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ALARM
A NOVELLA IN THREE PARTS

JESSE CRAMER
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Reviewed and approved* by the following:

Richard Doyle
Professor of English
Thesis Supervisor

Janet Lyon
Professor of English
Honors Advisor

Charlotte Holmes
Professor of English
Thesis Secondary Reader

*Signatures are on file in the Schreyer Honors College

ABSTRACT

“Alarm” is a novella following the life of Leroi McMullen, a Mathematics teacher at Blairstown High School. An incredibly lonely individual, Leroi spends each of his days attempting to win the favor of his fellow teachers and students. While Leroi’s affections fall particularly towards a fellow teacher named Patricia and an equally lonely student named Logan, his only want for his life is a person to share it with, even platonically. Leroi’s struggle is heightened by a seemingly unrelated second plotline involving a group of scientists dubbed the “Determinists” who seek to both correct shifting physical laws as well as determine the future using science. These two narratives come together under one umbrella by novella’s end, resulting in a tragic resolution involving power, desperation, and despair.

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INTRODUCTION

I am a lifelong short story writer, which considering my short life, is not much of an achievement. I still remember the first short story that I penned, a piece entitled “The Stationary Moon” for my 9th Grade English class. It followed a young unnamed traveler trudging through the woods towards some unknown destination. An unnamed hooded man approaches him. He tells him that he can never leave the vague forest for some unknown reason. The traveler was stuck there forever. He mourned his newfound eternity.

The story was a smash hit. I realized when I dotted that last period, that I was a good writer. Like, the best writer. Much better than those other kids in my class. I handed it in and got my deserved “A.” Then my teacher, a lovable Ms. Schnure, asked me to read it in front of the class. I did. And those cretins in my class said they did not “get it.” They said it was too vague. They wanted to know why the man entered the forest. Why did he get stuck there forever? Who was that hooded man and what was his back story? I said to them, “You’re missing the point. It’s meant to be *ambiguous*. You aren’t supposed to know.” They said back, “But we need to know.” And I replied, “No, you don’t.”

I have not changed in eight years.

“Alarm” resonates with the mind similarly to my first story. The main character, Leroi McMullen, is a definitive loner, constantly searching for some companionship. Without a doubt, this makes him feel trapped in society, where he cannot escape

the name-calling, the teasing, and the general lack of love. Leroi is just a sad, sad person. Even though he frequently ignores all the outward signs that the world loathes him, Leroi acknowledges his given circumstance as fact, all the while introducing a brilliant coping mechanism. He refuses to delve too far into anything, to *know* anything, for he fears that nothing good can come out of it.

This introduces one of the subplots of the novella, that of the Determinists. The not-so-science-fiction scientists who attempt frequently (and failingly) to determine the status and interactions of *everything*. The so-called “End Result” of all of this knowing is a working knowledge of what the future holds, not to prevent any bad hiccups, but simply to obtain the information of the future. I paint these scientists as fools – which might frustrate some of the readers out there – but I am dealing with extremes here. Leroi is just as moronic as all of his counterparts, for refusing to know anything is just as bad as trying to understand it all. It is unhealthy. And I think that it is potentially dangerous.

Throughout the novella, I have no problem using the words “God” and “world” interchangeably. I know that will also annoy some of my readers, namely my mother, but I cannot ignore the relationship between these two concepts. In public opinion, those who revere God acknowledge, first and foremost, His ultimate power and control over us. Basically speak, we cannot outsmart Him, and he will always get the better of us. Those who worship the world – or perhaps more accurately, Mother Earth – exhibit an identical relationship. Humans are an ugly mole on Its surface, unimportant. No amount of science will build our power up to the level of Mother Earth.

This element of control is terrifying to me. I frequently have panic attacks over my inability to determine my future, to stop my death, to know where I will end up, and so on. So, I decided that I needed to stop trying to know so much about everything. This lifestyle does not suit everyone; I would say it suits very few people actually. But, I maintain that a beauty exists in sometimes standing back in awe at the world rather than trying to explain it. There are some things I do not have any desire to know. For me, the traveler in the woods has no back story. He becomes entrapped for no apparent reason. He lives eternally in that forest without much detail to report. That is the beauty of it, the terror, and the hope. Is that counter-intuitive? Absolutely. Oh, well.

Some will notice the odd narration style within “Alarm,” and I need to explain it before you delve straight away. Since I am writing this as a thesis requirement, I decided to experiment with the typical narration styles that I have been taught over my years at Penn State University. The narrator begins as the archetypal third-person limited perspective, keeping us within the mind of Leroi. Somewhere near the beginning of the second part, however, a shift takes place. Suddenly, the narrator becomes a character, reacting to the actions of the story as they take place, as a commentator. Here, the narrator becomes adaptive towards Leroi’s mental state, and this mirroring of emotional states between the narrator and the main character appears throughout the entire novel. In a way, the narrator is Leroi McMullen, telling his story in the third person. I found while writing the piece that my mental state constantly matched Leroi’s mind. When he felt bored, I felt bored, and the prose succumbed to boredom. When he became excited and passionate, the same emotion filled me, and the prose blew apart in several different

directions. Keep with the prose and the narration the entire way. The secret to Leroi's motivation lies in that. Near the end of the novel, Leroi laments that he is becoming two people, possibly more. That second person is me; all of the readers are the possibly more.

I am Leroi McMullen as much as we all are. I am Leroi in both the good and bad ways. He is just so human. That is why I love him.

Someone told me once, "Déjà vu is time travel." I could not possibly agree more. Although I have never experienced any of the events within "Alarm," a constant feeling of déjà vu encroached me as I wrote. In that way, I feel as though I have relived some of those dear dead days beyond recall. I feel lucky, even, for having been given the opportunity to see some moments in my life twice. It has been an honor to time travel. I hope you do it sometime as well.

- Jesse Cramer

PROLOGUE

THIS MUCH IS CERTAIN

THE WORLD IS A GRENADE WITH THE FUSE BURNING

Part 1

Rust

There is something about knowing and knowing. That is where this starts and ends.

All the ears of the classroom perk up. There are boys and girls. Logan is there and he smiles and folds his hands and he listens like he always does. That is my lesson today, I say. They all clap their hands in rhythm – a pattered song or siren – as if they had rehearsed it at group meetings for weeks and weeks. They stand on their short legs. The standing does not make them any taller. My desk covers my face because it is so big, but I stand above it like a giant with giant's feet and legs. My voice resounds when I talk and it shakes the walls and the blackboard. Stop trying to know everything. You don't need to learn. You need to learn some Mathematics. You need to learn to read and write. But stop when you get to the World Wars, stop at the atoms with the quarks and the electrons. Don't read Darwin, because Darwin was just too smart and just couldn't shut up. –We will never ever read Darwin or think too much because we know what trying to know and know will do to us, Mister McMullen. And their hands clap again. That is when their faces start to droop and peel off. I can feel their bones collapsing, and their weight adds to mine. They start sinking into the ground and their bones start to appear and the blood stains the floor. They slip down into the ground like water through a drain. They vomit cold blood. They are half of their regular heights, and so I move and start to touch each of them on the face, and when I touch them, they start to come back and grow. They

stop melting. I use my arms and spread them over as many of them as I can. And then I see Logan, and his hair has fallen out and he has lost an eye and an ear and his nose, and I rush over to him and touch him with both hands until he is full again. He smiles at me, and I pat him on the head. We hug, and I can feel the folds of his skin clinging to mine. –Leroi, a voice comes behind me, and it is Patricia, all falling apart like some candle wax burning past prime. And she tells me to save her, but I cannot let Logan go. But her head drips off her chin and neck like rainwater off a broken gutter. Logan grasps my wrist and pulls me to the ground. He clenches me and gives me an Indian burn. I throw him off and reach for Patricia and I grab her and I run back and grab Logan too so I can save them both. We sit there and hug and that is all. The walls start to melt and fall apart and there is nothing beyond them but echoes. My desk, the blackboard, my chair, they are gone now and melted into the skins of the other children. And so I let the world fall apart and Logan and Patricia and I sit among the echoes. And they lean in. And this, I say, is what we get for trying to know and know and know.

Leroi McMullen woke up blinking but shrugged it off. There was nothing in his eye, no speck. He did not wear contacts or glasses, and his eyes did not glow any special color. They were not overly dry. So, he let it be.

April First brought with it several things. It was both the beginning of a new month, as well as the first full month of spring. The lofty air softened from crisp to smooth and weighed less. Leroi preferred the winter months and started a mental

countdown until autumn. It only took him a few seconds to come up with the exact number of days, one hundred seventy-six days– he said out loud.

This led him to ratchet a list of chores for the week. He needed to apply Liquid to his house; the current coat wore thin. There were groceries. There were no phone calls this week, but maybe next. There was an exam next Friday that needed preparation. His students needed to be prepared for that as well. A review sheet. A pre-test quiz. Sure. All of this thought occurred as he drove towards Blairstown High School between 7:00 and 7:20 a.m.

He shook his head after the mental list ended, knocking the thoughts out of his head. Forgetting he was driving, Leroi closed his eyes dreamily and breathed with heavy volume. His belly grew with air and expelled. Numbers fell from his lips, one, two, three four ten. He opened his eyes to see that he was still between the yellow lines and the sidewalk, only on the wrong side of the road. But no one was around, so it did not seem to matter. He drifted slowly back over the median and regained his place on the road. Leroi considered the possibilities.

He could have hit any number of people, numbering one to probably no more than four. If he had hit one person, he certainly would not hit three more before stopping or swerving or crashing into another car or beam poll. He capped the possible casualty amount at four concerning pedestrians.

A van full of passengers could have been hit. Twelve possible deaths or injuries there alone. Leroi allowed the possibility that he could have hit the four pedestrians and then the van full of passengers, and that van could have tipped and spilled, it could have

crushed if it were built or constructed poorly. Lackadaisical actions added innumerable possibilities.

He ignored the possible squirrel deaths. He could have mowed a dozen dozen in the time it took to stop a car. *A whole one hundred forty four*, Leroi considered. *One four four one hundred and forty four, one hundred forty four*. He loved that number. It felt round and safe, like a weight holding open a door. There was no reason it should feel this way to Leroi, and he knew that. The lack of reason felt like a warm hand on his back. He enjoyed it, all the same.

The car, his life and the lives of other people and squirrels, they remained fine and intact, and Leroi's mind drifted into thoughtlessness.

Leroi passed the Blairstown Zoo. Every town needed some sort of tourism draw, according to the state government. Three years earlier, Blairstown built itself a brand new zoo, complete with pandas and gorillas and the lot. They put them all in two-by-two, Noah's arc-like. In pairs, together. All but one. They left this one zebra alone. Leroi called him Zebra. Leroi visited the Blairstown Zoo during his weekends and liked Zebra. Zebra was alone in his cell. The zoologists put Zebra by himself because he kept killing his mates, no matter what nice female zebras they put in there with him. He always killed them, but never ate them. It was never about food for Zebra. It was something else.

Leroi approached Blairstown High, a concrete palace with glass windows. The three stories added to only a bit over twenty feet. It looked squished, a caked flattened in boxed transit.

His parking space was the fourth closest one, with only Principal Mathers, Vice Principal Jenkins, and Mrs. Winslow before him. This was their order of importance,

Leroi believed. Principal and Vice came first, of course, and then order of seniority of the teachers at the school. The turnover in Blairstown High was steep. No one seemed to want to remain that long – low pay didn't help and everyone hated Principal Mathers. Leroi hated Mathers when people around him hated Mathers. So, in all fairness, Leroi did not hate Mathers. Leroi liked Mathers okay; he respected him, which was the most important thing. He respected him and his position, because someone had to be the hated one – the Principal. He did not want to be the hated one, so he hated who he had to hate and liked the ones he had to like. In company.

Leroi tried not to entertain the idea that maybe, possibly, he was the hated one when he was not around. A possibility, sure. But not worth entertaining.

Leroi left his car in the parking space, even on both sides.

Principal Mathers pulled into the parking space, the first one, as Leroi closed his door. Leroi waited for Principal Mathers to gather his things, in order to say hello to him. *Hello, Principal Mathers* Leroi said loudly, to catch his attention. But whether Principal Mathers ignored the initiation or not, it did not matter. He simply walked with his briefcase, scratching the hairs of his mustache with ferocious fervor. This turned into a dig into his nose which lasted his entire walk towards the concrete steps, past the concrete walls, and through the front door of the school. Leroi stood watching all the while. He muttered something to himself with no meaning.

Blairstown High stood on a hill with no trees. The land around the school lay barren with concrete and vibrant grass. The concrete had cracked up and now was a fine dust. It blew away every few months, which led the school to repave it, which deteriorated within a month, which blew away, and so on to infinity. Everybody still

called it concrete, even in its dust phase. Still smelled of concrete. The fine bits often became lodged up people's noses and stuck with them throughout their days. Leroi constantly found dust in his ears, in his bellybutton, and under the rolls of his breasts. He was diligent about keeping them clean.

The grass that surrounded the building though, beyond the structure and the parking lot, glowed green. A highlighter green.

The grass appeared almost unnatural in its shade and intensity. On a bright day, Leroi and the rest of the teachers and students shielded their eyes as they walked into the building. They squinted and waved to one another every morning. *Grass is bright today*, was something one of them would say to another. *Sure is*, was one of many responses. *Not so bad for me actually*, was another. There were infinite responses. For Leroi – who never wanted to think too hard about how to pick the proper response – always responded, *Oh geez, that's bad, ain't it?* It suited his personality. It was a buoyant response. Leroi was a buoyant individual.

When the grass shone too bright, the teachers drew the shades from within the school, and some who had the unfortunate position of a field-facing classroom needed burlap to completely block the distracting light. Leroi luckily had earned a spot in the back of the school, facing the edges of Blairstown suburbia.

A small forest once led off past the back left entrance – next to the cafetorium – but not any longer. The previous week, The State mandated that each school – elementary through college – provide a space to store its own Liquid, since they wasted almost two million dollars in a fiscal year on hauling and storing Liquid. This cut down cost and made things more convenient. So, they chopped the trees into oblivion, and piled them up

right next to the football field, which never saw any play. They planned to utilize the excess wood – *to recycle it*, Principal Mathers said – in a bonfire for Homecoming that night. The bonfire was the centerpiece of Homecoming week, which ended that night. There was a dance scheduled. The theme was “Ferocity,” which seemed a bit vague to everyone. But the students hated the ambiguity. Leroi reveled in it.

Leroi tossed on his hat, which had fallen to the floor during the drive. His hat buttoned in the front with two buttons; it was a golfer’s style hat. The hat made him look like an old man from behind. When Leroi walked from his house to Blairstown Zoo (which he did often) or to the Acme, people offered to help him cross the street. This only happened if they saw him from behind, because from the front, Leroi looked like any middle aged man. Leroi was only about halfway to “old man.” He appeared about thirty-five, if someone had to make a guess off-hand, but was somewhat younger. He never clarified beyond that.

Leroi trotted into the school, just above the speed of an average walk. He passed bands of children entering the school. He said *hello* to each one who would listen. A boy in his Calculus One class sat out front on the concrete wall, kicking his legs against the gray. Leroi stopped in front of him and said *hello, Logan* and the boy replied a quick *hello, Mr. McMullen*. Logan bowed his head when he spoke his brief words. Logan was blonde and beautiful. Tall and thin, a carrot with limbs and a head. Logan was dumb but tried hard. And he was beautiful with innocence. Being dumb was okay.

Silence fell on top of them, and their eyes broke.

A Liquid crewperson spoke to Leroi: “If you two don’t move, I’m going to get some Liquid on you.” And so, the two in unit movement, slid to the side. The Liquid

crewperson moved a ladder right to where they were, along the concrete wall, and climbed up it with a bucket. The crewperson carried a bucket and a paint brush. The paintbrush was larger than the bucket, the size of a large human head with twelve inch long hairs, stiff as wood. Its bristles barely fit inside the bucket to lap up the Liquid. “Thank God for Liquid.” The crewperson said.

“Thank God for Liquid,” Logan echoed.

“Thank God for Liquid.”

“Til class,” Leroi said to Logan, turning to him and then away abruptly.

Leroi trotted along past Logan, speaking to himself *hello, hello, hello*.

Leroi’s head almost touched the ceiling as he walked down the hallway. Not that Leroi was particularly tall, just that the ceiling hung low, about seven feet. Leroi crouched while he walked down the hallway. His head was safely below the ceiling, speckled concrete grating the surface. He ducked anyway, in earnest.

He passed Patricia on his way to class. Patricia’s head almost grazed the ceiling as she walked, but she did not crouch. She walked in normal gesture. He waved and said *hello, Patricia* and she said right back *hello... Leroi*. They continued past one another, Leroi trotting, saying over and over again to himself *hello, hello, hello*.

Leroi entered his room and sat at his desk.

His room was dank like a basement. Water collected at the corners, where wall met wall, where those edges met floor and ceiling. It dripped and sheeted the rest of the surfaces in a cool slumber.

Leroi looked at his desk, counting the items on it. He counted one stapler, one pencil, one black pen, one blue, and a notebook. He cleared his desk of unnecessary items

at the end of each day, packed them into one of the three side drawers on the right. A routine, simple.

And so Leroi prepared himself for the day. For that April First day, when he would inevitably destroy the world.

Leroi did not intend anyone any specific harm. He would not bomb any countries or kill any Prime Ministers. He would certainly not exert himself beyond what he normally did with his days and nights. He would not stop and reflect on his actions before doing them and would certainly not consider the outcomes.

Leroi would destroy the world as anyone would go about destroying the world.

He would destroy it by accident and with the best of intentions.

Principal Mathers told them to take these drills more seriously. He warned through his mustache. “Our times have been uh off, and that reflects poorly and is generally uh bad for us,” he said, pointing at Leroi and then across the room, nowhere in particular. “Let’s be serious for a second. Let’s uh just think about this completely seriously.” Principal Mathers looked at some notes on the table. He could not read them so he brought the paper closer to his face and squinted. “Better alarm times means what uh exactly?” He took his eyes off of the piece of paper and looked around the room in a swift scan. His mustache itched him, and he brought an index finger across it slowly in a deliberate stalled motion.

“Is this question rhetorical?” Leroi asked after his motion ceased.

“No uh Leroi, it needs an-”

“If it is rhetorical, I will not respond.”

“It is not rhetorical, Leroi.”

“A better alarm time means a better score for Blirstown High School,” He responded with diligence.

“Right, Leroi.” Principal Mathers replied, just above a whisper. He looked to his sheet and then to the rest of the teachers in the room.

“Let’s give them a scare,” Principal Mathers joked to lighten the mood. No one listened attentively except for Leroi. Mr. Windfall certainly did not – Leroi thought – with his goat-tee. His goat-tee always contained a remnant from his previous meal or two. Today, there was a piece of bacon, from breakfast that morning, although there was no true way for Leroi to be completely certain about that. He caught these details and recorded them, shrugged them off if they delved too far. He wondered too much about things like that. There was a hint of mustard, as well – Leroi squinted, but then stopped himself from thinking about where it had come from.

“Why are we trying to scare the students?” Leroi asked Principal Mathers with sincerity. Leroi was concerned about the student’s panic to the false alarm, worried that they would take it too seriously, thus bringing about an unnecessary rise in emotional distress. *This could bring about panic*, Leroi thought.

“It’s alright Leroi, I was just making a joke.”

“Your joke could be misinterpreted.” *And it could have been.*

“I suppose you are right, Leroi.”

“I’m just concerned about the student’s panic to the false alarm, and I worry that they will take it too seriously, thus-“

“It’s alright, Leroi. No one will cause a panic.” Principal Mathers raised his palm up and pressed it forward in the air. Scout’s honor.

“Well, alright then. I feel much safer.”

“Good, Leroi.”

He leaned over to Mr. Windfall and tapped him on the shoulder, to ask him if he was concerned about the student’s panic to the false alarm.

Mr. Windfall was carefully doodling a pornographic image of a woman and himself. Leroi looked down at the image. He believed the woman to be very beautiful for a cartoon and noticed her high cheek bones. She had no facial hair, which was good. Appropriate.

Mr. Windfall never seemed too ashamed about whether or not he could see the image. Leroi fixed his gaze on the woman. He saw the curve of her buttock that moved inward up her back. She had no hair. Mr. Windfall had not given her any hair yet. Hair was least important. Leroi studied her face: cheekbones and a single-lined smile. Her eyes were huge. He wondered if this woman – if she was a real person – would have dinner with him and be his friend. This thought evaporated from his mind in a trained manner, like many of his thoughts.

Mr. Windfall looked up and him, and Leroi jumped back into his seat, cleared his throat.

“Leroi.” Mr. Windfall said, acknowledging his presence.

“I prefer *Mr. McMullen*.”

“Alright.”

And Principal Mathers flicked his wrist and clicked his teeth, ending the meeting. Leroi stood first and headed towards the door diligently. He leaned forward as he walked, hovering his weight just in front of his toes. Mr. Windfall glanced up from his drawing, seemingly unaware that the meeting had even occurred, that it had ended, and pointed towards Leroi's back, throwing his head back in a silent cackle. The others in the room acknowledged Windfall's gesture. His joke. Leroi caught this entire exchange out of the corner of his eyes, but ignored it all. He came up with an immediate explanation, an innocent one – *I have something funny on my back* – and continued out the door to his classroom.

“This is Calculus One, An Introduction to Derivation and Integration,” Leroi spoke loudly from behind his desk. He began each of his classes by announcing the title of the class. “Today, we will be reviewing for our exam on Monday.”

His class was full. It was the first module of the day, and the students at Blairstown High never enjoyed scheduling early classes. Calculus One led to many opportunities, though. All of Leroi's classes were completely filled, every seat, even the two in the back that had no desks attached to them. Logan sat in the back in one of those chairs. He stared at his notebook.

Leroi's class was also filled because it was an easy class. There were five Calculus teachers at Blairstown High. Each teacher taught at least four sections of the same Calculus One course. And no one graded easier than Mr. McMullen.

“Which equation is equal to the derivative of itself?” Leroi McMullen asked, and all but a few of the young hands shot up immediately, in earnest eagerness.

“Ee to the Ex,” one of the yelled. Leroi could not tell which one it was completely, since many of them looked and acted alike. They all worked for the same end-goal and Leroi understood this. So, Leroi said, “That is right, whoever said that. That is right.”

And their hands went down systematically. Like they rehearsed it. Two rehearsals a week after school with cookies and pop.

“That was an easy one,” one of them said.

Leroi ignored it.

“Now, what is the derivative of the sine function?”

And the hands returned.

“This is stupid.”

“This isn’t even the unit we are one.”

“Aren’t we supposed to be reviewing integrals, not derivatives?”

“It’s fine, he doesn’t even grade our exams, it doesn’t even matter, Jesus.”

They spoke.

They spoke in controlled whispers while leaning over to one another. Leroi heard what they said and understood their cruel intent with the words. He brought his eyes just above their heads as he continued the review section, speaking to the air just above them. This made him feel secret and safe.

The Determinists were highly revered for doing a job that needed to be done, perhaps the most important job in the world, at least in this Physical Age. Their history was well known by the general public. It was taught in schools, although that kind of

formal education on their history was ultimately unnecessary. Parents taught their children about the Determinists. They were current-day myths. They were Hercules and Pedicles and Dionysus, alive and well and working in the government for good money. Anyone could touch them and see them. No faith required.

Their purpose and their history were in the realm of common knowledge, recited by kindergarteners in exchange for snack food and naps. No debate over any of it existed.

The Determinists formed in order to protect the world from the dangers of unpredictability. They were founded out of hobby. A small electrical catastrophe struck an unimportant city some time earlier. For years, no one besides military personnel and officiated scientists entered the area. Many people died in horrible fashion, instantaneous and without any sort of warning. Families of the deceased demanded answers, and the public jumped on board before long. The public questioned why our smartest minds could not discover the cause of this seemingly random electrical interference that ended the lives of so many. The public became obsessed. A group of scientists, led by a Dr. Lorenz, thought they could figure it out.

They did not figure it out and failed wildly. Dr. Lorenz ventured into Pittsburgh, to see for himself the catastrophe, in order to know what had occurred first hand. He wanted to see the carnage, and he believed it would have a profound impact on the way he viewed and understood the situation. But he just died, like the rest.

So, in memory of Dr. Lorenz, his followers continued his work, vowing its completion.

In light of this failure, the rest of these scientists, who were the first Determinists, realized their error. They started with an event that could not even be explained within

the current Laws of Physics. They were doing Calculus when they did not even know how to add or subtract. They were children playing T-Ball hoping to win the Pennant.

So, they did as any person would do with such a dilemma. They started over. They started small.

The Determinists constructed theories on simple systems. Their first recorded experiment involved the amount of time fruits took to rot after they had been plucked off of trees, based on air pressure, temperature, amount of sunlight, among other factors. Observations turned into Laws and facts. And before long, they could correctly determine, to the hundredth of a second, the moment that a given fruit of a certain mass would rot, under certain given conditions.

The fruit experiment was fun, and proved that cause and effect still held some water in the physical world. But at the end of the day, all they did was prove that apples grew soft and mushy with time. They proved that at some point, an apple would be rendered inedible and useless to human consumption. So, eventually, they quit apples and got bigger.

These little experiments continued as all things do. They grew in size and fervor that would not quit, not for anything except violent and immediate expulsion. They made curiosity into a full time job. Eventually, as rotting fruits and vegetables piled up behind them, the Determinists moved on to social behavior, in determining the outcomes of little interactions between people. One of the scientists, out of a deep dedication to the project, offered up him and his wife for observation. They sought to determine how much stress their marriage could take before she would give up and leave.

They found that people were as predictable as apples, if not more so. They determined the date and time that the wife gave up and filed for a divorce. They even determined how she would phrase it to the husband-scientist. Her tone of voice. What she was wearing. The smell of her breath. The length of sag in her eyes. The number of blinks. The shudder in her shoulders when she spoke. The number of times she cracked her tiny, tiny knuckles. The prescription she took out. All of it. She was an apple rotting, rotting in the palm of the hand.

The Determinists had won the Pennant.

This experiment was called a necessary evil by supporters. It was usually left out of the told story. All stories needed a dirty secret. We *had* to drop the bomb. Made sense. Not at all surprising.

Membership within the Determinists grew. As word of the science-psychics traveled among talking circles, masters of the field began abandoning their frustrating and fruitless projects in lieu of such a promising new venture. The Determinists had their eye set on the End Goal – which they called their ultimate prize for all their work. They forgot their roots in Dr. Lorenz and the small city electrical disturbance. They wanted it all, a roadmap for the way the world worked and would continue to work for all time. Prediction-based science always had this as an End Goal, but it remained implicit – obvious for the given field. Why predict only a week's worth of weather when you could have years? Imagine the planning. No more ruined picnics and graduations. The joy.

After the government got involved and added a few incentives for new recruits in the project, enrollment shot up. Their recruitment was high, especially in the out-of-High School group. It took many Determinists in order to correctly measure and input the data

required to produce the End Result. Calculus I was the minimum requirement for application. 99% of applicants were accepted into the program. Their financial well-beings were then taken care of for the duration of their employment. No turnover existed within the field, but the jobs and the positions continued to pile up.

And the Determinists got close, so close, during the First Physical Age. An announcement revealed that within a few more month's effort, the End Result would be acquired, and history and future would become the same. Essentially. The same.

That announcement ended the First Physical Age, as the Determinists dubbed it thereafter.

Simply put, Gravity got all wonky. Everyone felt a bit heavier than normal. It was almost unnoticeable at first, just an unusual dreariness fell over everyone, a physical fatigue. But lying down didn't help. Some equated it to feeling constantly stoned off of marijuana. The most visible evidence for the shift was in the speed of objects falling. A basketball hit the ground just a bit too quick. A leaf could cause a small concussion in autumn. A high hop could cause a broken leg, snapped femurs like rotten carrots. There was slight panic over it. Terrorism was suspected. Some people claimed that they could smell something different in the air, a poison. It smelled like almonds. Some *swore* they smelled almonds the moment before they felt heavier. More agreed. It was observed that perhaps almonds were the cause. But the Determinists debunked this and said it was just a myth, a trick of the mind to attempt to connect the dots. A coping mechanism of the unresolved mind.

The Determinists were not happy about this new phenomenon. This heaviness set off all the measurements and assumptions that the Determinists needed in order to

achieve the End Result. They were frustrated and smacked palms on tables. They immediately sought out the cause of this heaviness. They searched the air for new molecules. They built new scales, and tested the water line.

But there was nothing new added to the global system. No act, with or without direct will. No physical cause existed.

The Law of Gravity – Newton’s Law with the apple smacking him in the head off of the tree – had simply *changed*, for no apparent reason. Mass suddenly related to Energy in a very new and different way. It was remarkable.

So, the Determinists tweaked their calculations, requiring an astonishing amount of time. Changing something like gravity can prove to be quite complicated. Meanwhile, the public adjusted themselves to their heavier lives. There were recommended exercises to help build better posture. The public adapted.

And the End Result was in sight again. An announcement was made. They were three months away.

And thus ended the Second Physical Age.

Now, everything was too light – the opposite problem. Gravity lost its effect in the opposite degree and people risked floating off into outer space with a good swing of the arm. Weights were given out in rations. It took almost two hundred pounds of pressure to keep a school girl on the ground.

This dismantled all of the Determinist’s calculations – again. The End Result fizzled from sight. They rewired their numbers. People wore big hats filled with sand, almost fashionable. The Determinists worked diligently. Their numbers began to work out.

This time, they planned no announcement – just in case that had *something* to do with the shifts in Physical Law.

But it changed again, even with no public announcement.

Word spread that some people were brought in for questioning by the government. These people were not part of the Determinists; they were just average citizens. There was a rumor that they had engaged in “suspicious behavior” in the moments prior to the shift in Physical Law. It was not released to public record what this behavior entailed. No one really knew what was going on, or why. There were so many questions to be answered.

So, The Determinists adapted to the Fourth Physical Age.

On the first day of April, as Leroi McMullen went to school and waited for the fire alarm to disrupt his day, as he spoke to Logan and Patricia and Principal Mathers and Mr. Windfall, the world and its inhabitants lived under the Seventh Physical Age. This Age featured an increase in entropy among non-organic substances. All materials without the breath of life deteriorated – fast. Wood rotted in stinking fashion. Rust-affected metals turned golden crimson and chipped away. Concrete crumbled into fine dust and blew into belly buttons and ear holes and between teeth.

A liquid was developed to help slow down the process, a lacquer. This was only temporary though, and needed to be constantly applied, before the air chomped through it to the material underneath. Buildings crumbled without constant application of Liquid. Many buildings had crumbled already, before the effects of the Age were completely figured out by the Determinists. That was how they lost the majority of the schools in the State. But they needed their schools, and they were rebuilt, more efficiently.

The Seventh Physical Age was the most taxing yet. It made the public nostalgic for the previous Ages, for the sand bag hats and the snapped femurs.

The world had settled on this Age for quite some time, much longer than Ages Two through Six. The Determinists were still seeking applicants, though, and the incentives grew with each year. There were rumors that they were close again. It was shushed though, quiet-like, in order to avoid anymore shifts. It started to feel like, maybe, there was something wrong with the world. That maybe, someone like the Determinists or God or all the people together had broken it. That someone caused the shifts in Physics with intention, and no one could just figure out who or what would do that. That was why no one wanted to talk about it, and everyone just moved on about it. No one wanted to be the next person brought in for questioning because of another shift. That would certainly be unfortunate.

The implication of all of this research and “determining” from the Determinists led to a certain, inevitable conclusion about what exactly they were now doing.

Although no politician or leader would ever admit to this, the Determinists knew everything about the past, present, and supposed future. They were aware of each action, from the smallest choice of Pepsi or Coca-Cola, all the way to the matters of life and death. And each decision interested them as much as the other, since they all could affect the End Result. Some regarded it as a security blanket, to help preserve order and certainty, and this opinion reverberated among the public eye. No one certainly disagreed, at least not openly, even though the Determinists knew one way or another how any given person felt. They knew of wars before wars were even whispered about, the diagnosis of cancer before the gamma rays penetrated the body, the threat of suicide

before the wife even considered leaving before the sex stopped becoming interesting before impotence had set in before infertility was established before that one time the wife was punched just a little too hard in the stomach by the turnstile at the movie theater.

Better yet, they knew and did nothing about it. They insisted on staying out of it all, either out of scientific integrity and observation or in order to maintain the course of events.

The only thing they did not know was how and why the Physical Laws kept shifting. They did not know that.

Patricia Jones taught the eleventh grade Physics class with an odd mixture of grace and sternness. She snapped the students to attention if she needed to, but never yelled. Why should she yell? She was much taller than all the students, certainly taller than Leroi.

Leroi caught the tail end of her class at the end of the first module. He had left his Calculus class early to talk to Patricia.

The back door smelled of sulfur and fire when he entered. Patricia nodded at him on his entrance and lifted a knowing frown that none of her students could decipher. He stood under the safety shower in the corner, since it left him relatively undetected by the students, who all stared at a chart. The chart had the word "MATTER" printed at the top and some arrows pointing in different directions. The flow chart swerved around the poster never reaching any type of conclusion or destination. The chart broke atoms down into electrons, protons, and neutrons. Each one of those words had its own bubble with arrows pointing off in other directions. Those arrows lead to other words in bubbles, like

the words quarks and rods and strings. Those were broken down further with arrows and bubbles and such until the smallest unit of known matter remained. An arrow pointed to a question:

“WHAT DOES THE BLACK BOX HOLD?”

One student – Leroi did not know his name – black hair with bowl cut, but no facial hair, asked: “What does the black box hold, Missy Jones?” His voice squeaked affectionately with S noises. Not a lisp, something different.

“That’s a good question. I don’t know.” Patricia responded. She never offered an answer to a silly question.

“What if it holds nothing?”

“Then, that’s it. It’s nothing.”

“It has to be something.”

“We don’t need to know. Do we?” Patricia asked in earnest rebuttal. She brought her arms in front of her, flashing her red tips of finger nails. She picked something in her teeth but gave up.

“Is it on the AP exam?” One student asked. Patricia walked over to the student, he was short, especially while sitting in a chair. She crouched down, bending both of her legs, and placed her hands on both of the student’s shoulders.

“No, don’t worry about that,” she said, grasping both shoulders after the last word with a hard squeeze.

“Never mind. Okay. Thanks Missy Jones.” And she returned to the front of the classroom.

The students called her “Missy Jones,” and she encouraged it. She said it brought her closer to her students. She told Leroi that once, when he asked her why her students called her by such an informal and disrespectful name. She laughed, and touched Leroi’s arm – hair and all and rubbed it with the tip of her thumb – and then Leroi suddenly agreed with her that it was a good idea for the students to call her that.

The clock on the wall glowed red “8:47,” the end of the first module of the day. Principal Mathers replaced all the analog clocks in the school with digital ones. *They are easier to read.* He also rid the school of the traditional ringing bell to mark the start and end of each class. A grated box hung in each room, down in the middle from a cord and wire. It buzzed at every appropriately marked moment. The buzz shook skin and bone, sawed like a saw into a cadaver. So, at that minute, the red of each number intensified as the buzzer buzzed its three second alarm. And the students collected their things in a frenzy of laptops and cell phone calculators – nothing broke.

A few students stayed after class to ask questions about the AP exam. *What is the smallest unit of matter that will be covered on the AP exam they asked and typed. How can we ensure that we will receive a score of 5 on the exam? Is the term “BLACK BOX” going to appear, is the flow chart going to appear, is there really such a thing as an atom?*

“Amazing lecture,” Leroi said to her after the students cleared out.

“No, it wasn’t,” Patricia replied with a clap of her hands and a bow of her head. Her demeanor dropped to that of a schoolgirl with a nervous twitch. She twiddled her big toe on the ground and pressed the tips of her red fingernails together. “What do you need, Leroi?”

“I don’t need anything. I just came to talk.”

“You need a reason to come down, remember?”

She dug deep into the tip of her index finger. Leroi caught the gesture and felt a pang in his stomach that audibly resonated.

“I’m hungry,” he said, quick and determined, “That was all that was.”

“Excuse me, Leroi?”

“That sound was from my stomach,” he clarified, adding with a wink and a laugh, “not from, well you-know-where.”

“Hm,” her lips buzzed. Her toe stopped, twiddled its last twiddle. It fell still and flat.

“It was not any sort of um not a sort of funny noise from gas or anything.”

“I think I understood that Leroi.”

“Good,” he brought his arm across his forehead in a humorous mode. Patricia did not laugh with him, but nodded her head to signal a segue.

“These kids are obsessed with the AP exam. I keep trying to tell them to cool it with the pressure. It’s only a test.”

Leroi ignored it. He had trouble picking up on segues.

“Why do you let them call you Missy Jones?”

“Leroi?”

“It’s disrespectful.” His tone changed and his smile faded. He put on a serious face.

“It’s not disrespectful, Leroi. It’s just informal. I’ve told you that before.”

“I don’t like when the students disrespect you.”

“It’s not disrespectful, Leroi.” Her tone shifted from its light-hearted origin. She crossed her arms.

“I apologize.”

And as quickly as she grew stern, the pretense fell away. She brought her arm up to Leroi’s shoulders, which hung low. She picked up his chin, which had also fallen down, down.

“Actually, I find that the students are nicer and more responsive since they use an informal name with me.”

“Responsive.”

“They even like me more, I’d say.”

“Hm.”

The buzzer buzzed. Their four minutes between classes were up.

“Don’t you have a class now, Leroi?”

“Yes. I do.”

“Shouldn’t you go to that class?”

“Yes, I should.”

He paused.

“I will go, then.”

And before she could as much as smile or wave, Leroi shuffled out of the room, using the back entrance he used when he had entered, and re-entered his classroom.

“Mr. McMullen’s late.” Someone in the back shouted. Leroi glanced up to see who it was, but all their faces blended together, matching his panic. “Mr. McMullen, why are you allowed to be late, and we aren’t?”

“I am not late.”

“The bell rang,” there was no bell, “and you’re late.”

Laughter erupted in the class, filling Leroi’s head with echoes of sound, an already filled head straight to the ears, nostrils, and mouth. This class had nearly fifty students in it. Each student shared a desk, a chair. Some leaned against the back wall, seemingly full of attitude and contempt for the class.

“I was busy. The teacher cannot be late.” Leroi said.

“That’s bullshit. The teacher can be late. You are late.”

“This is Calculus One.” Leroi’s voice shook and none of his words came out right. “Today, we are reviewing for your exam on Monday.”

“I hear Leroi is a faggot. You like a dick in your mouth, don’t you?”

“He sure does,” Mr. Windfall said, walking by Leroi’s open door. He passed by, never looking up from his notepad, which he doodled on. *Dicks all in his mouth*, his voice trailed down the hallway.

“No, I do not enjoy that. Now, what is the only function that is a derivative of itself?”

“How about, Leroi equals a hairy pussy.”

“No, that is incorrect. The answer is e^x to the e^x .”

“Leroi, Leroi, is so lonely, he likes to suck his own —“

“My name is —“

Leroi stopped his mantra immediately. His eyes rolled back behind his eyelids, and they shut tightly, pressed with fervor and determination. He recalled Patricia’s class, and all the students asking questions. He heard their questions in his head and rolled them

around under his eyelids. He heard her voice, although she did not say anything in particular. Instead, she just spoke syllables and noises, which seemed more meaningful to him than the tightest embrace. She spoke only to him, no one else.

“My name is not Leroi.” He opened his eyes and expanded his body, taking in a deep earnest breath. “You may called me, from now on, um –“

“Pussy breath?”

“No, you may call me uh. You may call me. You may call me Mister Mc. No. You may called me Mistah Mick.”

None of the students responded, but Leroi’s confidence grew. He felt the room enclose around him and dilate in deliberate pulsation.

“Do you seriously want us to call you Mistah Mick, Mr. McMullen?” A familiar voice called from the back. Logan was seated at the same place as the previous first module. Leroi remembered that Logan took the class twice a day, because he did not quite understand the material well enough. Leroi enjoyed his enthusiasm and appreciated that unattainable ignorance, now lost on Leroi himself.

“Yes, my name is Mistah Mick.”

And the class opened the books among unfunny murmurs between them. For the rest of the module, he stood at the front of the class, forcing everyone to call him by his new nickname.

“What is the derivative of the sine function?” Leroi yelled with bravado, like he was announcing the winner of an award.

“The cosine –“ one of them replied.

“Please address me by my correct name.” Leroi proudly replied.

“Mistah Mick...”

“Thank you. Now you may answer the question.”

And this pattern continued for the rest of the class, until the buzzer buzzed, and they all exited in one solid line, not speaking the entire way out. After they had completely exited out in the corridor, only Logan remained, planted in his seat and staring down at the desk. Leroi stood by the door, after greeting each of the students out with “good day, young student,” and looked over at Logan, who looked distraught to say the least.

“Do you have a question about the material, Logan?” Leroi asked him, still shouting unnaturally, even with no one else in the room. Logan looked up from his desk and grabbed his backpack, which had not been opened during the entire class. He had never even taken out his pencil or notebook. He had sat there the entire forty-eight minutes and simply stared at his desk. Leroi’s voice dropped. “Is everything alright, Logan?” Logan stood and approached the door, taking his time without regard for the question.

“Everything is fine, Mistah Mick.”

“Logan,” Leroi reached both arms out and touched both of his shoulders and crouched down to meet him at eye level. “You can be sure to tell me anything.” And he squeezed and released.

“Do I have to call you Mistah Mick, or can I call you Mr. McMullen?” Logan’s eyes looked like they were watering, but Leroi could not tell for sure since his face hurtled towards the ground. Leroi looked up and away and stood back up completely. A

silence fell between them that did not quit. Eventually, Logan exited the room, needing to go to his next class before the four minutes were up and the buzzer buzzed again.

Leroi went over to his desk and shoved his notebook into one of the desk drawers. His third module was a preparation time for the rest of the day, so no class would be around until the module closest to lunch time.

He slammed his head into the table, and before the sound of the pound hit his ear, Leroi was fast asleep.

There is a blackboard. The walls meet the blackboard but they are black and it is hard to decipher where and when the one becomes the other. There are questions. I stand on both my legs but only reach the height that my chair reaches and I sway and peek over top of the chair and stretch to reach over. There are hands raised and waving, fingers curling and straightening in eager excitement. Yes? Questions please. – Isn't it true that there are no such things as atoms? – That's a sound judgment but I'd be afraid to say something as blanket and ending as that. – Isn't it true that atoms are a method of coping? – Now you get it. And I start to reach over top of the chair and the arms begin to fall to the floor, like they are all forgetting their questions, forgetting their arms, the weight of them and the pulsing of veins that holds them up, they are forgotten. – Mr. McMullen, Mr. McMullen. – Ah, ah, ahhhhh.. – Mistah Mick, Mistah Mick. – Better, better. – If an atom is a method of coping, then an electron and a proton and a neutron, how do they fit into this all? – They are for the serious cases. The ones that atoms cannot solve. An electron is like a valium, and a proton is like a diazepam, and a neutron is like

a lorazepam. They exist to make someone numb so they stop asking questions. – Oh. And they all write down in their notebooks and the black board widens and breeches the walls. The walls disappear. There are no walls. Only black board. I grow and my legs straighten and thicken. Blood starts to pour from my pinky finger. I write on the black board in big block letters “DON’T OPEN THE BLACK BOX.” I write using the pinky blood instead of chalk. There is no chalk. And they all write down in notebooks. Their pencils break and now they hold bloodied pinkies and blackboards. Their notebooks are gone now. – Mistah Mick, Mistah Mick? – No questions. Just write this down. Can you pronounce what I wrote on the board? And they all pronounce it like they are just learning to speak. – Louder! I shout and they say it one syllable at a time. The syllable hangs in their mouths before they drop it for the next one. Each syllable crests and peaks and crashes down before it is forgotten. – Together! They stand and hold hands and hug each other. They have lost their black boards. They have stones, stone tables and stone pegs and hammers. My blackboard is a cave wall, there are hieroglyphics. They chisel the saying into their tablets. The saying is chiseled into the cave wall and the hieroglyphs make love around the letters and in the letters. The students are dancing and dancing. – So, in review –I say, but the dancing dancing continues- What Are Atoms? And they say, - Nothing, nothing at all Mistah Mistah Mick.

And I say, that’s right.

Leroi’s head smacked against his desk as he awoke. His head ached with the coolness of moisture. It was either cold sweat or the dampness of the room. Leroi felt his

brow, lifting his fingers to his nose. It smelled dank, dank like a cavern. He shrugged it off and lifted his head.

A pile of slanted papers sat at the edge of his desk, study guides for all his classes for the day that a secretary had delivered to his classroom, probably in his sleep. He had forgotten to request them for earlier in the day, before his first two modules of the day. *They probably would not have taken them* Leroi justified to himself. *They are smart kids, each of them. Good good kids, Leroi. They are good and smart. They don't need them.*

Leroi took his fist and punched himself in the right temple. He let up just before making contact and clenched his eyes to make them as closed as possible. A shiver grappled on to the edges of his skin, right where the hairs contacted the body. It flowed through like necessary pain. He shook his body to keep the shiver going, to feel it more and longer than it initially attacked. He brought his fist to his temple again. And again. Full force. He staggered back at his own strength and put his face on the desk, pressing into the surface. Leroi felt the grains on the wrinkles of his face.

A ladder hit his window and broke straight through. Leroi hopped from his chair and screamed a loud yell. The yell was much too loud for what had just occurred. It was a shriek, high in the middle, sharp on both ends.

“Is everything alright?” Principal Mathers appeared at the door.

Leroi screamed again.

“That was you? I thought I heard uh woman screaming.”

“A ladder came through my window.” Leroi pointed to the window. A man’s face popped in between the broken glass. He wore a hat with a wide brim, a cowboy hat. Leroi screamed at the sight of the man, covering his mouth. Cowering.

“Everything alright? I heard a woman screaming.” The man with the hat said. He looked around. “Where’d she go?”

“It was just Leroid.” Principal Mathers said. He laughed. “*Leroid.*”

“My name is Mr. McMullen.” Leroi said. He had already forgotten about his new nickname – Mistah Mick. It had come, and it had left.

“Who is Leroid?” The brimmed-hat man said.

“He is.”

“I am *Leroi.*”

“I thought your name was Mr. McMullen.”

“It is.”

“Curious.”

Principal Mathers hung in the door. He did not enter. The brimmed-hat man also had not entered the room.

“Get it together, Leroi.”

“But a ladder came through my window.”

“I see that uh get it together.”

“Sorry about the window, Principal Mathers. Sorry, Leroi.”

“Mr. McMullen.”

“Mr. McMullen. Sorry.”

“Get that uh fixed Leroi.”

“But I didn’t break it.”

“I broke it, Principal Mathers. Definitely my fault.”

“His classroom uh his responsibility. I’d say.”

“It is my classroom.”

“This is a little ridiculous. I put a ladder through his window. I don’t think this man here, Mr. McMullen, did anything wrong.”

But Principal Mathers had already left the vicinity. *Who was that screaming?* Leroi heard from the hallway. It was the voice of Mr. Windfall. *That’d be Leroi over there*, Principal Mathers responded. *Sounded like a girl, if I had to guess.*

“Sorry about that, Mr. McMullen. I’ll come around and fix it.” His head poked out of the window. His hat fell inside the room, caught on the sharpen edges of cracked glass.

“Your hat, sir.” Leroi yelled down to him. He trotted over to the window and stuck his head through and yelled again. “Your hat.”

“I’ll pick up there in a second, Mr. McMullen. When I come around inside.” He jumped off the ladder, four steps from the ground. The ladder was made of wood, covered in a fresh, sticky coat of Liquid.

“You sound like a girl McMullen.” Mr. Windfall yelled inside the classroom as he passed by in the hallway. “Like a little pussy girl with a small pussy.” He laughed as he sauntered down the hallway.

You probably shouldn’t say pussy in the hallways. The children. Principal Mathers said, his voice growing smaller and smaller as he carried himself down the hallway. *Oh shut up Mathers* Mr. Windfall replied. *Nice seeing you* Principal Mathers ended with a laugh. Sincere. And silence finally fell upon the classroom.

The man’s hat still lay on the ground next to the broken glass. Leroi bent down and picked it up, brushing it with the tips of his fingers in careful motions, even though

any glass from the window had fallen to the floor before the hat tumbled after. No particles could possibly be present on the hat, but Leroi patted anyway without shame. He wanted to be sure.

The glass laid in five large pieces on the ground. They had already begun to warp, just slightly, from the air.

He tossed the hat back and forth between his hands lightly, while studying the brim with the tip of his right index finger, bringing it around. He felt it like the edge of knife, checking for sharpness. Then, Leroi brought his nose to the cup of the hat and smelled softly and with a hint of investigation. Without a second thought – as a reflex – Leroi dropped the hat to the floor and went back to his desk. A sound of dripping permeated the room. Moisture pooled at the bottom of the cracks in of the window and dripped down and out the opening. Leroi could only hear this sound, the plop plop plopping, muddied dank water.

Leroi closed his eyes as tightly as the moment before the ladder came crashing through. He felt as through the walls of the room crumbled silently. With his eyes closed, he saw them turn into a fine, fine dust, worthy of bell-button implantation and eye scratching. Splotches of red permeated the crumbled matter, hints of unknown blood. He could see through the walls, with his eyes closed. He saw Principal Mathers duct taping his window shut shouting at the top of a scream *TSKTSKTSK*.

Leroi opened his eyes and saw the walls intact. Principal Mathers was nowhere to be seen. Leroi cracked the bones in his neck, savoring the crunch and release as each bone popped. The tension squashed and popped, finally pushing breaths normally.

“Sure am sorry about that window there.” The man entered from the doorway.

Leroi hopped off the ground, startled, excited. “You’re a jumpy man, aren’t you?”

“I am not usually this jumpy.” Lie. Obvious.

“I’ll put some duct tape over this. Then I’ll put some Liquid over the duck tape to keep it from falling apart anymore than it already has.” TSKing filled the space in Leroi’s ears, terrifying and bold.

“I appreciate the help, sir.”

“Don’t be calling me no sir. Billy is just fine.” The man said, turning to face the window. He pulled duct tape from his belt and went to work with cool grace. He made duct taping as beautiful as possible – which it certainly was – plotting out the lengths of the pieces he applied, so they lined up on every both sides. He planned on making a perfect square to cover the hole. Leroi gazed on, awestruck by the beauty of diligence in duct tape. Leroi felt a physical swell enter his body and subside. He decided to chase that feeling.

“Billy.”

“Easy name to remember, right?”

“Why would you say that it is easy?” Leroi smacked himself in the face, with Billy’s back still turned.

“Did you just smack yourself in the face?”

“No. I did not smack myself in the face.”

“I just saw you smack yourself in the face.”

“You saw incorrectly.”

“This window just got some Liquid on it this morning. Shiny as a mirror. I know what I saw, and I don’t want you to smack yourself around anymore.” It sounded like one complete sentence, the way Billy said it. He never managed to take any sort of verbal break, which was dandy for him and all.

“Of course, sir.”

“Well, this here is all fixed up now. Sorry about that before. Thank God for Liquid.”

“Thank God for Liquid.”

Billy put the duct tape back on his belt. The belt strung through the hole in the center of the roll. Billy had to unbuckle his belt and reapply it every time he wanted to use the tape. *That’s pretty inefficient*, thought Leroi, *but I guess duct tape never needs to be ready at a moment’s notice*. Billy headed for the door. He limped. Leroi considered asking him why he had a limp. He wondered why he had not noticed it before then. He put the questions out of his head, shaking his head to confirm their disappearance.

Leroi himself had a limp that he hid well. He walked as normally as possible, preferring the constant pressure on his right foot than the visibility of a limp. He watched Billy walk out the door and felt a throb in his leg with each of Billy’s steps, as if he were walking himself. The skin on Leroi’s arms and legs tightened, and he could not breathe properly.

“I wanted to say, Mr. McMullen,” Billy turned himself back to Leroi and extended his large hand, smoothed with Liquid. “I didn’t mean to be rude to you and that boy this morning, out front. I told you to move in quite a mean voice, and I didn’t mean

nothing by it. Just grumpy, is all. Hope you forgive me.” Leroi shook his hand, and Billy departed.

He stood at the door and watched Billy going away, down the hall. When the body of the firm and meaningful man dissipated around the corner, he clenched his eyes and thought – thought a great deal.

The sun glared between the cracks in the duct tape, straight into Leroi’s eyes. A smell of burnt leaves and smoke permeated his room with punches and karate kicks, the duct tape already drying and crumpling in quickened deterioration. The smell bothered Leroi, but his indifferent disposition never gave way to this. Instead, he looked slightly bothered by something disturbing and ordinary, say homicide or genocide.

He walked down to Patricia’s classroom without thought. His body wrenched him from his chair and set him down the course. Leroi felt the steps in front of him before they arrived, felt them come through his body before even setting down each foot. His head led first, a way he often walked, and a slight limp created a wave effect. His walk showed determination in the face of absolute randomness. He had no purpose. The urge to walk overcame his desire to remain still. So, he walked.

Patricia taught her class, a different section of the same Chemistry earlier in the day. The flow chart still hung in the background with its ambiguity and sharpness. Leroi watched her hands, wherever they moved. He pressed them together and bowed slightly to the students, and she spread them out to gesture something vast. She pointed and slammed down and raised her own hand to indicate her need for participation and student-fed answers. He moved his hands with her like a dancer learning choreography,

attempting to distinguish a heel step from a toe step. He could not understand it by watching; he needed to do it.

He could tell when she would point to the sky, before it even happened, after a few moments of watching her flap and flap. He literally could sense a second early when she would bring them down upon the table, and he brought his down in eagerness like a drag racer ready to slam the gas. A few of the students turned around, sensing his presence behind them, but none of them seemed overly disturbed by the grown man, miming like a street performer.

Patricia noticed as well and let him be, never allowing distraction to overtake her. She asked questions of the students, and they answered them with their own motions of understanding. With their hands, they learned. Armless bodies would remain stupid until new body parts could be adapted as arm-like. Words were not enough; a body was always needed.

“Who can tell me what parts constitute an atom?” Her smile spoke.

“An electron and a proton and a neutron,” one of them said. Leroi did not notice which and continued to watch.

“Amazing.”

“What is in a proton?” Their voices echoed through one another, so that no one of them ever actually spoke. One leader spoke for them all, the bravest one or the one picked last, forced.

“In a proton?” She said.

“Yes, yes, please tell us.” They said.

“You don’t need to know for the test.” She said.

And they said, “We need to know, we need to know.”

And she said, “No you don’t. It’s not necessary.”

And Leroi pressed his arm onto a nearby desk and gripped until his heart felt fine, felt dandy and like cool, cool mist.

“Tell us,” they said.

And she said, “No, I won’t. You don’t need to know.”

“Missy Jones, we need your help,” and they stood and held each others’ hands like red rover red rover send Missy Jones over.

And Missy Jones tore there hands apart, running and screaming, “I won’t tell you, you can’t know, you can’t know.”

But their hands would not come apart, melded together at the skin and the bones. And Leroi’s hand became soggy as wet cereal and fell off his table, and he could not move for fear of falling apart completely, for fear that no one would notice the difference between him and chicken soup on the ground like puddle-like, for fear – just that – for *fear*.

And they chanted like witches that didn’t exist except in Shakespeare and his copycats, they said “What does the black box hold, tell us we must be told.” And they encircled Patricia and hugged her tight until she melted too among them like metal in poisoned air.

And Leroi shouted through the mumbles of his crumpled lips, “M-m-ah-jk,” which meant nothing, nothing, nothing at all. He tried again but even less real syllables appeared and less sense could be made.

The waking nightmare faded like the fall of a stage curtain.

Patricia asked, "What did you say, Mr. McMullen?" Rolling her shoulders forward, her demeanor collapsed out of distaste. The class that once ignored him out of cheerful indifference now turned to face him, their chairs moist with sweat on his behalf. Each discovering him at his or her own pace, Leroi ducked out of the way of their little stares, which meant no harm, but hurt nonetheless.

"Magic," Leroi said through weakness. "The black box holds magic."

There were not any whispers of confusion. Only the beading heat of eyesight.

"The black box holds nothing but magic."

With the entirety of the classroom blind to her lips and her eyes, Patricia angrily waved him off, saying with ironic cheerfulness, "Oh, thank you Mr. McMullen. Now back to our studies."

And with the instruction of Patricia's dismissal, Leroi left.

He sat at a cracked lunch table in the lunchroom. The lunchroom ceiling hung low, like all the ceilings at Blairstown High. This ceiling was particularly low, but cleaner than all of the other rooms at the school. Health requirements forced Principal Mathers to keep this concrete room moisture free, for fear of mold and things.

Leroi took off his hat and set it down onto the table. He put his palms on top of the hat and felt the threads with his thumbs and index fingers. He sat at a table in the center of the room, but with no one else. The tables closest to the walls along the fringe of the room filled first with students, gradually moving inward. Any late or unwanted students ended up in the middle of the room. Those students spent the entirety of lunch in solemn reflection, either concentrating fully on the next bite of sandwich or gawking

around cautiously, searching for an ally. They sat at their tables like on a center stage, unwilling to perform a trick properly.

Leroi stood and walked to the grill area to pick up his lunch. Fridays always involved a “mystery” menu, an easy way for the lunch staff to unload any leftover food from the week that could not be kept fresh over the weekend. He enjoyed the Friday menu the best, not for the food content, but rather, for the mystery, which enhanced the taste of the meal. It seemed more fresh and spunkier, like a wrapped present rather than one lazily placed in a bag with some tissue paper. Tearing off the paper ruined the fun.

He approached the glass window, which jutted out at the angle towards head level, covering any bodily liquid that could be sneezed out onto the food. A lunch lady with a hair net stood behind the glass. She was tall, taller than Leroi and thin and attractive, even in the hair net, with stray hairs strutting through like rays of light. Her painted nails glowed a bright green, which caught Leroi’s attention, and he stared.

She spoke little English, despite looking completely American. She wore a nametag that read “Katie,” although this was not her name. Leroi had forgotten her name long ago, after she had introduced herself at the Staff and Faculty picnic last summer. Principal Mathers required all of the lunch staff to where name tags, even though they could not afford one to contain this woman’s name, which was embarrassingly long and foreign. She would have needed two nametags. So, Principal Mathers gave her one that said “Katie” instead, saying *it will uh probably be better for you, anyway*.

“You like? Wheech?” She said to Leroi, who stared down at it.

“I will have the mystery special,” he almost called her Katie.

“Yes, Mistur McMullah. Wheech?”

“Whichever the mystery special is.”

“We have cheecken and hamburger and pastah.”

“Okay. I will have whichever the mystery special is, but do not tell me which one you are giving me.” Leroi put his hands over his eyes and pressed tightly, like a kid playing hide and go seek honestly without cheating through the fingers.

“They all the mystery special, Mistur McMullah. You peeck one.” She rested her arm the metal counter, dipping her elbow in some mystery sauce. She recoiled, burned lightly.

“I do not understand what you mean.”

“My English ees no good, Mistur McMullah. You know thees.”

“I do not refer to your English. I refer to your statement.”

“Mistur McMullah, you always take forevah. Just peeck one, Mistur McMullah.”

“I want the mystery special.”

“We change thees week. You tell us wheech mystery you want. We got complaints.”

“You received complains about what?”

“People wanted to know wheech they was getting before they getted it.” She paused, waiting for his response. Leroi looked down at the selections and pressed his forehead against the glass, leaving a moist circle of indecision.

“Get the glass cleaner,” she shouted down the hall. A grunt replied *tell Mr. McMullen to stop doing that*. “I tell heem every time.” *Douchebag*.

“Peeck one, Mistur McMullah. You waste time.”

“Come on Leroid.” Mr. Windfall said behind him. Leroi had not seen him in line.

“Just *peeck* one.”

“I said I want the mystery special. I told – ” he turned and looked, saw the nametag, turned back “– her.”

“Mistur McMullah, you need to peeck one right away. Cheecken and pastah and hamburger. ” She waved to get his attention, but he was still facing towards Mr. Windfall.

“You’re such a little homo, Leroi.”

“What does ‘little homo’ mean?” Leroi asked Mr. Windfall.

“It means you’re an awesome person.” He replied.

“Is this a time when you are being sarcastic?”

“I don’t believe in sarcasm, Leroi.”

“Okay. I did not know that. Thank you. I think you are a little homo, too.”

“Order your goddamn food.”

“Okay.”

Leroi turned back to *Katie*.

“I will have the mystery special.”

The fire alarm started blaring with about five minutes left in lunch. A general groan resounded from the students in the hall, and a few stood up lazily, egging the rest on to join them.

“This is not a drill! This is not a drill!” Mr. Windfall shouted in syncopation. He giggled loudly between each shout, as a drunken man yelling at a crowd that wouldn’t move out of his way. “We’re all going to diiiiiie if you don’t move!”

“Please, hurry along everyone.” Leroi waved his arms in a sweeping motion, pushing their bodies toward the doors. Even with Mr. Windfall’s blasphemous shouts and Leroi’s soft pleas, none of the students moved outside faster than a saunter’s pace. Leroi heard all of their conversations, at the same time, and they spoke about the alarm.

There isn’t any smoke

We don’t need to go fast

They would be freaking out more if there was a fire

If there isn’t any smoke, then there isn’t a goddamn fire

I’d know if there was a fire. I’d just know-

Leroi thought *no, no, no, it’s a fire, it’s a fire*, even though it was not a fire at all. Leroi wondered *what if this isn’t the drill that Principal Mathers scheduled? What if it is a real fire*, even though it was only the scheduled fire drill, and there was no real cause for alarm. *I hope it is a fire*, he thought, *I wish it was a fire so they would learn and be happy*. But all the hoping and wishing by Leroi did not make the fire anymore real.

The cafetorium emptied out in six minutes, according to Leroi’s watch, which was more or less accurate. He moved into the hallway, in order to push out any stragglers that refused to move. The State reserved the right to suspend any school districts that performed especially badly, but Blairstown always brought in average evacuation times. Most schools pulled in an average evacuation time; no one seemed too compelled to

excel in the area. The difference between the worst and best performing schools was only a minute or so. No one seemed to take it all that seriously.

In the event of a real alarm, they would all be dead. That much was certain.

He entered the hallway and saw one group of students, dancing and skipping down towards the wrong end of the hallway, away from the exits. They linked their arms, like *The Wizard of Oz* and laughed when the boy on the end could not keep up with the skipping pace. They all attempted to hum *Follow the Yellowbrick Road*, although no one could get it quite right, especially the boy on the end, who gave up and just laughed along with the rest. When the tune ended, they all turned in place and continued down towards the exit, where they finally shuffled outside out of exhaustion rather than fear. The laughter echoes in Leroi's ears, which froze him, standing in place, waiting for someone to thaw him with warmth.

The hallway eventually emptied out after several minutes, and Leroi's feet came unstuck. He shuffled outside with the rest and started counting bodies, although no one had asked him to count or clarify. He counted anyway. Sixty-seven kids on this side of the building, he counted, which sounded good. *Sixty-seven is more than sixty-six. If there were sixty-six, that would mean that one of the sixty-seven was possibly missing, or just hiding on the other side of the building*, Leroi thought.

The teachers stood in their own little party off to the side, standing closer to the building than the students, because as adults, they could handle the danger of a burning school with more care and intuition. A group of English teachers stood there in a tight circle with no spaces, five of them. Leroi glanced around for the Science and Mathematics teachers, for Patricia, in order to join their huddle. Their huddle probably

had formed on the opposite side of the school, next to their classrooms and their emergency exits.

Leroi stood on the perimeter of the group, as an electron around a nucleus, hovering as a wasp. They each had no facial hair, the woman and the four men, and Leroi found it difficult to determine which one was which after a few moments of listening to their conversation. One was taller and had one a blue polo, which helped. But the rest of them wore white button downs and cargo khakis, even the woman, which seemed odd to Leroi as it would to anyone. *Tall Blue Polo Man must be the head English teacher*, Leroi thought. He did not know their names, only their faces with some familiarity but not enough for a proper *hello, hello, hello*.

“There is no fire.” Tall Blue Polo Man said. “Didn’t you hear Mathers this morning when he said it?”

“No, when did he say that?” One of the other said.

“This morning, moron.”

“I heard him say it as well,” Leroi said without consequence.

“There’s no fire, great. Glad my class was interrupted for no fire,” another one of them said.

“But you need the fire drill in case there is a fire,” Tall Blue Polo Man said.

“But why?”

“Yes, why do we?,” Leroi said. “It scares the students into thinking there is a fire and causes unnatural and terrifying alarm.”

They continued.

“The fire drill exists on the idea that there is either a fire or not a fire,” he said. “There cannot be the possibility of a fire without the possibility of no fire at all. The definitive lack of fire in this instance merely bolsters the fact that a fire exists, just not right at this second.”

The group of four nondescripts looked to and from one another in murmured understanding and mimed applause.

“I do not understand what you mean,” Leroi said above their approvals, finally pushing himself to the center of the circle, now the lone nucleus himself. He face Tall Blue Polo Man and ignored the rest behind him.

“Weren’t you listening?”

“Aren’t you in the Mathematics Department?”

“Shouldn’t you be on the other side of the building with the other pussies?”

“I wasn’t going to say pussy but you are one.”

“Please explain to me what you mean.” Leroi asked and put his hands in his pockets, rubbing his clothed thighs.

“In order for things to exist, there needs to be the possibility that they don’t exist. Without the status of ‘no fire,’ there cannot be the status of ‘fire.’ This is a basic law of science. That is why death gives meaning to life. With the human possibility of not existing, we better understand the current state of existing. It gives the meaning, the possibility of nothingness. The no fire gives meaning to the fire.”

“This is bullshit science, shouldn’t you get it?”

“He’s not a real science person.”

“I’ve heard he’s the idiot of the Mathematics Department.”

“And he’s a pussy.”

“But why can’t there just be no fire, and that’s all?”

The group fell still of their explanation and mockery, exchanging stares like *can you believe this guy?* in rounds.

“Because that is stupid,” one of them said, the rest agreeing. “That is what fools believe.”

On a loudspeaker from across the way, Principal Mathers shouted, “There is no fire, come back in.” The slow mass of students trudged back towards their tests and equations. The teachers remained further behind, even less enthusiastic, wasting more time than the students with little tag games and secrets told in whispers to one another. Leroi entered the building last and watched as each of the students returned into the lunchroom. Principal Mathers designated him as the *counter*, to count all the students as they re-entered the lunchroom, to ensure all returned and none had snuck off campus for boozing or sex.

But Leroi did not count the students as they re-entered. Instead he returned back to his lone table at the center of the cafetorium. He ate his three meals and prayed – prayed for a fire to wipe them all away.

Leroi’s three remaining classes of the day followed with the same murmurs of the students paired with the same lecture by Leroi. With each passing module, his energy shot up in order to reveal the information as brand new for that current round of students. Before each class, he entered a routine of shaking his arms and his legs and jumping up

and down in the air like and athlete loosening stiff muscles. This let the information drop from him, and each round felt revitalized like a blank piece of white paper.

Leroi's final students staggered out of his classroom at quarter until three with breaking excitement over the weekend. When they exited, their steps echoed from the concrete and mixed with the moisture to create cave sounds like thawump thawump.

While they trudged past him, Leroi listened into their conversations.

"Did you hear that the Determinists figured it out?"

"There will be an announcement later today, I heard. Or tomorrow."

"They will make it so everything won't fall apart and rust so easily."

"Thank God for Liquid."

"I heard they will make it so that we know everything about everything. We will *know*."

"Thank God."

After the last student exited and a dull absence fell on the room, Leroi looked at his desk, disturbed by its emptiness after each hand out traveled through the school and out into tossed aside backpacks. His chest dropped in a bout of disappointment that made no literal sense but rather suggested. Considering his home and dinner and television and the sofa with no cushions and the deadened car he would drive home, Leroi heard Principal Mather's *uh* at his doorway and shivered and ignored him.

"A word, Leroi."

What do you want?

"What can I do to help you, Principal Mathers?"

“I need to talk about your uh behavior today.” He entered the room and sat on the edge of Leroi’s desk and farted out loud like it did not even matter.

Did you just do what I think you did?

“What can I clarify for you?”

“Is it true that you asked your students to called you uh” he picked up an index card that had scrawl in sharpie “Mistah Mick?”

So what if I did you short mustache’d man?

“I did ask one of my classes to do that. I think it helps them to feel a bit more informal with me.”

“Are you aware that a ‘Mick’ is uh racial slur for an Irish person and that the term ‘mistah’ resonates poorly in the black community for its association with uh antebellum slavery?”

What did I do to you?

“No, I did not realize any of these things.”

He did it again. He farted and just frowned as if Leroi did something wrong.

“Are you an idiot?”

What did I do to you?

“I do not think so, Principal Mathers, but I will entertain the possibility.”

“I think you might be the uh biggest moron in this school.”

Will you take that back if I ask you really nicely? “

Please do not say that about me Principal Mathers.”

“Excuse me, Leroi?”

I am begging you.

“I am asking you to please not call me a moron anymore.”

“I’ll call you a moron whenever I want to, Leroi.”

Mistah Mick wants you to love him love him. Mistah Mick just wants you to like him, like him and say hello, hello, hello to him in the morning and say goodnight at the end of the day.

“There is something else Leroi.”

I am asking you, Mistah Mick says, I am asking you before I tell you. Asking it nicer than telling, so that will happen first.

Two of the Liquid-workers from outside entered; neither were Billy from earlier in the day. Leroi did not notice either of these men, as the came to his desk and dutifully emptied its contents into identical cardboard boxes.

“We need uh your desk for other teachers.”

Just look at me. Start there.

“There are shortages.”

I won’t blink, so I don’t miss it.

“You will have to use one of your student’s desks and just pick your things out of the uh boxes when you need them.”

You aren’t going to do it, are you?

“Sorry.”

I will have to tell you and I won’t ask anymore.

“But, frankly, you are the weakest member of the faculty.”

I don’t want to tell you. I don’t want to tell you.

“You are on thin ice, Leroi. Consider this a warning.”

I'll tell you now to love me, love me, like me, like me hell please.

“Have a good night Leroi.”

And Principal Mathers left Leroi in his classroom – his classroom with too many desks and two boxes full of carefully counted and categorized items.

Leroi traveled through time. He did not need a time machine, but rather, Leroi remembered and felt déjà vu. He found himself standing with Principal Mathers in his classroom in the moments that had just passed. He smelled the smell and heard the *uh* sound and this time Principal McMullen turned to Mr. Mathers and said *you have done poorly Mr. Mathers, and you have been terminated* . Mr. Mathers fell onto his knees so hard that they bled immediately through his pant legs, and he pushed his head straight into Principal McMullen’s groin without regard for strangeness or propriety. And he said in a loud shrieky voice like a bat in the dank dripping cave *please please don't terminate me Principal McMullen* and Principal McMullen said that he tried and tried and tried and begged himself but it never worked. And Principal McMullen pushed him off of his groin since the that type of touching of heads and groins felt a little funny to him. Without an effort of though, Leroi left him in the room with the countless desk and the two boxes filled with thing after thing. And Principal McMullen smiled, because he finally felt a feeling that has fled from him his entire life and, naturally, he wondered how else he could go about attaining it.

On his way down the concrete steps away from the concrete building, Leroi saw Billy – the hat-laden Liquid worker – coming down from that ladder smashed through his window. He lifted his hand to wave to Billy. Billy lifted his hand as well in mimicry.

They clapped their right hands together, a high five. Inadvertent. Neither had intended the high five; it just happened. Rather.

Leroi shuffled his legs, as he did when awkwardness struck him. His gaze hit the ground and his feet passed one another as close as possible, in quick succession, and with utmost intention.

“Sorry about the window again, Mr. McMullen. I’ll repair it on Monday.” Billy called after him.

“It was no one’s fault Billy. Thank you.”

Leroi’s shuffle died, a bullet causing blackness. He pressed his feet into the ground and stood still. He listened as Billy picked his ladder up off the side of the concrete building, and heard the Liquid bucket jangle at his side. In two quick pulses, Billy stomped his boots to rid them of excess Liquid, sticky.

“Billy.” Leroi faced him and took off his old man hat. He flicked his fingers through his hair, pushing down the follicles. He licked his palm and did it again. This did nothing.

“Yes, Mr. McMullen?” Billy was unsure, and he frowned. He had seen Leroi’s action. He had watched him part his hair with his saliva.

“Would you like to come to my house for dinner tonight?”

“Like?”

“Excuse me?”

“Come to your house for dinner, like what?”

“Like nothing. Like dinner.”

“This something to do with April First being today?”

Leroi shifted his weight between his feet and fished his hands around his pocket. He counted three pennies with his fingers. He fingered some lint. He pulled out some of his leg hair through a small hole in his pocket. He flinched. He spoke:

“April First is today.”

“Mr. McMullen. You’re a nice guy.”

“Thank you. I try to be the best guy that I can be.”

“Good. That’s good.” And then Billy said: *Take care then Mr. McMullen.* But Leroi did not hear that so much. He expected it, which made it feel surreal, hearing it in his head before the words fell out and spread around, filling the air between them. Leroi stared at the concrete school, and felt the heat from the neon green grass field next to him. He shielded his eyes. Billy was gone. Looking around with mild wildness, Leroi could not even muster a guess as to where he had gone.

The ride home went faster than usual, because Leroi drove faster than usual. The speed limit was twenty-five the entire way, down Blairstown High Drive, past the Blairstown Zoo and Diner, down by the Pike, and to his house. Leroi pushed thirty, thirty-five at parts. His pulsed tightened and released in uneven beats, like badly transcribed Morse code, a distress call. Long-short-long. Long-short. Long-long-long. Short-long-long.

He breathed from his guts, which settled it.

Leroi slowed his car and stopped, middle of the road and pressed his face against his driver’s side window. Fumbling with nervousness, he pushed the button to roll down

the window, but he did not remove his face from the glass. The moving glass smeared his skin and burnt him. Yet, still, he stared.

A red convertible had crashed on the side of the road. The front end was smushed into a tall tree with no leaves on it. The tree looked like a thirty foot skeleton, gray and crumbling. Blood smeared the windshield in uneven splotches. It pooled over an inch high in some spots, like a bumpy, mountain-ridden, map of the world. The red of the blood mixed with the red of the car, in uneasy equilibrium.

A body lay spread eagle on top of the wreckage, but Leroi could not see it properly. It slumped, face first, over the edge of the front of the car. The feet poked unnaturally up into the air, at a forty five degree angle with straight, unbent knees. Leroi's mouthed gaped, and his teeth showed. He felt his guts turn over like dough in novice hands. His guts felt disconnected from the rest of his insides, putting pressure on his stomach, protruding it outward. He scanned the scene for some intestines or organs. He didn't want to see the carnage, but he needed to see the carnage. He felt the contradiction in his mind and accepted it. He moved on.

There were no guts at the scene. Leroi noticed. Blood. Lots and lots of blood and no guts. Guts needed blood. Bodies needed guts and blood. Severed bodies, cut bodies, dead bodies showed blood *and* guts. Not just blood. Mostly.

It was not a body. The *body* was a dummy, inflated with baggy closes on. The blood was dyed syrup, as far as Leroi could tell, on a closer look. The mouth of the dummy looked spread wide in a deep circle, although he could not tell for sure. Leroi had seen this dummy before in a different setting.

Almost twenty cars were parked around nearby – parked evenly and carefully, like in imaginary parking spaces, unmarked and natural. Each of them looked horrified. A mother covered both of her sons' eyes while straddling a purse on both arms. *Two purses*, Leroi thought, *That's silly*. And it was. Silly.

Leroi parked his car. He picked his hat off the floor of the car, as it had fallen during his drive. He placed it on his head and walked over to the scene. A man dressed as a priest read a Bible with a wooden spine and cover. The passage was that passage from Ecclesiastes that every priest read all the time. *The time for everything*. The priest stoically read. All of the onlookers were weeping. They were not merely crying in a light manner that suggested the presence of some sad event. They were *weeping* as Jesus had wept before being crucified. Uncontrollably and without handkerchiefs. Snot and liquid fell through the spaces between their fingers. Their weeping registered audibly, and Leroi grimaced at the sound.

Next to the dummy, a woman dressed in an ankle length brown dress, matching shoes, and a bonnet sprawled out across the hood of the car. She giant-bear-hugged the car and screamed at the top of her lungs. Leroi had not noticed her before, while he was watching from his car in horror.

Leroi imagined her in the woods next to the car, out of sight of the onlookers. She smoked a cigarette. She finished the cigarette and flicked it to the ground and smushed it with her right brown shoe. She brought another cigarette to her lips, reflex, but a glance over at the fake priest and his Bible ended the motion. She whispered *shit* and dropped the cigarette and said *I'm back on* and ran over to the hood of the car and pounded and pounded and screamed over the death of her dummy of a son.

She cried with ferocity. That reminded Leroi that he needed to be back at school, for the Homecoming dance and bonfire by seven p.m. Another one of the woman's screams knocked him back into the moment, the fake car wreck and the people watching in terrific horror.

"What is this whole thing for?" Leroi asked the woman with the two boys and the two purses. She just shook her head.

He turned to the rest of them, and said louder, so they could all hear him. "What is this whole thing for?" But no one could bring themselves to answer his question. The moment wrapped them up and covered their ears.

"Could you shut the fuck up, please?" The woman in the brown dress and the bonnet said to Leroi. "You are ruining the tragedy of the moment." The twenty or so around looked at Leroi during the moments of the woman's short speech, but as quickly as she broke character, she returned to it and so did they.

Leroi returned to his car and drove off. He drove under the speed limit, passing a stop sign at the corner of the Blairstown Zoo. He stopped, dead, and pressed the brake pedal into the floor of the car. When Leroi pressed it hard enough, the stickiness of the Liquid coating would make the pedal stick to the floor. And Leroi pressed hard and made it stick. He released the pressure. The car remained still.

He thought about the moment he had stopped the car. He recalled the wreck, and felt the pain of the dead person, feet straight up in the air. With careful concentration, he saw the blood and shuddered. And with all that thinking, he could not recall the *moment* that the real-deal person with straight knees had transformed into a stiff plastic dummy,

in his mind. He could not recall the trigger. In heavy and desperate breaths, Leroi pried the pedal from its stickiness and continued towards his home.

He wished he could go back and remain in awe. He wished he had been too horrified to look and had driven straight past it, bowing his head in sincere and utter sadness over the death of a human being – someone who could have been loved.

Leroi McMullen sat naked in his living room, which consisted of a gray couch with no cushions and a white blanket of sparkling clarity. He sat naked because his clothes were currently being washed. Also, being home alone on a couch with no cushions wrapped in a blanket encouraged him to disregard clothing. A record spun on his recently repaired phonograph. Leroi had trouble discerning which song played, but the query did not bother him. He enjoyed the ambiguity. The static fuzzed the singer's already haggard voice. He could not understand the scratchy voice, even less than usual.

The setting sun shone through a dusty window. Leroi spoke:

“Oh, look at the sun. Isn't it beautiful?”

Leroi patted the arm of the couch, smelling the little pieces of dust that flew off of it. He coughed and held his throat

“Ahh, oh no, I am poisoned.”

He fell over dead, holding his breath. He crushed his nose uncomfortably on the springs of the cushion-less couch but held still anyway. For almost a minute and a half, he held his breath in perfect stilled position. Then, in a long raspy, throat-crunching cough, Leroi jumped up and yelled: *boo!*

“I am not poisoned. I am just fine.”

His cackle hit the walls and bounced back to him and filled his ears. Immediately, his laugh turned to a stern glare at the wall.

“Do you think that my death is a funny thing? Do you think the possibility of me keeling over in a bout of poison-induced comatose and death is a funny funny hilarious thing to be joked about?”

His neck craned forward. He placed his hand between his legs and turned his body completely towards the wall. Leroi breathed heavily with loud and obvious volume. The room remained still and silent for an addition time, as he stared toward the wall in disbelief. Leroi’s hand trembled.

A peel of laughter again. His body wretched and stretched over the springs. They dug into his back and pierced the skin in some places. Leroi felt the pinches of the edges of metal and squirmed even more in laughter, as if someone tickled him and would not stop, even after an hour of begging and screaming.

“I am joking. I am joking. Can’t you tell a joke when you hear one?”

His body lay motionless. The springs settled their places just under his skin and rested. They plugged the holes, Leroi did not feel much in the way of pleasure or pain. He did not feel numb either. He fell into neutral.

“I hope the Determinists fail.”

“Thank God for that.”

“They will fail.”

“Can you turn down the heat? It is spring for Chrissake.”

And Leroi jumped off the couch and turned the heat down from the thermostat. Before taking his clothes off earlier and washing them, Leroi had turned up the thermostat after a chill had passed through his body.

He lay back down. The springs found new places, dug in, settled. They pricked him, but Leroi only smiled in innocent play, grin to one side and eyes lightly closed. Resting. The grin transformed into an ecstatic smile that displayed all his teeth.

Leroi's cell phone buzzed next to him. Mr. Principal Mathers issued mandatory cell phones to each of the teachers. In order to save money in the district for Liquid expenses and other pre-emptive environmental safety measures, he deducted the charges from their paychecks. The cell phone, which was as wide as it was tall, buzzed intensely several times. Leroi picked up the phone and read the message: "Be at school in half hour. Help with bonfire. Thanx, Prince." Each of Principal Mathers' messages ended with that salutation. Leroi never considered the nickname or figured it out. He just accepted it as an electronic how-do-you-do.

He placed the phone on his thigh and glanced at the wall, thinking. The dryer rumbled in the background; Leroi's stomach made a similar sound of distaste. In a forced laugh, Leroi spit liquid from his mouth, spraying the carpet. The moisture settled into the threads and mixed with the dust in a thin paste. Fumbling through his mouth, the liquid tasted like bile and vomit, sour, burning.

"No, I am hungry as well, but I need to go to school now."

"Dinner when I get home."

"I promised Prince that I would help out. It is my job."

"Later, later."

“It’ll taste better if I wait anyway.”

He dressed and returned to Blairstown High before thirty minutes had passed. His clothes clung to him in moist and stinky connection.

The field next to the high school still glittered brightly, even with the sun extinguished. A large pile of trees, the remnants of the torn-down forest nearby, were piled high in the shape of a teepee. Principal Mathers danced in front of it, moving his open palm towards and away from his mouth as he chanted *oh-wa-oh-wa, oh-wa-oh-wa, oh-wa-oh-wa*. He stopped and laughed, arching his back. No one in the crowd understood the joke, so he just sauntered off coolly.

Leroi was the only teacher who had shown up in the appointed time, so he dragged, with the help of no one, each of the small trees of the slain forest. His back ached, but he smiled and laughed at Principal Mathers joke. “Shut up, Leroi,” he said to him as his saunter strolled across the field. “You don’t even get the joke.” Principal Mathers was correct. Leroi had no idea how the noise *oh-wa-oh-wa* related to a pile of sticks, but he still laughed and shouted past him: “I get it, I get it.”

All of the students wore light jackets or sweaters. The spring night, which had darkened to full black at this point, laid a weak chill over the bright grass field. Principal Mathers had made the student’s attendance to Homecoming week mandatory. After a fear that each of the events would go unattended, he had promised to deduct twenty percentage points from their grades in each of their classes if they failed to attend. Every single student attended, even ones with the cold or the flu, with an insurmountable pile of homework and stresses, with parents and grandparents sick and dying; each student

arrived and waited for the bonfire to commence. Principal Mathers had managed to realign their priorities. They stood and feigned glee, with pressed smiles that curved noticeably upward at the ends, just in case their willingness and happiness would also be graded.

“I’m so glad all of you came tonight. It uh means a great to me and shows your support,” Principal Mathers shouted to them all, cupping his hands around his mouth. “I want to thank all of your teachers who helped today. You all deserve a big round of applause.” And Principal Mathers clapped his hands out towards the pile of teachers camped off to the side. They all stood with their arms crossed behind their backs. Leroi glanced around from side to side, scanning the crowd for Patricia but could not spot her. “Where is Patricia?” Leroi whispered to no one in particular. “Shut up, Leroi,” Principal Mathers sharply spoke, stopping his applause, “I’m making a speech here.”

“I am so sorry, Prince.”

“Excuse me?”

“I am so sorry, Prince.”

“Excuse me, Leroi?”

“I am so sor –“

“I heard you, Leroi. You are out of line. Now shut up.”

“Okay, okay.”

Principal Mathers shook his head from side to side in violent fashion, erasing the moment like an Etch ‘N Sketch. His smile returned as he faced back to the crowd of students, who kept their smiles in full force as if nothing had occurred.

“Alright, enough uh chatter and teasing.” He took a deep breath and widened his stance. He stood in overjoyed anticipation for a few moments. His muscles flexed through his shirt and his mustache twitched and settled, twitched and settled. Then, he shouted at the top of his voice: “Let’s light this thing up!”

Principal Mathers thrust his hand above his head and pointed to the sky, turning his gaze to the dark blue sky overhead. The students all looked above them, waiting for something to come down from heavens. Principal Mathers breathed deeply again, and then shouted as loud as before: “Let’s light this thing up!” repeating his previous motions.

Nothing happened.

“Leroi. Light up the fucking bonfire like you’re supposed to,” Mr. Windfall shouted from the crowd of tired teachers.

“Mr. uh Windfall. You probably shouldn’t say *f-u-c-k-i-n-g* out here like that. The children.”

“Shut up, Mathers.” And Mr. Windfall looked down at his cell phone. Leroi imagined him staring at a naked woman’s pubic region on the phone. He imagined the kind of erection he would receive beneath his pants and how he would intend to hide it. Or how he would intend to not hide it at all.

“Leroi. Do what he said.” Principal Mathers said. “The children.”

So, in a quick shuffle over to the large pile of ex-trees, moist with rot, Leroi did as he was instructed. Principal Mathers had dumped several dozens of gallons of gasoline over the pile of wood. They had rotted completely through after a week of lying out in the

poisoned air. The gasoline made up for the fact that these trees were, ultimately, dead and un-burnable. But any substance doused in gasoline burned bright and quick.

And the logs lit up in an intense and beautiful fire.

And all the students and teachers stood watching the fire for several minutes, and no one spoke. The image of the burning logs mesmerized them in odd fashion. The image of fire was prevalent throughout history and time, and a burning fire demanded the attention of everyone around it, no matter the amount of ringing telephones and honking cars. All other sounds deadened as they approached the fire and dissipated into the air, as if the air were actively killing any sort of distraction. A deep silence of awe filled the area as the crackling permeated the space around them. The students and teachers paired off into couples and triplets and held hands tightly. Leroi stood next to the fire, as closely as he could without getting singed by the heat. He could hear tiny screams of pain.

“Does anyone hear tiny screams of pain?” Leroi asked openly, to no one in particular.

“Shut up, Leroi,” no one in particular said loudly, angrily.

“I am being serious. I can hear something.”

They took him more seriously, registering and acknowledging his typical ineptitude, and listened quietly. They, too, heard the little screams.

It only took the mass of students and teachers only a few moments to determine the source, which was surely the dozens of squirrels trapped within logs of the fire. After the passing of the most recent Physical Age, the Determinists had announced that squirrels and other animals had adapted to the increased entropy and had found new ways to survive among deadened materials, rotted wood being one.

They all looked and listened, until the teachers, except for Leroi, shuffled them inside to the dance in a large group. Leroi remained and watched, not thinking too much about anything in particular. He was struck by awe and disgust, but most importantly, awe.

Inside the cafetorium, the students mingled about in grind lines and casual dance circles. The teacher-chaperones stood on the fringe and watched and whispered to one another. The theme seemed to confuse everyone, since there were black and white streamers with no hint at *ferocity* of any kind. In addition, none of the students or teachers dressed in any kind of costume. In the back of the room next to the fold away bleachers and the DJ, a table housed two lines of colas and two lines of diet colas, which were certainly not *ferocious* in any sense of the word. Leroi enjoyed the ambiguity and smiled when he entered the room, at not being able to figure it out, and at the general merriment of those in the room. He had already forgotten about the screaming murdered squirrels from the moments earlier.

Leroi looked around for Patricia and could not find her on an initial scan of the room. A polka song played over the loudspeaker, hopping accordions and banjos battling it out. No one knew how to dance to it and the students stopped. If they could not properly dance to it, they would not dance. Simple. Leroi knew how to dance polka from being a kid. Just one of those things a person picked up over the years. He did not dance to it though.

“What kind of song is this Mr. McMullen?” Logan appeared out of thin air. Leroi looked down at him and patted his hand on his shoulder.

“It is a polka, Logan.”

“I don’t think I like polka.”

“Well, Logan. Some of us do.”

“Do you mean that you like it, Mr. McMullen?”

“That is exactly what I mean.”

And the two stood together and did not talk, and the memory of the fire and the travesty faded further and further until it did not matter anymore. Leroi smiled even wider and dug his fingers extra hard into Logan’s shoulder, and Logan seemed to enjoy it as well.

Patricia tapped Leroi on the shoulder and hugged him from behind. She brought her lips to his cheek and smacked hard, making the kissing noise and everything.

“I will talk to you later, Logan,” Leroi said and took his hand off of his shoulder. He gave Logan a strong nudge with his hip, pushing him. So, Logan trudged away, tapping his feet and-one-two-three and-one-two-three. He disappeared behind the crowds of students standing on the fringe, out of sight and mind.

“That was a nice way to great someone.” He said and pressed his palms onto his pants.

“I’m having a good night, so it is perfectly deserved.”

“Would you like to have dinner tonight?” Leroi took his hat off and grasped it between his fingers.

“I can’t tonight, Leroi. I’ve already had my dinner.”

“That is okay. Maybe some other time then.” Leroi registered no disappointment, but backed off and put the hat back on his head. “Why are you have such a good night?”

He asked. But he knew why, as he had noticed the new ring on her finger immediately after he had turned around and invited her for dinner moments before. He noticed these things better than others, the subtleties. He let on to the opposite though, that he never noticed the details.

“Nothing. We can talk about it later.”

“I must be going. I never ate dinner.”

“But the dance just started Leroi. You should stay.”

But Leroi had already walked away.

The north side of the Blaiirstown Zoo has a section of concrete wall shorter than the all the rest, and Leroi hopped it with the help of a thick tree trunk and some veracity. He briskly jogged down the roads of the Zoo, passing the cages with each of the animals. Each cage had thick glass walls that brought each animal slightly out of focus to any visitors. Leroi had memorized the layout of the area over the course of his visits to Zebra.

In a paper bag, Leroi carried an assortment of vegetables: carrots, tomatoes, and an ear of corn on the cob. The side of the bag read “Dinner” in block letters, written in pen. Leroi gripped the bag harder than the shoulders he had caressed that day, harder than his steering wheel before he almost drove off the road at the accident, harder than he had held his leg after his accident as a child.

Zebra slept soundly, so Leroi pounded hard on the pane glass, which seemed like it could break at any moment. Zebra did not move for the first few pounds, but eventually rolled his head over, acknowledged Leroi and rose to its feet. Its stripes seemed narrower

than typical zebras, and this made Leroi like him even more. Leroi knew the stripes attributed to his own affection for the animal, but never qualified it mentally. He let it be.

Zebra pressed his nose against the glass, and Leroi returned the gesture, using his palms and his face in a full imprint. A shudder ran through his body and did not quit. Leroi suppressed it by pressing as hard as he could, by thinking more and more about Zebra, by not thinking about much at all. A gurgle rose from his stomach that finally dissipated the moment, and he reached down into the bag in order to retrieve his dinner. Zebra backed away in anticipation.

Leroi ate his tomato first, rind and green leaf and all, taking each ounce of its nourishment without avail. The coolness of the center slid down his throat and settled easily at the bottom of his acidic stomach, and the refreshment resonated through the rest of his body. Leroi felt well, truly okay for the first time that day.

“Zebra. Hello, hello, hello.” He said.

“Oh geez, that’s bad, ain’t it?” He said.

“Call me Mistah Mick.” He said.

“It is a polka.” He said.

And he laughed a cackle too loud for such a secret moment, where he could be caught and removed and banned for good. He chuckled and sighed to himself without thinking and did not consider any consequences. His head rolled back, cracking his neck and upper spine.

“Why did you kill your mates, Zebra?” He asked.

Zebra trotted around his pen in circles, stretching his legs or exercising or waking himself up. Whichever.

“I think I know the answer.” He said.

Zebra continued and did not stop. Not for the questions. Not to even pretend as if he was listening.

“I know the answer. I know why.” He said.

“It does feel good to know sometimes.” He said.

“Time for your dinner, Zebra.” He said.

“Do you like carrots?” He said. But he already knew that Zebra loved carrots and ate every single one that his trainers put out for him each day. Some of his mates tried to eat the carrots before he got to them, and they always paid dearly with the breadth of their lives. Zebra could not be defeated, had not even been close to being defeated. One time, Leroi caught Zebra in the midst of one of his fights, but the zookeepers made their interns stand in front of the cage holding up a sheet, to cover the carnage. So, Leroi listened to the carnage, which proved to be graphic enough.

A few holes were poked near the stop of the cage, air holes. Leroi pressed three carrots through the holes and rapped on the glass for Zebra to come over.

“Enjoy your dinner, Zebra.” He said.

“I will eat my corn on the cob.” He said.

“I saved the best for last, for you.” He said.

Zebra completed his round of jogging and trotted over to the windowpane, staring down at the carrots with wonder. With rapidly blinking eyes, he bent his neck over and smelled each individual carrot. Leroi chomped loudly, swallowed loudly.

“Come on now, Zebra. Eat your dinner.”

But even with his encouragement Zebra did not eat. He looked straight up in the air at the top of his cage and sniffed wildly, like he sensed danger, a predator lurking behind glass. His feet clamored and he kicked against the glass with both front hooves, bending the glass inward towards Leroi. It still did not break.

“Stop that, Zebra. Please calm down.”

But Zebra would not calm down. His breathing intensified, and he began charged towards the glass with wild eyes, bulging from their sockets. With grunts and claps, Zebra rammed the top of his head into the glass again, bending it further still.

He stopped suddenly and backed away from Leroi, his tail wagging back and forth, a colored rope dangling from a cliff. Within a few moments, Zebra had moved as far from Leroi as possible. Squinting his eyes, Leroi tried to make out Zebra’s body or expression, but could not see him clearly enough, so far away and out of focus. Against any sort of critical thinking or judgment, he pressed his hands and head against the cage, squinting to see and see. He needed to see. He needed to *know*.

Two minutes later, Leroi awoke with frantic blinks. In sweeping motions over his forehead and face, Leroi made sure everything was still in tact. A throbbing seized his body. A loose tooth dangled stiffly from his mouth, one of the molars. His body felt bruised at every inch, but he stood anyway.

Blood seeped through one large crack in the cage. The top of Zebra’s head was pressed against it, still. Dead.

“Hello... hello... hello...” Leroi said and tapped lightly with his knuckles.

But Zebra did not move. Because Zebra was dead. Leroi knew this immediately but continued his games of pretend. He thought about how funny it would be when Zebra used his hoof to smear the ketchup from his head, when he would make a gun gesture and wink like *gotcha*. At those thoughts, Leroi laughed.

He laughed and thought about his options. There were always options, Leroi thought, even in the world of the Determinists. Even if they determined it all, he could still choose, for he was not as predictable as a rotting fruit. He was a human being. They may have been close, but they still did not know for certain. They did not know what he would do next. And that meant Leroi still had *options*, even in a world of fire or no fire.

So, Leroi decided to kill himself, just to be certain.

There is a field of dull, dead grass that comes up to my knees. My shorts come to my mid-thigh, and the grass blades touch and prick me until they turn red and start to itch. I like the feeling when it itches. My hands are smooth and small, and there are no wrinkles or hairs on either side.

This is Leroi McMullen at age twelve. At age twelve, Leroi has his poppa and momma around too but only in memory. Leroi does not think about them when he is twelve years old, because there is no point. Someone called it dwelling, which is a bad bad thing to do, since it does not look towards the future. At age twelve, Leroi is too big for his clothes, but he likes wandering around the woods and tearing holes in his shorts and t-shirts. He plays spy games, where he uses a walkie talkie that his dad gave him from his army days and he runs around talking into it like there is someone on the other side giving him commands and all. And when Leroi closes his eyes and concentrates

really hard and listens in the static, there are voices that tell him what his next mission is and where he needs to go next to hunt and play. Leroi plays these things whenever he does play. When Leroi is twelve years old, near the end of being twelve years old, he hurts his leg, because he snaps his Achilles tendon when he falls off of a swing. In the middle of spring on a school yard with wood chips all over the ground and a cross that hangs up above the school, there is a swing set, and there is this one swing. Leroi hops on this swing, which is not a normal swing, but instead, it is a special swing, so Leroi hops on it. It is a gondola swing, like one that you ride in the winter going up a mountain, and this swing is made out of different types of metals and has metal piping all over it. There are supposed to be plastic caps on the ends of the metal pieces, but there are not. Someone older forgot to put the metal caps on, or maybe they remembered at one point to put them on, and then they either fell off and someone stole them. Leroi hops on the swing and starts riding it like it is a skateboard, even though Leroi never rides skateboards or things like that. Leroi enjoys walking places.

Harold comes over to the swing and hops on to the swing as well, and sets himself there on the swing and Leroi skates. Harold laughs at Leroi and Leroi laughs with Harold. There is laughter between the two of them that does not quit until Harold jolts the swing and tries to knock Leroi off the swing. Leroi catches the joke and puts himself back in the seat, but Harold tells him to “stop being a cock, and stand back up like a man,” and Leroi laughs and listens. And Harold does it again, and this time Leroi thinks it is even scarier and funnier than the last time. Leroi sets himself down on one of the seats. “Hey guys, didja know that Leroi likes to put cocks in his mouth, because people who do that refuse to stand up on the swing.” And Leroi does not like to put cocks in his

mouth, and wouldn't want people to think that maybe that is something he likes to do, but he sees the joke that Harold makes and he stands back up to start skating again. And Leroi knows what Harold is about to do, because he sees it in his mind like it is happening. Leroi closes his eyes while skating and rolls his head back and listens to the future before it happens. And when he opens his eyes, he is lying on the ground on his back. He feels cold on his right ankle, but it is a hot day out. And the swing does not swing anymore. It is stuck on the inside side of Leroi's ankle, and it sticks through to the other side. The coldness from Leroi's leg turns to heat and then turns to scariness filled with red color that scares Leroi. And Leroi pries his ankle off of the metal piece with no plastic cap on the end and hops around and tries to run but collapses. Leroi's head throbs. Leroi feels like he wants to throw up, but there is nothing to throw up but nostalgia. Nostalgia for something that never existed in the first place. And there is no Harold or laughing anymore, and Leroi just feels the heat on his leg and sees the color that he can't look at. He falls asleep until the future.

This is Leroi McMullen, and he is with me. He is in this field with me of limp grass that pokes my legs. I have bandages on my leg and cannot walk, but I can hobble, which I do. Patricia taps me on the shoulder, and I turn to see her. I say "Patricia, I did not know it was you," but this is a lie. I can see things before they happen, even though I do not want to, so I do not try to very often. "Leroi, I want to have dinner with you. I brought you a carrot." And Patricia reveals her hands from behind her back and she has a hundred carrots exactly. "Can I have one," and it is one voice I hear but it is Logan, and Billy, and Principal Mathers, and Mr. Windfall that I see. Even Katie from the cafetorium. They all speak together, but there is no echo, and I only hear one voice that is

none of there's. And since there are a hundred carrots, I say "yes sir ee" and they devour the carrots and are full. And they say, "teach us, teach us, teach us, and then put us to bed." And I agree and pat each of them on the head with a squish on my palm. They take their seats around me, in the grass, and they almost disappear in the grass with it reaching up to their faces and necks. And I ask them "What do you want to learn today, my friends of mine," and they say all in that one voice, although I can hear Patricia's the most, "you know exactly what you want to teach us, Mr. McMullen. You have been waiting all your life to teach us one thing. So, please, teach us Mr. McMullen." "Please get ready," I reply. And there is movement so quick that only squiggly lines are visible where the people once were. Then, they settle and stop moving, and I see Logan opening his neon laptop with a case and everything, and he tries to plug his plug into a nearby dull, lifeless tree. And Principal Mathers pulls out a periodic table of elements, which is infinite in size and contains many many symbols and numbers. And Patricia parks her Delorean and starts shoving grass into it to make it go go go. And I yell "stop" and stomp the ground which causes a crack and an earthquake. And the grounds shakes until the laptop is gone and the periodic table is gone and the Delorean is gone. And the ground is back together and the field is as it was. They sit and fold their knees. "There is something about knowing and knowing, and it will kill us all." "But Leroi, Leroi?" "My name is Mr. McMullen." "Isn't the thing that will kill us nostalgia and déjà vu and looking through old photo albums and taking hikes instead of riding in cars and remembering the good old times that are dear dead days beyond recall? Isn't nostalgia a disease that needs to be cured?" "No, no, no, my student and friend, the future is the disease. The future will kill us all." "How will the future kill us if it is only a concept?"

How can an idea kill us?" "When the future is the present, then we will die." I clap my hands to end the lesson, but their heads are all down, down looking at the scratches on their legs and the rashes forming on their knees. And the itching starts to hurt, the itching that felt so good and ancient feels like it is leeching the inside of my skin, like a sucker of an octopus. And it starts to burn like acid and eats each of our legs under there is only bone. And then we are all bone. And I say "Déjà vu is time travel." And they just nod and nod, skulls and all.

Leroi awoke to the sound of a blaring alarm. It pulsed obscenely, second of silence followed by one of shrieking and so on. Metallic dew had formed on his body and entered his mouth. He coughed spastically and sat himself up. The glass cage sat next to him. Zebra was lying on his side, blood pooled around him in an oddly perfect circle, which seemed unlikely. The sun glared off of the cage and died on his body, heating it uncomfortably. He spastically starting rubbing his hands over his body to drain the dew off but eventually gave up the effort in uncomfortable futility.

Leroi heard the alarm and considered the possibility that someone had noticed Zebra and was looking for him in order to punish or arrest him. At the thought, he slumped down and his chest puffed out and he smiled. He would not have to kill himself, if they would find and arrest him. Someone would do it for him.

But no one came, and the alarm blared.

Leroi stood on his feet and looked to the sky. No sound beyond the bleep bleep bleep could be heard, and the sound matched a pounding in his head from dehydration.

Leroi licked his lips and gagged like a baby, spitting up saliva and bile, which splatted on the ground in a thud, heavy. A light prickling attacked his skin like small bee stings.

Leroi swatted his arms as a reaction from his guts, uncontrollable.

The prickling and the vomited bile and the metallic dew. Leroi took more notice of his body and caught an unnatural sensation across his entire being. He felt his blood pump throughout his body, each individual valve that opened pushed his skin slightly. The blood ran through and widened each vein, each capillary, each artery and felt warm like an internal Jacuzzi. The awareness that Leroi felt for his body made him uncomfortable. He thrashed like a child throwing a tantrum, trying to shake the sense out of his body. He stamped his feet until they ached and threw his body against the cage holding the lifeless Zebra. The other animals nearby watched him for a few seconds before mimicking his actions. Before long, rams and bulls and lions were launching themselves against their cage walls to stop the scratching, the pumping, and the prickling.

He stopped and fell to his knees, trying to forget his acknowledgement of the sense. He pressed his hands against his skull and shook his head like a magic eight ball but kept coming up short. The early energy waned from his body until he fell still and accepted the knowledge and realized that once something was known, it was impossible to un-know. And nothing truly happened until he realized that it happened.

Leroi picked up his feet and began to trudge back towards the lowered wall on the fringe. He reached the edge of the Blairstown Zoo without seeing a single person. He looked up at the sun and judged that it must have been around noon – noon on a Saturday meant big business for the Zoo, but the area remained completely vacant. Then Leroi

realized that he truly had no idea how to judge time by the sun position and ignored his own logic.

The alarm came from nowhere in particular, all around.

A young woman ran down the street punching herself in the face. She wore only bra and underwear and looked bruised across the entire upper half of her body. No noise came from her body, but rather, a silent distress that disturbed far worse than anything verbal. Her chest glowed with sunlight from salty tear water. She certainly had been crying for some time, all morning or all night.

“Hello,” Leroi called, but she kept running until she was out of sight.

Leroi found his car. The entire exterior had bubbled overnight a dull gold with rust. He thought little of it and opened the door, which required both his hands at full strength to wrangle apart from the body of the car.

Leroi’s phone vibrated. It was stiff to open but he succeeded. A text message from Principal Mathers read simply “Thank God for Determinists.” A tag at the end read “Thanx, Prince.” Leroi closed the phone and turned the key in the car. The radio came on immediately.

The siren outside played through the speakers for few seconds before a haggard voice came on. It seemed to be a recording playing on a loop, a warning.

“The end of the Seventh Physical Age has come.” It said and paused. A grumbling static intensified and then lessened. Scrunching his eyes, Leroi turned his ear closer to the speaker.

“The Determinists” it said and cut out and came back “shifted again. They have determined” static grumble krrrrsh “Law of Entropy has intensified and now affects live

cells.” Leroi rested his ear onto the console. The car trembled, vibrating his skull in a cool massage. The static suddenly cleared and the voice came on loud, pushing Leroi back into his chair. The message finished with “we must now rely on the Determinists. Without their solution, human life will be destroyed.” The voice paused and struggled to continue. A second voice came on and said coolly and monotonously “finish it” and the first voice said “no” and the second voice came on loudly, stark like a golf announcer. He said “All life will cease without the Determinists in only a few day’s time. The world will end without their help and guidance. Thank God for Determinists.”

And the recording cut off sharply with the echoed alarm.

Leroi rolled his head out the window and saw the semi-naked woman running back the opposite direction. This time she was screaming. Her face bled from the eyes.

Thank God Leroi thought and pressed his forehead against the window. He fell asleep in three breath’s time.

Part 2

Thank God for Determinists

Leroi slept until noon in dreamless slumber. A rap at his door woke him up. He looked over at the clock and saw the noon time and rolled out of bed groggily, mumbling sounds rather than words. “Kkkkkflargh,” he said. He slipped on a fresh pair of boxers covered in red polka dots unevenly spaced and scratched various places on his body, starting at the toes and ending at his forehead, slowly and without any sort of attention to the time or the rapping on the door, which continued in frustrated pangs like a honking taxi driver. Little scabs fell to the floor, aching his tired body in now-familiar fashion, even after only a bit over two days. Leroi felt for his heartbeat on his chest, but nothing panged to the surface of his skin. He felt bile coming up through his mouth and he bent over and waved his hands in large comforting circles, encouraging it to come out and splatter and stain the already stained carpet. The white and gray bile drooled out and splatted. Leroi dipped his toe into the liquid. *Cold and getting colder*, he thought, *suppose THAT’S not good*, and he went for the door.

“What can I do for you today?” He asked reaching his hand down his pants, picking a particular difficult scab. A young woman in gray sweatpants and sweatshirt stood before him with a large metal basket that glowed orange with rust. She shivered uncontrollably. “Stop shivering, it’s a beautiful day, what would you have to shiver for?” He asked her.

“We are collecting donations for the Determinists,” she said. A paleness started forming in her eyes that drenched the rest of her face in distaste, and she threw up straight

into Leroi's house and onto his sad sad couch now similarly decorated in gray, white, black, and purple bile stains from the previous couple days. Where bile had not hit, blood had spotted like an advanced form of connect-the-dots with no numbers to guide the lines.

"Would you like to come in and play random connect-the-dots on my blood-stained couch?" Leroi asked and pointed over to the mess. Still keeled over, she raised her hand in light protest and gurgled.

"Any donations?" She asked.

"Why do they need donations?" Leroi asked.

"In order to save the world." She said.

"They don't need anything to save the world." He said.

"They need something." She said. She spit up and wiped her mouth. Leroi backed up a step and patted her on the shoulder. In a hard moment, she clenched her body and dots formed in the imprint of Leroi's patting hand. He leaned close to her ear, as a wave of nausea settled into her body and commandeered her.

"I could save the world." He whispered.

"Donations or not?" She said, ignoring his comment.

"No, I'm sorry," Leroi said.

"Okay," she said and trotted away with both her hands grasped firmly on the handles of the metal pan. She turned back to him and said, "Thank God for Determinists," and continued on out the door. He watched as she – in bent fashion with a line of white stomach milkshake falling from the side of her mouth – made her way down his stairs, along the side walk, up his neighbor's stairs and tried again at the next house.

Leroi leaned out the front door and felt the humid air, which rose in temperature with each passing hour as his body cooled lower and lower. A haze blotted out the sun which dampened the colors around, leaving a dreary stiffness over Blairstown. Each house lined in the row looked the same muted color, although Leroi could not tell which color they looked. At one moment they seemed blue as a baby boy's wall but at a squint appeared pale pink and orange. The grass around lost its vibrancy, retreating from highlighter to brown to black to soft swampy mud to hardened soot – all over night. The concrete of Leroi's steps down to the sidewalk and driveway still retained their shape and sharpness, although appeared weak to Leroi, even with the lack of evidence otherwise. They just felt weird to sight. The air seemed thicker and heavier; Leroi stood like he had a baby on his back, or perhaps just a heavy backpack filled with sand or gravel. The air echoed sounds in random directions, leading to the reflection of the occasion soft wail of pain a mile away and yet masking the alarms that sounded off as close as the next house over. All Leroi could hear clearly was a soft buzz of the amalgamation of sounds and the rat tat tatting of the woman moving door to door in hapless misery.

Leroi looked out over Blairstown and gazed at the grayness of death and threw his arms in the air and said, "Yes." And then he said, "Thank God."

The front of Blairstown High seemed smaller, but Leroi had no proof that it was actually a different size. He just felt it in his gut when he stood out front, listening to the final lunch bell pulse lightly from within. The State kept school in session, even in light of the emergency and the puss from mouths and the bloodied polka dots and the general awfulness. The night before, Leroi attempted to set his alarm but it busted on its own and

he figured it a sign to just ignore it. He entered the front doors and walked through the halls.

Leroi entered right between lunch and the second set of modules for the day. About half the students walked through the halls right then, the other half presumably hugging parents and grandparents and feeling comforted around their televisions. Each student made the most earnest attempt at normalcy amidst the chaos. Couples still held hands, moist and sticky. Gossip continued. Standing in the center of the opening hallway, Leroi spread his arms perpendicular to the floor and stared up at the ceiling a few inches above his head. He brought his feet together and placed the left foot over the other and curled his toes like an ocean's mean wave. In a legitimate embrace, he brought his hands together and clapped, and Leroi imagined grasping each of them – each of those hapless students – individually and whispering things in their tired ears. He wanted them all in that moment and wished for their cool heads in his shoulder nook. He felt them as their bones crushed under futuristic-osteoporosis and loved them each with a parent's love, with the love of God, the God that they thanked the Determinists for, Amen.

A rough deadline had been set, a point of no return for lack of words, for a few hours from that moment. The Determinists needed to figure something out by then or else human life would begin the final stage of deterioration. It was something about the way the veins would start to form cracks in their walls, leading to blood flowing loosely between the skin and muscle. Or something. If the Determinists came up short, then it was kaput for everyone, unless the Physical Laws shifted again in their favor and made some sort of fast-acting reparation for the veins and the rest of the damage. But that seemed pretty unlikely.

Putting his hands at his side and lowering his head in forced slow motion, Leroi sauntered down the hallway, back bent at a forty-five degree angle, scanning his head from side to side like a motion sensor capturing the movement of intruders, only with a smile. Trashcans lined the sides of the hall like lights guiding an airplane down to landing, scattered every five feet or so for unpredictable spew, and several were in the process of being used by loyal patrons. Each face looked as haggard as the next in scorned mimicry, like an artist rendering of dust-bowl era social gatherings. Each head seemed to follow him as he walked, dead on, so he never saw anything beyond the rolls of their faces. As he walked by each student, Leroi registered only one face that carried over to the next that appeared black and white with shadows and dust of dried skin. Simply put, they all looked the same.

Any conversation or distraction that held their attention faded as he entered their immediately vicinity, and their faces turned to his, and eye contact ensued until he exited and continued. Leroi grasped each on the shoulder as he approached and squeezed as tight as he could muster, which was not tight at all. Finally, he reached his room at the end of the hall, which faced the edges of suburbia – as it always had done – and away from the fields of mud where the unnatural grass once grew, two days before.

He turned and looked at the students, who bustled in pained motions and spoke to one another and vomited cool cool insides. He wondered if any of what he had just witnessed, the saunter down the hall and the nonchalant importance, truly happened or if it was simply his *no fire*. He nodded and decided something ambiguous as the answer and continued into his room. He closed the door and scanned the room, which held haggard students of his own, dust bowl-like.

A draft entered the room like steam from a boiled pot of spaghetti, was as oppressive as one as well. The duct tape that held the hole in the window together had disappeared, evaporated in the air, like his desk and his desk chair. Leroi closed his eyes and spread his arms like angel wings and imagined them flowing around him and entering his nostrils until they became one with him and he shit them out like he never needed them in the first place. He opened eyes and felt something that tasted like rainbow trout entering his mouth from the wrong end. He swallowed it hard and felt it settle for the time being in the crevices of his throat.

“A problem!” He shouted and clapped his hands together wildly. “Let’s find a solution! This is a Mathematics Class gosh darn it. You are all made up of the chops of logicians and chaoticians and uh duh duh DUH Determinists, yes? You have the gosh darn stuff made of heroes that save the world? Let’s save the world together then.”

He ran fast down the aisles clapping his hands, a coach revving his players up for the big game against the big rival after the demoralizing loss to the underdog. Some ducked out of his way. No one tried to trip him or called him weird silly names or spoke when not spoken too. During his romp, a few brave students had stood and gathered around the warm breeze pouring in from the gap in the window, in order to capture its breathy hope. They felt none and gave up.

Leroi returned to the front of his class and searched for chalk along the base of his board like a blind-deaf-dumb guy. A voice behind him said, “the chalk is gone Mr. McMullen.” And Leroi pounded his palm to his face and said, “of course! No matter...” and pressed his fingers to find out the most filled one. He selected the pinky of the left hand and went at it writing his question. It took nearly half the module of strained

pressure and cut open sores, but Leroi managed to put up the words on the board, which dried immediately, a contract that could never be undone. The board read:

WHAT IF GOD STOPPED SAVING US?

“Who has an answer?” He said, clapping off the imaginary chalk for his hands, a hard day’s work worthy of a shower and a shot. No one dared to raise their hand, out of fear of the man that stood before them and the pinky blood that had dried up on the board. Or out of fear of not knowing the correct answer in order to receive the recognition of their intelligence. It was definitely one or the other, whichever made a little more sense than the other, although both were related.

He bent over and coaxed them with the tips of his fingers in soft begging motions. “I’ll give extra credit...”

Leroi left the question on the board and told his class to “just think about it for a while” and walked out. The hallway was completely vacant except for the trashcans and the occasional muddied splotches on the floor to dodge. A janitor that Leroi did not know walked up and down the hall with a mop, not sure of where to start or if he should even start at all. Leroi approached him and said, “start anywhere my friend.” The janitor did not seem to understand and simply walked down the hallway and away as Leroi stood there watching.

Hands in his pocket, Leroi gazed into each open door as he walked by it, trying to catch snippets of this lecture or that lecture. He noticed a trend after the third room. No teacher actually intended on teaching this afternoon but instead, insisted on keeping their eyes and their students’ eyes glued on the televisions in the rooms, all turned to different

channels yet each carrying the same image: an empty metal podium covered in an American flag with coughing journalists waiting on hand to report any recent news. The announcement would come in one of the next few hours, but developments could be coming sooner. The desks in each room were pressed in tight circles around the sets. They waited.

“We have things to teach!” Leroi yelled through the empty hallway, blown backward by the immensity of his own voice, as if someone had yelled at him.

“Shut up Leroi,” a familiar voice shouted. Mr. Windfall appeared in a doorway down at the opposite end of the hall. “No one wants to hear from you today.”

“You will,” Leroi said, “You will.”

Leroi decided his destination based on his necessity to urinate and walked briskly down the hall and around the corner, feeling each locker with the tips of his fingers as he passed by.

Leroi pounded his knee into the door of the restroom because he thought it would look and feel cool. The feeling swelled within his body until he felt stoned and prickly all over his skin. *That may just be the deterioration*, he thought and exited back through the door for another go. He pounded again. The same chills as before only slightly weakened from the lack of ingenuity. He tried it a third time and the door fell from its hinges and cracked through the middle. This gave Leroi the greatest sensation of all. He pretended in his mind for a second that the Physical Law had never shifted, and this was some great feat of strength and power. He clenched both of his fists and flexed his arms downward like a body builder on display to the public. Then, he brought his left arm above his head

and posed again, waiting for the cameras to flash and the interviewer to finish her question.

The walls were painted a sky blue. The pathway into the main part of the bathroom with the urinals and the stalls curved like a full “S.” Left, right, left, then the actual bathroom area, in order to keep out peeping Mary’s. It also acted as a warning for any girl who accidentally used the wrong one, giving them three full turns to notice the blue walls before realizing, “hey the girl’s room walls have always been a shade of salmon pink,” and exiting hurriedly out before anyone noticed and openly mocked her.

A spray of red covered each wall of the “S” zone, which Leroi expected. The blood seemed fresh. Leroi put his hands to the wall and touched. Fresh as in wet. Like still dripping fresh and wet. Leroi heard a whimper from around his final left turn.

Two boys stood over another boy. The one of the floor was not moving. Part of his face was missing, like a Picasso painting, ear where the nose should be and vice versa and etcetera. The eye looked gouged out, but Leroi could not tell for certain, since he only glanced slightly before heading straight for the urinal and pulling out his stuff and peeing. The two other boys looked up at him. One held a wooden spoon in one hand, which had a sharpened point at the non scooping end: weapon and tool in one. They stood breathing heavily like drawings of cavemen with clubs and heavy brows, knowing only how to breath, scratch their butts and heads, and pound things.

Leroi shook and zippered and turned towards the boys.

One of them said in an uneasy tone, “Thank God for Determinists,” like a password trying to get into a bunk house.

“Oh, you don’t need to say that,” Leroi responded, waving his annoyed hand in front of their faces.

“What do you want us to say?” They asked.

“Would it be okay if I get by here? I need to wash my hands.” He asked and motioned his hand forward. They scooted out of his way in a quick wave, knocked back by abruptness and lack of emotion. He pushed on the soap dispenser twice, but no soap came out.

“No soap,” he said. “That’s a shame.”

The pool of blood surrounding the boy widened. It approached Leroi’s shoe, and he backed up. He crouched down next to the boy. Leroi guessed in his mind that the boy had blonde hair like Logan’s (this was not Logan though, he noted). Overall, in terms of shaping and appearance, the boy looked very much like Leroi’s young pal, but some unattainable nuance in his appearance made him believe otherwise. He had not seen Logan that day or since the Homecoming Dance for that matter among all the ferocity. By all means, the possibility existed, but Leroi denied it.

“Why did you kill him?” He asked.

Neither of the two answered. Leroi noticed they were twins, had not noticed that since entering the restroom. They were some minority – he didn’t care to distinguish – and both wore torn polos popped up. An audible gurgle permeated the bathroom, and the left twin regurgitated some food into one of the stalls. This was in no way caused by the presence of the dead body. It also had nothing to do with Leroi’s nonchalance.

“Deterioration’s a bitch, ain’t it?” Leroi elbowed the right one and winked, who then scratched his head with the stained scooping end of his tool, even with the drippings

still hanging from it. “Oh man, don’t do that.” The kid did not seem to understand, kept scratching away. “Just gross is all.”

The other twin returned to his position.

“But seriously, why did you do it?” Leroi asked earnestly, out of nothing more than sheer curiosity, like the Determinists and all. He wanted to remain on theme for the day. “I won’t tell anyone.”

“Will we get in trouble?” One of the said. Leroi didn’t know which, even though he was staring right at them.

“That depends on what you mean.”

“Will you tell Principal Mathers?”

“That cocksucker? No.” Leroi folded his hands across his chest and leaned in like a real pal. He awaited the answer.

“But aren’t you a teacher, Mr. McMullen?”

“No more than you are.”

They stared inward toward each other. The one on the right vomited again like a little pussy, while the other one stood tall.

“We said that the Determinists would save the world by the end of the school day.” They said.

“And what did this blonde kid say?”

“That it would be by the end of lunch.”

“It was a bet.”

“Not exactly.”

“It was a disagreement.”

“Yeah.”

“Well,” Leroi coughed into his hand. A piece of his lung mixed with a cap from a molar and came hacking out. He stepped over the dead kid and went back to the sink, where he dumped the matter down the drain. “At least now you know death. This kid may have just saved your life. And you saved his.”

They did not respond.

“Here is death at your hand. Now you can know what life is. Congratulations!” He threw his arms into the air like a small party. He considered explaining the whole thing, about how a fundamental datum needed its opposite in order to exist, and how two of the same thing, like twins, meant nothing legitimate until one posed a threat on the other and forced the other to take on the opposing role, mounting to a metaphoric fight between light and dark, good and evil, existing and not existing that ended in either happiness for all or the end of the world, whichever one made more sense. He considered it – considered telling them all of that – and he figured that he should tell the boys. He should continue to *teach*.

But when he turned around, opening his mouth wide in anticipation, the boys had run away. He was alone with the dead Logan look alike.

So Leroi left.

On the way out, he noticed that the kids had slipped the tool-weapon into his back pocket sneakily, an attempt to frame him, he supposed. Leroi chuckled at the irony. He tossed the tool onto the boy’s chest – it stuck – and continued on his way out.

The nurse wing of the Blairstown High School overflowed with both students and faculty looking for respite. Only two nurses ran the entire wing on a normal day, and neither liked being called “Nurse” anything. They were not even R.N.s. They were parent volunteers, Ms. Applegate and Ms. Frumpskin. The system worked like this:

Ms. Frumpskin would deal with the students as they entered. She would determine which bloody noses and sore throats actually deserved special attention. If someone had a cut or bruise or needed an icepack, she would give out band aids and bandage wraps and icepacks. “Problem solved and back to class” she would say always say in a low octave oddly paired with a smile, like the latter nullified any cruelty. If any student attempted to fake it – and many would – she would threaten to call a parent, a father for boys and a mother for girls. Somehow the same sex parent was less forgiving. This usually scared away the fake cases.

If any student required more than a one-part quick fix, Ms. Frumpskin would send him or her down the long white hallway into the infirmary wing, which had two beds with no linens and a pair of crutches. Then, Ms. Applegate would take a look, almost always resulting in the student’s immediate departure back to class and a stern scolding for Ms. Frumpskin for “wasting my bloody time.” She said “bloody” even in front of the children even though she was not foreign. It did not count as a curse if you were not a foreigner.

This was how Leroi understood the system of the nurse wing. Leroi himself had never been there, had never even met the two ladies, but the children all talked and talked.

At that time, the nurse wing looked like a war medical tent. Students crowded the hallways as if healthcare had not yet been invented, as if they would not be treated unless they plowed their way in. All the boys and girls clutched themselves in similar fashion. Leroi's eyes squinted beyond his control until the blurred images of all the children came together in a mushy mash of blood blotches and the newest fashion and pale skin. The fluid on the ground had actual height to it, and Leroi slogged through it as he approached the area. Both Ms. Applegate and Ms. Frumpskin checked each patient with quick dismissal.

They checked pulses. Insides poured from the student's mouths without off valves, and they ran up to each student in urgent fashion and checked a pulse and gave an ice pack and held band-aids up to the skin to see if they needed a bigger size or not. Each person in the waiting room held one artificial icepack – some warm – in one hand and one unopened, unused band-aid in the other.

Anyone would expect cries of pain to permeate the hallway, but only Frumpskin and Applegate made noises, healing sounds of “oh no not that” and “that's a toughie this one” while they were dying themselves. There was no band-aid in their hands, no ice pack on their shoulders. But there was blood and holes, spots filled with purpled bruises that throbbed constantly and never healed. They had those like the rest. But they chose to be caretakers. *It kept them busy*, Leroi thought. For their own good.

Both of the caretakers gave a nod of recognition to Leroi's presence, although neither seemed particularly interested in providing any *medicine* for him. Leroi was an adult. He could take care of himself and hold his own icepack, get his own goddamn band aid.

“Can I help,” Leroi said to the caretakers. Not a question, because well, how could they refuse?

While not refusing his help, they did not respond, and instead, chose to ignore him like the adult that he was. Leroi clenched his fists, as if some poison began coursing through his insides, morphing him into something else entirely different and scary.

“I will help,” he said and went to work.

A young girl in the hallway sat closest to Leroi, right at his feet. She wore two nose piercings and a black beany that covered the tops of her ears and her eyebrows. She was either fat or pregnant or both, Leroi could not tell, did not care. He bent over at a ninety degree angle, and asked, “Would you like to be helped, little girl?”

She nodded, touching her nose rings to the top of her chest. Leroi released his still clenched fists and placed his palm on top of her head. A small pool of sweat and blood squeezed out over her, anointing her. And he said, “Done,” rubbing the curdled mixture off in her hat. He sauntered to the next patient he saw. A young foreign person – either boy or girl, certainly – but he couldn’t tell more than that. Boils sprouted from his neck in a few places, glowing with amber. In Zen fashion, he brought his hands overtop of the lesions and said, “Fixed. Presto.” And on to the next.

In the course of fifteen minutes, he touched each individual in the area, while Frumpskin and Applegate watched, registering neither fear nor indifference but rather somewhere rational between the two.

“Good as new,” he said.

“Kazaam,” he said.

“Winnebago,” he said.

The students allowed the process to continue, letting the madman touch them to do his business and get out – as if this insanity acted as his disease, his boil, his projectile vomit of fury. Some looked rather hopeful when Leroi brought his moist hands onto their sores, like maybe he was God, or at least a god, someone capable of doing *something*. It ended up being a good dose of insurance, that if the Determinists happened to fail, they might as well give this guy a shot. What could it hurt?

And, as any suitably intelligent person might know, Leroi knew all of this as it appeared and disappeared in his subjects' minds. He knew he was not God, not even a god, but he still held a power. The power to destroy the world.

“I cannot help you,” Leroi said proudly, about to exit the area. He looked out over all of the victims of the apocalypse, and each one watched his impassioned movements. “I, unfortunately, cannot help you.”

“We heard you the first time, motherfucker.” One of those little heathens said. Leroi's eyes scanned to see which devil it was, but he could not tell. As per his defining ailment as a teacher, he could not tell one asshole from the next – only that he stared at a large group of bleeding, unorganized, marked-for-destruction assholes.

“I did this,” Leroi said through a smile. His anger curved with the edges of his lips, puckered and ready for a kiss.

“What?”

“I caused the end of the world.”

“No you didn't.” The response was immediate and without any thought.

“Yes, I did.”

“Who says you did?” They all joined in now, taking turns at replying to Leroi’s claims. Leroi was a flamboyant piñata with paper streamers taped on. Everyone grabbed a hold of the stick and took a whack. Guts poured out if you broke him open. Guts and guns.

“I say I did.”

“You’re a moron.” Someone spat at him, hitting him in the neck. Leroi wiped off the chunk of saliva and threw it to the ground.

“No, you’re a moron!” He shouted. He paused. He breathed. He sighed. “You are simply misguided. Please do not get angry with me.”

“The Determinists will save us,” one said and the rest agreed in affirmative grunts and shoulder pats.

“They will fail,” Leroi breathlessly replied.

“Thank God for Determinists.”

“You are fools.”

“Thank God for Determinists.”

“You will die.”

“Thank God for Determinists.”

You will die, you will die, you will die as you should you assholes you motherfuckers you cocksucking

“Thank God for Determinists!”

And Leroi left. Right up the hallway, turn left, Patricia’s room on the right. It only took a minute.

Patricia's open door let out a moving mixture of colors into the hallway. The last module of the day was in progress. Leroi remembered that one of Patricia's preparation modules fell at the end of the day. He had a class himself, but figured the question on the board was lesson enough. Under the lids of his closed eyes, he imagined the confused students staring, approaching the board and feeling it for texture. They assumed there was some catch to the question, some trick to figuring it out. There was no trick. The trick was that the answer was obvious.

Leroi approached Patricia's door and peered inside, keeping the lower half of his body out of sight. Patricia sat in the middle of her room on the floor. For a moment, Leroi thought the deterioration had destroyed all of her chairs, forcing her to resort to the floor for comfort. But the chairs were intact and scattered faintly throughout the room, carelessly. The chairs were spread out as though everyone had left in a hurry and had forgotten to neatly tuck them back under the desks – as if something scared them away or drew them in – as if a trance overtook them towards some beneficial light. The possibilities could rattle on, and Leroi could provide each and every one from here to eternity. But rather, he chose not to care one way or another.

She stared into a television set with rapidly moving images. Her legs crossed Indian style, and she rocked gently, almost falling over at each peak of weight. Leroi looked into the television set. Home movie quality film played on the screen, shaky and filled with the buzz of occasional static. The colors of her face shifted with each new angle on camera. He imagined that she had been crying or bleeding or both, but he had no proof. Even in the deterioration, he could not help but feel the attraction that he had always felt. She – sweaty and gross – and just perfectly beautiful.

“Patricia, would you like some company?” Leroi asked. He folded his hands into his lap, twiddling away. His words floated around her before penetrating fully, and she looked over at him, sad and indifferent, unfed puppy waiting for supper.

“Of course Leroi,” she finally replied.

With both hands in his pockets, he sauntered in. His eye wandered around the room; Logan shivered in the back, tucked perfectly into a ball form. The flakes of his blonde hair poked up above his body, spiked to protect him from enemies, from the deterioration. Although nothing could protect him. Nothing. Leroi wandered over to him and put his hand out. He offered a business transaction.

“Logan, it’s good to see you,” Leroi said.

But Logan crunched harder into his body. Rejected. *Fair enough*, Leroi thought. That seemed a bit too harsh for the quivering young boy. They both knew that the Determinists, God bless them and all, would announce their failure around the corner. That much was certain.

So, instead, Leroi thought, *poor chap*, and turned back to Patricia.

Her room seemed smaller, Leroi noted, although the deadened sepia colors that had befallen the world made everything tighter and less translucent. Opacity raped the world with sternness, and although the air in the room and in the world boiled with intensity, everything fell by in a cold lump.

The television screen did not emit any sound, remained silent and still. Patricia held her chin in the palms of her hands, tucked snugly underneath. All of her energy, even when she spoke or referred to Leroi, focused into the screen. Leroi watched the images scroll across the television. None of it made sense to him. A gentlemen, good-

looking and blonde with wide-rimmed glasses, cooked breakfast in a bathrobe. He smiled and talked to the camera while frying two eggs. The images looked old, perhaps decades. Something was off about the décor of the kitchen, the glasses were a little clunky, all which suggested a time period well before any of this. Leroi asked something like, “Who is this?” But the words collapsed under their pointlessness. The man on the screen was important, that was all that mattered. Does a defined relationship status make it any less significant? No. The man on the screen burnt his finger slightly and recoiled in exaggerated pain.

“I’m sorry,” Leroi said, watching the screen with an eye.

“What could you possibly be sorry for?” She replied. Logan’s crying hit an audible note. His breaths crumpled under the chuck-chuck-chuck of his sobbing. Even amidst his disloyal and uncaring persona – the one he traipsed about like a new born baby – Leroi felt something deep for Logan, as he sobbed, and meant it all when he said:

“I’m sorry that I destroyed the world.”

Patricia’s eyes focused even heavier on the screen. She leaned close in, trying to clarify something, it seemed. Whatever caught her eye disappeared, and she settled back. An annoyance came across her face, pushing it close together and wrinkling her brow.

“You didn’t destroy any world, Leroi.”

“But I did.”

“No, you didn’t.”

“Let me explain,” Leroi went up next to her and sat there. He put one arm around her shoulders. Their blood mixed. And then, he explained.

“On Friday, I was going to kill myself. I decided that I would. But before I could do it, I fell asleep. I was at the Zoo. I was visiting Zebra, my friend Zebra. He’s a Zebra. Or she is a Zebra. I don’t know,. It’s hard to tell zebra boy parts from zebra girl parts. I feel that way with people. Anyway. Zebra killed himself because I wanted to have dinner with him. And no one else wanted to have dinner with me. Anyway. Zebra died, killing himself by running full speed at the bars. And I decided that I should kill myself, too. Anyway. I fell asleep at the Zoo, and I woke up. And there was this alarm. This alarm rang loudly off in the distance, because the Determinists had announced that the world would end. I think I was the only one listening to the alarm. No one ever listens when an alarm is blaring. They just pretend it’s a drill, like it’s not real. But the second I heard the alarm, I knew. That the world would end. I knew it. It wasn’t a drill. And it was all because I wanted to kill myself. The world or God knew that I should not kill myself. And it needed to stop me. So, it decided to destroy itself, because I was the only person left who wouldn’t ask any questions. The world hates it when you ask questions about it. That’s why they keep destroying the Determinists findings. We’re not supposed to figure it out. And I was the only person left who knew that. And if I killed myself, then, well, it would be bad. So, the world decided to kill all of us, like a virus. So, it’s my fault, and I’m sorry. Do you see what I’m saying?”

And immediately, with odd recognition and understanding, Patricia replied:

“Yes, Leroi. I think I do.”

“Good. I’m glad.”

“Are you happy?” She asked, returning his affection and warmth

“Yes. I think I finally am.”

“Then, you have nothing to apologize for, if you are finally happy.”

Leroi thought that maybe he actually *was* happy, and it was not just something he was saying. That maybe it was real for once.

“I think you should run,” Leroi said.

“I think you’re right,” she replied.

And with nothing left to say, Leroi exited the classroom through his familiar passageway.

With a well-placed foot to the door knob, Leroi kicked open the door to his classroom.

“This is Calculus One, An Introduction to Derivation and Integration,” he said.

To his surprise, his students sat thoughtfully in their seats. He considered the possibility that his kick had flown them into quick submission, making them all scatter from their shenanigans on a dime’s notice and scurry back to their seats. Either that or they were sickly and tired and scared and simply, no longer had the energy to behave inappropriately anymore.

If the second choice proved correct, then they were simply in their seats waiting to be told to go to the next class, pondering the enigma that Leroi had posted on the blackboard.

Leroi hated the second choice, because it involved their innocence. It made them seem like they were all sympathetic characters in some sort of novel where the reader was supposed to hate one character to begin with, only to end up liking him or her by the end. That meant that Leroi would become the bad character, and he would be the nice

guy turned evil. Well, goddamn it, Leroi did not like the idea of that. He like the first way a whole mess better. Yeah, that's how it had happened. Leroi decided.

“So, did anyone figure out the answer to the question?” Leori looked at the board, empty of any scribbles beyond his own. He fell to floor, miming as if he was passing out. They all leaned forward lazily, the only energy they could muster, even for a collapsed teacher. His legs crossed into an infantile Indian-style position, as if Indians actually sat in this style, as if all different ethnicities had styles to sit in properly.

When the students realized that nothing ill had beset Leroi, they settled back into their chairs and slumped, exhausted from the day.

“Can we watch the TV? We want to see what is happening with the Determinists,” a brave one said aloud.

“Oh ho ho,” Leroi started his answer, lying back on the ground and spread his arms and legs. “Absolutely not.”

“But history will be made, when they save the world.”

“They won't save the world.”

“Yes they will.”

It took nearly every thimbleful of energy in his body, but he sat himself back up and hopped to his feet. He pointed at one of them in the front row, not caring if it was the one that spoke or not. It did not matter which one it was. They were all the same person, the same person that he loved all his life and hated now. They all had duped him. They all had mocked him and tripped him and knocked him from the gondola and tore his Achilles tendon, and they all deserved a finger pointed in their face.

“They will not,” Leroi replied, calm and quiet yet furious.

The kid looked at him, not registering any emotion, one way or the other. Blood outlined his eye sockets, wicked tears.

“They cannot possibly succeed, don’t you understand that?” Leroi asked the kid, and then he moved to the girl next to him. She did not look to be in too much pain but was crying, uncaring. It looked like a chore for her. “They will inevitably fail. I know, because I’m the one who caused the end of the world. It was my fault.”

Amidst their pain and misfortune, their hopelessness and fear, they still each chuckled lightly. A smile formed on each of their faces, acting in unison like marionettes.

“It was my fault.” Leroi repeated.

He could not bring his voice above their laughter, which increased from its soft volume to fill the room entirely. The mirth turned physical and some pounded their legs into the crumbling ground while others smashed their fists on the Liquid-soaked grains of their desks. They shook their bodies, controlled seizures. Leroi shouted:

“I DID THIS.”

They did not hear.

So, Leroi approached the blackboard, listening to the faint melody hidden inside their improvised chorus. He heard the crescendo and let it pumped through his veins. In sincere patience, he faced the classroom, waiting for the ruckus to soften and stop. The pulsing blood rushed towards his pinky finger and pored out on its own, his body knowing the purpose and the necessity.

He wrote using the pinky. It took several minutes. In those minutes, no sound could be heard but the faintest sound of animals choking outside the hole in his window. The creatures cried and died.

He stepped away from the board. Pinky blood dripped the floor and created a puddle. The puddle dried almost immediately.

The board read:

WHAT IF GOD STOPPED SAVING US?

WE DIE.

MORONS.

And finally, finally, finally, Leroi received the silence he had always wished for.

Before the last bell rang, Principal Mathers buzzed the loudspeaker and called all of the teachers to the conference room for the big announcement. He said: “Uh for the big announcement the teachers should be uh together. The children should watch from the televisions in their homerooms.” He immediately sent a text to the teachers following the announcement that said: “Lock your doors. I don’t want the children leaving early. Thanx, Prince.”

Leroi hurried out of his room and locked his door in a determined pace. He practically skipped down the hall like a schoolgirl, trying to reach Patricia’s room in enough time to catch her for the announcement, so they could walk together and he could perhaps make some lofty apology for his new-born awareness of his “abilities.” Scratch it, no apologies. Just a kiss on the lips. The cheeks, each cheek, and then one long kiss on the lips. Then, she would say something like “Leroi, Leroi, let’s be powerful together,” and he would say, “my power is my own,” and she would say, “you can be my god.”

He wondered if she had taken his advice, if she would run, run as fast as she could towards someone that loved her. He wondered if Logan had done the same. Leroi

imagined them hugging each other and then turning to hug their loved ones, as if they were in front of him performing a little scene for him. Patricia's fiancé pulled her in for an embrace that could shatter wars, but Leroi could not see the fiancé's face. It was blurred out like a person's private parts on television. Leroi turned towards Logan's scenario and saw him embracing a mother and a father. Neither set looked happy or relieved. They looked terrified. But they looked terrified *together*. This gave an illusion of happiness.

Leroi reached her door and knocked *tappity-tap-tap tap-tap* and waited with his hands folded across his lap. His knees jiggled in excitement, trembling before the big moment. No response from Patricia. He kicked open the door to feel good and full of strength.

Lights off. No students. She had an afternoon homeroom, Leroi remembered clearly. She must have run like her life depended on it, although that was silly considering how meaningless it would all be. She could not run from death. God wanted her dead, along with the rest of them. *We have run from God for thousands of years, but not this time* Leroi thought. Patricia and Logan fled for their own benefit, to feel like they fought the inevitable in some tangible way, instead of waiting, waiting, waiting for death.

Back in the days when Patricia meant something to him, Leroi would sometimes sneak into the homeroom with some of the students and hide in the back until Patricia found him. She would laugh and tell him to stop it, if he remembered correctly. Her finger would point at him, the nail hanging over the flesh and inch, and she would say

“You silly goose.” No. That could not possibly be the truth. Truth did not matter anymore. Truth could be created and changed.

It happened that way. It definitely did.

So, Leroi thought.

A cupful of blood poured from his mouth, cold thick blood mixed with something nasty. Different consistencies filled the liquid and refused to mix together. Some of the blood was watery like broth while some parts felt closer to a solid. Leroi imagined that the inside of his body looked something along the lines of a Swiss cheese block. Each hole added its own type of blood until a general mixture was provided. In a way, Leroi had done something that few had done. He finally saw what his insides looked like.

He shut her door and headed towards the conference room. The hallway seemed smaller and Leroi’s head almost touched the ceiling. Leroi wondered if he was merely standing taller than usual, which of course was a possibility. Maybe this was all in his head.

The sound of shattering balsa wood permeated the halls. Alone in the entire short corridor that may or may not have been smaller, Leroi watched as the students in their classes broke free from their locked doors. As if some massive sort of coordination had taken place between the students with ESP or text messaging, they all rebelled simultaneously. The announcement had still not been made, as far as Leroi knew, so instead of trying to guess the cause of the rebellion, he decided to observe rather than assume.

One student freed himself from the classroom first. He spilled out onto the hallway linoleum onto his belly, immediately scrambling to his feet. As others poured out

of their constraints, a general mob began to move in the center of the walkway. It was as if they were animals free from their cages, now unsure of what to do with their new founded liberty. What had caused the rebellion? Leroi asked himself. He shuddered and hated that he asked questions now, a loathed side effect of his new persona since Friday.

A low chant of “Thank God for Determinists” started in the hallway. What began as a grumble soon spread throughout the young voices. The pitch of the chant resonated unnaturally high as if a bunch of cheerleaders were flirting with football players, shouting “Go! Fight! Win!” Like Alvin, the Chipmunks. Like a non-descript crying baby, boy or girl, since they both were essentially the same. And finally, like pubescent teenagers making a point about something.

The chant grew in speed and volume, attempting to reach its inevitable crescendo in brazen fashion. Leroi’s head tilted to the side as he watched the demonstration with fascination and awe for its determination. His body fell back against Patricia’s door. He wondered where her escaped students had run to exactly, whether or not they had joined the mob in their individual homerooms before breaking free, or if they were running and praying, or just running, for their lives. He wondered if any of them shared his power, his peace of mind, and his overall indifference. For this could surely only be called indifference. Surely there was no other name for it. This *was* indifference. Feigned, exaggerated, or real? It did not matter.

Their chant hit its cry of pain before starting over in waves. For several minutes, they continued this trend of reaching a high note and falling back to pieces. Then, they would pick themselves up again. Some even fell at the power of their incantation each

and every time, exorcised of demons only to find new ones waiting for them. Leroi felt the demons at work in the room.

“THANK GOD FOR DETERMINISTS!”

For the first time, Leroi felt the power of a religious experience. He imagined the Negro women in their churches that shook with fear and trembled before their Lord, who fell to their knees, clutching sermon notes crunched into paper fans. They gyrated on the floors and spoke in vicious Tongues, all admitted thieves and liars and lepers, all sinners deserving death for their sins. They transgressed against God and nature. They attempted to seize control of it through guess work and building towers to Heaven. They participated in the murder of their God incarnate, vicariously, two thousand years before their own births through the hands of the Jews that crucified him, and they repented in shouts of spiritual rapture, in pounding fists on each other’s soiled chests. They felt the presence of the Lord that sent a shiver through each bone, poking to the surface in a painful orgasm of redemption. Leroi understood this experience. He realized that they never faked it for the cameras or fabricated it in order to feel something close to legitimacy.

“THANK GOD FOR DETERMINISTS!”

The hallway seemed to shrink even further than what he had noticed before. This time, the walls came closer together. He felt the lockers reaching out for one another as the chanting rose. They stretched across the hall. The group in the center of the room seemed to notice the buckling of the walls and came close together into a single cell. They hugged each other. *Well, at least they have each other*, Leroi thought as he hugged himself. At least they goddamn have one another to hug.

Their words softened in fascination. They ceased.

The hallway continued to shrink until Leroi's head touched the ceiling all on its own. He spread out both his arms and put a palm on each wall. The metal of the lockers had boiled with rust but felt cold and damp. He realized that a shrinking hall was not a place he wanted to be. He did not want to die, at least not yet. Leroi felt the sensation of panic as he had felt two days earlier and each day before that. His throat closed up, constricting the upchuck that wanted the turbulent release of the act of vomiting. His body rebelled and held it in, making Leroi lightheaded. Yet aware and still powerful.

Leroi closed his eyes and pressed his weights against both sides of the hallway. He tried with all his might to knock the walls out, to bend in metal and concrete outward until they crumbled under his strength, forcing the entire building to collapse overtop of them. With the force of a cancer patient, he could not even dent the weakened thin metal of the lockers. He cut himself on a sharp piece of rusted door. He thought, *I guess I'll need a tetanus shot*, and then thought about his thought and laughed hard and outloud.

A grumbling sound traveled from one end of the hall to the other. A few of the students in the interior cluster looked around in mild panic. Leroi saw their eyes, and they saw his, and he felt as though he was making virgin love to each of them, a deep awkward connection that would never last.

And it didn't.

He bolted for an exit, the closest down the hall back towards his classroom. As he made his way out, he shouted back at the students, "The Determinists can't save you if you don't leave!" But none of them moved from their shivering spots. One of them, a leader, Leroi assumed, said simply and chock full of obvious fear, "They will save us.

Even if they need to resurrect us to do it.” Some looked at the leader as pangs of disbelief resonated through the group. Not everyone seemed on board with this plan. But they followed since following was easier when accompanied by a mob. Idiocy in pairs did not seem like idiocy. It became justified and moral. It became rational.

Leroi left them behind.

Blairstown High School held its shape until Leroi felt the mushy grass on his shoes. As he turned, he watched as the building buckled in on itself and collapsed. The destruction seemed controlled, being taken apart one piece at a time rather than imploding. First, the closest wall went in, leading to a moment of inactivity before a section of the second floor fell off the side. Leroi glanced behind him at the edge of suburbia and saw the destruction echoed softly around. Shingles and chimneys began falling to the ground all around him. Each piece seemed coordinated and choreographed for the show. As if each unit of dust symbolized some deteriorating social norm or sexual identity confusion or the absence of a strong father figure. But really, it just symbolized the last straw and the beginning of the end.

Leroi turned back towards the school. A cloud of brown-red dust flew up into the air from the middle and sent the structure into the ground. The dust continued traveling up and up, a newly formed fog that hovered and rose. It flew away in the shape of a battleship, retreating in victory.

A red haze permeated the air, a sign of early sunset. Leroi glanced up and could see the moon through the clouds, already out and visible. It appeared much larger than normal. It shown as bright as the sun in red fervor, which provided the color of the air around him. Everything looked on fire, but retained its boiling exterior, its cold core. The

vomit that Leroi suppressed in his moment of earlier panic flew out onto the dead grass, giving it some color that it had lost in the process of deterioration and cool, cool death. He swallowed deeply in recoil and felt his neck crumble as if a sponge. Near-frozen dots of blood formed around his neck in even spots a millimeter thick. He went to wipe them but they had already dried into his skin, a naturally born tattoo. He began an un-purposed trudge to the other side of the building out of some worn out desire to find any other people he could talk to and say, did, did, did you see what just happened there? That was something alright. The cloud just floated away didn't it. That's odd. Clouds of dust don't normally float away. *Jesus.*

He made his way to the front of the building. He caught a glimpse of the parking lot that held all of their cars. Each vehicle had collapsed under its own weight and deterioration, each a ball of wishy-washed metal and tires. Each had its own pile, and no piles commingled or mixed their debris. They remained separate in their own compartments, distinct from one another, marked by yellow painted lines.

Leroi's car was unscathed, un-rusted, looked slightly shinier than normal. It was repainted. Were those racing stripes? He needed to get closer to tell.

Principal Mathers stood next to the pile of school that he once ruled. He stood out next to the flagpole, next to the parking lot with the used-to-have-been cars, next to where Leroi was trudging slowly.

He waved. Leroi waved back.

"They failed," Principal Mathers shouted, cupping his hands around his mouth.

"They made the announcement and then the school started to fall down."

"They failed," Leroi mimicked weakly.

“Yes, they did, McMullen.” He started to smile, Leroi noticed, probably something having to do with irony, but the notion collapsed under its own illusionary result. All he could honestly do was frown.

“I’m sorry,” he replied. He wasn’t. He didn’t think he was, at least. Maybe he was a little sorry.

“What the hell are you sorry for, Leroi?”

“For all of this. It’s my fault.”

And amidst the destruction, the deterioration of everything that defined him, that he could call his own, Principal Mathers let out a hooting cackle that punched through the red dust and settled on both of them, harder than acid rain.

“Bullshit you did this McMullen,” he said, barely getting through it due to all the laughter. “Bull. Shit.”

And then Principal Mathers said: “Thank God for Determinists.”

Leroi stopped and felt his pulse course through each part of his body in odd recognition of what would happen next.

Principal Mathers bent over with a wretch of pain. He curled his hands around his stomach and screamed out a horrible sound. The sound contained words, perhaps phrases, filled with meaning and subtext, but no one could understand but him and his god. He must have felt his cell phone vibrate in his pocket, because he reached for it even in his pain. The screen never met his eyes. Principal Mathers limbs shrunk, like the ceiling and walls of the school. His clothing became loose and his face gaunt in a frozen expression of mixed horror and confusion. As if he watched a death and simultaneously sought out the meaning in it.

His body collapsed in a maroon bust, becoming like the cars that littered the parking lot. He was dead surely, Leroi thought. To be alive in such a state would be terrifyingly unpleasant. He wished some sort of rest on his body. Principal Mathers was not necessarily terrible to Leroi. He may have been the closest thing to a friend he had at the school. Leroi could not help but feel some sadness.

He felt his stomach. Pain, sure, but not deathly deterioration. Not yet, anyway. The world still yet spared him. Allowed him to live with his power. Gave him a few more minutes before sacrificing him as well in order to start healing itself with an appropriately sized band-aid.

But looking over the dust of the school and the dust of the cars and grass and the bloodied dust of Principal Mathers, Leroi could not help but smile and say, "Thank God." He imagined all the people trapped within the building, all those students and the teachers who mocked him. The ones who refused to love him or even notice him. Images of their bodies arose from the crumbled ashes, standing as ghosts would stand, arms at their sides all facing him.

Leroi looked around at each of them, including Principal Mathers resurrected before him. He pointed his index finger, curled his other three fingers into his palm, and cocked his thumb. And one by one, Leroi shot and killed each fluttery ghost in syncopated beats, hitting each one in the chest. He coupled the shot with a loud verbalized BANG that rose from his lips. When he reached Mathers, Leroi killed him again, fake bullet straight through the head.

He put the finger in front of his lips and blew. Imaginary smoke poured from the barrel.

Part 3

Alarm

Leroi felt more awake and alive than he had ever before. This was life, finally, finally. A dull wind blew chunky dusts of school and Principal Mathers and those students and particles of Leroi's imagination all over his windshield, so he put on his wipers to clear the way. He put the key in the ignition. His car ignited perfectly. It felt smoother, less jerky. He gripped the steering wheel, which glowed with heat and stuck to his skin, and prepared to back out of his parking space. But then he looked forward and realized that nothing stood in his way anymore, since it was all dust, dust, small rocks, and dust. Now, his car was the closest to the used-to-be Blairstown High. He had the best parking spot, goddamn it. The other cars had dissipated, evaporated, like the people who owned them. And when Leroi gazed out over the destruction of deterioration, the beautiful disaster smelling of moisture and finality, he realized that he was not one person, but two – two at least, possibly more.

He drove over a bump that used to be Mathers and bid the school a faux-sympathetic farewell, with a toss of the hand and all, tears in crevices.

Leroi McMullen is holding a grenade with the fuse burning. He is blowing a hole in time. He is in déjà vu. This is Leroi McMullen at age twelve. A small bump appears at the top of his calf. A hole is gashed at the heel. A fainting spell almost comes across him, but he withholds it and refuses its access. Blood empties from his calf and there is laughter, not his. A kid named Harold is the source of the laughter. He is a fat fuck. Leroi

McMullen at age twelve is also Leroi McMullen on the verge of tasty tasty apocalypse.

Harold is still laughing, for all these years. Leroi time travels and hears the laughter.

Harold is Mathers is Patricia is that bastard is Mr. Windfall. And they are all cackling.

Leroi McMullen's car did not make a sound as it traveled along the roads, which were now determined by the areas of less speckled grains than others. The roads dwelt between hills of sand which denoted old trees, houses, the Zoo. Suddenly, Blairstown found itself transformed into an old wild wild west ghost town, complete with tumbleweeds of skeletons and emptied homes with hinged flapping doors.

Up on the left, Leroi saw a small cloud of smoke, distinct from the life-sand that floated now. Cumulous intense smoke poured out in front of Leroi's car, distracting him from his trek to nowhere. He slowed the car. Another vehicle – maroon and mauve – was smeared across two trees. The trees had two limbs each that point out in a perpendicular line with the car crumpled between. Maroon bust had settled onto their trunks and altered the already dim color of their bark. A woman and two children lay dead among the rubble, in the rubble, beside it. They were utterly destroyed. The situation was not worth describing otherwise.

How did Leroi feel about this?

Leroi? Leroi noticed something that no one else could possibly notice in this situation.

Average Onlooker: Oh my... Oh my goodness gracious. Those individuals are dead. There are two young boys and a woman dead in a car wreck. The woman must be their mother. Where is the father? The father is probably dead as well, long ago. She had to raise the two little boys on her own. She must have been Super-Mother, a high

powered executive woman and also a mother that takes the kids to LAX practice. She was applying make up while driving them home from practice, because of her big night meeting to land the big case, and swerved to avoid a porcupine, before driving into a large tree. How pitiful! How sad! I will keep driving so I don't have to see their bones anymore.

Leroi McMullen: There is a terrible carnage. No one else watches, because it is real. A fake car crash will absorb and sadden and enthrall. But no one watches this car crash. No one is here.

*But Leroi McMullen is two people now. He is the **Average Onlooker** and **Leroi McMullen** at all ages.*

Leroi drove straight past the crash out of fear of splitting into two any further than he had.

A mile or so up the road, Leroi fondled the break and slowed to a halt. He adjusted his rearview mirror, feeling for it as if blind and afraid. In the distance behind him, he could see only the boiling rim of the sun as it sunk like a doomed ship-liner. He could only see the waves of sand that floated up and to the side, covering his tracks. He could not see the remnants of Blairstown High. Even in the remnants, Leroi knew that he could feel his other self taking control of his body. *I feel sorry and I want to go back* he heard it say. The edges of his skin seared with invisible fire, God's warning. *Why do you call it God?* Leroi did not have an answer. Leroi time traveled in the déjà vu:

There are Bunsen burners a plenty. Leroi leans over one of the burners, over Logan's shoulder and can smell the dank odor of his adolescence. It is the smell of no deodorant. Patricia grabs Leroi's bicep, digging her inch long sharp nails into his arm.

It hurts and he bleeds, sure, but laughs and laughs like it's a joke and they are married. When she pulls him away, his wrist catches the top of a burner, and the edges of his skin sear and cook for a moment. But there are no rings or vows. They are not married. She says, "you can't keep barging in here," and Leroi says, "but I like you and like to be here," and she says, "I like you too Leroi but you need to get out and stop doing this." And Leroi McMullen leaves the room.

His eyes unclenched and the burning on the edges stopped, leaving scratch marks of singed hairs. Leroi keeled over in a bout of stomach pain. He felt for his guts with both hands. The guts were uneasy and scared.

A soft buzzing snuck up. It hovered in the air before lightly settling in the space of Leroi's car. It hit a high frequency and resolved, returning to its peak and resolving again for a break. He knew the sound came from the high school. He knew the sound was real, not a fabrication or a *drill*, but a high pitched ringing of the ears – sending that particular frequency into death. Leroi knew.

It was the sound of the end of the world. Leroi needed to know what it looked like. He needed to know. To *know*. *There is something about knowing and knowing. That is where this ends.*

Leroi decided what was best and turned around. His body sunk into the seat and the gas pedal fell down. The car moved with increasing velocity, pulling rather than a push, a tugging of the rope. Leroi felt the bristles of a rope around his shoulders and neck, felt the burn of the threads digging into the surface of his skin. He found himself again.

"Hey McMullen?" Windfall pulls on the end of his unbuckled belt and whips it out through the loops. He snaps the belt and it cracks in the air. "Want to see what it

feels like to be a lion or a horse or a zebra being tamed?” And Windfall sends the belt hard on Leroi’s neck. His skin welts up immediately, and Leroi knows it hurts, but laughs. He says, “oh ho ho stop it Mr. Windfall that hurts oh ho ho.” But Mr. Windfall keeps going and going, until Leroi’s neck dents inward and Principal Mathers tells him, “probably not a good idea. Get back to class, McMullen.” And Leroi leaves.

Leroi’s eyes widened. Even as he drove blinded, he remained on track, back towards the brazen sun that promised to dissipate within time. The waves of the sound intensified as he grew closer. The singers of the sound hit a chord of contentedness that resonated a cool fury worthy of investigation, an enigmatic song that relished in its ability to stupefy with distant beauty. Like breasts. They beckoned, simple. *Come you mother fucker because you know you need to.*

So Leroi went on. He bobbed his head up and down as the waves entered and exited his body. He could see the sound in front of him as a sine function, each peak an ecstatic boy’s jissom and each valley the glazed eyes of regret.

The school approached with ferocious speed, sending the siren chorus into pumps of trumpets, blaring to cue the approach of angels. Leroi saw the school’s remains, and in the perfect downfall of silence of the song, said “Thank God,” acting as the spoken verse missing from the melody.

Leroi’s torso twisted in deserved pain. A tearing began beneath his skin, starting in his organs and spreading outward until his insides liquefied in a damp condensate. A sharp twinge sent him into instinctual motion. Leroi brought his foot down towards the brake, but the brake was no longer solid, only the steamy space of dust. Amidst the bluster of the alarm, Leroi tucked his face and neck into his body as his car dissipated

around him, leaving him tumbling to the ground, softened by the global pillow that the Determinists had created, that God had facilitated, that Leroi had caused. He rolled a good deal and scraped his body superficially. Even in those few minutes of interim, Blairstown High had become a pale pile of matter. Hints of structure appeared here and there amidst the rubble. A rusted desk poked up in one of the corners. A lunch table remained partially intact, seats deserted. Leroi sensed the possibility that hung above the pile – that something of mild importance had once existed in this spot, the possibility that something had survived beneath the rifts. The pile was chock full of torrid innuendo. Leroi rolled onto his knees upright, his back straightened at what sat before him. Weariness overtook him at the thought of the innuendo, at the word “innuendo.” He found himself again.

“There is something between us,” Leroi says to Patricia. He reaches out to grab her hand, to feel the edges of her trimmed nails. “There is a constant innuendo.” And she says, “no there is not Leroi,” and she dodges his hand. He places the hand on her shoulder and she shrugs it off. “Please Leroi stop coming down here and stop doing this, it is not appropriate” and Leroi says “please please love me love me” and she says “you shouldn’t come down to my room anymore Leroi.” Leroi’s hairs ignite with an imagined fire like bugs are poing holes in his skin and he says “wait we can be friends, I can do that.” And she says, “Well that’s fine of course.” And Leroi walks away, out the door of her classroom. He waves goodbye to the kids, who stare at him and then stare to Patricia, and she says to them, “sorry about that kids.” And they say, “it’s okay Missy Jones.” And Leroi, upon walking into the hallway, decides to forget the whole conversation even happened, with a toss of his head back and forth, and thinks about

what he should say next time he goes down to her classroom. He decided he will watch her lecture and say "Amazing lecture." Yeah. And she will change her mind. Yeah.

And Leroi's eyes widened as he saw the possibility before him. His insides swished around like a half filled water bottle, and this gave him the feeling that nothing more could happen to him, nothing worse. Pouncing with odd weightlessness, Leroi tore into the rubble, digging with no regard for sharp pieces or poisonous dust. The sound of the alarm pinched his eardrums with delight, pressing down on them and squeezing. The alarm forced the scrambled digging into its action, begging Leroi to dig deeper and harder. It was an anthem and chase sequence music. It was cinematic in scope.

Leroi searched among the rubble. *Patricia are you here? Say something.* He reached elbow deep into the ash and felt a skinny rod. He pulled up to reveal the leg of a metal chair, rusted strong into a bubbly stick. Tossing it aside, he kept pounding in. He scoured one area *Logan for the love of God say something if you can hear me. I'm sorry I.* And then, when he grew irritated and lost faith, he moved to another undiscovered area. He pulled out each inanimate object that rested beneath the surface, hairbrushes aplenty. Each item was tossed aside, resting idly in a pile of useless shit that was not alive. They were the antithesis of life – which was not death but rather, a distinct mockery of life and its mystery in its beauty. *I don't hate either of you. I'll be appropriate. Please God bring them back. Resurrect them.* These "things" proved to disprove the clarity of God, evident in his mystery. God's greatest power is his ambiguity. Why would he relinquish that? *Stupid. Morons. Fuck, bring them back. I'm begging you to bring the back. I love them too much.* Leroi lost fingers and toes in the search. The bleeping of the alarm chopped at his ear, pushing it to explode.

The haze overseeing the action began to lift. The red bubbles that designated that change taking place began to evaporate and disappear. Even the humidity began to cool off, allowing cool dryness to permeate the battered battleground beneath. The sky grew clearer and bolder, allowing the damage inflicted by God or whoever hated them all to finally, finally, finally be visible to any survivors, to the sole survivor. It was the first sunrise after a night of war; you knew the damage because you witnessed its infliction. But you did *know* until you *saw*. The heavens turned deep blue – a perfect day spilled out. The bluster of wind fell still, died altogether.

And the alarm, in a climactic shriek of disappointment, shut off. Leroi's ears pounded still though, the noise still making its way out of his head completely. The alarm lingered palely, in ceremony of remembrance – there is something about – a funeral dirge – breeze turned cold – boy's suffocating jissom – dust into dune – dusk before dawn – stuck joints – wince – slosh slosh slosh of insides – shrugging off – windshield wiping away blood – squeegee the ligaments – toasting the napalm – spreading your cheeks for God – giving a shit –stuttering over words – stop – the dirge abruptly – the masturbation of necessity – jack off of society – jack off society – never knowing anything. Leroi McMullen looked up, relishing the release of silence like a bullet pulled from his bicep. No wind blew. Cold air winked at him. He swished his hands lightly over his stomach, feeling the round abscess that protruded out. Leroi's stomach was fat, falling out with the surprising weight of organs. He pushed in to bring them all back together, back to order, but they pointed out farther after he let go.

The Earth seemed to tilt forward, bringing the sun higher in the sky like midday. It radiated security. Buildings did not reconstruct; life remained dead and formless. But

the sun shone on the carnage in cruel mockery of the war. Didn't the sun know that today was for mourning, the end of life? It was cruel to smile on death. And Leroi knew – at the sign of the cooling down, the end of the alarm, the glowing light that radiated down – Leroi knew that it was over. The world had ended and all human life had ended. The purge of the human virus *had ended*.

And now, it was restarting.

No. Not yet. I am not ready you mother fucker, I am not ready. Leroi dug, scratching skin into blood into ligament into bone. But once the bone was exposed, there was still the marrow burrowed underneath, and that was what needed to be got at – the marrow. The marrow was the core of a person, and the core could not be got at without getting to the marrow. You made me care and care about these fuckers; you made me like these fuckers. You don't get to just end the world like that and leave me behind. The smell of rotting and humidity fell away from him and cackled all the way, like that Principal Mathers that mother fucker Principal Mathers who made me love him who cried out and opened his mouth to shout Thank God for Determinists, take me, too. Kill me, mother fucker, just kill me. The dirt pile shortened, dying, exterminated like roaches on sticky paper. The ground sucked it all down with the sound of a vacuum. The ground emptied like a bathtub with a large opened drained, slurring and slushing towards a hole, leaving Leroi cold and naked and alone.

“McFucken, McFucken, McFucken.” A voice boomed behind him. He knew who it was. He knew that and did not need any confirmation. But he turned anyway.

“*You* are still here?” Mr. Windfall said. He tried to bring his hands together, but each hand only had hints of fingers and knuckles, looked like two mismatched puzzle

pieces that would never fit together. “The apocalypse happens oh but Jesus at least I still have Leroi McFucken.”

“Mr. Windfall,” a screech entered Leroi’s voice. It coupled with a desperate stumble towards Mr. Windfall’s feet, as if he meant to kiss them in adored ecstasy. “How are you?”

Mr. Windfall’s stomach punched out like Leroi’s. He held it, a newly acquired old man paunch. Like a jolly fat gift giver, he laughed straight from his belly, causing obvious pain that registered across his face as a necessary irony towards the situation. “I’m doing just fine you faggot.” He paused and fell to the ground, landing on his backside, probably breaking a few bones, which seemed like a finger prick at this point. “Glad to be here with you.”

“Are you?” Leroi tried to crawl towards him, but his legs would not work. He lay on his belly and pushed the remnants of his limbs into the ground. They would not catch. He swam in motion. “Are you glad to be here with me? I am glad to be with you.” Thank God, Thank God, Thank God for giving me Windfall. Thank God, praise God, thank you thank you thank you. I do not want to die, I do not want to be alone. I will be here and dance and sing with Mr. Windfall. And I will learn his first name. And we will say Thank God Thank God Thank God while holding stumps of hands.

“No, Leroi.” He said. “I am not glad to be here with you, you goddamn moron.”

Leroi felt the damp coldness of a shadow above his head, and Mr. Windfall looked up. A light shown down on his face, brightening it in a rapture of rapid intelligence, unwanted or otherwise. “Jesus Christ, McMullen,” Mr. Windfall said, gazing

up at the image that stood behind Leroi's back, where he could not see. His belly lay flat on the remnants of dust and deterioration. He could not see.

"Goodbye McFucken," Mr. Windfall said, his eyes bent on the figure above Leroi's body. And in an instant, he was gone, burst apart in small specks that floated for a moment in attentive hiatus before slowly falling to the ground. The specks appeared red with blood, but held an odd facet of color that refracted the light of the image above him. Leroi could not see.

No you fucker, come back, Mr. Windfall, you cannot leave me alone.

But he had. Windfall had set his eyes on whatever showed the buttery light and had blown up from awe or wonder, from the knowledge that came with determining the source of either. Simply, Mr. Windfall *knew* and had to die. Like those assholes who said Thank God for Determinists and expected to win out. Those *people*.

Leroi said something that sounded like a muffled chorus of "No no no," but it was just the caress of pointed noises, desperate and sure of what could happen next if he looked behind him. Before him, the upper crust of the Earth vibrated in a contained manner as stalks of wheat and corn blew out from the ground, rising higher with each passing second, passing by childhood and puberty and early adulthood straight into responsibility. They grew past Leroi's scope of vision, above and past his head and eyes, which lay softly on the ground. Leroi only saw them, as they bent in height and bowed towards the image behind him. Leroi did not want to know.

No, no. I will not look, I will not. The cornstalks and the trees that sprouted from the ground in a newfound confidence, ready to birth the new life of those that would follow and would not ask questions, they bowed towards the light glowing in obvious

power behind him. I will not look, I will not. Leroi clenched his eyes and pounded them into the ashes of the ground. He could hear the siren come behind him, a chorus of beautiful voices that rubbed the soft cells of his ears, caressing them into affection, but I will not look, I will not. The remaining particles of grime that remained pressed into his closed eyes, nestling like small animals beneath trees on the approach of the big storm. They covered and pressed inward. I refuse to know, I refuse. There is something about knowing and knowing. That is where this ends. A pounding in his chest, only temporary, told Leroi to stop caring for once, to stick with the rest of his people, that refusing the idea of knowing and knowing and knowing was silly and for the weak of heart. But Leroi refused to know. Nothing promising, no progress would be made from it. Leroi pressed his face into the ground, I will not know, I will not know. The ground pressed right back into him, keeping his head above ground. Still though, he juttet even farther downward, hiding like a kid under blankets scared of the Boogie man. No one knew what the Boogie man looked like, for real. They imagined. Imagination was a coping mechanism for those who refused to succumb to knowing and knowing. Leroi felt the brightness and heard the booming and knew the God image above him, that the cornstalks bowed towards in worship and admitted towards and pledged their allegiance. He knew what was happening above him, so why try to see it? What good would come of it? Why try to *know*? Why try to figure out love, when the thing could never be figured out, that Mathers would be Mathers and Patricia her Patricia and Leroi could never reconcile Leroi. With his head buried like an ostrich, he wondered what the point of knowing ever was. He wondered if maybe, maybe, maybe, he had been over thinking it all along.

Vita

ACADEMIC VITA of Jesse Cramer

Jesse Cramer
213 W. Beidler Rd.
King of Prussia, PA, 19406
jic5063@gmail.com

Education: Bachelor of Arts Degree in English, Penn State University, Spring
2010
Minor in Theater
Honors in English
Thesis Title: Alarm
Thesis Supervisor: Richard Doyle

Related Experience:
Internship with *State College Magazine*
Supervisor: Liz Jenkins
Summer 2009

Awards:
Theodore Roethke Poetry Award 2009
Dean's List
Cantwell Liberal Arts Scholarship Recipient

Presentations/Activities:
Director with No Refund Theatre
Founder and President of ImprovPSU
Mission work in Dominican Republic