

2005

The Econometric Value of Silence and Noise as Seen by a Non-practicing Marxist

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Colby College

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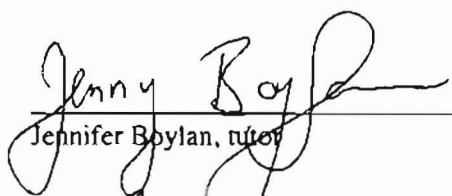
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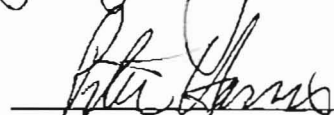
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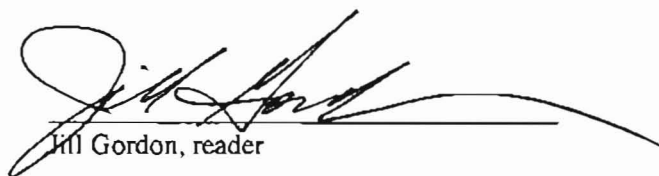
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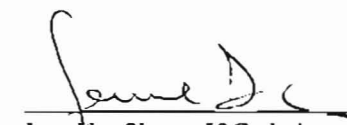
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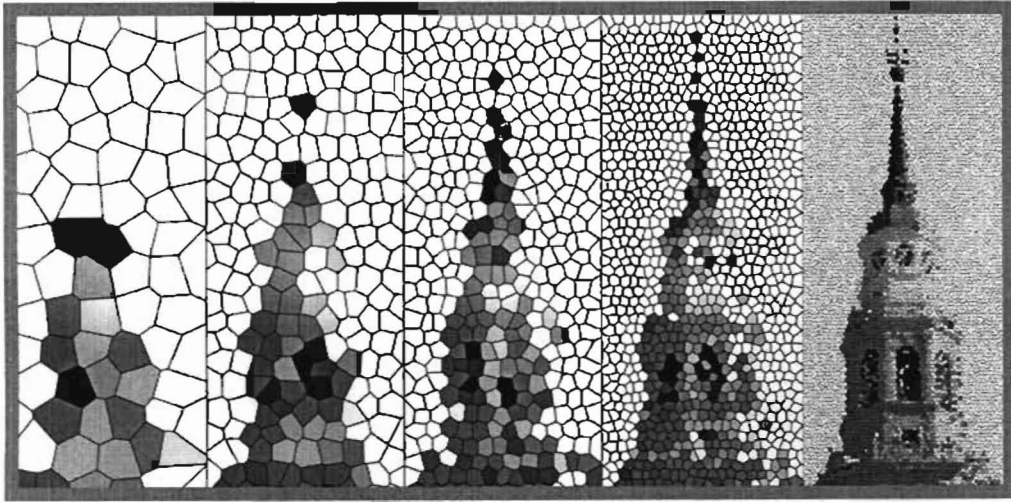

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**THE ECONOMETRIC VALUE
OF SILENCE & NOISE
AS SEEN BY A NON-PRACTICING
MARXIST**



(i.e. A COLLECTION OF POETRY AND FICTION)

STEPHEN WHELPLEY

The Econometric Value of Silence and Noise as Seen by a Non-Practicing Marxist
(i.e. A Collection of Poetry and Fiction)

**The Econometric Value of Silence and Noise
as Seen by a Non-Practicing Marxist**

(i.e. A Collection of Poetry and Fiction)

Stephen Whelpley

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A Senior Scholars Project

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Cover Art: Original photograph by Rachel Tobie; digitally altered by Stephen Whelpley

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These are but buds of still ripening fruit.

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We Have Fears¹

I have fears that I may cease to be
Before my hands transpose my turning wheels,
Before I leave some mark for all to see
And circumnavigate what fate does steal;
When I look out upon a skyline's veil,
Tall bodings signing both our life and death,
I figure I won't skirt their tops, won't scale
Those windowed shadows that outlive my breath;
And when my eyes gaze at some dulcet face
That grants me time without worry and pain,
Reflections brief on love's potential grace,
I wake to find a stranger and remain
 Alone in crowded streets to idly think
 Till Love and Fame to nothingness do sink.

¹ Adaptation of John Keats' "When I have fears that I may cease to be"

Patent No. 8,789,649

Until I picked up a book, I was
the first person to break life's seriousness
with a fart, but Aristophanes stole
that bit eons ago. Likewise, two days
after I summed life up in the simple
emptying and filling of holes, Sartre came
along, the thieving bastard
I now know him as, and published
my brainchild for himself. Illiteracy
is certain bliss.

(Illiteracy is a certain bliss.)

I might have thrown
these burglaries to the back
of my closet with my Starter jacket,
slumped amongst a mess
of other bandwagoned trends, if only
I had gotten credit for the Segway
or even the bathroom of automation
I created on the third of September in a History
notebook, but Segway's made the front page
months ago and my brother told me everything
was already automated. Segway,
schmegue. I have nothing
left. My shelves of self are
cleared. Through jazz, I found
I could not improvise, and in verse
like this, I found "cliché." Oh,
O'Hara why you too ransacked
my prenatal plan for poop
to enter poetry I will never know. My life
is but vast plagiarism. From seduction
to suicide, not a card left
untuned by the hands of Shakespeare, Ovid,
or Chuang Tzu. So now, I fold and turn

myself in for this account
of larceny. My apologies go out
to you and anybody else that once was.

Robert Frost and the Like

If a modern man can go a day without digesting
high fructose corn syrup, so finely engineered
that no natural nectar here or on Mount Olympus
could surpass it, while making certain not to fall
into the abbreviated html talk of a dot-com-inated
world, which emerged after the extinction of the nightingale
metaphor and before Webster's Dictionary
defined "scrilla" as an English word, then, for a day or two,
he could be mistaken for Robert Frost and the like.

Headlines

When I read that a five million dollar jock
smacked a two cent chump because the soda he had
hurled wetted the player's gemstone bod, I laugh.

When I read that a man in the woods of my home state
mowed down some NASCAR-loving hunters
and their family with a thirty round clip for ousting
him with racial slurs from their tree stand, I marvel.

When I read my name on the bathroom wall
along with tokens to Jah, reefer, and getting ass, I hate
the feeling I get and think about hunting the guy
who wrote it, so I can drown him in my fists.

Why I Go Get Boxers I Left at the Gym

At the gym,
I forgot them.

I have boxers, but
this pair
had two seams, one
for each leg rather
than one up the middle
and wedged
between cheeks.
I should get them.

And she gave them
to me, but we're over
and strings have been
severed. After
all, they are just
boxers, a seasonal
pair at that. But, it was
Christmas, and now,
her parents are up
and divorcing again.
I had to get them.

I had nothing else to do, so
I got them.

Comfortable Silence

When he reaches for the volume knob, I know enough
to assume it won't turn or twist but only be tapped head on
for silence and a digital display that only shows the time,
straining to get away from his drugs-sex-and-car-wrecking-
rock-n-roll lectures that saturate my palms with sweat
and my mouth with endless apologies to stop
the silence from winning and provoking more
questions, to possibly earn some diverting sound
from the radio, even NPR, but the radio never interrupts
his disappointment, never plays my song
against his silence, which speaks even when neither of us
do, of the cars he bought me, the sports he taught me, the liberal
arts college he pays for, and the twenty times my birthday
has come and gone with his flat rendition of the song
never missing a beat.

Religiously Killing

IN THE DARK, a silverfish crept out from behind the mirror and traversed across the textured paint to an open area. It made itself comfortable there and surveyed the bits of cemented sand with its antennas. No one ever left drywall smooth. It demanded some layer of textured paint to hide all of the possible blemishes that could develop in friable plaster-mixed walls. The small bumps took one's attention away from the big bumps. As proof of this, the silverfish was only conscious of the small bumps, the grains of sand caked onto the wall. It felt nothing of the larger kettle drums left behind by the beds of pickup trucks and slips of hammers. To the silverfish, it was all one continuous sea of granules.

When the bedside lamp flicked on, the silverfish paused for a moment, desperately wondering if it could blend in with the bumps in the wall, and then bolted, as they always do, for the thin strip of shadows that remained at the joint of the ceiling and the wall. Following the usual order of things, the twenty-year-old male flipped his bedding to the side so that it folded over in a triangle and swung his legs off the side of the bed. Before standing up, he did his standard three hundred and sixty degree scan of

the room that he had carefully developed to spot silverfish as effectively as possible. His eyes traced each joint in the room, making sure to focus on the corners near the ceiling, and then scanned back over the flat planes of the room like the ceiling and walls.

Whenever conducting one of these inspections, he made sure to begin with the northern wall where the closets were and rotate his view counterclockwise until he finished at the adjacent eastern wall where his bed was. In spite of how anal-retentive this precision might seem, this meticulous system was not an obsessive-compulsive byproduct of order. On the contrary, it had evolved out of necessity. He looked first to the joints and corners since silverfish had an affinity the darkest frontiers of any room. Additionally, he started his eyes at the northern wall and moved counterclockwise because that pattern gradually moved his eyes from where the silverfish were most prevalent to where they were least prevalent.

As soon as his eyes hit the southern wall with the mirror on it and the dresser pushed against it, he spotted what he had lifted his sheets for and quietly stood up in his boxers. Goosebumps had taken over his legs since his parents kept the heat off at night. As if stalking a deer, he carefully walked on the balls and toes of his feet to his desk where he grabbed one Kleenex and a green, wooden ruler that read "Ted's Ruler." This relic of his youth, a personalized ruler picked up either at some novelty store or in a gift bag from a kindergarten party, was his silverfish slaying weapon. It gave him a little extra reach without sacrificing accuracy and strength. Keep in mind these silverfish are quick, agile, torpedo-shaped insects and consequently quite formidable opponents. With the means of elimination in hand, he set himself up below the silverfish that sat

motionless in the joint and raised his two hands toward it with the ruler in one and the tissue in the other. Knowing he may only have one shot, he took a second to envision his motions, a rapid jab with the ruler accompanied by a swift follow-up with the Kleenex to seal the deal. Breathing in slowly and steadily through his nostrils, he took the jab, nicked the silverfish, and missed with the Kleenex. Fortunately, he had another shot since the green ruler had clipped its tale and maimed the insect enough to take its stealthiness down a few notches. Going in with the Kleenex, he finished the job.

Every night Ted was home from school he would turn out the lights, lie in bed for ten minutes, and then go through these motions. Ever since his first semester of college had finished, silverfish would turn up in his room, so over the school breaks, he honed his silverfish hunting skills out of necessity. When the first one showed up, he did not even know what it was. Only after asking around did he find out that these insects despised light, cherished dust, were incredibly fast, and allegedly enjoyed the presence of books and paper. This last tidbit came from his mother, who had heard from her brother, the doctor in the family, that they came swarming around his expansive collection of medical books. With each semester of college, Ted accumulated more books, notebooks, exams, and silverfish, so this hypothesis seemed to fit. Ted found that these insects were so daunting that legends even surrounded them. After hearing about Ted's silverfish, his friend Pat continually retold the story of how his father saw one darting across the carpet in the glow of a television, pointed at it, and hurled the remote at it, stopping it dead. Regardless of all the hoopla surrounding them, Ted did not see his room as their natural

habitat. Seeing how silverfish were in his room every time he came home, Ted's life naturally adjusted out of necessity and killing silverfish became a routine.

Doughnuts were on the table the next morning as they were every Sunday morning that the Stegle children were home from school. Without bothering to grab a plate, Ted sat down in front of the doughnut box in his boxers and started to sift through assortment. As usual, the assortment was less than eclectic. Every Sunday, there were doughnuts, and every Sunday his father made the selection. The majority of the doughnuts were old-fashioned, sugared doughnuts, and without exception, they were all brown.

"You see? Got you kids doughnuts again. Didn't I do a decent job of picking them out this time?" his father inquired as he entered the kitchen from the back hall. He always asked that exact same question with the same hopeful raise of his eyebrows and pinch in the corner of his mouth each time Ted sat in front of the doughnuts.

"Yeah, Dad. Great job.... Are you kidding?" As always, Ted could not just shelve his sarcasm and let it slide. He felt lucky enough that his father remembered his name each day. It was not by any means that his father was senile or inconsiderate. He simply did not have a high retention rate and was not always one for thinking on his feet. Although Ted never went with him to get the doughnuts, he could imagine the scene in his head. For a while, his father would hover far enough away from the counter that the grocer would not bother to ask him if he needed help. After he felt he had sufficiently surveyed the lot of doughnuts and figured out how to select a rainbow collection of them,

he would take two steps closer to the counter, be asked what he wanted, and return a blank look like a dog with its head cocked to the side not understanding the whole concept of “fetch” just yet. Keep in mind, when he surveyed the doughnut shelves, he only saw what was right in front of him since he had a pinched nerve that limited the rotation of his neck and what he could see all looked the same to him. Besides that, he did not have the keen eye of his son that could differentiate glazed, sugared, and powdered doughnuts from miles out. With the silence of his own pause finally startling him, he would ask for doughnuts in pairs even though he would usually get four of each type. Asking for them in smaller batches and repeating himself allowed him more time to think and reconsider things. For the baker’s gift at the end of the dozen, he would usually ask for a jelly doughnut, making Ted wonder if he actually knew other doughnuts existed.

Sensing his father’s disappointment, Ted followed up his facetious retort with, “Hey, just shitting ya, Dad. You know I like these doughnuts. Good picks. Thanks.”

“Oh yeah, I know how you like those croissant ones with frosting on top. Can’t blame ya. They’re one of my favorite too.” In all honesty, Ted had actually developed a fondness, or maybe it was a dependency, for the doughnuts his father picked out Sunday after Sunday. From time to time, Ted would even buy one of these blander doughnuts when he went to Dunkin Donuts out at school both for its simple taste and its association with home.

“Ok. Yes, Dad, you did a good job with the doughnuts. Are you going to keep standing there though? Why don’t you either have a doughnut and sit with me or

skedaddle? You make me nervous when you just hover over me, watching me eat and stuff."

"Ok, well... I just wanted to know if you were planning..."

"Yes, Dad. Fine, I'll go to church. You don't have to beat around the bush for Christ's sake."

"So, do you want to do the 9:30 or the 11?"

"Let's do the 11 like always. You know there's no way we'd be ready for the 9:30. At least not by the time you'd like us to leave for it."

Ted should have seen it coming. Part of him probably did see it coming, but just wanted to pretend it was not coming and eat a doughnut. Ted's dad provided doughnuts each Sunday morning since they acted as an over-the-table bribe to get the family to agree to Sunday Mass. The pastry primer never failed, but it might not have had anything to do with his father's success either.

As the lights switched on one by one during the processional hymn for a new dramatic effect, Ted could not deny the sensation the liturgist had created in doing so. He felt consumed by everything that entered his eyes. Lights with orange, yellow, and red lenses hit the stucco backdrop of the altar so that the metallic chips laid around the giant crucifix shimmered like the autumn sun outside the stained glass. A solo spotlight over the advent wreath drew undeniable attention to it, which seemed quite fitting for the first Sunday of Advent. As the light grew with each chandelier turned on, Ted grew progressively mesmerized by the sea of heads that bobbed above the pews to the swaying

melody of the organ. Since he was about six foot five inches, all he saw were the tops of heads, and to him, they all just looked like one steady sheet of pimples or bumps, like a blanket composed of large knots of yarn. At least for now, while the ceremony entertained his senses, he felt overwhelmed by the atmosphere in general that he did not pick out individuals like his old second grade teacher or the girl from his sister's grade who made his sister's life a living hell for the duration of middle school. He took everything in as if his eyes were actually out of focus so that, in the end, all he saw was a valley of heads packed tighter and tighter together in the telescoping pews like lemmings as they approached the peak ahead of them, the crucifix.

Between the organ, the soloist, and the parish body, the sounds of the church harmoniously accompanied the sensation his eyes saw. The organ itself was fitting since its song consists of complicated chords, multiple notes hit at once, a fusion of different octaves. Like the unfocused view his eyes took to pull in everything at once, his ears naturally took in entire clusters of notes as the organ provided them. On top of that, the soloist with a microphone had the mesmerizing voice of a siren and a pair of bulging eyes that made one think she was susceptible to her own spell. Following her lead, the swaying buoys surrounding Ted sang along in a slightly delayed succession to the organ and the soloist so that the noises as a whole formed a snowballing arpeggio of countless notes. As a result, the collective sum of all the notes from all the sources entered Ted as one continuous stream of musical noise. The presentation of the liturgy in this opening procession commanded his senses so completely that he felt as if he had lost control of them. The whole thing hit Ted as quite surreal.

As soon as the opening hymn ended, Ted's appreciation of things ended as well. With no organ playing and no lights flickering on and off, Ted was left with a man in a robe, reciting the same monotone lines as every other Sunday Mass to which his father had taken him. After eight years of Catholic grade school with a priest who was later "relocated" for what they described as "personal reasons" and four years at a Jesuit high school that did not offer philosophy, Ted approached his four years tucked away at his non-affiliated liberal arts school in Maine as his earned secular years. All in all, this shift in his life was not that difficult. His first year at school he occasionally went to church, but as the weekends rolled by, he gradually missed it more often and would rely on the shallow excuse that he had too much work to justify his poor attendance to his father. Considering how far removed the school was from the woes and tragedies of society, like poverty, death, and destruction, nothing too weighty ever landed on his plate that he really had to consult a higher authority. Additionally, these years finally marked the years of his life when he actually conducted independent thinking, and with the help of his philosophy minor, he honestly found little need for faith and its explanations. In no way did Ted look to abandon his faith or even the concept of religion. In fact, he still defended it on many fronts. When one of his friends spotted another student bowing his head over folded hands before starting a meal and belted out, "What the hell is that fucking weirdo doing?," Ted responded, "Shut the hell up, Joey. So the kid likes to pray before he eats, is that a big deal? It's probably something he always does." Ted just considered this his personal hiatus from it since the pressures of his life at the time did not really require it.

As the priest said, "The Word of the Lord," Ted knew it was homily time, and he could really let go of his mind for a while. Of late, Ted's break from faith did not seem that great since, the few times it would enter his mind like it did now, he would simply find himself anticipating its return with elements of guilt lingering in his mind. Every time he thought about it returning he figured it would result from something bad in his life so that he would finally realize how he took everything for granted during his college years. With the mumble of the priest's homily in the background, his mind drifted through some of these scenarios that could potentially conjure up his hibernating faith. First, he thought of the phone call he could receive from his sister, explaining how his dad had to rush his mom to the hospital due to the continued growth of the benign tumor at the stem of her brain. Then, he jumped to the possibility of his father's plane crashing on its return from a business trip to Mexico. Ted realized that all of the scenarios were obscenely tragic. He also recognized that even if they did renew his faith, they would only cheapen it by making faith a last ditch effort to cope with life.

During the "Lord's Prayer," all Ted thought about was how clammy the stranger on his right's hand felt as the entire parish joined hands for the recitation. He felt the sticky moisture of the stranger's hand transferring to his and almost cringed when he realized his hand was now as warm and supple as the stranger's originally was. As he dwelled on this, his mouth went through the motions of the prayer without any assistance from up above in his head or down below in his chest, wherever the metaphorical heart is located. Before starting the line, "and lead us not into temptation," Ted's mouth caught

up with his thoughts, and he stopped reciting the prayer. It scared him that he could do it so effortlessly.

Disturbed by his mixed reactions to the service, Ted walked up to his room without a word when they got home. He sprawled himself out on the bed and watched the ceiling fan spin for a couple hundred times. The quack of a hypnotist could not pull his mind away from things, so he did what he usually did over the breaks when he found himself stuck in his room for an extended period of time. Ted started to rummage through the relics of his not yet distant youth. First, moving to his desk, he sifted through each drawer to find plastic Ghostbusters figures, a bookmark from the United States Supreme Court, bicentennial quarters he once thought would be worth something, a handheld CB radio, crayon drawings of dinosaurs with bazookas, and the Bible he got for his first communion. That got him to move on, so he moved over to his trophy collection that included a bowling medal his grandfather had won and basketball team trophies for a team that would only play him when they were sufficiently up in points to risk it. He was searching for something that had not changed like his faith. Something that he could rely on to carry him through every stage of his life. Some ritual. Some regiment. It certainly was not his makeshift museum to Native American culture with its dusty kachina dolls and motley collection of arrowheads. Everything went in and out of his life at some point.

Giving up on mining through his room for a moment, he tried to get a hold of one of his friends from home. Ted figured someone had to be home for Thanksgiving break

just as he was. He tried Jeff, who lived about a block away, but nobody answered the phone. Then, he gave Greg's cell phone a buzz since he told us all to never call his house for fear that his four year-old brother would never pass the message to him. When Ted actually heard Greg's voice answer on the other end of the phone, he already felt some sense of relief, but this relief was nothing but a passing sigh since Greg was still down at Notre Dame unable to make it home for break. He suggested Ted try Pat. Pat went to school here at home in the downtown area and fortunately never had too much scheduled if anything.

"Yo, Pat. This is Ted."

"Hey, what's up, man? You home for break?"

"Yah, that's why I wanted to give you call. You up for some *Quake III* on that old Dreamcast of yours or maybe some Van Damme?"

"I don't know, man," responded Pat. This was nothing close to the response Ted expected of him.

"Come on... you know you can't ever get enough Jean-Claude. *Bloodsport*? How can you pass up some *Bloodsport* action?"

"Look, I would. You know I love the Van Damme, but I promised Jill I'd hit up some stuff with her?"

"Hit up some stuff with her?! What the hell does that mean? You're going shopping aren't you. Come on, man! You have to be kidding me. You two have been dating since high school, and she never dragged you to holiday shopping shift then. You've got to be kidding me."

“Dude, look. I’m sorry. It’s just this once. She asked me a long time ago, so I can’t bail. Otherwise, I would. You know me and Van Damme.”

Ted hung up the phone in solemn disbelief. He figured Pat was a shoo-in. Collapsing on his bed in frustration, Ted remembered one more niche in his room. He went to his bedside and pulled out the hidden drawer built into the frame. He found the survivors of his stuffed animal collection: a droopy looking bear, a Snuggles look-alike, Thumper from Bambi, a T-Rex puppet, and some bunnies bought the day after Easter when they went on sale. It was laughable how he wound up on these last since he could hardly believe he ever owned them. It was as if God was mocking his efforts to find a replacement. Sifting through the stuffed animals, Ted felt the glossy pages of some magazines. Instantly, he remembered what these were. It was his desperate, high school stash of pornography, a couple of vintage Playboys his friends had found at a construction site. He pulled them out from under the stuffed animals and laid them across his bed. Kneeling beside the bed, he flipped through some of the pages and smirked, remembering the first blooms of his sexual awareness: fuzzy television channels, paused movie scenes featuring tit, and these pinups of Ferra Fossett and other stars that burned out before my time. As he unfolded the centerfold of one magazine and felt his pants tighten up across his crotch, he thought maybe this was the one thing on which he could rely. Ted found this thought amusing for both its superficiality and simplicity. Tucking his worries away, he reached for a tissue from his nightstand, but as he did so, he saw a silverfish daring to be out in the light of day just above the bedside

lamp. Putting his plans on hold, he grabbed a tissue anyways and got his green ruler from his desk.

Approaching the insect with his weapons, he got into a poised position and ran through the motions in his head. However, he never actually took the jab with his ruler. As the motions had run through his head, he realized that the insect was not a silverfish at all. It was an earwig, which made sense since daylight was hitting virtually every corner of his room. Over the breaks, Ted killed silverfish so religiously in his room that he had jumped right into the motions of killing another. Looking at it closely, this bug, although torpedo shaped and sleek-looking like the silverfish, was brownish and had a pair of intimidating forceps. The thing looked twice as daunting as any of the silverfish he had killed, yet he did not want to kill it. The ruler was for the silverfish. Before this, he had never seen an earwig in his room. Throwing out the tissue and putting the ruler back on his desk, Ted hid the old magazines back under his bed with the stuffed animals and went downstairs.

Practice

At five a.m., the world is paused
with ponds like solid masses,
polished tops, reflecting trees
so strong in fiber not a leaf will rustle
for no wind harasses them, no birds meddle
with their twigs. The air's just rising
from the ground, and it's so yours
for the inhaling that each chilling pull
hits your lungs with a reminder
of how things are conceived,
birth, torrid eighth grade
two week love affairs, the pitches
you'll throw to your son
until your shoulder aches,
and everything else that comes

before death, but as the sun rises, the dawn
fades, and the world wakes, the air grows
warmer, staler and you hustle
from practice to class or, in the future, a job
you're not sure if you hate, barely talking
as you go, dishing out "what's up's"
for "I'm fine's." You keep moving
to stay awake, and the day grows
warmer as you sharpen pencils
and wave hands. The day comes
to a boil as the snowballing routine
ensues with the brushing of teeth,
the shitting, the talking by the water
cooler, and the brushing of the teeth
once again until finally, if you're lucky,
you snap out of it to realize
you are far too exhausted
to cook dinner, let alone have sex

and bake up some life. As the clouds
stroll off with the sun and the moon
takes up the torch, things slow again
to a quiet pause and only then can you sleep
in the growing coolness of a burnt
out day, banking on the polished ponds of dawn.

When You're Asleep

This is not a moment
when the beauty engulfs me,
swallows me up,
and makes a weathered man weep.

This is not a moment
when I see the vast blanket
of changing treetops,
get in touch with some other side
of me, see each individual
snowflake falling, and temporarily
shelve my testosterone.

This is not a moment
for poetry.

I am alone and accompanied
by an inaudible soundtrack
I orchestrated with the thought
that I, the hero, have persevered.
None of you know it yet, but the sun
is up. I assure you. It is grazing
over the land and evaporating
the dew. In my mind, even the birds
are silent. The soundtrack fades
out, I tweak
the soundboard to pick up
my footsteps and even
my breathing. I strut to the front
of the library, the top of the quad,
and stop to look out at my
moment. I have paused
everything.

At this moment, you are
asleep, I lie to
myself, and the world
is mine.

Red Handed

Sometimes, I really have to scrape
the ballpoint across my palm
when my fleshy canvas
clams up with oils
or worries or something of that nature.
I'd just like each crevice, each crack
a little deeper, more defined
and worn, so I wouldn't be scripted
as the young, debt-free college student,
hailing from the land of Suburbia.

Other times, I pull back the dead
skin of my calluses to flick it
away and pry open my ripened blisters
to feel the burn of salt on salmon,
unhealed skin. I pretend none of it
is from rowing, so I won't be
some chiseled All-American
with a cleft chin and summers off.

Many times, I look beyond
my hands at yours,
to see their bona fide
cracks and inerasable scars, a gift
from my people to yours. I can't
cut my way out of this one, and so I look
at my white hands and the future
their past has fingered and wish
that I had hands like yours, abused
by oppression and misfortune, so I would be
John Doe and not another
Stephen Whelpley.

The Deep End

I thought my friends didn't know
what they were up against.
I was a varsity swimmer,

but under these foamy crests
my limbs fail me, skin and bone
flapping around my body. This is
ridiculous. I am an eagle
scout, an A minus or so
student. I do civil service
and bail others out of the world's
impregnable troubles. I know
people. I know

people. Where's the merit
of my lifesaving badge? What's the worth
of bronze palms atop pewter
eagles? I smothered them,
I suppose, choked them
with the superfluous knowledge
of basket weaving and small
mammals. I sink further in a fury

of bubbles that dissipates
on its way to the surface
where my friends stand
huddled at the shore, wondering
if I can touch the bottom.

first comes words then comes politics

once i heard in an i.m. passing
(through that big infrmoation highway
in the sky) that it doesn't mtttaer how i drop the letters
of my wdors on you, so long as i keep the first
and last letters in line. the rest
could be a total cuslterfcuk and the bomb would still hit
its mark without a hitch because we don't bother
with each ltteer, but just the word as a wohle.

and so, maybe this is how we can justify dropping
bombs on countries, cheating on tests, or exploiting
labor since our big picture is all that matters.

'B' Follows 'A'

TO MAKE A long story short, Brian did not vote in this year's election. He had just turned twenty-one, and this year was the first he could vote in a presidential election, having been seventeen at the time of the last one. It seemed impossible not to vote this year, considering all of the hoopla that surrounded it. Aside from the usual pressures from parents and other aged citizens, the continual movement that exclusively targeted "young voters" had escalated to new heights. The web of persuasion was so densely woven that mind-controlling professionals, like MTV, managed to convert voting into the year's latest and most fashionable trend. Even mesh hats were produced that not only sported blatant messages like "VOTE," but also showcased clever cryptic messages as well like "BUCK FUSH." Not to mention, one could obtain matching sweatbands for his or her hat. With documentaries turning into pop culture mockumentaries, political bumper stickers taking priority over yellow ribbons, and sidewalks forever chalked in a rainbow of colors and opinions, voting was absolutely in, and yet Brian abstained.

The day Brian nearly voted felt like the longest day of his life. It had started before the sun did with his five-thirty crew practice. At the first scratchy beep of his

alarm, Brian woke up, going from zero to sixty in no time. Being so accustomed to the routine, he had no problem functioning that early in the morning. He could get dressed, drive to the boathouse, bring the oars down to the water, carry the boat down with his crew, and start rowing without a problem. While Brian honestly did not want to be up this early in the morning, he still cherished the couple of hours he spent rowing each day. Since it was early enough in the morning that his mind was not churning full steam and everything he had to do was blatantly set out in front of him, he could focus exclusively on what he had to do for practice and nothing else. Once he stepped into the hull of the boat, strapped his feet in the shoe stretchers, and shoved off the dock with his teammates, the advantages to rowing became even more evident. This morning Brian rowed over one thousand strokes, all of which were virtually identical motions except for a few that incorporated some pausing or drill work. Although the motion seemed simple, it demanded his complete attention and gave his mind something to concentrate on each of the one thousand times. Each stroke he had to square the blade so that it was perpendicular to the surface of the water, while moving up the slide to the start of the stroke where he was crouched with his ass close to his ankles and poised to take the water. Then, he would drop the blade of the oar into the water and push his legs down to the deck of the hull, swing open his back, and gather in his arms to create the dark puddle in the water that drove the boat onward behind him. At this point, he had to lower the handle, popping his oar out of the water, so that he could feather the blade parallel to the water and start the process all over again. In the midst of minding his own actions on each stroke that he took, Brian also had to consider the actions of the other seven

teammates in his boat since all of them had to complete each motion of the stroke in unison. Rowing broke everything down into very simple instructions. Brian knew if he followed those instructions, he would obtain the desired effect of moving a boat across the water quickly and cleanly. For him, it eliminated the grey area of what he should and should not do. It told him what he had to do and made things achievable. If he did 'A,' then he could always expect 'B' as a result. As the sun scaled the tops of the trees, it hit Brian's back as the bow of his boat slid back into the dock. The subtle change in temperature that the mere presence of the sun provides reminded Brian that time had passed and the day persisted. A corner of his mouth rose, knowing that 'A' and 'B' were done.

With the sun at a more appreciable level, the dew took off for wherever it hides, and Brian could now hear the symphony of alarm clocks, screeching through the silence of campus. At this point in the day, one could see him hurriedly galloping across the main academic quad, leaving heavy prints in the stiff grass that remained there, like temporary fossils. As he buttoned his flannel shirt in transit, the majority of students with morning classes would just begin their waking routine. Brian did not have any morning classes, but he had already had crew practice and was now headed to his campus job as a back-up secretary in the Admissions Office. He had fallen into the habit of always arriving at work a few minutes late since he could chalk it up to clock deviations, negligible differences on the time card, or simply being a busy college student. At least these were the presumptions in the Admissions Office that he knew he could play off of in order to get a few more minutes on the couch after practice. Naturally, he was running

late again on this day, so he was moving at a pretty good clip. When Brian would head to work, he would usually move with urgency, like someone running for help after witnessing an accident, but it was never a dead sprint. It always looked as if Brian prepared himself to carry that urgent pace for miles and miles on end as if that person running for help had to run through endless fields of cornstalks to find the nearest house of salvation. Brian preferred to move like this. That is partially why he enjoyed leaving for work slightly late and completely why he hated walking to classes. Since he would just look awkward and muddled if he ran to class with books in his hand, he forced himself to walk to class, and consequently, he had to endure the painful interactions with those pseudo-acquaintances he would briefly pass by on the way. These random exchanges of “hey, what’s up’s” and “how’s it going’s” just reinforced the idea in his head that walking was an unnecessary waste of time. He would much rather run to where he was headed and always tell people he was “running late” than move slowly towards his destination only to endure superfluous conversation on the way.

Bounding up the porch to the office, Brian put on his game face, an excessively cheery face equipped with a broad, toothy smile and rising eyebrows, and swung open the door with spirit to show just how anxious he was to start the day even though it had started a long time ago. As always, Barbara, the head secretary, raised her head from the appointment book and complemented his game face with one of her own. Even though Barbara was bordering seventy years of age and could not sit at the desk too long without getting up for a walk in her orthopedic shoes for the sake of her scoliosis, she was an expert at making the face and putting on the Admissions show. Barbara had not only

worked as the Admissions secretary for the college long before this present Admissions building ever existed, but had also gone to the school before this entire campus had even existed. This is one thing Brian always made sure to milk. He had an affinity for the past since it was done and set. Granted, change happens in the present, which quickly becomes the past, but once the present has passed into the past, it is done and an immutable memory. While he chose the college for its lack of a Greek system, he would sometimes indulge himself during his hours at the desk by asking Barbara about fraternity parties and where the old frat houses were located on campus. He could not always obtain this information with ease since Barbara's vault of memories was not always accessible. Even though Barbara had a well-practiced game face that she could turn on and off with a switch, her mind had run a great number of laps over the years and the fatigue it felt was evident. Seeing that Barbara was not on the phone and conversation was inevitable, Brian decided he should engage it in hopes that he could steer it towards some type of fruitfulness.

"Hey there, Barbara. How ya doing this morning?"

"Well, not much." She had already dismantled his efforts and murdered his hopes. 'A' did not lead to 'B,' and the conversation was already spiraling off-track. "Just have a few interview appointments this morning. One boy here all the way from England."

He figured he should try to corral the conversation back on track before he totally lost control of it. Taking a breath and a prayer, he tried again. *

"And how are you this morning, Barbara?"

"Oh, I'm fine. Yes. I'm very fine." Relieved that he got the appropriate response, Brian let his guard down and rewarded Barbara by allowing her to go wherever she wanted for a bit with the conversation. "Oh, yes, just trying to keep this ship afloat. Not everything runs the way it should here. You know they used to make tour guides go through extensive training before giving tours. I mean they even had to interview for the opportunity to give one. But now... well, now they let any first year give a tour that wants to. It's getting bad. Something has to change. I mean my niece was a first year last year and spent the whole year training, and now she can't even get a tour spot. Can you believe it?"

Brian threw out a random French comment to keep the conversation fresh and to feign interest. "C'est la vie." Despite raising the issue to a bilingual level, Barbara must have sensed his disinterest and switched topics in the hope of keeping the young blood interested in her stories.

"Oh geez, you see the front page again. There they go again. Not a day's rest. Do you think we'll live through this election?"

She did not know this was the one thing about which Brian could not stand talking. However, Brian could have predicted this move, considering Barbara always resorted to something on the front page whenever she found herself strapped for words. She subscribed to the common belief that when one has no news of his or her own to share, share the news of others. Besides, as mentioned already, the election was all the rage. Brian managed to survive this election and continue subsisting day to day by

avoiding it whenever possible. Only on occasion could he not find some way to avoid it or successfully MacGyver out of it.

The best example of an inescapable conversation was with his ex-girlfriend, who excelled at trapping him whether they were dating or not. In the middle of a benign instant messenger conversation, she blindsided him with:

WesCat06: so... who are you voting for?

DaBriGuy: um, well. that's hard to say...

WesCat06: you're not voting are you?

DaBriGuy: no

WesCat06: that's so stupid

WesCat06: i could've predicted it though out of you... just making sure to do something different

DaBriGuy: yah well i could've predicted this out of you

DaBriGuy: besides... it's not just that

DaBriGuy: i have reasons for this thing... at least, reasons for now

WesCat06: well, let's hear them

DaBriGuy: k there's 3

DaBriGuy: first i don't know if either candidate is right

DaBriGuy: i've heard convincing arguments for both of them

DaBriGuy: second

WesCat06: would you really consider voting for bush?

DaBriGuy: no, but i wouldn't consider it for kerry either

DaBriGuy: so second, i think college students may be too impressionable to make a truly independent decision

WesCat06: well i can see that

He knew she would. She had to concede that or risk being swallowed up in the impressionable mob that could not identify itself. In predicting this, he started to smile genuinely at his computer screen. What added to his smirk was knowing that she had recently become not only a fan of baseball as a sport, but also more exactly a fan of the Boston Redsox as a team. Although she was not from Boston and never watched baseball, she explained to Brian that she was not so much a Redsox fan as an anti-Yankees fan. She was quite the New England, liberal, college student.

DaBriGuy: and i guess the last one is kind of connected to that

DaBriGuy: but i think

DaBriGuy: for the most part at least... cause i know there are exceptions

DaBriGuy: i think that college students don't really know what living in America entails just yet or at least not enough to fully understand most of the issues that become critical with voting

DaBriGuy: i mean most have no idea about actually living in the community or providing for any one

WesCat06: well there's more to living in a community than the economics of it

DaBriGuy: yah i know that... but i bet even those other aspects most of us don't know well enough yet... i think it's all connected to having to be out in the community on your own and most of us are far from being on our own

WesCat06: you know you are the only person i know that is actively apathetic
Brian liked the sound of this since it did set him apart from the masses, but at the same time, it more importantly made it sound like he had a definite theme to his thoughts, a philosophy of his own. Although he knew these reasons were just part of an artificial ideology he had manufactured to make himself seem incapable of voting, he wanted them to serve as viable reasons for not voting. In truth, he really thought the fact that nothing seemed clear, or objective, to him, outside of maybe rowing, was a justifiable reason for not voting. Her comment made him smile until she threw in:

WesCat06: and i don't mean that in a good way

WesCat06: when you say stuff like this, i don't see how i could have ever dated you

He recalled this particular conversation nearly every time the election came up in general, and his memory of it made the topic all the more uncomfortable. Fortunately, his conversation with Barbara was nothing like this, and he thought he could maneuver through it or out of it however he pleased. He chose to play along with the inference she had already made about survival. It was the most peaceful and easy route.

"Oh, I don't know Barbara. It sure doesn't look good for any of us," he reparteed in a playful voice as he played along with her facetious tone. For a moment, he wondered in the recesses of his mind if she honestly would at her age.

"Well, I'm just tired of it. Thank heaven's today is the day. One more debate, one more front page of it, and I think I would pass out," admitted Barbara. "But there are

good people running here, in town. I always love what that Linda Green has to say. I really hope she becomes our representative. We need more women in there."

"Absolutely," concurred Katherine, one of the senior admissions councilors in the office that emerged from around the corner, and like that Brian was off the hook. As soon as Barbara had taken the conversation to local politics and then to women in office, Brian had braced himself for the possibility of either having to smile and lie or engage actively in the conversation by presenting his actual views, which were not necessarily controversial or separate from Barbara's, but required extensive conversation in order to really do the topics justice. Now, Brian was clear of it all, and let his mind spiral away as the conversation did around undesignated topics and to unforeseeable directions.

"Why hello, Katherine," belted Barbara in a voice that was louder than she had planned, "and what do you think of the election?"

"Why I've already forgotten it. My vote is cast and that's that. I just want to see that movie... what was it? Yes, *Shall We Dance*? Well, shall we?" She took a moment to revel at what she thought was her own wit and then waited for Barbara's response.

"Oh, yes. We must see that. How about tonight?"

"Well, that may be possible. Oh wait, I can't. I must go to the art gallery at some point. Well, I suppose I could always do that at four."

Although the conversation amused him as they playfully tripped over plans and frolicked among random topics, Brian drifted further away just sinking into the blurred reflection of the smudged glass desktop with his eyes. He passively let the conversation enter his ears since he had no physical means of barring it.

"Speaking of art, did you hear about Cynthia Court?" segued Barbara.

"Is she the new curator?"

"Oh, no, no. She was a professor in the Chemistry department, and did not fair so well so they just went along and made her an Art professor. Can you believe that? I can't even imagine what type of background she has in the field."

"Yes, that woman. I heard things about her. She has her hair cut really short, and it's dyed purple too of all things."

"Um, well. I believe she actually has long, straight, black hair."

"Well, how bout that. Must be someone else," Katherine tentatively responded. Nothing in the conversation seemed to fit or appropriately follow the comment ahead of it. She quickly tried to regroup after such an error by dumping the attention back on Brian. "Hello, there. You awake. Looks like you're hardly conscious."

"Sorry about that. Had morning practice, so I'm slightly out of it." He cited morning practice since that was something pitiable.

"Practice?! I thought you kids were done with all those races."

"We are."

"So, what are you practicing for?"

"Well, for next spring. We never really stop..." Cutting himself off, Brian did not finish his sentence since it really did not matter. Katherine was not looking for any type of response. She had diverted attention from her error and that was all she had needed. Brian started to wonder if her question had appalled him or offended him in any

way. He knew it felt abrasive to him on some level. Before he got far with his thoughts, the phone rang, he forgot about it, and before he knew it, his time was done.

Leaving the admissions office, everything seemed clearer and calmer outside than it had inside. The changed leaves gave everything the vibrant color of life, even if things were in fact dying for the coming winter. To complement the life in the reds, oranges, and yellows of leaves, the day had a fresh smell to it that Brian had failed to notice on his hurried trek to Admissions. Now that he had nowhere to be and morning classes were still in session, leaving the quad virtually empty, it seemed like the perfect, if not only, time to walk. The air felt so fresh that Brian could imagine watching it emerge from the leaves of trees. Going in through the nostrils, it felt so light and crisp as it headed for his lungs that it seemed like the ideal substance for breathing. There was a white cloud or two in the sky, but only enough to make the sunlight beaming between them all the more appreciable, and besides, the clouds that were out seemed billowy and idyllic. All in all, the day seemed engineered for living. As a result, Brian thought only of walking and breathing, and nothing of voting.

Halfway back to his dormitory, another moment in his day ended with a phone call. The novel ring he had downloaded pierced the rare silence of the quad with electronic treble as his father called his cell phone for the second time that day. Brian never wanted a cell phone, but his father got him one for this very reason, to “talk.” Unlike when cell phones had first emerged in the world and his parents exclusively reserved them for emergencies, like the one he used to keep turned off in the car, his parents got him this phone just to keep the lines of communication open on a regular and

nonchalant basis. While both parents were in on it, Brian's father really made sure to capitalize on the opportunity. He would call on average four times a day: once on the way to work, once at lunch, once on the way home for work, and once from home for good measure.

"Hey Dad," Brian bleakly answered the phone, knowing it was his dad and trying to convey an element of inconvenience.

"Why hello, son," his father responded with this element of surprise, lingering in his delivery as if he did not know it was the number he had dialed. "How are things?"

"Not bad."

"Oh yeah? Well, what's new with you?"

"Not much is really new since we spoke yesterday, Dad. I had practice, went to work, and now lunch. The usual."

"Well, are you going to make it out to vote today?"

"Um, I wasn't planning on it."

"Brian, you really should," he pleads in a low, slow coaxing voice that must require the flexing and curling of his bottom lip. "You know it's your civic duty."

"Dad, come on. It's my civic duty to help a lady cross the street. It's my civic duty to obey the laws. It's not my civic duty to vote. That's more of a right or a privilege." Although Brian adamantly said this in defense of his views, his father's imploring words still penetrated his stone-cold rationality as they always did, like the time he said, "I'm disappointed in you" after he had found Brian's stash of pornographic magazines.

"I guess you can think of it that way if you want to, but remember a lot of people would die for that kind of privilege."

"Dad, if someone really held a gun to their head and asked them right there, I bet they would pass up the privilege..."

"You know what I meant."

"Besides, dessert is a privilege, right? Yet, that doesn't mean I have to have dessert after every meal just because I can. That kind of gluttony can get you in trouble, Pops."

"Yes, Brian. Voting every four years or so is like eating ice cream after every meal. The point is you should take hold of this opportunity to voice your opinion and express yourself."

"Good Lord, Dad. That's a bunch of bull. I can express myself by not voting too."

"Don't say 'Lord.'"

"Ok, but I still think it's bullshit. Besides, Dad, I have a workout this afternoon, a paper due, and a group meeting I have to go to for a project." After playing with sophistry for a bit, Brian decided it was better to just exit the voting conversation as soon as possible. "It's a hellish day. If you want, I could just not write my paper or something and go vote. How's that sound?"

"No. No, I would not want you doing that. You're a real funny guy, Brian. You can be such a pain in the butt. You know that? I don't see why you won't be a lawyer

anymore. You and your mother. It's that Italian blood. Anyways, what's new with you?"

In this case, no escape route was necessary; Brian knew he could always rely on his father to break under the pressure. It had nothing to do with weakness, but everything to do with compassion. Each time the family flew out to visit Brian at school his father would always end the trip by stating in a probing tone, "So, I think that was a good trip. Yes, it turned out very well." The trip could not come to a close without those lines. While the trips never went poorly since the family was certainly all peas from the same pod, his father just wanted to make sure everyone had enjoyed it and had a good time. This is the same reason why he would never take a touchy subject too far. His father preferred ensuring the happiness of his family rather than circulating his personal agenda through it. Sometimes, this makes him appear aloof and malleable, but over the years he had already infused his basic values and beliefs in his children by patting their bottoms, coaching their soccer teams, and taking them to Sunday services. As the conversation fell away from the sensitive topic, Brian could not entirely shake the pouting words of his father. He did not necessarily value his father's opinion on the matter. He just valued his father's discontent.

Brian did not intend his decision not to vote to be a public one, yet it kept heading that way. If he really wanted to send a message to the world, he could have e-bayed his vote for money to show just how much it was worth to him and how much it was worth to others. Even so, it came up again at lunch with his friends, and he had to digest an onslaught of slandering. Few people actually wanted to hear his reasons and refute them

or at least provide their own reasons for voting. Most just wanted to say, “well, that’s idiotic” or “what you’re a terrorist.” Even his friend, who voted Libertarian not even knowing the name of the candidate, told him he was foolish for not taking advantage of his vote. It was not society or even the government pushing the election this year. It was the culture, and Brian felt it all around him, bearing down on him like a vise that clamped harder with each conversation. None of it made things any clearer for Brian. It all came to him like static on top of an already fuzzy radio station. For a moment, Brian started to wonder if maybe he was wrong. Granted, he felt oppressed and jailed by the constant rebukes, but perhaps this sentencing was due.

Feeling overwhelmed, Brian decided to get in his car and go for a ride. For a while, he kept the radio off and just let his mind wander. Eventually, his mouth wandered as well, and he spoke or even sang to himself. Since he was young, Brian had formed a habit of making certain to entertain himself when he was isolated from all other sources of entertainment whether it be television, radio, or people. Since he did not like the way he felt when defending his abstention, but still felt far too dissuaded to make another choice about voting, he blocked it out of his mind and, like his time at the Admission’s desk or walking across the quad, simply let his mind roam. Typically, his mind would roam to wherever his senses took it. If he flicked on a turn signal, he would think about the turn signal or merely mimic the clicking noise it made. If he saw a stray dog, he would contemplate how dogs in the United States could ever become strays. Did their owners die? Did they scurry under a fence to escape from a large litter? Did they just feel like walking out of the house one day? Whatever he saw or heard he took

hostage to the deeper caverns of his head. One could view his line of questioning in any number of ways. To some, it may have seemed obsessive to nitpick at every little thing. Others may have scoffed at it as simplemindedness to focus on such basic things. However, Brian had always worked this way. He never forgot when he was first tagged as being “observant” in third grade by the principal when he pointed out a splitting milk pod. That marked the first time Brian had ever heard the word, or at least been in a position to understand it. Brian worked with what was around him.

Following the pattern of the day, the world abruptly interrupted him. Brian slammed on the brakes at the sight of the burning taillights and the sound of the screaming rubber as the road tore it away from its tire. For a moment, he stared blankly at the Ford emblem on the rear of the car just inches in front of his bumper, piecing together why he had to break so quickly.

In his wonderings, Brian had created a continual circuit that looped around the city. It started at his school’s campus, skirted the highway, then moved through the newer commercial center of the city into a residential area that sent him down Main Street and the old downtown, and finally fed him back into the campus. Brian had driven for about an hour, used a quarter tank of gas, and figured he had done the route about five times. His car was now stopped at the end of Main Street just beyond the City Hall where the old downtown essentially came to an end. Here, he would usually take a right onto a road that aimed back at campus. He had stopped because the car in front of him had stopped, and this car had stopped because the car in front of it had been t-boned by a pickup truck that had run a red light.

Some cars behind Brian that did not have a clear vantage point began to honk their horns as the stopped cars violated the green traffic signal. To assess the situation further, Brian opened his car door, put one foot on the asphalt while keeping the other in the car in case it was all a dream, and propped himself up on the window frame. Automobile shrapnel littered the road. It looked as if someone with a giant salt shaker of shattered glass, loose hubcaps, twisted railing, and broken plastic had sprinkled it on top of the two cars like jagged sprinkles on a bloodied sundae. The truck that had done the t-boning was a cream-colored GMC from the late 1980s with square headlights, a single bench seat, and a skeleton and skin of steel. Outside of this context, it was Brian's dream pickup. The car it had hit shuddered in sheer comparison. The miniature Geo never stood a chance even though it was caked in a thick layer of bumper stickers. Not only did it fold like a piece of cardboard at the point of impact, but it was so light that it also rolled over itself two times. Brian could not understand why anyone would construct a car with such an egg shape. He watched the person in the truck get out with an uneven swagger, swing the door of the truck shut with a careless throw of his limb, and plop down against the front tire of his steaming truck. The slamming door was the only sound that stood out against the constant complaining of the truck's crippled radiator. There was no screaming, no sobbing, no pleading, and no lamenting. It had all just happened, and it was real and done.

Knowing this was an emergency, Brian did not hesitate to use the new cell phone that now had a place in his pocket. After calling in the accident, he ran forward into the intersection, wondering why everyone else remained seated as if waiting for an encore.

During this short sprint from his car, the difference between his gallop to admissions and a flat out dash became quite evident. However, as he neared the cars he slowed down like a heavy locomotive gradually breaking its momentum. Natural instinct had told him to quickly near the scene, but it did not have an answer for what to do next as he viewed the calamity within arm's reach. Upon this closer review, Brian could see the blood on the windshield of the truck that must have matched the red streams running through the wrinkling crevices of the truck driver's face. He could also smell the alcohol coming off his wheezes and hear the cocktail of subtle groans and gargling, emerging from the further compacted Geo.

"Um, excuse me, sir. How are you? I mean, are you alright?" nervously stammered Brian in a continually ascending tone.

The man never responded. That is to say he never responded in a verbal fashion. Pausing his deep, asthmatic breathing for a moment, the man rolled his head back against the tire and swiveled his eyes upward towards Brian. He held himself there for a moment with his eyebrows turned downward and let his head fall back down into an effortless hang. Even if the man wanted to, Brian could tell the man was not going anywhere, so he forced himself over to the Geo. Conveniently during the roll, almost all of the windows had broken, allowing Brian to communicate with the driver without having to lift a finger or alter the scene of the accident. He looked through the opening of the driver's side window, which the roll had halved in size, and saw a woman in her early thirties with curly hair intertwined with debris, contorted limbs that shaped unattainable yoga positions, and blood ridden clothes. Brian's jaw hung unknowingly, and he breathed

deep breaths through his mouth. The same type of breaths he would wind up taking when he got swept away in the intensity of movie. His mind wanted to drift to the curious looking dashboard and dials that were now painted with blood as if a four year old had flicked a brush at them, or the fact that the radio display was on but no music came out of the speakers. Fighting this temptation to just stand there analyzing everything, he tried to think of something to say. He knew he had to do something. Not knowing what to ask a stunned, inebriated man was one thing, but knowing what to tell a barely conscious, innocent woman was another.

“Hello,” whispered Brian. “Hello, ma’am.”

Even as he saw one of her fingers twitch, he could think of nothing else to say. Even though he was an Eagle Scout, he did not feel authorized to actually try and remedy this situation. Honors student or not, he could not invent a solution for the moment. Brian found himself squatting next to the car, staring at the woman and waiting for an indication of what else he should do as if she might tell him.

After some minutes that seemed like hours, the silence of the intersection in the setting sun was broken by the screeching, yet somehow angelic, sirens of the emergency vehicles. While Brian could not see them and figured by the faintness of their echo that they were a considerable distance off, he felt his muscles ease and heartbeat settle. He returned to a calm, natural state where he took it all in, but took it in with understanding. Without thinking, he reached out his arm as he squatted outside the driver’s door and wove his fingers through her hand. As he held her limp hand and patiently waited, he felt the combination of both fresh, runny blood and crusting, sticky blood exchange from her

hand to his. At an early age, he had started his paranoia of sticky substances, but this paranoia did not even enter his mind. He just stayed there squatting, not feeling the tendons in his knees grow tired or his quads grow sore, holding and waiting as the sun went down over the closing polls.

The Morning After

In the night, the rain policed
the sidewalk and washed
away the rainbow
chalking and "Buck Fushing."

No one had a chance
to remark the canvas
so early in the morning

except the leaves,
stuck like wet postage
to the pavement they obviously
could not dispatch.

Lame Dog

Find a change
of skin, you mutt.
Grody coat on
your back, you limp
around begging
for a bone, but
you couldn't
even hold one
master. Institutionalize
yourself. "Sit"
and my charity is yours.
You are one sad
sight, dog, doomed
from the start
with such a lame leg.

I apologize for sympathy
has jumped up and bitten me
on the ass, and I figure
the bitch is to blame
for your present
predicament. So I decide,
thanks to you, to choose
my love life by the potential
of its offspring. This way
my kids' greatness
will keep me
fresh in the produce
isle and steaming
in the coffee shop.

The Speed of Poetry and Life

How punctual are my thoughts
of Lego empires and mother's
lasagna or the back seat
memories of our first car?
As punctual as the sun climbs
or the moon falls?

How soon can I interpret
sites of young coeds
lost in ditches and the other ones in
web pages or my dry eyes
that won't flood for any wake?
As soon as the bell tolls
children in from the schoolyard?

How consistently do I account
for the tin cans of change
and the young and aborted
or the nightingale
in the beechen green?
As consistently as flies
kiss fruit or wanton
boys get cancer?

It's Embarrassing How We Let Go

I could not deny it. The day
was hot and probably one of the last
as leaves clung to branches by
drying threads, but still their sunbathing
irked me, sunglasses propped
like high school tiaras, exposed
New England tan lines as bra straps slip
down from curled shoulder blades, *Cosmos*
flapping in the wind. My mom would call

them "floozyes." I can't stop
gazing at their supple, Siren ankles,
twirling above them, luring me
to shipwrecking thoughts of passion,
tempted to abandon the compassion.
Shut my eyes and wax my ears
and think how they lay as I imagine
Dawn must've lain murdered, a girl
no older and paler still, having been raised
under a Maine sky,

belly down in a stream
with water relentlessly lapping
her face, bluing it with lifeless
embarrassment. Not knowing
her, I heard in sum: Christian
Fellowship was her club and squares
were her crowd. That's why

it seems all the more tragic. For days
after she died, maybe months even,
no one thought she deserved. Seeing girls
mini-skirting in the sun – tempting, forgetting,
probably hurting – I know she didn't
deserve it, but then again, some days,
someone probably thinks I deserve

it. And, like these glistening
girls, someday, I too will forget the fallen
shadows of exceptional people as I venture
to the store for some new vitamins
that will get me through the winter.

Without Friction

THE CAR WAS so rusty that it altered the overall shade of the paint. What was once a vibrant cherry red, waxed to fluorescence, was now a Mohavian clay. It looked as if a child had played with a paint roller in the mud and then taken it to all sides of the car. To match the paint, the muffler was nearly scraping the ground, occasionally bouncing off of it with a spark when the car sped over a dip in the highway. The interior of the car came from the same world as the exterior. As the car barreled down the highway without falling apart, the ceiling fabric by the rear window flapped erratically as chilling winds rushed in through the open windows. The tartar-ridden seats were cracked and cotton fibers fought their way into the daylight. On the front bench seat, a man nonchalantly sat with one arm cropped up on the top of the steering wheel and the other sprawled out along the top of the seat. Looking at the car, it did not seem believable that it was moving down the highway with such determination. It was improbable that such a dilapidated car could house the mechanical means to move itself seventy miles per hour. Somehow, it seemed more likely that the car actually had no engine and was simply carrying momentum in a frictionless world from some initial push by a gigantic finger.

Nonetheless, it rolled on until it veered off of 495 North at Raynham. The same exit as the dog track.

Mitch was not in this car. He would never be caught dead headed towards a dog track. He thought of them as the "inhumane NASCAR circuit." Mitch's car sat an excessive number of car lengths behind the vice-ridden car. As the rusted car exited the highway, Mitch loosened his ten and two grip on the wheel and decided it was now okay to turn on the radio. He twisted the dial and let NPR play through the six speakers of his Hyundai's stereo for the rest of his ride around Boston and back up to New Hampshire.

At age forty-six, Mitch was returning from an interview with a law firm in Providence. He wanted to see if he could at least get himself started as a paralegal. Despite the fact that he had aced the LSAT when he took it six years ago and received his J.D. from the Concord Law School, albeit an online program, people could not lose sight of the fact that he had once killed a man. People never cared that he took all of his exams via email and had to send away for his diploma. All they cared about was the unfortunate blip in his past, which he could never forget on his own, let alone with the entire world reminding him.

He was barely eighteen when it happened, the result of a broken beer bottle catching the neck of his ex-girlfriend's new boyfriend. He served out fifteen years of his thirty year sentence for voluntary manslaughter in the Northern New Hampshire Correctional Facility in Berlin, New Hampshire. During those fifteen years, Mitch grew up. At first, he made the best of it and tried to form whatever type of social network he could in such environment. However, maybe due to the length of the first few years or

simply because he had finally awakened to his true self, he could not entertain any more conversations about how no one was actually guilty and how everyone missed the “street candy” of the outside world. Mitch started to keep to himself. Occasionally, he read a book or two, but all in all, he felt too anxious in his twenties to just sit around and read. Somehow, just lying on his bed in his cell seemed more suited for him. It forced him to think about things whether he liked it or not. By the end of what would be his term, he had befriended most of the guards and grown into a six foot five inch, soft-spoken man.

Soon after his parole, Mitch realized that his incarceration at the correctional facility was actually the least of his imprisonment. This interview was the twelfth one in four years that had inquired about his criminal history and ended with a glossy “Thank you for your time, but we have no available positions at the moment. We will let you know if something opens up.”

Mitch felt as if his life revolved around rejection. So much so, that he even dwelled on the fact that no shoe store would carry his size fifteen shoe. Mitch felt he could only work for his brother’s architectural firm for so long and really wanted to start doing something of his own. When he first considered being a lawyer six years ago, the idea seemed to fit so neatly into place. Mitch figured he could essentially right the wrongs of his past by committing himself to the system he had once broken. He could perpetually offer up penance by protecting others. To him, it seemed like a fitting enough conclusion. Unfortunately, the world viewed things in another light. Mitch began to feel that the world had handed him his fate at age eighteen and left him forever tumbling in its wake without any chance of stopping.

As Mitch entered New Hampshire, he let the burning colors of the changing leaves mesmerize and relax him. He did not want to focus on yet another unsuccessful interview. With the windows sealed tight, he let the monotone voices of NPR keep any awkward silence from instigating reflection in his head. He thought he heard the station talking about Texas. It was probably something about the death penalty. When they talk about Texas, they talk about the death penalty, and Mitch was in no place to engage his thoughts on that topic.

Snapping Mitch from his therapeutic trance, a car sped by him in the right lane. Both the speeding car and the sheer fact that he was in the left lane startled him. He could not remember how he wound up there, but perhaps it occurred at some interchange or passing a semi. Or, maybe he had needed to pass a car. Either way, he was going sixty in the left lane, and the rust-bucket that passed him was not having any of it. As he watched the car pull past him, he jammed his eyelids shut and then forced them open artificially wide. He could not believe it, but the car looked exactly like the canine-betting-piece-of-junk that had gotten off at Raynham. He rubbed his eyes with a closed fist to check again. While there was no reasonable explanation for how the same car could be back on the highway beside him, Mitch wondered if he had somehow ticked the driver off at some point, causing him to get back on the highway after exiting in order to pursue him. How he had upset the guy by following a safe distance behind him was beyond Mitch. Maybe the distance had insulted him? Mitch recognized the ridiculousness of his thoughts and was prepared to brush it all off when the car swerved in front of him just to make a point. He hung so close to Mitch's car that it seemed like

the New Hampshire license plate, proclaiming "Live Free or Die," was sitting on the hood of his car. The heap of rust floated there for a few seconds, occasionally tapping the breaks, and then drove on down the highway. Mitch turned off the radio, strangled the steering wheel at ten and two, and moved into the right lane. He felt enraged.

After Reading Some Dean Young

Picturing himself atop some horned steed's cashmere
fleece laced with the raw emotion you get
when the pair of shoes that are "so you"
don't come in your size, the young poet walks
through a throng of hominids, who wear paper
copies of his face and bear the same breasts
or dicks as every other woman or man
made of carbon does, behind closed doors
and in front of telling mirrors. He sees them,
each paper faced with an expression
the Greeks had captured in a mask, large
rainbow frowns and heavy, drooping
smiles, looking at them he thinks
how he made that one when he popped
a button on his favorite pair fraying pants,
or that other one he had when a trap
he laid left a mouse bloodied
and paralyzed, like a ballerina
hit in the back with a billy club. Ok,

so he recognizes the similarities, but still he stays
on his cashmere-covered pony through Damascus
and rides, shouting phrases he won't admit
are clichés into a huddled mass
that closely resembles himself.

The -ISH Tones of Gray

A cycle, a bi-
sexual tied to the post
modern becomes a metro-
sexual. Yes and no lies
somewhere between True
and falsifying marriage
with "life partners." It should
be on the shelf with Miracle
Whip, to the right of mayo
and the left of center
but not quite liber-
ty. After all, it's one
big race
of selfless narcissists
fighting for the freedom
and independent thought
of hegemony. Apart from me,
every thing
is mos def
gray. None the less,
I am glad
to be a part.

Ant, Sink, Drain, Me

The ant is on the sink, and the sink
is white, the ant black. The seamless porcelain
with a speck of the segmented and the robotic-
moving looks artistic or maybe ominous. It is too much
for reality, so I fling a bead
of water at it to make it shudder
and arouse fear if it has any. It falters
for a bit and moves jaggedly
like a six-legged horse frantic
in thigh high mud. Exercising
my authority, I know I must
put it down, for its sake
or maybe mine, so with a handful,
I take away its grip, spiraling it
down to a black abyss of fluoride
and knotted hair, a place
I have not been. I walk away
from the plainly white sink, thinking
calmly the nature is restored.

Broken Lines

IT'S DEFINITELY THE witching hour or something like that. Moon's hanging up above with some clouds running across it, and I'm waiting for god knows how long, watching a fluorescent light sporadically flicker, when this fucker strolls up to me. He looks like a local, all flannelled out with scruff growing on his face, hiding some of its depressions and shadows. He asks me for a smoke, and I lie to him, patting my chest like I'm unarmed. That's actually a two-part lie cause I have smokes and am armed. I knew that wasn't what he wanted anyways. You can always tell if someone just wants a smoke or is actually looking to light a bigger fire and the whole smoke thing is really just him blowing it up your ass. So, I ready myself. I know this fucker's thinking I'm not from around here, it's dark, and he's got some easy middle class cash coming his way (little did he know I'm as poor as a schoolgirl without a boyfriend). I slip both my hands back to the fence I'm leaning on in a cool, steady fashion. My buck knife is in my back right pocket. Goddamn fool, this guy. I'm no aloof out-of-towner. I'm just not from this town, whichever fucking one it is.

Anyways, turns out I misheard him. He never asked for a smoke or nothing, so I let my hands come back around to hook in my front pockets. He's looking for some truck. He tells me there is more to it. More to it than a truck I presume. I think it was his dog. His dog had chased the truck, and so he wants to find the truck to find his dog. Some kind of chain like that. I say I don't care for dogs much, and he walks off. I watch him until he is out of the light's yellow ring. After that, he just disappears. Despite of how big it is, the moon isn't worth a shit.

That's what happened. Pretty sure of it. Weird thing really. Just happened a bit ago, but seems like it never really happened. Don't matter though. What matters is I've been here on this fence between this two-pump gas station and who-the-hell-knows-where for a good couple of hours now. Ride never showed, or at least it hasn't yet. Well, least I didn't see it.

Quite a story and a start. At least, I thought it was quite an introduction, so I decided to give him a ride. After all, I could tell I was nearing that point when the hypnotic, broken yellow lines of the road drive you to delirium. I figured having some companionship and breaking from the predictable ought to resurrect my acuity.

I think my night started on 95. That'd be my guess since I was supposed to deliver this U-Haul to some place in Maine, and there's really only one way in and out of Maine. That being I-95. It cuts through the stilted pines like one stiff, solitary lifeline. It's one bulging set, a vein and an artery divided by a median, jutting into the heart of

Maine and stopping so that threadlike, two-lane capillaries can branch off it in every direction. This way people get to those silhouetted towns that cluster around limited streetlights.

So like I said, I presume I started on 95, but what mattered now was that I found myself surfing one of those capillaries in search of the no-name town north of Augusta at which I was supposed to deposit this truck. Originally, I was in a pack of eight. We had eight new U-Haul ten-footers that we needed to deliver by morning. I split off to take a leak and buy some smokes. Figured it couldn't be that hard to find the place. That's basically why I took this job, too. It's not hard. I just cruise through it shuffling trucks around for U-Haul. No office bullshit mess, water cooler talk, or filing. For now, this is what I wanted. Simple assignments without the interference of the world talking back at me.

You want a beer? Take some of that edge off. Driving in the night can make you crazy, so take this and ease up, slick.

See? Already, it was paying off. I think he gave me an Indian pale ale of some sort, but it could be a Budweiser. I took some pills he had too to *put the right kind of edge back on* or something like that. You see I broke off to take this leak, and it turned out this gas station was nowhere near the highway. I mean nowhere. I don't really know how I ever found it, considering the amount of turns I took. Maybe I went to the wrong one, the wrong gas station. Either way, I eventually found myself to a gas station of

sorts. It only had one light in its lot between its lonesome, old two pumps. No matter, there was at least a whole in the back of the place to piss in, so I did and climbed back into the truck. No, that's wrong. First, I bought some smokes inside from the slack-jawed attendant in a checkered shirt that looked as if it was the sole food source for all moths in Maine. As I bought the cigarettes, he yakked about some truck in another town down from there and a guy's daughter. She'd been hit or something. I couldn't piece it all together. I doubt if he had it figure out either. One minute I swore he was telling me about how nice U-Haul trucks are and the next about how tires aren't as soft as they look. The way he spoke, so detached and jumbled, didn't seem like much moved him except for his own feet.

Anyways, outside this place as I started up my truck was where I found this guy off in the shadows. He came up to me, asked about a ride, and we've been driving ever since. The beer's definitely a Budweiser, but it's doing the job nonetheless.

How can you say that shit? You know the old fable. Every kid hears it. The tortoise and the hare bit.

Speed. That's what it's about. Fuck that Aesop propaganda bullshit. Poor guy was probably a paraplegic or something and couldn't run for shit. The faster you move, the less time things take. The less time things take, the more time there is for other things. It makes sense. Say you get this truck to where it needs to go by three. That gives you a couple of extra hours to fuck around in the morning or do whatever you want.

Why not just get it there at five and see what happens along the way? It's not like the world stops when you're doing one thing. I mean I consider myself multi-faceted. How bout you? Can you only do one thing? Can you only drive one speed?

Look, you're losing it. Take a sip of that beer and think over what you said. You can't just lay your shit on top of mine cause you made a metaphor. That's shit. It doesn't even work. You only can drive one speed, and you only can drive one place. Try to drive multiple places at once. You just made me right, slick.

Maybe I did. I think I might have just made him right, but I can't let that be it. He knows as well as I do that there's two sides. It's just like anything. There's always got to be some kind of binary, right? He's intentionally oversimplifying things for his case. I know that. Yes, I know that, and it's not right. Is it?

Ok, how about this... you're driving to the library, but you drive there cause it has books and cause it is quiet. I mean you need a book and you need to get away, you need isolation for a bit or something.

That's bullshit. No. I'm not going to entertain that crap. You're just reaching for something.

Fine. Run away from that one, but what if you're going somewhere not because of multiple intentions but because of multiple purposes. I mean like say you're going to a Wal-Mart. You may drive to drop your car off for an oil change, but you're also going to do this week's grocery shopping.

You grocery shop? I don't grocery shop. That was an excuse for soccer moms.

Then, he tells me to pull over so that we could get some air. I think I thought that was hypocritical of him. I mean we were supposed to rush to wherever it was by his theory. I think I thought that, but I might not have. After all, we were just messing around, just talking. That's what I wanted him for in the first place. Conversation. Spontaneity. Now, we lean on the hood of the truck with it still running and the headlights beaming from behind us, channeling cold air in its radiating cones. We hear a tree rustle, or at least I know I hear it. It was actually a pretty alarming rustle. Made me think some of the branches were breaking in the cold and tumbling through the steadfast branches until one was gracious enough to hold it from the ground. It scares me to think that it is so cold the timber's drying and freezing. I hear it again and look. Overhead, I see birds or bats, leaving from the breaking tree. Reconsidering the noise, I think it was the birds that made it. There it goes again. Yes, it is definitely the birds. It's still unusual. Why birds are meddling in the late, freezing hours of the night I do not know.

•

He lights two smokes and hands me one. I take a pull and forget about the noise. Same brand I smoke. Something runs across the street just outside the scope of the headlights. He kicks a rock in the direction of its shadow.

We should get back in the car now and drive faster.

Stepping on his cigarette butt, he says this and turns to the truck before I can respond. I am not even done with mine, so I just get in the truck and roll the window down some. It's probably better that way. We'll get some fresh air as we drive. I shift the car into drive and find my foot moving us to seventy. The yellow line looks solid, and the tree limbs above look like a net falling on us. I might push seventy-five just in case. What with the cold air and the trees drying out and all. I think this satisfied him cause he was done with lectures on speed now. Frankly, he seems done with lectures on anything. I look over at him, and he's just staring out the windshield into the blurring night without blinking. His look has this determination about it as if he's in a military helicopter, approaching the drop zone. I drive on mostly wondering what he is wondering about behind that one-dimensional gaze. Hearing so little of him, I begin to hope that that buck knife of his isn't getting anxious or anything like that.

Then, out of the blue when a some trees fade out and a couple buildings fade in, he speaks.

There we go, slick. Now, this is where you wanted to be. This is the place for this here truck of yours, and it's not even half-past three. See? Now, you've got some goddamn time for yourself. That's how it works.

What are you talking about? How do you even know this is the place? I thought you weren't even from around here, man.

I read the sign we pass about the town we're entering and try to pronounce it.

Skoahigon. Where the hell is that? I guess maybe that's what they told me. Maybe that's what was on the slip? Still. I don't know, man. And, what the hell do I do for three hours until the manager of the place shows?

It's Skowhegan, slick. Worn out land, or some shit like that they say. Now, you just got time for other stuff. That's it, and that's all.

So, I just start driving around and checking out the town. Once again, the talking has ceased. We see some things as we drive like a forty-foot, wooden Indian with geometric shapes for features, a closed ice cream shop straight out of the sixties in the middle of an island, a couple neat looking pawnshops, a waterfall, but nothing to really change the course of my life. Eventually, six o'clock rolls around on the dashboard clock, and I figure I should get this truck to the U-Haul joint, which we passed in the

course of meandering around town. I get to the right street and flip on my blinker when I get to the building before it. I can't see it yet, but I know it is just around the edge of this insurance building. It could be a real estate building, but I know whatever it is the U-Haul is kitty corner to it. I swing around the end of the building, see the U-Haul sign and loads of trucks, and brake shorter than expected to the additional sight of three squad cars. The four cops or so and ten U-Haul employees poke their heads out from around doors, behind cars, and wherever else they were to look at me like someone who just made an off-color comment at the dinner table. Things seem frightfully clearer now. I look around for a speedy answer, but I'm all alone in this.

CHECK, CHECK, CHECK

Checkmate.
Check mate.
Check eight.
Check ate.
Check tea.
Czech tea.
Chai tea.
Tai chi.
Thai pee.
Tie pea.
Type A.

Bullion Cube

I saw this thing
about which I knew
I knew something.

I'd say this for nearly every
thing, but on some
things, I must admit,
I know next to nothing –
elasticity, Tuvalu,
and posi-track
in the rear end
of an old Plymouth.

In admitting this, I know
I still know something, even if
it is only nothing. Who
knows? This could end
up being everything, if
that's worth anything. After
all, there is no

thing, which I believe
to be absolute-
ly nothing. It's all at least
something. I see these

things – raindrops
on roses, whiskers
on kittens – and some
times that's all it
boils down to.

•

Like Mother

I WAS SURE the man was dead¹. Everything seemed to unfortunately fit. The poor, old Asian man was dead. He looked so dead. I had not envisioned something like this as the end of our family vacation and had certainly not expected to start my New Year with a thing so sad².

We had just finished our New Year's dinner at this amazing Japanese teahouse. It came highly recommended in all of the guidebooks. They said things like, "Charming ambience" and "Unquestionably good, authentic cuisine." I know how to read these books and cross-reference everything each one says. They're helpful, but obviously have their own slants on things. None of the books had any qualms with this place though, and they were right not to have any³. They sat the five of us, my husband Harold, my oldest daughter Jessica, and my two sons Daniel and Eddie, at what looked like a traditional Japanese tea table that had an open view of their rock garden. Well, it turned out that, underneath this low table, there was a drop-off so that you would not actually have to sit in the traditional style. You just sat on a pillow with your feet on this hidden floor as you would at any other table. I think even Daniel admitted it was a clever move for a touristy teahouse⁴. In fact, it was probably the one thing that kept him satisfied during the whole meal since there was seafood in virtually everything. Somehow, he manages to never grow out of that. He claims it has something to do with the texture of most seafood⁵. Sadly enough, he'll make an exception for canned tuna. As for the rest of them, I think they loved every minute of it. Harold and Eddie eat alike, and I didn't hear a word from either of

¹ He wasn't.

² It wasn't sad. Tragic maybe, but sad oversimplifies things.

³ Both books had received equal payoffs.

⁴ It was clever enough.

⁵ Once again, she oversimplifies things. It doesn't take much to notice that seafood typically has a unique texture and taste with a few exceptions. It's usually flaky or slimy. One of the two. Somewhere along the line they get altered. By that, I mean the meat of creatures that walk on land is different than the meat of creatures that swim in the sea. The reason I like tuna is just because I can drown it in mayo until I have no idea what I am eating.

them for the entire meal. I'm not sure how they do it, but I swear they don't even come up for air. An old friend of ours from home, Jim Doore, used to always mime at dinner, pretending to throw all of his weight behind an invisible rope that dangled from a pulley above Harold's head. Mind you, Jim Doore is twice the size of Harold. It was always quite a riot when he did it⁶. I did not say anything to them this time though. The dinner was so good it was hard not to inhale it. For one thing, there were these dumplings. My God... pure ambrosia⁷. They were slightly fried, tied with a little rope of seaweed, and filled with shrimp, chicken, and minced celery I think.

For the majority of the dinner, it poured outside as it had for eight out of our ten days in Kauai. As we ate, water continuously clattered on the rocks in the garden. So much rain had fallen that the fishponds had spilled over and Koi flopped around amongst the rocks⁸. Fortunately, by the time Harold had paid the bill, the rain had pulled back to a slight drizzle temporarily, so we made a move for the car.

Since the tea rooms were on the backside of the restaurant back by the gardens away from the regular seating, we had to jog around the building to "rendezvous" with our rental car⁹. Jessica complained about her hair, but I told her there was nothing I could do about it. She tends to get a little dramatic about things from time to time. I think she does it for the attention¹⁰, what with Daniel nearly finished with school, Eddie just starting up at Columbia, and her at home

⁶ This is a prime example. She has completely altered the story. While Jim Doore is twice the size of my dad, he never conducted this miming routine. For whatever reason, my mother has chosen to confuse Jim Doore with my Uncle Leo, who never actually made a gesture involving a pulley. On the contrary, he would get up from his seat at the table and pretend to pull at my dad's head with all his might as if a Titan couldn't move it.

⁷ I resent the classical reference. She probably doesn't even realize that she's mixing elements of monotheism and polytheism in one sentence. Dad certainly would not approve of that. Ok well, maybe he wouldn't care that much, considering his twenty-year career at a chocolate company called Ambrosia.

⁸ That is just a plain Susanism.

⁹ I will give her that one. Our rental car was a Buick Rendezvous. Not a terrible pun on her part.

¹⁰ Yes, my sister does some things for attention. Then again, we all do at certain times. However, I will concede that my sister can frustrate most anyone that actually allocates the attention for which she asks. She's still easing into the reality of things, the reality that life does not float in on a silver platter. Mom's losing patience, and she shouldn't. With Jess in particular, she is forgetting that a kick in the ass will not go as far as a pat on the back. But, this is all really inconsequential to the story. Maybe that should be the real point.

struggling to finish in six years. Well, I guess she aims for five and a half now. Anyways, both of us forgot about her frizzing hair as soon as Daniel yelled back to us.

“I don’t think we’ll be leaving any time soon.”¹¹

“What? Yes, we are, Dan. Mom said we’d go to one of the nice hotels for New Year’s cocktails. Aren’t we mom?” inquired Jessica.

I assured her we would and that seemed to free her face of worry.

“That’s not the issue, genius. Look,” Daniel shot back at Jessica’s absent-minded inquiry¹². He always does that. He’s got a quick tongue. Too quick really. Even when Daniel was younger, he talked back so much that Harold and I called him “Bucky Badger” and I had to wash his mouth out with soap a handful of times each week¹³. “See that thing with the flashing lights, Jess? And see how it’s stopped right behind that tan Buick? And remember how our rental car was a tan Buick that we parked right where that one was?”

As Jess continued to make certain that we would get New Year’s drinks at midnight at some fancy hotel as I had planned, I looked over at Harold for some kind of an answer¹⁴. I couldn’t find any as I watched him walk along in that “Indiana Jones” hat of his and the oversized coat I bought him¹⁵. He still likes the coat though. I don’t think he really notices that the seams for his shoulders rest about mid triceps on him. The jacket and his hat were his

¹¹ Making reference to Jack Kerouac, I actually and jokingly said, “I don’t think thy shiny car is going anywhere tonight, America.”

¹² The word “shot” is a little strong in my opinion.

¹³ A handful? I was dining on liquid or bar soap for nearly every other meal.

¹⁴ Lord only knows why she bothered to look at Dad for an answer. When we go on vacation, he switches on the cruise control, or autopilot. All of us know that, when our family sets sail for vacationland, Susan stands at the helm of the ship. I try to stage a mutiny from time to time, but to no avail since Dad always serves as guard of her absolute infallibility.

¹⁵ Excuse the tangent. This is a bit of a long and painful one, but a story shall emerge. Through her storytelling, I have unfortunately located the origins of my sub-par standardized test-taking genes. Nonetheless, like far too many moms, mine has the tendency of purchasing clothes for all the men or boys in her life that are far too large. I believe it is part of some fantasy that the men around them will grow by their hand into massive knights in shining armor. For example, when buying my high school letter jacket, she got me a double XL tall. Although I was on the golf team and in mock trial, apparently, I was destined, in her mind, to be a linebacker. To this day, I am not a linebacker, and the jacket does not fit.

traveling gear, and no matter the climate of our destination he had to pack them. Funny how we grow attached to things like that¹⁶. Having a full stomach and his travel gear on, Harold had a rather absent look as if he was hovering off in some caramelized land of food euphoria¹⁷. I wasn't surprised. With the travel gear comes a travel mindset¹⁸. He lets himself unwind, takes deeper breaths, and frankly goes on vacation.

When we got to the front of the car, it was clear we were not going anywhere. Daniel was right about the ambulance. It was parked four feet from our rear bumper that faced the street, but we also had cars parked on either side of us¹⁹. Well, maybe there weren't two cars. There might have just been a car on our right and not on the left, but we couldn't get out²⁰. It was too tight. Although, now I remember Harold saying he thought he could make it, but who needs to rush? I mean it seems ridiculous that someone could be in more of a rush than an ambulance.²¹

"Well, can we at least sit down inside the car?" Daniel proposed²².

"Yeah, mom. Please. My hair's going to be completely frizzed by the time we get to the hotel," agreed Jess.

¹⁶ He grew attached to these things, because she gives him no other choice. Occasionally, Dad steps up to the plate and assembles his own wardrobe. However, for the most part, Mom is his personal stylist. Since he doesn't really know better, she basically gets free reign. If he had tried not to put that hat and jacket in his suitcase, she would have warned him of chilling hurricane winds and the fact that it was the rainy season in Kauai. So yes, we grow attached to things, but only when the world outside us makes us grow attached to it for some reason or another.

¹⁷ I am never a believer in this "food coma" that's all the rage in conversation. With the exception of maybe turkey, I don't see food as a viable excuse for a lethargic nature.

¹⁸ Like I said, he switches on the cruise control, but I assure you it has nothing to do with the hat he wears and everything to do with the wife he married. I should take the time to mention that my mom actually made a profession of her neurotic organizational skills. She is the founder, president, accountant, head of resources, and secretary for POU, Professional Organizers Unlimited. Enough said.

¹⁹ Now, Mom finally gets into the story and gets it all wrong. The ambulance was only like two feet from our bumper. It was so close that jumping the curb in front of our car and driving on the sidewalk would've been the only way out of the situation. Additionally, there was only one car, a maroon Jeep Wrangler probably a rental.

²⁰ Point. Case. Match. She hardly knows what happened. At least she makes good revisions. The Wrangler was parked on our right.

²¹ How about a tow truck on its way to pick up an ambulance with a flat tire and a hemorrhaging patient?

²² Correct, this I proposed.

There was no one around the ambulance. Even though its lights were flashing, no one was in the front or, from what I could tell, the back either. We figured they must've been inside the building still, so I told Harold to open up the car²³.

In the light of the dashboard and our headlights bouncing off the front of the restaurant, we sat in the car listening to oldies²⁴. The kids were sitting three across the back, Harold was in the driver's seat, and myself in the passenger seat, or "shotgun" as the kids always say. Daniel once told me people call it that because of police shotguns, but Eddie started laughing before I heard the rest of the explanation²⁵. We sat for at least ten minutes in the car, waiting for anything to happen outside of rain falling. It was a long enough period of time that Jess got back to talking about a fancy hotel, Daniel got anxious enough to tug on my hair, and Eddie fell asleep. They never outgrow some things. Well, Jess is Jess, but Eddie always sleeps like a baby and Daniel, even at twenty-one, resorts to annoyance when anxious. I really wish he wouldn't pull my hair though, what with the tumor I had and all²⁶. Finally, in the middle of that song about

²³ Nice of my mother to employ the Royal "We" for I did deduce on my own that it was far too quiet outside that the action still had to be inside and, apparently, at least she did as well.

²⁴ Mom leaves out one vital aspect of the scene. Since it had rained during dinner and continued to drizzle while we sat in the car, water droplets gemmed everything. I noticed this when I took a glance in the side view mirror to see the red of the taillights refracted in a million smaller mirrors of water. It gave everything a real surreal feeling as we watched through a blurry yet illuminating lens.

²⁵ Eddie and I have attempted to teach her the rules of "shotgun" at least a dozen times over the years, but all she ever wants to know is why we call it "shotgun." Someone once told me that riding "shotgun" refers to riding in the front of a police car since they keep a shotgun up there. Later on, I found out it had to do with stagecoaches since they would frequently have a person sit in front with the driver, holding a shotgun, to protect the coach from robbery. Similar veins I think.

²⁶ I admit this is a delicate subject, but Mom takes it way too far. About six years ago, she had a benign tumor growing on her brainstem. Although it was benign, it was quite dangerous due to its location. As a result of it, she suffered from chronic headaches, blurred vision, and pressure behind her eyes. It honestly scared us all. On the upside, this tumor was ideal for a relatively new procedure called Gamma Knife surgery, where they basically screw a colander onto a person's head and shoot radiation at a pinpoint from a million different angles. My mom went to Mayo clinic, one of the few places where the procedure available, and had it done. Fortunately, it alleviated the symptoms and seemed to stunt the tumor. The catch with such a revolutionary procedure is that it does not have a long history. She always reminds us of this and suggests that any year could be her last. Even so, every year she gets a MRI done, and every year the tumor fortunately looks the same. However, at the risk of sounding uncompassionate, every year she still milks it. Since being treated, she has used the tumor to get her out of speeding tickets, attain frequent flyer miles and hotel upgrades, and keep us in check. Six years after being treated, she still says her head hurts at the slightest touch.

love going where rosemary grows²⁷, the front doors of the restaurant push open with the frame of a stretcher moving through them.

With that song playing in the background, everything felt quite heavy. I never thought of rosemary growing in cemeteries, but now I started to at the very sight of a rolling stretcher²⁸. As the stretcher came out, so did two medics at its side and then a third pushing from behind it. I never thought of seeing medics in Hawaii²⁹. They had the stretcher slightly cropped so that his head rested above his feet, but I still could not make out who was on the stretcher³⁰. As if to answer this question, they wheeled the man right in front of our car as the five of us sat, watching like caged spectators³¹. Well, I guess the five minus Eddie since he was still sleeping. Oh, that's right. There most definitely was not a car next to us since, after wheeling it in front of our car, they wheeled it along Harold's side of the car to the ambulance behind us³².

²⁷ The lyric is actually "love grows where my Rosemary goes."

²⁸ Now, Mom has successfully converted a cheery, flower child anthem into a droning hymn for a funeral procession. Perhaps that song could still give the scene a feeling of heaviness through the juxtaposition of its loving tone with the somber images in front of us in a sort of numbing irony, but certainly not through Mom's modified lyrics. Those lyrics are just plain wrong. No one should attribute anything to something false.

²⁹ Enough said in simply noting this comment.

³⁰ The reason she could not make out who was on the stretcher just yet is because they actually wheeled the man out backwards so that the medic pulling the stretcher could use his body to open the door. After making it through the door, the medic turned the stretcher so that he was pushing it, giving us the perfect vantage point. Small things like this make the story authentic and true. If the logistics and science of a story are false, then why will people believe anything less objective than that?

³¹ I apologize for interrupting yet again, but I must. She has finally moved into the thick of the story, and I want to make sure she gets it right. I don't know if she fully realizes what she has done, but in saying "caged spectators," she has inadvertently developed quite a tension. Those who are caged are typically viewed, while those who are viewing typically watch what is inside the cage. In that clever phrase, the spectators are stripped of their freedom as if they have no choice but to watch with their eyes sown open. At the same time, perhaps this is all just an egocentric view. Maybe the caged always watch the spectators, and the spectators are simply too ignorant to see it. It's tough to know where this one begins and ends.

³² See? Like I said, one car. Maroon wrangler. On our right. She will always come around and admit things down the road. One time when I was young, I had to be only four or so, Mom was busy cooking dinner, and I came in to show her my latest Lego creation. Granted, at this point in my life, my Lego creations showed no concern for things like symmetry, color coordination, or structural integrity. I'll be the first to admit that, from a not so far distance, they looked like an atrocious conglomerate of plastic. Be that as it may, I took a lot of pride in my work then as I do now, and she had an obligation to pepper me with attention at that age. When I presented my work to her in the kitchen, she told me she saw it even though she continued to work busily over the stove with her back to me. At that time, she told me she had great peripheral vision and could see out of the corner of her eye. I knew better then and now. Only a couple years ago would she admit that she never actually saw that Lego mess.

Looking at the man as they wheeled him by, I knew he was dead, and it was so incredibly sad³³. He had no one³⁴. He had to be only five feet tall and had thin, graying hair combed over the top of his head. He looked so peaceful that it seemed like he had already been laid out for his coffin³⁵. Sorry, that was morbid, but he really looked that calm. His eyelids were shut over what I imagine to be dark, softly beaming eyes³⁶. I think he must've been a regular at this teahouse. The type of guy, who had no one at home, so he made a restaurant his home. Even so, not a single person came outside with him. Not a family member, friend, or restaurant employee. It was just the man, the stretcher, and the medics³⁷. It just did not seem right, considering how fragile he looked³⁸. Don't take this the wrong way, but there's just something about a small, elderly Asian man that seems so gentle and benevolent³⁹. I guess it's from all the old sages and such that movies show us. He looked like the most valuable, fragile thing you had ever seen.

³³ He was not dead. It was not sad.

³⁴ We did not know this. Although he was wheeled out by medics alone, there are a million and one possible reasons why no one else came out with him.

³⁵ They had something over his mouth. I'm not a science major, so I can't say exactly. I just know it was something for respiratory assistance. At that time, they were probably pumping him full of laughing gas or something. Who knows for sure? Whatever it was, the man was sedated. That was why he looked so "calm" to my mother. It wasn't that he had an itching to slide feet first into a coffin.

³⁶ This shows how far her extrapolation can take you. His eyes were shut the entire time we saw him. Not to mention, the amount of time we saw him was quite little. Regardless, she just decided he had these "dark beaming" eyes. Every story for her is a *Choose Your Own Adventure*, where she gets to choose from a list of choices that she chose on her own.

³⁷ This guy did not look like some type of regular. From what we saw, he appeared well-kept and proper looking. He did not look like the type of man that would rely on a bartender as his sole source of companionship. I already admitted that no one else came out with him aside from the medics, but that does not mean he had no one in this world. For Pete's sake, one of those medics could have been his son for all we knew. He might have stopped in for just one drink before heading home to his family. Better yet, maybe he was picking up New Year's dinner for his family. In fact, his whole family might have been in the restaurant for all we knew. He may have been in the middle of dinner with his wife of sixty years or at a huge banquet table with his extended family, numbering close to twenty. Whoever was with him could have been explaining what happened in the restaurant to a fourth medic. If I wanted to, I could speculate a plethora of different scenarios. Mom just chose the first one that jumped into her head.

³⁸ It never seems right. If it did, there would never be any tears shed or black clothing at funerals. That being said, when a person is old and fragile, it should be the most understandable time for him or her to go. I'm not trying to be a cynic. I'm simply trying to be realistic. This man looked old and frail. If he was going to have a time, it surely was not decades away. He had no more homeruns to hit or miles to run. We live for a finite time. That's obvious, I think. We will not always be the young virile pups we once were. But wait, this is all irrelevant really. The man was not dead. There was nothing about which to feel wronged.

³⁹ She is going someplace she shouldn't with this one. For the most part, we're a P.C. family, but Dad or I will slip an occasional joke and Mom will occasionally not realize what she's saying.

After staring at his chest for what seemed like a minute, I was certain he had died. It didn't move an inch. No rising, no falling⁴⁰.

Without turning to the kids, I told them, "This is why you have to use every moment. You never know what day is going to be it. It's New Years, and this is it for this man⁴¹."

Daniel threw out something about New Years being on a different date in China⁴², but I just pretended to ignore it. Silence was the best treatment in this situation,⁴³ and all I had since I could not think outside of what I saw.

As they loaded the stretcher into the ambulance behind us, I could not help but think how unbelievable it is that people just come and go in this world just like that. I honestly hope I go as peacefully as that man⁴⁴. Then again, I hope I have someone standing over me besides a medic⁴⁵. I didn't think we waited there too long with the ambulance loaded behind us, but I guess we had

⁴⁰ I watched the same chest and saw it rise and fall. She made herself see what she wanted to see. Slowly, his chest moved up and down in a very subtle, quiet fashion. I swear I even saw his lips move under that fogged plastic mask they strapped on him.

⁴¹ This is a prime example of what she will do in the face of adversity. At least once a month, Mom has a renewed revelation that we do not live forever and makes sure to communicate this lesson to us. Before her brain tumor, Mom rode us about everything: homework, practicing our musical instruments, taking care of the dog, etc. Meanwhile, Dad served as the relaxed voice of reason that would step in and tell us to take an easy, deep breath. After her tumor and as the years rolled by, their roles definitely reversed. Dad grew anal about everything from how often we brush our teeth to how frequently we go to parties at school, while Mom became an Epicurean, nonchalantly telling us that we must relish the short life we have. Being New Year's Eve and considering what was happening before our eyes, this was a perfect time for one of her moments.

⁴² February 9 is the start of 2005, the year of the rooster, on the Chinese calendar. In fact, it is actually year 4702 by the Chinese calendar.

⁴³ The "best treatment in this situation?" I was simply offering up some factual information that I thought was pertinent. She is too embedded in her ways. To shun information because it is contradictory to your own is preposterous.

⁴⁴ While it is natural to feel our own mortality knocking on our door when we see it bash down someone else's door, it should never be that distant that it overwhelms you when it occurs to you. To go over the top about things in order to make a point, I can see the frailty of things everywhere I look on any given day. Take leaves falling for example or even roadkill. Nothing around us lasts for that long with the exception of rocks, and even those whither away with enough time. Furthermore, this man is not even DEAD.

⁴⁵ Hypothetically, if a person were actually dead, I don't think it would really matter who was standing over him or her, if anybody at all. Naturally, none of us know what it's like to be dead, but I think it is generally accepted that things are pretty empty, pretty dark, pretty nothing, or at least for a little while until whatever happens after death happens. Given that, I do not think that if I were actually dead I would gain some consoling feeling, having someone stand over me. Thinking of this small, Asian man, I wonder if it matters even more. He was not even dead. He was alive and yet probably fearing death at his age. Even so, he looked peaceful as even my mom observed.

since Daniel and Jess had resorted to finding original ways of waking up Eddie. My guess is there's a lot of paperwork to fill out if someone dies outside of the hospital⁴⁶. Well, and in an awful way, I guess they aren't in any rush to get the man anywhere⁴⁷.

As Eddie woke up to the torturing of the other two, the ambulance turned off its lights and drove down the road⁴⁸. That might have been the hardest part, seeing the lights turn off. All bets were off. The ambulance had no reason to rush anywhere, no need to blaze through traffic, no purpose to shine its bouncing lights in the world. I wondered who would get the call about this man's death⁴⁹ and if there was anybody out there that knew he had flickered out aside from the medics, the bystanders in the restaurant, and us. He will probably get just a black and white, plain text obituary with his name, date, and cause of death⁵⁰. No one will ever have any idea of

⁴⁶ My guess is there's a lot of paperwork to fill out if someone dies anywhere. Additionally, I bet any time a person takes an ambulance dead or alive, there's a lot of paperwork to fill out as a result. To keep billions of lives in order, it is going to take a hefty amount of paperwork, filing, and communicating. Therefore, my mom was not entirely wrong about the paperwork thing. She just did not figure out why they were filling out the paperwork.

⁴⁷ Again with the "rush" of an ambulance. The fact that a vehicle says "AMBULANCE" on the side and has lights across the top of it does not necessarily mean it must spend all its days flying up and down highways. Medics have to eat, and ambulances need gas from time to time. Obviously, neither of those were the case with this particular ambulance, but it did not need to necessarily rush either. When the man went by us, he looked fine and no sheet was pulled over the top of his head. That's something to note. Generally, if someone passes on with medics on hand, they put the person in a bag or pull a sheet over his or her head. While an ambulance would not need to rush if its patient was dead, it does not need to rush if its patient is stable either. There is no sense in screaming down streets at night towards a hospital if the patient is not in need of immediate care.

⁴⁸ I reissue the statement I just made. There was no need to make a scene and drive out with pistols aflame since the man was stable. They could take their time and gently usher him to a hospital where he could get a more thorough examination.

⁴⁹ Mom is right. Nobody probably got a call from the hospital about the man's death, but that's because **THEY WILL MEET HIM AT THE HOSPITAL IN PERSON SINCE HE IS NOT ACTUALLY DEAD**. I am certain whomever he was with for dinner in the restaurant will drive to the hospital and hold his hand as the doctor pages through his chart. My mom has gone over the edge of contemplation with this story and taken her thoughts to exaggerated extremes.

⁵⁰ The implications of this statement show the extreme to which she has moved. Even if this man was dying and even if he had absolutely not a single person in the world, which is quite improbable to begin with on numerous levels as I have mentioned, what does it matter if his obituary turned out simple and plain? First of all, there is the issue that I already fleshed out with the whole "wanting-more-than-a-medic-standing-over-me-when-I'm-dead" thing. What would a dead person care about his or her obituary for? More importantly and practically speaking, how could he or she care? Secondly, we all have our fears while living of being forgotten. As they say, the bigger the headstone, the bigger the insecurities. No one may say that, but I just did. The point being we do fear being forgotten once we are out of this world. In spite of this fear, I don't think most people look to the obituary section for answers. No matter how big of a picture someone gets and no matter how graceful the caption, it still sits in the obituary section. An obituary is not a place to leave a mark in this world. There are nobler ways.

the way he lived. I honestly don't⁵¹. I can't imagine where they'll bury him. Probably some cemetery without trees with a wooden headstone⁵². Although, they may not bury him at all. Maybe they will cremate him, and I wouldn't mind that myself. I always tell the kids that's what I want. Well, not always. Naturally, I never spoke of such things when they were young. My point to them is that I would rather they scatter my ashes in some amazing place where they would then have to visit⁵³. That way good memories are always associated with visiting me, and it'll give them a reason to travel. Not to mention how much plots cost nowadays⁵⁴. Yeesh.

With the ambulance out of the way, Harold pulled out and headed towards the Marriot as I had told him to earlier. Before heading anywhere, I always show him exactly where to go on a map, but I should've known that, as always, tracing the route would not be sufficient⁵⁵. I fell asleep sometime after the first intersection we had crossed and woke up to a car in disarray.

⁵¹ She says this as if an obituary could really do justice to anybody's life. She didn't know this man, and she still doesn't since we left Kauai. Honestly, if she asked herself, I doubt she could say she knows our neighbors back home that well either. Simply because she thinks she witnessed someone dying that had absolutely no one, she wakes up to the everyday fact that we walk through this world not knowing the vast majority of people in it. By vast majority, I mean nearly everyone.

⁵² Nobody uses wooden headstones anymore. Unless a person buries a bird that flew into his or her kitchen window with a woodchip for a gravestone, wood is never seen at the head of a grave. Nowadays, stone is cheap enough and easy enough to carve that everyone can get it.

⁵³ Quite the saintly notion. She really did start unabashedly telling us she wanted cremation when I was probably thirteen. I was just young enough to still think it meant she didn't like us. Now, I do understand some of the reasons for cremation, but that doesn't mean I agree with hers. She makes it sound as if being cremated provides us with endless frequent flyer miles to a destination of her choice. I find a couple problems with that. A, she gets to choose the destination. B, we don't get any frequent flyer miles. Essentially, she makes whatever remains of herself, no pun intended, quite inaccessible. In addition, having it be some random place without a marking leaves more opportunity for people to forget the actual reasons why they are there. The barricades to visiting this place are endless. Hell, they could fill in a pond where we scatter them and put in a strip mall. What kind of memorial would that make? More importantly to the story than all of this, if the man was who she describes him to be, he probably would not share any of the same motivations for cremation as my mother. Somehow, she manages to superimpose her ideals on someone else that, by her own definition, shares very little with her.

⁵⁴ This is a meek attempt at appearing practical. One minute she wants a car that goes zero to sixty in five seconds to take the dog to the kennel, and the next, cemetery plots are too expensive to stash a body in them. She does not really believe this. I know she is just saying it to both further her cremation points and appear radically conservative with money.

⁵⁵ I said it before, and I'll say it again. Cruise control. She had to expect it. She had to have seen it coming. It's as predictable as gravity. This displays one of her tactics though. As she said, she mapped everything out for him ahead of time. She always does this since it effectively removes all culpability when we get lost. She rinses her hands of everything when she at least pretends to hand it over to Dad. This way she wins no matter what and sometimes wins twice when she gets to gracefully enter back into the equation and right Dad's wrongs.

"Now, this is a road we haven't been on⁵⁶," I threw out amongst the banter.

"Well yah, we have, Mom. We took this one to that beach with the cliffs on the second day we were here⁵⁷. You just can't tell because it's dark out now, and more importantly, you jumped in the middle of all this. Thanks for only telling Captain Harold here how to get to this hotel⁵⁸," yelled Daniel from the behind me⁵⁹.

"I thought I'd wake up dead with the dreams I'd been having⁶⁰. Not lost," I said half joking to the kids, but I honestly couldn't stop thinking about that old man. I told the kids to remember that man during this new year and to make something of what they have⁶¹. When I finished my rant, I looked out the window at the dark road and knew we hadn't been on it.

⁵⁶ While we really hadn't been on this road before, I knew there was no actual way she could tell. She probably thought the foliage looked different or something when it was the same as anywhere else on the island.

⁵⁷ A slight fabrication. I did it not on points of factuality, but for the sake of principle. She jumped in the middle of it all after abandoning the helm and going to sleep for twenty minutes. I had to restore some form of order and maintain a sense of justice. She can't have it all figured out after allowing things to slip into complete disarray. Besides, the ball was in my court since she had been sleeping.

⁵⁸ In actuality, I wanted no part in it. As I said earlier, I've tried to commandeer vacations and take them into my own hands. From this, I have discovered that most of the time it's better to just go on standby and ride everything out, according to her plan as Dad does. This way I'm not responsible for anything.

⁵⁹ I didn't yell. I explicated.

⁶⁰ She is totally foiling the binary. First of all, she was sleeping. I do not know exactly what type of thinking goes on when one is sleeping, but I highly doubt it reaches such levels of reflective consciousness. Off of this, she blends in dying with sleeping, while she is living. The great sleep mixed with a nap in a car. Something is losing its association here because no one can wake up from a living sleep to be dead. I don't want to go back to all of that. The point is its nonsensical. Frankly, if she actually wanted to, she could have prevented all of it, the dreams, being lost, by just staying awake.

⁶¹ I am not going to let even the idea of a dead man rolling in front of me spur me through the upcoming year. That defeats the purpose. The world shouldn't have to send constant reminders that life is fleeting. When I get back to school, I'll write on this if I have time, or at least think about it. We should not be motivated by what we see outside, but by what we feel inside. I will admit I stole that line from a videogame my roommate plays. It works though. I have a little more time at college that I feel like I get to use it at my discretion. That's what college is for, I think. After it, I will get cracking and demonstrate exactly what living is all about... Reminds me of Kerouac again. "What's in store for me in the direction I don't take?" I would throw that one at Mom, but she is more of a "Road less traveled" person. A compass of the world has four directions on it, and I'm going to spread my four appendages in each direction of it. It is too simple to say, "I'll turn every stone." Too simple. Things are not that simple. I will head in every direction possible, so I know what is in store for me down every dark alley of the world. I think that's what he meant. I suppose it could also be more sarcastic. I mean if you don't take a certain road, it doesn't really matter what is down it. That's sort of a similar idea to not knowing what's after death and all that I said before with the man and the obituary and the medic. Isn't it? I think that way of viewing it is similar to that idea. I could say, "Who cares what my life would be like as a corporate lawyer? I'm not doing it no matter what Mom says about it." That makes sense, I think. At least, it makes sense for that purpose. Even so, I will just check every direction for now. Except that one, I guess. I'm not going to be a corporate lawyer. And, you know what? Even if the guy was dead, what does that change? I mean maybe he was, but what difference does it really make.

Derivations of Male

Head rushing.

Head Russian.

He'd rush in.

He drew shin.

Hebrew sin.

He brews.

He bruise.

He broods.

What Every Single White Male Thinks?

Why wasn't I born a poor, black
child? Or even a woman
for that matter. I bet all of the slots
were filled. They really fly
off the shelves; all the wombs closed for
my business. I'm sure I looked pretty
suspicious. I'll shop
around, perhaps in the aisles

of disease. Looks like
cancer won the Tour
de France again and beat
out all the other
healthier white boys. If only

I could play funk. I'm sure

the drive to succeed is stronger
when the Man or the world
wants you down, so why do the French want
neutrality, such as mine? I was born
into it and claim it, fair and square. Though,

I did wage a revolution
once. Said "fuck"
when I was eight in the heat
of a rhyming game,
but I don't think that was enough
to lose my throne. I wonder

how herds choose
their alpha males out of all them
bucks? They all look
like deer to me, and I doubt
it's hereditary. I wonder

how much it costs
to stuff and mount a man. If you pay
by the inch, I'm rounding up
and counting seventy-six
of them for this guy. There are certainly
bigger animals, but do taxidermists
have unions? *And, how did I come to
this?* Did I mention he is
white? *Did I mention I
am white?*

Hug

IN ALL HONESTY, the socks felt rather comforting in a purely physical sense as well. Like the feeling of someone hugging his hands in his sleep. Granted, even hugging can harbor psychological connections, but I still think there is something to be said about it in a more carnal sense. There is something instinctual about it that perhaps touches back to the first few days we are nurtured in this world. At any rate, putting socks on his hands comforted Andrew Renard for both physiological and psychological reasons.

He never noticed Francine's conjunctivitis himself, but two days after she had started using the medicated eye drops it somehow came up in a passing conversation with her. In that same conversation, she informed him that it was passed the point of being contagious. Even so, having been brought into the light of awareness, he could not shut himself back up in the dark. I think he let the news blind him and cloud up his rational thought. After his early retirement, he told me that every time he spoke with her in the office he could not look her in the face because if he did he would just blankly stare into her eyes. He could feel his eyes pulsating as they scanned for every pink thread on her cornea. Andrew did not want to make her feel awkward by staring too intensely at his

enemy in her eyes, so somehow not making eye contact at all seemed like a more tactful option. Then again, he told me his mind would race even faster as his eyes skirted around to avoid eye contact. He would start to wonder things like *what has she touched, is she still taking the eye drops, how often does she wash her hands or better yet how often does she touch her eyes*, and, naturally the self-conscious turn of thought, *does she know I'm thinking about it right now*. The man would never let himself be at peace.

I have to admit that for a time I even got suckered into his hypochondria and paranoia. I mean I had worked with Andrew for twenty-three years. Frankly, I learned most of what I know about doctor to patient relations through Andrew. Well, he at least taught me some of the preliminary measures of running a practice. He was one of the most respected psychologists in the city. No, I take that back. On the entire east coast. So, it was natural for me to follow some of what he did by habit alone. I mean for a while he made some very convincing arguments for why he was so cautious. He would say, "What kind of practice would we be if both of us look people in the face with bloodshot eyes?" Unfortunately, what I originally tried to convince myself was mere cautiousness quickly escalated into the elements of paranoia I have already related to you. I mean I really started to worry when his wife told me about the sock habit. While I explained to you how I could understand the human sensations that drove him to such a thing, it still seems quite unhealthy to form a habit of wearing socks on your hands while you sleep to prevent the contraction of pink eye. You see we all have these peculiar drives, sensations, feelings, etcetera that make us human. However, it is how we allow ourselves to manifest them in society that separates the healthy from unhealthy. We all

put certain components of ourselves in check in order to live a life that is cohesive with our social existence. You see? I mean his wife even told me he would ask her to clean her hands before coming to bed, and his wife only comes to our office but once or twice a year.

Beyond all this at home, he started acting inappropriately in the office as well, or at least he was doing things that I saw to be inappropriate. Aside from the overall anxiety he would project in every conversation at the office, whether it would be with Francine, the secretary, myself, or even the custodian, he started to display some disconcerting signs of hypochondriacal neurosis. He left his door open at all times except when he was consulting a patient. He figured this way Francine would be less prone to touching his doorknob and spreading the bacteria. I even noticed Andrew religiously maintained a cleaning schedule in his office. Mind you, before this whole conjunctivitis scare, he never bothered to lift a finger in the way of cleaning his office. Aside from vacuuming the floors and such, the janitor would even have to push in every drawer in his desk at the end of the day in a continual effort to keep them from simply falling loose on the floor. The new cleanliness he had taken on bordered on the side of obsessive compulsive. Every other hour at fifteen to the hour, just before he would have an appointment with a client, he would wipe everything in the office down with Clorox Wipes that he kept stashed in his desk drawer. One day, I checked his supply closet to find it stocked with a year's supply of these wipes. He would start at his desk, cleaning everything from the lamp to each pencil, and then move counterclockwise around the room from top to

bottom, rubbing every bookshelf, chair leg, and planter with bleach. I could not believe it the first time I walked in during the middle of this process.

Naturally, Andrew began to display psychosomatic symptoms. He would ask me at least three times a day whether I could see pinkness around his irises or not. I would also see him continually blinking his eyes with force, scrunching them shut and then opening them artificially wide. He would do it constantly until something stole his attention away from thinking his eyes itched.

For as long as possible, I tried not to worry too much about Andrew's shifts in behavioral patterns, but I felt I had to say something when it started to become an issue with our clientele. During the six weeks after he had first discovered Francine's conjunctivitis and before he decided to retire, we watched our appointments drop by a quarter. It was unbelievable and inexcusable. Up to this point, we were the top psychologists in all of Long Island. Dr. Renard's disorder was causing our reputation to suffer. I had several patients come directly up to me and express what they called "concerns" but what I can only conclude were fears for their own well-being and for the effectiveness of our services. After these approaches, I expressed my concerns to Dr. Renard. Excuse me, Andrew. He told me he understood how people could interpret his actions the wrong way, but nothing seemed to change. How could he tell me that his actions were merely misinterpreted? Before long, both of us would be known as quacks. Hearing a comment like that, I had to conclude that he was not even fully aware of his disorder. I also started to think it was not just a disorder. If he had been a patient of

mine, I think I would have considered it a disease and recommended our psychiatrist. To me, it seriously seemed out of his hands.

About a week after I approached him, Andrew approached me. It was the first time in weeks that I could remember where he had gone out of his way to consult with me. However, this time it was not about a patient. I could tell from the start that it was not going to be an ordinary talk. That is not to imply that we had had a normal conversation in any of the days prior. When he entered my office, he did not knock as usual. He simply opened the door slowly, walked in without a noise, and sat down on the Freudian couch across from my desk. He said he had something to talk to me about. I noticed him plowing his hands up and down his thighs as if trying to steamroll the pleats out of them. Then, he clasped his hands to keep them from seeming so busy and proceeded to tell me how work had changed for him. The whole time his eyes darted the room, occasionally landing on me if only for a second, and he blinked so rapidly that it grew distracting for me. I had a hard time determining whether these motions were displacements of anxiety or merely remnants of his psychosomatic symptoms engrained by his hypochondria. He said he felt as if he was “losing touch with people on a basic level” and that “in attempting to repair the lives of others he had destroyed his own.” This line of reasoning seemed like quite a predictable route, considering the circumstances. In not fully recognizing his disorder but at the same time recognizing the more obvious presence of a disturbance in his typical lifestyle, he managed to develop a solution that was consistent with his cognitive state. He went on for some time with this constructed humanistic revelation and ultimately told me that he was done with

psychological consultations and the practice was completely mine without any strings attached. While I saw this coming with the rise in his paranoia, I still could not believe that the man who brought me into the field was now abandoning it. It is amazing what the mind can both give and take away from a man.

To wrap the awkward conversation up, I gave him the socially acceptable response and wished him luck in whatever he did. I figured that was the end of the whole episode, but he caught me a bit off guard as we were leaving my office. As I came around to the front of my desk to walk him out, he stood up and faced me. We stood there across from each other for so long that I felt moved to say something more or add something to the whole conversation that I thought had finished. Just as I thought maybe it was a pension plan or something that he was looking for, he hugged me and with that exited the room and the building without a word.

A few days ago, I spoke to his wife on the phone just to check up on things, and she claimed he was absolutely back to normal. She noted that he has stopped excessively wiping doorknobs and does not even always bother to wash his hands before he eats. I can only hope that the disorder I witnessed did not move into some recessed part of his cognition.

Now, I hope this helps, but why again do you need it? I am failing to see the correlation between Andrew's disorder and Jim Foster. Granted, yes, Mr. Foster was a patient of Dr. Renard's, but the man terminated his services with us about two months ago. That was just before any of this had started with Dr. Renard. It happens all the time

with patients. We put as much as we can on the table for them, but if that does not work, we have to go on living and take up the next one.

Who Blew Out the Light While Breastfeeding

As the baby takes a pull from the mother's nipple,
lightening her load and adding to its own
so that it too may someday pump the jack
to change a tire and keep the straight face
that fabricates the Tooth Fairy, does the mother
know, in this moment of humility, that
the very moment the baby was born
it started dying? Does she know
she has brought it one step closer
to never taking steps again?

She fears for it as we all would,
having tripped down a flight
of stairs, felt the turbulence of air
in a plane, and coughed up
some alien phlegm. But she has started
this baby's countdown to the great surprise
party at which we cease to be among the falling
confetti and quiet whispers of how
well we loved, how decently we dressed,
and how long we managed to shovel
driveways. Whether coming or going,

we do so without ever really knowing
when. One instant a light goes on
to reveal the switch that triggered it,
and the next, the light goes out, the switch
is gone, and babies cry out into the darkness.

The BIG Pause in the Sky

To think that sitting had lost
its value, that taking a pause
had grown superfluous in the face
of the incredibly long pause,
and that a doctor could say, "No
treatment is necessary," while my innards
have gone kaput and burn
with the cold sensation
that someone else has moved into my body
before I wanted to move out.

But, I am still young and my bones
far too filled with jumping marrow
to actually know that tickle under
my chin, turning my head towards Styx,
Hades, all those mythological words
that make humans human, and a wooden
classroom that teaches me all I need to know
about decomposition. Even so, I still think

if I was old with arthritis rusting
all my hinges and Alzheimer's oxidizing
my brain, I would want that doctor to fix
me and take that pinch from my ass. Treat
me, god damn it. Not so I can leap a building
or even throw a ball, but just so I can go
on sitting for a few more painful seconds.

Arrivederci

LIKE CLOCKWORK, SHE marches through the rotating, glass door with the exact same movements every day. At the silent stroke of ten past twelve, you can always see her coming into the museum with suitcase clutched in hand, hair pulled back miles behind her eyes, and glasses perched ever so precisely on the bridge of her nose. She will do a slight nod at front desk without breaking her stride and will continue, like an unstoppable breaking wave, down the central hallway without a word to anyone. When she hits the fork in the hallway, she will always turn right and head down the whitewashed walls of the contemporary wing. For the duration of this trip, the intense fluorescent lighting of the contemporary hallway bounces off her gold watch and bracelet and diamond earrings. Additionally, it will always seem as if her stride increases in both tempo and intensity down this hallway as her pointed heels beat over the keys of white and black marble. She will breeze by countless pieces of art and only stop three quarters of the way down the hall, where she will promptly do an about-face and stare into the bleeding colors of a painting done by an American expressionist. After about five minutes of simply gazing at this painting, without taking off her coat or setting down her

briefcase, she will head back down the hallway and walk with the same dutiful strut down the opposite end of the museum that leads to the various chambers of art like naturalism, surrealism, and the whole slew of techniques that developed out of impressionism. Being the older part of the museum, with its original design from 1910, nearly everything is wood: lightly stained cherry wood floors, paneled wood walls, mahogany furniture, and an intricately cut ceiling of darkly stained cherry wood. Her footsteps will be softer and less intimidating in this section of the museum since the ancient floors have learned, through countless beatings, to absorb the sounds of anxious spectators from the city streets. The young businesswoman will turn into the first room on the right, go straight to the bench at the end of it, take her coat off, set her briefcase down, sit on the leather bench, and just stare at a naturalist painting completed by an Italian painter in the early nineteen hundreds. She will sit there for about ten minutes, alternating her attention from the painting in front of her and some photograph that she pulls from her wallet. When her time is up, she will gather her things and head out of the museum as swiftly as she came into it.

I have seen it all gone down about a thousand times now. As the nametag says, my name is Harry. I'm one of the museum's docents. Since my days playing the market are up and I donated a few pieces to the art museum, I figured I should lead some tours around the place to keep me busy through my retirement. When I am not giving tours, I just roam around the museum, greet people at the door, and strike up random conversations. We usually have a pretty steady flow of visitors during the day due to our location in the heart of the city. I can usually tell which people are approachable and

which are not simply by their response to my greeting at the door. If someone merely gestures back with a body movement, like a nod or a wave, then I can be pretty certain that they're not looking for conversation. On the contrary, if someone says something back with a little spirit behind it, then I have no reservations about approaching him or her later on in the museum. From the first day that I ever saw that businesswoman come in, I could tell that she wasn't one for talking.

She comes in so religiously that I can reset my slow pocket watch by her every day. Due to her quiet yet consistent visits, I naturally took a private interest in finding out more about her. What I couldn't learn from mere observation, I got from Madame Fureau, as she would like to be addressed. Madame Fureau is another docent, who even has a few years on me. Ever since my wife passed away two years ago, she has tried to infuse, so to speak, a female presence in my life. So far, I have resisted quite successfully since she is not really my type. While my wife was bravely independent and driven by her own life, Madame Fureau knows everything about anybody. She has two methods of obtaining information. First and foremost, Madame Fureau feasts off of the grapes of gossip. Secondly, if she finds the gossip to be fruitless, then she will directly accost the actual subject of the gossip no matter how uncomfortable the topic or situation may be. From Madam Fureau, I found out the basic information that the mystery woman was Julia Facinni, a young, successful woman that works for a law firm about two blocks away from the museum. I wanted to paint the rest of her on my own, by gathering information from her frequent visits. It became sort of a hobby to keep an old man busy, a puzzle of sorts.

Within her first two visits, I had already coined her as one of those progressive, modern women. You know the type of girl who would certainly wear the pants in any relationship, so to speak. They have so much energy and drive to prove themselves in the world that, as I see it, there are two directions for these modern women to go. Some of them choose to pursue a righteous cause, like women's rights or the environment or some other higher endeavor. The others, like Julia, place all of their ambition and tenacity in a field that already exists, a field that, in the old primal sense of things, was for men. They want to show their fortitude and strength by excelling in their jobs, and what better place is there to do it than a field where they were once told they could never work. I could tell Julia was one of these independent women by the way she only slightly nodded her head upon entering the museum, the absolute neatness of her clothes with the middle button of her blazer always buttoned, the steady movement of her legs like swinging metronomes that will falter for nothing, and the absence of shifting in her eyes as they stay exactly fixed upon her destination, or goal. To me, it seemed as if she had this aura of self-righteousness and maybe even arrogance, but it did not really get under my skin or curl my fingers into fists as it does when some young, smug kid runs around espousing the downfall of Western thought after taking one philosophical class. I got the feeling that she had thoroughly earned her narcissism, and from the little fragments Madame Fureau gave me, it appeared she had.

Even though she never spoke a word or said anything to reveal the fact that there was something more than a female attorney tied up in a business suit, I started to suspect

that something existed underneath her frigid shell since she always took time to see these two particular paintings in the museum each day of the business week. Neither of these paintings were our pride and joy. As far as the business world of art saw it, these were just mediocre pieces. Nonetheless, she wasted no time looking at anything but these two divergent paintings. I call them divergent since the two paintings are so distinctively different that one could almost call them contradictory.

The first painting hung amongst a smorgasbord of modern paintings. Personally, I do not enjoy this hall as much as the others since it has no consistent genre. Some of the paintings pull from impressionism and others from surrealism. Julia's painting of choice was a simple, expressionist painting of a woman. A virtually unheard of female artist from New York painted it along with maybe three other paintings of women. All of the subjects of her paintings were women from the heart of New York City. Critics say that she uses expressionism in an effort to draw out a woman's inner strength and hidden emotions that society forces women to suppress. Julia's painting is entitled "Loud Eyes." Done predominantly in acrylic grays, the painting depicts a young woman with pronounced cheekbones and pursed lips. The only color in the painting comes from the woman's large, green eyes. Although the eyebrows are set adamantly low, the eyes are of an exaggerated size and mandate attention from all viewers. The woman reminds me of a woman from decades ago in my youth, who had been the first woman to ever break my heart. She had explained to me that I was "too conventional." "Loud Eyes" seems to dominate the entire wing with its prodding green eyes and unwavering expression.

Unlike “Loud Eyes,” the other painting that Julia would always grace just sank into its surroundings. This painting is a bit older and easily blended with the aged wood paneling of the room. Its darkly stained, wooden frame is cracked from dryness like the walls and floors that surround it. Completed by an Italian painter, the picture plainly portrays a very young Italian girl being pulled by an arm that extends from a body outside of the frame. Behind the girl is a blurred mass of hurried bodies, carrying large duffel bags and tickets. Fittingly, the piece is called “Arrivederci.” Apparently, at a very young age, the artist had been torn from his home in Italy and dragged to the States with his family. In the painting, the young girl clings to an arm with one hand and clutches a worn stuffed animal in the other. Oddly enough, the girl is smiling and unaware of the predicament that surrounds her. She simply smiles and holds onto the two things dear to her.

Knowing that she always visited these two paintings in opposite ends of the museum and nothing else, I figured I could do her a favor by pulling some strings and bring her two favorite paintings to everyone’s attention. I figured in doing so I could make her happy by seeing her two paintings earn special attention. Sort of a tribute to them. Having donated enough to the museum, the board of directors allowed me to place the paintings on this weeks greeting flyer without asking me any questions. Over the weekend, I drew up the flyer and placed a massive stack of them right inside the entrance to the museum. This way anyone that entered the museum would have no choice but to pick up the flyer and gaze right into her two paintings juxtaposed by one another on the cover.

When Monday rolled around, I impatiently waited for the moment when I could reset my watch for ten after twelve. As always, Julia came striding into the museum without missing a beat. She nodded at the front desk without making direct eye contact and almost bumped into the podium that was holding all of the flyers. I watched all of this from a chair near the entrance to the museum. My podium placement had temporarily broken her stride and forced her to pick up one of the flyers. For a short moment as she blankly stared at the flyer, she lost all of the composure that she was so notoriously known for in my perception of her. Then, without taking off her coat or setting down her briefcase, she swung around and picked up a new tempo towards the door that was so fast it almost seemed out of control. Julia quickly pushed around the rotating door and drifted into the sea of people in the street.

I was obviously puzzled by this seemingly erratic reaction from Julia. Nevertheless, I waited for her the next day. Eventually, I looked down at my watch, and the hand was past three o'clock. No matter how slow my watch is, it was certainly past 12:10. I figured any number of things could have prevented her from making it to the museum, so I didn't sweat it too much. I let a few more days roll by without any concern, but since I refused to reset my watch until her return, I was quickly losing all sense of time. As my pocket watch lost its purpose, my anxiety began to grow.

At the end of the week, I had had enough, and I needed to find out what had happened to Julia. Naturally, I turned to Madame Fureau for answers. Apparently, the

two days after her anomalous visit, the museum had received a letter from Julia Facinni with two requests. First of all, the letter asked that a new flyer be produced with different cover art. Secondly, she asked to buy the painting by the Italian artist and asked that a response to her letter be sent to the return address on the envelope, which directed everything to some small city in northern Italy. In spite of her generous offer and polite letter, the museum wrote a letter rejecting her offer, but explaining that they would promptly change my flyer to something else.

I could not care less about the flyer. The only reason I tampered with it at all was to hopefully put a spark in Julia's day. I never thought she would stop coming. I never thought I would drive her away, even if it was inadvertently.

After another week at the museum, I stopped volunteering and just stayed at home. Madame Fureau had been pouring it on pretty heavily, and I had nothing to distract me from it. Besides, I found the paintings did not seem to have much meaning without someone looking at them.

•

Strands

Catching a glimpse
of it, just a gentle
bullwhip crack
to the eyes, in the young
morning sun that gilds
everything with generous
light, I found a hair
dancing on my sweater, a hair
much too long to be
my own. I believe your fine

hair was the last
this sweater had seen
during some shiverable,
autumn days in Boston
when you would hold
back your hair
in a bun so that the wind
couldn't run through it. Months

have passed and, since
then, a girl has come
weekly to fold my laundry,
my roommate has had
an underclass fling
with a girl who's hair
was just like yours, and the female
janitor has silently emptied
the trash from each of our rooms.
I am sure they're all losing hair
over something too, and so it moves

throughout the world
into the creases
of books, around leaf
stems, onto plaid couches or lambs

wool sweaters, and through the air,
floating and glistening
like unanchored fishing
line or spider webbing,
still struggling to reel
something in, trying desperately
to find somewhere to rest.

A Late Autumn Stroll

This is no time
to manicure the world,
no time to beautify it
with thought. I must think
of survival and those carnal
things that drive people
to the point of sawing
their own legs off, the point
of making black smoke
signals, the point of
drinking their own
urine. But I already
digress, for the point is
it's cold.

And, even so, in this moment
of necessity when my breath
leaves me in visible
droves, I can't help
but notice the sound
my feet make
as hardened rubber
treads over stiffened
leaves.

Waking Haverford

IT SEEMED AS if Haverford Street almost always housed days of either praise or disdain. Either way, they were usually days that an elderly lady with a heightened sense of faith would attribute to God in some way or another. Sometimes, it would be that the sun shined so brilliantly that it would catch the bits of glass and honed rock within the asphalt to make it shine like a river of angelic eyes. In other cases, it would be that the trees in the park across from all of the well-kept flats would bend over backwards at the howling, hellish winds of a rightfully deserved apocalypse. In all likeliness, it was not that the weather itself was exceptionally religious, but rather that the people were.

For some inexplicable reason, today presented a complete absence of religious meteorology. The heavens did not open up with flooding rains, and the air did not hint of God's sweet graces. There was nothing. No material for the religiously guided; just a bland day for the atheists. The sky was a homogeneous gray with no alterations except for the occasional flight of a bird. Likewise, the air did not move unless someone walked through it, and although everything was gray and still, there were no ominous signs of misfortune nor hopeful signs of fortune to come. Birds and squirrels moved throughout

the park at their own discretion, and people walked the street without umbrellas or sunglasses. Providing the only intermission from monotony, a dark brown U.P.S. truck rumbled up the usually eventful street and paused only once in the middle of it at 217 to drop a large square package on its stoop.

Like clockwork, Ignatius Godfrey came to the door at eleven in the morning, his regular Saturday tradition, to collect his paper and any other mail. After placing the paper and some envelopes under his arm, he squatted down and picked up the uncharacteristic box on his doorstep. Once he had set down his mail and the box on the black and white checkered floor of his foyer, he peeked through the windows on either side of his front door to survey the weather. He always did this in order to verify whatever type of greeting he received from his older neighbor, Mrs. Hinsky, since she religiously sat under the protection of her porch to report God's meteorological recipe for the day. As he looked out the window, it occurred to him that Mrs. Hinsky had not greeted him at all. The wicker rocking chair on her porch was completely empty, and seeing how it was not an exceptionally inclement day, this seemed rather odd. Ignatius did not spend too much time dwelling upon this oddity since he could go a thousand days without her nagging reading of the weather. Due to his parents' early deaths and his inability to find affordable housing elsewhere, he found himself being the youngest resident on Haverford Street. After passing away when he was in college, Ignatius' parents essentially left him with two family keepsakes: the house and the name.

His parents had always lived in the house at 217 Haverford Street and would probably have had it absolutely no other way. The block of Haverford Street across from

the park had always served as, and still does, a harbor for “good Catholics,” as Ignatius’ father would put it. Every Saturday afternoon at a quarter to five, the residents would file out of their houses and walk two blocks east to the Church, no matter what the weather was. Saturday night mass was optimal for the Haverford clan since it usually weeded out the families with rowdy children and the unreliable holiday believers. As they do today, the Haverford clan spends the rest of the weekend playing gossipy games of telephone to one another as they sit on their stoops and porches. The Godfrey house always mediated the invisible wire of talk since they had prime location in the center of the street. Ignatius attempts to continue this tradition every weekend for the sake of his parents but acts merely as a figurehead since he lacks both the respect and wisdom of the other elders.

Like the house, the name carries similar weights of Catholic tradition. While Godfrey is simply the patriarchal name, Ignatius is allegedly the brilliant brainchild of his dad’s great grandfather. Regardless of who actually started the tradition, it is currently accepted that the first-born male of any Godfrey family would take on the name Ignatius in order to pay homage to the Catholic saint, Ignatius of Loyola. When Ignatius was five and infatuated with toy cars and dinosaurs, his father began telling him the story of Saint Ignatius every night as a bedtime story. Despite frequent reminders and random allusions to saintly acts, Ignatius could never remember all the ins and outs of the story. All he knew was that Saint Ignatius got hit by a cannonball, found faith in God, and founded the Jesuits. If he worded it just right and acted exceedingly enthusiastic, then this abridged copy of the Saint’s life would pass his father’s sporadic quizzes. Ignatius could never really tolerate the name since kids could not help but laugh at it in his younger years and

it always seemed far too formal. As a result, Ignatius started going directly by Godfrey ever since the fourth grade, when he was given the option of choosing, and maintained it until he moved back into his parents' house after college and their deaths. He went back to Ignatius for their sake.

Leaving the box in the foyer, Ignatius sat down at his parents' dining room table to look at the paper and sift through his mail. Every day and every meal, he sat in the same chair that he did growing up in the house years ago. In fact, everything in the house was about the same, all the way down to the ivory crucifix that hung over his bed. He did not even move into his parents' bedroom even though it was about twice the size of his. There were just too many issues with moving into the bed his parents lived and, gently put, bred in. As always, the mail was nothing out of the ordinary, and the paper seemed especially bland. So, Ignatius moved on with suppressed excitement to the box in the foyer.

Before even reading the return address label, he knew exactly what was in the box. It was the one grace he allowed himself in the wake of his parents' death. It had already been two years since his parents had died in the car accident, and up to this point, he had forced himself to live his life in their image. But after two dedicated years of imitation, Ignatius decided to grant himself the one wish of bringing a television into his parents' home. As a child, he never witnessed the witty word games of Sesame Street or the teachings of Mr. Rogers. His parents permitted a few toys, but he was to derive the rest of his entertainment from biblical parables. Limited ventures to friends' houses and ultimately college showed him what a blessing television really was.

After opening the box and plugging the television in to see if it worked, Ignatius promptly made preparations for its permanent place in the house. The only table that seemed suitable for holding the TV was a small, cherry wood table that had a white crocheted snowflake and framed photos of his parents on top. With some uneasiness, he temporarily moved the photos to a chair in the corner of the room and placed the TV in their place. Ignatius spent the next few hours absorbed in the few channels he had until he made an appointment for the cable service to come. Although for now, five channels seemed like a blessing in it of itself. He watched some news for a while, then a cheesy sitcom replayed for what was probably its eighth time, and even one of those extremely vocal religious preachers in honor of his parents. Ignatius found himself having his first enjoyable moment since moving back into his parents' house. He finally pulled himself away from the TV after seeing a commercial for a bar that was only two blocks west of his house. He had not been out of the house for anything but church, work, and grocery shopping in ages, and the witty jingle at the end of the commercial really sang to him: "Come on down and forget your frown at Brian's Brew Town."

After looking up and down the block for any of his neighbors sitting on their stoops, Ignatius dotted up the block and turned the corner, where he promptly began humming the ridiculously simple melody of the commercial jingle. He bounded down the street with a noticeable bounce in his step and did not even notice the gray sky and quiet weather that had kept Mrs. Hinsky at bay this morning. As easily as the jingle had thrown him into this giddy trance, he abruptly snapped out of it when he heard the short burst of a woman's scream from somewhere nearby. Ignatius quickly ran a few steps and

looked around feverishly with his eyes pulsing over the unfamiliar buildings of the street. Finally, his eyes found an alley between two buildings where he saw a teenager nervously pulling at a woman's purse with a knife drawn.

"Hey you! What the hell are you doing?" is all that Ignatius could quickly get out of himself, but somehow it did the trick as the kid bolted around trashcans and empty boxes through the other end of the alley.

Ignatius walked over to the woman and picked up a few of her things that were strewn across the filthy floor of the alley.

"Goddamn it! I can't believe that just happened. And, to me?! Of all people," exclaimed the woman from the ground.

"Are you alright?"

"Yeah... yeah, I'm fine. Just can't believe it. I can't thank you enough for finding me in time to do something. I feel like such an idiot for trying to take a shortcut down the alley. Usually, I would just walk the streets to the bookstore, but I was late for the reading this time... and I was supposed to introduce the poet... God, I'm sorry. Here I am, just chewing your ear off when you just saved me from being robbed. What's your name?"

"Uh, yeah. Well, that's no problem. My name? Right, my name is Godfrey," he replied somewhat nervously after just hearing her onslaught of worries and problems.

"Here's your watch and bracelet back. They were on the ground. I'm surprised he didn't try to run with them."

“Lucky, I guess. Well, excuse me for being a bit out of it, Godfrey. My name is Jill. Like I said, I’m in a bit of a rush to this poetry reading up at the bookstore. Do you like poetry?”

“Well, honestly, I don’t know much of it.”

“You should come, then.”

“What? To the reading? Now?”

“Yes, yes. We put together some great readings at the store. Every Saturday night. They’re not too long, I promise,” she pleaded, seeing the uncertain look in his scrunched cheeks.

“Well, not this time. I’m headed somewhere, but next time? Maybe next Saturday I’ll try it.”

Realizing he still had her watch in his hand, he raised it up to give to her and noticed it was a quarter past six. He expected himself to let out a boyish shriek or stamp the ground in both astonishment and annoyance of his own negligence in missing church, but he did nothing of the sort. He handed the watch back to the woman, shook her hand while exchanging final thank-yous and goodbyes, and continued to the bar.

Home

Before we moved, so before I was
six, we played in the unfinished
foundations of budding subdivisions.

Once, there was a tractor, more likely
a dozer, that sat on our lot for the weekend,
exhausted from plowing the horizon flat.

We loved running through those
walls of dirt and columns of cinder
blocks, getting lost in them like mazes.

At the end of our cul-de-sac, they left
the ruins of a stone farmhouse and fastened
it with wires, so it would never fall.

Later, we'd play in a house that filled
one of those craters, but sod has been
laid and trees grow in around it.

The dozers are gone, the wired farmhouse still
stands with tiger lilies at its feet, and moving
through the grocer's labyrinth, I still find
there's fresh produce on the shelves.

Thoughts of Air & Death

She told me he died
a wealthy man, but I didn't
know what that meant.
This is one reason why
I try to sleep through the turbulence
of flight; I am the closest to a stranger
I ever want to be and the furthest
I ever fear to be from those

I love. She was laced
with gold trinkets and yet,
when she shuffled
through her purse, I saw her wallet
was thin and void of pictures. She had no one
to parade in front of me. I figured
her husband's riches
were in the bank. At the cruising
altitude, she turned down
peanuts and a pillow, while I
ate double and stayed

awake. As the flight attendants
prepared for landing, we hit soft-
looking clouds that somehow beat
the pilot into putting the seatbelt
sign on. I usually slept through this
and quickly thought, "I should've
located my exits and known how to use
my seat as a float." As I reached
up for more air, the woman
grabbed my hand and I realized
you could bury me in a suit
cut up the back so long
as I had someone to hold.

Planet #3

Here's a planet so perfect for us:
water goes in and out of air, nitrates
come and go, each breath out we make
produces trees. Not too close, not too far,

we're planet #3, the only planet
where creeks still babble, birds peck
at bagel crumbs, moms wash
mouths out with soap, blue cars
rear-end taxis with burnt out tail lights
ushering young execs to their first business
luncheon, and young classicists
hypothesize about what life is like
after occasionally ladling
soup, wearing rainbow colored
ribbons, jotting free verse blurbs
in the crosshairs of postmodern
rules, and watching reality
television. When we gracefully accept

visitors to this planet of ours, are we sure
they'll talk to us and not the whales?

During a Grande Caramel Macchiato

It's the stage for *It's A Wonderful Life*,
and I sit in front of it
behind a huge, triple glazed pane
of Starbucks' glass, pulling a Grande
Caramel Macchiato through my lips
and listening to the latest compilation
of secular Christmas carols performed
by our favorite pop artists with a lady
on a pink, furry cell, a gaggle of pre-adolescents
sporting Victoria's latest secret, and a man dj-ing
through his creased Wall Street and Ipod
of concertos. We're all waiting
for the snow to let up and for our coffee
to grow cold, so we can throw it out guilt-free.

The snow keeps falling, accumulating
on cobblestone sidewalk, as a man turns
the corner. Dressed in tattered black
from jacket to visible toe, he begins
to pack snow with the shards
of his mittens. Without a cup
for change in sight, he heaps the snow
to form a yardstick size snowman
and even goes as far to equip it with shale
eyes and a carrot-looking nose. He steps back
and nods at it. I nod at it. We both know
its perfect.

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Appointment

THAT CONVERSATION HAD nearly driven him mad, so he was exceptionally thankful for the doctor's appointment that delivered him from it. In the four months they had been going out, it was the third or fourth time they had fought like this, throwing out various accusations about each other's character, questioning the relationship, broaching those small, trivial details from the past that made his blood course a little faster through his veins. It was lost on him how a seemingly normal conversation had snowballed into that. Things had happened fast and without warning.

As far as all this goes, Trey truly enjoyed being with Anna, and Anna truly enjoyed being with Trey. They hit little bumps every once in a while when the day rubbed one of them the wrong way, but they were fleeting issues for the time. They were skating through their last year of college. Knowing these tiffs were transitory, Trey always wanted to find a way out of them. If they both wanted to be with each other, it did not seem necessary to ruin a conversation or even a day with some trivial argument. Conflict did not agree with Trey. It made him feel nauseous. Why should he allow something unnecessary to infiltrate his life and make him feel terrible?

For these reasons, Trey was anxious for his doctor's appointment even though he did not know exactly what it would entail.

As soon as he got into his car, things felt marginally better. He was behind the wheel with keys in the ignition ready to head somewhere. At this point, the fact that he had a destination that took him away was enough. It was an escape from the chaotic world of "I do care about you's" and "you bring out the worst and best in me's" to a place where he had a specific appointment at an exact time for a particular reason. His two o'clock neurology appointment with Dr. Blackenton was for an EMG, electromyography, of his wrists. They were checking for nerve damage.

Trey did not know exactly what to expect from this appointment. The town in which his school was located had once been a medical center for the Northern half of Maine. However, as the paper mills and textile factories moved overseas to cut costs, the majority of the medical resources moved further south. Trey found himself approaching what looked like a downsized version of a high-rise in the Bronx's Coop City. From the air, Trey imagined the building as the epicenter of a bomb denotation with its radial clearing of a quarter mile or so. After parking his car in the shadow of the bomb, Trey headed for what looked like the main entrance. Entering the outdated hospital, the incorporation of automatic doors caught Trey off guard.

"Hello there," a woman said in a babying voice from behind glass that was still thirty feet away from Trey. "Can I help you with anything?"

Surprised at how quickly a response could rise out of such a lethargic building, he took a second to figure out if he actually needed help and then responded, "Well, yeah. At least, I hope you can help me out. I am looking for a Dr. Blacktin."

"That's Dr. Blackenton, and you just need to continue down this hall until you get to the next set of glass windows. You want the ones on the left."

The floor was speckled, beige tiles that Trey figured were white in their heyday. The walls were a softer shade of green with faded navy accents. Adding to the buildings sense of time and neglect, Trey spotted a missing ceiling tile and a couple of flickering fluorescent lights. The fact that color coded arrows of electrical tape were peeling up throughout the course of the hallway served as the crunchy icing on an already stale cake. When Trey came to the first major intersection in the hallway, he saw the two sets of windows and bore left.

"Excuse me," he hesitantly said to a pane of glass with a woman behind it. No response. He cleared his throat a little and tried the same line with a little more conviction.

Without looking up from the paperwork in front of her, the woman replied with careful enunciation so that the message would sound through the window to the clearly uncertain inquirer on the other side, "I'll be with you in just a moment."

Slipping his hands into his pockets, Trey took a step back from the window and waited for several minutes until the woman pushed her paperwork to the side and slid over the window.

"Now. How may I help you?"

"I have an EMG with Dr. Blackton at 2:30."

"You must mean Dr. Blackenton, and you must be Trey Seurchin. If you'll just go have a seat over there, a nurse will be out shortly."

"Uh, one quick thing, though. How do you say his name again?"

"Her name is Dr. Black-en-ton."

Trey took a seat. *Her name?* Trey had never given a second thought to what this doctor might look like since he had instinctively calculated that a neurologist tucked this deep in Maine with a name like Blackenton had to be a somewhat burly, middle-aged man, who enjoyed flannel on the weekends. Dr. Blackenton now turned into a tall, slender woman with brown hair, perfectly tweezed eyebrows, and a skirt that rode just short of her mid-thigh, practitioner coat. In the middle of this lucid daydream, a geriatric nurse called out his name.

"Trey Seurchin? Right this way."

After doing some background tests like blood pressure, height, weight, pulse, et cetera, the nurse showed Trey to an examination room and told him that Dr. Blackenton would be with him momentarily. He waited and, for a moment, wondered if she would wear the plastic rimmed glasses and messily bunned hair that most pornographic businesswomen, scientists, or teachers do.

Then, the large door to the examination room rotated open as Trey anxiously rubbed his sweaty palms on his pants. His anticipation left him as quickly as it had come when the door opened to reveal a less than erotic, aged, Indian woman. He nearly missed the introduction as he took in the sight of the actual Dr. Blackenton and felt his dreams

run from him. She was either bowlegged or crow footed, causing her to saunter with a rhythmic sway that emphasized the beat of her right foot. Her skin was brown with random dark spots from moles, birthmarks, and hair growth. The woman had a rather noticeable moustache, and her nose was mashed and broadened on both sides. At this point, Trey could not tell if she had a lazy eye or not, but he got the feeling that both were uncontrollably suspended in liquid.

“Um, hello,” Trey tardily responded to her introduction. She had her hand out in a limp, crippled manner, so he slipped his inside and shook it.

“So, what brings you here?”

Trey hesitated for a moment. This question seemed superfluous since she had to know why he was here already. He guessed she just wanted to hear him say it and get a feel for his situation or at least his awareness of things.

“Well, an EMG of my wrists to check for carpal tunnel.”

“And, why do we think you might have that?”

Her use of the collective felt presumptuous or invading to Trey this early in the examination, but he managed to respond.

“Uh, well. I’ve had pain in my wrist and some numbness at night. I’ve been seeing an orthopedic in Portland and wearing wrist splints while I sleep. You know, like my old rollerblading wrist guards. That seems to help stop the numbness.”

“Do you happen to remember which fingers have the numbness?”

“Well, originally, it was these two,” said Trey, pointing to his left index and middle fingers. Then, he pointed to his ring finger and pinky and said, “Lately though,

it's been these two, which I know means something other than carpal tunnel. The orthopedic said it was a separate issue with some nerve. Maybe the ulna nerve, slowing through my elbow or something. He gave me elbow pads to sleep with after that."

"Hmm. Yes. You can really use those all the time. If you ever think you might bump that ulna nerve, just go ahead and use them. You know. Your funny bone. And, it's only in your left hand?"

"Both actually."

"Worse in the left?"

"Well, yeah, worse in the left," Trey responded in a slightly puzzled tone as he wondered how she knew to ask that question.

"Ok, so why do you think you have these symptoms, these carpal tunnel symptoms? Why do *you* think they've developed?"

"Well, I work out. I write a lot. I play video games."

"You work out how? With weights? With sports? How?"

"All of the above. I don't know. I play a lot of sports. I usually do something each day whether it's basketball or soccer or just going for a run. I probably lift weights three times a week or so. I've had to cut back on that, though. That and squash. That obviously does a number on my wrists too."

"So, they got hurt weightlifting?" She had shifted into this form of questioning in which she did not actually form questions, but simply raised her voice at the end of a presumptuous statement. Picking through her accent, it was almost unclear to him if she actually wanted answers.

“Well, no. They started giving me problems at the end of the fall when I played a lot of squash. I would get all tight in my forearm. That’s when the tendonitis got really bad, or at least what they thought was tendonitis. Ok, well, I guess I was lifting then too, but I don’t think that did it.”

“I see.... And for school, you study?”

“Umm, yes. I study a mess of humanities: English, Classics, Philosophy, Creative Writing. That’s why I have to do all the writing. It hurts then, too, in my wrists.”

“Ok. All right, then,” she said, clicking her pen.

“So, this takes about an hour right?” asked Trey as he glanced at the clock that had been ticking throughout this hearing.

“Yes, about that.”

“And does it hurt?”

“Oh, no. Some people say it’s uncomfortable. Yes, uncomfortable maybe. You’ve been shocked before, yes? It doesn’t hurt. It’s just not ordinary.”

As she motioned him to the papered table with one hand, he watched as the other began pulling various wires and setting out certain instruments. The cords she took out looked like miniature jumper cables, color coordinated for positive and negative charges. She put pads between the pinchers at the end of the cords and gelled up what looked like the primary instrument, a double pronged tool with a plastic handle, a twistable knob, and a thick wire running off the end of it. She applied gel to some other wired pieces with her thin, curling fingers and then turned to face him.

“Give me your left, please. Since that is worse, we shall start with that one.”

Turning his arm over so the palm faced the ceiling, she taped one of the wired pieces to the fleshy part of his palm next to his thumb. The tape kept coming undone when she would turn back to put more gel on the double pronged tool she was wielding.

“Look. You sweat. You are nervous?”

“Anxious, I guess.”

“You must relax. The tape won’t stick to you, and if you don’t relax, the readings won’t come out right. That means more shocks.”

She taped an additional piece of tape to his hand and the piece remained stuck to him. Gently probing with two fingers, she felt the end of his forearm by his elbow for depressions and grooves. After pushing some tendons and muscles around, her fingers rested on a particular spot just above his elbow.

“Now, relax. This won’t hurt.”

“Right...just uncomfortable.”

With that, she turned the wheel on the pronged device for a few revolutions and glanced at the screen of the laptop. With a satisfied look, she turned back to Trey, placed her fingers in the spot she had just found, and brought the two prongs to where her two fingers rested. Removing her free hand from the marked spot, she pulled back on the adjustable wheel and a click broke the transient silence of the room. Then, Trey’s hand convulsed.

“Just different, right?” asked the doctor.

“Yeah. It didn’t hurt. Just different. I can’t control it.”

To this, she nodded knowingly and started a new search with her fingers, moving up his forearm towards his hand. She found a place in the middle, put the prongs to it, and his hand convulsed again.

This is how it went on both arms. She would adjust the pronged instrument to different areas that she pinpointed with the ends of her fingers and put it to different intensities. They all felt the same to Trey, an internal flick in his arm and a twitch of his hand. She also moved the taped piece around to various points on his hand and substituted it once on each hand for two metal rings that looped around his ring fingers. Towards the end of the test, Trey had gel on nearly every part of his forearms and hands due to the moving of electrified pieces, the accidental bumps with the perpetually goosed prongs, and the purposeful placements of the prongs for shocks. Although it was just on parts of his arms, he felt like he was submersed in jelly.

“So, there is no sign of carpal tunnel so far, no slowing of nerves through the wrist. There is a slight slowing of the ulna nerve through the elbow as to be expected from the diagnosis your orthopedic gave you and the numbness you feel in your fingers. I don’t think there’s need to do a needle test,” she informed him without eye contact.

“What’s a needle test?”

“It uses a needle pushed into your muscle to send off the shock. Tests for differences through the muscle to see if that’s a cause. Since you don’t have much slowing in these tests, it really wouldn’t be necessary.”

“Well, that’s good, I guess. Shocking needles don’t sound too inviting.”

“No, it is not quite as fun... So, what I think you have is muscle strain. You’ve done too much. You see, like nerves, muscles are held in compartments. They are in a sheath of some sorts. Actually, with muscles, you have one large sheath for the whole muscle and then many smaller sheaths for each muscle fiber that makes up the muscle. You see?”

“Yeah, I think so. So, what I’ve done is stretched everything out too far? I’ve pushed the muscles too tight in the sheath or something?”

She squared her shoulders to him.

“Why do you do what hurts you?”

“Well, a lot of reasons,” Trey initially responded, not knowing exactly how much to put on the table with this person, albeit a doctor, who was still more or less a stranger. She wanted more.

“You enjoy doing it?” She had reissued her earlier form of questioning and was clearly looking for something more.

“Well, yeah, but there are other things too...” he stalled. “Here, take video games. That’s easier to talk about. Obviously, I enjoy playing video games, right? Yeah, but it’s not just that. Video games for a little bit take you out of what you know and what you have to face. And, they all have games with rules. There is no grey area. You get shot by a sniper or hit by a frag grenade, you die. Or, it’s a race, and you just have to finish it.”

“Yes, it is direct, right? Calculable? It is a certainty for you.”

“Yeah, I mean that’s essentially it. The response seems very tangible and expectable. And, when I stop, it stops. So, yes, it may hurt me to play them, but there’s a pay off in playing them. There’s no grey area to deal with. There’s no bull....,” he stopped himself as he realized how open the conversation had become.

“That may be. In fact, I don’t doubt it. However, if something hurts you, you cannot keep on doing it. That is not grey. That is straightforward. There are other things that give responses. Frankly, yes, most things do. You like writing, no? That will give you a response. It’s just a matter of understanding what form the response takes.”

Trey did not respond. He understood the moral of the story all too well. She had suspended everything right in front of his face.

As the comment resonated through the sterile room, she took his right hand, probed it, and finished the testing. She shocked, and he twitched. The right hand showed the same thing as the left.

In the end, the whole test left him feeling strangely relaxed, and he did not know if it had to do with the peculiar images the hospital had run through his eyes, the electricity that she had run through his arms, or the words she had run through his head. In the aftermath of all this tension, Trey felt a sort of contented resolve.

“We are done,” she said, tearing a piece of paper from her clipboard and handing it to him. “Bring this to the desk where you checked in and find a way to give your arms a rest. You do too much. You must find responses from the world, yes, but they don’t have to be so simple and neat. You are smart enough to know that and to decipher the difficult responses that matter.”

"Thank you," Trey said as he held the blue receipt up in front of him as if he had just scrubbed for surgery. He still had gel running up and down his arms, but she had already turned to the laptop and made it pretty evident that things here were done. For a moment or two, he stood there disoriented. It was not a terrible thing. It just surprised him.

Gathering his sweatshirt and fleece in his open fingertips, he quietly opened the door and left the huddled, brown woman with her fingers tapping on the keyboard of the laptop. He wondered if she even knew he was leaving the room.

Walking down the hallways, he found the glass window, tapped on it, and left the receipt on the shelf in front of the closed window as the receptionist typed busily. He turned from the desk and put on his sweatshirt and fleece, forgetting about the gel that lingered on his arms.

Heading out of the hospital, he noticed a sign for a chapel that he had not seen on the way in, so he took a moment to look at it. The chapel had yellow stained windows so that all the light inside had a softer feel as it hit the humble, little altar and virtually empty guestbook. A couple rows of chairs faced the altar. Looking more closely at the guestbook, Trey noticed the last name in the book was Sue Blackenton.

Trey carried on down the hallway and out to his car. As he turned out of the hospital, he saw two dogs at each other's throats. It seemed odd to notice, so he turned on the radio to take his mind away from it. However, when he pulled to a stop at the next

intersection, he did not believe his eyes when he saw a business woman drive by in a red, indiscreet sedan with one of those obscenely large, foam collars around her neck.

Without conscious effort, Trey took the long way home and found himself winding down some unfamiliar streets. On one, he saw a man sitting on a stoop that he could have sworn he had just seen sitting in the hospital minutes earlier. Or was he more sure about seeing the man at the hospital than he was about seeing him on the stoop? Briefly, it came to him that Anna would know if she had been there. She always keeps things straight in her mind. A couple streets later he saw an old railroad bridge made of stone, arching over a moving stream, and could not sum up the beauty of it in words.