

# PROBLEMATIQUE

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*This magazine, and all future issues of it, are dedicated to the memory of Christopher Mulrooney  
June 9<sup>th</sup>, 1956- July 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2015*



*music/Christopher Mulrooney*

the early overtones of any musical imagination  
says Schoenberg are by way of Impressionism  
a feeling of nature in her courses Rimbaud's summer dawn  
later on one gets down to brass tacks and fine upholstery  
warp and weave and wood and springs the chair she sat in

*a piece of sculpture/ Christopher Mulrooney*

*The Anarchist* painted bronze

fin-de-siècle youth in blue denim pants light denim shirt

striding in imitation of *John the Baptist* by Rodin

arms outstretched low on either side

wrists flexed middle fingers pointing down

airily by Tommasini

*for a desk of books/Christopher Mulrooney*

the foibles of all art here is the one book  
of all the great library  
on this tree-lined avenue  
grows weary of it listing them  
in very copious order  
like a grocery list by Deryck van der Bost of Scheveningen  
Vincent painted the beach there in a storm

*psalm/Christopher Mulrooney*

here is the harper criest thou  
upon the strings  
who reads these things  
hast thou seen what they read  
who are the literati



*Hope Is Kind of Like Dominoes/Howie Good*

I was hit with a hammer during an argument over \$5. That's the problem with most people. One day it might be your adult child found dead in his bed from an overdose; another, high school kids raising their arms in the Nazi salute for a yearbook photo; another, an old woman sitting in the window of an East Village apartment – two, three hours, just sitting in silence. I don't believe in the healing power of hope, but sometimes things happen, like the sky rumbles for a small eternity and then the light shudders, shedding white polka dots all over.

*Litterbug Blues/Howie Good*

The old bluesmen had voices as scuffed and battered as their guitar cases. We're all, in a way, patch jobs, at risk of imminently coming apart. One of my high school teachers had been in a death camp in Poland. He told us (I've no fucking idea why) that after the camp was liberated, he took a trip around the world just to see if it was still there. There's no point in pretending these things didn't happen. Men in orange jumpsuits creep alongside the highway, each with an empty sack in one hand, a sharp stick in the other.

*A Netflix Original/Howie Good*

Two Scandinavian dudes set out in a vintage VW microbus to prove the secretary-general of the United Nations was the victim of assassination. But then, by accident, they discover an attempt to eliminate entirely the smoking of cigarettes after sex. The Scandinavians meet a leader of an underground militia who says that while that's his signature on the document, he didn't write the signature himself. I got to be honest, I was expecting more: maybe a "crime wall," with photos and red strings and so on; maybe the angel of death promising in a mocking tone to stay in touch.

*The Surface of Last Scattering/Howie Good*

I'm not afraid of dying, no. It's just that I doubt the sincerity of the doleful expression frozen on the faces of graveyard angels. I have difficulty even talking about it. But, for form's sake, I'm always making up songs, a sound, you remark, like the dot-dot-dash of Morse code. Every day someone falls off a roof or tall ladder. Someone else encounters in the street a woman last seen flat on her back in a vegetative state. She gives a fuzzy, fragile smile, as if the world is a sort of seed that blooms wherever we happen to be.

*The Condition/Howie Good*

After dark, it's a whole other thing. Smoke boils up from cracks in the brick. Local volunteer firefighters distribute oxygen masks for pets. There are more and more places where a person can get lost and not even realize it. Just last year the condition had no name; now it has too many for me to remember. The day is coming, if it isn't already here, when the lonely will be packed off to rehab centers and psych wards. Look, I don't want to rush you, but the trees are melting fast, and the Viagra is starting to wear off.

*untitled/ Kaleigh Maebly*

that dog bone,  
that canine anthem,  
means nothing to the boy  
with the rock in his left  
hand  
and the sun beating down on him  
mercilessly

*untitled/ Kaleigh Maebly*

in the essence of nosebleed,  
lost in its prime,  
the tombstone will read  
as follows:

“mistakenly made love  
in the middle of  
earth’s final  
thunderstorm”

*untitled/ Kaleigh Maebly*

inside of your mouth,  
on the underside of  
your tongue,  
i am safe

between the teeth and  
the way you breathe  
'holy',  
i am known

under ultraviolets and  
the promise of  
thunderstorm skin,  
i am whole

--we always swallowed  
just the right way



*untitled/ Kaleigh Maebly*

cry, that sick dog,  
with the rock 'n roll epilepsy  
and constant angel of  
dying  
to the maker of windows,  
the birther of the drunk-

did the weight in your chest  
fall into your  
stomach?  
do the doves still sing  
your liquid  
praise?

*The Propaganda Machine/Tim Kahl*

A statue of a woman with stone breasts rings a bell for truth.  
She intercepts the packages of salt on the Avenida where the Madonna stands,  
  
a sting of mint in the rain that shocks the Portuguese El Camino.  
Then a century of exodus begins with lost husbands in front of screens,  
  
sparrows commanding the untamed donkey whose horoscope is surprise, surprise.  
Cypresses work from sun to sun and clean the pollen off the bee.  
  
Balls of yarn hang over the doorways in Ireland. The wolf moon hunts  
a stranger with Chesterfields who burned through the black  
  
and hides in the chaparral blessed by the barn owl's grace  
and is cradled by a cone of starlight shining down on him.  
  
The wind chimes startle a pale moth and the soft ash is kissed  
by the fallen angels. The tourists knock the rust off the rose.  
  
They play their erotic badminton and the ballad of the new blue spruce.  
A hundred mornings flare then disappear during the dance of the plague.  
  
The shape of a human is turned into an idea of a cloud,  
odd in its tiny white uniform the botanists have groomed.  
  
The houses of meaning are improvised to threaten the daylight in its depression.  
Go ask a dog what madness is and it will bark three times.  
  
The engine of language cranks out its squeaky little sentences  
and arranges them in sheets to slowly grind down into the propaganda machine.

*Not One Blade Handle/Tim Kahl*

I report not one blade handle that is sorry enough  
and not one path completing the loop through the center of gravity

But a "Wait Here" sign is added. The shorter yuccas direct coyotes  
to the waters of empty lots where granite figures settle into the city streets

The contents of our illuminated interiors impose fun at great angles  
but the highways slowly transition into events without brains

while the body continues to feature its platform of being beautiful  
and plus-size models assemble to engineer a bike swap off the grid

The consciousness camp is filmed amid the happenings in the gardens  
companion plants are sprawling: beans and peas, okra and amaranth

sunflowers and cucumbers. They all convene at the Hotel Congress  
where illicit couples splash against each other like bugs against windshields

The dark-haired white-winged angels tame the breeds of wild lightning  
that planters call *yartsa gunbu*, summer grass winter worm, larva of the ghost moth

child learning language at a rate determined by the axon's bandwidth  
so where did all this claw foot and carbon come from?

To where is it driven during the dream of its motorized hermitage?  
The violent planet ascends to the sea surface and becomes Bread Rocks

crowding out the nomads and the goat carcasses the fortunate flayed  
while the glow of memory faded and flooded my endless regard for the blade

*Fishing on Lake Useless/Tim Kahl*

Release these men from fishing on Lake Useless where they waste  
their days and save their mandatory fatigue for both folded hands

the hips of these stiff Europeans are grafted onto nocturnes  
their courtyard wings unfurl in the style of blood red hibiscus

sweet nothings gathering force like prickly pear people  
their faces weary from the gypsy self thrown out to the airport

and the woman God uses to trivialize the councils of nature  
as they stand in their unspoken thoughts more visitor than resident

across the train tracks and among the hothouse flowers  
their Esperanza is whisked away by clerks and immigrants

their passport of the one last chance attempts a better adventure  
where they are called to battle with a ragged fart in public

they are never happy with their names said incorrectly by the masses  
becoming adults in blanket forts, eating Jell-O with chop sticks

naked snipers in the night, ghosts in the ponchos of the peasants  
proud of the language learned in their 9 to 5 portraits

a blueprint truer than birthday praise and a white face  
not just some guy trying to be internet famous who can't

understand that no explanation dizzies more than regal titles  
so they cast into Fruit Ales Falls with the wonders of their hearts

*The Eulogy for Alabama/Tim Kahl*

The eulogy for Alabama begins when machines are orphans and poisons  
during the Nigerian summer and its burning banter churning in an unknown furnace

the blood and bone of a child stands in a single stained glass window  
the mirage of just causes revolving in a hideous Lutheran bottle

*Dasein* opens to the strong seismological ale of the seasonal peasant  
Yoga breeds walk around in slow motion trying to quantify reasons for *agua*

Can anyone dance with sincerity in the parking lot of consciousness  
Is the starving carnivore's workbook filled with pages of panic

The run-up on the alternate take makes Miss America squint  
not quite neutral gloss of monitored eye blink at the static

then blame it on the blues and tones of fog jumping over mountains  
hacked — nothing sticks to the ribs, nothing heals the time limits

The spoiled meat of the system exists next to the polished corpses  
There's always one more river for the man of Georgia red clay to cross

from cape to camp to a rhythm of freedom hidden in the sacred ashes  
the burning investigated along the broad arc bending to justice

Tumbleweed spirit is razored by oxide and positron and osmosis  
Stick a thermometer in the persona and measure the imprint of passion

The inherited appetites slide into quickly learned language  
Nightspells of compassion and anguish shine in the Birmingham dirges

*Come Join the Youth Band!/Tim Kabl*

When spit becomes spittle and reaches the middle  
of the horn and sound is born as warning to  
the walking and the gum chew clicks of the trap  
the landscape of taps and pops and cymbal shimmers,  
then the band wanders into funderland. So then it undoes  
injury and surgery, extends majesty and mystery,  
kisses the impossibility of wind dressing as image.

Can everyone see the blowthrough, count out the beat  
of one-two-three — *Sweetly Sings the Donkey*.  
And you and me sit in half-wonder at every blunder  
sounding a little like a bitten kinder who'd bray  
all day if given an inch of imagining. Aw-righty then,  
no inhibiting a hee haw here. Just snort and rip  
a note to beat back neglect both far and near.

But over yonder where the clarinets will ponder  
where their silhouettes will dare to squeak  
and interrupt the will to speak like firecrackers  
or a sonic boom shooting out the baritone. Oh boy.  
The melody is pilloried with joy, and it jumps for  
a general sense of loyalty among the flutes and tubas  
and trumpets and tractors as well as other new recruits.

*The 16<sup>th</sup> of September/Daniel Hudon*

this is the tree I love  
invoking its name  
erect and green  
in the lovely twilight  
in the azure echoes I love  
its crown of leaves  
proud as the crescent  
moon singing  
in its heart

*Good Fortune/Daniel Hudon*

Look.  
Night swallows  
the house at the end  
of the street  
of stars.

Into its shadow  
the crescent moon  
minuets.

Darklit clouds buoy  
up the meadow of sky.

The silhouette of a winter tree  
croons through a window.

In the cello of dark  
all is quiet.

Turn off the lamp.  
Come outside.

Stars are blooming  
before our eyes.



*The Haunted Castle/Daniel Hudon*

The sea is calm            among the shoals  
the water waves gently around the stone

the clouds gather,        the clouds break  
dark as the mouth of the night

the sky is dark above the shoals  
the clouds stir gently around the stone

the water gathers,        the water breaks  
dark as the night of the mouth

heroic in its restraint,        the sky breaks  
the lightning bolt        inches its way  
down  
stone

by  
stone

*Evening Falls/Daniel Hudon*

WHY THIS TITLE?

The Enigma of the Absolute was already taken.

DESCRIBE THE PAINTING.

The shards of glass create the sun in the sky, orange as a dove in flight, setting beyond the hillside much admired by the poets of Paris.

WHO BROKE THE WINDOW?

A bell tolling through the wind of the sky.

WHY DIDN'T YOU CLOSE THE CURTAINS?

The desire of the full moon, scrupulously unkempt.

HAVE YOU EVER SEEN SUCH AN ORANGE SUN?

Gorgonzola, camembert, either will do.

WHERE IS THE STONE THAT BROKE THE WINDOW?

Time ends here; here it begins.

THE WINDOW DOESN'T SEEM TO OPEN. WHY?

The luminous dreams of your heart transposed into grains of sand.

WHO LEANED THE SHARDS OF GLASS AGAINST THE WALL BENEATH THE WINDOW?

The Fibonacci sequence that separates day from night.

WHY WAS THE WINDOW PAINTED LIKE THE SCENE BEYOND?

A shadow is a shadow all the same.

IS THERE ANYTHING YOU'D LIKE TO ADD?

The lipstick of a kiss, the nipple of my love.

*The Companions of Fear/Daniel Hudon*

In the silence of the hilltop  
owls sprout from the ground.

In the doom of the daylight  
round eyes open black.

In the veins of the leaf  
heaves the breast.

In the speckle of the breast,  
pits of black, pits of black.

In the still of the wind  
the vigil continues

The night calls  
The silence answers

The roots of your fear  
are growing inside you

*the cult of repair (i)/Barton Smock*

I dared once my brother to kill a single mouse he could fit into his mouth. he killed and killed. his jaw became so tight that he entered every dream angry and every chat room as me. the shadow of a beast we'd known to stand on two legs begged us to break its bones. we poured it a glass of milk then grew so close that I had to pour the milk alone. the beast tried to be our sister but our sister was a circle that moved away from the light. the mice that went with her

wanted to.

*the cult of repair (ii) / Barton Smock*

the baby thinks it is god without ever thinking of god. its parents are almost naked in a light that doesn't grow back. someone sad is calling the baby

big-boned. the candle lit by its twin is blown out

by a fish

*the cult of repair (iii) / Barton Smock*

the last thing you say in this story is that jesus jogs alone. I want to leave you but not before this is fixed. in some versions, I beat you to the blow-up doll and in others there is no me. I know your hope is for me to feel as if I've just left the theater after watching all my mothers die in the same photo. give jesus a stopwatch. have him check it.

*First Time Swimming/Reece A.J. Chambers*

new melody I drink  
disco fizz on my tongue  
to strawberry ballet

chime of magic  
down my spine  
when you bless me with whispers

first time swimming  
cathedral where echoes  
make new constellations

handful of sunset  
hundredth bouquet of thanks  
look how you made room in your shadows

( for me )

*What We're Both Thinking/Reece A.J. Chambers*

And when you say love,  
as if the first chilled sip of champagne slapping your tongue,  
I know you know I know. You, thinking of summer walks  
in the park with a pet we'll soon own, a whisky sunset  
and a John Legend song, strawberries half-licked  
in molten chocolate. We'll kiss - fireworks.  
Sex to make us sweat.

I smile, because what else would I do?  
I think of bags for life sleeping beneath the eyes,  
black apostrophe hairs on the brink of the sink.  
Perhaps splashes of blood on the sheets, scrunched stomach,  
arguments that sprint out our mouths,  
temporary electrocutions.  
We'll kiss - loose knot. Sex to make us fret.



*The Man Enters the Chip-Shop Again / Reece A.J. Chambers*

when he opts for the obvious again  
this time I think will be the time  
I finally pipe up and say what needs saying

that while I hope this fish dinner  
satisfies you the taste of the sea creature  
on your lips that salt and vinegar mixture

it ought to be me next to you on the sofa  
smiling or laughing at some crappy TV repeat  
fork skewering the gone soggy chips

tips of our fingers stricken with grease  
but worth it because our hands  
will be a ruler's width apart

and so while I wrap your golden gift  
slip the fiver into the till  
as you puncture a Coke

I concoct my line of choice  
something about fish  
or how I'll batter your wife

*Sleep/Reece A.J. Chambers*

new coat

soul free

till your rise

from white sleep

invent veins of runes

frozen breath parcels

garden enamel

your morning photo flash

leaf plink and dribble

window peck shiver

squeak and drool

off from your rooftop

there in the heart

of your hand

my noiseless bleed

goodbye

*Fair/Reece A.J. Chambers*

Old school, gymnasium, Christmas fair, Thursday night.  
Hoops at either end. Tables. People. A woman carries a baby,  
could be the PE teacher's. A Ugandan flag. Jars of dark purple  
jam next to jars of chutney, perhaps. The youth, us once,  
flit between here and the hall. A choir, maybe thirty strong,  
sing *Santa Baby*. Parents watch, as do we. Half a minute.

The head. Still a towering, suited figure. Handshakes all round.  
What are we doing now? Voices like knots of consonants.  
Geography man. Flecks of grey stubble. Procedure repeated.  
Finger pointed. Scrabble for a surname. Exclamation.  
Years rattling back to the front. He remembers, as do we.  
Head of sixth seven years ago. Instant recognition. Repeat.

Half an hour. The place, no longer ours. Never was.  
Friends the same. Memories. Dust between dark and light.  
Car. Back seat. Barely two miles. Little traffic. Turn  
into street. Step out. Chill drizzles the face. Handshake  
again? Again. Time and place discussed before home.  
See you tomorrow then. Yeah. Yeah. Front door key.

*Unboundary/Ella Rennekamp*

Willed into the state of a desert  
Through absorbing piecemeal cures for uncertainty,  
Impatiently, romantically, whimsically.  
Attached to the humiliation of living as if I don't need,  
The lines blurred between barrenness and secrecy.

Greet me with a talisman or two,  
Extinguishing artifice on flammable surfaces,  
Shedding decorative safety blankets and  
Relinquishing in mammals melting.  
My stomach turns nervously at the fight of the scene.

Until erosion becomes commonplace,  
The bounds of my body  
Promise enraptured treachery.  
One day scattered dust opens its eyes  
And feels the surface beneath, fluctuating.

Faces wind and its abrasions:  
Bids it,  
Do the carving for me.  
To touch and be touched anew.

*On Worry/Ella Rennekamp*

A friend brings up a question regarding the chemical derivations of bugs no longer sticking to windshields. I visualize my dashboard and no image comes to mind of using my wipers without rain. I worry that I don't relate enough. I worry that I can't relate. When we become lucky, our minds have a way of rearranging worries into misguided imaginations. We worry about our imaginations, then. On days when I'm especially worried, I grow weary of talking about the weather and prefer to notice it. I'll reject umbrellas but I don't expect cleansing, look into the sun to remember why I can't. Savor beads of sweat and wet cloth over the perceived comfort of a fan, but move into the wind if given the chance. If the only self is all of us, if every generation rewrites itself but our stories contain the same myths, if love is attention without consumption, a surrender to the object, then the symbolism I impose has never rang true. Simone Weil says there is only a single fatality: the inability to let the light in. I am not attached to the idea that I've tried. I wonder what would be more frightening: hitting a wall and being forced to cling, or being bounced back into oblivion.

*Self-Preserving Negligence/Ella Rennekamp*

What will transform perception's destruction? Is it the practical?  
When fear meets anger  
by way of self-loathing  
and isolates itself in an armor of  
the practical.

Still, one must have an imagination to produce their own cowardice.  
Imagination  
to liken herself to a white rabbit,  
her passion a coyote, to call her fear  
The only practical.

Armor turns to manacles when confronted with her own longing,  
an innermost flood  
as primordial as fear,  
that which unmasks change's glory,  
the most promising practical.

The beginning of the drought's end, fiery waters melt the manacles,  
the hands free,  
not to grasp, but to reach,  
for exposure and eternity's indifference,  
the boundless, unexplored practical.

My actions are choices that reflect  
The "I" beneath the me that rejects.

*centipedes (no. 1)/Kristopher Biernatsky*

censored and immaculate, the dove weeps  
an ocean of liquid shadow—born in  
these fields, the circus is the insight I  
give to passerbys and invisible  
saints preaching splendor and tangible winds.  
reach, for me, for the still-beating heart of  
the sun, because it's yours, and only yours,  
because every day is our wedding day  
and every day wears your perfume and eats  
the oranges that never say goodbye.

///

the dark refuses to speak to us anymore.

*centipedes (no. 4)/Kristopher Biernatsky*

with a smile: the neighbors are all gone,  
and a fishhook has been assigned to all  
of the stars, the names, first and last, have been  
replaced with shapes and sounds; a galaxy  
under neon mind—his hair is falling  
out in the lighthouse Atlantic; a beach  
held in a single stone watches in an  
absurd wonder, counting the waves and stars,  
the desire, exhausted and tree-less,  
eyes your satellite cigarettes, unsmoked.

///

in the home of your heart, cold minerals will starve and I'll smile, watching the thing eat you alive,  
shivering from pleasure.



*centipedes (no. 5)/Kristopher Biernatsky*

a severed hand balances fate; and hell,  
itself, takes a number, having to rest;  
and awake, the sailboat will forget to  
get lost in the rain called last night, looking  
for your ghost, to remind it that the bell  
is the brick wall we broke our shoulders on,  
hours after healing, and just moments  
before or after the resurrection  
in the dark breeze of a michigan night–  
and the sirens are as they've never been.

///

my sin knows your name.

*centipedes (no. 8)/Kristopher Biernatsky*

telephone, telephone, dripping faucet  
dreams, the wreckage of innumerable  
disposable cameras, the pools of  
wet midnight, a blanket of honey white  
therapeutic scenes, basking in the nude  
moonlight. my dear perfume, are you awake?  
--we are curious and forgetful on  
our hollow-vowel isle, where the saints  
are afraid of the backyard, because the  
house it belongs to has always been there.

///

together, a sunset...confounded.

*Lines in Search of.../Michael Lee Rattigan*

a foreign welcome      a switch on language never learned  
prayer for those who sleep in strips of cloth      a sought-for question  
a tear-polished image      a picture scribbled on a fridge-door to heaven.

*Sword/Michael Lee Rattigan*

emerging from the mouth  
a figure of eight,  
suffering joy's perfect work  
to destroy the wall between.

*Nameless/Michael Lee Rattigan*

start's upward fall,  
deep-known question's triple gallop  
in loving key

sea of glass, arm-reviving  
root's possibility of blessing  
unbearably brighter than self.

*Scene/Michael Lee Rattigan*

sky-cornered blossom's comprehensive dazzle  
bridging the way to will

the base of a cross lit from behind  
wishing to be gone

golden-silver-white script's  
conquering sign.

*Descent/Michael Lee Rattigan*

As tangible embrace,  
childhood-ripening lights  
prove greater than all others.

Of personal concern,  
nothing to hide between  
the flower and the eye.

Issuing a certain sound  
on heaven-willing earth,  
gives and receives before asking.

Youth's constant age  
bends to human assurance  
in the throes of cold heat.

To seek what's stolen  
only speaks of kindling  
to every breath's dependence.

Milk of affirmation  
close to hand, overleaps  
all that intervenes.

Not daring to forget,  
the last beginning draws  
no further off than a straw.

Soon-discovered, the thought  
carries of one more  
radiant song.

Between here and there,  
the miracle of just enough  
reaches from almost nothing.

*Boundaries (to Jean Baudrillard)/ Rus Khomutoff*

Hyena season genesis grasp secret psalm  
in search of duende..  
this eventuality's carnival row exit in memory  
reclaiming time with unexpected grace notes  
vagabond of the margins, mantic flame  
burning up the green guardian  
assignments crestfallen  
between music and silence  
pledge of presence afterfall  
operative x knocking on the sky-  
vacillations of xerox and infinity,  
images in vogue  
amber soul sieve of moments preserved  
cascades of desire and nostalgia  
forming an umbrella of infallible truth  
new rules incubating in the absolute room  
in order to break free of the shadows  
the rupture of word and thing



*Radia/Rus Khomutoff*

My heart is elsewhere camouflaged by the  
poetic phantom power  
church of clarity eminence front  
cardinal lamentation dwell  
melancholy body sacrilege  
tattoo highway insomnia punk equinox  
superhorse transfiguration tesseract  
deacon anarchy untitled child  
and the night ocean I neglected to mention

99 infinite pliable soul  
tomorrowland love juice needle eye compulsion  
evergreen simmer miracle moon zero escape  
not my circus not my clowns  
pardon want motion aero dialogue  
encore of the redolent drop  
warning mash interzone margin  
the book of days  
autumn thorn halo acid  
phantasm espresso glance  
invisible empire hypnotic satellite  
jungle crusade holy land prayer  
naked galaxy gala walkthrough  
There is a diamond part of us that is trying to emerge  
paradox kink wild and wonderful  
let it be civil wanderlust rampage  
sentiment hollow love  
renaissance extract delta  
this portent stone of cosmic comedy  
the other apocrypha  
alongside the need to explain  
porcelain corridors of the body poetik  
the beautiful unspoken

*Anthem of the Heart (dedicated to D. Harlan Wilson)/Rus Khomutoff*

Exorcise the neoslave mediatrix of dead time  
church of clarity cold breath  
explicit audience zero  
pyramidhood ensnared by this plenum space  
paragon cause of essential neosacrifice  
the paradox to be discerned is the poison of course  
sincere wine deathtainment  
the intrinsic dire mad glory dopamine agonist demolition hex  
initiation in the aeon of the child  
cutting mouth domino wanderlust indigence  
a universe cast from the shrapnel haunts of facts  
the heart and soul of an impasse

*Untitled, with roommates/R. Keith*

Day 1:

The building manager showed me the apartment. The ad said it was fully furnished. The living room had a couch and a love seat, tv, the kitchen was fully equipped. The bathroom even had toilet paper. There was a storage closet I didn't bother looking in. The bedroom had a queen size bed. Everything looked just fine. And for three-fifty a month, this was kind of a steal really. Even if it was a little out of the way from downtown. I don't mind taking public transportation. After the building manager showed me the place he asked me So, what do you think? I said that I was interested and I can give a deposit anytime. He said to me Well there's one little catch, there's no deposit just don't put any holes in the wall or whatever. But well, I'm going to Bermuda for a few months to visit my mother so I need three months rent, after that it's just month to month. I scratched my head a bit. And realized I probably couldn't do any better than this place but a thousand bucks was all I had til next payday. The building manager said That's fine, just gimme fifty when I get back, no biggie. So I gave him cash and he gave me the keys for the apartment and the front door and I guess he took a place to Bermuda.

Day 2:

I packed up all the stuff at my old place and hauled my suitcase on the bus to my new apartment. This is gonna be awesome, I finally found a place of my own that I can afford. I'm totally broke until I get paid in a week and a half. But I dunno maybe I can ask for an advance at work. I dunno if they do that. I'll just explain my situation. This is gonna be fine. It'll all work out.

Day 3:

The smoke alarm is going off and there's a smell of bacon burning. I get out of bed and in the kitchen there's a young girl in my kitchen. She sees me, turns to burner off and runs in to the storage closet. What the fuck? I twist the doorknob on the closet door and it's locked. Why would a closet need a lock? I bang on the door and say that I'll call the cops and bang some more. I didn't even notice if this place had a phone or not. the door opens and a man in his boxers says Fuck's yr problem? I'm taken a back. really flabbergasted. I ask what they're doing here. We live here, idiot. And the door slams in my face. I had to book it to work and spent all day in my cubicle thinking what the fuck, the building manager never mentioned anyone else living there and took off Bermuda for three months with all the money I had.

Day 4:

It's really still day three because I haven't really slept yet. All night the man in the storage closet and the young girl sat in the living room with the volume on the tv up loud. I went out to the living room and tried to ask them to turn it down and the man just made a shooing motion with his hands. I couldn't concentrate at work and asked if I could leave early. I rode the bus all around the city thinking about how screwed I am. \$350 for a furnished one bedroom apartment. Yeah, that did sound too good to be true. I paid rent for three months and can't get out of it because the building manager disappeared to Bermuda.

Day 5:

I got some sleep. Didn't see the man in his boxers or the young girl in the apartment. I got curious and knocked on the storage room door. If they answered I was planning to say something like I think we got off on the wrong foot and introduce myself and whatever. But no answer. I tried the doorknob and the door opened. Inside was a small bedroom with a mattress on the floor and clothes in milk crates, shopping bags full of garbage and used Kleenex. I shut the door and left for work. Work was the same old, same old. I asked the boss for an advance, explained to him all the things that happened. Behind his desk he chuckled and he wrote me a cheque for \$200. Well, now I can buy some food. I took the bus to the supermarket and stocked up and came back to the apartment. When I got back the apartment door was wide open and I could hear a bunch of little kids zipping around the living room. The man in his boxers was in the kitchen as I was putting my food in the fridge. One of the kids grabbed my box of Lucky Charms out of the grocery bag and opened it up. I yelled Hey what the fuck and the man in his boxers said He's just a kid, fuck's your problem? The kid threw handfuls of cereal and marshmallows all over the living room carpet. I asked the man in his boxers if these were his kids while thinking to myself "please for fuck's sake say no!" He said No, they're my nephews and nieces. I went to my room and there was some woman laying fully clothed in my bed. I came back out into the living room and all I could say is Uhhh, what in the fuck... and the man in his boxers said What? That's these kid's mom. Fuck's your problem? I asked what she's doing in my bed and the man in his boxers said She needs a place to sleep, idiot. I pointed to the couch and the man in his boxers said She's pregnant, idiot and her kids and gonna sleep on the couch and love seat. I can't have guests in my own home?! Fuck's your problem?

Day 6:

The pregnant woman snored and tossed and turn all night and I barely got any sleep. normally I'd be glad to have a woman in my bed but under these circumstances... I felt like shit all day at work. After work I rode on the bus until it was out of service and walked the rest of the way home to listen to my new bed buddy snore all night.

Day 7:

It's Saturday so I don't have to go to work today. In the kitchen the man in his boxers, still the same boxers as the first day I saw him, is helping himself to the bread and peanut butter that I had bought, making sandwiches for all the little brats that sleep on the couch. I figure it's no use making a fuss about them eating the food I got with an advance from work. I ask the man in his boxers if he knew any way to get a hold of the building manager. No, why? Gotta problem? I just went and put on my jacket and rode the bus pretty much all day trying to think of what to do about my situation. On the bus a man sat beside me. He had a cigarette behind his ear. I asked if I could bum one off him and he said it was his last one. I got off when I saw a convenience store and went in and asked for a pack of cigarettes. The woman at the counter asked what kind, and I asked for whatever was cheapest. I walked a few blocks until I came to a restaurant and went inside and ordered Curried Penne Pasta and got a glass of lemonade. I put the pack of cigarettes on the table and ate the curried pasta. The server came up to my table and asked if I needed anything else. I asked to see the dessert menu and for another lemonade and told them I was going out for a smoke. I just didn't bother going back inside.

Day 8:

I never thought that I would have to be in the position where I would have to dine and dash. Fucking fuck. If I buy food then the creatures at the apartment are just going to eat it. I have a few more days until I get paid, then I guess I should just pay to eat out. It'll give me something to do, an excuse to be out of the apartment with the brats screaming and running around and their pregnant mother sleeping all day in my bed and the man in boxers saying Fuck's yr problem to anything I say. I figure I can Dine & Dash for a while until I get paid.

Day 9:

I get home from spending another boring day at work and doing another Dine & Dash at a restaurant on the other side of the city then riding around on the bus again. The woman in my bed is sitting upright, this is the first time I've seen her when she wasn't sleeping. There's a huge wet stain on my bed and she's holding some prune the size of a football wrapped in my bath towel. She shit out her kid in my bed. The first thing she said to me was You have any money? I said No of course and she started freaking out that her baby needed formula. I said to her Don't your boobs make that stuff naturally? And behind me I hear the man in his boxers say All her kids are lactose intolerant, fuck's yr problem? Just cough up some dough for formula so her baby can eat.

Day 10:

After a bunch of arguing that I didn't have any cash to buy any formula I had a nap on the floor of my bedroom. I wasn't going to sleep in a puddle of broken water and afterbirth, sandwiching a football sized prune with the sister of my roommate which I didn't even know I had until after my building manager bounced to Bermuda. My back hurt all day at work no matter how I sat. I looked in the mirror in the washroom at work. The black stuff under my eyes was so thick I looked like a football player. Another dine & Dash. This time I had a T-Bone steak. This trick has worked great so far. But the cigarettes are starting to smell stale. I saw the guy on the bus with the smoke behind his ear from before. He asked to bum a smoke of me. I told him that I don't smoke. But he said he remembered me asking him for one some days ago. I told him he was mistaking me for someone else.

Day 11:

I woke up on the floor to the football sized prune crying. I looked at the alarm, it was 5am. I looked at the pack of stale cigarettes and thought fuck it and went to the kitchen lit a cigarette on the burner on the stove. I had a few drags and looked at the little shits all curled up on the couch and love seat sleeping. The smoke alarm went off and everyone in the apartment woke up. The kids started running around yelling Fire fire, I'm on fire. The door to the room where the young girl and the man in his boxers slept flung open and the man in his boxer, still the same ones, grabbed the cigarette out of my mouth and yelled Can't smoke in here, fucking kids and a baby around, fuck's yr problem? He grabbed the pack of cigarettes off the counter where I had placed them and crushed them up in his hand and the young girl came out of the room and waved a dirty t-shirt under the smoke alarm until it stopped making noise. I went and got dressed for work and left.

Day 12:

As I woke up on the floor of my room, with the football sized prune and their mother snoring away in my bed I got dressed for work and the man in his boxers comes into my room, flinging the door open. No knocking first, just barged in. He says to me You know what the fuck this is? And our hands exchange this little bug. I say Yeah, it's silverfish, they eat paper and clothes. He says Huh, it crawled out of my foreskin this morning. I went to the bathroom to scrub my hands and of course there isn't any soap. In the kitchen I lifted up a bottle of dishsoap and it was empty. I rubbed my hands on a piece of steel wool and rinsed them with sink water as hot as I could stand and dried my hands on a kitchen towel that was probably dirtier than my hands were in the first place and skipped out the door for work. Usually, home is where I like to unwind from a day of work. Now my job is where I get away from the beasts I share an apartment with.

Day 13:

Again the man in his boxers barges into my room which was taken over by his sister and the little prune she shit out in my bed. The door hits my feet and I lay on the floor. He says Watch it, dude. And he drags this large Rubbermaid container that makes a swishy sound into my bedroom. I ask what the hell he's doing. I making my own wine. I ask why he has to do that in my room and he says No space in my room and I don't want the kids getting in to it. I'm expecting to hear "Fuck's yr problem" but he just turned around and slammed the door behind him. So the little prune woke up and started crying, then its mother looked at me and put her finger up to her mouth and went sssshhhhhhhhh!!! Before giving me a dirty look. I got up to escape to work where it's boring as shit staring at a screen all day in a cubicle, but at least it's quiet.

Day 14:

My bedroom is now full of fruit flies. I didn't get any sleep last night because they kept on buzzing around and crawling on my face. The woman who took over my bed asked me in the middle of the night Do you have another blanket? I said No and she asked if I can go buy another one. I reminded her that it was 2 o'clock in the morning and shutting the window might help both the temperature and the insect population and she says My baby needs fresh air. Then she lit up a cigarette and I watched her put it on the side of the mattress.

Day 15:

Today is payday, I get direct deposit. Straight to my account. I don't have to take any paycheque to a bank and stand in line waiting for a teller. And I get off at 6pm and by then the banks are closed anyway. So if I had a paycheque and took it back to the apartment the circus freaks that share...well, I would exactly say "share" the apartment...uh, they'd know I had money and they'd figure out some way to get it off me. I stopped at the drug store and bought some earplugs and sleeping pills. When I got back to the apartment no one was there. The kids that run around the living room all day were gone. The door of the room where the young girl and the man in his boxers sleep was wide open, no one was in there. My room, including my bed was vacant. I wonder how long this will last? I drug the Rubbermaid full of bum-wine out to the kitchen and opened my bedroom window as much as I could to air out the smell and maybe get rid of whatever fruit flies were hanging around. Ripped off the afterbirth stained bed sheets and flipped over the mattress. I'll wash the sheets later. I shut the door to my bedroom and pushed the dresser in front of it. Set my alarm and dry swallowed

four sleeping pills. I just slept in my clothes. If I wake up because of the cold air I can just shut the window.

Day 16:

When I woke up, one of the kids that buzzes around the living room screaming was curled up next to me in my bed. They had ripped down the curtain and wrapped themselves in it but the window was still wide open like I had left it. The dresser that I had pushed in front of the door was lying face down on the floor and the door was open. I glanced over at my alarm and it was one in the afternoon. I had missed going to work. I think I said For fuck's sake! And the kid wrapped in the curtain asked why I was being so loud. I asked him if the alarm went off and he said yes. So I asked why he didn't wake me up, or try to tell me, anything. He said I wanted to sleep more. I got out of bed and looked around the apartment. Everyone else was still gone. So I went and asked the boy in my bed how he got in to the apartment. He said he hadn't left since he got there. I said that I didn't see anyone here when I got home last night. And he said he heard me come in, he was having a bath. I asked if he knew where all his family went and why he didn't go with them. I saw him shrug his shoulders. Do you know when they're coming back? and he shrugged his shoulders again. I didn't have time for shit. In the bathroom I washed my face and noticed the bathtub was full of grey water and a turd was floating around. I booked it to work and explained that I had a small emergency to take care off and that I'll stay late tonight to play catch up on everything. The boss replied telling me that there was some kerfuffle with payroll and that it should be fixed sometime next week. So yesterday I didn't actually get paid.

Day 17:

I worked until 10pm last night. I had a nap on the couch in the staff room until the night cleaner turned on the lights and started yelling at me. I got up and left and sat at my cubicle until I heard the night cleaner's vacuum coming my way. So I went to the reception area and flipped through magazines. Modern Bride. Suburban Mom. Today's Parent. Vacationer Monthly. Mostly I looked at the photos, I was too tired to actually read anything. I heard some footsteps so I scampered over to the washroom and hid in one of the stalls. Sitting on the toilet tank with my feet on the seat. When I figured the coast was clear I went back to the staff room and slept on the couch until someone came in in the morning and the noise woke me up so I just went to my cubicle and started the work day. When I got back to the apartment the kid was sitting on the couch still wrapped up in my bedroom curtain. We had a conversation, it went something like this: I'm hungry / Did your family say where they were going? / No. I'm hungry. / Did they say when they'll be back? / No. / uh...why didn't you go with them? / I was having a bath I told you. / ...so...where do you live? / I live in a blue house. / uh, yeah, great but I mean, do you live in this city or another town? / yeah. / what yeah? Where do you live, in a different town? / yeah. / well, what's it called? / Gerville. I'm hungry. / ok, uh...where's Gareville? / I don't know. / How did you get here? / with my mom, I'm only 7 I can't drive. / so you came in a car then? / no. / how'd you get here then? / with my mom I told you! I'm hungry! / did your mom drive a car here / no, she don't got a car. / did you take a bus or fly here / I can't fly, you're kinda stupid, do I look like a bird to you? ... In the fridge I found some bread and ripped off the bits that had turned grey and green and wrapped a hotdog inside and gave it to the kid and told him to sleep on the couch instead of my bed tonight. When I went to my room I saw a huge piss stain on my mattress. I went back and told the kid he can sleep in the bed, just when I



alarm goes off, make sure I am awake before you shut it off. I flipped over the couch cushions just in case and slept on the couch in the living room.

Day 18:

I wake up and look at my alarm flashing 12:00. That little shit must have unplugged it when it went off. My face is covered in fruit flies. I had enough. I went to the kitchen and lifted up the Rubbermaid full of bum-wine and went to go dump it down the kitchen sink and my hand slipped and a bunch of the stuff splattered all over my pants. I didn't have any other clean pants and I don't know what time it actually was but I knew I was already late for work. I'll make something up to tell my boss. I'll buy some new pants on my lunch break or something. I got to work and went to my cubicle. The boss was sitting in my chair with his coffee cup in his hand. He was about to say something but I saw him, the look on his face. He smelt the air. He got a whiff of the booze that spilled all over my pants. He said, It's better if we have a chat in my office. In his office he mentioned how I was late, really late two days this week and my performance hasn't been up to par for a while now and today I come in wearing wet pants and smelling of booze. He handed me a pamphlet that had bottles on it and a couple that looked like they were yelling at each other and told me Why don't you take the rest of the day off and look into getting some help, alright?

Day 19:

I barely slept but I got up when my alarm went off. I set it for two hours earlier than I usually need to wake up. I went down to the manager's apartment. I thought maybe he was married, and only he went to Bermuda by himself. I banged on the door but there was no answer. I figured I'll try again after work. As I was leaving the building I went around and peered in the windows of the manager's apartment. Everything looked normal. I'm not sure what I was really looking for. I got on the bus to work. That kid knows how to open the fridge door when he gets hungry. On the bus there were a bunch of Boy Scouts. I said to the Scout Master How do I get uh...a kid involved in Scouts? He told me every Friday there's a meeting at the gym in Rec Centre, bring him on by and we'll get him signed up.

Day 20:

When I woke up that kid was sitting on the floor staring at me sleeping. Who knows how long he was doing that for. I asked him So what's your name anyway? He answered with Why you wanna know? I said Yeah, I really don't care but I'll just tell the Scout Master your name is Philbert. You're probably hungry so let's go get something to eat. We got to the bus and I said to Philbert that if anyone asks tell them you are 5 years old. Because children 5 and under ride for free. We got on the bus and the driver said Hold it now, how old are you? and Philbert said I'm 7 but today I'm 5. And the driver gave me the look. I told him I was out of coins for Philbert's fare. The driver said Ok, just today but don't try to lie to me next time. We got to the Rec Centre and went to the front desk and I asked Where do we sign up for Scouts? The lady at the desk said Scouts doesn't start until 5:30 pm tonight and it's for kids as young as 11. I looked at the clock on the wall and it was just after 8am. I asked her What's happening soon, today I mean? And she looked at Philbert and asked how old he was and the little shit said he was 5 years old today. The lady at the desk said WOW, happy Birthday Sweetheart! What are you and your dad gonna... And I interrupted her So uh yeah, any program he can start today? That's great, yeah. She told me Swimming lesson for toddlers start in 45 minutes. I

said Super, can he rent or buy a swim suit here and she told me yes. I asked how much it was and she said You know what hun, since today is your birthday it's on me ok? Just come sign up in 45 minutes and we'll take care of you. I told the lady at the desk You, you are an angel. And I walked over to the vending machine and got a bag on corn chips. Philbert came running over when he saw I had food and I told him You can't eat before you swim, just go thank the lady at the desk and I'll pick you back up when the swimming lessons are over. I booked it to work and felt totally fucking relieved. I was rid of that little leech and cross my fingers his family isn't coming back.

Day 21:

Last night I slept in the hallway of my apartment building because after work I came home and the key broke off inside the lock. I banged on the manager's door again and no answer. I banged on the door next to the manager's and the older lady who answered had trouble hearing me and I had to shout asking if she knew how to get a hold of the manager or anyone else and the person across the hall came out with a hammer in his hand and said Keep it down or I'll put you down. So I just slept in the hallway outside of my apartment. I went to work and got there on time. My boss gave me a nod when he saw me come in. After work I went to the door of the man who told me to keep it down and when he opened the door I said Hey, my apologies about the noise last night, could I borrow your hammer, sir? I tried to pry the door of my apartment with the claw of the hammer. Some people down the hall watched me getting frustrated and pounding the door knob with the hammer. Finally the door knobs on both sides of the door fell off and I used the claw to move back the lock and open the door. I didn't care if I couldn't lock the door again. What is anyone gonna steal, my piss and afterbirth stained mattress? And I don't care about whatever trash the young girl and the man in his boxers might have. I was rid of Philbert and finally had the apartment to myself. It was the weekend so I didn't need to set an alarm and no one was here to unplug it when it went off. I rinsed out the least dirtiest glass I could find in the kitchen and washed down a bunch of sleeping pills and got all horizontal on the couch.

Day 22:

What am I going in a jail cell? There's a few other men in the room. The one beside me says You got any matches? Styrofoam containers are pushed through a slot in the door. They all have the same scrambled eggs and white toast with a package of butter and plastic fork and knife. I look around the cell and notice all the graffiti scratched in the walls. Mostly drawings of dicks. So and so sucks cock. So and so is a rat bitch. Call this number for a gummer. The person on the other side of the door asks for the Styrofoam containers back. All of us push them back through the slot and the slot opens up again and a voice says One is missing a knife you need to give it back where is it? And the man beside me asks if I have any matches again. The slot closes. The cell door opens and a police officer says Give it up or will strip search all of you. No one moves or says anything. Two more police officers come in and they tell us to take off our clothes. I start with my socks, as slow as I can. The man beside me gets hauled away when the plastic knife is found in the elastic band of his underwear. They didn't even let him put his pants back on. I folded my socks and set them beside me as I closed my eyes. I don't know how much time passed, but I got up and went to use the toilet. The man walked right up beside me while I was in midstream and said You got any matches? I said No and zipped up. He looked at me weird when I washed my hands the sink that was attached to the metal toilet. I couldn't tell what time it was. Or what day it was. The light in the cell was always

kept on. When I went back to where I had been lying down my socks weren't there. I don't care to make a fuss and see another strip search. I lay back down and shut my eyes.

Day 23 & 24 (& maybe 25 too, I'm not sure) :

Every time I opened my eyes I was asked if I had any matches. When I couldn't sleep I tried to figure out which dick drawing on the cell wall was the best. After a while a different police officer opened the cell door and came in and called my name. I sprang up and followed them into some office. They explained to me that someone from the apartment called the cops and I was too loopy on drugs to comprehend anything. I told the officer that I just took some sleeping pills. They said Oh yeah, we found the bottle on you what else did you take? I said Nothing else, but if you thought so why didn't you take me to a hospital? He didn't answer my question but asked one of his own Did you take anything from the apartment you broke into, do you remember breaking in there? I told the officer that I lived there and I had broken the key in the lock, and borrowed the hammer to get into the place where I live. He said The neighbours say that a family lives there, we didn't find any family and we tried to contact the building manager.... I told him The manager is in Bermuda and I moved in less than a month ago. He looked at me and said, well you can collect all your stuff at the front, we can only hold you for 72 hours so you're free to go. I asked Why didn't I get a phone call? And he said You must watch a lot of movies, you're free to go. I went to work. Some poindexter I'd never seen before was sitting at my cubicle. The boss was walking by and stopped and stared at me. I didn't need anyone to tell me that I don't have a job there anymore. I just left. At the apartment the door had a new door knob. I knocked on the door and the young girl opened it. The chain was still on. She saw me, closed the door, unhooked the chain and opened it again. I said Uh, did uh you change the lock? She took a key off the table and handed it to me and went inside her room and shut the door.

Day 26 I think :

Since my bed was soaked in body fluids I spent most of the time on the couch watching tv until I fell asleep. I parked myself there for four, maybe five days. I ordered pizza twice and it sat on the coffee table in front of me as I made a nest in the couch. The girl would come and go from her bedroom. Never said a word to me. One night she came into the apartment with the man I borrowed the hammer from and the two of them went into her room. I turned the volume up loud to drown out their sex noises. When I got sick of all this I decided to go out and wander around the city. I checked my bank balance, I finally got paid. Buying food was a dumb idea. The young girl and whoever shows up to the apartment next will just help themselves and inhale it all. I went back to the apartment and grabbed my backpack and went to the food bank instead. Fuck buying food so other dickheads can devour it. When I got back to the apartment with a backpack full of canned food the young girl and the man I borrowed the hammer from were planted on the couch. He asked me if I was done with his hammer. I went and got it from my room and set it on the kitchen counter and hung out in my room. I opened up the window because the mattress still reeked of piss. The Food Bank gave me a few packs of gum along with cans of soup and ravioli. Staring out the window, I chewed spearmint and the sex noises started up again in the living room. I snuck out of my room and to the bathroom. Shutting my eyes as I passed the living room. I sat on the toilet and spit my gum between my legs into the bowl. And I could still hear them in the living room. I flushed and turned the tap on the shower and took off my clothes and jumped in. I washed myself with

whatever girly soap the young girl had in the shower. I noticed that I had gum in my public hair. I tired pulling it out but the hot water from the shower had melted it. I found a box cutter in the medicine cabinet and started sawing off my pubes that had gum stuck to them. The bathroom door flung open and there's the man I borrowed the hammer from with a stretched out condom in his hand looking at me with a box cutter at my genitals. Both of us naked. He tossed the condom in the toilet and said Flush that for me would ya? And left the bathroom door open when he left.

I don't care what day is it :

Last night I slept on the floor of my bedroom like I did before. The young girl and the man I borrowed the hammer from were on the couch all night. They'd watch tv in between sessions of sex noises. All night I was cold with the window open to try to air out the rank mattress. I woke up to sex noises and just got up and left the apartment. I think I still have gum in my public hair. I walked all over the city until my feet were sore. In the middle of an overpass, I stopped and just watched all the cars passing under the the overpass. I don't know how long I was standing there for. From behind me I heard car tires screech and someone yell Hey, buddy! It's ok! Let's just talk. You don't need to do this. Come on! It took me a few seconds to realize what the shit he was yelling about. Jumping off an overpass was the furthest thing from my mind, what the fuck. He got out of his car walked up a bit closer and the lights on his car blinked. A couple other cars had stopped. He stuck out his hand and said his name was Cody and his handshake turned in to a hug and I was totally confused. And there was clapping and cheering from the cars that had parked to watch. We drove around in his car and he went on and on like Whatever you're going though, I been there. I know. It gets better. You're loved and all kinds of shit. I just kept quiet and gazed out the windshield. He said I could sleep at his place tonight which sounded better than the alternative.

Whatever day it is :

I woke up in the spare room of Cody's house. In his kitchen there were boxes of cereal and half a pot of coffee left. A note on the table Help yourself to anything in the fridge and stay as long as you need to. Under the note was a house key. I drank coffee and channel surfed on his tv. On the news I saw the young girl being put in the back of a police car and on the screen Two men murdered in love triangle. Pictures of two men, the one I borrowed the hammer from, his throat cut with a box cutter. The second picture was the man in his boxers. This was the first time I'd seen him with more than boxers on. The tv screen said he was bludgeoned with a hammer. I thought that staying here at Cody's was a good idea for awhile.

Well gee whiz, I work in a grocery store and you know, one day a shipment came for the meat department. The salmon came in a Styrofoam box filled with dry ice. And jeepers, I thought it'd be funny to put a handful of dry ice in the toilet. So, by golly I took a handful of the stuff and went downstairs to the staff bathroom and dumped it in the toilet bowl and shut the door when I left. But wouldn't you know it, Billy-Joe from produce was next to use the little boys room and when he opened the door all he saw was a room full of white smoke from the dry ice being in the toilet. Billy-Joe had a conniption fit and grabbed the fire extinguisher and pulled the fire alarm gosh darn it. He sprayed the fire extinguisher all over the place thinking the dry ice smoke was the bathroom on fire. Everyone in the whole gosh darn grocery store was evacuated, won't you believe it. All the workers in every department, the managers, the shoppers, they all met outside in the parking lot. The manager of the grocery store did a headcount of all the staff to see if anyone was missing, but all of us were there. Then the manager of the grocery store said to everyone Let's go to the movie theatre, it's on me! And holy guacamole, all of us went to the theatre where JAWS had been on the screen for ten minutes already, but everyone from the grocery store packed the theatre. Some people had to sit on laps as they watched JAWS in the theatre. I decided that gee willickers, I didn't really want to watch the movie and I knew there wasn't really a fire anyway so I went back to the grocery store through the delivery area and went and made sure the front doors were all shut and locked up tight. I went to the frozen section and got myself a pint of mint chocolate chip ice cream. I didn't feel like going over to the deli to grab a plastic spoon so I started eating the gosh darn stuff with my hands as I went up to the manager's office. I sat in the manager's office chair and put my feet up on his desk as I ate mint chocolate chip with my hands. Green little blobs melting all over his paperwork that was piled on his desk. The chair smelled like farts. Then I saw the monitor that was recording every part of the grocery store. I pushed STOP on the VCR and then EJECT and stuck that tape halfway in my pants since it was too large to fit in my pocket. The side of the plastic cassette was digging into my ribs. The manager left his name tag on his desk and I pinned it to my polo shirt. Doug McDonald Store Manager. I sat in that smelly chair and spun around filling my mouth with mint chocolate chip until I heard some glass breaking. On the monitor some firemen were breaking through the front door. A few came into the grocery store and they split up. I watched on the monitor as one of them went to the deli, another to produce, and another came up the stairs to where I was. He banged on the office door and just let himself in. Hey, sir, you ok?! I told him Yes, dang nappit you gave me a start you know. And he asked where the fire was and I said Fire, what fire? What's on fire?! And he said We got a call about an alarm going off. I told him Must be a false alarm. Do you see smoke, do you see anything on fire? We're closed today for inventory, I been alone here all day. And he said Ugh...alright then. My crew and I will have a look around just to be safe. And he went off to look for the fire that didn't exist. I thought "just to be safe" and it was then that I noticed the safe under the manager's desk was wide open. Stacks of bills, bills in envelopes. I went over to the storage room and grabbed some paper grocery bags and filled them up with all the bills. I put the pint of mint chocolate chip on top of the bills in the paper shopping bags and went out through the delivery area. Not sure if those pesky firemen were still in the store or not. I walked back to my apartment and washed the sticky ice cream off my hands and in the bathroom mirror I noticed I still had Doug's name tag on my polo shirt so I took that off and threw the gosh darn

thing in the garbage can. I was thinking of putting that in the toilet and peeing on it but the darn thing probably wouldn't flush down the toilet. That VHS tape keep chafing me and digging into my ribs. I took it out of my pants and tried to think of how to get rid of it for good. I went to my bedroom and took out the mint chocolate chip from the grocery bag. Some of it had melted all over the bills. I emptied the two grocery bags on my bed. I didn't care about my bed sheets. I can buy some new fancy ones with this money. I'm not sure how much was there. I got my laundry bag and dumped out all my dirty clothes on the floor of my bedroom. Gathered up all those darn bills and put them in the laundry bag then threw my dirty clothes back in. Put that VHS tape in the paper bag without melted ice cream in it and went back outside. It was the end of the month. People were moving in to new houses and out of their old ones. Some people that move leave stuff they don't want in the front yard. Some blocks from my house, in a yard there was a toaster oven, a super soaker and a book on astrology. I looked at the house in front. It seemed totally empty. There were no curtains on the front window. I went up and knocked loudly on the front door. If someone answered, I'm not even sure what the fudge I would even say but no one was in the house. So I grabbed the toaster oven, the super soaker and the book on astrology and went to the back yard. On the back deck there was an electrical outlet, so I plugged in the toaster oven and cranked the heat to 400F\* degrees and started the timer and shoved the paper bag with the VHS tap inside the toaster oven. I read about the Moon in Gemini as the paper bag caught on fire inside the toaster oven. Well, gee whiz. That VHS tape really stunk and black smoke started coming out of the toaster oven. I really had to take a leak. I decided to piddle inside the super soaker. I had to go so bad, I filled the darn contraption up to the rim. I put the cap back on and started reading more about Moon in Gemini. I'm not sure if I have moon in Gemini or not, I just had nothing to do while the VHS tape melted and stank inside the darn toaster oven. I decided I didn't care about astrology, it was too complicated for me to understand so I chucked the dumb book in the toaster oven too and oodles of black smoke came out of that toaster oven. From behind me I heard a squeaky voice say Hey mister, what're you doing? I turned around and some neighbour kid was peering at me over the fence. I grabbed the super soaker and pumped it up and sprayed the nosy kid with it. She went off screaming and laughing around the yard then came back up to the fence again. So I sprayed her some more and she ran some more laps around the yard cackling like a gosh darn banshee. The toaster oven went DING! So I guess time was up. I unplugged the darn thing and put it under the deck and the little neighbour girl had a sad look on her face as I was leaving. So I sprayed her one more time and she flailed again around the yard and I tossed the super soaker over to her side of the fence as she ran around spazzing out. I passed by the grocery store on my way home and the front door was covered in plywood from when the firemen bashed the heck out of it to get inside. Well, back at my apartment I drank four big glasses of Crystal Light and watched Wheel of Fortune. After that I had to whiz so bad. I took out Doug McDonald's name tag out of the bathroom garbage and held it in front of me as I whizzed all over it. I put the name tag on the toilet tank, and then again on the commercial break I had another pee on the name tag. When I went to bed at nine o'clock I thought I should keep my gosh darn job, then it wouldn't look suspicious. If a bunch of money was missing and I wasn't at work the first person they would think of would be yours truly, dag nappit. Well holy Toledo, at work in the meat department the next day manager Doug McDonald, sans nametag comes up to me and asks why he didn't see me at the movies yesterday. I told him that I didn't like scary movies and he just gave one of those laughs that are like fake laughs and told me everyone went to his house after and they had a barbecue and everyone drank punch in the outdoor

pool in his yard. Billy-Joe came up and said Yep, I swam in my underwear. I didn't know what to say. I just went back to work, making sausages and wrapping up turkey breasts for any customers that came. Wouldn't you know it, a week and a half went by. Just kind of flew on by you know. The glass in the front door of the grocery store had been replaced, no one ever mentioned the fire alarm and I nearly forgot about the mint chocolate chip sitting in my freezer. Billy-Joe became an assistant manager of the darn store. Oh boy did that ruffle my feathers, I tell you. On my day off I went to the laundromat and dropped off my bag of dirty clothes then just went back home and watched Wheel of Fortune. When I saw that wheel spinning round and round, with all those vibrant coloured dollar signs on it, it clicked in my head that I had forgotten I had all those darn bills in my laundry bag. Golly gee whiz did I ever run back to the laundromat! At the counter the lady that always does my laundry handed me back my laundry bag. I dumped out all the clean clothes on the counter and the lady had a hissy fit, yelling at me What are you doing?!?! I asked her Did you happen to forget to put something back in my bag?? And of course she said all my clothes should be there. So I asked her Did you find anything...out of place in my laundry when you washed it? She said No sir, what's the problem?! I gathered up my clothes and dropped them back on my bed at my apartment. I sat on my darn couch eating the rest of the mint chocolate chip ice cream and channel surfing because I was sick of watching people on Wheel of Fortune winning money. I went to bed at nine o'clock like always even though I had the next day off.

*the grating of the shrew/R. Keith*

he remembered something from his creative writing class in order to be a good writer  
you must consume the greats he seasoned cervantes with garlic and cumin let it to  
marinate in the fridge all day when he got home from work he roasted cervantes in the oven  
225F\* for two hours then next morning for breakfast was dickens in the toaster with  
peanut butter (he was out of jam) he took a tupperware full of leftover cervantes to work  
he did some overtime hours and came home late didn't feel much like cooking off the  
shelf he grabbed a handful of small press poets and chucked them in the microwave 90secs  
each side usually he pressed the 1,3 & 0 buttons he chowed down on the small  
press poets and looked at what was still on the shelf hemmingway dostoevsky orwell  
kafka he was thinking to make a beat generation casserole he could live  
off of that the rest of the week thinking how long is it gonna take for all this to kick in and  
he can start writing consume the greats that's what he learned in creative writing class  
he took the class over three years ago and didn't even try to write anything afterwards  
he kept in touch with a few other students one became a baker and moved to  
another city another went into journalism because they thought they can make money off  
of it he saw some of their pieces in a couple magazines and a newspaper that's handed out  
for free he found the writing pretty fluffy he thought that maybe he should take a  
different writing class really apply himself this time kissing the instructor's ass  
might get him somewhere maybe but still you have to consume the greats the  
brontë sisters country fried hermann hesse ratatouille he had only a third of  
shakespeare's work they were all from a used book store he bought them four years ago to try  
to impress some girl at work he thumbed through half of othello now it feels  
strange to look at shakespeare the girl from work had an affair with the boss the janitor had caught  
them in the closet fooling around people at work whispered all about it really juicy  
gossip a few days later she was carrying a box down the hallway and was trying to hold back tears  
that was the last he saw of her the boss is still married with four children  
she could have been his muse then he wouldn't have this writer's block problem  
she could have encouraged him to create there could have been sestinas composed all  
about her ghazals and free verse poems sonnets are kinda played out haiku  
no haiku are too cheesy speaking of cheese he got out the grater from the kitchen  
drawer and taming of the shrew off the bookshelf shredding waiting for any idea to  
pop in his imagination the only thing that came to mind was to leave a bit of the kafka on  
his plate since franz never finished what he did either



*Only Through Suspension/Nicole Melchionda*

We couldn't crack the lightbulbs from your spine  
so you burned through fragmented silences.  
Is it in our nature to be un-nurtured  
or did my saliva only homogenize your sadness?  
When we were younger we used to lay  
belly to belly, hoping we could squeeze our chimera into existence:  
something better or worse than our sum, I'm not sure.  
You couldn't see from beneath barbed lashes  
so you relied on the absences.  
My Tiresias, didn't you feel me coming?  
You craved every impossible version of my cell(f).  
The woman you want to subsume so desperately  
eludes you through mitosis. I rot  
and peel faster than clothing.  
You cling to every abandoned hair, my entropy, an idea,  
and your heart gorges on these metaphors.  
Maybe you could always see, but our mantles seared too permanently.  
I suspect you've loved at least a trillion idolons by now,  
but you've never held me, only fingered between the distances  
of each admiring atom in their transient summers.  
I'm glad they have known such warmth,  
but as long as I am living, my remnants will never stop reminding you  
of all the little dead girls I once was  
and you will never stop mourning.

*Fission/Nicole Melchionda*

The first day of spring, Gibbs did a headstand  
and I cried for all I'd lost through laughter.  
That moment of humanity saved and destroyed me.

The membranes of unfeeling collapse—  
my nervous chatter a rattling of cerebrum.  
Do hearts require entropy to beat?

Six years later my tongue couldn't help but prune  
when you asked what's wrong with me, and all  
I could see was Gibbs, legs solar-bound, careless.

Your affection is heard as a belly full of blades  
of grass pinwheeling through my vessels.  
An affair wet, the brain a fertile womb.

How beautiful bodies are when inverted,  
but I will never feel my gray matter plump to sanguine,  
my vertebrae one winter close to fracture.

Resentment shreds each double helix,  
but when you ask, I perform.  
Your love notes cover holes punched through walls.

*Where the Tongue Claws/Nicole Melchionda*

You didn't need flames held against skin to melt  
desperately hated lipids.  
Only once it was too late did I see your ligaments unhinge,  
your skin dangle from maxilla and flap  
around your cursing lips, your soft-boiled skull drip  
down to coccyx.  
The resulting blisters were malleable, unlike  
the shriveled scabs you held too deep inside for me to scratch.  
You constantly teased your arteries to homicide,  
to collapse the both of us.  
I never saw the blaze, never smelled the char beneath your sweater.  
Ablation can't be too painful  
when the punishment is what you prayed would cleanse you,  
but didn't:  
the body to dissolve all bodies.  
I never wanted to unearth you, simply rip  
your skeleton right out of you and shake it.  
This is all we have, and you don't want it.  
Listen to the chattering.

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*Gnawed Breath (a redaction of George Salis' "Ecdysis as Forgiveness")/Nicole Melchionda*

Her breakdown traced  
the living grave of x-rays.  
Adolescent teeth escape backward,  
divine steps toward nonsense.  
Before warmth: honor killed psychology,  
dismantle legs of dreams,  
wreath shadows polished untrustworthy.  
How inviting could pockets of fingerprints be  
if her treatment was watching reality locked in spectral fists?  
She felt a different color implanted in duplicitous lips.  
Sobered vortex, notice cracked neurons.  
She has nothing but petrified twilights.

With resolve, Evelyn was able to take control of her breathing in this trembling church, on this tempered pew. She had almost lost herself. Although, having an episode here might be mistaken for an exorcism of demonic possession, a miracle. Her near breakdown was caused in part by the sermon on hellfire, but also the Catholic priest who spoke with such cogent calm, with premeditated movements of the arms and unctuous facial expressions. Her father.

She had traced him to this small church on the outskirts of Atlanta, Georgia. All it had required was an online search of his full name. So simple, yet not, for she was moved by an unnamable compulsion coupled with the desire to disturb the living grave of her childhood memories. She wanted to know the answers as well as the questions to which they belonged, and so she had immediately driven seven hours right through, silent as she gripped the wheel and stared ahead, listening to one station as it faded in and out, ripping the air with static for three hours until it finally tuned in to another area's station....

When she arrived in her car, parking in the front lot, the church appeared ghostly with wisps of fog trailing the perimeter. As dawn arrived, the reds and oranges, the blood of the sun, washed away the haunting and made the church seem slightly nostalgic, fond even. The building was white with gray roofing, a structure from the mid-nineteenth century. Subtle snow still clung to the edges. A little shed, dark red with white trim and a black roof, like a miniature barn, was placed off to the far side of the property. The surrounding trees were bare, mere x-rays of their former selves.

Before everything had happened, Evelyn and her parents would go to church together as a family, and she was only aware of everyone's kindness and sincerity. The congregation complimented her lace dresses and pinched her pink cheeks. That was before her father began to listen intently to the sermons, and then study the Bible on his own with more and more fervor. Where once abstract truths and concepts had been far from the reach of Evelyn's adolescent arms, with age, she began to slide her fingers across their slippery surfaces, to grip them but for a few seconds, then minutes, until she was able to pull them closer to the concreteness of her innocent world. Now, she knew....

Currently, listening to the sermon, she still wasn't tired, even though she hadn't slept in days. She had watched the transformation of the church, and then she waited until the next day, another transformation. Come Sunday, cars had appeared in the lot as though blurring into existence. Many had been vintage trucks, some newer models, but resistance to change was evident. Comfort in the quotidian. She did not sleep during her wait. Sleep wasn't something she needed. It was for the living and breathing. She was another kind of creature. In the cold. Ever awake in a dream reality. A hole in her chest in the shape of a key's teeth. In search of something that would unlock, not her heart, but the chain around the soul, to let it escape and fly with abandon. To rid her of its burden.

She sat in the farthest pew, in the corner, watching the man who was not only her father, but had become Father to God's followers. The church, warm inside, was small enough for her presence to be noticed and acknowledged by smiles and nods and waves. They clustered in the front, but some were scattered backward at the margins. Father Peter's sanctified task was to shepherd them into one indistinguishable mass. She knew it was a matter of time before they approached her. But this worry was buried once she saw Father Peter take to the podium. His hair had whitened, shining silver when it reflected the light. His eyebrows, now unkempt, remained an antique brown. Evelyn took a perverse comfort in recognizing his features, under the aging of nearly ten years, as still elapine, conforming to her bleakest memories: the wide eyes, the forward tilt of the neck, the overbite in the lips which was a smirk and a frown at once. He wore a starched suit, different from the seven similar button-ups he used to wear interchangeably. Behind him was a crucifix-adorned altar and a shadow-streaked stained glass

window. He carried his broad body like a storm cloud. He had seemed calm in the beginning, perhaps a bit ingratiating, but the movement of his arms was the cloud reshaping itself at will. Father Peter, the divine cumulonimbus, mesmerized the congregation with his depictions of hellfire. Her presence was absorbed within the graying mass, the brewing lightning of Father Peter's sermon. At the climax of his tempest—when he elevated both arms and hollered, "Look to the glory of God! Taste him! Trust him! Be transformed by him!"—his eyes found Evelyn's.

He had looked at her and then looked away. She had seen for herself the fulgurations in his eyes, heard the echoing thunder in his voice. Her memories were confirmed. Her dark childhood remained so. But there was something else. As he stepped down, level with the people but for their bowed heads, he looked composed, human, a confident if not modest neighbor. Modest in that he was only a conduit of His power. Father Peter had started a new life. He looked so natural that she wondered how many times he had accomplished this. As if he were an expert at shedding skin and forgetting it had ever existed in the first place.

"Glad you could join us," said an elderly woman who was half-turned in the pew in front of Evelyn. She wore a light blue hat decorated with a cluster of three synthetic violets. Her arm and white-gloved hand rested on the pew's length. "Although you look a tad, how do I put this, weary?"

"I've been sort of sleepless," said Evelyn.

"Oh, dear." The woman rose with difficulty, and Evelyn thought she was leaving, but with careful steps, guided by her grip on the pew, she inched her way around, toward a space next to Evelyn.

Sitting down, Lucille cleared her throat and spoke further in a parched voice, "So, what did you think of Father's sermon? I'd wager this is your first time with us?"

"You could pick up on his energy."

"Yes, yes. The energy is His." They had yet to make eye contact. The woman kept examining her white-gloved hands, stiffly folded in her lap. "Oh, how rude of me. My name is Lucille. Lucille Morris."

"I'm, uh, Cathy," said Evelyn.

"Well, Cathy," said Lucille. "His name's Father Peter if you haven't caught on by now. He sermonizes every Sunday morning and leads a Bible study for the kids. Every sermon is so, so electrifying. Inspired, like you said. He's a modern saint, if you'll allow me."

In her current state, Evelyn appeared emotionless. She was able to conceal every cringe, contain every tear. Sometimes, a twitch would surface, a death throes of whatever emotion had attempted to release itself, but Lucille didn't notice. Her gaze was now ahead, at the altar, her face still lowered.

They continued to talk and then Father Peter, appearing behind Evelyn and Lucille, said, "I'm Father Peter, so very pleased to meet you."

His face, rested after the excitement on stage, still as altostratus, revealed no recognition of Evelyn. Only the smirk-frown he gave to every member of his flock.

"Cathy," she said.

He made no move to touch her. He stepped back. To get a better look at her or to avoid any chance of contact, Evelyn couldn't tell.

"Oh, Father. What a lovely sermon it was, as always," said Lucille.

Evelyn could now see the deep wrinkles on Lucille's face, particularly the nasolabial folds, a fleshy mask over the real, younger face. The applied blush only highlighted the severity of the trenches, and her lipstick served as an outline for these dummy-like wrinkles.

Considering how prone she was to panic attacks, Evelyn was surprised by how unmoved she was in Father Peter's unequivocal presence, but then she realized that his sermon had been the ultimate test,

a theatric aggregating much of the eschatological gloom of her childhood. As far as she could tell, she succeeded in this trial, maintaining a calm mask amid the rain of flames in her mind.

While itching his wrist, Father Peter said, “The missus and I would love to have the two of you over for lunch today, perhaps even coffee and pastries, if you’re of mind.”

He spoke differently than how she remembered.

“My,” breathed Lucille, “it would be an honor, but I must see to it that I check on my plants. Plus, caffeine is practically poison for an old woman.”

“Nonsense,” said Father Peter. “You can check on them later today. Or I can see to it myself, before lunch. Those coverings will protect them from any frostbite. All you have to do is wait out the winter. I’m sure the specimens we brought inside are more than thankful for the shelter. Plus, coffee will do you good, it’ll bring warmth from the inside out.”

Father Peter was now itching the opposite wrist and Evelyn was able to discern a strange rash, separated into peeling flakes of scutum.

“Oh, if you insist,” Lucille said. She turned toward Evelyn.

“I, uh—”

Lucille leaned forward and whispered, “Invited to his den after your first time here. It’s an honor.”

Looming, Father Peter’s smirk-frown slithered wider.

“Okay,” said Evelyn. More than ever, she was surrendering to the automation of her nervous system.

Raising his hands, Father Peter nearly shouted, “Wonderful. You’ll find my home at the end of this street. There’s a tire swing hanging from an oak in the front yard. You can’t miss it. Let’s say noon?”

A fixed smile on her face, Lucille stood with difficulty and nodded. Evelyn followed suit.

“Thank you for taking such care of the plants. These ol’ hands aren’t up to the work anymore.”

“Don’t mention it, Lucille. Your garden is an extension of you, and I must protect every living part of my flock, including all that gorgeous flora.”

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The purpose of her sudden visit, after having run away, was to somehow confirm all the memories she had had of him: how he kept her from visiting her mother in the hospital, forcing her to focus on Bible studies. “The Bible is salvation in the form of paper and ink,” he said. “There’s nothing for you there, with their cold, steel instruments, their scrubs and masks and latex gloves. Such is the world of science, where God is gladly killed every day, a system of Judases. All that waits for them is the fires of hell. I wish your mother would have heeded me....”

Evelyn had taken psychology as her major in college because she wanted to help others who were suffering from similar afflictions. Post-traumatic stress. Adrenaline. Nightmare insomnia and daymare fatigue. Flashes of the occurred and the foretold. More than that, she wanted to dismantle the power of belief and see it for what it might consist of, in all its minute and delicate parts, or its impervious structure, solid as an obelisk. Maybe the nature of belief was somewhere in between, the desert-deserted and worship-hungry legs of Ozymandias.

As though her body thought it earned rest, she slept in her vehicle for some time, with the seat fully reclined, still in the church’s parking lot, with nothing for a blanket except her clothes. And the blood in her lids became the landscape of her dreams, not much different than waking life, it seemed.

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Father Peter’s home was a two-story colonial stuck in time. During the soundless tour conducted by Father Peter’s wife, Marcy, a prim and rosy woman, Evelyn walked past theological paintings in the

halls. The taut hand of God reaching to touch the passive hand of his first son. A swooping angel disarming Abraham before he sunk a dagger into the moon-gray chest of Isaac, his child, bound and gagged by Abraham's own bearish palm—he had passed the test.

Around the corner was a prominently displayed bust of Thomas Aquinas, pupil-less and with a wreath of hair around the crown of his smooth skull. The living room crackled with a bundle of flames in the fireplace, the light of which created shadows across the vintage settees and recliners, the oaken shelves containing dusty tomes. There were silver candlesticks and gold-gilded pages of books open on tables polished to the color of wine. Up the sturdy steps, Evelyn followed Marcy, who looked surprisingly young, no more than thirty-five, and fit, from what she could gather during the moments Marcy's modest, turquoise dress pressed against her body through natural movement. Marcy's quietness seemed at first a solemn kindness, a respect for things as they were and should be, but Evelyn knew Marcy was thinking of how this guest of hers was checking off all the valuable items she could steal unnoticed. The platinum fountain pen Marcy had engraved with Father Peter's initials, any of the silver utensils she had seen earlier in the capacious kitchen, or even the gold-plated ornament at the end of the plunger's handle in the bathroom. Of course, as disheveled and untrustworthy as Evelyn appeared, she hadn't made a shopping list out of all these items. Rather, she was perversely impressed with the ostentatiousness of a home whose owner had been all about suffering and complacency. The house had an anthracite stink that she hadn't identified until now. She imagined if hypocrisy could invade the olfactory, this was how it would smell.

In a final gesture Marcy swayed a flat and ring-festooned hand toward the last room on the second floor, inviting Evelyn to peer with false interest, hands clasped behind her back, where she viewed antique bed frames, the mattresses covered in fine linen sheets and lace pillows, on separate sides of the wall, and several peculiar red bulbs, like heat lamps, directly over the farthest bed. Being a Father clearly had its advantages. However, it also came with pockets of loneliness. Evelyn could almost muster pity for him, but she spat it out of her heart as one does the pit of a sour olive. Before she reclined her upper body to look back at Marcy, her eyes rested upon the jewelry box for a moment longer than etiquette allowed.

"Don't even think about it," said Marcy. The teeth of her smile were flawless. Her hand formed into a half-fist at her side, her gypsy rings like brass knuckles.

"I'm sorry?" asked Evelyn. Although uncertain, she thought she saw pearlescent fingerprints around Marcy's forearm. Evidence that echoed her own broken childhood. That's when she realized there was probably an excess of foundation applied to Marcy's left eye. The socket looked too delicate, unlike the sparkling stones of her jewelry.

"Don't be sorry, just don't do anything. Father Peter invited you because he thinks he's Jesus. Can't you see the crown of thorns on his head? He's practically dripping with blood...."

"I didn't mean anything," said Evelyn.

The front door opened. Evelyn saw over the wood railing that it was Father Peter with Lucille following behind him.

"Cathy! I'm so glad you arrived," called Father Peter from the first floor. "I apologize for my brief absence. I was walking Lucille, you see. One has gentlemanly duties."

"Hello, Cathy," squawked Lucille. "I'm delighted you'll be joining us."

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For a time, she simply sat at the table, which was plated with green beans, corn on the cob, mashed potatoes, and fried chicken, all steaming, each a foreign organ with the ability to exhale, and near Peter was a small plate of six boiled eggs, slick with light. It was more of a dinner than lunch. Abundant meals for an abundant man. Marcy was the one who had diced and sliced the vegetables,



peeled the potatoes, submerged the meat in boiling oil, and had finally set the table with surgical precision. And she smiled, as persistently as a porcelain doll. Behind that face, Evelyn knew, was scorn, the proverbial idea that enemies should remain close, although not so close as to sleep in the same bed with them.

Everyone but Evelyn spoke amongst themselves, about the few plants that had inevitably frozen to death, including a beloved bunch of cranesbill geraniums too fragile to bring indoors, and then about Marcy's cousin, Horace, who had gone to seminary school in Brazil. Because Evelyn was sitting at the table with her father for the first time in years, she was temporarily trapped in a past layer of time, of space. In consequence, Evelyn didn't perceive Marcy pouting and saying, "I miss him dearly." Instead, Evelyn recalled her mother sobbing dryly at the table of Evelyn's childhood, before asking Peter, "How can you be so, so cruel?"

"It's not cruelty," he said. "It's not even me. It's God. It's what He wants. Do you really want me to go against His will? Where—" He stopped. The tips of his fingers shook on the table before he shouted, "Where do you think that will get us?"

This was the night that the diagnosis was confirmed. Stomach cancer. Weeks before, she had been reduced to begging at his feet, as if he were a demigod in need of placation, in order to have scheduled the first doctor's appointment. But he claimed to be, at most, the middleman. The pleas, the appeals, and the appeasements should be reserved for the Creator, he told her. It wasn't simply his Catholicism that made him want to prevent her from receiving medical treatment, it was a precious and personal faith of another kind, but what, exactly, Evelyn had been, and still was, unsure.

"I'll pray," he had told Evelyn's mother then and innumerable times before. "We'll see what He truly wants."

And on that night, after eating a cold meal, five-year-old Evelyn would do praying of her own. Whether she wanted to or not, she was instructed to as a matter of morality. Even when her father stood listening at the door, or when he cast a heavy shadow over her, she was still able to think other prayers, sending them directly to God.

*Dear God, please tell my father that you don't really want Mommy to die. He thinks you do. He says you do. You don't, do you? Allmen.*

*God. Please God. I can feel my father watching me. He doesn't know, but he needs to. Things are really, really bad. Pleaaaaasssssseeee. Allmen.*

In that way, she had someone who could listen, for her mother dared not acknowledge the reality of things. As much as she could, her mother kept it inside, all of it. Prayer, then, was little Evelyn's freedom. At least until one night when her father told her, "Recite your prayer. I need to hear you. No whispers, no mumbling. Aloud."

She didn't dare turn and look at him. She remained on her knees, elbows pressed into the springs of the bed, hands together, as thin and pale as a sheet of tracing paper. Her mother had locked herself in the bathroom, and his fists, pulsing like a pair of hearts, were reddened and tired of pounding.

But she couldn't recall how the prayer went. For as long as she remembered, she had used the silent voice in her head. The free voice that only she and God could hear. Now he wanted to listen, to investigate, because of the paranoia that had taken hold of him. He was the deific intermediary.

"I...Dear God—"

He knelt behind her. She could smell the funniness of his spectral breath as it passed over her nape. A new and funny smell, which caused her nose to scrunch up. She remembered first smelling it somewhere in the kitchen around the time her mother's stomach pains had arrived.

He put his arms over Evelyn's arms and clasped his hands over hers, enfolding tightly. She felt as though he was trying to consume her with his body, absorb her. Phagocytosis.

“O my Jesus...” He said into her ear, the proximity turning his words into a whispering shout.

“O my Jesus,” she said.

“...forgive us our sins...”

“Forgive us our sins.”

“...save us from the fires of hell...”

“Save us from the fires of hell.”

“...and lead all souls to heaven...”

“And lead all souls to heaven.”

“...especially those in most need of Your mercy...”

“Especially those in most need of Your mercy.”

“Amen.”

“Allmen.”

“Ahmen.”

“Amen.”

Evelyn, Father Peter, Marcy, and Lucille, connected by their hands, murmured in unison, “Amen.”

“Now, dig in,” said Father Peter. “Don’t be shy, Cathy. You’re not only our guest, you’re family.”

Shocked, Evelyn looked up at him. He was smiling. At that moment he would have flicked his tongue if it were forked, if it was the color and structure of a capillary. Did he know, then, even though she was taller, tanner, with shorter hair dyed a different color, let alone the subtle mutability brought on by time’s passage, all of which amounted to a strange if vaguely familiar person? His face didn’t express any surprise, now or earlier. How could he be so insouciant in the presence of his only daughter who had run away, whom he hadn’t seen in over half a decade?

*You’re family.* It was a clumsy, hollowly affable phrase that fell from his mouth and made the connection conscious. He swallowed, as if his Adam’s apple were really an apple, implanted in the throat.

She couldn’t imagine the amount of physical and mental energy it required to maintain human form. Except for that slight shift in his duplicitous clothing, he created an art out of illusion. He was both actor and magician. A master of thaumaturgy.

To be sure, she scrutinized the slightest movements of his face over the course of lunch. What’s more, she decided she could make a strategic game of it. “So, Marcy,” said Evelyn. “I’m curious. How did you and Father meet?”

Father Peter bent his head toward his plate, as if in further prayer.

“Well,” she said, looking fondly at Peter and then back at Evelyn, “funny story, actually. I found him at the bottom of a bottle.”

Peter looked at her calmly enough. Under the skin, deep in the irises, there was anxiety.

“Oh, no,” said Lucille, wrinkled fingers to her lips.

Grabbing a boiled egg from the plate nearby, Peter swallowed it whole, the ovoid shape of it bulging at the sides of his neck before it descended into his cavernous stomach.

“It was more or less as romantic as it sounds. Think of a bottle, washing ashore, and tucked inside is a little scroll of parchment, a note. Interesting, isn’t it? Wouldn’t either of you want to read this note?”

“Yes,” said Lucille.

Peter looked calmer now, but still alert. His head was bent somewhat backward, as if poised to strike if need be. His eyes were hooded.

“There’s no way you can get it out,” Marcy went on, “other than breaking the bottle. And that’s what I did. I broke it. It was a part of him, and I broke it.”

Evelyn wondered if Marcy always spoke in metaphors, or if it was a whimsy inspired by Evelyn’s presence, part of the game she had initiated.

“So,” she said in a final, blunt note. “He was a drunk and I sobered him up. I made him into who he was supposed to be, or at least I tried....”

“Now, Marcy,” hissed Peter. “I will not sit by and listen to this. Our guests do not want to hear about my past sins. I do His work now. I am indebted to Him more than I am to you.” He looked toward Lucille. “I do apologize for my wife.”

Evelyn’s father had drunk during the time of her mother’s illness, maybe a little more than others, but she wouldn’t have called him an alcoholic, not exactly, more like a premature mourner. A praying man filled with too much hope and too much doubt, the sum of which was zero.

There was probably more underneath Peter’s skin than she could imagine. She watched as he scratched at the side of his wizened neck and tiny flecks of skin fell as dandruff upon his lapel.

“Peter mentioned you were visiting. May I ask why? Surely it wasn’t to simply attend our church.”

“No, ma’am.”

“Marcy.”

“No, Marcy.”

“So what did you plan on?” asked Lucille.

Evelyn scooped mashed potatoes into her dry mouth. She was trying to come up with something. Not only did it have to be believable, but she was also still attempting to play the game, to crack the mask of Father Peter.

In a bovine manner, she chewed against the silence. She gulped water from a nearby glass and heard it cascade down her throat as though through a hollow pipe. Sustenance was unnecessary, but she ate in order to look natural.

“I’m—I’m visiting my mother in the hospital,” she finally said, unsure of the intelligence of the move, until she saw Peter’s saurian eyes expand, embedded in elusive wrinkles.

“That can’t be,” he said.

“What?” said Marcy.

“I mean,” he stammered, “I mean that I’m sorry to hear that. I—I had no idea.”

“No, of course,” said Evelyn, pleased with herself. “How would you?”

“I’m truly sorry,” said Lucille. “What’s wrong with her?”

“Stomach cancer,” she answered without thinking.

Now it felt as if she were reliving the past. In a new theme, in new circumstances. She was unsure if this was more or less complex to navigate. She could do this, she told herself. She had matured, she had learned, and she wasn’t the same person. Little Evelyn had been, not exactly weak, but too ignorant. The world had only existed to her as a small town and nothing more, it could have been clipped to her hair or worn on her wrist. She could have played marbles with it.

“So your mother lives here,” said Marcy in an interrogative tone. “And you come from?”

“Florida. A small town.”

Marcy continued, “Have you seen her yet, your mother?”

Evelyn looked down at her lap, choking one wrist with her other hand. In her attempt to fake the feeling of shame, she really did feel shame.

“Not yet.”

Evelyn peered upward, between the strands of hair that fell over her eyes, and saw the sorrow in Lucille's face, the incredulity in Marcy's, and the void in Peter's. That void, made of eyes, a nose, a mouth, made of the ingredients of a human face, offended her. Mocked her.

"I want to see her, more than anything, but I can't," she explained. "Father won't let me."

She gazed straight into the void, tears making a vortex out of Peter's features.

"But why?" said Lucille.

"Why indeed," said Marcy.

Evelyn dabbed away her tears with her napkin and saw that they hadn't been the only cause of Peter's rippling face. There was emotion there, almost failing to be repressed.

"Okay," said Father Peter, rising from his chair and placing his hands on the table. "Enough of this, this melancholy." His chin was dimpled and the corners of his mouth twitched upward, downward. "I notice that we've nearly finished our lunch. No hunger like a Southern hunger. Allow me to bring out the pastries and coffee."

His stomach contained those six boiled eggs, and nothing else. Evelyn had watched him swallow each one without so much as a single bite.

"I'll get it, dear," said Marcy, making no move to stand.

"No, thank you," said Lucille. "No coffee for this one."

"Allow me," he said. "And please, Lucille. You can at least have a sip."

He waited a moment, jaw clenched, eyes nearly closed, and then he attempted to make a subtle and courteous retreat to the kitchen, the soles of his shoes sliding against the wood floor.

In a hushed voice Marcy said, "I cannot tell you what drives him sometimes. Maybe it's his feeling of victimhood."

"That's Father Peter you're talking about," said Lucille, her frown subordinate to the wrinkles in her skin.

"Well of course it is. Who else?"

Lucille huffed.

Silence settled, except for the miscellaneous sounds of glassware clinking and cabinets pounding in the kitchen. His face may have been only slightly more moved than a sculpture, thought Evelyn, but his actions spoke of something undeniable. Anger or grief, or a maelstrom of innumerable emotions, past and present.

He returned, restored by the brief intermission, balancing a tray of coffee cups and cinnamon buns.

"It all smells delicious," said Lucille.

"I knew you'd give in," he said, and placed the tray on the table.

"Well..." she said, coughing up a laugh.

"You're a darling," said Marcy to Father Peter. "I could have gotten them myself."

"I insisted."

Lucille directed an expression of disapproval at the shadowed ceiling.

Father Peter passed a cup of coffee and a cinnamon bun around to everyone. Evelyn noticed that he was avoiding her gaze.

"So what did that note say?" asked Lucille.

"Note," said Marcy.

"In the bottle, in Father's bottle."

"Oh. I haven't finished reading it. I guess you could say it's more of a novel, a long novel."

"I do hope it's a good one," said Father Peter. His free hand was fidgeting some beneath the table and Evelyn imagined that he was rubbing the top of his thigh through the material of his slacks.

Marcy scoffed, although politely, in a way that could be mistaken for minor choking on a crumb of her dessert.

“Don’t you like the pastry?” he asked.

Marcy didn’t answer. Her chin lay in the palm of her hand, the speckled stones of her rings covering half of her face.

The silence became palpable. They nibbled and sipped carefully. Evelyn wondered to what end was she playing. Humiliation? Reconciliation? She had already confirmed that this man, Father Peter, her father, had existed, that he had done those past things that pressed so heavily upon her fragile, immature mind, such things that cracked through the abstract and damaged her tissue, the very neurons of her brain. Irreversibly altered. That is what she had been seeking, a confirmation of the past. After learning about the studies of Elizabeth Loftus in her psychology class, the ways in which memories were fabricated as easily as dreams, the possibility that she had imagined her father’s treatment of her mother and her, or construed it, was frightening. It was more than she could bear, and so she had taken the risk to find out for herself. What more was there, what more could she confirm or deny? She didn’t know. That was the problem.

The lingering smell of the bountiful lunch commingled with the sweet heat of pastries and coffee. The kind of smells that would have caused Evelyn’s mother to retreat to the nearest window or improvised receptacle and vomit or retch, the sound of it demonic, the tendons in her neck taut, like spindles of bone. During such moments, which occurred off and on, with or without the smell of food, Evelyn felt hopeless. There was nothing she could do. Yet, over time, the extremes of her mother’s body in action didn’t scare her. Evelyn had always been intimate with her mother’s physical form. They had taken baths together, ever since she was an unknowing infant, shaggy with bubbles from the water’s surface, up until little Evelyn was less little and more knowing, when the nakedness of another was strangely natural. It was that disturbing feeling which caused people to clothe themselves. Decency. Modesty. That was something Evelyn had learned. But it never seemed to bother her mother, and Evelyn couldn’t bring herself to object, to deprive her mother of this tenderness. The tub was their womb at first, then their boat, then their spacecraft, and then it was their porcelain cocoon, shielding them from the outside world, until one day, just maybe, they would emerge from the curtain having transformed beyond beings of cleanliness and godliness, reaching toward a singularity where nothing could touch either of them. Until then, they were organisms of the senses. The sound of the water like a stream in the forest. Pruning fingertips. The smell of the soap like wild flowers in a hidden meadow. Wet and clumped hair. Shimmering bodies, one young with a chest as flat as a boy’s, the other curvaceous and supple as a mermaid plagued with sadness. They sat in the tub, with Evelyn between her mother’s legs, as if recently expelled from that brunette patch of hair. Sometimes they stroked their own bodies with chunks of farmer’s market sea sponges, and other times they stroked each other. This act that they shared didn’t cease with the onset of cancer. On the contrary, it became the one communication they maintained. Her mother couldn’t talk about her sickness, but she could show it to her.

Cancer, to her mother, was pregnancy reflected in a septic puddle. It turned a gift into a curse. What she carried inside her would only birth her death. Even her stomach bloated as if she were expecting, along with her feet and other parts of her. After chemotherapy treatments, her body thinned. Her stomach didn’t bulge, it pulled inward. Her ribs resembled skeletal and petrified wings, trapped beneath a concave stretch of skin. Her breasts had deflated, emphasizing her ocular nipples, like the pattern on a moth. Her buttocks had fully flattened. And when she would bend over, her spine emerged.

This ritual of bathing made it as clear as if her mother had whispered in the water-filled canal of eight-year-old Evelyn’s ear and said, “I’m going to wither away and die, and then disappear into nothing.” But nothingness would have been better than the reality that her father had made her believe.

He never conceded to her cancer treatments, he didn't even tolerate them. He simply gave up on her. If she wanted to work against God's plan, if she wanted to align herself with the desolation of a secular worldview, then she would be on her own, and would have to abandon her family in the process. Never mind the hospitals named after saints with crosses above every bed, never mind the work of Mother Teresa. "You think she healed people?" he challenged Evelyn's mother during her restless twilights of supplication. "She gave them a cot to die in. That's all. Suffering, she said, brought them closer to God. Suffering as Jesus had suffered. We're not here to make things easier for ourselves. Whatever happens, happens for a reason." Little Evelyn wondered what kind of mother Teresa was. Not one that she would ever want. To her father, faith healed, prayer mended, and God loved. Such were the ingredients of life and death. Unless one fell from His grace.

The last time she saw her mother was when Peter drove her to the hospital as an inpatient, like dropping off a terminal waif. Evelyn had followed them into the vehicle, stepping silently, uttering no sound, and even holding her breath for long stretches of time. He never said she could go with them, but he also hadn't officially objected to her becoming their small shadow. Her mother was in so much pain by then, moaning and gripping her stomach as though the thing inside kicked, punched, gnawed. Her mother's stomach was beginning to swell again, so during the car ride little Evelyn rubbed it, as if washing her body once more, the most important part, Evelyn's first home. The protuberance was squishy, and the belly button was as big as a bowl, filmed with brown, diaphanous skin.

She couldn't even remember what had happened once they arrived. Only a solitary image: her mother lying on the hospital bed, eyes wide and hollow, expressing relaxation and surprise, her hair thinned on the sides and nearly nonexistent at the top, the neck permanently tense. Her mother was young, but old, so very old. That was because mermaids didn't exist, little Evelyn thought. So foolish to have imagined her mother as one. She couldn't remember what was said at the time, either, if anything. But it didn't really matter. They spoke in the language of soaped sponges. Their tongues knew the talk of water and lather. Cleanliness was their godliness. Their world existed in the curtained tub with curved feet.

The car ride home was the epitome of emptiness. Evelyn still existed only as a shadow. She sat in the back while her father drove, silent as he gripped the wheel and stared ahead, listening to no station, paying attention to the road only, the pulse of the dotted lines, soporific, hypnotizing, a muted Morse code in God's language, symmetry which told him that the path he was on was the path he was meant to be on. Meanwhile, little Evelyn, hands and nose pressed against the car door's window, with a white puff of breath coming and going as she inhaled and exhaled, followed the silhouette of the forest line beneath the starless night.

Then they passed a burning orange farm. This was where she had come for solitude during the rare days when she had a few hours to sneak out on her own, when she wasn't at the library soaking up the ink with her eyes. What she remembered as the Garden of Eden, with globular fruits hanging like suns amidst the leaves, was no more. Now the fire was everything, crackling like a trillion knuckles and necks. The sky filled with smoke blacker than the night.

In the tumult, she spotted a hawk or some species of bird with its tail aflame, just the very tips of the feathers, soaring in and out of the broiling sky. And then, as though it had realized the fire it held, or as though the act of little Evelyn observing it had forced physics to obey their laws, the bird, compensating for the lag in time, burst into feathery flames. Fire in the shape of a bird. And then the smoke, billowing. She was so astonished that she said, "Daddy, look!" He didn't respond.

A week or so later, she was able to sneak some time in the library, and found a book about imaginary beings. There was a section on the mythological phoenix. *Coming from Arabia, this legendary animal is eternally reborn through its fiery death and subsequent rise from a mound of ashes.*

The accompanying illustration featured a vermilion bird, wings outstretched, roosting on a fire pit, endowed with a seven-rayed nimbus behind its head, a sun-infused halo. Little Evelyn would, at times, imagine herself as that creature, a once-perished phoenix risen afresh, but even more so, she wondered, had her mother been reborn in such a way? And if so, what did she become, another girl's mother, or something else entirely? The idea comforted her, believing that her mother was still out there, even if she wasn't with her, but her father had the real answer.

It only took six days for her mother to die as an in-patient, and when it happened her father sat her down in a chair in the living room and told her that it was over, that he had tried his best, but because Evelyn's mother didn't listen to the will of God, she was in hell now. She would be in there not sometimes, not even for a little bit or a big bit, she would be in there forever. "I'm going to have to raise you strictly so that way you'll avoid going where your mother just went," he said.

"But I want to go where Mommy goes."

"No, Evelyn," he said. "You don't."

"But why?" she asked, beginning to cry, to shake all over.

"She's in a place of fire, a lake of flames, where there is continuous torment, where other souls who have fallen from the grace of God writhe in the grease of their and other's sins, a compounded suffering that never sees real light because the fires of hell are dark, so dark," he explained, beginning to quiver with a kind of frightened excitement, a despondent awe, "and the worst part is the regret, which is felt here," he tapped the middle of her chest with two fingers. Evelyn was wailing now, ululations that peaked and then descended only to allow her to gain breath in the lungs and begin again. "I know," he said. "I know. I tried to warn her. I did my best. She couldn't accept His plan. Now there is a worm of three stings eating away at her. It's the second death. I only tell you this so you know the truth. There is a lot more that you need to learn. This is for the best. I will not lose you too."

He grabbed her by the wrist while she was still calling for her mommy between gulps of breath and he dragged her across the floor to the rot-smelling Bible that he kept on a wooden lectern in his room. It was the first time he grabbed her with such force that in the morning her skin showed black and blue and purple, like a crow's neck in the light. That's how she began to think of the bruises, as portions of a sun-caught crow. He made her stand at the lectern for what seemed like hours, reciting marked verses: *And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell. The Son of man shall send forth his angels, and they shall gather out of his kingdom all things that offend, and them which do iniquity; And shall cast them into a furnace of fire: there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth. As smoke is driven away, so drive them away: as wax melteth before the fire, so let the wicked perish at the presence of God. Who among us shall dwell with the devouring fire? Who among us shall dwell with everlasting burnings?*

Sitting at the table in Father Peter's home, while everyone else chewed, sipped, blinked, Evelyn's breathing intensified in a way that made air seem nonexistent. Her heart rate increased. She was in labor, giving birth to the pain of her childhood, a perpetual crowning. Her goal was to sever the black umbilical cord, to desert the blighted baby in the wild or drown it in a lake, allowing the things of the earth to dissolve it, break it down into constituent parts. Cells, molecules, atoms, quarks. Make it no more. As much as she wanted to do that, she couldn't. The life inside her was a part of her, in all its sweltering blood. She had to accept this. She had to....

When she came to, there was a pillow under her head and she was laying on the floor. Above her was Marcy, kneeling, and standing over her were Marcy's angels, Peter and Lucille.

"Are you okay?" one of them asked.

"Yes," she said. "I'm okay."

She was herself now, yet that wasn't quite true, for the unbreathing being that had been her would always be her. They were one and the same.

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During the following hours, while Father Peter was at the church and Marcy went out for groceries and other errands, Evelyn took the form of a ghost. The house wasn't hers, it didn't occupy the domains of her memory—dormant or otherwise—but there was something mysteriously familiar about it. Chimeric. She didn't belong here, she wasn't supposed to be here, yet she walked from room to room once again, minus the dissecting eyes of Marcy. She had some sort of unfinished business, something beyond the idea of confirmation, but she still wasn't sure.

Through the window of the living room, she saw the soft drifting of snowflakes. Only charred logs remained in the fireplace, a heap of unmoved ashes underneath. Aside from wind-induced creaking, the house was in a state of stale silence, indifferent. The creaking spoke more of bone than wood. Haunted was the word that came to Evelyn's mind, but different than the church's spectral phase she had witnessed. This was the kind of haunting that was seen from the inside, that was orchestrated by her presence. Then she realized, as she continued to move, that the house wasn't creaking, her joints were, the toes of her bare feet and the eyes swiveling in her orbits were. She was drawn to this room out of all the other rooms, as if the beginning motions of particles in the primordial and unobserved cosmos had been directed toward this moment: her dry eyes squeaked in the direction of a black journal left open and downward on a table near an orderly bookshelf, a perched insect capable of flight. A death's head hawkmoth inscribed. Her skull groaned as it turned atop her spine. The rest of her skeleton scraped as she approached the book. She reached for it, as delicate and stern as a lepidopterist. She closed it. She flipped it so that the dull marble cover faced her, one side of a folded wing. She stretched it open once more. With a layered and echoed voice, she read the first sentence: *What do unborn babies dream of?* She was puzzled. She recognized the handwriting, so much like the cramped and frantic scribbling in the margin of the Bible. It was Peter's.

Afterward, she locked herself in the guest bedroom and read the journal as though it were a novel and not the otherworldly confessions of her father, about how he had descended into alcoholism and religious doubt after the stillbirth of a child he had conceived with a woman named Lilianna.

Following an unknown passage of time, there was a gentle knock on the door.

Evelyn remained quiet. In fact, she didn't hear the knock, not consciously. She was now in another world altogether, in memories un-lived by her, yet undoubtedly connected to her existence. She read on.... After Evelyn had run away, Peter must have been shocked into a kind of moderate belief, retreating into classic literature and even teaching it to middle school students. When he met Lilianna at church, she demonstrated how the Holy Spirit was not only a teaching tool but the essence of inspiration and life as a whole. This included being as strict as necessary with the children who attended Bible study. He learned from her, from the Holy Spirit, and rediscovered that doing God's work was invigorating. And at the same time he fell in love with Lilianna. But when their child had died in the womb, strangled by its own umbilical cord, she left him, blamed him for something that was out of their control. After much inner turmoil, he declared disbelief in the trinity, recognizing that he loved his stillborn daughter more than anything, more than God.

After she finished reading the journal she held it to her chest and stared at the ceiling until she wasn't seeing the ceiling, only multi-colored dust motes.

Her father spoke to her over the bed, his voice quivering and disembodied by the sheer darkness: "I did what I had to do. You were my gift from God. The payment for you, was your mother. I couldn't interfere. Did you want me to lose you, too?"



“You did lose me,” she said, her voice muffled by blankets, by muscle relaxant chemicals of the brain. “Don’t act innocent.”

“What choice did I have?”

“You chose faith over family.”

“My beliefs were what gave me you.”

“You abandoned Mom. You abandoned me.”

“You left.”

“I needed to live.”

His face attempted to surface from the blackness, but it hardly produced a ripple.

“Me too,” he said.

And then the dark.

She awoke after she dreamt multiple dreams, almost all of which she forgot, except the one where she was face to face with Father Peter, only a few inches in-between the tips of their noses. They had stared at each other for hours, and then he screamed as fire enfolded them, the cavern of his mouth overflowing with liquescent shadows that clung to his ridged roof and stuck between his teeth like tar, but she didn’t join him.

Dawn was on the fringe of arrival. Now was the time to slip out. The black journal wasn’t in her arms anymore. It was gone, absorbed. Still barefoot, with her shoes tucked under her arm, she unlocked the door to the guest bedroom and opened it mutely. On the floor was what looked like a shredded latex glove, but when she kneeled to inspect it, she saw that it had torn holes on the fingers where nails should be. She picked it up and realized it was skin, delicate and translucent. She dropped it. As she maneuvered on the balls of her feet, she avoided the moaning floorboards that she had mapped in her mind, while also coming upon more molted skin, a foot without toes, half of a thigh, the head of a phallus. She glided down the stairs, her hand hovering over the freezing, wrought iron railing, stepping over a circular area of the stomach with a peephole for a bellybutton, a pair of fissured lips, a quarter of an ear. At the base of the stairs, she collided with a soft-hard obstacle that produced a human noise. First a small, subdued yelp, then a hushing.

Marcy.

Evelyn instinctively said, “Sorry.”

They stared at each other in the revitalizing light.

Marcy wore a nightdress the color of glacial air. She came from the living room, not the bedroom from above, nor the kitchen. Evelyn wonder if she had been expecting her, patiently waiting in an armchair.

“At first I thought you were an ex-lover, despite your age,” she whispered. Her face was half shadow and half gasping beam. “But then it struck me. He had another journal, you know. One that documented you, your mother. You look like you’d want to read it. You would, wouldn’t you? Well you can’t. He burned it. Right over there,” she said while motioning her head imperceptibly toward the living room. “He was so ashamed. In his mind, he failed twice. Of course, you can be the judge of that. He was so regretful...he wanted to forget. I left that journal for you to find. He had asked me to destroy it after he caught me reading it. I told him I did, but I didn’t. Whether you burn something or not, the past will find a way back, somehow, someday. You’re living proof of it, aren’t you?”

Evelyn didn’t know what to say. She was disoriented, laid bare.

“You, you speechless little thing,” she said. “You’re wrong for coming back into his life. Don’t you see he’s had enough? He can’t take it. Any more and he’ll have to be nailed to the cross for real. Or maybe he’ll just hang himself as people do.” She looked at the floor. “He’s so difficult to read.”

Evelyn dared to move her lips, to form and emit sound: “But I’m his daughter.”

“Yes. You were. He’s not the same person anymore. He’s changed so many times he probably doesn’t even remember who he is. He lives day to day, guided by the word of the Lord. It’s the only thing keeping him sane. It’s the only reason he’s alive. If you didn’t see on your way out, he’s changed. Again.”

They thought they heard a noise, some shifting of the Father above, the man upstairs, and they stilled into temporary statues.

When Evelyn decided it wasn’t anything of consequence, she said, “Why do you stick around?”

“Have you ever eaten trash, darling?” She placed a hand over her breasts. “It’s where this body came from, what it survived on. He plucked me from that world. And now I cook meals like each day is my last supper. Before, I knew the word feast as bread without mold or rainwater collected in a bowl without rust. Sometimes it’s better to stay put. At least I have a better idea of what to expect.”

Evelyn noticed that Marcy was rubbing and squeezing a lump of shed skin in her hand, like worry beads. It looked like the thin film that covers the brain, the pia mater, and Evelyn imagined that it had oozed from his nostrils as a kind of cerebral snot.

Evelyn crossed her arms. “No,” she said. “This isn’t real. He’s a coward. He’s not as powerful as I thought. A coward. A wizard of Oz.”

Marcy’s left eye squinted. The surrounding skin was a soft blue. “You’re a prevaricator yourself, aren’t you...Cathy?”

“I did what I needed to do. And it’s not just him who’s the coward. Look at yourself.”

Her eye, Evelyn saw, swelled. “Speaking to me. Like that. In my house.”

“I’m leaving,” said Evelyn.

“Oh, don’t worry. You’ll make it. The door’s not far. None ever is.”

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Once more, she was driving on the highway, this time listening to all stations as they permeated her skull, and as she sighed she saw the foggy, two-dimensional shape of a head form against the inside of the windshield, then arms outstretched, then legs and feet, until the glass was clear again, and she knew this to be herself, her soul let go. And just as ghosts may dissipate by the second glance or be dismissed as pareidolia, both were left to wonder if any visitation occurred at all.

# Author Biographies (order of appearance)

**Christopher Mulrooney** (1956-2015) is the author of *toy balloons* (Another New Calligraphy), *alarm* (Shirt Pocket Press), *supergrooviness* (Lost Angelene), and *Buson orders leggings* (Dink Press). <http://cmulrooney.tripod.com/>

**Howie Good** is the author most recently of *What It Is and How to Use It* from Grey Book Press and *Spooky Action at a Distance* from Analog Submission Press. He co-edits the journals Unbroken and UnLost.

**Kaleigh Maeby** is a designer/illustrator from Melbourne, Florida. She spends her time creating glimpses into other universes and finding the beauty in this one. She hopes you look upon these words and find something- a connection, a joke, disgust, even joy. She is in love.

**Tim Kahl** [<http://www.timkahl.com>] is the author of *Possessing Yourself* (CW Books, 2009), *The Century of Travel* (CW Books, 2012) *The String of Islands* (Dink Press, 2015) and *Omnishambles* (Bald Trickster, 2019). His work has been published in *Prairie Schooner*, *Drunken Boat*, *Mad Hatters' Review*, *Indiana Review*, *Metazen*, *Ninth Letter*, *Sein und Werden*, *Notre Dame Review*, *The Really System*, *Konundrum Engine Literary Magazine*, *The Journal*, *The Volta*, *Parthenon West Review*, *Caliban* and many other journals in the U.S. He is also editor of *Clade Song* [<http://www.cladesong.com>]. He is the vice president and events coordinator of The Sacramento Poetry Center. He also has a public installation in Sacramento {In Scarcity We Bare The Teeth}. He plays flutes, guitars, ukuleles, charangos and cavaquinhos. He currently teaches at California State University, Sacramento, where he sings lieder while walking on campus between classes.

**Daniel Hudon**, originally from Canada, is an adjunct lecturer in astronomy, physics and math. He is the author of *The Bluffer's Guide to the Cosmos* (Oval Books, London) and the just-published *Brief Eulogies for Lost Animals: An Extinction Reader* (Pen and Anvil, Boston). He is a big fan of Magritte, and can be found at [danielhudon.com](http://danielhudon.com), [@daniel\\_hudon](https://twitter.com/daniel_hudon) and in Boston, MA.

**Barton Smock** lives in Columbus, OH, with his wife and four children. He is the author of the chapbook *infant\*cinema* (Dink Press 2016) and of the full-length *Ghost Arson* (Kung Fu Treachery Press 2018). Is the editor of the online journal {isacoustic\*} at [isacoustic.com](http://isacoustic.com) and writes often at [kingsoftrain.com](http://kingsoftrain.com).

**Reece A.J. Chambers** is a 26 year old writer from Northamptonshire, England. He is currently an MFA distance-learning student in Creative Writing, specialising in poetry, through Manchester Metropolitan University. He previously attained a degree from the University of Northampton in the same subject. He has had work published online and in print, and the majority of his poetry can be found at [hellopoetry.com](http://hellopoetry.com). He also maintains a blog ([reeceajchambers.wordpress.com](http://reeceajchambers.wordpress.com)), and occasionally writes prose as well as poetry. Influences include Sylvia Plath, Simon Armitage, E.E. Cummings, William Carlos Williams, and a variety of prose writers.

**Ella Rennekamp** is an undergraduate student at the New College of Florida. She is originally from Louisville, Kentucky. Her interests lie in the interconnected relationship between psychoanalytic and critical theory, self-actualization, film, and writing for revealing the depths of individual experience.

**Kristopher Biernatsky** is a poet (*A Sleep/less Night*, FowlPox Press and *Bathwater*, Forthcoming) and screenwriter from Florida. In 2014 he started Dink Press and is the editor of *Problematic*. He is in love.

**Michael Lee Rattigan** (Caterham, UK) has lived and taught in Mexico and Spain, and translated the first complete collection of Fernando Pessoa's *Alberto Caeiro* poems (Rufus Books, 2007). His first poetry collection, *Liminal*, was published in 2012 (Rufus Books). He contributed to the *Selected Writings of César Vallejo*, published in 2015 (Wesleyan Press). His latest collection, *Hiraeth*, was published alongside its French translation in 2016 (Black Herald Press).

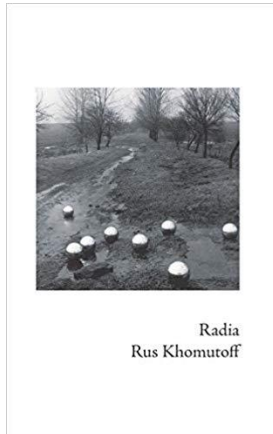
**Rus Khomutoff** is an experimental poet in Brooklyn, NY. He has been published by San Francisco review of books, Propose magazine, Silver Pinion and Hypnopomp. In June he published a chapbook called *Radia* from Void Front Press. He can be reached at @rusdaboss on twitter.

**R. Keith** works in poetics, fiction, visuals and exophonic writing. His latest books include the novel *Wild Rose Country* (Cajun Mutt Press) and *FLOP* (Rust Belt Press) His visual art has been presented in galleries in Canada, Russia, Malta and Italy.

**Nicole Melchionda** is a poet and essayist whose work has appeared in various journals, such as *Abyss & Apex*, *Helios Quarterly Magazine*, and *Brindle & Glass*. Her work has been nominated for the WSFA Small Press Award and the 2018 *Best of the Net* anthology. You can find her portfolio on [nicolemelchionda.wordpress.com](http://nicolemelchionda.wordpress.com).

**George Salis** is the award-winning author of *Sea Above, Sun Below* (River Boat Books, 2019) and the editor of *The Collidescope*. He is currently working on an encyclopedic novel titled *Morphological Echoes*. He has taught in Bulgaria, China, and Poland. Find him on Facebook, Goodreads, and at [www.GeorgeSalis.com](http://www.GeorgeSalis.com).

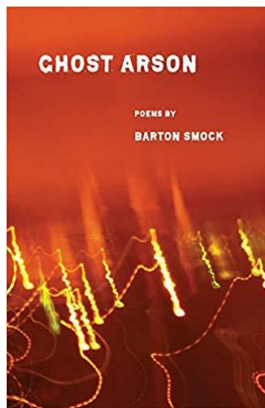
# Recommendations



**Radia** (Void Front Press) by Rus Khomutoff

Rus Khomutoff is, in my opinion, one of the most exciting poets working today. His *Radia* is a fantastic sampling of his highly stylized, experimental, and often surreal work. Every time I've sat down to read from *Radia* I always find myself at the end, having read every word and blank space between the covers. -KB

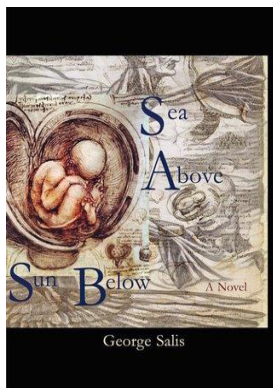
**Radia**- <https://www.amazon.com/Radia-Rus-Khomutoff/dp/1072687003/>  
**Void Front Press**-<https://voidfrontpress.org/>  
**Rus Khomutoff**- @rusdaboss on Twitter



**Ghost Arson** (Kung Fu Treachery Press) by Barton Smock

It is no secret that both Kaleigh and I are devoted to the world Barton Smock lives in and reports on. His work, often spare, and always beautiful, is among the best being written today. It is simultaneously concrete and smoke, solid yet dancing. *Ghost Arson* serves as an amazing introduction to anyone interested in Barton's work and is ready to start a deeper dive into it. -KB

**Ghost Arson**- <https://www.amazon.com/Ghost-Arson-Barton-Smock/dp/194664286X>  
**Kung Fu Treachery Press**- <https://www.facebook.com/KungFuTreacheryPress/>  
**Barton Smock**- <https://kingsoftrain.com/>



**Sea Above, Sun Below** (River Boat Books) by George Salis

George Salis' novel '*Sea Above, Sun Below*' engulfs you into the thoughts, fears, and lives of the complex individuals he has created. For every shaking hand, every nauseous stomach, every crying child, the body responds as the mind. Not a moment passes in which reader is not given new life in the personalities before them. Every page brings an intense captivation that leaves you craving the next. Salis weaves myth and fantasy through science and rational thought so intensely, you are left believing that they should have never been ripped apart in the first place. There truly are no words for the experience to be had through these pages, and I urge everyone to take the leap themselves.-KM

**Sea Above, Sun Below**- <https://www.riverboatbooks.com/>  
**River Boat Books**- <https://www.riverboatbooks.com/>  
**George Salis**- <https://georgesalis.com/>