permanent record, I can tell you (though I probably shouldn’t [but let this breach of conduct on my part belie the desperation we, your children’s educators, all feel re: the epidemic that has become your son’s imaginary friend]) that Sally Ann Roberts has scored extremely unsatisfactorily in all facets of maternity studies. In nurturing, four out of ten; in kindness, five out of ten; in labor simulation, two out of ten; in umbilical severing, N/A (she insisted on biting down on the cord, despite the urging of Ms. Laurie Ross to make use of the instruments provided). More perplexing still is her insistence on Horny Hank’s paternity in this case. This is unprecedented, and in the rough draft of her future child’s birth certificate we have been left in the unfortunate situation of listing an imaginary friend as father. The situation is quite new, and we are left wondering how an imaginary friend will fare in providing child support. William has indicated to me that, “Horny Hank is not the marrying kind,” and that “That cooze is on her own.” Though we have pled with William to help broker a compromise on this subject, it seems the father of Sally Ann’s unborn child, whomever he may be, will not budge.
It was around this time, though student accounts differ in the details, that during a biology lecture, it is said that the figure of a man walked into room 305, strode up to the cage of Hero the Hamster (the newest mascot of Ms. Laurie Ross’ classroom), scooped the rodent out of the cage, and flung her out the window. He then declared, “I’m Horny Hank and I’m the only symbol you’ll ever need.” Cheers erupted.¹

All of this has led us to the conclusion that Horny Hank must go. And by go, I mean die. And by die, I assure you I mean we need to kill him. This is all very legal. The student government, led by student body president Brook George, voted on the matter following a long trial in which evidence was brought forth to suggest the guilt or innocence of Horny Hank, and he was found to be “obstructionary to the educational process.”² ³

Horny Hank was well represented in terms of defense. The opposition party, led by young William, whom I am sure you know is a leading member of the student government, argued passionately and tirelessly in favor of keeping his imaginary friend

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¹ Ms. Laurie Ross’ written lesson report from that date reads, and I quote, “Missing: one hamster, brown and white.”
² During the trial, Sally Ann Roberts spoke (eloquently, I am told) for about fifteen minutes, though transcripts were lost, and it is unclear as to what her intent was.
³ Turning enough students against Horny Hank to ensure that the vote went the way we needed it to go was no small feat. However, as is so often the case, the blueprint to our villain’s downfall was coded into his own divisive behavior. I mentioned earlier that he had been accused of stealing Susan Wayne’s pencil sharpener. We soon discovered a penchant for the disappearance of pencil sharpeners (though we never discovered the purpose behind the hording of pencil sharpeners). We decided to exacerbate the situation, limiting the use of public pencil sharpeners to occur only between the hours of 8am-9am and 2:45pm-3:15pm. Eventually, a pencil sharpening toll was instituted, one cent per shaving. Public opinion began to shift. Protests, led by Susan Wayne (who has become a bit of a rising star in her own right and, it is suggested, might make a run at student body president next year) gathered, calling for the sharpening of Horny Hank’s pencil. Incidentally, funds raised by the pencil sharpening toll have been quite the windfall for school funding, and we are considering adding another wing to the history department (one small positive, I suppose, that I should acknowledge has resulted due to the Horny Hank ordeal).
around. William, in what I assume is his Sunday best, pounded the podium with all his might. Beads of sweat stood out on his ardent young brow (I myself witnessed much of the “Horny Hank Hearings”). His voice, cracking with the changes that must now be occurring in his young, muddled body, trembled. This was the beginning of the ten-day filibuster, now legend in the annals of our student government records (also, that’s where William was in late April, in case you were wondering), in which William argued for a cause that he must have known, for I saw defeat twinkle in his eyes even as he sweated and pounded that podium, would thud in defeat. And so it did.

Yet here is where we come to the ultimate problem that must be addressed in this letter, a problem of logistics. As is tradition when performing an execution that has been so ordered by the student government, the culprit killing is performed, via bow and arrow, by the best shot in the school. This happens to be, as I have mentioned, young William Johns.

I’ll describe to you the Tuesday set aside for the execution of our newly dubbed criminal, as I have amalgamated from a compilation of student testimony. One of the Peters twins (no one can tell them apart) handed William his bow, the other an arrow. Sally Ann Roberts caressed the small swell of her belly. Susan Wayne grinned and sharpened a pencil furiously. Ms. Laurie Ross chaperoned. Student body president Brook George attended, reader of last rites. William stood in the archer’s circle, surprising seriousness enveloping his aura. A lock of red hair had fallen loose across his forehead,

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4 "Est-ce la mort qui donne du sens à la vie?
Non, c’est la vie qui se donne du sens.
Mais la mort, n’est-elle pas, comme une donnée fondamentale,
le moyen qui nous permet de transcender la banalité du quotidien,
prise pour un fait [établi], vers l’— »

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but this did not hide a shining in his blue eyes, reflecting the spring sunlight. He lifted
bow and arrow, strung the bolt, and, so slowly, pulled, aiming with both eyes open at the
bound prisoner. Horny Hank fell to his knees. He brought his duct taped hands to his face
and tore out pieces of his brown beard. He wept, earnestly I am told, begging the boy not
to do it, to just let him live his life, that he would do anything, would even become a
teacher if asked, if only he could be forgiven his trespasses. “Save me, father,” was heard
by the students in attendance. And William, sensitive boy that he is, wanted to relent, yet
it seemed at that moment he would not relent and would perform his duty, but the sound
of weeping and William’s heart thumps were broken by a familiar, loud, prolonged
auditory presence. And then there was silence. Until, I am told, bursts of laughter, violent
in their insistence, rang out through the courtyard. Hysteria blanketed the solemn
occasion. Students rolled in the grass, clutching stomachs in an agonized fever of hilarity.
I am told that even Ms. Laurie Ross gave a wry smile (something for which she has been
disciplined, I assure you). William shot his arrow at the sun and declared, “I will never,
ever, give up my friend Horny Hank.”

I want to stress the unfortunateness of what comes next, that viewing these events
as unfortunate is the official position of the council of education professionals at Frank
Lloyd Wright Elementary School (Keystones to victory!). We decided by vote, with only
one dissenter (whose name is being withheld as per the order of the Ross family lawyer),
that William must face punishment. Methods of punishment thus far enacted by the
council are as follows:

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5 Ms. Laurie Ross confirms that these words were spoken.
1) Scraping off the accrued blackened pieces of gum that have been stuck under every desk in the school, a collection that goes back at least twenty-seven years (as that was, I believe, the last time our school had an offender that warranted this level of punishment).

2) Sticking said blackened gum into several balls so that it might be more easily delivered in a chewable format.

3) Using saliva to moisten, teeth to soften, reforming said gum pieces, one at a time, until they could become a more flexible texture, usable in the construction of gum sculpture.\(^6\)

4) Corporeal punishment.

5) Forming a ball of gum into the shape of a fully grown sticky male, hauling it into the courtyard, and shooting arrows into it.

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\(^6\) Items 1-3 in the punishment list took place over the course of two months. This was an admirable space of time for William to have achieved so much. He stayed after school every day for hours on end, chewing and chewing. His jaw must have most certainly ached, for he would become lethargic at times, clutching his face, but still he chewed on, facing punishment as befits a member of the student body government. The council was very impressed at this time and voted on whether to commute William’s punishment based on the spirit that he had shown in scraping the desks and chewing the product. We decided that, *unfortunately*, systemic problems still occurring as they are in the school (which I will soon clarify), the punishment must continue. Moreover, William in the course of fulfilling this punishment, expressed in explicit terms, unrepentantness. As he chewed the blackened accrual of the underdesks, small streams of sticky drool streaked down his chin, and he declared, “This chew’s for you, Horny Hank!” I myself witnessed this.
6) Fashioning a sign out of rope and cardboard reading, “Here’s what happens to Horny Hanks,” tying the sign around the neck of the pin cushioned gum man sculpture, dousing the sculpture in kerosene, and lighting it on fire.7

7) The denial of nourishment.8 9 10

It is true that perhaps the punishing of William would not be necessary if Horny Hank had had back in April, during his creator’s act of unfathomable mercy, a change of heart. However, this has not been the case. Horny Hank has been as much a blight to the school as ever, making his presence known through a variety of senses. And it has become apparent that student body president Brook George has a new swell to her belly. And I am told that Ms. Laurie Ross is late on her monthly.

7 On this occasion, ironically also a Tuesday, William was overtly unapologetic. He did not take seriously at all the ceremoniosity that should come with an effigy burning. It seems all symbolic value was lost on him. Instead, there was a maniacal glint in those blue eyes which had lately affected true seriousness. As the flames engulfed the gummy Horny Hank figure, William cackled into the cloudless sky. We in attendance felt most unsettled.
8 Perhaps you have noticed how thin William has gotten over the last two months. His clothes hang about his boney frame. Hollow cheeks. Skin graying.
9 This punishment is complicated by the fact that William has been receiving nourishment when he goes home from school. This is a regrettable avoidance of punishment, for which the cessation is a part of the purpose of the letter you hold in your hands. We do not in any way hold you responsible for this specific setback in William’s reform. This is a problem of communication, and we are to blame as we did not inform you that William should be taken off of nourishment immediately. We apologize for not informing you sooner.
10 Yet more complications have arisen as a result of this punishment. In solidarity with William, a certain segment of the student populace has gone on hunger strike. They call themselves the “Hungry for Hank Foundation.” As you can imagine, this has resulted in backlash toward our community’s children’s educators. We receive phone calls daily. Sometimes hourly. Just yesterday, I received a phone call from one Mrs. Marks. It seems her son is no more than skin and rib bones. And Phillip Marks was one of our overweight children just two months ago. This is to say that this problem, the very real problem that Horny Hank represents, is bigger than you or me or William. Horny Hank is a danger to the health of all the young people in our community.
The school year is coming to a close, which brings with it new desperations. This is to say that time is not on the side of young William Johns. I want to be clear about that. That is why I am writing to you, Mr. and Mrs. Johns, to do everything in your power to help us, your son’s educators, reform the boy by consummating his punishment and encouraging him to perform his duty as executioner to Horny Hank.

And yet, as I reread this letter to myself, it seems as if I have only focused on the negatives of our experience with your son. It reads as if it were a list of complaints against the boy. I assure you, we care deeply for William and, again I want to stress this, he is a most gifted and potential-filled student.

This is all to help us avoid making an unfortunate situation even more unfortunate than it needs to be. We could all use some good fortune.

All best wishes to you and yours,

Catherine Riley O’Leary, Ph. D. Behavioral Science,
Lead Guidance Counsellor, Frank Lloyd Wright Elementary School (Go, Keys, go! [etc. etc.])