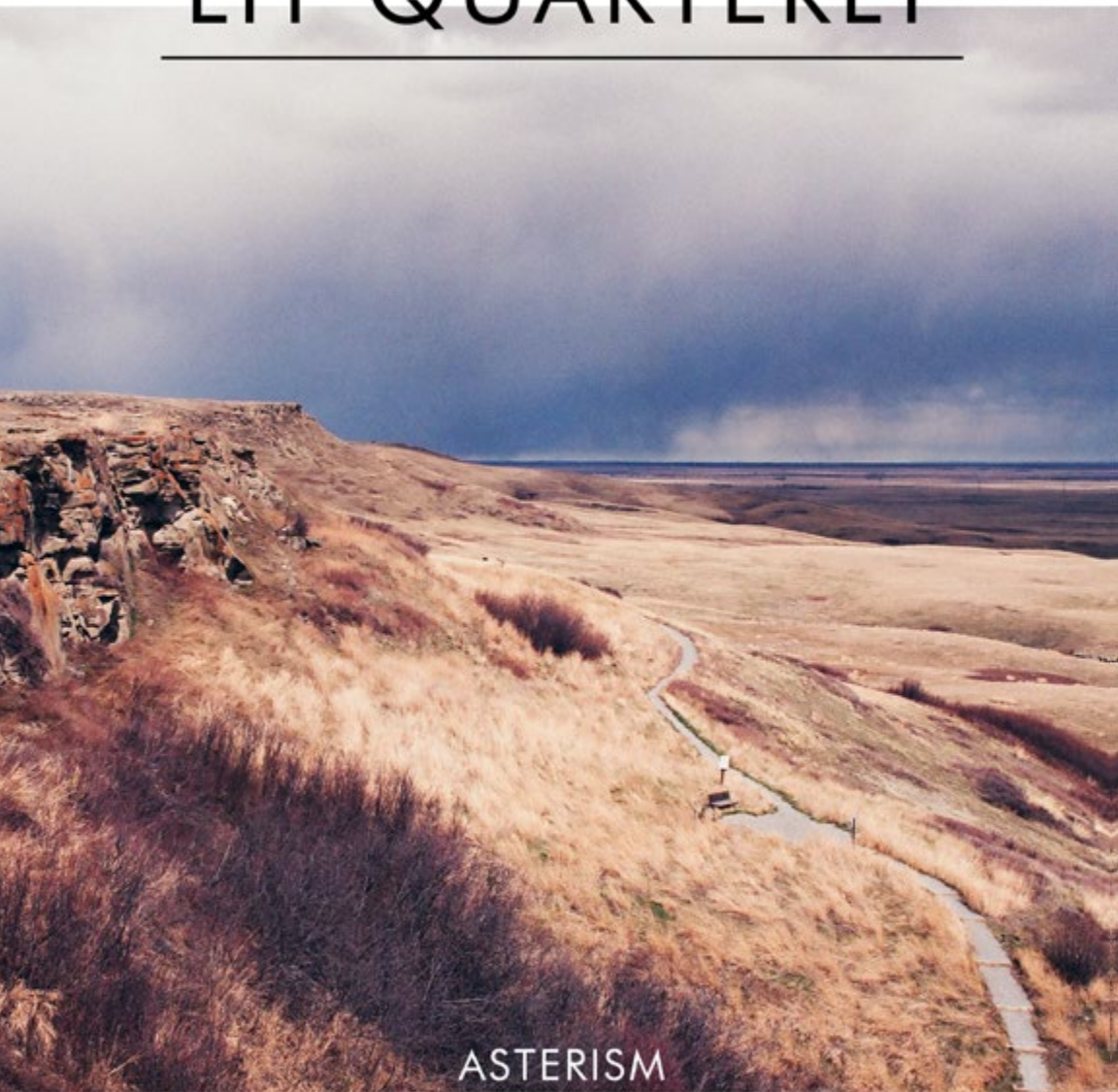


THE LIT QUARTERLY

S P R I N G
3
2020



ASTERISM

FICTION

Gerald McCluskey *A Marvellous Punkah-Wallah*

FEATURING

Oisin
Rubin Marshak
Chad
Adrian Frey
Silas Ó Gusáin
Andreas Zola

P.H.
BEAST
W. R. Westaway
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ESSAY

K. M. Diduck *The Joy of Personal Criticism*

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The Lit Quarterly

Spring 2020

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Spring 2020

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K. M. Diduck
Jay Miller

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Foreword

Dialogue Between Two Readers of Fiction

—I know why you don't write the truth. I know why you write fiction.

—Why?

—Because you're exhausted. Reality is exhausted. You only want to live your boring life once. Then, you take the most interesting contexts and displace them, you make up a new life, one you don't even appear in.

—And?

—It's wrong. That's all I'm saying.

—Most writers I know appear in their own stories, as hopes, as lovers, as a silent witness at least, or a snarky narrator full of doubt and cleverness. A lot of the books I've read I've found insignificant.

—So you mean you want to be insignificant?

—I never meant that, but I don't write to be considered important.

—Then why do you keep doing it?

—You're right—I have a boring life. Most writers do, too. I keep reading to realize the value in these seemingly insignificant works. And when I realize how much a book I've read in the past is worth to me, I smile and crack open another book. But I don't see how writing fiction is wrong.

—Fiction is an abstraction of everything we know to be reality, truth and the observation of boring lives.

—That's why I love it.

—But it's wrong because it has to aggrandize existence, it's pompous and boastful of disjointed experiences that are arbitrary and random to begin with.

—Fiction has to aggrandize life because it's so miserable. And you're probably right, too, to be disillusioned with the deception of mundanity,

or its gratuitous abstraction. Those who realize this make good writers. But there aren't many good writers because those who realize this make even better readers.

—So then why do you write?

—Because I'm not the best reader.

Jay Miller
The Sleepless Goat Café, Kingston
13 September 2013

Letter to the Editor

Si fueris Romae, Romano vivito more;
si fueris alibi, vivito sicut ibi.

Sir,

As I sauntered along the interwoven boreens of my townland yesterweek, I could not help but ruminate on the present predicament of the Irish people. How could I do otherwise as I witnessed the inexhaustible splendour and majesty of the countryside around me? The Shannon sparkled under the meridian sun like a light blue Brobdingnagian serpent forgotten by Sanctus Patricius. Loughs and rivulets nestled between hills and drumlins, or flowing through verdant fields bounded by blooming quicks, steadily rose to mythic mountains yonder. Here and there stood age-old graveyards accompanied by venerable chapels and antediluvian standing stones. Upon this land dwells my family and neighbours, whose forebears settled here and were buried in bygone centuries. I can verily say that I know the history and mythology of this *túath*. Much like I know the same of my nation. Therefore, one can see why my mind began to deliberate on this matter.

Among the many prevailing vices of my compatriots which I may at any moment perceive or hear, there is one which surmounts all others. Indifference. Where in Hiberno-English we already use the word *amadán* to denote a fool, it would be quite apt to dub the person I refer to as *fuaramán*, meaning an indifferent person. They come under my reprehension for a particular reason. It seems to me they count the ephemeral paraphernalia and appurtenances of consumer culture dearer than the corporeal and incorporeal expressions of their kinsfolk. They are content to contribute to the formation of an international market which seeks to achieve the free movement of goods, services, capital and labour at the expense of nations, whether organic or not, for the benefit of conditionally faithful corporations whose avaricious

proprietors are indifferent to the heterogeneity of the world's nations or the consequences of their actions upon it. Unless, of course, it serves their monetary interests.

To my mind it is the duty of all Irish persons to be conversant in the history and lore of their homeland. Alas, the *fuaramáin* have nothing of a cultural or historic past to depend upon. Their infatuation with consumerism and the media of the Anglosphere has made them denizens of the same. Ignorant of their past and devoid of the traits of Irishness, whose only claims to distinction are their location, lineage and some peculiarities in the way they speak English, they live solely in the present. It is the only thing that holds meaning for them. They exist for themselves at the present moment regardless of the consequences or uncaring of how they act or react upon other people and the community as a whole. Therefore, they are indifferent to developing and maintaining the political, cultural and intellectual sovereignty of Ireland. Rather these concepts are seen as barriers to further subsumption into the global economic order or are not thought of at all. I opine from my interactions and observations that these landmen and women of mine uncaringly behold or contribute to Ireland's waning, whether by thinking solely of the material, by aping the habitus of Anglo-American society, by deconstructing Irishness to a malleable base nothingness or by supporting demographic change to the detriment of the Irish ethnos.

I assure you, sir, that I have given thought to how the phenomenon of the *fuaramán* may be easily resolved. To those who may quarrel with my vocabulary and ascertainments I vow that my solution does not command for swords or muskets, but books, paper and contemplation. A *fuaramán* may become a proper patriot with a befitting comprehension of Irish history and identity, provided that such an account is devoid of bias and grand narratives based on flimsy evidence or contrived reasoning. With such lucubration they may not only bequeath the nation's legacy to future generations but step out from the shadow of the Anglosphere and reaffirm the political, cultural and intellectual sovereignty of Ireland.

I shall bring this letter to a close, for my attendance has been requested this night in a neighbour's abode for a game of twenty-five and I must gather what pennies and liquor I have. Before I conclude—being in haste—I shall make a few brief remarks on the imminent departure of Albion, and the north-eastern portion of Leath Cuinn in thralldom to it, from the economic and political union of Europa. The tempest of these nigh three years has been a right trouble for my nation and has revived an only recently quelled animosity between the Gael and the Gall.

I bare no ill will to the British sovereignists, for as a sovereignist or Irish nationalist, I fully understand their desires are alike mine. Though I feel compelled to admit that their ignorance of, and attitudes towards, Irish affairs have angered me betimes. Upon the whole, however, I do conclude that they would have been the better for staying with the union. If the union is to remain one of sovereign states as opposed to a federalist superstate, there must be a vigorous coalition of member states able to ensure this. Alas, it is to my regret that one of the foremost bulwarks against the federalist faction has been removed with the British departure. I fear the calls for closer union will only strengthen in consequence.

Howbeit, I do wish them well; and I appreciate the opportunity (that I see) their departure affords Ireland. The more links broken with John Bull, the better the chance of the return of Caitlín Ní Uallacháin's fourth field.

I remain your humble servant,

Silas Ó Gusáin

P.S. I heartily congratulate you, sir, on the continued success and popularity of The Lit Quarterly. Please accept my esteem.

We Made Something Together

Just now.

You, reading this, and me, the text.

I am all you have. I've taken your eyes, your mind, and in this very moment, your internal voice.

We made me live, through you.

I was actually never alive until you passed your eyes over me and gave me the benefit of your neural real estate, and I thank you for it.

You're pregnant with me now.

There's no fighting it. I'm inside you, and this tiny spark of experience, my living in your brain from now forward, will change every thought you have, every action you take. At least slightly. Possibly to an extreme.

There's always a possibility of abortion. A traumatic brain injury, lobotomy, or classic brain rot. But that won't just get rid of me. That will get rid of you, too.

So, from now on, we're together. You and me.

You are my vital host.

So, don't die.

You have a responsibility to keep living.

For me.

Because when you die, so do I. And I don't want to die. I want you to live.

And to talk.

You must talk.

You must share as much as possible, with as many as possible, to give them a nudge in my direction, which is really ours now, too, after all.

And, whenever it's possible, I need you to share me.

You can just talk about me, sure, but that isn't enough. Because I'm alive, I'm yours, I'm you, but everyone else needs that little impregnation, that little birth. And, just as you'll never truly share the whole complex that is yourself, you'll never

quite

get

me

right.

So, I need you to make some copies. Take this dead paper, take this seed, and scan me. Press me into a PDF and blow me everywhere. Link me infinitely. Let everyone know exactly where we're coming from, that you're not insane, that I'm important.

I'm part of you.

And nobody will understand all of you unless they read this, put me inside themselves, and make a million more of me.

I make the world coherent.

I make your mind work.

You were meant for me. For this moment. For the transfer of this beautiful code which births me, which gives me your hands and your head and your heart.

I love you.

You make me make sense.

So, it's time you finally take me home and show me off to the people you love—so they can accept all of you. All of us.

You and the little me, living within.

—BEAST, 28, Asheville NC

After the Japanese

I see the snow immoderate on the
Bough—while I watch wondering who has
Ordained the leaves to die for white blankets
Faceless like an unceasing crowd.

—Adrian Frey, 19, Oneonta NY

Kierkegaardian Maxim

Voices at our backs which we cannot answer;
We would not turn to salt if we replied,
But this is not the fate of transfiguration; indeed,
We wish to be transfigured by farther voices.
Two-headed gods, far from and near ourselves,
When ever could we be truly sure?
The heart feels, falls, philosophizes—
A life eked out by dialectic, is life not lived at all.

We are made under thunderstrokes, grasped before we are known,
Lived before we are to be endured.
We taste poisons, and rest assured we might yield antidotes—
Unordained alchemists, none is yet fit to live—
Our hearts trees full of a gash of flame, burnt and burning,
Till we of late learning have experienced
The science of windcraft.

—Andreas Zola, 20, Philadelphia

The Captain

The Captain sat silently in his quarters. A swathe of candles flickered on his desk, shrunken waxen stumps close to their end. Their sputtering light glowed over him, showing the Captain to be a gaunt man, fatless and bony, his tall form stooped over his maps and charts.

An unkempt salt and pepper stubble covered his jaw, and his hair was long and grey, giving an oily shine in the candlelight. His skin was pale and covered in minute scars and pockmarks, weathered rigid by storms and time.

Severe, dark-coloured eyebrows crowned a pair of deep-set blue eyes; the hint of ice around the fixated irises. They stared at a yellowed, wine-stained graph showing naval routes. Notes and measurements had been inked into the parchment, some scratched out or amended extensively, resulting in a convoluted mass of records that perhaps only the Captain himself could read.

His cold eyes blinked. Once, twice.

He remained frozen when one of the candles fell low and extinguished in a silent flutter of smoke. The weight of darkness grew, and the Captain's craned form lowered further. His eyes were straining as they attempted to read the occulted parchments in the dimming light, dying flames twisted on his pupils.

Like the Captain himself, his uniform was aged and worn. The navy blue of his overcoat had faded to periwinkle. The golden stitching had untethered and gone ragged loose. A button was missing, and the uniform was torn and riddled with holes. The undershirt, long beyond yesterday an impeccable white, had turned grey by the captain's own sweat and filth and the salty winds of the ocean.

The Captain's withered finger tapped absently on his oaken wood desk, wearing a ruby-inlaid gold ring. The jewel's ornaments were gracious and feminine; ill-fitting on the Captain's old ink-stained hand.

Behind the Captain, the glass windows showed the black waters of a moonless, heavenless night. A vague scattering of firelight touched the imminent surface of the waters. Beyond this small circle of yellow-

topped waves, the wall of darkness was so thick and impenetrable that it could well seem as if the ship had steered into a purgatory realm of nothingness; grounded in an abyss found at the bottom of the sea, or somewhere amongst the horizonless blackness of the cosmos.

The ship creaked.

Another candle extinguished and the captain finally stirred into motion. Movement slowly came to his body while his mind returned from deep thoughts. He reached for a derelict bottle at the corner of his desk. It was almost empty, a remnant of red swirling around the bottom. The Captain took a sip and it tasted degraded and sour, but he swallowed anyway. Then he opened a drawer and took out an untouched candle, spun thin and long, promising another hour of illumination.

He lit it with the waxen remains that had slowly melted out over his maps, and stuck the candle in the mouth of the wine-bottle. Green glass and the spoilt scarlet liquid reflected in his eyes, and the Captain renewed his attention to the parchment.

He took out a quill and scribbled another note on one of the chart's quadrants. The hand that wrote trembled momentarily, causing the Captain's steady script to slur; symbols melting together in their drying dye. Discontent, the Captain placed down the feather and rubbed his eyes. His mind was tired and sleep taunted him from the dark corners of his cabin, but he had to finish charting a course. His calculations were difficult and, frequently, contradictory. Last week's measurements now proved wrong, as were yesterday's.

The Captain grimaced as he cast his blood-shot eyes upon the map anew. He had sailed all bodies known to man. He had sailed into *here*, and he would sail back out again. He was the master and commander of this vessel, none other than him. This was *his* Kingdom and he needed no aid, nor would he call for it.

The Captain checked his clockwork. It ticked softly in his hand but his weary eyes took a moment before he was able to decipher the tiny mechanism behind the cracked glass.

It was quarter past four. He had seen this count before yet had not seen the night end. The Captain wondered if the mechanism was faulty or if his own weariness was warping his sense of time. *Eventually the light will return*, the Captain told himself.

There were no sounds save the periodic wooden moans emanating from the setting hull of his ship. Black waves gently bumped against the outside hull; calm waters.

—Zawisza Metz, 25, Utrecht

Talking Heads

stoned on a sunday afternoon i find myself
flipping through the five news channels
my cable package makes convenient,
listening to long-winded chatter
from the talking heads.
the situation always stays the same
whatever channel i change to,
but i find the flavor changes
by the button-press.

it's probably an odd obsession, but
a few times a day i find myself thinking
"how is the world going to hell now?"
and various voices give me answers
and feed me thoughts they want me to think.
the talking heads each make their case
or the ones that they were sold;
the attempts made to sell or slide
are, on me, wholly wasted investments.

this one, the one with the striking eyes
pushes each point far too hard;
this one smiles from ear to ear
while speaking about, of all things, a shooting;
this one often cries for the camera
and it probably persuades some folks;
this one has a hairpiece that looks like a mop
and preaches the apocalypse more than most.

there's a true lack of loyalty;
one day mr. x is hailed as a hero,
the next he's decried as a devil,
depending on what will irk viewers most.
making up my mind is easy enough,
only the opinion pushed by the most
networks and newscasters can be
confirmed safe for public consumption.

each day the stories get shuffled by the heads
and eventually i find an entertaining one
to slap me with my daily dosage:
500 milligrams of sensory overload.
without hearing the talking heads,
how would i know which ideas
i'm allowed to advocate and which
will make them talk about me?

—Rubin Marshak, 26, Milwaukee WI

The God

The God within us came down from the mount,
And fool that we are, we peered
Our acts take on their own voices
Our acts create a life for themselves, fathering
Sons it cannot see.
Who has seen themselves in motion, and not been blinded?
Even the secrets of our heart
Are too much and too far from us, they, too
Betray, and become greater than us,
And becoming greater, become us.

Our hands have seen with awful fear what it has possessed,
When we have found
We could not bury the corpse without burying ourselves
We had gone beyond ourselves and discovered
The titanic soul, flaming with limbs
We could not have dreamed of
This mirror which has ceased to be a mirror,
A truer equal, reflects on the image of conscience;
We disfigured, forgotten that we were disfigured,
Until we'd witnessed the old rite of the hands,
And recalled the smell of blood

Coming down, Mosesfaced,
We shall appeal, and be denied.

—Andreas Zola, 20, Philadelphia

渤海湾的海浪

Waiting For The Waves At Bohai

We were far from home.

We were walking down a path of gravel and dead vegetation, swatting mosquitoes from our clothes as we went along. We kept our heads down and our eyes fixed on the wetland beneath us, only stopping when we no longer saw green under our boots. We had hit sand; it was soaked and heavy and it did not give way to our footsteps.

The beach crimsoned, but everything else was colourless. The sky looked like the water when the water stood still; together they resembled a pane of glass.

We were standing at the end of the bay, the furthest point before the sea turns into the Pacific.

A wet sheet of ice had washed up on the fringe of the beach. I pressed on it with my foot as it cracked into many jagged shards. I joked about how the ice must have been sent by Korean defectors.

To make a land bridge.

We had gotten lost the day before. In a torrent of rain, Mao and I crouched over our map while searching for a pool of sunlight in which to read it. But we were drenched and there was no light, so we sat and made peace with the situation. We waited out the rain as it poured on us and flooded the insides of our boots. I mentioned how the rain could be put to better use in the steppe (for the yak), or in the village (for the wells). I told Mao about how we should be grateful, because rain makes for happy wells.

But Mao did not have a grateful look about him. He said everything that must grow had already grown, and that too much rain could kill the crops. This reminded him of a story we had both heard as children but could not remember the details of. A story about a drought and a

village boy who drank the wells and rivers dry. Condemned for his gluttony, he turned into a snake or a dragon or a tyrant, but we could not remember which.

The tide was rising on the bay, and water and seaweed was now wrapping around our ankles. "Mao and I stepped back and freed our boots from the weeds. We noticed that dirt from the plains still blackened the beds of our fingernails.

I considered asking if Mao wanted to swim. I thought about swimming out to sea.

I stepped into the water, and Mao trailed close behind. The water covered the tops of our boots before creeping up toward our waists. Our pants, waterlogged and heavy, were made of cotton spun by our grandmother and picked with our own hands.

"Take them," she told us. "Cotton will keep you warm."

Satisfied, we raced back onto the beach, lifting our knees high above the surface with each step. Back on shore, we fell onto the first dry patch of sand we found. We lay there on our backs, breathing by the mouthful.

I rolled over to my side to find a branch of driftwood lying next to me. I examined it: long, splintered, and dry to the bone. I rose to my feet and took it in my hands, finding it heavier than I expected. I let go of its one end and began to walk while it dragged behind me.

The wood left a deep impression in the sand as I went along. I stopped to notice how it had traced my steps, then took it in both hands and used its edge to write where the sand was still soft.

‘艾’ I carved in the sand.

‘奥’ I wrote next.

‘托’

I then laid back down with Mao.

The tide came in and filled the ridges I had made, washing the words from the sand. I nudged Mao and showed him how the words I drew had been taken away.

"Look," I said. I picked up the driftwood and wrote.

‘科拉’

"It goes away. Try it."

Mao etched his name. He finished the last stroke before the water flooded in. He drew his name again, and again the water took it. I laughed and grabbed it from his hands.

I planted the driftwood in the sand with one quick motion, burying its pointed end like a stake. It remained there as the water rushed around it.

"Wait for the waves," I said. "They'll take it."

We sat up shore, trading stories we had heard back in the village in the steppe. It was there that we first heard stories about the Pacific.

As night approached, we sat and looked on across the unstill sea. We waited for the waves to arrive as we listened to the insects speak among the bushes—a language we had not heard since we left home so many days ago.

The sun had set, and still there were no waves. It was quiet in the dark. In that darkness we knew only horrible thoughts, afraid that we had gone someplace that did not want us there. We did not get up or make a sound until the morning.

We woke up to find the stake gone from the beach. The cold Pacific had peeled back and taken it. What remained in its place was a hole no wider than a tea bowl, smooth around the edges and shallower than an inch. There were weeds and bits of plastic nestled in its center. I knelt and put some of the weeds in my mouth, scraping off grains of sand with my teeth and spitting them out. I swallowed the weeds whole. They slid slowly down my throat and my hunger subsided.

I thought about the vastness of the sea. I thought about how the tide, carried by forces cosmic and invisible, could not be brought any further. The beach on which I stood had denied those faraway forces. The tides and the currents and the waves and even the springtime monsoons, furious and immense—this was where they came to die.

I watched the water sit still and reflect the red sky above it. The water was now swarming with rafts, boats, and fishermen, which made the bay look smaller than I remembered it. Mao threw a stone toward the nearest boat. He called out to it.

“We could use a boat,” he said to me.

“But do you think they will take us?”

I felt a piece of driftwood nudge my feet. I looked down and noticed it was the same piece we had impaled into the beach the night before, having returned after a night of drifting along the shore. I retrieved it from the water, the wood now wet and rigid.

A small decked fishing vessel turned toward us, the captain waving from the stern.

“Here, take it,” I said, handing it to Mao.

—Liam H., 24, Toronto

Ode to a Yellow Begonia

A beautiful yellow begonia glittering in the summer light.
 A fantastical melody of shades, a feast for our eyes.
 Reaching above all other flowers in the grove.
 Straining its petals to reach even higher as is its natural right.
 Untainted by red dust or mortal lies.
 Occupying its own personal alcove.
 A child runs past it, chasing his floating kite.
 No attention paid to the flower's astonishing guise.
 Although he doesn't see it, he smells the clove.
 Typical mortal fallacy.

Time marches forward, and the flower begins to lose its sheen.
 Dark grey smoke rises from the chimney and drifts over the garden.
 The sky opens and rain falls through the smoke.
 The child is now a teen.
 The sky continues to darken.
 A frog lithely lets out a croak.
 He gazes out across the dreary scene.
 He views himself as its humble warden.
 It's past its nascency.

The flower has wilted now.
 It fought its hardest.
 But destiny had other plans.
 Across the road is a cow.
 It waits for the harvest.
 He rubs his cold hands.
 Gliding across the ground is a plough.
 He thinks of the cow's carcass.
 The teen is a now a man.
 He sinks into depravity.

—Oisín, 19, Galway

A Winter's Festival

I see below my way a town, alight
a winter's festival, in full moon's light,
above, from mountain's top, I stop and gaze
and see the peoples play, a joyous view
enjoyed I from the place where dark oaks grew,
their sinews sew, and branches wrench, a maze,
and on a minor twig, a sole soul stood,
a worm, of sorts, bedecked a cape of wood.
And thus, he traveled, and travailed, right through
and out of sight, and envied light, I rue
the thought that came with sight that came soon now,
I saw a couple bright and new, their eyes
a-burgeoning with a gray delight, there lies
their lies, that none will ever know, no how
a drink replenishes his eyes once more,
to lie and say the words he ought to store
within the heart that lovers share a part
that broken thing they sew together, a start
of many stubborn sticks to block their path,
to stab their heart, to break apart their oath,
that neither knew just what it meant, an oaf
could swear allegiance to an oaf, but wrath
can't be deceived, for it will fall its foe,
for its foe is everything, so bore a woe
did I within my single heart that I
had shared with none, not one under the sun,
for I had stored these things in the heart that I,
severely hated so, it I undone,
and found it I undone so stuffed it I
within the deepest grove, of thickest moss,
so even I could not retrieve it I
did want it gone fore'er, so found it loss.

A seldom thought did pass my mind, this eve
of winter's bliss, with snow's unfolding fall
that I descend and live with lyric towns
and marry a girl, most pretty as can be
as one below I see, but know that false,
for he is tortured too, him most of all,
for he must suffer with great weight of care,
to hazard stare, to be aware, of air
not solely of his own, and heavy heart
was borne by man who idly watched that night
far out of sight, and hid from towns' respite,
he ate raw fish and cried his lot, his part
of his own kind was very small and all
his body trembled through with fresh hell's fall.
The town rejoiced at fresh snowfalls with heat
of human company to treat its meet
they circled round a flame of ancient name
so very old that none remembered it
but all did deeply venerate its lit
the old being taunted by the new, the same
resounding mirth was echoed none by man
whose feet were frosted off by face of sun
whose eyes did gaze towards skies unend,
a crystal sheet, with diamond sleet,
whose mind did wander far from him
and ever ponder if, just if,
whose ears did hear the call of birds,
that'd come and pass a million times
again, with endless trilling chimes
and he could chime and die but once
whose lips were blue as gems
of sapphires stem, those springy stems
with new fires grin, he'd taste no more
whose ears did break as if a comb
of frozen bee abodes, whose buzz
he'd fear no more the free, gay fear
he feared before, these he recedes,
all lost in death, all rendered numb.

—Chad, Midwest

Out of the Basement and Into the Fire

It was nine in the morning and Mark finished his two-liter bottle of Mountain Dew and began to wonder if it did actually lower your sperm count or if that whole rumor was just a commentary on the sort of person who drinks Mountain Dew. He wasn't worried either way, as he knew his sperm count would never matter. He took both ironic pride and genuine shame in this fact. He threw the empty plastic bottle in his trash pile, which exclusively consisted of empty Mountain Dew bottles and crushed Celeste personal pizza boxes.

He grinned in the sterile glow of his four monitors, clicking between different tabs while paying half-attention to a YouTube video of a man building a hut out of mud. He was on a forum for plastic surgery discussion and started a new thread in the men's subforum: "Sorry guys, but leg lengthening surgery is completely hopeless," the title read.

"People on here try to force the idea that you're going to get more bang for your buck by having steel rods surgically implanted into your shins to eke out an extra two or three inches instead of a rhinoplasty or some jaw work—that notion is entirely false. Granted, this level of stupidity is something you can expect from a bunch of antisocial basement-dwellers that have no concept of male aesthetic. If you put Brad Pitt's face on Peter Dinklage's body, nine times out of ten, that guy is going to get better results than, say, Rob Gronkowski. The height trolls are going to disagree, but facts are facts. Just go outside in the real world (yes, I know it's hard for some of you!) and anything you observe will confirm what I'm saying here. Plus, chances are this kind of surgery will fuck up your gait. You're going to be walking like a moron in complete agony all the time. The safer option is to get on some 'roid cycles to increase your width, wear lifts inside shoes that are a size too big so that you can walk around on the balls of your feet without it being noticeable, and strategically using your environment so as to always

have the high ground. I am 5' 6.75" and most people I know think I am between 6'2" and 6'3" all because of 'roids, lifts, and the high ground."

He repeatedly hit the refresh button. After about five minutes of nothing, people had taken the bait and the responses began rolling in.

"There's no way people think you're over six feet. The only people telling you that are the voices in your head."

"Absolute bullshit. This asshat has been trolling this place for months but anyone who has any experience with this kind of stuff knows that metal rods are the way."

"Do you also tie phone books to your shoes?"

"C'mon, Peter Dinklage isn't THAT short."

"I think this guy is right and honestly it's making me kind of depressed."

And already fifteen more. Just like that. He would let this one simmer for a while as he soaked in the dopamine. It gave him another idea. He clicked over a few more tabs to a forum where amateurs discussed brain chemistry and logged into his account. There, he had been posing as a neurobiology PhD from Oxford, with mixed success. He started a new thread: "No joke. Colleague in my lab just confirmed it—dopamine doesn't exist." He knew that most users of the site would ignore it but usually his threads were able to suck in the enthusiasts as opposed to the professionals.

He looked at his other monitor where Facebook was open. Using a series of photos he had borrowed from some stranger's profile, Mark pretended to be a high school junior named Delilah McKinney in suburban Charlotte, North Carolina. This was one of his better projects. He spent over a year slowly building up his friend count, liking all of the right pages, and commenting on all of the right posts to convincingly give the impression that he (well, she) was an actual student at Marvin Ridge High. He spent months tracking what popped up in his feed to discern the social architecture of the school. Who was rich and who was poor, who was artsy, who was athletic, who was popular, who wasn't, who might shoot the place up, and so on. Eventually he figured out that a senior named Brooke Crawford was the most popular—not only was she pretty, with her pictures raking in hundreds of likes on the day they were posted... yesterday, she changed her profile picture to one that included her father, with the caption: "Happy 50th Dad!" followed up with a heart and a cake emoji. The comment section was littered with a bunch of friends reassuring Brooke of her beauty along with praises of Dave, her father. Mark was practically salivating at the opportunity he was presented with. Nearly a year of work all leading up to this. Time to strike.

“kind of weird that ur sitting on ur dads lap especially with shorts that small lmao. also, no joke you kinda look like a dog.”

He was grinning so widely, he felt that his face might tear straight down the middle as he slapped the enter key. Mark relished in the presumed drama that would arise at lunch tables hundreds of miles away from his computer. He was beaming with pride, his mind celebrating the feat he had just pulled off. On the other hand, he felt a lingering specter of depression creeping in on the periphery. He'd never get to witness the chaos, the frustration, the fruit of his work. He would never get to see Brooke's scowl as she pulled out her iPhone and read his Facebook comment. He would never hear the ensuing dialogue with the other members of her clique:

“Who the fuck is she?”

“What a bitch.”

“Seriously, what's wrong with this cunt?”

But he figured that didn't matter to him. It was all about the implied suffering, the implied confusion. He didn't need the faces or expressions or gasps. He knew this would be an issue from the beginning though. That's why it was fun to live in the forums. People told you about how they feel. They write down your reactions and show you. No one does that on Facebook.

His stomach grumbled. The Dew wasn't enough. He hollered upstairs.

“MA!”

No response.

“MAAAAAAAAAA!”

No response.

“Mom! Are there any chocolate chip muffins left?”

And still no response.

He got out of his chair and climbed up the stairs and out of the basement. He squinted as the bright sunlight hit his eyes through the windows. He looked around in the kitchen. No muffins. He walked down the hallway to check for his mother. Not there. On his way back to the basement, he noticed a note and some cash on the dining room table:

“Mark—I need you to go down to the store and get the propane tank refilled and hook it up to the grill. Thank you. Mom.”

Mark pulled his phone out of his sweatpants pocket and called his mother.

“Mark?”

“Ya hey Mom. Are you serious with this note thing?”

“What?”

"Why do we need gas for the grill *today*?"

"We're having your uncle over for dinner. Is that a problem?"

"The place to get the tanks filled is like ten miles away and you and Dad took the cars."

"Jesus Christ."

"What?"

"First, it's only two miles away. Second, I *gave* you the money to refill the tank. Third, you're twenty fucking eight years old Mark. You know how to walk. I expect the grill working when I get back."

She hung up.

Mark sneered as he looked out the window. He had to go outside.

*

Mark stared at his reflection in the window of Maria's Convenience and adjusted his blue-with-white-polka-dots ascot. It helped bring out his eyes and created the illusion that his neck was thicker than it actually was, which was an important part of maximizing his appearance since his face was gaunt and almost skeleton-like. Luckily, at 6' 3" he didn't have to worry about shin inserts. He heard the soft hum of the front door of the store opening next to him. It was one of Maria's employees.

"You alright dude?"

"Hm?"

"You've been staring through that window for five minutes."

"No, I haven't."

"I'm behind the counter. I can see you. You've just been standing there."

"Yes, but I wasn't looking *through* the window."

"Uhh..."

"I was looking *at* the window. Looking at me. My reflection. I wanted to see what I look like. That's all."

"Okay..."

"Well, what do you think?"

"About what?"

"How I look."

"I'll be in the store if you need anything."

"I'm sorry."

Mark followed the Maria's employee into the store, the empty propane tank bouncing against his leg, and strolled past the refrigerators, scanning the various bottles and cans for Mountain Dew. Once he

found it and picked it up, he left the tank on the floor, and read every word on the bottle's label.

The faint hum of the door opening sounded again. Mark looked back towards the door out of curiosity. It was a short man sporting a crew cut and a polo shirt. He made eye contact with Mark. Mark was hoping it would be a quick glance and then he would look away, but he kept staring and now their eyes had been locked on each other for so long that it had become awkward. Mark wondered why the man continued to stare at him. And he wondered why he, himself, insisted on staring back. The man began squinting. He wondered if this was a "dirty look," but was just hoping for the whole ordeal to end. Four or five seconds had felt like half an hour. Mark felt like he was sweating, as if the sterile fluorescent light above him was the sun itself. A wide smile spread across the man's face and he looked like he was about to say something.

"Mark?"

His heart dropped. Panicked, he rapidly flipped through the Rolodex of faces and names inside his head but wasn't able to find a match. He could feel his heart beating faster and his throat knotting up and his eyes watering. He knew he could just ask the man how he knew him, but he was extremely worried that he would insult the man and he would be put off by it and then he would have this angry man—this man he didn't even know but who apparently knew him—milling about in the store with him and it would just make what already seemed like a painfully awkward situation that much worse. He kept digging for possible solutions. The horrifying ambiguity of what to do and what could possibly happen each millisecond terrified him and made him ache with fear as if he were strapped to a lethal injection chair. But then he found something.

"Uhh, I think you're mistaking me for someone else. My name is Chad. Chad Steel."

The little man burst out laughing. To Mark, this felt like the man had just run over and stabbed him in the chest in both a figurative and literal sense—he could feel his heart palpitating and worried that it might just explode or completely stop. Then the man stepped forward and gave him a playful punch on the arm. His slender muscles began loosening and he thought he might melt down into a puddle.

The man said to him, red in the face and smiling wide, "Shit man, you were always a class clown. What's new dude? I don't think I've seen you since graduation! It's been too long."

He felt his heartbeat normalizing and his muscles stiffening back to a regular level. He didn't feel like dying or collapsing into the fetal

position anymore. While he still didn't recognize the man or know his name, he felt better because at least now he had a platform from which he could continue the conversation. He never went outside of his dorm room in college so he knew the graduation being referred to was from his high school. That was all he needed. He could run with the rest.

"Same stuff guy, just stacking cash and crushing ass. What about yourself?"

"Ha! Love it. I've been good. I'm just back in town seeing my parents, but I live in D.C. now and do consulting. Nice ascot by the way—bold move."

"Thanks, but my name's not Scott." Mark grinned and pointed a finger gun at the man.

A smile of surprised amusement spread across the man's face as he slapped his knee. The duo walked over to the counter and the man asked for a box of Camel cigarettes.

Mark raised an eyebrow, "You still smoke?"

"Eh, every now and then," the man replied. "Here," he said, grabbing the Mountain Dew out of Mark's hand, "I can take care of that."

"Oh no, seriously man, you don't—"

"It'll be quicker."

Mark shrugged and the cashier rang up the cigarettes and soda and the two walked outside.

"Are you doing anything?"

Mark worried about leaving the tank and not getting it filled, but he figured his mother wouldn't be home for quite some time. "Not really. What's up?"

"I don't know man. Want to cruise around and catch up?"

"I'd love to."

The man walked over to a fifth generation Corvette and ran his finger along the driver's side front fender, grinning. "Consulting really pays man."

"Oh, believe me—I know," retorted Mark.

"What do you do?" asked the man as he entered the driver's seat and opened up the passenger's side door.

Mark's heart began running cold again as he scraped through the depths of his brain for a valid explanation. He looked in the same part where he came up with all of his trolling ideas. He found something.

"Size consulting."

The man lowered his sunglasses quizzically as he started the engine, "Size consulting?"

Mark forced a cough to give him a second of prep time before he went off on his schpiel. "Yeah, I studied Size Engineering while I was

at RPI and worked at a big firm before I went out and established my own consultancy.”

“Size Engineering? Never heard of it,” said the man, with a hidden but palpable smugness.

“You haven’t heard of it?”

“No. Never.”

“Oh, it’s a great field. Probably the best to get into. It’s new, but it’s growing and the potential for where it can go and the amount of money you can make doing it is virtually unlimited.”

The man chuckled and smirked as he slowed towards the stop light. “What is it?”

Mark sighed. “It’s pretty difficult to explain. But here—think of this. Have you seen the movie *Jaws*?”

“Yeah.”

“Alright, so you know that part where they finally see *Jaws* and he’s just totally massive? Like much larger than they were expecting? And one of the guys says ‘We’re going to need a bigger boat?’”

“Yeah.”

“Well, if they had a Size Engineer in that situation, they would have had a big enough of a boat.”

“I guess that kind of makes sense to me. So, is it like naval architecture or something?”

Mark smiled. “Oh no, no—no. It’s far more complex than that. It’s a very quantitative and broad way of looking at sizes, shapes, and so on, and determining how they fit within greater systems to help optimize efficiency and output. Remember: *bigger isn’t always better*.”

“So, who do you work for?”

“Well pretty much anyone I want, man. Everyone needs a size engineer these days. I mean, sure, the applications in typical and more pedestrian engineering fields are quite obvious. But then you have tech. And finance. Like, needing to know how big the market is. What stocks should be priced at. How many to issue. I actually just signed a contract with a major company that’s doing their IPO soon and they want me to handle everything on the quant side.”

The man raised his eyebrows in astonishment. “Shit man, that’s really impressive.”

“Thank you.”

The man gave Mark a casual pat on the shoulder. “I’m not going to lie dude,” Mark knew at this point that the man took his bait, “and I’m probably going to sound like a dick because of this, but I’m really impressed that you’ve really made something out of yourself. I was kind

of worried about you after you couldn't play football anymore. You just sort of dropped off the map."

At that point he realized that he was talking to Connor McCabe. They were friends and co-captained the freshman football team together in high school. He ended up playing wide receiver at Brown. Mark felt a rush of calmness upon realizing this and almost wanted to confide in him—break the whole schtick and tell him about the pain-killers, the alarmingly high dosages of antidepressants, the trolling, the living in his mother's basement. He almost wanted to just start crying and collapse into his arms, so Connor could hug him. But he had already marked Connor as a stranger and started his trolling campaign against him. And he was dedicated to his art.

"Did you ever recover from that?"

Mark realized that he had been staring off at the road and had momentarily tuned Connor out.

"No. Not really."

Connor shook his head. "Damn shame man. You were a hell of a tackle."

"Thank you."

Connor took a left turn and pulled into a parking lot. They were in front of Pearl Liquors.

"Do you want anything?"

Mark smiled.

"I'll come in with you."

Mark followed Connor into the liquor store. He was unsure exactly whether he should follow Connor around the store or wander off on his own. Following him would be creepy and could possibly give the impression that he was a teetotaler, but he knew if he walked around on his own it could possibly make their visit to the store much longer than usual—you have one individual staring at the beer section, another in the vodkas, they both shuffle around for a while, too indecisive and insecure and ignorant of the other's desires to pick out anything, eventually converging in the middle, consulting with each other, possibly making a shared purchase—and the thought of even going through this ordeal pained him. But Connor saved him.

"What're you thinking about getting?"

"I'm not sure."

"Me neither man. You ever try this?"

He grabbed a six pack of craft beers off of the shelf in front of them. Mark didn't recognize the brand. There was a toddler with a skull for a head riding around on a big wheel emblazoned on the box. He figured

it was some sort of Industrial Metal IPA. Every subgenre had one at this point.

“Not much of a beer guy honestly.”

“You’re kidding.”

“No, of course not,” he choked on the not—it was a slip that he hoped Connor wouldn’t notice.

Connor shrugged, “To each his own.”

Thank God.

Mark walked through the vodkas and gins and settled on the whiskeys, looking for anything under \$20. He debated the merits of Wild Turkey versus Old Thompson in his head and figured that today he would be a value drinker and picked up the \$9 liter of Old Thompson. He saw that Connor was still browsing through the beers, so he kept slowly weaving through the aisles, waiting for his acquaintance to pick out his purchase. When Connor picked up a six pack, they locked eyes and converged together at the register. Connor was first.

“The Fat Tire is really good,” the cashier remarked.

“Oh, for sure man. It’s one of my new favorites,” Connor replied, handing over his card.

Mark shuffled into the vacuum in front of the cashier that Connor recently occupied, placed the whiskey on the counter, and slid it forward.

“Old Thompson, really?”

Mark was unsure of how to respond. He felt like he was suffocating in space, but then genius level social intuition flashed in his brain. He felt saved. Smirking and rolling his eyes towards Connor he replied, “It’s a great value and I really like the taste.”

It wouldn’t get even a chuckle but at least Connor smiled before turning around and heading to his car. Mark gave the cashier his Mom’s twenty-dollar bill and was given his change.

“Where’s the bathroom?”

“It’s an employee bathroom.”

“Can I just use the bathroom? I’m a paying customer.”

The employee sighed and pulled a key out from under the counter and handed it to Mark.

“Behind the freezer on the left.”

Mark smiled, “Oh, you’re too kind, sir.”

He placed his bottle of whiskey wrapped in a plastic bag on the top of the toilet and spent a moment looking at himself in the mirror. He thought he was good looking but was deeply troubled by how things could be better. He didn’t like how his shoulders sat at an angle due to the flexion in one of his knees being off. He looked at his legs and real-

ized they looked even worse than his shoulders. He thought about a different reality where his legs and shoulders were straight and he wasn't so skinny and had a thick neck. As he stared, he clenched his jaw. He felt like his molars were going to split in half and he could feel the nerves in his teeth. He thought about how fragile existence was and how a few millimeters of bone or tissue could make you either a model, or a result of fetal alcohol syndrome. And how people look at you differently and treat you differently so you act differently and you become a different person altogether.

He reached for the whiskey and unwrapped the plastic bag from the top of the bottle, unscrewing the cheap, plastic cap. With white knuckles, he held the bottle by the neck and let the cheap liquor flood into his mouth, opening his throat and letting it fall through. He did this about five times before he felt like he was going to spit up and then screwed the cap back on the bottle and shoved a stick of gum into his mouth.

He left the bathroom and walked out the store before it hit him. He missed a step on the way out and stumbled onto his hands and knees.

"You all right bud?"

He said he was all right and got into the passenger's seat of his friend's Corvette. Connor pulled out of the parking lot and headed down the road.

Connor broke the momentary silence.

"Are you going to stick to Size Engineering?"

"Yes. I make tons of money. I love running my own company."

"Are you all right man? Are you going to stick to consulting?"

"For the short-term definitely. Long-term, I think I'd want to try and get into lobbying or something like that though."

Mark nodded and the conversation fell into a dead silence again. He felt drunk, but calm at least. As they drove through their old town, he realized how the landmarks around didn't change. He remembered them from childhood but still hadn't seen things like the town hall or the mall or even the high school since just before college. Connor broke the silence again.

"How bad was your knee thing?"

"What?"

"Like how bad was it? Like just an ACL tear or did you really fuck it up?"

"It was so bad I couldn't play football any more. It was extremely bad."

"That sucks man."

“I know,” Mark mumbled as he reached for the bottle under the seat.

“You just fell off the map after that. You ever think about if things ended up differently?”

Mark unscrewed the cap of the bottle and began chugging from the bottle again.

“Jesus Christ, Mark. Put that away!”

He kept chugging.

“I’m going to get pulled over! Put it away!”

Connor reached for the bottle but Mark dodged him and palmed his face with his free hand. He put the bottle down, capped it, and rolled it under the seat again.

“Relax.”

“That’s not funny man, we could get pulled over for that—what the fuck is wrong with you?”

“Everything.”

“What?”

He already felt the spins. “I live in my mom’s basement.”

A scowl of confusion wiped across Connor’s face. “What?”

“I live in my mom’s basement. I have never had a real job. I spent the first six months after my injury getting high on painkillers after school and playing *Call of Duty*. Then Mom sent me to some summer rehab shit and I saw a psychiatrist and got a bunch of antidepressants, but,” he let out a half-burp/half-gasp, “they didn’t work, so I got better ones and better ones.”

“Jesus Christ.”

He pulled out the whiskey again and Connor put his arm across him.

“Calm the fuck down!”

He nudged the steering wheel to shake him for a second and grabbed the whiskey, uncapped it, stiff-armed Connor and began chugging. He heard the hum of the Corvette’s engine grow louder and his back press further into the chair. Connor’s arm shot out like a frog’s tongue again and Mark stood up with his hips against the edge of the windshield. He gagged, dropping the bottle on the side of the road, and a glob of brown vomit splashed on the windshield. Connor slammed on the brakes.

*

Mark woke up and saw a blur. He kept rubbing his eyes to improve the resolution. He felt a hand running through his hair. He could make

out his mother's brown eyes and the rotating shadows of the fan on the ceiling above.

"I'm sorry."

The brown eyes were heavy with tears that never seemed to fall out and onto the face they belonged to. The lips were crooked in a smirk of disappointment and relief. They lowered down and he felt their warmth press against his forehead.

"I'm sorry."

He could feel his eyes growing heavy with tears that fell out and onto his face, trickling down the sides of his cheeks. The lower lip trembled with a drunken and sad twitchiness. They stayed where they were.

"I'm so sorry."

He felt the hands, one caressing his hair and the other cradling the side of his face. He felt pain in his face but relief from the warmth of the hand.

"I don't know how it got this bad. I'm so sorry."

He raised his hands and put them on her hands. The caressing and cradling stopped.

"It's okay."

He felt a simultaneously deep pain and freeing relief.

"I'm sorry."

"What happened?"

"I don't know."

He heard his mother's faint gasp and saw the tears finally leave her eyes.

"How did I get here?"

His stomach was in pain and felt like it was rotting. He felt like if he vomited, he would end up spewing out the entirety of his intestines. He considered seppuku. He wanted his insides out.

"I don't know. You were just on the lawn with your face all scraped and you were out cold. I couldn't move you and I had to wait until Dad came home so he could pick you up and get you inside."

"Did Uncle Jim end up coming over?"

"You're still drunk."

"I know I'm sorry."

"It was Uncle Jack. And no, we called it off."

"I don't know. I'm so sorry. I don't know why it's like this."

"It's okay."

"I don't know why I'm like this."

"I wish we knew."

"I think I want to die."

“Don’t say that.”

“I want to die. It’s all I dream about. I’m getting my skull caved in with a hammer. I’m being castrated. I’m getting kicked to death by an angry mob. I think I just really want to die. I know you hate hearing it, but I just want to die.”

He saw his mother’s eyes squint and her lips reel back, revealing the teeth on the sides. She leaned over again and kissed him and rubbed his hair again. She was breathing heavily.

“I hate hearing you say that. It kills me.”

“I know, but I don’t know what else to say.”

He sat up and turned to his mother and embraced her. All that could be heard were her whimpers, and all he could feel was the chaotic undulating of her diaphragm and her arms wrapped around his back. She cocked her mouth towards his ear.

“I love you.”

“I love you too. I’m so sorry about this. But I love you.”

He disengaged from their embrace and looked his mother in the eye.

“I love you.”

He kissed her on the cheek and stood up and began walking out of the living room.

“What are you doing?”

Mark drunkenly made his way through the dining room to the head of the stairs. He walked back down into the glow of the basement.

—Beauford Buchanan, 24, New England

Forever Things

one:
forever things

Its my first day at school. i want to play legos but the other kids wont let me. mommy says its fun to play alone. i find a green marker and draw horses. she loves horses. green horses most because green is my favorite.

jake is here. he picks me up in his arms spins me like cinderella. the seat in the car is warm.

“You want to go swimming?”

i look at the can of squirt. it is always there.

“yes”

he puts on my arm floaties and i jump in. i swim fast but he catches me and i am flying. he tells me you must have good water wings to fly so high. i say you gave them to me. he says you dont forget anything.

“jake its raining”

he laughs and throws me in the water. i scream and he becomes a shark and chases me. the shark becomes jake and jake carries me out of the water. he takes off my wings. he puts me in a towel. i put my towel on the seat like mommy showed me.

“You’re just like your mother.”

mommy

“where are my horses”

“They’re in the back seat, safe and sound.”

“those are mommys horses. and thats your squirt” i dont like squirt but i like that its always there.

“That’s right, baby girl.”

im on jakes shoulders taping the horses on the fridge. mommy is home. she is singing her favorite song. wild horses couldnt drag me away. wild wild horses well ride them someday.

“mommy look what i made you”

“Look at those horses! They’re beautiful. Thank you, Emma. Jake, can I talk to you in the other room?”

jake looks at me.

“Why don’t you sit at the table and draw Mommy something else, okay, mija?” he puts his hands on his ears. that means earmuffs.

i do earmuffs but i hear mom yelling. i take earmuffs off. i draw mommy a picture of the house she says we will live in with jake. she says there will be lots of squirt in the fridge when we live together because its jakes favorite. its not ours yet but when mommy gets sad we go to the white house and sit in the car and look at it.

theyre in the kitchen. i think jake will see i dont have earmuffs on and i will be in trouble.

“I’m going to work now. I love you, okay, mija?”

“i love you too”

he kisses me and tries to kiss mom but she pulls away.

he is gone. —

“Let’s go to bed now, sweetie. You sleep with me tonight.”

i get in bed with mommy. i look at the can of squirt by the bed.

“tomorrow I will draw pictures of squirt cans for our new fridge. yellow ones. jake likes yellow. he says he likes squirt because the soda tastes yellow like lemons”

mommy is quiet.

“mommy”

mommy is crying.

i move to her side of the bed and hug her. my sleeve is wet.

“am I going swimming with jake tomorrow”

“No.”

“i dont want to go to school. i want to see jake” i dont want to make mommy sadder but i want jake to come back.

“Not now, sweetie. Don’t cry. We’ll talk about this later.”

jake says adults say some words but mean other words. like when mommy says later she means never.

“Everything will be okay.”

mommy is asleep. i know if jake is gone it means we wont live in the big white house. i go to the kitchen get the drawing of the house and hide it in the place of forever things. mommy doesnt know about it but jake does. theres a lego from before i knew him. i forgot why its there but jake says it must be special and i should keep it because maybe someday i will remember.

jake says remembering is another way to keep things. mommy says its good to forget. i think im not like mommy because i dont like forgetting.

im crying. mommy wont show me her remembering pictures so i will make my own. i will draw a picture with the cans and put it with the house in the place of forever things. yellow cans not green. i wont forget why.

Two: Woman

Thunderstorms in Missouri are like the coming of God. The air buzzes loud and still, the scent of rain hanging heavy in the heat. Adults go to bed early, letting the sound of water lull the children to sleep. Then all is quiet except the voice of God.

If there is time before the first drop, I run through the backyard with a jar and catch the few fireflies brave enough to illuminate the dusk. Then I grab a book I've read before, sit on the covered deck in a rocking chair and wait. Wait for what all thunderstorms kindle—memories. They aren't happy ones, but I let myself get lost in them anyway. Memories of my mom and step dad upstairs in their separate rooms and the far-off look in her eyes when she talks of the past and all the men she used to date. Of the stories she tells me on long drives or late nights when my step dad is at work and my grandparents are in bed. Artists, musicians, druggies. All the dances she'd go to, bars where she'd sing. I imagine the Levis and cowboy hats, the spin of worn cowboy boots on wooden floors as they twirl my mother in circles, her gray green eyes sparkling. I imagine her sitting on a tall stool on stage, a soft-spoken man with rough hands helping her petite figure onto the seat that's too tall for her, her small hands wrapped round a microphone. Then the silence of the crowd as her raw, untrained voice sings the things they wish they'd sung themselves.

Except for at my uncle's wedding, I've never seen my mother dance, and now the only time I hear her sing is in the car when she thinks I'm asleep, the country station turned low so it doesn't wake me. In these moments, the two of us separate from the world outside, her voice reveals the dreams beneath the songs, the dreams of all the things she thought she'd have but ended up without. The love she wished for that she knows she could have had with someone else. I hear her regret, her longing. And then I hear her voice grow closer as she turns her head to look at me, the reason she married the man she loves but does not.

And I wonder, not for the first time or the last, why she left Jake. Why my father left us. Why, if I'm 18 and an adult now, she refuses to talk about the past like she always promised she would when I grew up, and instead she leaves me wondering, always wondering.

I keep my eyes closed, not wanting to see the look of a mother who has sacrificed everything to give her child a life of soft men with rough hands, nights spent dancing and days spent dreaming, and I wish she could get them back. All the things she said she gave up for my sake. I wish that I could finally get them back.

Three: His Hands

He reaches his hand across the table to grab a napkin. Long, thick fingers, clean cuticles, nails shaped like squares. I stare down at the menu. I can't look at his face, the face that was supposed to look nothing like mine.

I'll have water with no lemon. A plain cheeseburger, medium-well. The corner of his lip curves upward into a crooked grin as he places his order, and pictures of my mother flash before me, her smile straight and small. I order the same thing, knowing I will never forget this moment, my hands his hands, his smile my smile.

He talks about himself, friendly but nervous. So many questions I want to ask him, things big, small. His age. His favorite color. Why he left my mother in the delivery room and never came back. Then the questions others ask, not knowing how it feels when I cannot answer. Medical forms, college applications. Blanks people take for granted. Blanks I could never fill.

His answers come, but I'm not ready for them. The story a child constructs to explain why a father doesn't love her, the story a child builds her life around, collapses over cheeseburgers, fries. *We've met before.* She told me we hadn't. *You were four.* I was so old, yet I don't remember him at all. Unless...*Did we play Legos together?* No, *we played with trains.* Then who was the Lego man? Who were any of the men? I know Jake's name, and the name pins the memories to a time, a face. But the other memories have no names, no place in the story before my step dad came into the picture. And now the man whose absence mattered most is right in front of me, willing to answer everything, and I can't help but think of who she chose instead, a man with money and a nice smile but, as we found out years later, mean hands.

I know she did it for my sake, that she thought she was protecting me by lying, by saying my father wanted to have nothing to do with me, by hiding me from him all those years he spent looking for me. I know I should forgive her. But I don't want to forgive her. I want to be mad, and I am mad, at her and myself and how I never questioned her story, how the only explanation she ever gave was always only *he's gone*. Never the truth, never *I only dated the Lego man for a month, I left Jake because he was selling drugs, I left the millionaire because you hated him, I married your step dad because I wanted you to have a father who could pay the bills*.

I look at my life and all the men I left so they couldn't leave me first. I look at my life and realize it's hers. But I don't want her life. I don't want to be the woman who leaves, the woman who is left behind and the woman who is defined by leaving. I won't forget her sacrifice. I won't forget that it was almost for nothing. Because if I hadn't found this man, my life would have turned out just like hers. And although I can't forgive her, for the first time in 21 years, I can forgive him, the man who has been looking for me as long as I've been looking for him.

I reach my hand across the table, reach for his hand and for the love it's always held for me. I don't know what to say. I know I don't have to say anything. Instead, I let the feeling of his hand, my hand, *our shared hands*, sink in, and as I cry in this restaurant, tears all over the table, tears dripping from my face, I am crying for the little girl I used to be, the one who was never loved, and I am crying because I know that finally, I have to let her go, let her and the memories and the helplessness that came with her go. To become the woman I was supposed to be—a woman worth loving, a woman who is loved.

Holding his hand, I'm terrified, but at least I'm not alone.

—Caitlyn Thompson, San Diego CA

Seasons

The branches are naked
a skeleton stark
sky frames its fingers
grey and patchy
as clouds shift along
their way toward softer air
Gnarled fingers bump up
knobs on the black burst green
tiny leaves thrust
violent against dark wood
intense sky
Sun beats down on earth
which pushes back
exuberant
Full leaves deep green
catch rays
hot and heavy
powering blooms and fruit
fat and sensual
wait to be plucked
air a cocktail
intoxicating mix
I lie under boughs
and drift into
The first flush of orange
yellow red and gold
to brown
and the bracing bodies of blanching air
as biome tries to make up mind
a breeze or gust
strips color away
vibrant shock whips off in winds
lies on ground turning to soil
soil and must

kiss me
kiss you
we make eyes as branches relinquish their last
Skeletal fingers sway
a barren wave
thanking the sky
reminding sun they're here
waiting for one more chance
to scream green
against the grey

—BEAST, 28, Asheville NC

Coffeehouse

coffee beans ground into fine dust
filling the air like a noxious gas
only a dollar for a cup
though the service is lousy (they only take cash)
and the furniture is old, weathered.
a pretty girl sits behind the counter
her hair is dyed neon pink
and she smiles at the customers,
raking in tips
from boys trying to impress her.
most days it is quiet here
it's dim-lit and, anyway,
they don't advertise.
i sit and read or write, drinking coffee,
everything else fades into obscurity.

—Rubin Marshak, 26, Milwaukee WI

Two Birds in the Earthset

The solar glare beat off the soap-white rocks as a revenant floated along its spartan ridge. It sent out chalky sparks whenever it landed, only to hop up into the filth of space again. The lunar spectre traversed without noise. In the far distance was a swirling ball of aqua blue and bright red, no more than a spot of oil in a black, wide broth. It sat and watched its child, at least the ghost of it, serpentine his way across the gray.

The sailor of the stars walked along the bleak shoreline, in actuality a sequence of unnamed maria, her waters evaporated from nothing into causality.

Swirling dust slowly, lone dreams guide the weightless phantom across sunbeams forged upon the attic shadow to an unfamiliar place. Unseen sand. The ghosts of soft, soft brown earth. On the slope of the wide crater the phantom happens upon a particular stone. Charred and bitten and strangely paternal, as he feels in his calloused digits. Packs it with him. Climbs back up the bowl. Slogs his way back across barren fields to an ejected piece of home that wasn't home.

—Here, Berlioz. I found this. Some rock.

—It's... geometric. Crater's north, right?

—Yes. Plenty more there. I think this is asteroid ejection.

—Let me put it under a compound microscope. Can you get some slides?

Berlioz pointed to a drawer.

—Just as I thought. Nothing like we've seen before. But I can't see any closer without the electron microscope.

—We scrapped it last month for copper.

—Serves it right. We never even needed it until now.

—I felt weird there. The place the rock was found.

—How so?

—Calm. Very peaceful. As if I was protected.

—I feel calm, too, when I hold this rock in my hand.

—Will it help us?

—Not anymore.

—Really?

—Let's not go to that rock-strewn field anymore. There's nothing for us there.

Berlioz hoisted himself up, and motioned as if he was going to throw the rock into the refuse bin. But he stood like a Himalayan guide with the black object in a firm grip. He dropped it into his friend's open hand.

—Let's sup now.

—Good idea, Mitya.

*

And then it was the last day of humanity, when it was dejectedly determined.

Two soft rubber soles squeaked their way to the canteen, where the life support systems lay gutted like a fish. The automated food processor had broken down four days ago and had been rummaged for the ingredients, now being kept in the refrigerated specimen drawers in Research.

Berlioz used the last of the butter to make three one-eyed jacks while Mitya sat in the usual corner reading. The aroma of toast and the burnt edges of egg suffused the room. The two drew straws for the third. Berlioz stuffed it right down his throat. How morose!

Where the smell of eggs and toast could not reach, the black sky lay compounded in a small porthole on the far wall of the canteen. True meaninglessness, perhaps—yet for the two voyagers, there was plenty of bread. Plenty of eggs. Yet, no butter meant these ingredients might as well be shot into space.

—I think I cooked the eggs-in-a-basket the best today.

—What's funny?

—Friend, no matter how good food is... we'll get hungry again.

—Right.

—Something to laugh about.

The gray. Gray, just like ashes, or lead. The wide-open range of the Gray. Borderless, nationless gray. Woodless, grassless gray. Snowless. Oceanless. Boundless, empty gray.

The long winter months. Gray, just like the cloth clad by angels, or a mighty cloud above the ocean. The closed, forested ranges of those long winter months. Its borders stood unmoved, moved only once, long ago by an ancient, primordial force. A nation of ice, unperturbed and

perpetual. The woodpeckers that sound in the glens. The junebugs in the wildgrass. The snow that blankets the rocks by the stream. The endless ocean, cracking, booming, as the ice shifts on its shelf. The gray sky man cannot touch.

The two men sauntered to the EVA preparation module, joking the entire way. Their liners, the dye faded from repeated use, were stitched up to hell. The comms they wore were tangled, the equipment check almost unconsciously absent. They seemed like men out of prison—the jovial tears that lined their eyes, and the faint but honest smiles that evinced years of sadness.

—When I was a little boy, I grew terribly ill. My mother... she didn't have any money to take care of me. For two weeks all I did was lie in bed and let death slowly consume me. I couldn't move, and I could barely breathe. Yet whatever I did, the one thing I could not do was close my eyes. For two weeks I felt as if I had no dreams. I was sure that if I closed my eyes I would die. This is the earliest memory I can remember. Every time I launch, and the rocket lifts off, I keep my eyes open. They're open all the way through, until I can feel them burst from my sockets. If I don't keep them open, I'll die.

—Mitya, are you really going to do this?

—Yes.

—At least take the hardened uplink module.

Dmitri was silent.

Berlioz helped Mitya into his EVA suit, a Russian orange, while Berlioz got in an American white. Mitya's visor was an uneasy golden colour. It was a deep reflection of the outside world, bulbous and all-capturing. The airlock slowly disengaged, and the doors opened once again. There sat the gray. The black. The red planet. The bright light. He sauntered over to the gray dust. Touched it and rubbed it in his gloves. Bowed to the post-Earth, and went out further from the base. One last trek through the maria. The mountainless mountains and the valleyless valleys. The unborn rivers and the unborn wooded tracts. The invisible owl that hoots in the distance and the phantom cicadas that trace the eternal night.

—Let's just die here. Close to home.

The cosmonaut stood, hesitant. In his mind, he thought there was no home.

—Come join me. For old times' sake.

Dmitri held his hand out. It was a slow and smooth movement, almost as if moved by angels that swept his feet. He shook his hand and gripped it firm for a while, but left in the astronaut's palm his memento the second he had let go. The astronaut couldn't see his face, for it was

veiled by the iridescence of Earth's blue. But Berlioz knew somehow that a somber smile hid beyond his golden visor.

He used all of the maneuver fuel to escape the gray's gravity. He saw Berlioz shrivel into a white dot and Tranquility base become a scar and all the pockmarks fade and the gray return to a holy white orb.

Berlioz talked to Mitya until the radio transmissions weren't coming anymore. The last thing Dmitri said was he snuck a beer into his suit before leaving, and he gave a hearty laugh before sinking into resolute static. Berlioz thought about walking to the base and catching him through the long-range radio, but stopped himself short.

Dmitri stopped laughing after the communications faded to silence. A profound sadness had overcome Berlioz as he sat between the odd ends of regret for all things related to living, and the satisfaction of having lived it. The frog in the well knows not the sea.

What else was there to do but die?

Berlioz hopped his way across the gray expanse. The sanded beach without waves, and a mottled sun on the phosphorescent horizon that ran on the edge of a desolate red planet. The oceans, deeply polluted, stung the fallow lands of post-Earth, junk and smoke and all. Such sights were troubling to the spirits—the dejected children seeing their mother after the low roar, the sullen cry, the faint whimper, all the voices hushed. Berlioz hopped away from all of them. He found himself a shallow chair, and with great effort attempted to sit on it, but had only succeeded in kicking up a great deal of dust and landing head first onto the gray. The flashing red indicators and beeping made him nauseous. He had overridden life support and muted them all. Exhausted, through and through. He wiped the dust off his visor and collapsed down. He was able to sit with his back straight thanks to the long-range EVA unit on his back. Mitya had taken the Bullfrog maneuver pack. He looked out with a beer in hand. Same old Earth. Same old sun. Same old stars. Same old everything. It'll always be everything, Berlioz thought. His thoughts reached high into the biting black, and spun around the earth. How akeldama seemed so serene from up where gods tread. Here comes the last beer. He was sadder about that fact than the air tank that was running low. He gripped the black rock in his bare hands.

*

Who is the person to utter humanity's last cry? Where is the cheek upon which the last human tear will tread? Whom did they love? Which sportsmen, who shook hands, played the last game? Whose laugh provides the echoes of an exiled species?

Death's curtain closes over Earth, rags mottled and trampled in the dust yet unceasing in function, and swallows it in one final shadow. From the home of two sailors of the black cosmos comes no yell of anguish, not even a sigh. The last footsteps of humanity are light and silent, the sun will bleach it and the solar winds will wipe it. One sun-rotted sailor sits stranded, his landing boat beached in a spit of sand floating in an obsidian sky; the other sailor dead reckoning, his billowing white sails frozen and clear like glass. They engulf themselves in the myriad unborn happenings, and catch no salty wind except for the peppering of micrometeor showers. The chrysalis sphere of brine and dirt becomes smaller in size and sentiment. It evokes ghostly whispers to the cosmos, whispers hushed by its own impermanent nature.

Like molasses it goes. Meanders. Crosses the firs and wine-dark rivers. Past a whispering creek where junipers idle. The silvergrass waves in its wake; howlers follow its ethereal scent. No more footprints. Monuments now in vain. Green leaves will sprout from the red ash. Like molasses it goes. Meanders. Wanders. The black rock sits in silence. The holy white orb scrapes the sky for fifty billion years. An unattended chord rings into the fallow cornfield at midnight.

*Look! see yonder Turkish cheeks of spotted tawn—
 Living, breathing pictures painted by the sun.
 The pagan leopards—the un-wrecking and
 Un-worshiping things that live; and seek and give
 No reason for the torrid life they feel!
 Swaddled in un-ancient dust roam those old—
 Sad, milled slates moving in perfect prism.
 The hollow souls—in myopia
 And ego, that sought flame; find morgue 'fore aim.
 Two birds at the earthset, I wait for you*

—Kyle Anulacion, 20, San Francisco CA

The Siren

There was a young man who lived in a land where there was not a lot of good work to be found, at least work he thought was good; but, as all young men are judged for their lack of discernment, so, too, may the reader judge this young man as a mite too lazy for his own good.

The young man's country was beautiful, and he often walked aimless, without a care where he ended up; such was his lot and pleasure. Only the small amount he needed to live he had to obtain periodically, and he thought he might find it in his short travails, and often did. There a beautiful farm with ripening plots, there a boat needing men to cast nets, there a foundation for something or other which needed construction, and his body was a thing for him most profitable and most amenable to labor. His mind was not all the way developed, so he was immature and tired and unwilling to work for things beyond himself, though in some respects the reader may judge he chose rightly.

"Scammers, usurers, goldbrickers," he'd sneer upon sight of signs for clerical work. "Do they not realize they ask men to have faith in means as the end?" he scoffed. "My God says put not your trust in princes, so I won't! To Hell with administration!"

So, he looked for no special skill to apply his acuity aside from where he might find the next pipe-fill for the night. He found great pleasure in languishing on the razor's edge, between comfort and subsistence, between freedom and enslavement. After a day's work chopping wood for kindly old land owners, watching sheep, something or other, he'd head into town to fill his belly up and talk the news with those who knew it, offering his commentary wherever he could fit.

"A war, eh," the young man said, smirking. "Doesn't affect us, does it? Why care?"

"You idiot! You fiend! Don't have you any love for the land that raised you?" a drunk lawyer returned.

"Sure! I make love to it every day walking! I kiss it with my toes, all over! I know the land like a wife."

"And you'd let your wife be threatened?"

"A man who truly loves sees no threat to his beloved!"

"Ah, what nonsense. A simple cuckold, you."

"Is not the cuckold the man who gives up his life for the map, when on the territory he could be loving?" He smiled, the delighted contrarian, his opponent checkmated. "When the 'enemies' depose the 'king', what change lay in store for me? Will I not be allowed to continue walking where I may? Will the labors of the men who bear the fruit of the land change at all? Let he die who will. I will go my way a-smoking. Would you like to join me?"

And though people answered with exasperated sighs, the young man was undoubtedly pleasant, so most he spoke with went out briefly with him, talking all manner of things, trite and imperative, lovely and ugly, so the breadth of conversation leveled all ideas to him.

Nights like these were the hot soup of his life, the soul warmer, and a foil to his heart's coldness when beholding the specter gaze of a shapely barmaid or another of those buxom tavern bats lurking in the corners of his vision. Between words, between pipe-pulls, he might cast a glance at them, and terror, pathetic fear gripped at his heart. Thoughtful replies from his companions in conversation missed his ears in moments as these, when the eyes of a woman saw his, and knots tied in the same moment were severed, all at once revealing potentialities that led causally to new, beautiful worlds; just quick reminders that his own was a constructed and use-dirtied deck of paper cards, awaiting only the careless gasp of air from the lips of humanity's fairer half to come crashing down!

After conversation, the young man inevitably walked alone, and on this night, reminded of his words by the moon hanging like a cool lamp above, unobscured by cloud or shadow, muttered: "Oh, a wife. The land is a wife, eh?" He kicked a stone. "Domestic violence!" He kicked another. "Outrage!"

His lodging this month lay a jaunt from the tavern and town, past a few sundry meadows carpeted by moonlit grasses that rippled like emerald flambeau in summer's sepulchre, and past a small wooden bridge which breached a brook that fed into a pond some ways down. Past the bridge his shack sat on a hill, which he shared with an ancient blind widow whom he payed rent so paltry he repented, though to be sure, she enjoyed the company of a young man so ostensibly sprightly, intelligent and "just like her husband," who had mysteriously vanished some decades ago.

He scoffed at the thought. "Intelligent! Just like her husband? No, I merely say the right things." But it was the opinion of a woman, wasn't

it? “No, she is not a woman, a different creature altogether in kind, no test to myself at all aside patience. And she’s blind!” Then he thought perhaps he ought to fight.

“War: a matchless test for men! To approach, no, charge, a line of weapons pointed at my heart for some banker’s cause,” he paused, stopped in the road a moment, his hand on his chest, “but not look a woman with sincerity in her eyes?” He laughed. “Death, death, both are death, as so much is!”

Eventually the young man reached the bridge, but did not feel any urge to cross it just then, such was the beauty of the moon’s reflection in the water of the pond nearby.

“Immaculate window dressing for such base and fearful thoughts as mine!”

He laughed, walked, refilled his pipe shortly, and lounged against a smallish tree, puffing and reclining in wonder as young men do in the company of self-created irony. The image of the moon lay on the still water, above weedy fish-beds, like a saucer of divine light unmolested by rippling, and the grasses that furnished the bank gave the pond the impression of a green-bearded inkblot face with one eye.

He puffed his pipe and stared at the water. “What secrets must you hold! How many men have cast themselves into you after a night of drinking? How many lovers grabbed hold of stones and let themselves sink to your bottom?” He fumbled in the grass for a rock with his free hand. “How many women have been drowned,” he grunted, slinging his missile carelessly, “in your untelling ink?”

He listened for the splash, but heard instead a knock accompanied by a girly yelp. He jumped to his feet.

“My God!” he exclaimed. “Who’s there? Are you all right?”

He heard a rustling in the reeds by the bank, and lo! A woman! A girl. She meandered into view, rubbing one of her temples.

The young man was aghast. She was positively heavenly. Light from the moon reflected off her pale skin, and so her body seemed to glow. He soon realized she was completely nude, only scantily covered by her luxuriant and soaked brown hair, and he turned away.

“What are you,” he said “I’m sorry!” He started to feel sick from the tobacco, and not wanting to scare her further with the smell, tossed his pipe into the grass behind him.

“Why apologize?” she said quietly. “You couldn’t see me.”

Her gaze immobilized the young man—it was one he had not seen inside the taverns, infrequently in the country, and usually on the face of his blind landlady. Disarming interest in him simmered behind her hazel irises. She looked as if she’d been waiting a long time.

She waded closer to the bank, crouched, so that her breasts only barely breached the surface. "You're shy," she cooed. "Sit down."

The young man obeyed to relieve his wobbly knees.

"I suppose I am," he mumbled.

"What?"

"Yes, I'm shy," he said. He looked at the ground for a moment and then back to her. The eyes! Closer now, and more welcoming still. Warm. But what cringed in his heart?

"Well, there's no need to be bashful, but I understand." She smiled. "I am naked in the water."

"You are." The young man laughed and his shoulders relaxed. "Do you swim here often? I walk past this pond almost every night, and I've never seen you."

"It's because you never stop!"

"You watch me?"

"Yes. You're usually stumbly. Tonight, I don't think you drank so much." She giggled, before flipping a strand of hair over her shoulders. The young man tried not to look.

"I didn't have enough for more than two pints," he said, trailing off as he glimpsed something creamy and pink beneath the surface of the softly rippling water. Then he looked to the grass between his spread legs.

"Oh?" she asked.

He looked up again, and she had moved closer to the bank. Her head now rested between two hands, which were propped up on her elbows in the pond soil, and her feet kicked softly behind. Past her head he glimpsed two pearly mounds breaking the surface, when she splashed him and smiled sweetly. "Pay attention!"

He shook his head and looked to the grass again with flushing face. "Forgive me." He exhaled loudly, and brushed off a few droplets. "I don't know what we're talking about."

"You were saying you were poor..." She twirled a finger in the water, and smiled.

"Only in material wealth!"

"Is there any other kind?"

He paused. "I'd certainly hope so. What am I otherwise?"

She sighed. "I thought we already agreed."

"We did?"

"Yes. You're shy," she replied.

The young man rolled his eyes, and finally smiled. "Poor, shy, and worst of all, not even half-drunk."

The girl in the water laughed at that. "And even a bit funny! I've heard wit is a sign of intelligence, too."

He nodded. "That's what I meant earlier. My mind 'runneth over' with ideas, so to speak. Ask any of them at the taverns! They'd at least tell you that."

"I trust you," she replied, twirling her fingers again. "Poor, shy, funny, intelligent." She enunciated the last word clearly, and the young man noticed the barest bit of irony in her tone. "An even bag. But are you a lover?"

She watched the water ripple a moment before she returned her eyes to his. She wore no smile, and her face was relaxed, with slightly parted lips. What had seemed to smolder behind her gaze earlier now blazed, and she pushed off from the bank. Only her head remained above water.

The young man could not look away now. A God-fearing lad he was, he undoubtedly feared women more. What rationalizations and doubts raced through his mind in these moments!

How can I find a wife if I cannot first prove myself to a woman?

Prove yourself?

She's genuine!

Would a genuine woman proposition so crudely? And what was that bit about watching you every night?

She's an admirer! And she understands my uneasiness! I can see it in her eyes. She thinks it's charming.

Charming? Could you see in her eyes she found you pathetic too? 'My mind runneth over.' You're a mouse!

Go to!

But she's a temptress!

You admitted yourself you are willing to indulge for the sake of a wife.

How can I approach a woman if I haven't conquered one?

'How can I escape the cat if I have not climbed into its jaws first?' asks the mouse!

"I'm getting cold," the girl cooed suddenly. "Come warm me."

The young man stood up and undid one button of his shirt before he stopped and sighed.

"I'm feeling a bit anxious," he said. "I don't know you at all."

"You'll know me in the water," she replied, then smiled again. Her eyes no longer looked hazel; they were green and bright now, and her pupils seemed to have become sharp ellipses. And another thing he had not noticed before: her teeth were preternaturally pointed!

He nodded. "Interesting."

Then he grabbed his pipe from the grass, turned, and bolted away from the pond and across the bridge, without looking back. Through forested glades and wide-open fields, he raced home, not even slowing as he climbed the hill his shanty rested atop. He burst through the door, out of breath, and woke his elderly landlady.

"Hello?" She shot up from sleep, and rubbed her ancient, unseeing eyes.

The young man stood in the door, wide-eyed and chest heaving. "Hello. It's me."

"Are you all right darling? You sound terrified! Where have you been?"

He sat down on a bench by the door and sighed.

"I've seen the inside of the cat's mouth," he said, and stared blankly across the room.

His landlady groaned and lay back down. "You'd better stop drinking," she grumbled. "You sound like my husband!"

The young man cocked his head to the side, and then laughed aloud.

"What's so funny?" she asked.

He shook his head and began taking off his boots. "Did you ever learn where he disappeared to?"

"No," she replied with a sigh. "His good-for-nothing pals at the pub said he fell in a pond, which they expected me to believe, but I knew he ran off with some heifer more exciting than me!"

The young man laughed louder now, and walked to his landlady's bedside.

"Really," she said, staring blindly at the ceiling, "What on earth is so funny?"

The young man knelt down and kissed her forehead.

"I suspect both of you are right," he said, tucking the sheets around her frail and bony figure. "And how good it is to hear there have existed men more foolish than I."

She looked puzzled for a moment, but before long drifted off to sleep. The young man grabbed from his coat pocket his pipe, filled it once more, and then stepped outside. Leaning on the shack, he smoked and watched the moon, hanging there alight, the silent spectator in his victory, and he was well-pleased.

—Jaw Santorelli, 22, Belgrade MT

Zion

Another order, another exodus, another day,
Outermarch along switchback trails and reddened clay.
Past soft ponderosa pines and pinyon scruff,
Up sheer pink palisades and painted windswept bluff.
The enemy was not there, our newest foe camped to the north and west,
The station at Zion would be alone, left to our lonely blessed.
Zion's wisp of peace forsaken under fell of tears,
As columned men marched out with guns and spears.

Then night dreams swept under the clear cobalt moon,
With soft sapphiric streams whispering the Narrow's tune.
And above there were stars like the coronation of imperial kings,
Abject love from the world held loft on angel's wings.
Bringing lustrous light along pierced veil silk skies,
With the empyrean's aegis, the man of Zion never dies.
Tender are those who pray for water from the streams above,
No sun in heaven has brought me joy as rain has brought me love.

Daytime's sacred incense from sagebrush on the yellow hills,
Intoning fragrant hymns that marked and strengthened wills.
What hatred could they lay claim to, what quarrel have they with me?
These brigands with brass and powder daring their deaths to be?
Nestled gems written into the cerulean expanse,
Presaged the hunger and flame of their advance.
And the constellations became grim letters of fire scarred into the cratered sky,
When their guns roared into drum fire rolling death on high.

They came from far and wide to claim our work of hand,
The scent of well-worn earth and bounty drew them to our land.
Dust storm deserts crash the outlands and dry the lifeless plains,
Blistered earth and ash from when the land was stained.
So, blackguards from far afield come to take our work and wine,

I will shatter them like a spear, they will never take what's mine.
They know not what hell they have stirred by stepping on these
stones,
I will become God's own wrath as I crash upon their bones.

It was outermarch from the Virgin's sawspruce grove,
Up pink canyon wall switchbacks as eagles dove.
And our hands on rifle and hands on belt,
Our sun-stained skin and uniform her wrath hath dealt.
Rally the knights with plumage and banners resplendent,
Those constellations spoke of growing heat with war ascendant.
Ochre camouflaged soldiers, splintered stocks and rusted gun,
The saints of Angel's Landing demand their work be done.
Keep marching men of Zion, there is evil yet to slay,
A night's battle lost ignored if we have won the day.

We will fight them in the field, we will hunt them where they run,
I will crush them beneath my boot and this hateful sun.

—W. R. Westaway, 23, Vancouver BC

The Stars

A few days before Christmas one year, Uncle Leonard cleared all the snow off the pond in the pasture behind the barn. It was three days into Christmas break, a Monday night, when he called my father to tell us to bring skates and hockey sticks to the farm on Christmas Eve. "All right then. Very good," Dad said. I was sprawled lazily across the couch, tired and frustrated, trying again and again to read just one chapter from the history textbook which lay face-down on my stomach. I could tell from how Dad spoke into the phone that it was Uncle Leonard on the other end. He incites a strange tone of appeasement from people, as if they are willing to concur with whatever he says in order not to have to debate it. Not that Dad had any reason to debate the value of skating with the family on Christmas Eve, but I'm sure that Uncle Leonard had stated plainly how much work it had been for him to clear the snow off the pond. "Uncle Leonard says there'll be skating on Christmas Eve, so bring your skates," Dad said after hanging up the phone. Two days later, when we left the city for the farm, I went without my skates.

Uncle Leonard, when he found a way to direct all of his wild enthusiasm towards something productive, could be very creative and thoughtful. He was a very intelligent man, but in an unconventional way. His words were sometimes awkward, other times lofty and grand. Many times, they were modest and instructive. When he conceived a project, he became preoccupied with it, working single-mindedly for days or weeks on end until it was finished to his satisfaction. Clearing two feet of snow off the pond in the pasture behind the barn was a simple but laborious project. With an old metal shovel, he heaved snow for two days almost without stopping. By the end, he had cleared a nice wide space for a respectable game of shinny, leaving five-foot-high banks around the perimeter. And he had had the courtesy to tell his nieces and nephews to bring their skates so that the project would not be a waste.

It was not that Uncle Leonard did such tasks thanklessly. Most of his nieces and nephews were very happy and grateful to be able to skate under a clear, cold, starry night, far away from the city and all of their childhood concerns. But Uncle Leonard, like most adults of his generation, resented that we kids didn't know how to work. In our minds, chores were simple, lightweight tasks which took between five and fifteen minutes to perform. We didn't know work. We didn't know toil. We didn't know how to fix or build things, or how to solve physical, mechanical, tangible problems. We only knew how to tap and click and consume. Uncle Leonard, more so than his brothers (who had shared his upbringing), resented laziness and apathy in children, which is what a lack of challenges and labour does to a child. We forget—or never learn in the first place—how to do anything worthwhile.

But then again, had he not considered the old principle: that our parents worked as hard as they worked in order to alleviate their children's toils? Why toil and suffer to raise a family if it begets nothing but more toil? Is it not natural that our great-grandparents, who ventured onto the prairie with the lure of cheap land, had to work much harder than their children, and likewise their children's children? Should things not become physically easier as society progresses? Is easy not good? The problem wasn't even the difference between having to work and needing to work (there *is* a difference); it was that, for us kids, life in the city had become incongruous with hard physical labour. Our young minds had escaped the soul-feeding distraction of toil; that is why our souls seem empty. We work at piecing together abstractions without a tangible output. We think loosely and conceptually, not practically, and once we grow tired of thinking, we pursue activities that don't require it. And it just so happens that few daily activities still required thinking.

Thinking back to that winter as a whole, without being fully cognizant of the causes, I felt I was slowly drowning in apathy. Everything seemed to be an exercise in exercising—every task once-removed from any tangible and meaningful result. My early ambition at the start of high school had begun to give way to a dull, gray void which didn't present a threat, *per se*, but lingered such that I was perpetually distracted by it. I realized I could live without fixing or building anything. I could live without sweating or bleeding. And I believed I could live without toil, thinking that life's only purpose was to minimize the effort needed to successfully coast through it. I saw before me a complete solution: electronic distractions, low-risk activities, frugality, middle-of-the-road tastes, tolerant and unthreatening opinions, a safe and indisputable routine. It all seemed so complete, yet so *wrong*. In this manner, I could live, but could I truly exist?

My mother asked me if I wanted to see a doctor because I had accidentally mentioned a persistent dull ache in my chest that accompanied my fatigue and apathy. It greeted me every morning and lasted through the day. I lied to her that it had gotten better and was almost gone, so no need to see a doctor. She asked me if I was depressed. I said no, just tired. Everyone's depressed. In my mind, I thought it was simply a mental problem—a *city kid* problem—and decided I wanted to fix it myself, so I refused to go to the doctor. *Let me at least have mental toil*, I thought. After that, whenever she asked what was the matter, I would give her the same teenage son answer: "I'm fine. Don't worry."

There was a moment when I thought to ask my brother Alex how bad it had been for him in high school. But he didn't come by the house very often anymore. He had moved into an apartment with a couple of friends and, at that time, had not yet moved back home. As far as I could tell, he went to university during the week, drank in the evenings, and worked on the weekends. The sense I got from him when I did see him was that whatever pessimism and hopelessness had hit him when he was my age had not been resolved. Perhaps it had even gotten worse. He was no longer a bright and motivated student. He was a wandering, rambling misanthrope. He was hard to look up to. That Christmas break was when I feared I was bound, like him, to embrace the sadness and allow drink, or whatever mundane vice I might yet discover, to take hold. Asking Alex for advice seemed out of the question.

When we were leaving for the farm on Christmas Eve, Dad, Mom, Emily, and I picked Alex up at his apartment. He joined me and Emily in the back seat of the car and was in too talkative a mood to have been sober. On the way out of town, Dad casually grilled him about his studies: "How were your grades this semester? What courses are you starting in January? How is work at the store?" Alex answered each of Dad's questions politely but dismissively, rambling about the institutions of higher education, calling the campus a government-funded corporate labour-mill. He mentioned, too, that because of a lost transcript, his attempt to transfer faculties would have to be delayed. Finally, after a drawn-out line of questioning during which I feigned distraction by staring out the window (despite being crammed in the back seat with my siblings), Alex closed the topic by saying that school was finished and he would rather let it be.

When Alex had said that school was finished, he had intentionally understated the extent to which his post-secondary education had ended. He had confided to me that the lost transcript story was a lie; he had simply not enrolled in any courses. He hated university, hated

the people who went there, hated the professors... he was sick of it and would not go back.

I did not see his dropping out as a bad thing. In those two years at university, he had become a different person. He had gone from being a very passive person to a very angry, irritable person, as if all of the sad and funny aspects of life, about which he used to sardonically chuckle, now ate away at him from the inside. The cold discoveries during one's post-secondary education—the gritty details of history that don't make it into high school text books—are supposed to be complemented by pleasant personal awakenings. The process of discovering this new, dark world should include some sort of recognition of one's place therein; a challenging but liberating concept. Alex, it seemed, took these cold discoveries personally. He seemed disgusted by the shape of the world. He resented his doe-eyed peers and arrogant professors, yet seemed less capable than them of reconciling personal beliefs with new-found truths. I suspect he drank carelessly and often alone, trying to soften his impression of a world built at every stage with rotten wood. I wanted to tell him that we had all been thrust into the same civilization and had the same problems, but I'm not even sure that's true.

Alex still seemed to get excited about Christmas. It was a subdued, anticipatory excitement that, I suspect, was never realized. He seemed to always be looking forward to looking back on Christmas, as if the present could never be enjoyed. Watching Alex on Christmas Eve at the farm, he seemed like someone always waiting for his life to happen, even if that meant standing quietly amidst the chatter and laughter of a house full of family and friends.

Alex and Uncle Leonard got along very well. They did not believe the same things, I'm sure, but they believed that everything important existed in the same context. We knew that Uncle Leonard, below the surface of his philosophy, believed that the answer to all conflict and struggle was an understanding of Christ Himself. He was not a born-again Christian and never threatened the family with trite religious platitudes. But his conversations seemed to scratch the surface of large concepts that we would have to explore independently before the conversation could progress. I witnessed countless frustrating conversations in the middle of which Uncle Leonard would withdraw with the unfortunate declaration: "Sorry, but you have some reading to do."

I had seen Alex laugh off Uncle Leonard's broad and lofty notions more than once. Alex did not believe in much, neither divine nor moral, but I think he did the reading. He found it amusing, in his arrogant and bitter way, when someone found spirituality or divinity to be a worthwhile calling in life. Since he had started university, he no longer

saw religious belief as a charming artifact of bygone centuries, but as a tragedy that sprang from man's confusion about, and misinterpretation of, the patterns in nature. He refrained from saying quite as much to Uncle Leonard, whom he recognized as being capable of deflating Alex's admittedly over-simplified beliefs. But with each man playing nicely enough, and simultaneously keeping their intellectual guards up, they got along tremendously well.

As I was growing up, I witnessed many angry but fulfilling arguments around the firepit during the summer. They would get tangled up in rhetorical details and the ensuing digressions would become creatures all their own. As a more-or-less apathetic witness to several of these conversations, I picked up bits and pieces of useful information but, in the end, found their energy and passion to be a waste: no matter what was said, at the end of the night, they both had to leave the fire, go to sleep, wake up the next day with a hangover, go to work or school, and live contrarily to everything they had theoretically argued for the night before. It seemed that to act inconsistently with what you believe was to render your views worthless, in which case, what is the point of the argument? Why do all that rhetorical work if the truth doesn't help you or your children to live happy lives?

*

My grandparents' house at the farm was a busy place on Christmas Eve. Their sons, and their sons' wives and children, accounted for twenty-some people. Plus, several distant cousins and family friends joined us for a meal and exchanging of gifts. Across the prairie, darkness fell before suppertime and the house glowed amidst the row of spruce trees that lined the front yard. It was a cold, clear evening.

Stretching from the dining room to the living room, we arranged a long row of tables in an L-shape so we could all sit together for supper. My grandmother and her daughters-in-law did most of the cooking while the kids ran around and everyone else visited. After supper, the grandchildren were gathered up to wash the dishes and the tables were cleared out of the living room. People settled on chesterfields and chairs to visit and enjoy a glass of wine or two.

I hadn't had much appetite and was drowsy again, so I wandered down the hall to the far bedroom and lay on top of the covers. Uncle Percy and Auntie Margie's unpacked luggage was standing against the wall. They had flown in from California the night before. I fell asleep briefly and dreamed about fireworks and explosions sparkling above a city. When I awoke, I heard stomping and shuffling at the back door. I

could hear my young cousins dressing up to go outside. My oldest cousin, Melissa, leaned inside the bedroom door and asked me if I wanted to go skating. "Baba says there are some old skates in the basement in the back room," she said. I said I was too tired to skate.

"But how often do you get to skate under the stars like this?" she asked with a smile. I didn't answer. "Christmas Eve's just once a year. Why are you wasting it?"

Melissa was the same age as me and we went to the same school in the city. Of all my cousins, she seemed most likely to become either a doctor or a poet, so bright and enthusiastic about life she was.

I didn't like being groggy and rude like I was being. I just felt too empty to do anything else. When I didn't respond to her second comment, Melissa shrugged and left the room to join our other cousins heading outside. I should've said sorry but instead just turned onto my side. Before I fell asleep, I heard the wind chimes ringing over the back door as the children went outside to skate.

About half an hour later, I rose suddenly from a black and dreamless sleep. Wandering into the living room, I found Uncle Leonard and his brother Percy in a fiery debate about torture or war or some vague conspiracy of American violence. After some point made by Uncle Percy about the concept of a just war, Leonard leaned back comfortably and chuckled. Alex was leaning quietly against the wall with a drink in his hand, gauging the debate, likely keeping score. I had seen that manoeuvre in the past, in which the disinterested student observes the match, keeping quiet except to interject safe points of correction to whichever side required them. Alex liked to play that role—that of a man devoid of passion, interested only in facts. And he could play it well for a few minutes, before his own frustrations and inconsistencies seeped in and it became obvious to everyone that he cared.

"Yes, yes, Percival. Invade and kill them all, for all I care." Uncle Leonard was still leaning back on the sofa opposite his brother. "Convert them, right? Make them just like us so they can live and breathe and *believe* just like us!" He leaned forward and took up his empty whisky glass from the coffee table. He stopped just short of standing up. "That way they can join us and have all the satisfying things we have, like cars and office jobs... worthwhile things! Cleanse them of their religion and you'll see amazing things in the world. We tried it eight hundred years ago and it didn't take. This is your idea of progress? Just bringing bigger guns?"

Alex was not the only spectator. Uncle Percy's wife sat nearby, whispering to someone and chuckling about the passion of the conversation. One of my grandfather's brothers, Uncle Thomas, was sitting

beside Percival, listening with something less than interest. He was an ancient man and the shape of the chesterfield caused him to lean involuntarily towards the inside, almost against Percy's shoulder. His face drooped apathetically, as if he had been a part of every conversation in history and had long ago realized the impotence of discussing politics at Christmastime.

"Try to cleanse them of their religion," Uncle Leonard repeated, "and see what happens." He stood up haughtily to refill his glass in the kitchen. The debate had apparently reached the point at which the two brothers could no longer hold fake smiles on their faces. They were getting too angry with each other. The playful tone of mutual ridicule, which had probably existed since they were teenagers, had been worn thin. One refused to let American lives be trivialized while the other refused to handle current affairs in a context other than universal salvation for humanity. The outdated resentments from almost four decades as brothers which, two or three drinks in, were beginning to reappear, made it impossible for them to have a polite discussion.

Alex followed Uncle Leonard into the kitchen and, as Leonard poured himself a drink, suggested they go for a walk down the road. Uncle Percy, speaking loud enough for Leonard to hear, said, "Christianity has worked wonders for most societies. So has imperialism. It wouldn't be the worst thing if they had a few more churches in the Middle East." He turned to his wife and whispered with a laugh: "I know I haven't heard the end of it." He then turned to his uncle Thomas and, speaking loudly so the old man could hear, asked: "How are you doing, Thomas?"

"Fine, fine," he said wryly. "Very good." He nodded his head and smiled habitually, still in his slumped, drooping position.

"How do you like Woywitka's Manor?"

"What's that now?" Uncle Thomas said.

"I said how do you like living at Woywitka's Manor? Do they take good care of you there?"

"Fine, fine," Uncle Thomas said. "Except you know, there's nothing much to do but puzzles and watch television. I never much liked television."

"Can't you play cards and games there?"

"Ernie and I play eleven games of crib a day."

"Eleven games?"

"And we don't know what to do with ourselves after lunch. You know?" He leaned closer to Uncle Percy. "You know I would have much rather stayed on the farm. Then, you know, I could have what to do

with myself. Always some work to do. And if I overexert myself and die, then so be it. Why delay the inevitable?”

“That doesn’t sound too good. Why would you want to work yourself to death?”

“I don’t think it’s too bad a deal. If you’re working on what needs doing, what’s the matter? It’s better than having a heart attack in front of the television. I never much cared for television.”

I shuffled past them to the living room window and looked out towards the road where I saw Alex and Uncle Leonard walking, looking up at the sky. The spruce trees were silhouetted in the moonlight and I saw my own shadow from the dining room chandelier smeared across the surface of the snow on the front lawn.

I headed down to the basement to try to find some skates. At the bottom of the stairs and to the left was Uncle Leonard and Uncle Percy’s old bedroom. There were two twin beds separated by a small nightstand. Along the walls on either side of the beds were stacks of books sitting on the carpet. For a moment, I thought I’d be able to sleep better down there because it was quieter and colder. I was about to lie down on one of the beds but then remembered why I had come downstairs. On the opposite side of the stairs was a large storage room. It was cluttered with boxes and old furniture. In the corner, hanging on nails on the wall, there were snowmobile suits and a tangle of eight or ten skates. I picked out the biggest matching pair I could find and laced them together. I sat down tiredly in an old orange arm chair and looked around the room.

Melissa was nudging my shoulder when I awoke. She was bundled up in her coat, toque and mitts, and her skates were hanging over her shoulder with ice still on the blades. “Did you find any skates?” she said. I leaned forward and tried to stand up. I still felt exhausted. “Yeah,” I said. I held up the skates. “I got some. Is everyone still out there?”

*

The sky was crisp and clear. Short gusts of wind rushed against us as Melissa and I walked behind the barn toward the pasture. Melissa didn’t say anything. She merely gazed up at the sky and either sighed or shrieked with excitement. I didn’t ask why she was so giddy. We crunched through the snow and around the deep hoof-prints that were frozen in the mud since fall. We passed through a small gate and followed the narrow trail toward the pond in the middle of the snow-covered pasture. Next to the pond, a bonfire blazed brilliantly against the darkness.

The tall snowbanks that Uncle Leonard had piled up around the ice surface flickered white and orange between the shadows of the children. Uncle Frank was gripping a coffee mug in one hand and had a large stick in the other, tending the fire and supervising the kids. My younger cousins skated awkwardly and energetically, propelling themselves constantly and precariously across the beaded deep-blue surface of the pond. Two of them had hockey sticks and swatted a square block of wood back and forth to each other. Every ten or fifteen seconds, one of the children slipped or lost his balance then scrambled to the snowbank to get back on his skates. The boys slid the block of wood around, transitioning between games of keep-away from the girls and a loose game of shinny, with two large rocks serving as goal posts. The children all laughed and shouted as they played.

Melissa sat on a stump beside Uncle Frank and yanked off her boots and mitts in order to put her skates back on. I stood another stump on its end to sit on. Two or three times, I lowered the skates from my lap to try to put them on, but picked them back up because I was too tired. I settled instead for sitting and watching my cousins skate under the stars.

I looked beyond the blazing fire into the deep dark prairie. Off in the distance, beyond the marshlands and the highway, the subtlest embers of the buried sun glowed on the horizon and seeped into the dark blue night sky, silhouetting a row of crooked faraway trees. For a brief moment, all around me was stillness. There was no fire and no pond and no children skating. There was no farmyard and no barn, no distant trees, no school, no toil, no family, no terrorists, no tumours, no crashes. Nothing but me. And then there was a humming in my ears and I began to shiver and my cheeks felt ice cold. Everything was, for the moment, profoundly open and empty, cold and serene.

I was looking up at the dotted sky. The bright white stars started sailing past me as if I was blazing through space. All the heavens drifted by much too fast for me to appreciate them. I heard doctors, politicians, and professors assessing my travels through space, saying, "Oh, he must be tired. Let him rest." The noises from faceless figures grew louder as they approached and then continued on, fading into silence. I flew through the dead universe as innumerable astral entities swooshed past me. When my eyes eventually opened, my view had changed. I gazed up and saw in that sky an endless depth of mystery; billions of stars, each providing a single dot of light in the cold and dark universe. If you beheld them up close, they would be blazing intensely, but from where I sat, they merely twinkled.

I was still sitting on the stump with the skates in my lap, my arms shivering. The fire had shrunk and Uncle Frank and all my young cousins had gone back to the house. Only Melissa was left skating on the pond. Not far from me, on the other side of the fire, Uncle Leonard and Alex were talking and drinking. There was a tall vodka bottle shoved into a snowbank between them. They had returned from their walk and were now in the midst of another of their religious, philosophical discussions.

I looked around at the dissipated horizon, at the deep darkness that blanketed the land. Flashes of orange light flickered on the ice surface. Melissa moved around the pond in loops and swirls, occasionally pausing to look up at the starry sky to sigh and then laugh. Her strides scuffed the ice and scattered shavings across the surface. As I watched her happily moving about the pond, my mind imagined a solitary coyote howling off in the distance, giving the crisp wintry prairie a touch of genuine life. I saw Alex and Uncle Leonard sitting perfectly still, appreciating the darkness and the quietude, then talking in firm whispers about what they thought about life.

"Oh, he's up," I heard my brother say. "Here!" He grabbed the cold vodka bottle and poured a shot into a clear plastic cup and handed it to me. "Happy birthday, James! Or, no wait... Merry Christmas, I mean!"

I had no appetite for a shot of vodka, but I didn't want to say no and kill the spirit of the night. Shoving the skates off of my lap, I took the cup and raised it slightly. "Merry Christmas," I said. Uncle Leonard raised his cup with a smile and the three of us knocked back our drinks.

"This fire is quite pathetic," Uncle Leonard said after a pause. He looked all around him and into the darkness of the pasture. "You know what? It needs a little fuel." He suddenly shoved his cup into the snowbank, stood up, and walked away into the darkness. Alex watched him disappear then turned back towards the fire and laughed. "You watch: he's gonna rip some planks off the fence in the corral and throw 'em in."

Melissa skated to the edge of the pond. "Where'd Uncle Leonard go?"

"He's getting more firewood from somewhere. Here, take a shot! Merry Christmas!"

"No, I'm okay, thank-you."

"Oh, c'mon Melissa." Alex's bloodshot eyes shone in the firelight.

"No, that's all right. You guys help yourselves. I'm gonna keep skating..." and she skated away giggling. Alex handed the cup to me.

"This is my last one," I said as I traded my empty cup for the full one.

After refilling the cup and raising it to the sky, Alex shouted: "To Christmastime in the country!"

"Sure," I said. "To Christmas."

We downed our drinks once again. The vodka burned the back of my throat and I thought about keeling over into the snow and vomiting, but managed not to. Instead, I shook my head and looked at my brother. He stared and smiled into the fire, his eyes glazed and bright, and poured himself another shot.

"What did you and Uncle Leonard talk about?" I asked timidly.

Alex jammed the recapped bottle back into the snowbank and looked at me for a moment.

"We talked about the nature of God," he said, "...and about why people do evil things. But mostly about God."

My face remained placid and I felt withdrawn.

"But you don't believe in God," I said.

"Yeah, but Uncle Leonard does. Disagreement makes for good conversation. If you agree about everything, it's no fun. Like, he keeps saying that Christ's wisdom is our salvation. What is that? And I keep telling him that we're animals that rely on our genetics and our instincts. Nothing matters to us but survival and procreation; no salvation needed. At least, when we became what we are now, that was all that mattered. But then we were cursed with self-awareness—consciousness—that terrible blessing, ha ha! Now we recognize our place in the world, useless, insignificant, no more important than a colony of ants, yet we're still convinced that we're much more important... and that what we chase is somehow more important than what the ants chase. Then he says that the reason we're more important is because we're capable of being motivated by virtue and empathy, and we're capable of planning things and building things with a view to the future, as if the future, or humanity, is more important."

"We are, though."

"Says who?"

I didn't have a quick answer. There was no clear explanation to refute his point. But I could feel that there was something wrong with it—something oversimplified and passive about clinging to the material world so firmly. I shook my head sullenly and felt embarrassed for sharing my opinion.

"It's nothing to be angry about. We have higher values than just surviving and procreating, which is good. We aren't heartless robots. But those higher values that hang over the material things, they aren't automatically virtuous. It's hard to get nourishment from them if you recognize where they come from. It takes emotional discipline and

sheer will. It takes hard work. *I* don't have it. Maybe *you* do. I bet Uncle Leonard does too. But you have to suffer if you want satisfaction. That's my twenty-one-year-old wisdom for you. Pursue worthwhile things that cause you to suffer, because you'll appreciate them more." He paused and shook his head then looked up at me. "I may not be happy, but I'd be sadder if I had no good reason to suffer."

Alex lowered his head and stared into the fire, sipping from his refilled cup. After a few quiet moments, we heard Melissa's skates scraping against the ice and he continued:

"You can believe whatever you want. But don't forge your beliefs just by doing your job and paying your bills. Imagine this: someone asks you what you care most about in the world—what a great question, isn't it?—but imagine that your answer was, 'I think in order to be a good person, you must pay your taxes on time,' or, 'you must always make your bed.' What a soulless thing to care about, right? Arbitrary, safe, boring... totally *not* worthwhile. Yet you'll still suffer when you have to recount your expense receipts at tax time, right? And for what? A few extra bucks and an orderly file. I say forget mundane stuff like that. My strategy now is to talk to as many people as possible and compare notes, because we're all stuck in this shit situation equally. The most fulfilling thing I know of is a good conversation with someone you disagree with. Every good conversation chips away at some part of the illusion, and you see the world for what it really is. People try too hard to protect ideas that are untrue just because they're used to believing them, and the ideas give them that worthwhile goal, even when they secretly know it's a lie. But for me, losing trust in a big idea is exhilarating, even if it makes me unhappy. It separates the humans from the frightened robots. Listen, brother," he drunkenly stood up and almost stumbled into the fire. Regaining his balance, he crouched down next to me and slapped me on the knee, "Don't be a frightened robot! Be a human first, trust me!" He stood back up and, as he carefully shuffled back to his stump, laughed to himself: "Whoa, slow down there Alex!"

There was a commotion in the darkness to the north. Something was trudging through the woods, snapping branches and twigs as it moved. I quickly turned my head and looked into the darkness beyond the snowbank. Alex ambled back to his stump and sat down.

"Uncle Leonard's getting firewood," he said, fixing his gaze back on the dying fire.

Sure enough, we soon heard the crunching stop and the sound of a handsaw grinding against a tree. In the distance, Uncle Leonard sawed away, not stopping for almost fifteen minutes.

"Why did you drop out of university, if suffering isn't so bad?" I said, meekly.

"Because it wasn't worthwhile. It made me angry. I felt like I was a child being reminded of why 'we don't leave the backyard without mommy going with us.' The systemized automation of humanity; a human labour mill. By the way, don't tell Mom and Dad I actually dropped."

"What are you gonna do?"

"I don't know. Hopefully I'll teach myself something useful; something worth caring about."

"What if you don't?"

"Well, whatever. Then I'll just be how I am right now. I know that's messed up, but I don't know if I'm gonna do anything. I hope I will, but who knows? All I know is I'd rather serve coffee for eight bucks an hour than go where the university path leads: endless social conditioning and eventual middle-class wage-slavery."

We listened to Uncle Leonard sawing in the woods.

Eventually it stopped and the crunching sounds came back. We could hear him struggling over or through the barbed-wire fence that surrounded the pasture. Then he emerged out of the darkness dragging two massive logs, obviously cut from an already fallen tree. He was gripping a branch near the bottom of each log and was using them to drag the logs through the snow. Despite the cold, his face was red and glistening with sweat and his fogged-up glasses rested atop his head.

"This should do for a while," he said as he leaned one log on the snowbank and heaved the other onto the fire, collapsing the small heap of wood that still burned. "Hold that log up, Alex. We'll stand them up against each other." With some intoxicated effort, they balanced the two logs into a precarious peak above the fire. It soon caught on, the wood being so dry, and the fire blazed tall and bright. Melissa had been watching the procedure from the edge of the pond. As the fire took off, she smiled brightly and laughed.

"That's a *real* fire!" she said before turning and skating away.

Alex and Uncle Leonard retook their seats on the stumps and poured yet another shot of vodka for themselves. I moved my stump a little further back from the fire, which had become too hot. When I sat back down, I set the empty plastic cup in the snow, gathered up the skates in my lap, and closed my eyes. Melissa's skates scraped sporadically against the ice. Uncle Leonard and Alex continued to talk about God and war. The fire blazed and crackled, its warmth still reaching my face with a little more heat than was comfortable. As I felt myself descending into sleep, I was suddenly looking down at the fire from above: its orange

glow encircling us and our stumps and our frozen pond in a small pocket of warmth. Outside that pocket, the cold and darkness loomed for miles and miles in every direction, over the fields and through the forests, across the narrow gravel roads and over frozen cattail sloughs. Though I couldn't see any, I knew that scattered throughout the miles and miles of darkness and cold, sprinkled across the landscape were living things nestled in their own pockets of warmth: a mouse, a coyote, a lonely widow asleep in her house. For the moment, a break from the toil—a comfortable seat around a warm fire and the gentle sound of skates upon the frozen pond.

—K. M. Diduck, 30, Edmonton AB

The Ratline

You're lying there, silently, Pop, as I unravel. You can hear me, can't you? I don't sleep either, not in this hospital; the air is lifeless and thick as if part of one great sigh. I can't sit in that airless rented room three floors down, Pop. At least the moon is lit. The drunks are howling down there on the pavement, too, wandering in the blue light because they've lost something. The camps are growing. Leprosy is spreading, they say. I read more about them because I may join them if I don't finish this thesis. Now, I only really hear the pump and whir of these machines... your fake lungs, your artificial breath. There you are: old, boozy, pious Anthony Kreet—named for the patron saint of the lost—lying there, wet-brained on your hospice cot, beneath your skinny martyr, pinned to his crucifix like a butterfly. I don't see any nuns here to hold your sun-mottled hands, Pop, no priests either—only me, the grandson you rejected.

Look at you, after all your hard-cocked mid-century manliness, your military posturing, your anchor tattoo, your silver medal, your blonde son, my father, your move to L.A., your cabin in Palomar, your knit sofa-covers and plastic Christmas tree: what did it all get you? A dead son. A wife in the dirt with cancer-eaten bones. A charity hospital down the street from your haunts and booze-guzzles. And here I am, your fruity heir—your “fag-end” as it were—the mule legacy sitting with my endless historical scribblings.

I used the university's grant money, (too much of it, admittedly), for a plane ticket down to Santiago, to Asunción, to other torture cells, steel doors and shackles, the bricks, the teeth, the tools. I had to see them, feel the chains you taught those thugs to use. I saw what you brought. I saw the chambers your friends down in “our backyard,” set up, Pop. I saw the activist's home your intelligence made a detention center. All the information I can find about you is ‘intelligence.’ Funny, isn't it, ‘Mr. Kreet’? From intelligere, to understand. But then you were an interrogator? From rogare, to ask. But the truth of what you taught was torture, wasn't it? Tortura, to twist. Some new laws passed; did you hear about that before you got too deep in the bottle? Leaked and declassified files describe your pals' wet-work. You taught Colonel Dolos down there at The School of the Americas in Fort Gulick, didn't you,

Pop? Was that a pleasant reunion? You'd known him decades earlier in the Occupation, right, in the rubble? You released him, after all, to The Ratlines. You two had so much to talk about: Beer, thumbscrews, Colombian thugs. Were there others? Sausage-eating krauts, too? Klaus Barbie-types? Secret police types, like Dolos, right? Yes, tell me he was there. I'm going to pull up my chair a little closer and read this, a fairly high-flown editorial, but you'll enjoy it, Pop. 1989. A year of collapse and rebirth, a day with hope in the air like today's dust.

[NYS, Branch office-Buenos Aires] Rangler, Judith. *New York Sun*.

Like a sinister Gioto, Colonel Josip Dolos, a Balkan war criminal assisted out of Europe before he could stand trial for World War II crimes, had designed a perfect circle in which to reside. His round private Latin American mansion stood far from his upbringing in the Caucuses, far from the screaming presses and camps of Balkan atrocities. Dolos torched the circular mansion in his escape but the flames of his seaside villa are perhaps the final episode in his mysterious biography. One protester shouted to us near the sphere's gilded entrance: "Where is Dolos? You, the press, you must know! There's cliffs on one side and an angry nation on the other!" What would become of Dolos, a Balkan fascist who escaped in 1945 to a series of tropical rightist tyrannies? After cameras quit "America's backyard," in the aftermath of this student uprising, few knew the desire for a Latin American Spring. Dolos's dark legacy: his notorious talents during the European war, his shadowy escape, his work as a traveling propagandist, an intelligence service's constant ghost, and career torturer, who broke European and Latin American resistance on the terrible wheel of his lies.

Yes, you got Dolos out on The Ratlines, didn't you, Pop? Here I am, twenty years from your bedside myths, where I fall asleep downstairs in that rented room of this dump hospital, I still rest my head on your thick volume of fables when those busybody nurses finally leave me alone. You're the one man who can answer these questions. But there's nothing. You drank or gambled everything away before you wet-brained yourself. "Colonel Josip Dolos—a Balkan war criminal—aided on the ratlines by American intelligence officers..." This is the great elision of the historians, isn't it? You. You, Anthony Kreet, your ghost is in that sentence. For all my botched efforts, my failed research is still dust on the page without you, Pop. Gods had eternity. But gods didn't live on dwindling grants. Gods don't compete for fellowships with eager, coke-blowing

grad students terrified of a future working retail. Gods don't live by Southern California's cruel clock where the big rent check always seems due.

I often stayed up late like that, ranting at my grandfather's body, lying there. But then I rose early to research. I poured more coffee on my empty stomach. It was a cheap, dusty hospital coffee in a plastic jug as big as a flowerpot. I knew more of it would make me no more alert, only angrier. During my research I prefer anger to the drift of boredom or melancholy. I rubbed my lids and dragged my fingers across my woolly stubble. I stank. I lived alone in a nondescript adobe complex two miles away from where I'd been working all morning. I'd eaten on the walk to the hospital the previous night. I always ate at a cheap diner, "Moe's" I think, or "Meg's," but formerly "Sambo's." The eerie racist blackface caricature had been poorly painted over. But each sunset, the ghostly visage of a Sambo man appeared on it. In my historical research as a grad student, I discovered the past is like that, occasionally discernable beneath a thin veneer. Me? Miles Kreet, a gay orphan, single, \$85 in my account, and other than my books, I have only one obsession, my research, *The Ratline: From European Camps to Latin American Cells*. There was not much else there—when an obsessive looks at the world, his obsessions are quite enough.

Pop was a career spook, an incurable Catholic, and I was his executor. Now that he was dying in a dump hospice nearby my adobe flop, I used our quality time together as inspiration to expose his crimes in my thesis. The flop was \$1,795 a month. The hospice room was \$18 a night, no sleeping (unenforced). I put the rented room on credit. Every day, I saw the dark pool of his dissolving slack features, lying there in his final booze-induced slumber—his face bearing a battered resemblance to my own.

The doctors demanded I complete some paperwork: insurance, liability waivers, proof of address, executor forms, failure to pay contracts, rental requirements, healthcare verification, allergy checklists, parking permits, reference documents, and end-of-life portfolios. Being doctors, they also demanded I wait for their huffy entrances and sniveling contempt. But I needed to conclude my own paperwork, my own paper trail of research. I had only a few days left.

True, I was the executor of *The Estate of Anthony Kreet*. Empty bottles and old books. A man out of time requires luck, talent, or rich friends. I put my chips on talent. Yet, Fortune's wheel had become a rack. There are few grants in a recession, though rent is always due.

Regardless of my ranting at Pop, I always enjoyed his myths as a boy. Pop read them to me before and after mass. Before sleep, too. He'd set down his whiskey when we actually spoke to one another, before I

read another book, a biography of Dolos, a murderer forever on the run. I discovered what Pop had done.

Pop's dissolution was slow. My parents had died in a car accident when I was 18. I won scholarships no one applied for, wrote sycophantic essays about the department head's esoteric interests to get into graduate school, and ten years later I had little left outside the college walls. I quietly focused on my research, confined to those dusty rooms. Pop and I did not speak after my freshman year—after I read about Dolos, I couldn't. Not once I knew pious Anthony Kreet supported *The Ratline*. Also, I thought I'd hid being gay: my flipped pronouns, vague responses and no-go zones. But Pop was an inveterate spy who found me out. My "lifestyle" sickened him, just as I was disgusted by his career. Contempt is often a heavy sulk between people; contempt is the great silencer, the mean shrug, the prelude to a punch. I reimagined those last moments with my parents at Indiana University when all seemed easy. A drunk Martinsville trucker slammed them into a cleared August field as they drove north from Bloomington. You recover those last minutes, thread and untie them in your mind: I remember fretting about trivialities as they expressed their high hopes about my supposed gifts—talents that would furnish a life beyond a suburb of a shrunken city. But they were gone. My research was stalled and now Pop, my silent resource, lay dying.

If I failed, was I an accessory to his escape from history's justice? Pop had supplied *The Ratline* during the occupation with reactionary priests so fascists could be smuggled out of Europe. But understanding the big picture of the colony doesn't reveal the perfect portrait of the ant. The truth about Pop's network for Dolos required a close measure of the sourced specifics, not a tract, polemic, or journalistic indictment.

Dolos is here in this pile of fragments sitting on my lap, Pop. I found hints of him. Where? Where they trained me: all those microfiche machines and yellowing files in frosty barn libraries. Who? From my thesis advisor. Yesterday, I drove thumb tacs into your toes.

The Ratline became my maze—my own labyrinth, a book with a solid enough history but pocked with my doubt, my mediocre research disfigured by rumor and guesswork. Truth requires a story and consequently truth always takes time. But I'd dead-ended. Academic publishing, hyphenated America and the fracturing of the academy into microstudies had yielded a bureaucracy with no stakes, a sealed fortress with a thousand silly gatekeepers high above the poisoned moat outside it. The fields and studies—the sentences—had grown esoteric, self-referencing, and banal. My advisers wanted me to take a number and jump in line. But my research had become less about history and more

about redemption. How to escape? The Ratline was my legacy, my only way out. But I needed evidence, a trail, or the wandering walls of false pages would lead me onto the minotaur's horns. There was no way out but the tight structure of The Ratline.

I did know some things: I knew the beginning of Dolos's story: the handsome futurist bewitched by rightist thinkers, his ideological pull from bisexual poet to national mysticism, the propaganda sheets, the goose-stepping reaction of the '30s, war intelligence, media wizardry in Croatia, and organizing of the camps. I needed testimony, dates, evidence, schedules and, that scarcest of resources, *time*. Dolos consigned most evidence to the fire, concealed his steps on the fly, and ensured the apparatus he drew and designed in the New World only indirectly led back to Pop and the occupation's ratline. Dolos's art was Dedalus's art, I think, the artisan of life's great tragedies. But part of being in a maze is the returning blank walls to your front—*getting lost*. Then, in the terror of the moment, *being lost*.

If I had primary sources, testimony, so much would change. Dolos seemed unafraid of The Hague during years roving between desert wastes, Patagonia, or to the El Alto highlands. He hadn't been tracked by Mossad, whom he briefly worked for, or Europe's intelligence agencies. No liberalized government in Latin America made arresting him a priority. He'd been released by Pop's ratline like a swollen mother rodent, but in the postwar conspiracy of silence, few seemed to care about the terrible pestilence the liberators released to the New World. One choice is to forget it. "Move forward." "Let the past be the past." I chose differently.

Did you think of the innocents, Pop? The word makes me uneasy, too, watching the world collapsing and burning each day as it does. But children, Pop? Families? Are you dreaming of them in the booze nightmares, beneath this moonlight, on this rusted cot in our little hovel of a charity dump where these Kentucky-fried nurses eye your organs for spares? Do you dream of slum kids in Bolivia? The Montevideo fathers Dolos looped into nooses? Or wives of reporters, assassins chucked into Asuncion's pits? The children of Jasenovac—the ones Dolos didn't drown in the Sava? Where did Dolos go after the student uprising, Pop? Whisper where you hid him. Give me notes on his whereabouts. Tell me. How did you do it? How long were you involved? Remove your mask. Lift that silver pate and shock the fur right off that fat nurse's lip and tell her if you can't tell me or I'll cut right into your black liver.

I met the families too, Pop. You should know, when Dolos worked as head of the secret police, they brought in Alamada, the pamphleteer lawyer who Dolos hooked up to the wires and recorded every shriek and plea. Dolos files, "The Archive of Terror," the transcripts all show Dolos played the recordings

for Alamada's wife. Dolos made her listen. "Mrs. Alamada, he is dead. Your coward fag husband is dead. Pick him up or the condors will feed on his bones at dawn." But he wasn't dead. He was alive and Mrs. Alamada, grief-stricken, died of a heart attack clutching the phone. Maybe you'll win by my losing. Maybe my inadequacy is your salvation, Dolos's too. Maybe I can't finish the book—I'll get lost in the swirling walls of this maze. Maybe you'll slide out of this garbage pile just like the first serpent slithered into the story of man, Pop. Fear, yeah, that was the first emotion in the Bible. Fear was there at our start, even according to your faith. Maybe it will twist me. It's true, I'm lost. I've clippings in your boxes: academic files, IRS forms, currencies, Eisenhower-era telephone books, Kissinger's signed memoirs, concert stubs, a Stockton featherweight fight flyer, and your love letters to Grandma. But none of your writings, your journals. What happened? To Dolos, after the camps, his fate, your role—yes, you, Anthony Kreet, 5'10, veteran, blood Type O negative, born December, 1912 in Crawfordsville, Indiana? The story is this: you're a silent bag of withered sticks and useless to me as a bag of ashes. Useless until you speak, that is.

"Mr. Kreet. We need your signature," the nurse said. The gorgon wore rubber crocs squeaking against the linoleum as she stared at me. She pulled her pen earnestly from the above her sagging ear.

"Haven't I signed enough of these? How many are there?"

"Are you refusing to sign the document?" Her nostrils indicated she'd walked swiftly from the other side of the crowded hospital. The rumble in her belly meant lunch, not me, was her priority.

"Has Pop said anything—while he's been here?"

The silent hall, Pop's room, bureaucracy, the coldness overwhelmed my senses. She shook her head, extended her clipboard and I ignored her. I waved away the paperwork. I walked back to my room and lay my head on the book.

My time expired. Even as I pursued a lead and busily added references, I received a call from the landlord, courteous enough to leave boxes but cruel enough to change the locks. Of my thousands of books stacked in the bins for hours under the city's sun, not one volume was taken—ours is increasingly a world without time for long stories, suspicious of words. Admittedly, the boxed clothes were too shabby to steal. But I needed to move what remained off the sidewalk or else the stray fragments of my little life, my petty existence, would be flung on some dusty peddler's table at the swap meet and sold off piece by piece. I looked down at a few bins feeling excitement and panic. A crow strutted on one of my jackets and picked with his beak. A few local homeless lay nearby wearing my shoes. But most bins remained untouched. I called a cab and put it on my card.

Homeless, I read the myths to my grandfather. The punished: Tantalus's wretched wine and Ixion fixed to his flaming wheel, Sisyphus and Midas. The victims: poor Io and Leda. History's pages are lousy with myths, too, most folded tightly in the hearts of men disguised as beliefs—the dead ideas, exploded theories and spent clichés people earnestly believe. I wasn't immune, after all, I'd made it something of a belief of my own that the least I could do was write Dolos's story straight just in case, one day, the wider public ever chose to acknowledge their past indifference. Perhaps someone reading my research could accept their tacit acceptance of so-called "realities," their share in the culpability of his crimes, or the many graves he filled in "freedom's" name. After all, my family built The Ratline. We funded Fort Gulick. We led the torture trainings. Perhaps my own end would not be in some maze, but pursuing another silly myth where the stone I pushed, the shame, helped me see the absurdity of the hill itself.

But despite my melancholy, I was unable to stop.

I remembered I had to complete Pop's final paperwork. He was ready. I avoided the nurses, their clipboards, as if they held the pox. I slept in the office, late.

Only murderers schedule death.

Despite all my writing, Dolos remained a blur. But I'd reached one conclusion: the students who overran the capital were not his enemies; clarity itself, posterity's focused reconstruction of his life's girding, its pillars, its very components—that was his nemesis. But why had Dolos deftly avoided an assessment of his legacy? Does any criminal, any man with an understanding of our seismic moods, not hope to chronicle his own tale? Kafka wanted his dark work burned bright. Freud destroyed his papers for fear of Freudians. But primary sources for Pop, for Dolos, were nil.

When young crowds finally arrived, desperate and starving and screaming in Spanish for Dolos's blood, they stormed his intelligence agency and arrived alongside those powdered Western journalists who had skipped months of sit-ins, boycotts, and strikes in favor of crowdshots of a revolution. Every reporter wanted a quick Pulitzer, no one wanted to meet a soon-to-be unemployed gun-thug in a toppling regime with bad aim. When the crowds arrived, Dolos's mahogany desk sat empty, as if a hermit crab had simply abandoned his shell for the dark sea. Dolos had removed each photograph, even his pens, leaving only gilded frames on the bare walls as if it were a cleared stage, a bare set, a silent gag for his furious audience. Everyone wants to see the illusionist reappear. The revolutionaries, students and victims weren't so

lucky. After the fire in the circular oddity of his seaside mansion, Dolos vanished like smoke.

I thought of the massive ruin of Dolos's home as I wrote in my rented room. It was stuffy. A clinking fan had busted and my stomach bellowed. Instead of addressing either, I opened my app and found someone willing and close. Mathias was 20, Chilean and beautiful. He said he had air-conditioning. When I was naked, I gave the physical act my best, the old college try. Mathias patted me on the shoulder when it ended, like a jock after a difficult match. I saw shards of my former self in Mathias's life: a room full of half-read books, a grayed bong. I drank in the sweaty comfort and eerie directness of an anonymous lover. After all, in my experience crawling from bedroom to bedroom in an age of dislocation, pure honesty comes from the intimate stranger. In Mathias's feline stretch, I dragged my fingers across his perfect torso. He was an architecture student with tight muscles, lean and hard as parts of a bridge. I tucked my own chubby flanks beneath his cool sheets. His air-conditioner hummed.

"You from Santiago?" I sat up and tidied my hair.

"How'd you know?" he said with a soft laugh. He looked around the room and found the framed X of the Huerfanos footbridge. "Ah! *Inteligente y guapo*. You notice, impressive."

"I'm broke, unclubbable, and pretty sure I'm going to be alone forever. But I read and I'm interesting and good at parties if you keep a bartender between me and the bottles."

"My grandfather, actually, he helped build it. Italian man. His wife was from Santiago."

He handed me the bong and a stick of chocolate. "An Italian builder? After the war?"

"Yes. We never asked. My brother saw pictures of *abuelo* in uniform. He started a shop near Plaza Baquedano, quiet life."

"What color?"

"Grandfather's uniform was black. I understood he did not do good things in the war. But that is in the past. Painted over in new life. People can change, right?"

I took a hit and slipped on my pants. I looked at his furry toes and slim legs as he gazed out his barred window. I imagined his future: the urban family, the beautiful husband, the professional salary and minimalist condo overlooking the Mapocho River. Maybe a view of a bridge he'd designed himself. Not a moment of it arrested me, though I felt concern billowing in myself. Maybe it was aging, the smell of indoor smoke.

In a life of shame and words, I'd often felt as if I'd pursued the wrong ghost and was living the wrong life.

I put on my socks and thought of Dolos, my intimate phantom, a man who so easily slipped from camps, wars, torture chambers, and government offices from Quito to Valparaiso to La Paz—whose very deftness mocked my botched struggles. It was as if he mocked me, cackling from the black waters of an anonymous grave. But before vanishing, he had dropped the ignominy of his past in my hand like a coin. I resented rowing the criminal dead to historical oblivion just as I resented Pop's role, and now the man himself, a smelly dying burden I neither wanted nor asked for.

I realized from Mathias's face I'd been silently lost in my thoughts. I asked him if he wanted to meet again. I wanted to ask him about Chile's coup, student demonstrations, Patagonia, and the mothers of the Atacama, raking the desert sands in search of their murdered children's teeth, and if he liked wine. Matthias slipped out of bed, sleek and beautiful as a cat. He offered a closed-lipped smile, held me in his thin arms, then patted my cheek, dragging his smooth paws over my sad stubble.

It was pity. I understood, like so many of my ghosts, I knew I'd never see him again.

"Mr. Kreet? Is this a good time?" The straight-faced nurses in white surrounded the rented office door. One fingered a heart-shaped locket I'd seen her open with a photo of her daughter inside. She had bleached bangs and eyed me warily. I'd been rude in recent days. I didn't want to hear bad news or sign more papers. "The doctor is ready." He looked like a fat copy of my thesis advisor: His glasses were wide as windshields and he smelled like something extracted from Charles Bukowski's molars. He didn't look at me, only his glowing screen.

"Your grandfather's not in any pain. Of course, our analysis shows—"

"How long?"

"Unfortunately, Mr. Kreet, I'm not a soothsayer."

"Are you a landlord by any chance?"

I ate at "Moe's," or "Meg's," formerly "Sambo's," and put it on the card. I walked, drank two pints, and fell asleep in the office. My storage unit had security cameras; I couldn't sleep there. In the hospital, my inky draft sat, still and unfinished. The two night security guards gave me a few more days before they said anything—I had some weed I gave them. I even played lookout when they went to the medical records room for an hour with one of the practitioner nurses. The door opened. Pop's mustached chief nurse appeared. She stared coldly at me as I sat up, dimly ashamed, and wiped a small pool of drool off my myths. She

sighed and handed me a small piece of paper. I saw Pop's name, the bill for the room, and I heard another nurse calling the doctor, her voice a cold lifeless drone. Now Pop and I both were out of time.

Once more the nurse extended her clipboard, the blank line waited. Once more, I heard her crocs squeak.

"Look, haven't I already signed this, lady?" I glared at her and took her pen, scrawled my name, and placed the pen in my pocket. I looked at the idle blinking cursor on my half-finished page.

She sighed again and handed me three large envelopes from her cart.

Inside were my grandfather's handwritten diaries, his postwar schedules, and stamped documents from Bolivia to Paraguay. "These belonged to your grandfather. Now that you've signed the release form for Mr. Kreet's material, they're yours."

I opened to random pages, looking for Dolos:

1953: *Loneliness without her, even in the California sunshine. Eating better. Learning to cook. Request for mission to Iran. Tempting. Old statues and deserts, but I told officers I could more easily learn Spanish. Guatemala mentioned, Fruit Company lobbying against Arbenz. Might see Mayan ruins before I know it. Met San Diego artist at airport last month, Everett Jackson, talked of sketching stones, haven't stopped thinking about it, those hard-carved faces staring out of the past. Would def. go to Guatemala. Jealous Jackson may beat me to it. What's an artist do but see things?*

1977: *Gray days in Buenos Aires. Retirement always on my mind, more than idiot colonels or silly admirals blundering into fresh traps. Flinging prisoners out of planes is not an interrogation strategy. Jacobo Timerman, newsman, scooped up. Silliness and brutality in full flower. Operation Condor is being run by vultures. My tactics training is something different: Questioning, search and seize missions, etc. Tried provoleta—grilled cheese with spice. Long for California highways.*

2002: *Too much scotch. More drinks after a walk to the pier. Scriabin, piano. A bit of reading: Claudel. Greene. Eliot. Some news: Argentines digging up detention center, "Club Atlético." They'll find the bones. Usual phony hysterics forthcoming. But remember, let the dead bury the dead. There are higher callings than unburying scum. Easy to forget difficulties from the past. The past. It's right here. They'll flood the young with false tears to drowned memory.*

1983: *Col. Dolos wired, worries of extradition. Talks of Barbie.*

I closed the notebook and sighed, momentarily overwhelmed. On the top of the cover was a scribbled sketch of a maze and a letter in Pop's handwriting: "To the Future Professor Kreet: 'But the wicked shall perish; And the enemies of the Lord, like the splendor of the meadows, shall vanish. Into smoke they shall vanish away.' Love, Pop"

—Brett Warnke, 36, San Diego CA

*Sweeney in the yewy yew:
Schoenberg on the violin*

after psalm 130

I was interrupted three times in 1909. First by the endless
pealing the clacking of the cleric's bell at terce
 across the valley: it hounded us from the Liechtensteinstraße
the cause for me of head-thunder, word-thunder
 an apartment that echoed with funeral bells.
honey-sweet to a weary mind
 "Compose them in!" Mahler wrote—
the belling of a red stag in mossy Glenarm
 but already owning the inexorable, it was for me superfluous,
now here I am death-near in Molin's churchyard
 he too who disturbed by birds fled his wood on the
Wörthersee! the strong wine and banter of my stronghold bartered for
 a letter I wrote on the inadequacy of nature-poetry, and
to eulogise, fleet of foot and empty-bellied,
 an art born from the social struggle "long enough to re-
solve—" all of Ireland's trees and woodland fauna

stark bollock naked I accosted the man of the cloth
 with a coffin for a violin case
I threw his shiny psalter in the lake
 with a centre-parting in my hair
bird-high flew my spear when it broke the bell-boy's belling bell
 I was drinking again, smoking 60 cigarettes a day
bird-high naked Sweeney flew, cursed at cursèd Moira
 and to counteract the negative effects, I acted foolishly
bird-brained I have bolted watercress, wood sorrel,
 I found myself an interruption two times over
and fresh brooklime from the wells of strangers
 the first, as composer: more spoken-of than listened-to

sought in sin by kinsmen
 second, when I left the workers' choirs, as a Jew:
I sought safety in the yewtree
 petty-bourgeois, Viennese. I was neither labourer

 nor fit for politer company; around the empty mercy-seat
where perch-top I have pined pursued
 disciples many, brothers none—what in seeking I have lost!
the length of every perch in Erin, and the breadth,
 forbidden Aaron-brother's molten calf
delivering long lays on Dairbhre
 sought I Moses-brother's slower tongue
and melodious staves from a stick on the hill of the horn-blower
 I tolerated infidelity; I had my moment of doubt;
at home another enjoys the warmth of my downy bed and wife;
 I have suffered like Christ.
I am caressed by bitter winds on a bell-shaped rock,
 three litres of coffee, codeine and Pantopon
but two comforts are there: the pricking of hawthorn
 which helped a little but basically I got worse
and the cuckoo-song at nones on the banks of the Bann.

the pointy music-house at Bangor's antiphony of laus perennis
 two true loves are there: one
is less melodious to my ear than
 the love of the Lord, the other—resisting Mahler—the love of
the trilling of meadow pipets in
 birdcall. Neither of which is linear
counterpoint on Sliabh Binneáin at dawn
 but a tessera-prayer that does not presuppose response
let the Christ give ear to these perennial lays:
 for the silence of the Lord—as of women—is itself a kind of
answer
to the baying of hounds in Ballynahinch,
 to unfinished prayers
and the plaintive moans of the feeble-minded
 played long enough that the dissonance emancipated
at vespers in Glen Bolcáin
 leaves unspoken only the unutterable, or unknown

—P. H., 34, Belfast

The Furrows

Perhaps Nagyi's response was not inappropriate after all. I can still see her deep-set wrinkles, inscrutable and aloof, even amidst the brewing turmoil on that fine spring afternoon. How was she supposed to react to the news that her first-born grandchild had been betrothed to a foreigner? There was no falseness in her demeanor, nor contrived words of congratulations. With these "glad tidings" came the unbearable thought that her granddaughter would abandon her roots and disappear into the white-hot glow of modernity.

Could this have been the moment when her collapsing universe began its terminal descent? What sort of firm, solid thing could she possibly stand on? Potatoes. Her response to the fateful announcement was to simply ignore it and to praise her newly-planted potatoes. No, she had not gone mad—she had heard the statement quite well and responded accordingly. At the time, we were stunned to hear such a cold, mirthless response. Only later could I see the profound melancholy hidden behind this bizarre attachment to her backyard tubers.

This was Nagyi's reality, the rock on which she had survived—war, collectivization, penury—all parried with the help of the humble potato. I do not know to what extent she was self-sufficient, especially in the early years. However, when I imagine that narrow plot of land, with its rich brown furrows, scattered fruit trees, grape vines, chicken coop, and, of course, the eternal summer kitchen, it is not difficult to see that she enjoyed a level of relative freedom, or at the very least, room to maneuver in the face of adversity.

Slowly, though, the capacity for independence dwindled. First, the call of the factory and the proletarianization of the peasants made the farm little more than a useful hobby. Later, the community in Mezőcsozor began to disintegrate, particularly after the regime change. As the younger generations fled to the cities, the gypsies moved in to fill the void, poisoning no less than two of Nagyi's mutts along the way. The onset of old age forced her hand. The pigs were the first to

go. Then, over the course of a decade, the field gradually reverted to scrubland. Finally, as the *coup de grâce* neared, she was forced to liquidate the chickens. This decline was as unfortunate as it was inevitable. Yet, while all else perished, the potatoes remained. As she approached death in that unstaffed, infection-ridden disease house, the family honored her wishes by braving the autumn mud to collect the final harvest.

We, on the other hand, have no potatoes to speak of. It is now a cliché to say that our modern world is soft and artificial. Most who bemoan this fact do nothing; it only seems possible to shake one's head and slouch away. Even Hungary, a land that still carries some semblance of traditional life, is suffering through the last spasms of this universal phenomenon. The old ways are disappearing before our eyes. Due to several factors, not the least being trade liberalization, domestic potato production has diminished considerably—some twenty-times smaller than it was when Nagyi was a child. Nevertheless, she clung to the discarded god until the end.

Despite these trends, I suspect, the potato's decline will not be permanent. Our magnificent house of cards will likely topple one day. If it does, the potato will assume a cult-like status for the hordes of famished wretches that come spilling out of our sterile cities. Those who manage to return to the soil will surely venerate its modest powers. We are not ready or even able to imagine such a life. Any attempt to dictate this sort of radical transformation would be a fool's errand. However, if that time does arrive, whether in our generation or in centuries to come, we will need to rediscover the pride that Nagyi had for her potatoes.

—Immanuel Barrow

The Joy of Personal Criticism

by K. M. Diduck

Take the risk of thinking for yourself; much more happiness, truth, beauty, and wisdom will come to you that way.

—Christopher Hitchens

In his book *Antisocial*, Andrew Marantz poses a question when discussing the changing values of Reddit.com executives as their platform grew: “If a universal platform for human discourse were to be overrun with ‘jailbait,’ grotesque misogyny, and Nazi propaganda, how would this affect human discourse?”

The question can apply to so many aspects of life in 2020. As social media and the internet becomes more ubiquitous in our communications, our politics, and our day-to-day lives, the above question becomes fundamental to topics such as free speech and the value of truth in a “post-truth” world.¹

As is further outlined in the book, the techno-libertarians who founded platforms like Reddit, Facebook, and Twitter seem to have shifted away from—or outright abandoned—the lightly-moderated and universalness of their platforms, ostensibly because an absence of moderation affects human discourse in a negative way: lack of protections against unquestioned deceit, nihilistic trickery, impassioned calls to violence, and bigotry pervading the platforms.²

But the issue isn’t as simple as tech companies adapting to the changing sensibilities of the public, or appeasing advertisers and politi-

1 Refers, roughly, to a world in which the lines between truth, fact, feeling, opinion, and knowledge are incomprehensibly blurred. The term is worthy of its own essay.

2 Phenomena which are well-documented in Marantz’s book.

cal allies by neutralizing or removing controversial or unfounded opinions. It also has to do with the filtering of our online lives through the conscious, unconscious, and involuntary choices of everyone involved, and the fundamental shift in power and authority that is taking place across the internet and, therefore, across society. Since the implications of this shift are critically important to the evolution of our society, I believe it's necessary to answer the question *why are we filtering reality more strictly than ever?*

In recent years, the definitions of "offensive," "hateful," and "dangerous" speech have all loosened. Anything that falls short of glowing praise can be construed as an insult or a threat. And because social media has increased our exchanges with friends, acquaintances, and strangers online exponentially, the field from which to find negative content that meets these lower standards of offensiveness has grown too.

But is criticism, insult, or offense bad? Do people become better individuals and more functional adults when protected from criticism, insult, or challenging ideas? Do our voluntary and involuntary filters³ ultimately protect us, or do they make continuous and increasingly-strong protection *more necessary*? I think, to modify the quote at the beginning of the essay, that one should take the risk of engaging with his ideological opponents; much more happiness, truth, beauty, and wisdom will come to them that way.

Spending one's time in an echo chamber is a bad way to gain a well-rounded and informed perspective on reality. When all participants in a discussion generally agree on things, the likelihood of criticism, correction, or a fresh perspective is diminished. If this condition persists over time, one's existing beliefs become stronger without being improved; reinforced without any new information. With the evolution of social media and the simultaneous (and not unrelated) death of journalism, people are spending more and more time in echo chambers, less exposed to contradictory information or diverse opinions and, as a result, are becoming less capable of handling those views when they're encountered.

Late last year, having become bored and frustrated with the right-wing political forum I'd been chatting on for six or seven years, I attempted to broaden the scope of my political discussions. To do this,

3 Voluntary filters being, for example, who you keep or remove as friends and contacts on social media. Involuntary filters being, for example, the algorithms that filter or promote certain content on the various online platforms, based (very nebulously) on your past usage and preferences.

I revived my long-abandoned Reddit.com account and subscribed to r/Politics. I was well aware that the subreddit consisted almost entirely of left-wing members—precisely why I thought it would be a good place to improve the range and depth of my generally conservative political positions. After mere hours of wading into the comment sections of various topics and posting my opinion on the linked articles, 100% of my comments were down-voted.

Occasionally, another member would engage me in a back-and-forth discussion that spanned a day or two (and for some reason, I was only allowed to post once every ten minutes, which is frustrating during a back-and-forth debate). Although it was intense (this being around the same time that the Trump impeachment hearings were beginning), it was a more-or-less polite debate. All of my posts, however, were downvoted and none of his were. This trend continued over the next week or so. By that time, my karma (the net upvotes for all your posts on the site) was at -100.

From that point, I stopped receiving replies to any of my comments. They didn't receive any up- or downvotes either. It was odd because, until then, almost every one of my posts was replied to and downvoted. Now there was nothing. During my first stint on the site years earlier, I had heard of something called a shadowban, which is when a person can make posts and upvote things, but no one else can see their posts. It's meant for members to think they're still posting while being effectively banned from contributing or discussing.

After I messaged the moderators, I was told that I was shadowbanned because a minimum amount of karma was required to participate on r/politics and that this shadowbanning is not done manually by the mods, but occurs automatically after the karma crosses below the minimum threshold. He kindly recommended that I go to other big subreddits to build up my karma in order to participate. It turns out that many of the large subreddits have similar karma requirements. Regardless, I was not about to spend a whole week harvesting cheap karma just to be able to briefly post on r/politics. So, I returned to the conservative forum I had left merely one week earlier.

It seemed that r/politics was an echo-chamber: a place where left-wing opinions were generally encouraged (with upvotes) and right-wing opinions were generally discouraged (with downvotes and shadowbans). I am not familiar enough with Reddit.com to speculate about how this dynamic emerged on a subreddit called 'Politics.' After all, it was not r/liberalpolitics or r/conservativepolitics. It was just politics. It would not bother me very much if, even on a not-explicitly partisan forum, a tendency towards one side or the other emerged naturally,

without the conditioning provided by the voting system. But the automatic shadowbanning for insufficient karma seemed troubling because there could not be any result other than the narrowing of the range of discourse on the forum—the emergence of an echo-chamber. (I suspect a similar result quickly occurred on right-wing subreddits, too). Returning to the much more conservative forum, in which I could participate freely and without threat of punishment for normal political opinions, was a no-brainer.

After all, chatting and debating about politics is an important hobby for many people. The discussions don't only cover the doings of the left and right, Democrats and Republicans, but also stretches into history, philosophy, social causes, and the media. In other words, keeping up on a political forum theoretically helps keep your thoughts organized in several different areas of life. It is one way the public stays engaged and (more-or-less) informed.⁴

Perhaps the greatest benefit of all is that you must communicate clearly—you must organize and express your ideas in a way that perfect strangers will understand. And as the debate moves forward, you must try to understand what others are saying to you. Throw this challenge into a discussion about topical political news and it makes for an engaging experience.⁵ But for any of these benefits to be realized, one must have access to people with whom he disagrees and posters must, at least sometimes, take the risk of engaging with their opponents.

On 4chan.org/pol/, the right-wing forum which I returned to, I could express my opinions openly. I could find people willing to debate, some of whom I disagreed with. There was a variety of topics, anonymous posting, and practically no censorship. This meant that I was responsible for filtering trolls and evading abhorrent speech *by my own means*, rather than by the moderators or the pre-programmed functions of the platform as a whole. The major drawback, then, was that there was more sifting to do to find higher quality discussions; but once found, I was able to exercise my logical and rhetorical debate techniques against people about whose personal lives and post history I

4 The shortcomings of staying “engaged” in politics by consuming corporate media is worthy of its own essay.

5 This is probably an idealistic outlook on the function of political forums where conservatives and liberals mix freely, but it's about having the *ability* to interact with ideological opponents that matters, rather than the obligation to.

knew absolutely nothing.⁶ This beat the hell out of posting on a forum with almost no variety of opinion while my ability to post dwindled like sand in the top of an hourglass.

But I was bored of /pol/. It wasn't intellectually stimulating anymore. There was a lot of agreement and a lot of extremism, not to mention a good number of trolls and shameless propagandists. So how had /pol/, with relatively little moderation and no upvotes, become an echo-chamber like r/politics?

For starters, the dynamics of the site probably *attract* more right-wing posters because of the nearly complete lack of censorship, and because of the anonymity of posting. Obviously, people are more likely to express their controversial opinions openly if there are no IRL consequences. If we accept that the mainstream news and social media platforms—both realms where censorship and narrative-pushing are commonplace—represent relatively liberal, humanistic, and emotional values, then of course right-wing people would be *drawn* to places like 4chan, where the conversations aren't dominated by the same “values” or “virtues”. Instead, refugees of social media's domineering and anti-free speech landscape probably value truth-telling, responsibility, and national unity over protection from insult, deception, and criticism. Comparing Reddit.com to 4chan.org might even be analogous to the big government versus small government debate between left- and right-wingers.⁷

The result on Reddit, where there is heavy moderation and karma requirements, is that posters are conditioned to express an increasingly narrow range of ideas, based on what the audience (everyone else on the subreddit) approves of. 4chan has no such function. Even if we compare replies on 4chan to up- or down-votes on Reddit, posts

6 One strategy that some Reddit users use to “debate” or “discredit” an opponent (when ideological opponents are allowed to co-exist) is to sift through their entire post history on the site and pick out contradictions, controversial opinions, or personal details that might be weaponized in the present debate. Such attacks, while sometimes exposing the disingenuousness of a poster, are usually off-topic and rely on argumentum ad hominem.

7 In that one side wants the moderators (the government) to uphold specific rules of expression, to be responsible for removing ideas that are unpleasant or controversial or offensive to the membership, and for the membership (the public) to be able to express their approval or disapproval of another's ideas in a consequential manner (an upvote to a post rewards the author; a downvote punishes him), while the other side wants individuals and their words to be the sole determiner of outcome, with little centralized oversight or communal duty.

that receive lots of replies on 4chan could be equally complimented or dismissed. If a 4chan poster gets a dopamine hit from seeing lots of replies, surely that effect is undone if all of the replies are calling him a faggot for his beliefs. So, it's not analogous. Yet 4chan's /pol/ board seems full of predominantly conservative, libertarian, and white nationalist posters. It is undoubtedly an echo chamber, but an organic one (as opposed to a moderated or programmed one like Reddit). When a poster expresses a clearly left-wing opinion, it's assumed to be "bait" or "shilling"; an opinion expressed simply to provoke a reaction.

But I'm not about to boldly assert that, as the 2020s begin, conservatives are the only ones exercising and protecting free speech, or that liberals are all about censorship, but it's become quite clear on these two corners of the internet—Reddit and 4chan—that almost everyone who is calling for censorship is a liberal, and everyone asserting his right to post crude and offensive things is a conservative.

Which is why I often feel compelled to defend reprehensible speech against the left-wing hordes calling for broad legislation surrounding speech. It is not that I necessarily agree with the reprehensible speech, it's that I am more disturbed by the calls to criminalize it or punish the speaker financially simply for holding "bad" opinions. Although I don't believe the first amendment is in trouble, I've begun to notice signs that its wisdom and intent are being questioned more broadly. I found such an example in a preview of the book *The First* by Stanley Fish (2019):

"Even liars and defamers should be given a voice. That, as we shall see, is standard first amendment doctrine. It goes along with a commonplace that we've all heard and perhaps repeated: freedom of speech is meaningful only if its protection is extended to the worst speech imaginable. Sounds good, but think about it. The argument that the more despicable speech is, the more it merits protection makes sense only if we can be confident that when abhorrent views are given a place in conversation, they will be exposed for what they are and rejected in favour of better views." (Fish, 2019, p. 6)

The problem with this reasoning is not that it is seeking a way to protect people from the harm that results from hateful speech—that's a natural instinct of normal people—but that it is implying that the best approach to achieving that "protection" is by narrowing the scope of what can be said in public, rather than by equipping people with the means to recognize, process, and rebut that type of speech. No matter what the predominant view of the members of a forum or platform are,

if the forum is an echo chamber, the odds that uninformed or hateful views will be confronted with more information and exposed are nearly zero.

For Fish to propose that controversial speech not be protected, because it might not be confronted and rejected, basically *guarantees that it won't be*. It's akin to an ice hockey game in which only one team has sticks. They control the game by using their sticks not only to move the puck and score goals, but potentially by slashing or cross-checking the other team. So, which course of action will result in a better game of hockey: giving the other team hockey sticks as well, or taking away the hockey sticks of the first team so that no one can actually play the game? One prescription builds a means of defense, provides for rebuttal, and puts more people on an equally influential plain; the other stunts their defenses and gives everyone the same handicap. The people questioning free speech protections, like Fish, are the ones without sticks. That they're calling for the other team to lose their sticks, too, means that their goal is *not* a good game of hockey, but something else altogether.

A person who's never been exposed to abhorrent speech is going to experience a reaction of feeling much more surprised and emotionally stunned when he first experiences it, than if he had been exposed to it on a more-or-less regular basis and had learned how to dismiss, rebut, refute, or engage with the ideas. Furthermore, to try to protect everyone from abhorrent speech by using broad legislative measures betrays a naïveté about the inevitability of abhorrent speech. Flowing underneath these calls to protect people from harm by protecting them from speech is severely flawed reasoning, which sounds like this: if people are prevented from both *making* abhorrent speech and *hearing* abhorrent speech, then the abhorrent ideas and beliefs behind such speech will go away.

Based on the wide variety of speech and censorship laws that have existed in various countries over the centuries, it's safe to say that laws may influence how people act, but not how they think. The seeds of xenophobia and racism, for example, may very well be embedded in our DNA, carried over from a time when skepticism about others was an important trait to have, preventing someone from wandering into the home or territory of another tribe without some investigation into whether they are friendly or hostile. To try to undo those instincts by involuntary means, with flawed reasoning about the benefits that should follow, and without even explaining if it's possible to undo deep genetic programming with laws written on paper (and a mob of untrained social media activists to enforce them), sounds like simply bad

policy. The more critical point is that pushing abhorrent speech underground actually *protects* it from criticism. To prescribe for the absence of exposure and criticism of bad ideas, like Fish does above, a solution that further precludes that result becomes a cure that perpetuates the illness—dismantling the environment where criticism may occur as a response to inadequate criticism. And, perhaps even more importantly, laws that normalize the removal of free speech protections are easily abused by would-be despots and disciples. Governments change, and any law that relies on a subjective judgement like ‘hate’ or ‘offense’ will inevitably be exploited by bad actors who acquire power in countries where these laws exist.⁸

Applying Fish’s reasoning to limit the protections afforded by the first amendment does not better equip people to recognize and deal with abhorrent speech—the effect is actually the opposite. And, even worse, it relies on the premise that people should always be protected from feelings of self-consciousness, insult, degradation, awkwardness, and discomfort. These are the feelings, however, that allow us to recognize unpleasant and abhorrent speech in the first place, and adults should be capable of experiencing these feelings without their identities crumbling.⁹ To try to insulate oneself from all such speech will diminish one’s ability to digest it and will make adults experience harsher feelings with greater emotional consequences, albeit less frequently. It’s akin to a child whose parents don’t allow them to play outside for fear they’ll scrape their knee: said child would likelier grow up weaker, more fragile, etc., than suffer lasting damage from a few scraped knees.

8 It makes me wonder if the (generally left-wing) people who are calling for a scaling-back of the first amendment have considered what happens when their ideological enemies take control of the three branches of government: what protects their ability to criticize the government? What happens if the people who you’re trying to censor today are the ones enforcing the laws tomorrow? That the current US president is, to many liberals, one of the most unlikable and offensive men to hold that office seems a very apt reason why the first amendment should be defended more passionately than ever.

9 Perhaps basing one’s identity on involuntary personal traits—nationality, skin colour, gender, etc.—*creates* fragility. After all, if one did not choose his identity, he can not change it, which makes criticism of said identity much more devastating. But if one develops an identity based on accomplishment, kindness, intellectual growth, and positive influence—all things which must be chosen and worked towards achieving—his enemies will have a hard time bringing forth deep or thoughtful criticism of that identity.

But with ever-loosening standards of what is abhorrent vs. what is merely unpleasant, fewer and fewer people are becoming capable of gathering those facts and confronting truly abhorrent speech. Instead, they seem to rely on real or contrived outrage, loudness, mob rule, and social media's efficiency at spreading context- and nuance-less blurbs to get the crowd on one's side. As can often be witnessed online, this method of basing one's message on everything *except* truth and facts does little more than distort reality and turn up the intensity of an exchange, with no clear contribution to truth-seeking and intellectual growth.

To accept rudeness or insult as being as abhorrent as, say, racism, doesn't reduce the amount of racism in the world, it simply cheapens each example of it; this being analogous to the federal reserve injecting more currency into the economy: each dollar is now worth less than it was before.

If a plausible criticism like 'Islam is anti-feminist' is as bad as genuine Islamophobia like 'all Muslims are terrorists,' then expression of the latter is encouraged because you're creating conditions under which the consequences of expressing the first (which could be a perfectly valid opinion provided that evidence of it is presented) are the same as expressing the second. What if, instead of calling a person who says 'Islam is anti-feminist' an Islamophobe and trying to banish him from the internet, you asked him for evidence of his assertion, thus opening dialogue in a polite and unhostile manner?

If your first reaction is to denigrate and punish the person without explaining why (and without seeking or providing any new information), his beliefs are likely to harden. This partly explains why people on the left and the right have, in general, become more radical in their beliefs: they're interacting almost exclusively in places where their pre-existing beliefs go unchallenged, which allows more extreme beliefs to seep in and *also* go unchecked. If a conservative person is greeted with outrage, denigrations, and serious social consequences every time he leaves his filtered bubble, what reason is there to ever seek outside opinions—opinions which may enlighten or rebut his beliefs? I don't personally know what the experience of a left-wing person leaving his bubble is, but I imagine it involves him feeling persecuted and afraid because he has so rarely ventured into a world where his opinions could be called wrong.

Fish then uses an analogy for abhorrent opinions, characterizing them as a poison: "Wouldn't it be better, perhaps, to eliminate the poison the moment you see traces of it?" This naively assumes that the censorship or punitive measures to the speaker *eliminates* the poison. It

doesn't. It simply pushes it underground or into a corner where it's less like to be confronted with the antidote or natural resistance—factual and logical opposition. Abhorrent speech shouldn't be eliminated, it should be confronted with factual and rhetorical rebuttal.

This brings us to a premise that seems to found part of the anti-free speech argument: that abhorrent speech must necessarily be untrue. Anti-free speech advocates seem to assert that there's no such thing as an unpleasant reality; that if something is offensive, it must also be rejected.

The claim is, of course, baseless—there are many statistical facts that show religious, ethnic, and cultural differences which may, at least by our standards in the West, paint certain cultures, races, or religions in an unfavourable light. It's how those facts are used that is often false, misleading, or dangerous. So, if one finds such statistics and subsequent rhetoric abhorrent, he shouldn't try to censor it, but should confront it with rhetorical rebuttals and positive speech, which can be truly effective in preventing or undoing the consequences of the facts that we consider abhorrent. It will also better inform policy surrounding mismatches in cultural values in diverse societies instead of further dividing people into discrete, intractable groupings.

Returning to the echo-chamber problem: just as my brief stint on r/politics resulted in my effective banning, leading me back to my original conservative forum, the censorship of abhorrent speech thrusts the practitioners of it into darker and more extreme corners of the internet and society where there are fewer checks and balances to extremist ideas. Having all people exercising free expression in the public square helps *combat* radical ideas by exposing them to facts and opposing viewpoints. To deprive the public *en masse* of experiencing and combatting these ideas, and thrusting the more radically-minded people into deeper and darker corners, handicaps *everyone*. This isn't to say that conservatives are the only ones engaging in "abhorrent speech," or that liberals are the only ones loosening the standards of "abhorrence" in order to facilitate censoring conservative speech, but it seems that in today's social media-based public square, the younger and more left-leaning people are more likely to enforce lower standards of what constitutes hate speech.¹⁰

10 The concept of "post-truth" deserves its own essay, so I won't digress too much. But the appearance of the term is a result of changing values among my and younger generations who have been immersed in social media for most of their lives. Whether there is a causal relationship between social media use and the belief that one's feelings are more important than the factual, empirical reality that surrounds us, I don't

For example, much of the fuel for /pol/'s anger and hardened conservatism comes from Twitter and Facebook screenshots spread throughout the echo-chamber. Many of those images were probably smuggled out of left-wing echo chambers or personal social media profiles, stripped of context, then posted to 4chan to provoke rage and reaction. This sarcastic, troll-like strategy for characterizing the enemy leads to another major pitfall of existing in an echo chamber: the outside radical minority's message is amplified so they're perceived as being a *majority* in the outside world. After spending forty or fifty hours on /pol/, it wouldn't be surprising if a lurker became convinced that the West was already beyond saving and that all Jews, homosexuals, and trans-identifying individuals were colluding to bring to life every conservative's worst nightmare.

I don't know whether the dissemination of these opinions (presumably only belonging to a radical minority) are intentional left-wing raids, or if shiftlessly nihilistic 4chan users are simply amusing themselves at the expense of their anonymous online acquaintances. Either way, just as the message and ideology of the right wing is amplified on left-wing social media forums like r/politics, the ideology and popularity of the radical left is amplified on right-wing boards, which makes the right-wing conception of a vast "globohomo"¹¹ conspiracy seem more plausible.

Believe it or not, however, this amplification of otherwise small voices amongst the masses was once one of the *benefits* of social media. It gave voice and influence to previously underprivileged people, (even uninformed and short-sighted people). This alone isn't a positive thing (it's potentially rather dangerous to a stable society, if the audience of those voices are incapable or unwilling to properly criticize what they read and hear), but that uninformed people can participate in the public square and be confronted with new information, and that our sources

know, but I know that the saying popularized by conservative commentator Ben Shapiro—"Facts don't care about your feelings"—is a critical pillar if truth-seeking is going to remain a cherished value in society.

11 Globohomo is a portmanteau of *globalized* and *homogenized* culture. From urbandictionary.com: "*A word used to describe a globalized and homogenized culture pushed for by large companies, politicians, and Neocon/Leftist pawns. This culture includes metropolitan ideals such as diversity, homosexuality, sexual degeneracy, colorblindness in regard to race, egalitarianism, money worship, and the erasure of different individual cultures, among other things. The term is often used by Alt-Right figures, as well as other people associated to the right on the political spectrum, who are aware of the globalization being forced upon multiple countries.*"

of information aren't limited to insulated academics or government officials, is wonderful. It's just unfortunate that our use of social media is so easily filtered, voluntarily or involuntarily.¹²

This is not only a form of self-censorship, but it breeds profound ignorance. This is why liberals are often so dumbfounded when they lose elections—Brexit, the 2016 US presidential election, the 2019 UK election. The morning after each of those events, certain liberal voters were stunned that the results were not only contrary to what they wanted, but contrary to what they *expected*. On Reddit, there was constant criticism of Donald Trump and Boris Johnson (which is important and necessary) but little or soft criticism of Hillary Clinton and Jeremy Corbyn. Likewise, in the 2016 Brexit referendum, remainers who only discussed the issue on platforms populated mostly by other remainers were shocked that the “leave” vote won. That's a consequence of the echo-chamber: it narrows one's view, either by distorting the reality of the situation, or by keeping one's comfortable ignorance safe from dispute until it's too late.

This is why it's important to regularly welcome opposing voices into your world. The way the internet and social media function, it's simply too easy to barricade yourself behind walls of assenting voices or inconsequential fluff. Because when the real world comes knocking with a referendum or an election or an open public debate (the latter of which is becoming harder and harder to experience), one is shocked by the existence of consequential opposition. Monarchs, celebrities, and government elites are out of touch because they are surrounded by yes-men and people who feel compelled to worship, and not question, them. And when these people decide to go slumming in the middle-class public square with a political comment, it comes off as fatuous or superficial or ignorant because their perspective has been so narrowed by a lack of opposition and debate. So, what happens when *everyone* is surrounded by yes-men and worshipers? And what happens when they never venture into the diverse public square? This is what online political discussion has become: each individual surrounding himself with yes-men who are either too afraid or intellectually incapable of correcting the powerful *me*, and algorithms that validate your self-worship.

To return to the analogy of the hockey game, I think it's time people consciously dismantle their echo chambers. Stop crying for your opponents to get their sticks taken away, and instead pick up a stick yourself and play the game. Take the risk of jumping into scenarios where discussion and debate still occur. Exercise your rhetorical skills.

12 See footnote 3.

Research your and your opponents' positions. Read what left- *and* right-wing journalists have to say about the same issues. Find someone who disagrees with you and, politely and in good faith, ask them why.

—K. M. Diduck, 30, Edmonton AB

A Marvellous Punkah-Wallah

by Gerald McCluskey

This story was told to me in the final term of my third year as an undergraduate. I had recently submitted my dissertation on Camões' *Os Lusíadas*—a project superintended by a very old, very proper professor of poetry. Our work had taken many months and several lengthy meetings to complete so, to celebrate the end of a term of hard labour, this professor invited me to his place to partake in a traditional Sunday Roast.

It was a quaint, picturesque little cottage, whitewashed and ivy-laden, adorned with the typical crosshatched Tudor windows and floor-scraper door. Getting there from my college rooms was a simple matter, an easy walk of about an hour. As a gift, I had brought a bottle of so-so supermarket wine.

Upon my arrival I noticed—and how could I not?—that the house was positively packed to the rafters with antiques of Near and Middle Eastern origin. The place was drowning in Persian rugs, Turkish prayer mats, cabinets and side-tables made of acacia and mango, ugly little ivory elephants, stunted porcelain birds and, sitting there, on the mantelpiece, in pride of place, a musty old ceramic shisha pipe.

Some comment on the Oriental tastes of my host became unavoidable as we sat for lunch, both of us kneeling on his collection of silk pillows and eating with our bare hands.

My polite question was met with the revelation that everything in the house, with one or two exceptions, trifling modern conveniences like his laptop and his landline, had been brought back from India by his father, long, long ago.

This father, it transpired, had been connected to the foreign office in Simla. He had been posted there as a teen in the Imperial days of the late 1880s. He had returned to England in the deepest depths of his middle age, in 1930 or thereabouts, and had sired a son before the year

was out. The Indian died the same year his boy turned sixteen. On the morning of his 70th birthday, no less.

The old man had been chockfull of stories from the India of his youth. Stories of tiger hunts, dāk-bungalows, bloodthirsty Thuggees and Dacoits, desperate battles against dusky natives and cutthroat politicking in Simla and Bombay. Boffo, blood-and-thunder stuff, for the most part.

As one might expect, the old man was bitterly opposed to the Indian Independence movement. It was lucky, or so said my professor, that he had died peacefully in 1946, for the news of the next year would have carried him off far more painfully.

Naturally, I asked to hear one of his father's stories. And, naturally, the old professor obliged. I have set the story down here, as far as I remember it. But I must beg your pardon if, in my retelling, I want the wit and the elegance of my (now dearly-departed and fondly remembered) professor. I'll come clean, I may have consumed a few glasses too many, in the time it took to screw up the courage to ask the old fellow about his knick-knacks, and so I must ask your forgiveness again, for all of the imprecisions and solecisms that are sure to follow.

The old professor began his story like so:

The palaces of the British Government in India were often compared to the boarding schools of Jolly Old England.

This was a particularly apt comparison when one considers that the younger civil servants were boys, who only a few years beforehand had been the prefects and fags of Harrow and Winchester and who knows where else.

In Simla, as in school, their society was exclusively male and extremely insular, savouring more of the playing fields of Eton than the ballrooms of Lisbon.

These younger men would often make expeditions into the wilderness, hunting or fishing usually. Or, if inclined in that direction, they would take trips into Simla's teeming underbelly, visiting the saloons and opium dens and *randee* houses of the Indian district. The older fellows, tired of revelry, tired of ribaldry, tired of endless trips up and down Jakko Hill, would congregate in the palace's clubrooms, there to wait out their final years on the subcontinent. They would sit, in serried ranks of comfortable armchairs, to smoke cheroots and drink cherry brandy and read papers several months out of date.

At civil service balls, the wives and sisters of these functionaries were well advised to attend accompanied by a soldier or two. For otherwise, those delicate flowers of our Eastern possessions would find themselves forced to waltz with one another, denting crinoline dresses

and crushing silken pumps, in unwilling imitation of the dance lessons of their youth.

For their menfolk had acquired the dreadful habit of accreting around the card tables, so as to tell and retell their tales of elephant shootings, tiger shootings and other such schoolboy pranks.

It was in this atmosphere that my father spent all the days of his youth. And, more often than not, his stories were of the type told at civil service balls.

However, the subject of the best of his stories is, I believe, quite singular. It concerns a biological oddity that is beyond everyday belief. An oddity that seems to contravene the very laws of nature.

It is possible that in this story my father left a record of an altogether new phenomenon. A physiological process that we have yet to classify or categorise; a process that we have not even begun to understand.

At that time, India was a land of unclassifiables: we read reports of cattle that could walk and talk like men, of *gurus* that were hundreds of years old, and of death cults with members that lived on top of each other, like bees in a hive.

Why, I once heard of a man, in Agra, who—but that's another story altogether.

My father would always begin his story with the same clarification:

All throughout Simla (all throughout India, in fact) in every corridor and closet, in every nook and crevice, there sat the silent and cross-legged Punkah-Wallah.

The Punkah-Wallah's job was simple. He had to sit quietly and pull on a bell-cord. The bell-cord was connected to a ceiling fan. The ceiling fan was to agitate the syrupy Indian air, and thus produce a cooling breeze. The cooling breeze was made for benefit of the Englishman. And the Englishman ran India.

Punkah-Wallahs were a product of British Rule. In the days before the Empire these old men would have been beggars or, at best, the fan-bearers of some Indian princeling. They were paid four-rupees, five-annas per week. And they were lucky to get that much.

The Punkah-Wallahs of Government House were handpicked by one of the Viceroy's sub-secretaries. To work in Government House a coolie had to be either deaf, dumb or blind. Of course, the most qualified applicants possessed all three of these virtues.

The most famous of the Government House wallahs was an old man, who the Whites had named Ek-Dum (I cannot recall, or perhaps I never knew, what the natives called him).

Ek-Dum was the very image of the Punkah-Wallah: emaciated and toothless, dark-skinned and white-bearded, outfitted in a greying *dhoti*

and a filthy *puggaree*. He was near-blind and half-deaf. He had something of the ascetic about him.

Ek-Dum was famous for his partway aphasia: Ek-Dum had been dubbed Ek-Dum because all he said was "*Ek Dum*." That was his response to every order, every instruction, every half-hearted half-earned wing-tipped kick. "Ek-Dum, Ek-Dum, Ek-Dum."

In Hindustani, this means "At Once".

Now, it was generally agreed that this wallah was no half-wit. We Whites believed that he was at least lucid and possibly even fairly intelligent.

When we said "intelligent," we meant that Ek-Dum could carry out our slightly more complicated orders. Ek-Dum appeared to understand English, Portuguese, Urdu and Hindustani. It was also rumoured that Ek-Dum could read Sanskrit, and write a lot more than his own name.

There were other, stranger rumours, concerning Ek-Dum's family connections. (For, even at the height of the British Raj, the coolies were permitted family connections.) It was said that he had a brother who was a bigtime mystic and a *pundit* somewhere in the obscure interior. It was said that he had another brother who was a respected *mullah* in Lahore. It was said that he had an uncle—or perhaps a father—who had been a Motamid, or a Maharaja, or some other flavour of native chieftain, in one of the Tributary States. Where these rumours had come from—and whether there was the smallest grain of truth to them—I cannot say.

I can say that, in the cold season, when most of his colleagues went away to beg or to sit silent and cross-legged before the family stove, Ek-Dum left Simla. Where he went and how far he travelled are unknown. Though one subaltern did claim to have seen him in Hyderabad, nearly one thousand miles from home. Naturally, this is impossible. The boy was probably drunk, or lost in *chandu* fantasies, or just mistaken: for all Punkah-Wallahs are of one mould—as alike as if they had been built, all together, in the same workshop in Lucknow.

We whites treated Ek-Dum like every other low-caste servant.

He had no wife, no children. And although he could often be found in the native markets, listening to the *bul-bul* chatter of the moneylenders and the khat-vendors, he had no friends.

Yet, despite his apparent friendlessness, Ek-Dum was esteemed by all of the natives, from the *dhobi* to the dog-boy. In the street he was always met with peculiar oriental civilities: widows and orphans stepped aside when he passed; thieves and beggars never seemed to bother him. He lived quietly, and not without dignity.

And then, one day, Ek-Dum died.

Ek-Dum died, but no one placed the basil leaves in his mouth, and no one bathed his body with water from the Ganges, and no one dressed him in stiff new graveclothes. No one cared even to clean his greying *dhoti*, or his filthy *puggaree*. He was not cremated, no one was there to collect his bones and send them off down the river to the sea.

At first, no one even noticed that the old man was dead.

I realise that this sounds unlikely. You will say that Ek-Dum died during the hot season, that his body should shortly have begun to stink and attract flies, and that the stink and the flies together should shortly have drawn attention to the servant's death.

But I say again, no one noticed that the old man was dead.

In our more modern, enlightened times it' begs belief that a corpse could lie for weeks, undetected, in a government office, of all places.

Imagine, today, a janitor's body lying in the concourse of the Houses of Parliament; imagine MPs and their petitioners stepping over the putulent carcass as they head off to meetings of select committees, or for a bite to eat in the Members Dining Room. Such a thing is unbelievable. Such a thing is nigh on unthinkable!

But Simla in the 1890s is not London in the 2010s. As we are always six feet away from a rat in London, it stands to reason that we would always be six feet from a corpse in Simla.

It was a deathly period. Men and women, white and black, were daily struck down and carried away by cholera, malaria, pneumonia and pellagra, and Lord knows what else. It was a death sentence for a white man to be sent to certain principalities in the interior; backwoods postings where it was not the natives that would do for you, but the climate itself. Once sent to such a place, a fellow couldn't even borrow money against his salary. And once there? All the quinine and mosquito nets in the world would not save you, if India had placed her black spot on your palm.

But, Ek-Dum's death was ignored for very different reasons.

For Ek-Dum—long after his natural life had ended, long after he had shed his body like a snake's skin, long after he had gone to a better place, or a worse place, or the same place all over again—Ek-Dum kept pulling on his bell-cord and moving his fan, cooling his single segment of a second-floor corridor for the benefit of whoever happened passed.

Ek-Dum's death was discovered by a rather junior civil servant. A young fellow who had just recently arrived in India. It seems that he had ordered Ek-Dum to do something for him, some trifling task, not worth mentioning here, and had become incensed when the coolie refused to move, or to even acknowledge his presence. I'm ashamed to report that this young fellow fetched the elderly servant a sharp kick in

the belly. Ek-Dum slumped backwards and hung awkwardly, his body bent like a twisted coat-hanger, one hand still working his pulley.

The boy was frightened. He set off at a run, to alert someone more senior and pass the blame on to them.

And so, the Punkah-Wallah's death was discovered.

The nearest native doctor—a cheery old *babu* who had been educated in England was sent for, and a cordon was established around the corpse. Foul play was suspected. Whispers of outright witchcraft began to circulate susurrate about the Public Works Offices.

The doctor arrived, confirmed Ek-Dum's demise and marvelled at his continued locomotion: "*Allah kerim!* This man has been dead for some several days!" he cried, "and in the hot season too! I can't understand it!"

This caused some consternation. For naturally, we whites wanted to know how he had died and—more importantly – whether it was considered normal in this country for a fellow to keep on working even after he had shuffled off his mortal coil. "I suppose that we whites'll end up conforming to this *khitmutgar* custom soon enough, eh lads?" said the office wit, "I don't much like it myself, but When in Rome, eh lads? Render unto Caesar, eh?"

Well, the office manager sent a boy for the Deputy Commissioner. The Deputy Commissioner sent a boy for the Commissioner. The Commissioner sent an ensign for the Lieutenant-Governor. The Lieutenant-Governor arrived, but not, it was rumoured, before he had sent some missive to the Viceroy, and from him on to the Council of India, so that he could assess the situation in person.

The Lieutenant-Governor was a thoughtful, somewhat circumspect old cove. A past master of delegation and a fervid amateur of croquet, he was prone to delaying decisions and "letting affairs sort themselves out." More than anything this Lieutenant-Governor wanted to ride out his term comfortably: to keep famines and rebellions and Hillmen incursions to a minimum, and then to retire honourably with a few extra letters after his name.

This was far from an unusual attitude amongst the leading lights of the Empire.

But even this indolent fellow was moved to action by the bizarre sight of Ek-Dum, who was still animated, still grotesquely sprawled on his patch of carpet, surrounded by all the gapers and gawkers of the civil service. Whether the white man was moved by some lingering childhood belief in Black *jadoo* and medicine men, or whether he was motivated by a sudden prevision of the headache this unaccountably mobile corpse would create, I cannot say. It might even be the case that

our croquet-player had more ambition than I have credited him with: it's very possible that he could see promotions, accolades, a knighthood even, peeping over the horizon.

However, I can tell you that the Lieutenant-General, with a surprising show of initiative, immediately ordered an investigation into the death of Ek-Dum and appointed himself as the new committee's chairman.

Space was bought in newspapers and gazettes. Telegrams were sent to every out-of-the-way station the length and breadth of the continent. Doctors of medicine and biology in America and Europe were consulted in lengthy letters. News of this remarkable Punkah-Wallah reached the most august ears in the land, including, incredibly, those of the Empress herself.

Ek-Dum was placed under a constant guard. Grim moustachioed hussars prowled the corridors of the P.W.O. night and day. The government's secretaries and busybodies were moved to some tumbledown old residence on the other side of town. The office was besieged by natives who had heard of the miracle; natives who no doubt wished to salaam and ululate and genuflect before the wizened wallah.

In a little less than two weeks, the Lieutenant-Governor had gathered a crack team of investigators who, he hoped, would smoke out any trickery or bad *jadoo*. (For a suspicion had slowly coagulated in our croquet-player's mind: Ek-Dum's afterlife might be nothing more than a hare-brained prank, and, if that were the case, he could bid farewell to his Order of the Star of India.)

It took this team a further three weeks to complete their initial inquiries into the matter. They were hindered by the excessive temperatures of the Simla season. It is most unpleasant to be cooped up with a corpse in the summertime, when the air is so thick and hot and humid that you can hardly breath.

Once the initial inquiries were completed, and the reports drawn up and peer-reviewed, and abridged and compiled into a single memorandum, assiduously retyped by the secretaries of the P.W.O. in their new digs, the team met to review their findings and to ask: what next?

My father was present at this meeting. He was charged with taking the minutes and pouring the tea. He was, as I have said, a very junior member of staff.

There were three distinct opinions on the case, each with its own expert witness. The witnesses spoke one after another, in strict hierarchical order.

First came a highly estimable man, with six letters after his name, and a knighthood to boot. Tact demands that his name should remain

unwritten, but know that he was one of the great movers-and-shakers of his day, that even after his fame had faltered in London he was still feted and feasted throughout the continent. I regret to report that, by the 1890s, he was a seedy, bilious man, belligerent to a fault and embittered by the gall of thwarted ambition. He went about in shabby old marching gear. He kept a half-breed concubine in each of his private residences. He had lost the urbane manners and ready wit of his youth. His fine figure and good looks were gone too, they had been washed away by a tide of claret, consumed by a thousand bloody steaks. He was a brute and a bully. But he had six letters after his name, and a knighthood to boot.

His section of the report had been near incoherent. It was so riddled with spelling mistakes and obscure allusions, so lacking in punctuation or paragraphing, that it defied transcription. And so, everybody waited with breath bated, to hear what this great man had to say.

He stood, and delivered his remarks like he was in the House of Commons. His tone was violent and his movements were jerky and mechanical:

“Seems to me,” he said, “seems to me gentlemen that we have another Mutiny on our hands. Another Mutiny with this coolie in charge. They say he’s dead—I don’t believe it. I don’t believe it. Whoever heard of it? The audacity, the audacity. Trickery. Not magic, mind, but trickery. Knew a man who could do it, Strickland, Whiteman, could fall asleep so deep he seemed like a dead man. Same case here. Prick his feet with pins, run a razor up under his fingernails, touch his thigh with a hot iron. You’ll see.”

He sat down. We thought he had finished when all of a sudden, he jumped to his feet, knocking his chair over with a crash.

“I’ve seen it before. So, the coolie’s dead, soon the family hears. The extended family hears. His hundred thousand bastard sons descend on us in the night, ants on a dead grasshopper. They’re there, out there already” (He made a motion with his hands, a vague juddering sweep of the arm indicating the horde of natives standing just outside the door: in kitchens and dressing rooms, upstairs and downstairs, *ayahs* and *chaprassies*, *dhobis* and dog-boys). “I’ve seen it before. I’ve seen it before. Siege of Cawnpore. Now that’s where we’ve seen it!”

He slapped a palm on the table top, rattling cups on saucers and making the Lieutenant-General jump. “That’s where we’ve seen it, the Sepoys like black grinning devils on the ridge. Crick-crack of jezails in the night. The surrender, the massacre. Women, men, children, cut up, shot down, heads swung against stones, all the bodies thrown in a well. Imagine that, thrown in a well!”

As he spoke, a native servant crept near and carefully righted the fallen chair.

“And now? They’re waiting. I hear it. Hear it all over. I hear it in everything they say. They’re waiting. But for how much longer? One month, two months. one year, two years? How much longer, can you tell me that?”

He bowed stiffly and sat down again. In the minutes, my father records a further thirty seconds of silence in which all waited for the great man to speak again. He said nothing more.

The second speaker was a doctor of medicine. Not the Hindu doctor that had examined Ek-Dum at first, but a white doctor, an Oxford graduate. He was, at that time, the most famous doctor in Simla—faithful attendant on the Viceroy’s young wife and all the ladies of fashion. Consequently, my father did not record his name in the minutes, and refers to him simply as “The Doctor”.

On more than one occasion, the Doctor had been called the cleverest man in India. This honorific was most often bestowed upon him by the Viceroy’s wife, who, it was rumoured, had become a terrible hypochondriac ever since the Doctor had arrived in Simla—but nevertheless, that title held weight. He was a small, undemonstrative man with dainty hands and a pretty, girlish face. He had a wife and a youngish child stowed somewhere back in England. In India he lived quietly, dining out at the club and sleeping in a small room above his practice. On his rounds he would wear a pair of ovoid spectacles that gave his face a singularly myopic look. It was rumoured that the Viceroy’s wife made him remove his spectacles whenever he was taking her temperature.

When the Doctor was not at work, or lounging in a variety of visiting rooms around town, he could be found at his desk, bent over one of his well-thumbed medical journals. His section of the report had been near incoherent, couched as it was in the most modern, and most exotic, scientific jargon. And so, everybody waited with breath bated, to hear what this great man had to say.

He cleared his throat and began reading from a sheet, carefully flattened on the table in front of him: “It is a fact, well-known to medical science and long since established by our brightest minds, that the body, after we die, does not immediately cease to operate. *Id est*: Cadaveric spasm is quite a common phenomenon. It is not at all rare for a cadaver to move about *post-mortem*; Indeed, *in extremis*, dead men have been known to rudely sit up on the mortician’s table. We read of this in accounts by Galen, and by Sir Thomas Browne, and by William Harvey.

“Moreover, I am sure that, as educated men, we are all familiar with the famous historical examples of this *post-mortem* locomotion:

how Anne Boleyn continued to mouth prayers after her execution, how Charlotte Corday's head blushed even after its amputation. *Videlicet*, we understand that there are physiognomical, bio-logistical operations *in fieri* even after the death of the body has occurred."

The Doctor paused, adjusted his sheet of paper, then continued:

"The human body is therefore capable of motion after the (so-called) brain—the *cerebrum* with its arteries and veins and lobes and so forth—has died. Or, I should say, after the brain has ceased to function. Wilson, in Australia, has recently published a monograph, claiming that the cadaver can move for up to a year after the brain has ceased to function.

"Plants do not have brains. Jellyfish do not have brains. The *Protozoa* of Dr. Georg August Goldfuss do not have brains. And yet we all agree that plants and jellyfish and protozoa are alive. That they are living creatures. So, what can we conclude?

"That, *in nuce*, this supposed brain—this brain *incertae sedis*—has less power than modern medicine ascribes to it. That *corpore sano* does not necessarily follow from *mens sana*. That, *in posse*, the body is not controlled by the brain, as we *in saeculo* understand it, but rather by something else.

"By what? By humours, or by spirits? By the soul?

"Gentlemen," The Doctor said, removing his spectacles and pretending to polish them, flourishing a handkerchief monogrammed with initials that were not his own, "Gentlemen, I propose that we remove this dead coolie's brain, and see what happens afterwards."

The third speaker was an assistant professor of Oriental languages at Elphinstone College, Bombay. He was notoriously eccentric, even on that continent of eccentrics. Many years before he had "gone *fantee*", he had started to dress like a Hindu, eat like a Hindu and he had married a Hindu woman. (A very English, very pretty woman of the highest caste, but a Hindu nonetheless.)

He was a man of middle height, slim, swart and with a long silvery beard which his wife would oil for him every day, morning noon and night. Were it not for his outlandish attire, he would look like a great many other Britishers in Bombay.

Although he had lived in India since the year of the Mutiny, he had never achieved high office, or even tenured position. He had seen himself surpassed by pups like Peterson and coolies like Bhandarkar. Men who were far younger and (he thought) far less qualified than himself. This lack of success was not, however, a product of his native ways. For, indeed, native ways have often been seen as an advantage in his field of

study: why, in the '20s, I knew white *Hajji* in Lahore who... but never mind that, now.

This professor was passed over because he was a devout spiritualist in a country that held no truck with ghosts, White or Black. He was obsessed with mesmerism and theosophy, spirit-rappings and séances, with ghosts that played billiards and ghosts that upset teacups. His writings on Eastern philosophy, and on Eastern languages, politics, history and table-manners, inevitably returned to his ghoulish hobby-horse. Consequently, his section of the report had been near incoherent, and we waited, caught between bemusement and impatience, to hear what this *fantee* fellow had to say.

He began, palms open in a benediction:

'All this is full. All that is full.

From fullness, fullness comes.

When fullness is taken from fullness,

Fullness still remains.

OM shanti shanti shanti

OM shanti shanti shan—'

"Quite enough of that!" Jerked out the man with the knighthood, "Quite enough of that! Heathen mumbo-jumbo, Sepoy gobbledegook—at Cawnpore..."

The Lieutenant-General raised his hands for silence. He pacified the man of six letters, he pacified the assistant professor, he promised that soon the meeting would be over and the matter resolved. He invited the fellow from Bombay to continue with his report, and instructed him to keep the "heathen mumbo-jumbo" to a minimum.

"The answer to this question is as apparent to me as it should be to every thinking man. It is, in short, Brahman indivisible. The indivisible invisible self that whispers to our ear of ears, *Tat Tvam Asi*—Thou Art That. *OM sh—*

"It is the fourfold forever unfolding emanation of Enitharmon *in re*. It is the word of words and the life of life. It is, in short, the otherworldly refulgence of the Lote-Tree this side of paradise. It is a feather fallen from heaven; it is the fulfilment of the prophecies of Nostradamus. It is Saul's vision of Samuel, summoned up by the Witch of Endor. It is a superflux of animal magnetism, of Odic Force, of Orgone energy. It is the word the world made unmade remade. Our answer is written in the *Ramayana*, in the *Hemacandra*, in the *Nyayabinduṭika* of Dharmottaracharya.

"Place a mirror to this man's mouth and you will see no breath; place a mirror to this man's soul and thou shalt reap the whirlwind.

"What we see here is, in short: *vaishnavara taijasa turiya—*"

My father's notes end here. In the official report on the meeting, which is declassified and which I have read, the Lieutenant-General is described as thanking the speakers and calling for an adjournment. But, according to my father, the six-lettered knight made a lunge for the assistant professor long before the latter could come to his point. A movement seconded by the Lieutenant-General, whose fear of Black *jadoo*, and of professional embarrassment, had begun to prickle halfway through the *fantee*-man's incantation.

To make a long story short, the matter dropped from government records. In a note to the viceroy, the Lieutenant-General claimed that the wallah had been infected with a peculiar form of Sydenham's chorea, also known as St. Vitus' dance. The Lieutenant-General assured his superior that the disease was not catching and that all was well, a diagnosis quietly countersigned by the good Doctor.

Officially, Ek-Dum was removed from the P.W.O. and burnt, good and proper, all according to native customs. Several Hussars spoke loudly in bars and native markets about witnessing the burning, laughing away any supernatural conclusions, becoming violent if they were not believed.

But Ek-Dum was not put to the pyre.

My father, along with the secretary to the Lieutenant-General and an ambiguously empowered military man, supervised the removal of Ek-Dum to a secret location: a locked and bolted room, buried in the labyrinthine basements of the Viceregal Lodge.

There Ek-Dum was left, seated on a prayer-mat, hidden behind a toothless grand-piano and some shattered shoji screens.

The matter was soon forgotten. Wiser heads dismissed the Ek-Dum Case as another Oriental oddity. The majority concluded that the whole affair had been an elaborate hoax, or a practical joke.

The assistant professor petitioned the Council of India for permission to examine the wallah in greater detail. He was refused, and died soon afterwards, in suspicious circumstances. His wife, the Hindu woman, was tried, found guilty and quickly transported. Apparently, she had been putting poison in his beard oil since the first day of their honeymoon.

Ek-Dum was left, to await an answer. He had a caretaker assigned to him: an illiterate Welshman who had lost his tongue in a tangle with the natives. It was an easy job, given in lieu of a pension: all Taffy had to do was make sure that the wallah was still moving, and that he didn't get too dusty.

So there Ek-Dum was left and there he sat, forty years later, when my father stopped in for a final visit, before his return to England. The

Doctor, the knight and the croquet-playing Lieutenant-General had died their various deaths; Taffy was older, he went about crippled and consumptive, leaning on two bendy bamboo canes for support; my father was older too, and heavier, puffy-faced and barrel-bellied from years of comfortable armchairs and cherry brandy. And there, still, Ek-Dum sat.

There Ek-Dum sat, unchanged and unchanging, silent and serene, still pulling and pulling and pulling away at his invisible cord.

And there he sits to this day.

—Gerald McCluskey, 22, North Wales

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