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A VISTA OF US:
A Collection of Short Stories

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ABSTRACT

At its core, this compilation of eight short stories is meant to depict diverse illustrations of beauty in life. Individually, the stories delve into different fictitious lives – people, creatures, and forces—that, when viewed together, offer a panoramic vista of literary styles and elements that echo the suffering and redemption within human conflicts and experiences. More specifically, the collection is tied together through genre, and more generally through characterization. All of the stories present certain elements of the magical realism genre: simile, extended metaphor, symbolism, anthropomorphism, and personification. Third person point of view is most frequently employed as that narrating perspective melts most harmoniously into my genre choice – the narrative distance drifts between limited and free indirect style; however, the register, tone, and mood of the stories vary based on characterization and plot. Lastly, the organization of the pieces reflects a planned shift from key themes: guilt in the human conscience, to freedom from guilt, to self forgiveness, to the spontaneous discovery of happiness. Though much planning has gone into the writing, formatting, and presentation of this work, it has only one important purpose: to make the reader feel. Enjoy.

A Vista of Us

A Collection of Short Stories by Peter Szekeres

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Drawing the Sun

(7:43 a.m.) On a foggy September day, a blue Cadillac sedan wound up the hill to Westminster Preparatory School for the Young. In the car bounced little Elle, excited for her first day of Kindergarten; her mother nibbled on her nails as she drove, eager to meet and thank the teacher; while they were arriving, Dr. Holidean paced about his classroom and hummed as he memorized the attendance sheet. Today their hearts all pulsed with hope, gushing life into thoughts that leapt like dreams – the first prey to worries of the mind.

Almost touching her nose to the backseat window, Elle tried to see through the haze and clouds the color of dusty snow. The endless grey fog drowned the dandelion yellows in the grass, the verdant greens of distant trees, and shrouded the world from dazzling morning light. On any other day Elle would mope from such dull, wet cloudiness -- Barbie's clothes would soak outside and her drawings would be as colorless as the grey sky, under which she loved to play and draw. Though she could imagine almost anything, Elle was most proud of drawing her yard and her house in the brightest of colors beneath the clearest light. The sun must have overslept today, she thought. But it was the first day of Kindergarten – of real school -- and she grinned, imagining her future pictures and how they would inspire widened eyes and smiles in her parents and move her siblings to gasp and say, "Wow!". Elle knew that her chance was finally here, her chance to prove her drawing talents to everyone and become a master drawer. She felt happy and purposeful, like a twinkling star in the big night sky.

“Welcome,” Elle mouthed, reading the glistening white banner strung over the arcade that led to a pair of large oak doors, opened wide, below a carved façade that decorated the front of the school. From the parking lot on the hilltop, grey air erased the far horizons, even as Elle stood on her tiptoes. She put her Artist Barbie doll in her book-bag and hopped out of the car, knees bouncing with excitement as she gazed at the magnificent stone school with its large windows, the two tall white cupolas that clanged their old bells at noon. For years she had wanted to go to a school like where her older brother and sister went. They seemed important and grown-up with all their homework folders and cello practice and after-school basketball or dance classes. They also brought home papers with writing and big red numbers and letters that made Mommy and Daddy smile and nod their heads; on days like that her parents ordered pizza and everyone got to stay up for an extra hour. Although her older siblings were always very tired and barely watched Spongebob Squarepants anymore, they must have felt good and happy from being the best at their work and making Mommy and Daddy so proud. Elle figured that once she learned to write better, she would write letters to museums all over the world, inviting them to see her works. That would impress even her big brother and sister. “Let’s go, Mommy,” Elle urged, afraid she would miss anything on her first day.

Using the rearview mirror, Elle’s mother examined a tiny coffee stain on her suit shirt’s collar. She called herself an idiot under her breathe in the tone she calls the dog a “bad boy!” when he tracks mud and leaves into the house. They left the car, her mother thumbing the stain.

Elle’s little black shoes squeaked on the linoleum as she followed her mother’s heels clack-clacking with the purpose of a memorized march. Her mother said it was eleven ‘till eight and they walked faster. To the right they passed a thin old lady in a glass office to whom her mother waved and smiled. Elle did so too, after her mother squeezed her hand.

“Elle. Sweetheart. Daddy and I paid a lot and worked very, very hard so you could be in this school and have this teacher.” She hooked her fingers and pulled them through her hair as if trying to lengthen it over her shirt collar.

“I know, Mommy.”

“He molds kids from students to scholars at the most crucial point in their education,” she said again, “which is what Education Weekly wrote about him – a very important magazine.” She looked at her watch (7:50 a.m.).

“You have to do your best,” Elle’s mother added, “and you must listen to the teacher and focus. And don’t be lazy, okay? Because before you know it you’ll be in second then seventh grade, then high school, and then filling out applications to colleges like Harvard.” She looked down at her daughter with an expression of love twisted with worry, “I know you are capable, sweetheart. I know you will make me so proud.”

Not a sound left Elle’s lips. The little girl looked up from the floor and marveled at the hallway walls: a turquoise ocean of pink jellyfish, purple barnacles, and red King crabs scuttling on the peach sand. Had someone painted these on the walls at home, she thought, they would have been in big trouble. But it seemed allowed here, and she began to skip. The brown doors wedged into the painted panorama seemed out of place, or fake. Wow-mouthed, she touched a yellow eel snaking between sea-weeds and was shocked – such walls should have been warm.

“Elle do you understand me?”

“Yes yes, Mommy, I’ll do my best,” Elle answered in confident quickness.

Classroom 1A was ahead. A carpet of light burst through the door polishing the linoleum into a glinting white, which made the little girl squint. Elle turned, shielding her eyes with her free hand, and it was suddenly all so beautiful. The back wall of the classroom held a massive rectangular window popping with sunlit stickers. Her eyes fluttered over the yellow stars and cinnamon-red planets down to the sweeping rainbow and lamb-puff clouds just above the toucans, parrots, and sparrows swooping through a rainforest howling with black monkeys, pouncing tigers, and spotted snakes slithering through underbrush. Elle laughed in awe, tickled by the same mystery she finds in cartoons and stories with magic. The colorful, glowing glass made her believe, for a moment, that her drawings could make imagination seem real. Other kids were already here, she noticed, playing on a red rug in the far right corner of the room. But that beautiful window with those bright stickers recaptured her attention.

“Good Morning Elle, you will learn all about our world and solar system.” A smiling man with a gaunt face and thick glasses squatted down in front of Elle. She stepped back, frightened to see such a skeletal face up close, wondering how such a thin little nose could support those heavy glasses. He smelled of wool sweaters and had a monkish look overall; her eyes followed the shine of his bald spot moving inside a thick halo of brown-grey hair. Then Elle nodded and tried to overcome her nervousness by saying in a matter-of-fact way that she already knew that the earth is the fourth planet from the sun. She glanced up to find her mother’s smile. It was not there. The teacher chuckled.

“Honey, this is your teacher, Dr. Holidean,” Her mother said and let go of Elle’s hand to glance at her watch (7:52 a.m.), ”and he knows very much so be sure to listen to him.” The teacher told his new student to hang her book-bag in the cubby with her name and join the others on the red rug in the corner where she could read or draw or, as the poster with a monkey itching

his furry scalp exclaimed on the near wall, "Puzzle over a puzzle". Elle's mother bent down and gave her little girl a kiss on the cheek. "Be good," she stated.

"Oh, I can already tell she will be," Dr. Holidean chimed in and winked at Elle, "I'll teach her everything she needs to know and more." The cardinal rule for an educator, he knew, was that one shall develop trust within the child; he would inculcate Elle with the comforting idea that *he* was the right teacher for her. He will give his student the awareness to understand her place in the universe. "For example, sweetie, the earth is the *third* planet from our great big sun, which can hold a *million* earths."

Elle ducked her face, cheeks reddened by a pang of embarrassment. She did not want to look up and know her mother's disappointed expression. As Elle walked to her cubby, she told herself to only say the answer if she was sure about it. Elle looked back to the doorway, her mother was laughing with the teacher, holding her head, her hair, still. Then she thanked him, almost kneeling as she shook his hand, and then thanked him one more time, before she waved to her little girl and walked out.

After putting away her book-bag, Elle rushed to the massive window with the bright stickers. The fog worsened outside and it seemed like a little troublemaker was shading over the world with a pencil. Water droplets trundled down the trunks of tree stickers; Elle followed one with her finger. Their roundness reminded her of ladybugs. Her first masterpiece, she decided, will be a drawing of those tree stickers. The picture will amaze and impress everyone and prove what she already knows: she is both a great drawer and everything good her mother sees in her. Elle picked out a sheet of green construction paper that was stacked on a desk near the rug, chose

a brown marker, and sat on the rug next to a little girl with a pretty blue bow in her wavy red tresses.

Boys and girls arrived one, two, three and shrunk the space upon the rug. Their chatter and laughter soon resounded all the way down the hall. As more came in, the teacher gently told a boy to stop climbing onto the heating unit, and warmly warned a tall girl that running is dangerous in a classroom. At last when all arrived, Dr. Holidean sat down behind his metal desk, which faced the kids, cornered opposite of them. He had one last sip of his organic roasted-barley tea from his bio-degradable thermos, which he set aside near his Bauhaus-inspired pencil holder and a glass apple blown in Italy – gifts from past students. He glanced at the big clock over the door (8:03 a.m.), quickly folded up the day's New York Times, and made a note in his planner to critically respond to the article, "China's Kids Exceed and Succeed". After he withdrew a little piccolo from a desk drawer, he played the national anthem as he marched in place like the leader of a procession; the trilling tune captured the gaze of every little student. With their attention in his control, he told the children to stand with hands over their hearts and recite the Pledge of Allegiance to an American flag that hung beside the clock over the door. Dr. Holidean smiled and assured everyone that they did a great job and had beautiful voices while he put away his piccolo. He was most pleased to hear that every student chanted all the right words; perhaps he would teach the national anthem in two weeks.

"Look at you all," Dr. Holidean began to profess and held out his arms as wide as his smile, "You are all astronauts and artists. You are all presidents and professors. There is nothing you cannot do. You are all the best!"

How Elle's little eyes shimmered. She thought that it was much better - more real - hearing this from a very smart teacher than cartoons and Mommy. Elle imagined herself as a master artist and drawer with a white smock and gigantic easel. In a way, the nice teacher sounded like her Mommy; he seemed supportive and she wanted to show him too that she could draw amazing things.

Dr. Holidean continued to proclaim the excitement of school. Numbers are magic in logic, he asserted, and words, oh, words are plane tickets and camel rides and castle adventures in France and even hikes on Mars. He paused for a moment gazing over his congregation of little scholars --- and was overcome by an eagerness to teach and fill each little human with a passion for wisdom. And so, a little behind schedule (8:12 a.m.), he began the database enhancement procedures. The children drawing and reading on the red rug were called up one, two, three for a digital photograph that would be placed into his computer's Little Scholar Database – a program that had garnered national attention for effectively and efficiently tracking a student's educational development. Everyone smiled their biggest for the camera. Soon after the final flash, Dr. Holidean explained that there was no better way to turn the cobwebbed cogs of the morning brain than with drawing exercises and had the children sit in the rowed desks before the blank slates of the chalkboard.

Elle folded up the green construction paper with her drawing of two beautiful brown trees and put it in her dress's breast pocket, which made it bulge. Dr. Holidean handed out sheets of white paper, new twelve-packs of crayons, and gave eight minutes of quiet during which students would draw their house and family. He explained that he wanted to get to know the students better; it was part of his duty to make sure the children held necessary learning abilities for his classroom. The students all scribbled right away. First, Elle thought of what she wanted,

and then began to draw it on her leaf of paper: a brown line for the ground (a dandelion here and there), a blue car, her family in orange stick figures (a black beard on Daddy and black high heels on Mommy which made her tallest), and then a sun sprouting rays in the top corner, purple like her warmest blanket. Oh, and Pavlov, their tan dachshund (his belly white and pink). Her feet tapped against the floor as she examined her work -- this was sure to make it on the cork-board in the kitchen. It was, she agreed with herself, her very best work. Dr. Holidean paced between the rows chanting “well done”, “great job”, and the occasional, extra-gentle, “could you tell me what this is, please?” Elle grinned up at him as he bent down to her picture.

“Elle, could you tell me what this is, please?” he cooed and pointed to the purple circle in the corner.

“Oh, that’s the sun. And this is my family and flowers in my yard. My dog too, a dark-sunned I think. Do you like it?”

After stroking his chin, he made sure he was smiling and sounded forgiving when he told Elle not to worry and draw the sun and clouds on another piece of paper. He told her to do her best and moved on.

The teacher seemed just as nice as Daddy or Mommy but did not seem to like what she had drawn. At home, her drawings were deemed a “very nice” at first glance, if not tacked onto the cork-board by the refrigerator. Elle felt a sudden emptiness, as blank as her new paper. Her thoughts became jumpy, blurring together into fog. Can she still be the best drawer? Are many clouds better, or just one? Puffy or smooth? Both? Most of the others had their pictures accepted and collected by Dr. Holidean, to be framed later by elbow macaronis. They got to return to the red rug and play out loud. She was not alone though, four other kids had to draw more things, all

of them scribbling away already. But she was glad that her Mommy had not seen her mistake, and her parents could still be proud even if her teacher might not be. Though, she knew she had to get it right this time, and the nervousness made her have to use the bathroom. She looked back at her picture, her eyes recapturing colors that swirled in her imagination and stopped. Blue crayon in hand, she began to draw her new idea.

Dr. Holidean returned to his desk with the collected pictures. He typed temporary notes into the Little Scholar Database about the children re-drawing at the desks. The primary canon of the system was that permanent marks shall only be utilized for significant instances of observed educational impairments, something of which future instructors might want to be warned when they are forwarded the Little Scholar Portfolios so they too can have the strategic opportunity of adjusting teaching methods and curricula per the individual. But as of yet there were no problems of a significant nature. Upon finishing his notes, Dr. Holidean returned to the students at the desks. The first boy got a pat on the back and an, “I always knew you could!”. Looking at another boy’s paper he nodded and said, “Ah-ha! There it is!”. He smiled as he walked to the girl two seats in front of Elle, and gave her a whistle and an, “Oh, lovely!”. The teacher then approached Elle, his thin lips stretched below magnified eyes. He bent down and stared at the picture, clasped his hands between his knees, studied the objects, wrinkled his brow. The light on his bald spot was white and focused, as if trying to burrow and enter his head.

Elle was quiet. Head bowed and neck stiff, she stared at her picture. It was exactly what he asked for: clouds and the sun. No wavy rays, or rain showers, or red moons. Nothing else, nothing extra. She watched the paper, wishing it would be snatched away by a happy hand.

“But, Elle,” he half-whispered and pointed to a globe in the middle of the paper surrounded by blue clouds, “why is this brown?”

“Well,” she said, thinking, eyes shifting between his pointy joint and perfectly cut fingernail. She forgot why she chose the chestnut colored crayon, “Why not?”

“Please, try again, dear, but really focus. Think of what color light we see from the sun, and just draw your best and brightest sun. Do you understand?” Dr. Holidean wondered about this little girl and his thoughts returned to the *New York Times* article, which was a testament to the importance of learning quickly and effectively in this competitive modern age. He was worried. The world, he knew, was an ever-hardening place and kids needed to develop sharp, strong minds to build their place within it. It was both his devotion and job to give children the mental tools to succeed and the confidence to use them with speed and efficiency. The clock made him frown (8:38: a.m.), a counting exercise with elbow macaronis was scheduled to begin in two minutes. He sighed, wishing he could build a time machine; if only he could freeze a moment and take Elle aside for a quick lesson or two.

Elle nodded to the teacher. A third piece of blank paper joined the two pictures on her desk, and the teacher’s shadow floated away from her. She looked over at the rug, her brows moistened and she started swinging her legs to keep herself from going to the bathroom. Most kids were flipping through picture books, or drawing whatever they wanted. The girl with the blue bow looked up for a moment, met Elle’s gaze, shrugged a little and focused back on her book. Elle wanted nothing more than to be on that rug with everyone else, side by side with her classmates who could draw. She grabbed her two pictures and tore them up. She did not like them. They were not like what the other kids had drawn, which the teacher liked, and probably

their parents would like too. She huffed and glared at the girl with the blue bow and the other kids; they probably thought she was a dumb drawer when she really was not.

Swiveling around on her seat, she peered through the massive window, past the stickers that were obstructing her view, and tried to find the sun. All was gray and cloudy outside, and the higher she looked the whiter the sky shone and she had to squint. Elle looked and looked until it made her so teary that she had to glance away, rub her eyes. But the answer was there, in the light, she remembered. Again she gazed up, but the light only stung and she saw strange splotches when she shut her eyelids. None of the crayons were that glinting color -- that was the only thing she saw, a glint. The crayon pack did not even have a sparkly silver or glittery gold color. Her little body quivered. She watched Dr. Holidean typing at his computer and she wanted to hide and plug her ears with her fingers. Her hands were pressed between her legs; she had to use the bathroom badly. Yet, more urgent was the picture. The stupid, impossible picture. Then an urge burst through her as suddenly as a cloud rip. She wanted to get up and walk away, out of the class room, down the hall and out of the school. The teacher and Mommy will be sad and that's that, and she hated to know that and felt sad herself. But Elle would rather have cut off all her Barbie's hair than put crayon to paper again. She was not as good as the others proved to be, their bests had earned quick smiles. There was no point in trying anymore, there was no glint color. Maybe the other kids had that in their crayon packs, or they somehow made it from two colors, but she could not, and that was that. She was missing something she had not realized before, and she felt incapable and bad like when she accidentally broke the bathroom mirror at home. All Elle wanted was to hear the words of "wrong" and "bad" and nod in agreement so that she could leave this school and end this day. The disappointment from everyone, she

thought, was fair punishment for her shortcomings in a classroom with smart kids who could draw the sun.

When Dr. Holidean stood up it felt like a daddy-longlegs was crawling inside Elle's stomach. She shivered with each one of his steps and – felt abrupt warmth.

The teacher came to Elle and wrinkled his nose and looked around before he realized what happened. Children sniffed and whispered on the rug. A freckly boy pointed at her and whispered to the boy beside him. She heard the word “lazy” after a boy stood up to see what she had drawn. Their faces were blank, expressionless, like racers at the starting line. Elle covered her face in her little hands refusing to cry in front of everyone.

“Sweetheart, follow me,” he said and led her by the hand into the hallway. Some children nodded in approval. Dr. Holidean thought about what could cause such a thing. Was Elle nervous about leaving her mother? The poor thing, he looked down at her bowed head; and she had not drawn anything either. His lauded philosophies about education derived from two simple commandments: gauge the student's capabilities and then tend to their strengths and weaknesses. He would have accepted a red or pink sun in addition to the normal yellow and orange because he knew that the world would have accepted that from her, but Elle seemed to lack basic observable knowledge, and there is no advantage or time in today's grueling world to be misunderstood. Would he be able to teach *her* without slowing down his lessons for the whole class? He glanced at his watch (8:44a a.m.); the class should have been arm deep in elbow macaronis four minutes ago. Though, Elle deserved everything, every advantage of this school and education -- but there could be problems for her grasping those opportunities. No one, by any means, is dumb, but learning is different for everyone. He continued to reason. It was not

unusual to recommend children to private tutors and lessons, which he had done many times out of concern. When he met the child's mother earlier this morning, he knew from a glance that she was the type that would do or give anything to ameliorate her child's academic development; and she would enforce his recommendations strictly, almost desperately. But he too shared in parental worries, and thus strove to teach all his pupils every ability and way of thinking necessary to live happily, comfortably in today's world. And it was always better to have caring parents than negligent ones. Besides, he rationalized, his educational dogma and methods have been sound for years, deriving from his Ph.D. in elementary-level pedagogy earned in Georgetown. In fact, all his achievements burst out of his passionate faith in education's limitless gifts. Most teachers don't even care enough to analyze the psychology of a child's drawing. Even his Little Scholar Database was his selfless offering to education's improvement, and it was praised with fervor. Everything pointed to the fact, as it always did, that he was doing his job better than right, and that, unfortunately for the poor, sensitive thing, she may need extra educational attention, if not a slower paced class.

They entered the bathroom across from the classroom. Elle was patting her dress down, eyes shut hard, as if ready for a flu shot. Dr. Holidean bent to one knee and lifted the girl's tear-glazed chin.

"Elle, do you have to use the bathroom anymore?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

She nodded.

“I’m afraid I’ll have to call your Mom since you don’t have a change of clothes.”

Elle’s eyes widened, “I want to go home.”

Dr. Holidean sighed, and it ached his heart to see a child want to leave school. School is fun, learning is finding buried treasure chests. But he understood that humans have brains of all sorts along the intelligence spectrum. Poor thing. He will recommend a tutor tonight, when he calls Elle’s home. “Ok dear, let’s go down to the main office. And Elle, I still believe you are the best at something out there,” he said and smiled into her wet eyes.

Elle followed the blocks on the linoleum floor – grey then white then grey then white – all the way to the office with the old lady. She held her Barbie, its little blond pony tail swishing with her steps, and she wanted to rip her book-bag off and stuff into a trash bin. Dr. Holidean talked to the lady in the office, sighed as he gazed at Elle and told the little girl that school is fun if she gives it a chance, and after checking the time (8:45 a.m.) he went back to his classroom of children that were ready to learn. In compliance with the process, he would go on to cogitate, and then make a permanent note in Elle’s Little Scholar Portfolio: *The student has shown a cognitive impairment in terms of a request to draw a simple picture of the sun, there is an exhibited agitation and anxiety within a classroom setting; she urinated in her seat without any inquiring for the bathroom.*

Elle’s mother arrived in fifteen minutes and thanked the old lady before she frowned and took Elle by the hand, who was undressing her Artist Barbie. They did not speak until they stepped outside into the mist. It smelled as if fish were hiding all over, but it was likely the drowning worms on the pavement, Elle thought.

“We will talk at home,” the mother stated, nodding in the direction of her car. “I better not find out that you were lazy, or playing with toys when you were supposed to be learning.”

Using a towel from the trunk, Elle sat in the backseat and picked at a stain on the door handle, distracting herself. She wanted to be in her room, under her covers with her Barbies. Under there she could make her own world, a world without disappointed Mommies and stupid classrooms and heavy throbbing feelings in her throat and head. She was good at playing Barbie, of that she was sure. And her best friend Stacy knew that too, and so did her siblings. She saw her mother look at the car’s digital clock (9:02 a.m.) and make a call.

Rolling down the winding driveway of the school, a world of grey wetness went on and on across the windows. Tree leaves drooped towards the ground and yellow flower petals sagged onto the tarmac. While her mother was talking on the phone, Elle pressed the window button and slid her window down as far as it went. She took out the green picture of the trees that rested close to her heart and looked at it. It was probably not good, she thought, and she wanted to yell “I’m sorry!” but felt it was useless; she dropped her drawing out the window. Since the wet, leaden fog would blur the drawing, she knew no one would ever see it again and she let out a breathe of relief as if she got away with hiding a stained dress from her mother. Elle looked back and watched the school recede on top of the hill and wished for the grey to erase it. But it was tall and wide and looking down on everything as if it floated above the fog, the fog that seemed to seep from its foundations; Elle was worried, very worried – she was sure that only from the school’s tall white towers could she see through the fog, and see her house, and grandma’s house, and every house in the world.

A Desperate Man Reads a Fairy Tale Titled “The Dance”

In a village nestled within a Carpathian valley, below the summer night’s Libra and Venus, an old man stumbled to the Ox Yoke Tavern¹. His vest and pants had splatters of dried mud, face was burnt red, but his black boots gleamed in the moonlight. Approaching the tavern, he glanced around -- nothing but empty streets, a cat’s eyes, and a few flickering orange windows on the nearby houses. He swigged from his flask before he stepped inside.

Heads nodded and murmurs rose from the old man’s entrance. Some elbowed their drinking mates to attention. No one greeted him, despite growing grins on each face. After balancing himself on the stool, he put his finger up. But the tavern keeper already had his order, a pint of beer, topped off and ready to serve.² It was on him, the tavern keeper said and returned to wiping glasses. Like everyone at the bar, he looked to the door time to time.

The fiddler at the end of the counter paused with his pint in midair. Catching sight of the glinting black boots, the old fiddler began to smile. He finished his drink, and walked to the corner of the tavern that served as his stage. Sitting on a bar stool, he withdrew his fiddle from its case and with his ear close to the strings he began tuning it.

¹ This global location lacks specificity, the tone is obviously not reflective of reality, and it lacks relatability to a middle class American. I do not know what my wife sees in such a piece.

² The protagonist drinks in excess, even in old age, the bar tender knows him personally, and he has no one so far – friends or family. Am I supposed to understand him when I do none of those things, and have plenty of respectable friends with whom I golf?

After an hour, a stout but soft-cheeked woman burst into the tavern and yelled, “Where is that worthless goat?”³ Her eyes were aflame, strands of black hair splayed out of her tousled bun. She breathed as if she had been running, or had been building a volcanic anger.

The tavern hushed. No one dared do anything more than stare down their drinks. Head hung, the old man met his wife’s scowl; his pleading look broke apart with a hiccup. Using a rag from the pocket of her house dress, she began slapping her husband’s chest while bellowing obscenities reserved for the darkest corners of the tavern.

“You’re squandering all of our money, what little we have!” She spat, thrashing her towel at her husband.

The man shielded his face and replied, “No, no! I can sell our fattest hogs whenever we want. They’re practically worth their weight in gold, they are. Stop! Stop for a moment, will you? You’ll see. Next week. I’ll have your purse filled with money by next week.”⁴

In the midst of the fury, the fiddler began to play. The melody was rain -- startling, fresh, and invigorating.

³ The fat, controlling wife trope is introduced. It lacks a degree of originality, and I can relate it very little to my quiet and slender life partner, Hannah. Is she doing yoga upstairs, or is she crying again?

⁴ I do not blame the wife; my little sympathy is with her. Realistically, the man should have been more practical and forward-thinking. A man must, of course, provide and not squander fiscal security. Sometimes, however, the need for fiscal security forces one to spend less time at home, but that is only normal, understandable – a small price to pay for assured future comforts. Of course, Hannah must know this.

The man stood, stumbled backward from his wife's thrashes.⁵ Then he grabbed her waist and shoved her backward; she held on to his hand and twirled back to his chest. Brandy on his breathe, she huffed and took two steps back. His heels beat the floor planks creating a rhythm that joined the fiddler's melody, and he danced, clacking his boots together and hopping and kicking and clapping. The woman let out a cry and twirled, holding up her dress while her feet moved in reserved fluidity that meshed into the booms of her husband's dance. The tavern erupted in laughter and cheering, the fiddler sweating and beaming. When the old man stumbled, his wife yipped and he recovered, grabbed her outstretched hand and followed her steps, her rhythm.⁶ It was they who led the music as they danced for one beautiful song.

The two left afterwards, to the dismay of the excited crowd. Her hand rested on his back and his on her waist as they stepped out of the door.

"Get yourself to bed you goat. And clean your boots," she said as she led him home. The fiddler's strings whined yet sang as they walked.

⁵ The old man makes a show of his foolishness. He lacks social awareness, shame, proper values, and self-discipline. I don't condone the violent catharsis of his wife's rage either. A more civil, conversational argument would make more sense, and be more effective, as my marriage experiences have proven.

⁶ This dance must be the "magical" element -- no one can love a man so out of control. How ridiculous. Love is sociological, rational. From a purely practical standpoint, the wife has little reason to stay with her lout of a husband. Other than dancing, perhaps, I have many of the desirable attributes of an ideal husband – wealth, intelligence, and discipline. I still can't see why Hannah urged me to read this.

The Ox Yoke Tavern then roared with dancing, clinking glasses, and laughter, as it did on most Tuesdays.⁷

⁷ Why does the wife stay with the old dancing sot? Why does Hannah want a divorce? What the hell does a story of magic have to do with anything?

Little Miss Georgia Peach

“No, cupcake. Left , right, left, right, twirl, blow kiss, and continue,” Darla’s thick thighs rubbed together as she demonstrated the catwalk to her daughter, Cookie. She twirled on the maroon carpeting of room 1217 and with puckered lips she made the sound of ripping Velcro as she blew a kiss. “Now, show Mommy.”

Darla judged as her little girl in the glittery bikini swimsuit strutted by the bed towards where she stood before the hallway door. Her child was imitating with adequate flash, and her lime eyes were popping quite well against her marshmallow complexion. Darla’s thoughts flashed to that skinny brunette employee at check-in, who asked in that fake inflection of curiosity if she was Cookie’s grandmother, or aunt, perhaps. Darla glared at her, her name tag – Lillian, written in pink, with hearts dotting the i’s; she was probably a girl who can get away with anything at work, just from her pretty little grin. Then Darla stated to Lillian that she was neither, and as she walked away felt burning in her stomach – more craving than anger – especially when Lillian said “G’bye beautiful” to her child. Such encounters remained in Darla’s mind, making her feel like wads of gum were stuck in the back of her hair and no one would tell her; she felt nervous, hungry, and wanted to freshen her lipstick, or eye-shadow. As Cookie strut forward, Darla’s immense shadow dimmed Cookie’s beauty.

“Smile!” Darla blurted, her fingers snapped to her face and poked dimples into her smile-pumped cheeks. She chomped her gum with a quick, smacking intensity -- a metronome on allegro agitato. With a flick of her hand Darla motioned for Cookie to imitate the smile.

Cookie beamed her biggest, displaying perfect rows of acrylic teeth -- except for a red smudge on the bottom right.

Sighing, Darla threw her hands up and let them fall, which made a whip-crack sound against her sides. “You’re biting your lips again. You haven’t done that for the past two pageants. You said you would stop for Mommy, don’t you remember?”

Cookie dropped her head and veiled her eyes with the curls of her wig, which was the same color as the plastic Tiger Lilies petrified in a green vase upon the nightstand. “I’m sorry, Mommy. But, I can’t be as pretty as you.” She crossed her arms and kept her eyes on the flecks of white in the carpeting.

“Sorry means it won’t happen again, sweetie.” With the wig now slightly mussed, Darla squatted to the child’s level and lifted her daughter’s chin, frowned. The errant curls were pushed into place and as Darla inspected the wig a yawn escaped from Cookie.

“Now, I want to relax tonight, like you, to let off steam for the big day tomorrow. So, the harder you focus, the faster we can take off the make-up and doo-dads and watch T.V. or go to the pool.”

Shaking her head, Darla wished she could jump inside the little body and finally win Little Miss Georgia Peach, for the two of them, her and Cookie. She imagined the joy from finally hanging the winning sash – framed, and behind glass – over the big screen in the living room back home. The whole neighborhood would know too, of course, after she throws a block party and invites everyone – even that twig-figured sunbather two houses over. Perhaps she would send a picture of Cookie in her sash to Lillian, downstairs – “From the most beautiful thing to stay in your hotel. Try and stay lovely, Lillian. XOXO”.

“Mommy wants you to win and be happy. You’re *so* beautiful, you know that, hon? You have to learn to use it.”

Darla grabbed her child's hand and kissed it, then stood and put a finger to her lips as she admired the glint of the glossy red lipsticks spiking out of the open cosmetic kit on the room's office desk. How lovely; they were the same reds Darla wore at Cookie's age. When she too was five, Darla was Blissfalls' charm – the prettiest little thing along Georgia's stretch of I-95. Attention came as naturally as breathing. In the local and then regional beauty competitions it was her sleepy eyes that melted the judge's *awww*'s into delighted sighs, and inspired near perfect scores; her baby blue eyes drooped at the edges, and coupled with a toothy grin, her expression exclaimed, "I'm so happy I got up to see you!" It never mattered what the announcers droned on about in their monotonous enthusiasm – hobbies: dancing and singing, dreams: to become a ballerina or nurse -- as long as on stage she kept her smile wide and eyes upon the judges. The world thought she was the picture of beauty, but a picture that was never truly finished, and therefore forgotten. Before Darla's fifth pageant, at which a tiara would have qualified her for the state-wide competition, she fell off the oak tree in her backyard and broke her ankle, fractured her tibia. She spotted a beautiful red leaf near the top that she was sure everyone would love to see in her hair. Four months in a wheelchair put her below the adoring gazes of the cheek-pinchers at the grocery store, the forehead-kissers at church, and the coddling of her Momma, who opened a hair styling salon a month after the accident. The endless sitting plumped her legs and belly little by little, year to year. Looking back, Darla knew she had the whole package at one point – the cuteness, the adorable toddle, the smile -- and she could have hoisted her beauty to new heights, fame, and, somehow, probably a more noticeable happiness.

"If I'm mean it's 'cause I love you and want you to win. I know you're a star, so be like one. Now, jellybean, show me the swimsuit strut again."

Cookie pumped her hips, elbows swinging, and had not taken three steps before Darla interrupted. "Gracitude!" Darla squawked at the duck-like walk of her child, "Toes straight. Wrists tight. Grace with attitude!"

Her daughter then twirled, flipped a curl with her right arm, blew a Velcro kiss, and began to walk back towards her mother but froze. Darla had folded her arms; Cookie pouted her Maraschino lips and looked down at her heeled shoes.

“Use the left hand to flip the curls, you know this, honey. As much as I love the caterpillar, the judges won’t.” A small oval birthmark, which had to be shaved twice a month, nestled in the warmth of the child’s right underarm. Each mistake increased the hunger, the craving in Darla. “Just pretend you’re on stage, and I’m one of the judges, and you have to impress me.”

“Okay, Mommy,” whispered Cookie and looked up, “But I’m still pretty, right?”

“The prettiest.” Darla smiled, “And don’tcha forget it.”

Darla glanced at her watch and mumbled to herself about there never being enough hours in a day -- it was time for gown rehearsals. Like dressing a doll, she slipped blue stockings over her girl’s shiny legs and strapped her into royal blue two-inch heels. The gown that maxed out two of Darla’s credit cards was creamy blue, flowing silk chiffon, and had been fitted with thin wires to parachute out at the bottom like an umbrella. What won the tiara at each pageant so far was the way Cookie’s fairness glowed against the blues and how her eyes glistened from two tactfully placed saline drips. One judge in Summerville’s annual pageant deemed her “a porcelain doll,” and asked to photograph her in the swimsuit outfit.

When her daughter flawlessly walked to the door and back, Darla grinned and her stomach lightened with excitement. Her daughter would outshine any tanorexic, wannabe model! The sassy confidence Cookie would gain from winning the big one would be invaluable for her future, perhaps even career, Darla thought; her abdomen groaned – a desirous appetite for

victory, fame, beauty, and youth began to suck away at her patience and compassion. Why didn't Darla ever win it? Once, she could have easily won it!

“Walk it again, sugarplum.”

Frustration and hunger mounted over three hours of practice and the mere sight of her child irritated Darla to the point of canceling the tiara ceremony rehearsal; the day's performance did not deserve the ceremony, where she crowns her grinning child with the old, refurbished Tiara from her own first win. Too many mistakes. Inexcusable. Darla knew that she herself, if she were Cookie, could easily have fixed each flaw. Cookie sulked on the bed and wiped her eyes and nose with her forearm.

“You gotta earn it, sweetums,” Darla shrugged, and began pinching off Cookie's synthetic lashes. She dropped her child's flippers into disinfectant solution and removed the wig and makeup that smeared together on the hand-towel like a smushed butterfly. When Cookie made a whistling noise from sucking in air between her splayed milk teeth, Darla scoffed. Silence. Hanging the gown on the closet's doorknob, Darla tossed a comb to Cookie who brushed her own amber hair and then dressed into J. Crew sandals, black leggings, and a pink shirt with a faded blue Cinderella's Castle in the middle that her parents bought her in Disney Land. Cookie pressed buttons on the TV remote, but Darla had unplugged the TV the moment they came into their room.

“Just wait and rehearse in your head,” Darla said as she ironed the bikinis, and then added some curlers onto the wig that rested on a faceless white ball set on the room's office desk. She reorganized the makeup and decided to apply some of the green eye-shadow above her blue eyes. No, she thought, the green would make her eyes look beautiful not bruised. She dared not look in the mirror, but wondered what Lillian would think, or if she would notice at all.

“Where are we going, Mommy?” the girl asked and picked her nose, but turned slightly to hide the guilty finger.

“Huh? Oh, we’re gonna fix your fingernails somewhere.” She turned from the window rubbing her lips together to spread the deep red of Rouge Queen, and grabbed her purse from the office chair. She replayed the little girl’s strut in her mind again, looking for the source of its awkward motions.

Cookie quickly retrieved her Barbie purse from her backpack and put on bubblegum flavor Chap Stick, which she soon scraped off with her teeth. On the way out, Cookie slipped one of her soft, plump hands into her mother’s, who took it and squeezed it, noticing that it turned a succulent pink.

“When we get back I sure could go for some juicy steak, sugar. But just for tomorrow’s sake, you know. Maybe a nice veal or something,” Darla gulped while walking down the hall. It was a strict break from her pre-pageant dieting principles for both of them: salad, low-fat dressing, and two tablespoons of white tuna. But Darla ignored her standards, even more so when Lillian waved only at Cookie from the check-in desk. Darla popped a square of gum into her mouth, grinding it between her molars as she stared at her skipping child. She wanted, craved only one thing: to be Cookie.

“Can I eat chicken strips, Mommy?”

Walking through the parking lot, Darla was about to tell her child that fried food before a competition was a ridiculous idea, but she looked down at the soft white flesh of Cookie’s little face.

“Chicken would hit the spot, actually.”

Darla's stomach had groaned ever since she left the room, but even more so as the manicurists kept calling Cookie the cutest little thing that ever walked into this town. Darla smiled at the comments out of politeness, and told Cookie on the drive back to the hotel that we should be grateful for everything we have because we could lose it all in a minute. The world won't give a spit either. Stomach rumbles filled the rest of the drive home.

Darla was relieved when the check-in desk was empty, as she quickly dragged Luce by it. When they arrived back to room 1217, Darla plugged in the TV for Cookie and told her to let her nails dry. Her child, as if by some sixth sense, found the cartoons before Darla could blink. This was the last thing Darla wanted: a distraction, a box with millions of pixels gushing bright colors that would shatter Cookie's focus. But glancing over the laminated menu on the office table she saw there were chicken fingers, and drumsticks, and even wings. Darla salivated – slowly looked over her child who was prone on the bed, kicking her legs – and swallowed.

Darla grabbed the phone and dialed Room Service.

“This is room 1217, we'd like to order a bite or two. Yeah, yeah she was my daughter,” Darla sighed more than chuckled, “but listen, we're famished. Hey Cookie, what do you want for dinner?”

Cookie swung her head towards Darla, eyes ablaze, “chicken strips, please!”

“You get that? Okay, and I'll have...”

Darla noticed her child's excitement, how it pulsed through her little pale calves as she swung one, then the other, up and down, making little booms on the bed. How she yearned for them! If only Darla could have those cutely plump legs again, like when she was five.

“Oh! Now I know -- I'll have the drumsticks please. And just water for us both. Yes, the sooner the better, 'preciate it.”

Hanging up the phone, Darla felt a deep, cosmic hunger as if a black hole was pulling at her stomach. She stared on at her pretty child, her fleshy little legs and arms. So much beauty, she thought, and yet she stares at cartoons like average kids when the fickle mirror is always so kind to her. Then a craving, a human yet misunderstood force stretched out and rumbled her gut, her neck craned forward and her tongue pushed against her incisors. The food she wanted was before her, thick and juiced with youth and life. Her underarms moistened and she tap-tap-tapped her French-manicured fingernails on the office table. She watched Cookie examine her nails, wondering if those little digits were softer than a cut of filet mignon.

Two knocks on the door broke Darla's daze.

"Coming, coming."

Lillian, in a maroon shirt and black pants with blacker stains held a plastic tray with two foam boxes. A warm touch on the back of her leg made Darla jump; Cookie peeked out from behind her.

Lillian bent down and grinned her white teeth at Cookie. "Oh, she's just the cutest. I could eat her up!"

"Haha," Darla shouted more than laughed, "Thank you, Lillian! How much did you say I owe you?"

It was everything at once. Lillian, still pretty in her stained server's uniform, and Cookie showering in compliments as she always did. Nothing for Darla. Never anything! Hunger growled in Darla's stomach as she tried to separate her bills. She gave up and told Lillian to keep the change as she shut the door on her practiced smile.

"Let's eat, let's eat!" Cookie chanted as she skipped around the room, her nails glistening on each of her fingers.

Darla set the tray on the bed and opened the foam boxes. Cookie's box of chicken strips had way too many French fries, and gobs of ketchup and ranch dressing. Darla dumped the fries onto her own plate over the mound of coleslaw, and oozed the ketchup, guiding it with her finger, onto the fries as well. "Mommy will eat your finger fries, honey. We don't need so much unhealthy food."

"Alright, Mommy."

The bed creaked as Darla sat. She pushed the box of chicken fingers back towards her daughter and ravenously pinched six ketchup-drenched fries into her mouth. She chewed slowly, savoring the salty crunch and warm spongy insides of her daughter's little finger fries. After eating eighteen of them she tore into the drumsticks. Teeth ripping the white muscle fibers clean off the bone. She stopped only to flip her hair now and then. The meaty substance of the food was silencing the deep growls of her hunger, her desire to be young and pretty like Cookie.

Cookie yawned, her eyes heavy and half-closed. She had only eaten half of a chicken strip. Her head now rested on her folded arms on the bed and her hair, smelling of chemical roses, spilled all over comforter; the light, candied scent flared Darla's nostrils. She inhaled deeply; it was a sweetness she must have. Darla brushed her tongue all over the inside of her mouth, searching for sugar. She wiped up the ketchup on her plate with her finger and put it so far in her mouth that her tongue could swirl all over it.

Darla leapt to the phone and dialed Room Service again. She wiped her mouth on her forearm while it rang.

"Hello," Darla giggled into the phone, adding a confident cuteness to her tone, "we'd like some sweets tonight. Maybe you have cake? No, no. Oh, yes! A slice of vanilla cream sounds perfect." Darla glanced at her pallid child and whispered, "It's my daughter's favorite, you know

– can you write her name on it? Cookie?” She slurped in spit that dribbled at the hinges of her lips. “And green sprinkles, if you could. Yes that’s it, but,” Darla snickered like a child finishing a joke, “could we get it before we fall asleep?”

Room Service interrupted Darla humming, picking at her nails and cuticles. She was glad at first when it was Lillian at the door again. Having ingested the food, the juicy, plump, and cute food, she was convinced that she was prettier and more adorable than before. But as pretty as dumb Lillian? Darla grabbed the cake, slapped a five dollars into Lillian’s hand and locked the door.

Darla plopped beside her drowsy child, whose back gently rose and fell with each little breathe. She picked up limp little Cookie, setting her on one thigh, and pressed her face against the girl’s marshmallow-soft cheeks. Cookie drooped forward with exhaustion but Darla gripped her to her abdomen. She swiped some icing off the cake with her finger and put it on her daughter’s nose.

“Hom nom nom! I’m eating your cute little nose!” Darla chuckled and half-slurped the icing off with a very wet kiss. It tasted so sweet, as sweet as she imagined it would taste; it was satiating. The child blinked but did not react. Darla dabbed dollops of icing onto Cookie’s hand and her cheek and sucked them away with big kisses. Giggling, wide-eyed, she felt like a god controlling fate itself, devouring the source of all threats and fears. She felt more powerful than Zeus! Then she grabbed the slice of cake and opened her jaw as wide as possible, teeth bared, and bit “Cookie” clean off.

While Darla’s stomach filled with cake, Cookie itched herself vigorously on the bed as if covered in sudden pricks of acidic hotness. Darla belched, and Cookie turned and for a moment clung onto her mother’s bosom, but did not wake. Darla eased Cookie onto the bed. The mound

of chicken bones and cold chicken fingers was gross to Darla; she shut off the TV and left the room, trying to skip down the hall to throw away the icky trash.

The light from the hallway poured into room 1217. When Darla returned, Cookie lay on the beige comforter covering the queen bed of their hotel room. Cookie squirmed some but surrendered herself to motionless slumber. Darla quietly turned the doorknob, eased the lock shut. For a moment she thought that something was wrong with her daughter; the parking lot lights cast a faint glow over the pale child making her seem like a visiting ghost. Darla drew the blinds, closed the curtains. Without a sound she undressed, leaving on her purple Minimizer bra and her skin-colored Control briefs that stretched up past her belly button. She remembered her first pageant and pretended to pose for the judges, spun her imaginary parasol, and smiled shyly ahead. Shuffling, her feet felt her way to the bathroom door as she carried the heavy, silver cosmetic case. The hard scalp of the wig balanced on top of her other hand, and she hummed “itsy bitsy spider” – her favorite tune as a little girl.

The nightlight candle beside the sink glowed a faint orange, and when Darla removed its batteries the mirror turned black; this was meant to be her reward, a surprise. Opening the cosmetic case on the toilet lid, her stomach fluttered. After over a year of competitions with Cookie, her hands knew the precise place and color of every cream, pencil, lipstick, and beauty product. First, Darla applied the foundation to cover the big freckle next to her right eye. Then she patted some blush to each cheek, and the tickles made her giggle like when she and her Momma blew dandelions onto each other’s faces before she fell from the tree. The glittery sea-green eye-shadow was painted over her eyelids and eye sockets up to the hairs of her manicured brow. Oh, yes, she picked out Cookie’s pale red lipstick, Vulpine Sky, and lathered it onto her lips smacking and rubbing them together. And finally, she lifted the wig off of the air freshener

can on the toilet tank and pulled it over her own amber hair. She imagined herself wearing a blue sash – Little Miss Georgia Peach flashing with rhinestone – with everyone in front of the stage, judges too, standing and clapping for her, except those people like Lillian, who stood in the back and were forced to watch someone obviously prettier than them steal all the attention.

She took a deep breath to settle the hummingbird fluttering in her stomach. Darla flipped the lights and did what she had yearned to do for years: she looked into the mirror with her practiced, straight-toothed smile -- that soon transmogrified into a gaping frown through which the hummingbird in her stomach escaped. Her eyes were like two green rubber balls from fifty-cent toy machines in Walmart. The crow's feet wrinkles had not left the corners of her eyes and the skin on her burnt-red cheeks was still too easily pinched. Sun-drained slugs quivered around her open mouth, and the mane of fiery curls mocked her, standing askew on her head no matter which way she pulled or pressed. She looked nothing like her little child who lay silent on the bed, almost breathlessly silent. Her tongue cringed, drew in on itself. Gagging again from the molasses-thick smells of synthetic sweetness she doubled over the bathtub and vomited. A purging of acerbic sludge like half-eaten entrails surged from her mouth and dripped through her stinging nose. Shivering, sobbing she turned on the cold water and rinsed her mouth, gargling and spitting through tears. She wanted to hold her daughter who was never a cold mirror; she wanted to smash the mirror for her daughter. No one but Cookie looked up at Darla with such certainty that the prettiest hair, voice, nails, eyes, laugh, and smile were only her Mommy's.

Darla stood, wobbled, wrapped herself in a towel. Feeling empty, a new craving had filled her again and she desired to be by her daughter. Cookie shrieked as Darla opened the door and she pressed her face into the pillows, crying hysterically.

“Baby, it's me! What's the matter?” Darla rushed over to her heaving daughter and rubbed her back.

She peeked out from behind the pillow. “I got scared! I thought you were a monster, Mommy. I woke up. I thought you were going to eat me,” Cookie said gasping for breath. Her watery eyes squinted and she drew her head back, “Why are you wearing my hair?”

“I’m sorry, Cookie, let me just go put it back. And wash off.”

“You can wear it, I don’t mind. It looks better on you.”

Darla wiped her cheek, “Sit up Cookie. I think I forgot to do something earlier.” From under the bed Darla pulled out a small lock box that always followed them on their pageant trips. The code was Cookie’s birthday. Darla cleared her throat.

“And now, ladies and gentleman,” Darla gave her best impression of the baritone-voiced host, “the winner of Miss Georgia - no - Miss Universe is,” she drummed her palms on her thighs, “Miss Cookie Landers!” She placed her old Tiara on Cookie’s amber hair – her daughter looked as if confetti and balloons had just fallen from the ceiling.

“Am I really pretty enough to be Miss Universe, Mommy?”

“Yes, baby,” Darla hugged her daughter. And when she felt the little hands reaching, trying to embrace as much of her as possible, Darla closed her eyes and thought of nothing. A peaceful equilibrium of nothing, when the being is sated by the earnest, equal exchange of simple joy.

Sasquatchism

March 6th, 2004

Hi Momma and Hillary,

I'll try to be as honest with you as possible. Father seems to be doing okay, despite his insatiable appetite for meat and his relative obliviousness towards his own safety. But as you know, he was already like before I left with him for Canada to treat his condition: Sasquatchism. I can't recall if I told you, but I obtained an inconspicuous job as a pharmacist in Wicharya, a logging town on the northern border of Manitoba and Saskatchewan. And we live in the woods, birch and spruce trees everywhere, in a big vacation cabin 45 minutes from the closest food store – he's less likely to be seen out here. While I'm at work I bolt the door shut from the outside, and the first thing I installed were bars on the windows, so I have him contained for his own safety. No need to worry. And though I only fulfilled three years of my doctorate studies for physiological medicine before we drove to Canada, I want to remind you that I was at the top of the class; thus, when I tell you about the medications I'm formulating I want you to be at ease because everything is under control. I treat Father well, he is my patient. You and Hillary must be curious how he's doing, let me explain the latest results of my studies.

Father's chest measure 4.6 feet across and he is 2.1 feet taller than me at 8.6 feet. Muscle mass has increased slightly around the quadriceps (thighs, trapezius (upper back), and pectoralis major (chest) since you last saw him, and using two scales I was able to determine an estimation of his weight: 413-437 lbs. His feet, if you're wondering as I did, are indeed big as they measure 2.3 feet long. But they look more human than apish. Much of him still looks human to me. The brown fur that covers his body has thickened as well (while I just seem to be losing mine), and

he refuses to wear shirts as it makes him perspire profusely. Of course, this must be a natural reaction as he adjusts to new body temperature levels from increased coarse hair growth. Though for decency's sake I require he wear sweatpants when I'm around. I assure you, his discomfort from clothes is from the physiological changes he currently experiences and he does still value and understand specific standards of human dignity and decorum. The toilet seat is always clean, if you want a good example.

Father ties his hair back in a pony tail, and his sideburns connect with his beard now and it looks like a wiry mane around his tan face. His eyes are the same though – that gentle green. When he walks his chest tilts forward and his lower jaw hangs a little. Do you remember how people used to perceive a curt rudeness in his voice at the grocery store and Hillary's track meets? After reading a few studies on tracheal and larynx development I have concluded that the grumbling, guttural tone in his voice was likely caused by increased testosterone production coupled with the elongation of his trachea, his throat, essentially, and that the perceived "rudeness" in his demeanor was clearly unintended as its cause derived from physiological, not psychological, transformations. It only goes to prove, Momma, that Father does indeed have a disease -- a curable physiological disease -- which I term as Sasquatchism. I promise, I will find a cure. I know how painful it was when he would confine himself in your bedroom and go through boxes of Jerky in front of the TV. You tried to hide it, but you cried frequently. But it's okay now as he can't cause you, or Hillary, that pain anymore. And I'm fine as well. Remember how he laughed, and had this ebullient way of talking? I'm sure I can bring that back.

Most days, Father spends his time reading history books and watching the History Channel on three mattresses, his bed, which is upstairs. I sleep on the futon downstairs, close to the front door. I can easily hear him move – his footsteps boom and make the plates chink in the

kitchen cupboards. Despite his background in pediatrics, he seems to indulge in history, specifically military history, and asks that I bring him certain books from the library. At his request, I checked out a book called *The Genius of Gustavus Adolphus's Winter Campaigns*. Even though he doesn't talk much, let alone looks at me, I can expect a concise diatribe at breakfast tomorrow morning against the loser in whatever conflict that book covers. He always does that, criticizes people who have lost; and he looks for what they should've done instead. It's a mildly interesting habit, but I'm more concerned about his absent-mindedness, his apathy. The other day, after I came home, I asked him to help me lug two coolers of meat into the house. Hunched over the kitchen table reading *Time* magazine, he took off his reading glasses and sighed as if I were bothering him, or was doing something pointless. And I had to remind him to wear his track-prevention shoes, which are sandals I made from wooden planks, for his own safety. He doesn't seem to realize the potential of danger to himself if he's spotted. I told him about the hunters, the trappers, and the government. Moreover, when I explained that I was dissecting possible diagnoses for his unhindered hair growth – which is really just a matter of isolating proper chemical compounds – he just nodded, grunted as if I just stated that the sky was blue. While carrying one cooler in each hand, which must have weighed seventy pounds each, he asked me if I saw any deer, and when I replied why he'd ask that, he asserted “Oh, no reason! No reason!” Strange. We don't talk much otherwise. He reads books, I read him. You probably know too that it's easier this way, with silence – no one gets hurt.

Do you recall how he used to cook stews for us, Momma? He still cooks for me, which is reassuringly human, and it's still mostly delicious. So there are plenty of empirically sound reasons to hope for a solution to bring Father back to normal, and then back to us. Father takes his time while cooking, seasons the stew for hours, and the house fills with stomach-teasing

smells as I pore over my studies of Hypertrichosis and Big Foot Hunting (for his protection). Silence isn't always bad, it has purpose too, you know? We eat together still. Of course, his portions are massive (he can eat a full steam pot of stew with ease), but that's just due to his new metabolic needs from physical growth. When he asks me how the stew is, he looks up at me from his plate in this almost hopeful way. I tell him it's good, and it is, mostly. Father still uses utensils too, which is encouraging. He has to pinch the neck of the tablespoon with his fingers because they are so large (his thumb is 6 inches long); sometimes he uses a soup ladle though. I believe it is from papillae mutations on his tongue, but venison is his meat of choice and is a prominent aspect of his overall diet and the stews he cooks. Every day I can explain more and more things about him Momma, so it shouldn't be too difficult to find that cure.

Hair-Growth Medication number 11 (HG-11) has shown little of the intended effects. Father complains of head-aches occasionally but I give him plenty of Ibuprofen. However, it's relieving that he follows my prescriptions. Five more days will prove HG-11's ineffectiveness, at which point HG-12 will be ready. I feel good about this new one, Momma. Father's acquiescence to take the medication seems to show a willingness to change, though physiological results are minimal at best. Is human medicine ineffective on something inhuman? Disregard that notion. It's silly. It makes no sense in my studies – Father must be human.

Anyway, Father is washing dishes now. He glances out the window time to time as he wipes the dishes dry. Before he goes to bed I'll let him onto the porch to smoke a cigarette. I am yet unsure of how aware Father is of his appearance as a man-ape since he often leaves the house to smoke his Marlboros without his track-prevention shoes. It could be that he finds his animal instincts more natural and has forgotten how humans may consider his appearance. No. It is mostly absent-mindedness, I assure you, Momma. Maybe you think I am too cautious, but it's

better to be safe than sorry. As he usually does, he will go upstairs to observe history's winner and condemn its losers. I'll make a coffee and study. I wish you and Hillary all the best (is she still the track star at Penbury Middle School?) Know that I'm working hard to fix everything, even if you didn't ask me to. Once my patient is cured, he can be Dad again. Don't worry.

Love,

Franky

October 18th, 2006

Hi Momma and Hillary,

Sorry about the infrequent letters. I'm much busier. Yes, we are both okay. And no, I don't have to go out and have fun with people. I'm sorry but I won't give you the address to the house – the less distractions the better. Besides, Alexander has been more difficult lately (I've started to call him Alexander as its more professional in terms of my medical goals, and a good doctor doesn't let familial emotions drive his decisions). So please just direct your letters to the pharmacy, you know, the address you've been writing to.

Alexander was displeasing today. Warning: what I will describe to you may make you uncomfortable, but it is essential to learning about my patient. I am writing because as a doctor I must remain honest to the patient's family, no matter what the condition of the sick individual. Let me consider where to begin.

I've owned a tranquilizer rifle for over a year now. You see, one year three months and twelve days ago I was napping at home after work, exhausted from analyzing Alexander's blood, mucus, and stool samples. Somehow, without waking me, Alexander snuck outside and started lumbering around or doing who knows what in the trees and bushes. I heard a shriek, popped up, rushed outside, and saw Alexander staring at Jasper, the local grocer, who was stumbling through the forest to his truck by the road, hunting rifle in hand. I called out to try to stop him, calm him, but he kept on running and I sprinted after him. He was overweight, frightened, and I easily caught up to him and knocked him out with a thick branch not ten feet from his vehicle. I'm not ashamed to admit that. It had to be done. My research had to be protected for my questions to be answered. What shocked me most was that Alexander just stood there, staring at me with a worried face when he was the one who should be worried! Now THAT was frustrating! Luckily, when Jasper came to I explained that he collapsed from dehydration after hallucinating something and had hit his head on the branch I used. I made sure Alexander was back in the house when I tended Jasper, and told him he could come to the pharmacy anytime for head trauma medication. Don't bother lecturing me about morals. That happened a long time ago, and I know what I did was right in the context of potential research, research that will tell us if we should treat Alexander as a human or animal (I've modified my experimental aims to answer this question to determine the necessity of creating a cure). Thus, to protect Alexander and my research, I obtained a tranquilizer rifle to be used on witnesses.

It seems today was similarly distressing. It makes me irritated just to think about it. I'm sure you can sympathize, Momma, once I describe what happened. I took Alexander outside to allow him some fresh air and an opportunity to hunt for deer (yes, he has been hunting deer for nine months now). Of course, I strapped the tranquilizer rifle to my back, in case any witnesses

stumbled across us. It's not hunting season, but you can never be certain of trappers or bird watchers. We were walking through the brush, Alexander skulking ahead of me smoking two cigarettes. He stopped, honed his attention to some rustling in bushes up ahead -- a spotted fawn darted out. Alexander sprung after the baby animal, his sweatpants ripped in two and his hind kicks flung them backwards towards me. I watched him, Momma, I watched him through my rifle's scope as he pounded across the ground, snapping ever branch in his path. He saw me aiming (I was afraid, and anyone else would have done the same), and then he roared and leapt up and smashed the fawn's spine with a clenched fist. It was disturbing. Alexander squatted over his kill, naked, and bit into its gut. How could such a creature -- a meat-crazed ape -- be anyone's father? Momma, as I'm writing I still wonder how that ravenous, self-indulgent thing could be the man who used to make homemade soft pretzels and take us bowling on Thursdays. I remember you told me to be gentle with him, but does he still deserve kindness when he acts so inhuman? No matter what, I will determine if he is human.

Well, he got up, walked over to me, covering his organ with one hand, and spit out the meat, wiped his mouth. He looked sorry for what he did, and made a pained whining sound, as if he were trying to say something sincere about himself. Something that would perhaps conclude my research once and for all. But I didn't look at him. You can't blame me. I was ashamed, angry. Why should a man's son witness the indignities of his, nevermind. I urged him to get home. He punched a tree, which made the oaf's knuckles bleed, and I picked off his fur off the bark (trappers notice these thing, you know).

I considered whether his aggression derives from seasonal cycles; the coming of Winter, I've read, affects different species of mammals in diverse ways. But that is inaccurate. I only stated that to relieve any similar worries you may have formed while reading. Rather, unbalanced

acetylcholine levels are more likely the cause of his mood and behavior. I highly doubt his actions derive from side-effects of my HG-34 and ADAA-7 (Anti-Depressant/Anti-Anxiety sample 7). Alexander already told me that the side-effects cause tingling sensations in his spine, some constipation, but nothing notable. He took a larger dose during dinner, despite the discomfort it causes him. I bet it's an apologetic sign for the killing. The inhuman rage. The selfishness.

Alexander gave me a difficult time with the nightly behavior analysis (a series of questions I ask to monitor his mood). First of all, he begged to watch the Battle of the Bulge Special, pleading it was only on once a year. Can you believe that? Here I am exhausting myself by studying his problems and he wants to watch TV. What's more, when I asked him what mood changes he noticed today he replied in his plodding, terse way, "I ask you it too", obviously referring to me aiming my gun at him. I looked him in the eye and gave him a stern response that this was not about me, and it was all about him, and it had always been about him, because he is the one who cannot control himself. He's like a child sometimes, Momma. I was too infuriated to finish the questionnaire. He turned the TV back on the instant I went back down stairs. How can someone be so inconsiderate? So narrow minded? I must remain objective however, and try even harder to see him as a patient. Emotion is only an impediment in my research.

Have you ever heard of endoscopic neurosurgery, Momma? I'm reading books on it. I can basically take a look at a brain and tell from deformities or abnormalities the cause of certain diseases and physiological dysfunctions. One book, called *Changing Minds*, explains how minimally invasive surgical techniques can actually change behavior by singing specific neurotransmitters in certain regions of the brain. Fascinating stuff – I will take a deeper look into it.

I still hear the tanks going off upstairs, machine guns. But I still have hope, and you should too. Especially when you can consider the possibilities that surgery opens. I have doubts of course, and it seems harder to believe the more I see, but I believe I can find out what my patient is – human or ape. Then, we can finally determine what Alexander should mean to us. I think about you and Hillary, and I'm glad to have heard she got an A in physics a while back. I know you tend to worry, so don't. Don't worry about me. I'm doing just fine.

Love,

Franky

May 23rd, 2008

Momma and Hillary,

No, I am definitely not coming home yet. Not until I'm finished. And your suggestion is crazy; I most certainly will not release AL-63 into the woods (I realized it was more accurate to refer to my patient as test subject AL-63 in my research entries; the identification code refers to the individual's initials and age). As per his status, AL-63 has lost his ability to speak, and I have attached a shock-collar to his neck for more control. I don't care how the collar feels on him. The control makes research much easier. In terms of demeanor, AL-63 seems tired and exhausted. I've only shocked him three times. He hardly resists my orders and has stopped watching TV on his own. At night, stars seem to interest him. All in all, AL-63 is resigned in behavior.

I am really writing to let you know that the surgery is today, in twenty minutes. I have obtained a bone saw, heart-rate and oxygen monitors, medical lights, and drip machines to conduct a successful,

painless surgery (all provided by my colleagues in medical school). The electronics all function properly, and I have an endotracheal tube to assist in breathing. How do I know everything works? Everything is attached to AL-63 at this moment, and everything is running smoothly, which is an important indicator of a well-planned surgery.

AL-63 is lying on his back on the kitchen table. His legs from the knees down dangle from the table, but that will not affect anything. I hosed the test subject while he thoroughly soaped himself, in order to minimize chances of infection. I also cooked him venison and mashed potatoes earlier, but AL-63 did not eat much. Breathing is calm; I can see from here his chest moves gently and evenly. At this moment, he is being anesthetized by a powerful sedative-analgesic injected into the Ulnar artery (in the wrist) and he should be unconscious and ready for operation in eighteen minutes now. AL-63 grabbed my hand when I inserted the drip tube and looked at me with his green eyes -- I don't know why; and I was only able to pull my hand from his grip after his eyelids batted heavily and closed. He looked as if he wanted to give me something, but that's beside the point, irrelevant. I have practiced on numerous pig skulls in the lab at the pharmacy, and I can hold my hands still for hours at a time. I've read everything on neuroscience and neurosurgery. My mind is steady. I know exactly what to do.

I will perform the surgery now. He looks peaceful, in his sleep. Our family will gain peace too, after I go in. I will finish writing once I've gathered my results. I have three hours before he wakes.

--

AL-63 has died, Momma. He died during surgery -- I didn't even notice. His breathing stopped but I was too focused on exploring his brain. I'm sorry if this is getting hard to read, I can't keep my hands from shaking. I'm not sure what I've done. Perhaps it will clear my head if I explain the results to you.

I shaved his head, sawed it open. His brain looked normal, grayish and raw like liver. The motor cortexes were of usual size, shape, and color. Peering into the crevices (the sulci and gyri), I found no

indication of any sort of cranial pressure upon the brain from skull growth. But my curiosity prompted keener examination. Deeper, the corpus callosum proved to be regular, the cluster of neurofibers was neither severed nor pressed by surrounding tissue. Furthermore, Broca's and Wernicker's areas were of average size, no indications of clots or oxygen-deprivation. I pinched off a tissue sample from the basal ganglia and quickly placed it under a microscopic slide. Focusing the high magnification, the nerve and brain cells became clear; they were unquestionably human. Every aspect of the brain was human, simply human.

I'm not quite sure what to do now. He is on the table still. I stapled the skull back into place, removed all of the electrodes, tubes, and wires. His hands were heavy and still warm – I crossed them over his chest before I covered him with my lab coat. I bet you'd know what to do, Momma. You would probably cry, but you would know what to do. None of my books told me what to do now.

I think I'm done. Finished. I imagined I would be leaping with glee the day I found the answer to what he really was. But I feel cold like the blade of my surgical scalpel. I'm shaking, as if something wants to come out of me. I have no medical explanation for this. But I hope my results will make you and Hillary happy, Momma. The patient is diagnosed. Sasquatch doesn't exist; no cure is required. A human has died. And so, Dad can be ours again. Now that I know he is human, I can care about him again, maybe love him. But I think he knew that, Momma. With his strength potential, he could've easily overpowered me, crushed my neck between his thumb and forefinger, knocked out the door, ripped off his collar, and ran away. But as I studied his pain, I think he saw mine. Like when I was twelve and Dad kept letting me try to beat him in chess for hours at a time – he knew I wouldn't stop until I knew I'd won genuinely; I exhausted him into defeat. (Please ignore the wet spots on the paper). And now he let me prod him with experiments and physicals and questionnaires until my journals were filled, until I was satisfied. I was still his son, Momma, even when he wasn't Dad to me.

I am coming home, soon. I'm very tired. But first I will burn down this house with Dad in it. No one else will bother him. I will not move a single book, journal, or tool of mine. Nor will I bring home even a follicle of his hair. He was Dad, is Dad, and will always be Dad, no matter what sort of good or bad memories we may recall. I want you to think that way too, Momma. And tell Hillary.

I will see you in a week or so. As the only pharmacist for eighty miles I have to prepare medications for some townspeople before my departure. Yet more importantly, I will need to buy perhaps 10 gallons of gasoline. I'm excited to see Hillary, maybe meet her boyfriend. But I feel like crying now. I will do that. When I get home, please have some stuffed cabbage prepared for me. I miss eating what I like. Thanks, Momma.

Love,

Franky

Earthworms in an August Storm

Thunder. Rain cut through the August heat and pounded against everything on the ground. Two earthworms felt pattering from above that reverberated down through the soil. Frightened, Lerryl listened to Murma and they both began to crawl upwards to survive. The earth was turning wet, suffocating, and foreign. Murma, aged two heat seasons and one frost season, wriggled through the dark soil which left a thick path for young Lerryl. Half the length of Murma, Lerryl had never seen the soil, his home, turn instantly supple as water seeped into every pore. Lerryl watched Murma squirm and push through the soil as if fleeing from an army of red ants.

“What was that roar? Moles?” Lerryl blurted. He had heard of moles and knew to be worried.

“Everything’s a mole with you, dirt-for-brains. It was a sky-boom,” Murma said in-between squeezing his way through water-cracked dirt. “You’ll sense the sky soon. It’ll be light blue with white. The sky-drops will hurt like a bitch but just move on. Follow close.”

“I think we can wait it out here.”

Murma’s muscular body split and widened a crevice in the darkness and pushed upward. The old earthworm spat out water. Lerryl shuddered -- the liquid tasted acidic and harsh, and looking up he noticed little sluices run against Murma’s sides as the earth softened and the pattering now sounded like pounding.

Though Leryll was able to secrete seminal fluids and have his eggs fertilized, making him an adult by earthworms' standards, he began to whimper. Feeling the width of Murma's earth tunnel, he knew he would not be able survive this flooding. But Leryll was more afraid of losing Murma than dying himself.

He would debate frequently with himself beside Murma, as he lounged under the onion grass roots that served as their home, declaring that rationally there was no environmental proof that worms should keep trying to live. Purpose? That was for creatures who could forge their future, not succumb to every jowl, jab, or jolt in the world. In the story of life, worms would always be too small and weak to resist any of the forces of nature that would end up driving their lives; their will mattered little, if at all. Murma never entertained such ideas, he called it shit-talk and often smacked Leryll on the head, which peeved Leryll, and only asserted that you couldn't know everything, and admitted that for as much as he'd seen he didn't know much. But he still knew more than, Leryll, who he called dirt-for-brains and flung some soil at his face, laughing when Leryll would spit it out. Other times, Leryll would follow Murma through their tunnels, chattering about the point, rather the pointlessness, of being a worm; he knew Leryll was listening even if he shrugged the whole time. Leryll would often cite the death of his parents, whom a drove of fire ants tore apart as they blocked a nexus tunnel and allowed him and his 12 siblings to crawl away. But once, Murma snapped, whipped Leryll in the face, and looked into his eyes as he shamed his companion for such cynical talk, saying that that he must be the densest tube of shit to think he knew everything – life isn't that simple. He demanded that Leryll attempt to control what he could – his home, diet, the direction of his tunnels. There are such things, Murma spat as he shouted, as moments of happiness, little victories, in perhaps the larger context of disappointment. Leryll was shocked and did not retort with why's -- felt confused

when he did feel shame. He respected old Murma more than anything, and to hear the disappointment in his tone, feel the sting on his cheek, was a fate worse than death. Despite being a largely humorless worm, Murma, Leryll conceded to himself, was the only little victory in his life. Were it necessary, Leryll too would plug an ant-filled tunnel with his body if it meant saving Murma.

Looking back, the young worm saw no practical reason for Murma to raise him. When the older worm first came across Leryll, who was stringy as a grass root, crawling aimlessly, with green veins showing through his translucent flesh, he was already thicker and longer than most worms, which made competing for food and burrowing much easier as an individual than a group. Yet Murma chuckled at Leryll, called him hopeless and ordered him, in a calm but stern tone, to follow him to some Dandelion roots nearby for a meal. Leryll followed Murma ever since.

Dirt fell onto Leryll and muddied his body and he felt helpless; the onion grass roots and the earthen tunnels he had known were disintegrating, turning unbreathable, unlivable and he was too small to do anything about it. Leryll rubbed against Murma's rear in hopes of forever clinging to the powerful earthworm.

"Focus, Lerr. Shake the dirt out of your head and remember: sense for ants, moles, buzzing flyers, feather flyers. I've been on the top before," Murma yelled over the pounding from above. "It'll be okay, dirt-for-brains. Keep your head straight and pinch, thrust, pinch, thrust. Contract all thirty four segments of yours. The surface hits harder than I do. Stick close."

Lerryl could not tell anymore whether it was his muscles trembling or Murma's or the earth itself. "How do you know we will be okay? How do you know those things won't kill us. All anything wants to do is kill us!"

Murma stopped wriggling. "Hell if I know. I saw my friends die out there before." Murma's abdominal segments puffed in and out from exhausted breathes. He looked at Lerryl, "But maybe we find something good out there. Like I found your dirty mug after the fire ant infestation. Now don't be a slug, let's go."

Lerryl followed in Murma's mucus-slicked trail through the familiar darkness of the soil. He realized how frightened he was when he released his bowels without meaning to. But he was sure that he was only afraid from the risk of losing Murma, or causing unhappiness to his friend by dying. Lerryl slunk after Murma; he would follow Murma into the pincers of any skeletal insect, the heat of the whiterock in the sky. Despite the confusion of everything else, being with Murma made sense. Perhaps they would mate soon, if things got better.

Murma groaned and whipped his head from the beating of the blinding sky-drops and the striking light. The daylight sliced through the dark and Lerryl felt the light for the first time as whiteness seared across his senses. Murma thrashed about, cursing, until he felt the grass, the ground, and muscled his way out of the dirt.

"Keep fucking close and follow. Pinch, thrust, pinch thrust! "

Water punched Lerryl from above as he emerged and sky-drops quickly pounded his head and front-six segments to the surface. Wet-rot-petal-chemical-grass-dung, cloying and bitter smells shocked his smell receptors. To the left were two massive plants that he had heard Murma talk about, their brown stalks thicker than a million worms which extended up and opened into a

flurry of green leaves bouncing and shining like wet quartz. A sky-drop burst beside Lerryl. Gasping and gurgling, he listened to Murma and moved as fast as his muscles could pulse. He felt no stronger than the grass blades mashing against him. Glancing up into the sky, the opposite of where he lived, Lerryl noticed the sparkling blue and the white puffs like dandelion fluff and froze as the sky-boomed; he had no words for the sight – it was beauty and death, life and pain – then a sky-drop smashing against his intestine compelled him to move on, quickly. Murma’s mucus still made it simple to follow, and Lerryl was at his companion’s back in no time. Lerryl saw a flat, black mass up ahead.

“We’ll be on a stone surface soon, “ Murma faced backwards and yelled with a shaking voice. “We can’t burrow for shit on it, and the sky-drops will hurt even more. But if -- but when we make it across we can rest in the shade of the Tomato leaves.”

“Okay, Murma. I trust you,” whispered Lerryl to himself.

The skin on his stomach scratched as Lerryl propelled himself up the little slope of the dark stone. From the top it looked like a river of tar, on which sat a shiny red animal perhaps, with four round glinting wheels as feet. Rain must feel like nothing to it. The size of the thing frightened Lerryl, and as he looked at the pipe-like mouth above one of the wheels he assumed it was a predator indifferently facing the desperate exodus of worms crawling and moaning across its stone domain. He wondered if it scared Murma. He had only seen Murma scared once, when he was about to burrow into a wasp nest. Two sky-drops hammered onto Lerryl’s esophagus and gizzard; writhing and whipping he moaned on the tar-stone as worms of all sizes wriggled by.

“Don’t fucking do that! They will see you!” Murma roared as he turned around and wrapped Lerryl into his body. “Move Lerr, Damnit move!”

Lerryl turned onto his bristles to grip the tar and pushed forward with wheezing breathes; soft white wisps were above while stone-hard blackness was at his feet, he felt tortured; a worm has no place, he thought, between such elements. Murma led again and the two grunted under the blows of the falling sky as they pushed, and pushed, and pushed. Pain and confusion ebbed Lerryl's fear. If he would give out, he would do so beside Murma. Death. Death started to make sense to Lerryl; he felt as if he knew now that death was slow and throbbing, which was meant to be the way out for weak, hopeless worms. Knowing he would die soon made him feel indifferent. Lerryl knew now he was born in the worst of times as the worst – the most useless and desperate -- of living things.

“I sense the green of the plants up ahead,” Murma cried, sounding surprised. “Good gizzards, the sky-drops are fading too!”

Inside and out, Lerryl was agonizingly sore, yet Murma's voice made his crawl keep happening, as if his blood only flowed at Murma's command. A shadow, then another, passed over them. Nerve-shocking pain shot through Lerryl's body as his rear was snapped between the jerky yellow pincers of a black, feathery, twig-legged thing.

“Murma help!” squealed Lerryl, whipping from pain and fear as two wings spread. Lerryl began to leave the stone surface.

“Like this!” Murma thrashed his head and rear and Lerryl mimicked the movements. Lerryl fell and hit the stone, his body convulsing from the impact in a stream of water now carrying him, ants, petals, and gnats away from his companion. Two hind-segments had been pinched off, the raw nerves on his backside stung and smoldered in the wet, white heat.

“Keep going! Keep fucking going!” were the words that faded from a roar to a dull cry as Murma flogged the stone with his body where Lerryl was plucked up. A piercing caw echoed across the stone. Trusting in Murma, Lerryl moved again, used his upper eight segments to grip the stone beyond the water and drag the rest of his limp body out of the stream. Struggling towards the green of plants, he imagined that his companion was close behind, cursing at the feathery thing with every breath he had. With a surge of new life Lerryl pinched and thrust in complete ignorance of the spiking pain pricking the inside of each segment; he felt hope as he tumbled down the slope of the stone and crawled under the moist shade of a forest of leaves and red-orange vegetables, one of which had fallen. Panting, Lerryl was about to laugh to his partner behind him when, to his horror, the black feather flyer on the stone-sheet had Murma dangling from his yellow mouth. Before Lerryl could even move towards his up-bringer, Murma had left the earth and disappeared into the sky.

Lerryl could only watch as worms rolled down the black slope, were burnt and suffocated in the growing heat -- some just short of shade, and joined front to end to mate even in the futility of shrinking puddles that dotted stone-slab he had just left. The reek of death filled his lungs for the first time and he breathed coolly. Pain was nothing but pain, empty of meaning. Numbness dribbled from his heart; he had lost his teacher, his only hope. Why did Murma want to come here? What was he to do now? He realized he knew nothing anymore. Every fact had been a prediction, a picture of a thing but not the thing itself. He did not die. Murma died quickly. Movement felt strange. Where should he move to?

“What are you waiting for, come help me dig.”

A worm not much smaller than him was attempting to burrow beside the prickly stalk of the towering Tomato plant. Above, moths and clear-winged buzzers were clinging to the undersides of the leaves and were beginning to come to life. Lerryl did not feel like helping, but he offered the advice to dig farther away from the stalk where the water could have made the earth more movable. The smaller worm crawled close to Lerryl and again tried to thrust his head into a crevice and widen it. Lerryl gazed at the spot from which Murma was plucked; Murma could still fall, at any moment.

“What the hell are you doing, I don’t want to mate,” Lerryl said and moved away from the smaller worm, who had improperly aligned himself to inseminate Lerryl’s egg sac. “That’s not even how you do it. Besides, why would you want to bring more sad worms into this world?”

“I don’t know.” The small worm looked away. “I felt like it could change things somehow. Make me happy maybe.”

“We can’t change anything. What are we good for? Do you know?”

“No.” The small worm then looked up, “Do you?”

“No.” Lerryl watched the heat ripple the air above the stone and figured he would die quickly in it, or maybe be snapped up by a feather flyer, or mashed or sucked up by the red four-wheeled thing.

“How do you know we don’t change things, or help things? Every worm knows that their tunnels fill with roots in no time, that we help things grow,” the smaller worm persisted.

“Yes but we use those roots to feed. There’s nothing special or meaningful about making food to eat. All we’re doing is trying to survive, or rather, just not die.” Leryll imagined Murma calling him a dirt clod for saying what he just did.

Leryll faced the smaller worm hoping to be challenged with observational logic and insight, which Murma never valued intimately. The smaller worm straightened his body, and looked at Leryll.

“Inseminate me. Then I’ll go.”

“So you can birth worms at the peak of heat season? So they can drown or burn or become prey? Give me one good reason and I’ll gladly fertilize you.” *Dirt-for-brains*, Leryll thought, *how about you realize you just survived a shit storm*. He yearned for a shove, a hit to the head.

The smaller worm sighed, and it made Leryll angry to think he had won the eternal debate of whether to be or not to be a limp creature that slogs through the muck of life with eyes fixed on the flickering glow of improvable purpose. Leryll felt an urge to find a reason himself.

“I don’t know much,” admitted the smaller worm. “I was only born this heat season. I don’t know if I should or I shouldn’t reproduce. No one tells me these things – my family died to something called a shrew. I don’t know if my tunnels help the roots, if my tracks create underground lungs for sprouting plants, or if I revitalize the earth in any way at all. How can I know that when I spend my life not seeing but just doing what I see others do – eat, reproduce, eat? Maybe you’re right though. You’re the only one that’s made sense so far.” The smaller worm began crawling towards the edge of the shade.

Leryll felt he could have anticipated the answer, which disgusted him. He remained silent as the smaller worm approached the searing light. Murma would smack the small worm for what he was doing. He looked at his raw wound, and it would be about until leaf-falling season before the muscle in those two segments fully regenerate. Why should those segments regenerate at all? What was in him, why is something forcing him to live? He did not understand, life was never in his control even though it was in his blood and brain.

“Dirt-for-brains! Yeah, you, maggot. Crawl your worthless little body to me this second.” Leryll moved towards the smaller worm, who wore a look of shock and confusion. “Now!” shouted Leryll.

The smaller worm approached Leryll with its head lowered.

“What are you called?”

“Jurdin.”

“No, you’re called dirt-for-brains, and start burrowing right this second. We’re going to go eat.”

Leryll was pleased that he compelled the smaller worm to listen, to resist crawling into the life-draining sun. Jurdin was looking for a slit in the ground to widen and burrow further downwards. Leryll didn’t know where any food was nearby. Yet, Leryll did not feel frustrated for not knowing.

“Got something,” Jurdin said as he began to undulate his body into the ground.

“Out of the way.” Leryll rested his head against the moist soil, breathed in its rich familiarity, tasted the decaying sweetness, and felt that the earth was somehow made for him

despite all its dangers. Of course the earth looked illogical, but it somehow felt uniquely ordinary, like home. The earth was for worms to crawl into, to struggle and squeeze through, to nourish eggs, and to live in. Long, old Murma must have learned much to have wanted to survive and help others.

“Follow me, Jurdin. Oh, and you can call me Leryll.”

Leryll wriggled through the hole into a void of comforting darkness. A darkness that made you feel your way through the dirt and mud, made you smell and taste and touch; it was perhaps the perfect place to learn to be a worm. Leryll eased himself down into the earth with a tingling curiosity – what it would it be like to mate?

The Spirit

Bardo, the ghost, hovered near and watched his family all day, wherever they went, ever since he died. Floating above, Bardo watched his little daughter, Luce, crumple a piece of paper on the coffee table and toss it behind the couch into the other twenty or so wads. She grabbed another 10 x 10 inch square paper – her little fingers and ten year old handiness could fold that size with ease -- and tried again to crease the paper perfectly to the instructions of the open origami book and create a hot air balloon. She glanced towards the kitchen every so often and did not even look up at her favorite TV show in front of her, Spongebob Squarepants, but let sweat from her forehead trickle to the tip of her nose and drip onto her paper; each crease she pressed deepened Bardo's remorse – he observed that she had only started origami after his death and pursued the craft in a desperate, cocooning way. Even at the pleading of her best friend from school, Patty, she kept on folding and creasing and bending while the other kids clambered on the jungle gym at recess. Yet, it was more interesting for Bardo to watch Luce than stare at his wife, Margie, who read her cheap romance novels in her bedroom upstairs. Outside of cooking, waitressing at the snooty French restaurant, and packing Luce's school lunches, Margie did little more than turn hundreds of pages a day from novels with a sweaty Fabio on the cover that sold for \$2.50 at any K-Mart or CVS. Her boss, who Bardo discovered was Swedish and not even French, had already warned her twice this week about keeping her books in her apron and reading on the job. Origami, cheap romance – Bardo blamed himself for both of the obsessions that were agonizingly obvious in showing him the anguish of his little girl and his wife. And he could do little more than funnel pre-formed breezes through his arms. What use was that, besides giving them each a slightly less miserable sleep in the humidity of the house? Unable to see his

own reflection, spell his name in the fall leaves, write on foggy windows, he was worse than dead, he was alive in death. And it pained him immensely to suppose that his death, his irresponsible and understandably deserved death, was in fact draining the life out of his two beloved girls.

Bardo's body had died about a year ago, though Bardo figured that he was probably dying sometime before that -- dying in will and hope. His hot air balloon was supposed to spare his family and himself from worrying about the bills, their screechy Ford pickup, and, ultimately, unhappiness. It was good at one point. Bardo had convinced Margie that moving closer to the expensive Boston suburbs, where about every other car seemed to be a BMW or Mercedes and was parked by beauty shops and restaurants, would fill his balloon's gondola to the brim with cash each week, for the rest of their lives. He knew Margie couldn't say no to his smile, his visions of comfort, his passionate hope. And he had been right for a year and two months after the move. Back then, Luce was one of the most popular girls at school; she said other kids were at her knees all day, begging to be taken on her awesome dad's hot air balloon. Bardo remembered she called him superman once because he could fly. But that memory had eventually turned painful, as if it were a picture of life he could never have again. In the spring, the cars stopped showing up to the Bellamy Farm field and barn he rented. Newspaper ads only emptied his bank account. Margie was forced to study the classifieds, and eventually got a job serving rich eye-rollers French food at *Canard*; some would correct her pronunciations and ask for a more experienced server, she had told Bardo, and in the first week she fled twice to the walk-in refrigerator to cry. Bardo burdened himself with all responsibility: he had brought his family into something worse than they had before, which was a decent flat and a secure though

low-paying income as a hot-air balloon operator for the city zoo. He had found it all hurt less with Jim beam, though Margie never laughed at his stumbling jokes about spitting in people's food. Luce didn't either. And even then Bardo's charm, warmed by whiskey, still got Margie to screw him a couple times a week, after which he would roll over, burp perhaps, and pass out. He hated himself for that, for fucking up love, for everything.

Desperation had bred ingenuity, Bardo realized after his death, and he managed to bungle that up too. He was stumbling back home from Chap's one night, when he had an idea that would, without a doubt, make his family rich. Bardo had never heard even a whisper of a glowing hot air balloon ride; his idea was completely original. Strapping two sixteen volt batteries to the bottom of the wicker gondola, he powered four lines of ice-blue Christmas lights that he stitched onto the inside of his balloon's canvas. It could stay bright for about three hours, illuminating the yellow, blue, red, and green ribbon stripes that ran up and down his balloon. Bardo bet that it would've made Halloween, especially for Luce. And it would've attracted every local news station too. He would've had customers till judgment day. But those air-heads, the Finnegan twins from the bar, kept elbowing him at Chap's one night, after he had a bucketful of whiskey, begging him to tell them about the plan that would change ballooning forever. Bardo had told those dirt clod friends of his, and he got so excited that the three of them gassed over to Bellamy fields for the first test run. Using some flashlights, he got his balloon out of his rented barn, but had forgotten to reconnect the electrical cord to the batteries under the gondola. Hooting and cheering, the twins held the gondola in place as Bardo inflated the balloon and ignited the gas burner. Bardo fell into his gondola before take-off; the twins near ralphed from laughing. Thinking it would be more striking, Bardo waited to reach about two hundred feet before starting the first-ever balloon light show. The switch wasn't working up there. Unplugged,

the cord was dangling from the balloon's bottom skirts and as he reached for it his balloon was pushed by a sudden gust. He couldn't depend on his drunken feet to keep himself in the damn basket. Bardo figured that ghosts, like him, were people who messed up second chances, and to pay for it those people were given a horribly endless third chance to watch how life carried their failures.

Gushing with shame and repentance, he bound himself to his wife and child. His suffering would be his atonement. He went where they drove and walked, watched them cry in the realms of their lives, confined himself in their silence; he was for them, and certainly not for himself. His time was split between floating around Luce at school and Margie at *Canard*, and forced himself to watch every scoff behind Margie's back and the loneliness of Luce, folding paper on the playground bench at recess. You have to own up to your mistakes, he decided.

After Bardo watched the thirty-third crumpled wad sail over the couch, Luce broke into tears and banged a little fist on the TV remote; there was no more paper, or an origami hot air balloon. She crossed her arms and blubbered as she watched the TV screen pan across the striated ridges and cliffs of the Grand Canyon. "What is it, babygirl," Bardo yearned to say. Helpless, he flashed upstairs to see if Margie had heard. No, not at all, why should she have? After all, she was lying in bed, licking her forefinger and turning to page 348 of *Pirates of Desire*. Margie grabbed her necklace locket with Bardo's ashes and sighed, as she sometimes did while reading. Though frustrating, he never blamed anyone but himself for her unresponsiveness.

By the time he flashed back downstairs, Luce was putting her origami instruction book into her school backpack, which had its contents spilled over the couch. She grabbed her gym

shoes and put them on, forgetting to tie the knots as she headed for the kitchen. Fear rippled through Bardo. Luce got on a chair and grabbed Bardo's ash urn off the kitchen table, which was set there by Margie so they could still eat as a family, she had said, together in love for eternity like the Harper family in *Timeless Passion*. Luce eased the urn to the bottom of her backpack and then froze to watch the stairs, as if listening. Bardo swooped in figure eights, pleading soundlessly to Luce, to Margie, or to any other being or force that could stop his daughter. Luce slipped out the front door and left it open after it started creaking; glancing left then right at the end of the driveway, she walked to her left. Bardo flashed over to Margie, his thoughts spiking with fear. The humidity stilled the air in the room; he couldn't even aim a breeze onto his hypnotized wife. She yawned as she finished chapter 38 and looked at her watch.

“My love, it's time for bed soon,” she hollered, “Finish up your origami puzzles, okay?”

Bardo groaned to himself as Margie did when as she sat up, her belly folding more than it ever had. Flashing to the window, Bardo could still see Luce walking under the ovals light from the street lamps, and when he saw Margie stretch her legs and arms he wished he was more dead, so dead that he couldn't move or see. Hell would have been heaven compared to his anxiety.

He pushed Margies back, his hands popping out of her chest, as she ambled to the doorway with her finger in the book as placeholder.

“Love of my life? Luce? What are you doing?”

Finally! Bardo followed as she walked down the stairs. The kitchen table – look towards the kitchen table!

“Luce?” Margie called out at the bottom of the steps. The silence quickened her footsteps to the couch. Bardo watched her gasp, run her hands over the spilled pencils, markers, and books, dash to the kitchen, and shriek when she saw the front door ajar.

“Luce!” she hollered as she burst onto the driveway. Bardo funneled some outside wind onto her right cheek hoping she would think to run left. Margie stumbled to the end of the driveway and bellowed her daughter’s name as she looked about on her tiptoes. Exhilarated, Bardo knew that Margie saw the tiny figure that was suddenly illuminated near the end of their street.

He zoomed with Margie as she ran to the old pickup and nearly ripped the door off. She leapt in, started the engine, and swerved out of the driveway.

It was a relief, though an empty one; Bardo and Margie pulled up beside Luce, who looked ahead.

“Are you crazy?” Margie screamed, her pony tail swishing from the force of her voice. “Stop your step and get in the car -- Now!”

Poor Luce. She lowered her eyes, stopped.

Margie stepped out of the truck and picked up Luce, held her and kissed her neck, and sat her into the passenger’s seat. With the engine turned off, Bardo listened and made himself watch Luce’s hard face soften with tears as Margie shouted about kidnappings, abductions, murders, and sick people who treat children like...like toys.

“Why on earth would you do this?” Margie asked after her breathing had calmed.

“I’m taking daddy’s ashes to the Grand Canyon. I’m doing this no matter what.”

Bardo wished he could read his daughter's mind, perhaps just one thought. Margie's eyes near popped out of her head when she heard Bardo's ashes were in her backpack. She stated there was no WAY that was happening, to which Luce broke down hysterically and asserted it will happen no matter what. Bardo sighed to himself, he, the source of the grief and the mess of tears in his old pickup.

They drove back in silence. And at home Luce re-stated, as she handed the urn to Margie who tucked it securely in her arm, that she will make sure the ashes get scooped up by the wind at the Grand Canyon.

Bardo watched in horror as Margie snapped one Saturday night at 6:51 p.m. in the kitchen. She stopped in the middle of washing the dinner plates and grabbed *Craving Hearts*, her purse, the urn, and the arm of her daughter, who was folding on the kitchen table, and threw each of them, except the ashes, into the back of the pickup. She placed the urn in Luce's lap and gave her a curt look, lips pursed. It seemed to Bardo that Luce had won after nineteen days of saying nothing -- not a word -- beyond going to the Grand Canyon. But he wasn't surprised; he knew that Margie could not accept unhappiness in her daughter and, like himself, would eventually pop like a balloon against the friction of the child's endless yearning.

In the truck, Luce kept quiet, stared out the window. Margie screeched rubber turning out of the driveway and tuned the radio to 100.6 *The Sizzle*, which played little more than soft rock love songs from the 80's and early 90's.

"We're going away from all of this," she said. "We are just going to go. And when we come back we will be back to normal."

But Bardo was baffled when Margie took every road and turn that led directly to I-95 North, and every additional mile she took in the opposite direction of the Grand Canyon made him wish he could read her mind for only a few seconds. His daughter did not look content, only anxious, as she clutched the urn's lid shut. How could she know they weren't heading to the Grand Canyon? She never looked up from the sunset scenery, not even at the signs welcoming them into Vermont, then Maine. Perhaps she wanted to be the first to spot the massive, dusty gorge.

After sitting in three hours of speechlessness, Bardo decided to race along the highway that split the forests of Maine, but hovered about two hundred feet above the pickup. The world always seemed simpler from the sky. Nothing can touch you, he had always believed. Not the cops, not the principal, not the bullies and muggers, not the religious folks – all those things struggling on the ground. Sun-hugged cornfields, apple orchards, grassy vales and dandelion dales, amber and red birch groves, candle-windows dotting roads, streetlight empires and car-beam playgrounds all for the eyes, those few lucky eyes, that ever cared to fly. It was freeing to be up there, and in a strange but impossible way he felt lighter. He was wondering what Paris looked like, or the Amazon Jungle, or peaks of the Himalayas, until a cacophony of horns went off below him as his truck shredded and slashed off a rear tire in a scream of sparks and swerved left cutting off a braking sedan and came to a shrieking halt on the shoulder.

Bardo's essence pulsed with fear as he rushed down. The windows were clouded with grey dust, and when Bardo burst into the cabin, his two girls were embracing each other, faces sobbing onto each other's shoulders as their hair, shirts, and cheeks were covered in his ashes. Luce's right shin was striped with blood, probably from the urn shards scattered on the floor, and Margie was quivering. Margie was holding Luce like a baby as she pulled her out of the wreck

and sat her on the grass that extended into dark woods. She wiped the blood off Luce's leg with her shirt. Bardo remained beside Luce, trying to blow some wind onto her leg.

"Let me call for help," Margie she, dusting off her jeans.

"I'm so sorry Momma."

Margie looked straight at Luce, "Baby, this is not your fault. Don't you DARE blame yourself. Understand?"

Luce nodded, and Margie retrieved her purse and dug out her cell phone. She called the police, and talked on the phone for ten minutes before someone agreed to help her in an hour or so.

Bardo floated beside Luce and gazed at her arms with her, coated in his fine, gray ash. Margie joined Luce as well and sighed as she explained when help would come. The police instructed them to stay and wait in their car with a cloth or bag hung out the window, but as they both glanced back at the windows – which looked as if Mt. St. Helens had exploded in their truck – they both laughed. Luce looked through Margie's purse and pulled out the book, flipped through it, opened it to the middle and ripped out a page.

Margie snapped and grabbed the book out of her daughter's hands. "What on earth are you doing?"

Luce shrugged, "I wanted to fold a hot air balloon."

It surprised Bardo when Margie, after gazing at the front cover for a few moments, gently placed the book on Luce's thigh. She then stood up, rummaged through the glove compartment and came out with a yellowed roll of scotch tape. "Let me help, huh?"

It was a small smile, Luce's, but Bardo knew how a drop of joy had just rippled through his daughter. She ripped out six pages as cleanly as she could and handed them to Margie, who taped them together along the edges into a large square. When Luce made a single inaccurate fold, a mistake, and crumpled up the paper, Margie rubbed her knee and told her to try again. "Yes," Bardo agreed in the moment, "do whatever you love". He was happy to see them try again with a slowness that emanated a peaceful emptiness of worry, fear, and thought.

When Luce did it, when she delicately slipped a triangular edge into a notch and blew life into her creation, Bardo danced with them, sashaying between his girls.

"I'm so proud of you," Margie kissed her girl's forehead.

"It's not done! We need some ashes."

"Okay let's see." Margie opened the car door. Bardo noticed plenty of little ash piles on the backseat, the floor too. But the way Margie's brows furrowed told him that something displeased her about the mess. She shut the door.

"How about this, Luce," Margie said as she unclasped the locket from her necklace. She stilled Luce's hands, which held the origami hot air balloon, as she tipped the metal heart into the paper gondola, no deeper than a thimble, and then went around and turned on the car. Luce was smiling as she covered the gondola with her hand, as if she and her mother understood each other in spirit. Bardo was enjoying the sensitivity of the strange ritual too much to notice or conjecture any sort of purpose about it. It was like playing. Margie scrambled back cupping a little flame on a small piece of paper.

"Quickly, quickly," Margie giggled.

Luce held out the balloon and Margie slipped the paper into its gondola. There, beside his family, along I-95, at 12:14 a.m., Bardo watched a little hot air balloon rise about twenty feet in the air and burn into wisps that the wind and the cars swirled higher towards the stars.

They were driven home by a taxi, and Bardo followed in the sky, taking in the twinkles of the world and universe. They arrived home on the brink of sunrise, and Margie carried drowsy Luce up to her bed. Bardo felt that his girls were okay, snoozing in Margie's bed, still dressed in their jeans and tube socks. He rose above the roof and took in his neighborhood and the orange slit of light in the horizon lifting the purple of night.

While floating in the sky, Bardo was struck with a curious idea: what was the opposite of all this sky, this world? What was below – inside -- everything he had ever imagined? What was the center of the earth? Calmed by the safety of stillness he decided that he will – but only for a moment – see for himself.

Darkness everywhere. Soundless. He could not see. Everything was black. He dove, kept heading the same direction; he had to know what it looked or maybe felt like, though his vision was painted black. Then rock. It felt different from the dirt as he flew through it, like walking against wind and water. He wasn't sure if he slowed at all, much less how deep he had gone by now. Time went unperceived in the dense nothingness. Though knowing he was less than air, he was afraid he would still be crushed. But there was more, he believed, and he pressed further down.

Orange-black happened. Bardo thought it must be hotter than hell down here. Faint rumbling sounds resounded through him. Magma and lava rippled the air and maybe, he worried,

he would get burned or disintegrated if he dove further. Bardo stopped a moment and looked at this orange color in front of him; glowing like embers but thick and oozing like tooth paste. Blood of the globe. He wondered how close he was, how long it had been since he started. The girls were fine, he trusted, and he went on.

Yellow then. The earth quaked and roared. Bright and loud. Uncomfortable. Bardo knew he could flash out at any moment, but he was also aware that he could never return; since he could not see or know or even imagine this place, this depth, he could never be here again if he left. He thought about never hearing Luce again. Yet he pushed lower.

Crackling booms and roars louder than a billion bombs. Armageddon blasts, and somehow, Bardo heard it perfectly, as clear as the tinkling of water. White. White heat was all around him. Whiter than clouds, whiter than snow, pure and whole like universe-black. He was afraid. Overwhelming color and sound. But it was okay. Like the stun from plunging into a cold creek on a hot day. He knew he was in creation, on the first blank page of a moment that would resonate up to the surface and fill with a story of sounds, smells, sights, and maybe human emotion. And Bardo twirled and closed his eyes and let the thunder go, bellow, ring through him with bell-power and whip-crack clarity. What forces that control the earth! Every unnoticed breeze and cricket song, somehow, derived from here. The gasping, roiling, white hot heart of the earth. And he – trembling – had gone down and inward; refused fear. Bardo could not identify his new feeling: he was contented, fulfilled – he was happy without his girls for once. Of course he loved them to bursting, but it was okay to be without them at this moment. Perhaps, he thought, it might be thrilling to explore the universe. Go see Saturn's rings? He flashed up to his girls first.

Oh, the sun was rising, Bardo noticed. And he felt strange: airy, and shaky. He was light. Luce looked perfect, frizzled head of hair and her little lashes meshed together peacefully. Perhaps everyone is perfect in a way, he thought, and we just don't have the eyes to see it. He felt more than he could see. Warmth around him – he had not felt temperature before. All of Bardo quivered. He wanted to go do more. See everything he could. He shot up through the roof and watched the sun rise over his world. He somehow knew the world, like a child or wife. But he was frozen before it. And the Sun was growing, brightening, pulling him. No, he did not want to flee. It was okay, everything was somehow okay. There was his house, the whole neighborhood, the farm, and he was happy for those on the ground — they were perfect for this place. Bardo ascended faster and felt warmer and saw corn fields and cow farms, sky scraper buildings in the distance, then watched the sun's light spread over the land and oceans still drowsy with shade. The globe was before him. Hot now, he felt charged, ready for something. To be taken elsewhere. He faced the sun -- sparking, whipping solar flares -- and trembled with anticipation. There was a brown spot, growing bigger against the whiteness of the sun, an empty wicker gondola hanging from ropes of flame. He was done. He was going to see everything now. Got harder to think in words. They couldn't show anymore. Universe's story had no words. Listen. Look. Touch. Roiling within him. He knew why. All was Bliss! Bliss.

23 Plums

The more Goose looked around the small Saturday flea market and the more his shirt yellowed from dust and sweat, the feeling grew that somehow everything was and had been stuck – melted into place. The patched canopy of blue and brown tarps hung above the same stands from the peaches to the squash to the butchers' corner, and on rainy days the puddles never moved. All the faces behind the weighing scales nodded or scowled or stared, and smiled for a moment after a sale, as they always did. The smell of the market was sweet at first, until the leaves of fetid cabbage, watermelon rinds, strewn pansies and worm-chewed cherries would unsettle a footstep or enrage a wasp – the nose would then realize that the sweetness was cloying and rotting. Though it was a place of flies and temporary business, it had always been as permanent and necessary as a home, old Goose knew and sighed. He startled a few customers at the bakery as he bellowed what the town called his crazy song.

“I’m the king, I’m the king, kiss my heels and diamond ring!”

Sanity, it was believed, had left old Goose eight years ago when he strolled through town naked, blowing on a bronze kazoo; he stopped to piss in the traffic of Main Street before the horrified gasps of mothers smacking palms to the curious eyes of their children. The police chief jailed him for two months, during which time Goose behaved like an old Basset with dementia; he barked his crazy song upon waking, during lunch, and before bed, and twice a week he would dump his grits and corn mush onto his head, and with his spoon raised like a scepter, he declared his kingship over all people on earth. But Goose spent most of his time quietly reading history books and newspapers in his cell. The police deputy, who was also the jail guard of the town,

could only take so many crazy songs and mopping duties, and let old Goose out into town after three weeks. A few days after his release, four of Goose's closest friends approached him with kind words in place of debt reminders and a jingling envelope of coins. With tears welling at such undeserved loyalty and concern, Goose immediately snapped his kazoo to his mouth and blared buzzes into his friends' shocked expressions and yelled that a king already has everything. Shaking their heads, hands pocketed, they explained they would send the money to his wife before they turned and never talked to Goose again. Goose hurried to the thin alleyway between the post office and hardware store and bawled into his shirt; this was the best way, he believed, he could live.

Eight years to the day, he bellowed his crazy song to clear the line at the bakery. The stares and murmurs did not please him as much as they used to – his plan was working, but he had not conversed with anyone since his outburst on Main Street. Goose wanted a change again; he did not want to die crazy.

A breeze upon his sweat-sopped back startled Goose -- it must be pushing him, he thought, past the bread bakery for some reason, even though it sold the only necessity he could manage to buy. The breeze cleared the fruit flies and gnats from before his face and freshened his forehead. He had to squirm through the crowd to follow the wind and the draining heat made many slow to move and quick to cuss. Goose declared he was king of gnats and a little pathway parted.

From the distance, the whistle of the 12:35 outbound rang through the market, which molded itself around the train station like dead wax at the foot of a candlestick. The whistle, the

breeze, it must mean something, thought Goose, and he found himself standing over the plum stand.

Mrs. Brigdy folded her arms and pursed her lips, adding more wrinkles to her sun-creased face as she saw old Goose eyeing her plums. Her age was a mystery to Goose, since she could lift barrels of brandy and crates of watermelon with the ease of brick layer. Somehow, the fruit in her stand glowed at him, he was sure of it, as if the juicy globes of magenta held life and vigor at their core. The fruits even looked like hearts of some perfect being, a most graceful animal, angel, or child who only knows how to play. The old man breathed in, filling his lungs with the jam-thick smell of summer plums, and his stomach groaned for a taste. The wind blew towards the train tracks; he trembled from hope. Nodding at the plums, he mustered his most confident voice, “may I have the glory, dear duchess, to pick ‘em?”. The locomotive steamed and slowly tugged its load and chuffed.

“How you feelin’ today, Goose? Empty flask still?” Mrs. Brigdy said. The old man patted his other pocket, which made some coins jingle against a useless set of keys. He said the king has all the money. Mrs. Brigdy sighed, “Pick as many as you can pay for. Them are the last of summer, best ones of the season too.”

Goose withdrew a patched flour sack from his back pocket and poked through the crate. His fingers found the softest and warmest plums, he held each one to the sunlight to see the depth of their glow. It excited him further to see Brigdy’s bemused expression—only Goose could sense the energy and life smoldering in the Plums! His movements were slow, quivering, and calculated, and by the second clear-the-tracks whistle of the 12:35, a sack full of twenty-three plums creaked on Brigdy’s scale. Goose cussed as he dropped a coin beneath her stall, and

began mumbling about his lazy page as he snapped his head in several directions; Brigdy placed a hand to her hip and grunted as she bent down to retrieve the small coin.

“You old coot!” yelled Mrs. Brigdy after the old plum thief, who was flying as fast his stork legs would allow towards the trundling train carts. “Stop that worthless Goose! My Lord! Klaus, do something!” she hollered in the direction of the guard, Klaus, who was inspecting the apple stall for worms by the east entrance of the market. He shot his head towards the commotion, and sprinted with his billyclub in hand. Though gray-haired, Klaus was quick and scrutinizing, everyone in town remembered the time he was fired from his post as a policeman after he bludgeoned a young pickpocket half to death on the sidewalk. His badge and boots were polished each day, and his corner of the market was the cleanest, always free of loafers. Klaus, Goose had learned, was the only one in town who refused to be intimidated by rumbustious insanity. He was a law enforcer who told everyone, mostly people with rotten fruits in their stalls, how society should be, and acted to achieve his visions of pure, determined order; a popular rumor was that Klaus had two lists, one with names to be protected, and another with names to be punished.

“Goose,” he bellowed, raising his club, “you’ll be punished you damn rakehell! You know it!”

By the time Goose was within arm’s reach of the last three carts, they were rolling faster than he could run and he watched in horror as his escape plan dashed by, faster, louder. Brigdy’s hollering grew closer, and after he imagined her snapping his neck he looked at the last cart on the tail of the caravan -- it was open. Head aching, wheezing, stumbling he ran alongside the train and hurled the sack and himself onto the open cart but his lower body dangled; he dug his

elbows into the splintery floor planks to keep himself from falling backwards. The ricketing made his arms slide, and he was slipping backwards, as if some invisible goo were stuck to his feet and pulling him back to the market. Heaving, he let out a yell with a spurt of strength and swung his right leg into the cart, then the other, and rolled onto his back. Breathless and dizzied, the *pa-thump pa-thump* was the train beating across the tracks and his heart chugging against his chest. Klaus was yelling something about justice, dogs were barking. And the last voice he heard was Brigdy's, a bewildered and hurting cry.

“Goose you fool! Why? Why...”

Goose leaned against the back wall of the jolty cart and rubbed his stinging elbows as he stared at the four wooden crates across from him stacked two by two. They rattled but seemed heavy enough to remain in place. When he looked into his sack, the plums were dark in the shade of the cart. He took one and held it to the light of the open door, but the shade was stronger and the fruit remained dark purple. Thrusting his nose into the sack he inhaled only the smell of cloth and wood dust. His once groaning hunger was replaced by disgust.

He was no good, Goose was now sure about it. He had commanded his body to steal from poor, good-hearted Mrs. Brigdy, and perhaps run Benny into his second heart-attack. His body, he decided, was a puppet to his stupid ideas, acting out every fault he had. He wished his body had a conscience of its own so it could choke his sordid soul out and fill itself with a less worthless spirit. He dreamed too much, and imagined, and lied. Dreams put him on the saddle of a black warhorse at the head of a brigade of mustachioed hussars, or in the sky-scraping throne room of a fine banking firm, and always on the balcony of a mansion overlooking a family picnic

that had every sort of pastry and fruit jam. Even worse, Goose knew he tried. But when each dream turned to a delusion, he found himself blurring his vision at the town's tavern as if the sights of his son's floppy shoes and sobbing wife were too real to acknowledge, too permanent. Each failed dream, each failed opportunity to support his family drove Goose to see himself as one unworthy of concern, consideration.

Goose stood up with the sack and grasped the cart's door frame as he watched the town shrink against the hay-thick grasses rumbling across the surrounding plains. The plums felt heavy, his legs ached and quivered, and he wondered if the train would go faster, if the ground was hard and rocky. Yes, he should wake up from all his dreams today, he thought. His life is a dream but he will leave it with the liberty of a King, a final leap will be his choice, and he will be blanketed by nature's warm brush, and he will relinquish his soul to the greater forces, and he will...

"Leave them plums if you're gonna jump," a child's voice cried out.

Goose fell backwards and winced as he landed on his bony rear. A small boy, toasted skin, with a bird nest of black hair, pointed a pen-knife at Goose as he emerged from behind the crates. The child's green eyes were wide, shimmering like dewy flower buds, and his scabby feet had toenails that seemed spattered with ink. A man's pair of shorts was roped on his waist and the crinkled up sleeves of his adult dress shirt made his arms seem more like fleshy hangers.

"Go on, just leave me them plums," the boy motioned to the door with his knife.

Was it *déjà vu*? Did Goose know this boy? Goose stared into the young green eyes as if it would blossom a memory. The child seemed familiar, and Goose felt the urge to discipline him, to slap his hind sore, and pull the shorthairs by his ears so that he could then teach him.

“I’m the King,” Goose began in a commanding tone while rising to his feet, “and you will obey me and put down the knife.”

The boy scoffed and smiled for a moment before he assumed a pouncing stance, legs spread, knees bent, knuckles white. Green eyes darted between Goose’s face and the plum sack.

Goose knew the boy would not spring. Perhaps it was delirium from hunger and exhaustion, but he felt as if he recognized and understood the spirit of the child despite not even knowing his name. Backing up to the wall opposite of the crates, Goose leaned his back against the wood and eased himself into a sitting position, plum sack nestled between his knees. He felt out a soft plum, breathed on it, and rubbed it gently on his pants. He watched the boy gulp as he crunched into the fruit and slurped the first bite into his mouth. The boy sat cross-legged opposite of Goose, his little weapon clenched like a dinner knife waiting for a plate.

“Oh my, they’re good.” It was difficult to swallow since Goose had no desire to eat. “Yep. It fills you right up. Not even hungry anymore.” Goose placed the plum beside him onto the kicking floor planks, the fruit’s juice dripped onto the wood. The boy watched a little river of sweetness curl and cut its way towards the open door. Then the plum tumbled over and began to roll towards the rushing land, splattering juice here and there with each hop. Goose sat still with a hard face and watched the green eyes dart between his own and the fruit rolling towards the thundering edge of the cart. As the boy lunged and snatched the fruit from falling, Goose pinned the boy to his stomach with his knee and squeezed his wrist until the knife hit the floor. Knife in his own hand, Goose yanked the boy over by the shirt and pointed the sharp steel at the dirty little face, a face white and shaking, with eyes shut and lip bleeding. Goose only wanted to scare the boy, and make the boy his.

Goose dropped the knife. "I'm sorry," he whispered as he backed up to the wall and slid to the floor. The boy clambered behind the crates with a half-mashed plum and his weapon, and peeked over and glared at Goose.

"I'll kill you if you come close!"

"Yes. I know."

He listened as the boy slurped the plum and spat the seed out over the crates and towards the doors. Still widened, the boy's eyes punished Goose, but made occasional glances to the plum sack. Goose tossed a plum into the crevice between the crates and the wall, and then another after a plum seed sailed through the air.

"What's your name?" Goose felt he should have known this boy's name; it was like asking questions to his own reflection.

The boy didn't answer until he spat the seed in a big arc out of the train cart. "Don't know. Another."

"Don't be savage. Everyone with a mother has a name." Goose was ashamed after moments of silence. How could he presume the boy had a mother? He tossed another plum across the cart and picked himself a juicy one as hunger purred in his stomach.

"I'm Holman," the boy grumbled.

"Mmm." The silence itched Goose's conscience. "Don't laugh now, boy. No one knows this but my closest kin, but my name is Cecil."

The boy hooted. He said he once stole a licorice twist from a girl called Cecil.

Cecil sighed. He was glad the boy did not know his nickname. “Now, how about you come out and we split this sack here. I won’t so much as move, I swear on the king’s crown.” He lobbed a plum over the crates and Holman soon eased his way from behind the crates with the plum in one hand and the knife in the other. Cecil bit into a plum of his own as Holman remained standing.

“Where are we headed,” Cecil asked between chews, “you know?”

Holman shrugged, suckling on his plum.

“Where you from?”

Holman shrugged again.

“Neither do I, to be frank. I read history, and it’s easy to see where other people came from, but I never know where to place myself in it all. Everyone’s a hero but me, it seems.”

“Why you ain’t a hero?” Holman sat down and a purple fruit rolled his way.

Cecil told Holman everything. He explained how he was a troublemaker ever since he could toddle out into the front yard, and that he was broken for never being able to control himself. He hated that about character. School had been a place to daydream with doodles and play kickball for a few muddy hours, though history class always churned his imagination and often painted his grand delusions. Father, after making a small fortune from selling his candle wax business, sent Cecil to a catholic high school in a horribly quiet town with a cloister and six churches. Perhaps he was most behaved after that, when he met his wife, who was reading on a bench in between her bakery shifts. Her wheat-tan hair smelled like fresh baguettes on their wedding day, when Cecil promised her happiness and comfort. He took a small-town postal

delivery job after it became apparent that he had no money to buy a horse, a saber, or a uniform – a career in the army seemed impossible.

Cecil couldn't tell whether Holman was listening or not as his green eyes inspected plum seeds for any missed fleshy fibers. But it was nice to talk, for once. Cecil handed the boy two plums and continued with his story as an orange sun grew tired of the day.

He had a son, and he was happy for a short time before work seemed endless and pointless. Unfulfilled dreams taunted his sense of purpose, his self worth. In grade school, his son was rather good at kickball and math, which Cecil never understood. It was on March 15th when a well-dressed man from the city made a speech in front of the post office and showed charts of something called a Stock Market, which was not a place you sold livestock apparently, but a banking sort of thing that made your money multiply. Cecil and a few others emptied pocketfuls of money into the man's briefcase, and received certificates -- stocks for a white pill that gave you bursts of energy like coffee. The pill turned out to be deadly on the heart, and Cecil's pockets were never full again. Having visions of wealth collapse embarrassingly before him, before his family, Cecil lost sight of the value in himself. Soon after, there was never enough wine at home, too much weeping from his wife, and his son looked at him less and less. Failure compounded failure. Cecil discovered that after he lost his job and his son had to work with his mother at the bakery, Deacon Harry would sneak money to his wife each time he bought a loaf of bread; and Klaus would not let him near the upstanding citizens at the bakery. Drunk, Cecil tossed the shoe in which she hid the extra money down a dry well. After, his wife and son left for the city to live with an aunt, Cecil decided to go insane and never hurt anyone again. No more failure could haunt him, he figure, if he did not let anyone else down. With crazy and bizarre antics, he would swat down dead any feelings of love, caring, or friendship buzzing

around him. The farther he could push people away, the safer they were from his ineptitude. And it worked -- it worked too well.

“Now do you get why I’m a nobody?” Cecil rubbed his eyes and stood to look out at the stars, the night’s eyes blinking awake in the dusky blue.

“Okay. But I don’t care,” Holman said reaching for the sack.

“What?” Cecil blurted as he spun around, “why not? I haven’t done anything with my life. I don’t have a thing to show for anything.”

“You gots plums though,” Holman grasped about in the sack with his tongue out as he searched for another soft plum. “They’re making me full – that’s something in my book.”

“ I stole them! From a poor old lady!”

Holman held the plum in his hand and stared at it. He shrugged and chomped half of the fruit off. Chewing and wiping the juice from his chin he said, “That’s okay, I f’ give ya.”

“Why? I just made someone’s life harder.” Cecil squatted and studied the boy.

“I dunno, I just don’t think ya meant to do all that stuff. Ts’what it seems like to me anyway.” Holman chucked the seed out into the darkening land.

“I can’t stop dreaming. I can’t see things like everyone else, and it’s frustrating. It hurts people. I thought these plums would---- change something. I don’t think I have too many breathes left to breathe, you know, and I just wanted to change before they’re all gone.”

“Everyone hurts people if y’ask me. But if someone does on purpose, then they’s dirt. I once spilt a robin’s nest when sneaking through bushes, and I moped for the rest of the day. But I

woke up the next morn and told the shells I was sorry, buried ‘em, and that was that. That accident is a part of me ‘cause each time before I scramble up a tree or into a bush I make sure to watch out for nests. When I get rich, I’m gonna buy a whole jungle of bushes just for robins.” Holman thrust his head into the sack, “Only a few plums left.”

It was nice to talk with someone, thought Cecil, even if it is a boy who is trying to compare splattered eggs to a man’s ruined life.

The train screeched and the two lurched forward as the train was braking. Cecil assumed it was a regular stop, but Holman jumped to his feet and looked out toward the train’s locomotive.

“Hard to see from here,” Holman said, “but there’s a gang of people on horseback. They riding along the carts. We ain’t near no town either. The woods is a bit away. They could be bandits, or train pirates!”

As Cecil peeked out, he saw a figure he had known for much his life, a figure of law that was more threatening than his insanity ever was. Klaus was riding beside the train carts, looking into each one.

“I think it’s time for me to give in,” Cecil sighed and sat down, “You go on.” With no one around but some orphan boy, he did not expect Klaus to let him leave the cart with his life. Perhaps this was the death he deserved. A few bats of the billyclub would finally end his incessant dreaming.

“No, no! Come!” cried Holman, beckoning from the edge of the cart which had halted. Some shouting was in the distance. “We can speed into the woods. It’s almost night. We can do it!” Holman grabbed Cecil’s hand and pulled, tipping Cecil over.

He had not expected the boy to show such concern. The caring was strange to him, the desire of someone wanting him to live, to keep living. Cecil stood, exhilaration lightening his weight. He was the first to jump out of the train and run for the woods, plum sack swaying in his fist. Holman soon overtook him and kept turning around and beckoning for him to run faster.

The shouting and rumbling hooves grew louder. Cecil glanced back and saw three horsemen, Klaus in front with his raised club, pounding dust up into the light purple sky. The forest was twenty feet away, the horses forty feet, only thirty in a blink of his eye. Cecil was going to make it! No, he thought he was going to make it until about four leaps from the dark woods someone grabbed Cecil’s shirt collar, choking him. He glanced back and saw Klaus leaning forward on his horse ready to strike him.

“You’re dead, Goose,” Klaus said in a horrifically calm voice.

A pen knife flashed by and struck Klaus in the face. Cecil dashed into the trees, the darkness. He followed the nimble footsteps ahead of him, crunching leaves and twigs. His hands were out in front him, he felt near blind in the shadowed woods.

“I unsaddled that thug!” Holman said between breaths as he ran. “The others stopped too. To help him. The thug was just pointin’ into the woods. Haha,”

Cecil, tired, began to stumble. He stopped, doubled over. Lungs phlegmy and cold. He coughed from the depths of his chest. He wasn’t sure where the boy was in front of him.

“C’mon, let’s find us a place for fire, and rest. Gotta keep them wolves away, you know,” Holman’s voice approached Cecil. A little hand patted Cecil’s back.

The two found a patch of ground lit by the moon through an opening in the trees canopies. Cecil, still coughing, collected twigs and leaves beside Holman – he was delighted, it felt like a chore for a family. Cecil marveled at the boy, who was using his keys to strike sparks onto the kindling. A little glow of orange soon grew into a crackling fire. Cecil split the last four plums between them, and they both chewed voraciously, slurping up every drop of juice they could.

Sighing, Cecil tossed his last seed into the fire. He knew he was in the woods somewhere, without food, water, blankets, and perhaps he had only eluded death for a short time.

“I think I’ll stay here for a while,” Cecil told Holman, then coughed hoarsely into his hands. This was a peaceful enough place. The law wouldn’t find him. Wouldn’t drag him back to the world. No one would. That was more than he could ask for.

“Why you do that?” Holman said, who was squatting and poking the fire with a stick. He picked out Cecil’s plum seed. “I gots work to do tomorrow. You could help me,” Holman said staring at the burnt plum seed in his hand.

“Yeah?” scoffed Goose, “what do you need me to do, keep stealing plums?”

“Well, yeah! And we take them, then we eat them, then we plant the seeds where we steal ‘em from. In no time our mistake is gonna be repaid times a thousand. We can even start our own plum forest, and sell ‘em, and have robins in the trees who can eat our plums with us and

make even more seeds. ” Holman stood up and grabbed a plum seed from his pocket and tossed it at Cecil.

It was a childish plan. But, somehow, not impossible. The little fruit seed in Cecil’s palm was already growing in his imagination. Cecil was holding a chance to change, to do right times a thousand. Perhaps only a few trees would grow, but that was still a pleasant thought. He laughed under his breath and inspected the seed closely to the delight of Holman. The seed glistened in the starlight and the stringy fibers reached out like roots grasping for a place to grow. All ten of Holman’s teeth were out as his smiled; Cecil felt close to Holman, as if he was his boy.

“First thing tomorrow, we plant the seeds in the richest spot of dirt we can find,” Cecil stated.

The boy nodded serenely. The two of them put their seeds back into the sack, which Cecil let Holman hold for them. Though he was shivering, Holman was not, which was calming. With bellies rounded out like plums, the two exchanged “good nights” and fell asleep in leafy, summer beds.

The thundering steps of two men moving through the forest startled Cecil awake, whose eyes watered from the white light pouring onto him.

“Holman run!” yelled Cecil.

The two figures grabbed Cecil by the arm and helped him to his feet. Their green uniforms had brass buttons and golden cords braided and trimmed across their chests in the

neatest rows. Such gleaming boots he had never seen before. Oh, and their faces were perfect -- with black mustaches pinched upwards to a point.

“Cecil Holman, is that you, sir?” one asked as the other patted the dust off Cecil’s clothes with his white gloves.

“What’ve you done with the boy?”

The two ornate figures, handsome as hussars, looked around. “There was no boy around here, sir; only you are here.”

“His name is Holman. He was here!”

The two hussars glanced at each other.

“Cecil Holman, sir,” one of the men let go of Cecil and bowed with an elegant yet modest hand flourish, “you were the only one in here. And look, we have your sack right there full of – what’s that partner? – yes, with twenty three plum seeds.”

Cecil easily tore the sack from the other figure’s hand and dumped it out so the seeds thudded all over the hard earth. They were all there.

“You ate them all,” laughed the figure, his white gloves resting on his saber’s hilt.

“How do you know my name? Nobody knows it but me, and the boy.”

“You must come with us now.” One in front and the other in back, Cecil had little choice but to cross his arms and follow.

It was a trodden path through the woods stretching directly from the very spot he had slept. He did not walk long before the woods receded and the path turned to hard pavement, a city avenue, with cheering crowds and handkerchiefs waving about on either side of the road. And the same hussars – perhaps twenty, in magnificent green uniforms – lined the crowd raising their sabers in salute for him, yes, he was the only one marching with the soldiers. His audience cheered as he waved and bowed, his muscle's lightening with each motion.

He could recognize the faces, and feel a familiarity to all of them somehow. That was Brigdy back there with her arms folded, smiling! Ah, his friends were bickering about horse races again, until they saw him and waved. Klaus was clapping, his face red, a stern expression of respect on his face. And each hussar nodded as he passed. Cecil was like a king to them!

In the distance, on the hill, there were the two silhouettes – a woman in a baker's apron and a boy with a ball resting under his foot. They were beckoning to him. Cecil's heart fluttered. His past did not matter anymore to them, to him. Cecil ran towards the outstretched arms of the two figures, and he felt young, and confused, and happy, and scared, and perfect, as a child in play.

Breathlessness

Death came to the bedroom of 483 Evergreen Road at 2:43 a.m. and watched Clairie. It watched her white hair move with each breathe. It counted each of her breaths. Then it stilled her heart at the final breath she was to have. She was not to move again. Gordie slept beside Clairie; he still had many breaths. Death left 483 Evergreen Road at 2:43 a.m.

Gordie shot up in bed and glanced about the room – TV set, red curtains, vanity mirror, books, tissue box, photographs, yes, photographs on the nightstand at his side of him and his wife. Five other pictures of different dogs too, names on little gold plaques at the bottom of each wooden frame. He had forgotten that they were his dogs, as he had forgotten that he leashed his last dog to a park bench one day, and his wife found the dog lying motionless by a road curb half a mile from their house with the leash chewed through.

Gordie sighed in relief as he recognized his bedroom all over again, his home. And that was Clairie, his wife of, what was it, fifty eight years or so, snuggled into the comforter -- a most peaceful stillness about her. He will not wake her, he thought, after he found that the ticking in the room came from the wall where an old clock with a tarnished pendulum read 6:35 a.m. He will let her rest, she must be exhausted from something. Gordie shut his eyes and searched for memories, sounds, smells, anything from the day before, which was a Tuesday, perhaps. He sighed and supposed he must have tired her in some way. She was good to him. But this morning he will be good to her. Oh, he will not make a sound, and he will surprise her – quietly, he will

go downstairs and look for something to make her. What did she like again? Gordie would know when he saw it, he was sure.

A maroon bathrobe decorated with white bones, chewed and tattered at the bottom, had the name "Gordon" stitched into the breast and hung on the door that led out to the hallway. As Gordie fastened it around his waist he examined his wrinkled hands, the liver spots, and how they trembled even when he made a tight fist; the golden ring on his finger reminded him of his mission. He blew a kiss at Claire, whose face held such a relaxed tranquility that it was beautiful, enviable, and could only be hers. He eased the door bolt into its notch.

The hallway, with walls holding nice pictures of those dogs from before, led to the stairs, on the right. The top of the wooden banister was worn, and Gordie froze as the first step creaked. Or was that his bones? He chuckled at the thought. But his knees did ache and felt like rusty hinges as he took each step, one well-placed foot at a time, his hands gripping the banister.

He looked around at the bottom of the steps. To his left was a room with white carpet and a TV on a wooden cabinet, and to his right was a kitchen opening into a dining room. Ah, the kitchen -- that is where he could find Claire's soon to be cooked breakfast.

Gordie ignored the little orange pill-bottles on the counter and began to look through the cupboards, the drawers, and it was not until he found the packaged Rye bread that he remembered that it was precisely Rye bread that he was looking for. But was it pancakes that Claire liked or French toast? He looked through the refrigerator, found the eggs, and grabbed one in each hand and left the refrigerator open. The eggs rolled a little on the counter, but they would not tell Gordie what he should make. Claire deserved a delicious breakfast, of that he was

sure, but he searched his mind and it was like opening doors to empty white rooms without windows. Nothing in there, next thought, nothing in there either, next thought...

Leaning on the counter Gordie grumbled at his ineptitude. He glanced at the stairs hoping Claire would be smiling down them, coming to help him. "What do I do, what do I do," rolled around in Gordie's mind, and kept rolling. He gazed back to the stairs and yearned for Claire to come down. The yearning was from deep within himself; he was a being now who had parted the curtains of life with one hand, while the other hand's fingers interlaced with another person's; their fingers have dabbed each other's cheeks, pointed accusingly at each other, then at their own hearts, with nails that tickled the skin into excitement, and the fingers would somehow rest forever – as they deserved to – only in the warm grooves of the other's hand. Come down, Claire. Please, come down the stairs, Claire.

The clock on the microwave indicated that a half an hour had passed. No. Gordie would not concede so easily, he pounded a fist on the counter. Claire will be served a delicious plate of toast and pan-fried eggs. She can sleep as much she likes because this morning he will take care of things.

Gordie took two pieces of Rye bread, they smelled delightful, and put them into the toaster for a light crisp. He then shuffled to each of the cupboards and looked through them, and felt very proud when he found the pots and pans and took out a smaller frying pan.

"Come here wobbles," he said, which is what he called eggs since he was a little boy. The oblong eggs bobbed around with as much as grace as he did, Gordie smiled to himself. He cracked them into the pan, pinched out the little pieces of shell that fell in with the albumen and

yolk, and placed the pan on the stovetop with such a serious air of accomplishment and self-satisfaction that he might as well have been putting an imaginary Nobel Prize into his own trophy case, or a beautiful memory into a picture frame. Now, how does the stove turn on? Gordie read the notches on the gas dials and tried each one. Damn it, none of them worked! He had forgotten, as he did with most things with his dementia, that Claire used a kitchen lighter to ignite the stovetop since the built-in sparkers had broken six years ago. The lighter hung on the wall beside the stove from a nail he had hammered there, but he did not remember that.

Gordie's nose wrinkled. Grey smoke wisped from the toaster. Gordie was startled, scared. How does he stop it? He lunged across the kitchen counter and pulled out every cord in the nearby outlet. Two pieces of Rye bread with black char lines popped out of the smoking toaster.

"Claire!" Gordie yelled. His hands and face trembled with fear. "Claire, help me, please."

He heard nothing move upstairs. More smoke was filling the kitchen. Gordie coughed and fanned his hands in front of his face as he tried to move quickly towards the stairwell.

"Claire, help!" he yelled up to the second floor, forgetting which way exactly the bedroom was.

The smoke was clearing in the silence, and Gordie calmed as he realized there was no fire, the bread was not burning, and between himself and the toaster, it was probably he who was more broken, though not yet completely. Claire's uncaring indifference irritated Gordie; doesn't she realize he needs her help, sometimes? Of course he was no helpless child, he knew he forgot things nowadays and she should be considerate of that. As long as she reminds him of things, he can do them. The betrayal he felt was infuriating.

“Fine! Waste your day in bed, you layabout,” Gordie blurted up to the second floor. “Make breakfast yourself. I’m going for a walk.” He was an independent, healthy old man and he could take a walk anytime he pleased. He fastened his robe and shuffled to the front door that was in front of the stairs. After a minute he unlocked it and looked outside. “Enjoy loafing your morning away,” he added, before he stepped outside.

Gordie saw the day’s newspaper near the end of his driveway. He strode over to it and his back burned when he bent over to grab the dewy plastic wrapping. Fear rushed through Gordie. Across from him, a row of white houses stretched along the road, each alike with only different colored cars parked in the driveways. All the mailboxes had flower beds near them. What road was this? His address had a “4” in it too, but there were the other numbers, what were they? He felt stranded – his driveway an island and everything else a sea of replicated homes. Gordie spun around; the house immediately in front of him was identical to the one’s on either side of it. He shook, heart thumped, chest huffed. The newspaper slid out of his sweating hands. A door closed behind him, across the street, and a man in a white shirt waved to him. Who was that? In a moment of composure Gordie put his head down and followed the driveway he was on, followed the brick pathway with crabgrass in the cracks, and went into the door.

He had never been so relieved. He laughed as he recognized that he was in his home, safe. But, looking around, part of his home was missing, his most cherished part. Claire must still be in bed, he thought. Perhaps she is reading, enjoying the rise of the morning light. Gordie’s face flushed as he remembered that he yelled something nasty to her, calling his Clairebear a “loafer” or a “layabout”, or perhaps both. Did he curse as well?

“Clairebear, little guppy, I’m sorry I yelled at you earlier,” Gordie cooed up the stairs. He wanted to hug her, kiss her forehead. “Let’s have a nice breakfast, shall we?”

The silence was disheartening.

“I am truly sorry,” Gordie began, “you know how frustrated I can get with, well, my memory.”

He probably deserved the silence, he thought. What a burden he must be to her, like some wrinkled old dog that needs to be fed, walked, and pampered. No, he will not go upstairs; she should have all the space and personal time she wants. The least he could do is wait for her to come down, when she is ready. Gordie sighed, and wondered why two pieces of burnt toast poked out of the toaster.

While puzzling over the toast and eggs, a loud thud from upstairs startled Gordie. He remembered --they were for Claire, a breakfast in bed surprise.

“Oh, don’t you move another inch,” he bellowed as he grabbed a plate from the cupboard, “I’ve got something for you.”

His mind sharpened. The butter was in the refrigerator behind the milk carton next to the orange juice, the butter knives lay in the utensil drawer – third drawer to the left of the stove. Before he spread the butter onto the toast, he hastily scraped the char marks off with the knife. Moving the plate, grabbing drawers, walking to the refrigerator, his quick movements loosened the knot of his robe.

Gordie thought he heard her calling his name. “No, no, you stay right there! Wait until you see what I made for you,” he replied, spreading the butter onto the second piece of bread.

Perhaps the toast was a bit tough and crunchy, but she will like this surprise, oh, she will love it! Gordie knew exactly what smile to expect: when her green eyes widen and she puts both palms to her cheeks and says “Ooooh, how wonderful!”

He took the plate and walked to the stairs as if the pain in his knees did not matter. The sheer excitement of sharing a moment of joy had lubricated his joints, excited his muscles, and he ascended each step with confident footfalls – no need for the banister. His robe felt like a cape.

“I’m coming, Claire,” Gordie said, not knowing why tears were forming above his smile. He was sure of one feeling however, and his heart had beat to it for the past fifty eight years like a song that always stayed fresh.

Near the top of the stair, Gordie’s right foot stepped on the corner of his robe, slid forward, and put Gordie into backwards freefall. His head hit the crease of a lower stair, and he died.

Death appeared in the small foyer of 483 Evergreen Road at 8:12 a.m. and watched a plate smash against a front door into thirty seven pieces. A slice of buttered toast fell on Gordie’s chest, his arms came to rest in a spread position. Death had not foreseen this. It did not need to touch Gordie.

Upstairs, it examined Claire, lying limp on the floor, her forehead against the hardwood, her arms spread out as well. She was not supposed to move. The kinetic forces were to leave her undisturbed. Gordie was supposed to live. Death observed Gordie and Claire many times. They were not without each other now. Death remained a few moments longer than it should have.

Death did not understand this happening, why Gordie had no breaths anymore. This phenomena, therefore, must have been caused by a force – an emotion -- beyond death's control.

ACADEMIC VITA

Peter Szekeres

Education:

The Pennsylvania State University; Schreyer Honors College

- Bachelor of Arts in History Summer 2012
- Bachelor of Arts in English, with Honors Summer 2012
 - o Minor: International Studies

Experience

- Filippelli-Stelts Intern in Special Collections in Paterno Library Spring/Summer 2012
 - Conducted archival research, collection descriptions, and created a virtual exhibit
- Research/Editorial Assistant for Professor Michael Anesko Summer 2012
 - Copy editing, proof reading, and coding
- Rohm and Haas Summer 200
 - Intern in the company IT department

Achievement, Honors, and Awards

- Recipient of 3rd place award in fiction 2012 -- Katie Lehman fiction award; Judge's choice.
- Poetry published in 2012 edition of Kalliope – Penn State's Literary Journal
- Recipient of 2nd place award in flash fiction 2012 – English Department writing competition.
- Treasurer of Phi Beta Kappa Society, Penn State Chapter , Fall 2011-Spring 2012
- Dean's List at Pennsylvania State University
- Completed research and presentation for the Sony Corporation, Fall 2008
 - Tested and evaluated the Sony E-reader
- Member of the Blue and White Society
- Studied abroad in Budapest, Hungary – Fall 2010
- 2008 - Member of Penn State International Affairs and Debate Club (PSIADA)
- Since Fall 2009 – Treasurer of Schreyer Honors College Literary Committee
- Recipient of the following Scholarships
 - Whole World Scholarship
 - Grant in Aid Scholarship
 - Schreyer Ambassador Travel Grant
 - Filippelli-Stelts Study Abroad Scholarship
 - Class of 1922 Memorial Scholarship
 - Liberal Arts Summer Enrichment Grant
 - Schreyer Summer Grant