ABSTRACT

THE HOLE: STORIES

By Joe Squance

This thesis is a collection of short stories based loosely around the idea of “the hole.” In these stories, “the hole” represents that thing which is missing from each character’s life, the gap that each character must struggle to identify, to fill, or to sink into.
THE HOLE:

STORIES

A Thesis

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by

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The Hole: Stories

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Dessert

They came back in from Matthew’s workshop while the others were still sitting at the table, eating their dessert. The lights in the dining room were dim, the candles burned nearly down to the nubs. Matthew held Jackson’s elbow just slightly as they crossed the room, not guiding him, but prepared to if it came to that. Jackson walked steadily but looked disheveled; his hair was mussed and the collar of his blue and white striped shirt poked awkwardly out of his sweater like a dog’s ear in the wind. Through the candlelight, they could clearly see a tight round welt bubbling up on the right side of his face, the pulled white skin turning crimson along the edges. A dark head of blood peaked out from one nostril.

Jackson slid gracefully into his chair, picked up his napkin and draped it across his legs, then sniffed. Matthew stood beside him chewing nervously on his thumbnail, his white shirt splattered horizontally with something wet and red. The others watched in stunned silence—Abbey with her mouth half open, food inside, understanding now exactly what had happened, why Jackson couldn’t accept her offer, wouldn’t complete the connection—as Matthew placed his hand softly on Jackson’s shoulder then walked around the table to his own chair and sat down. Jackson and Matthew kept their eyes down as if in silent recitation of the same prayer and then, having reached the amen, both looked up. The other four faces were ghostly blank.

“My god,” said Berg finally, the tiny wisps of candlelight glinting off the frames of his glasses. “This flan is absolutely sublime.”
The Hole

Abbey stood in the dark in her walk-in closet, solemnly removing her clothes piece by piece. From the bed, where he sat with his bare back against the cool mahogany headboard, Jackson could not see her. He tapped on the comforter nervously, crossing and uncrossing his legs at the ankles. It had been many months since their last time, so long that he could only remember fragments—an intake of breath, the light brush of her hair on his abdomen, a frictional drag of skin against skin—during his moments of furious concentration and unsatisfying release into a bit of paper while sitting on the toilet, or afterward, fantasizing of connection and satiation, holding his head in his hands.

Abbey stepped halfway out of the closet and stopped, peered around the doorframe at Jackson in his boxer shorts. Her slight, pale legs dropped from an oversized gray sweatshirt like two streams of poured buttermilk.

“You okay?” Jackson asked.

She didn’t answer, only smiled, the tips of her fingers tugging lightly at the elastic hem of the sweatshirt that hung around her thighs. Dark wispy brown hair framed the sides of her face, casting shallow pools of shadow in her cheeks even in the darkness, and fanned out below her jaw. She tucked one side behind her ear, walked to the bed and lay down beside him. She watched the ceiling for a while, and then looked at him.

Jackson shifted his weight onto his elbow and leaned toward her. He looked at the sweatshirt—one of his he liked to shovel snow in, the black lettering flecked half away, indistinct—and the hidden form underneath, one large mass of gray fabric. He lay his hand on Abbey’s shoulder.

“Are you sure this is alright?” he asked again. “You sure you’re ready?” He expected it to be awkward and was prepared for it.

She shut her eyes and nodded quickly. She leaned towards him now and slid his underwear down past his knees and off his legs, then eased herself back down and took him in her hand until she felt he was ready. She pulled the elastic hem of the sweatshirt up and folded it in on itself once, twice, and then slid it up just above her belly button. He could make out the points of her hips, the curved landscape of skin in between.
Abbey grabbed his shoulder and moved him on top of her, sliding her legs apart as he set his weight down on her, a gesture that drew attention to itself in a way Jackson had never noticed before. He looked at her for reassurance and she looked back at him, their faces still far from each other. She moved her hand to his hip and pulled him to her. When he entered her she inhaled and clenched his skin in her hand. He began to move slowly, tentatively, watching her, and then faster. He placed his forehead on her shoulder and listened to her breathe.

Jackson felt her shudder and began to move faster. Her breathing had become erratic. When she shuddered again, he raised himself and looked at her. Her face was a grimace, and tears stretched away from the far corners of both eyes. Her body shook and he pulled himself away.

“Abby,” he said. “What…”

She put her hand to her mouth and cried. He leaned off of her and started to speak and she smacked him on the ear with her open hand. He recoiled, stunned, with his arm half raised, and she hit him again. He turned his head away and she hit him on the back of his neck, his shoulder, his back, flinging wildly, her face turning blotchy, her breathing heavy. He said nothing and didn’t try to stop her.

Abbey wrenched herself out of bed, pushed him away from her, and ran to the bathroom, leaning her weight into the door from the inside. He could hear her openly weeping, could picture her crumpled on the bathroom floor. Jackson didn’t move from his position on the bed for a long time. He waited for her to calm down and then tapped lightly on the door. It would be many weeks more before he got the chance to connect again.

**Dinner**

Everybody laughed. Janice held her hand to her mouth to keep the food in, while across the dark oak of the dining room table Amy whipped Berg’s arm with her starched white napkin. “And,” Berg said, holding one finger up, shifting his eyes from one to another, “it’s all true. That’s a true story.” He scratched with the butt end of his fork at
the mustache he wore ironically, each end dipping over the corners of his mouth like two thick tangles of brown wire.

“Bullshit,” said Janice. “I don’t believe that.” Her short, black hair was beginning to pull loose from its plastic yellow clip.

“It’s true. I swear!”

“No it’s not,” said Amy leaning back next to him, her long arm hitched over the back of her chair, the napkin wadded into a ball in her fist.

“Alright, maybe it isn’t,” Berg said. “But it should be.”

At the far head of the table, Matthew wiped his mouth and set the napkin on his empty plate. Short blond bristles covered his knot of a chin and ran up the flat sides of his cheeks, climbing his bare head above the ears before petering out just below the peak of his skull. He adjusted his black framed glasses, leaned back and pulled a cigarette from behind his ears. He slid it between his lips without lighting it.

“So, Berg,” he said. “How’s class?”

“Mm.” Berg put his finger to his mouth, chewing, then swallowed. “Great. Really great.”

Janice looked down the table at Matthew, one of her last remaining hunks of pink salmon on a fork near her mouth. “What are you doing down there?” she asked him.

He pulled the cig out like a lollipop and shrugged. “It makes me feel better to hold it.”

“What are you teaching this semester?” Jackson asked Berg.

“332. It’s an Issues in Sociology class. Mostly majors, which is nice. And I’m lucky this semester, because I teach from ten to eleven thirty, so every day we’ve been watching Maury.”

“Povich?” Janice asked.

“Absolutely. Have you watched it lately? Each show is like a case study in human deviancy. It’s a god damn goldmine of material. I don’t even have to plan class anymore, it’s great.”

“What do you do,” Matthew asked. “Just watch TV?”

“We watch an episode, and then discuss the issues in a sociological context.”
Jackson leaned over towards Abbey, touched her lightly on the wrist and she turned to him. She’d put on more makeup than he was used to seeing on her, the wide whites of her eyes traced in chalky black outlines. “Getting enough?” he said softly. She nodded and turned away.

“So…” Matthew put the cigarette back in his mouth and leaned forward, both elbows on the table. “You and your students just make fun of these poor people?”

“Not at all, man. Not at all.” Berg slid his plate forward and poked at the bridge of his glasses. “In fact, in a way, the guests—or, as we call them, the subjects,” he smirked, “are kind of the least interesting people involved. I mean, think about Maury himself. Consider the duality involved in the sort of surface respect he shows his guests and then the disrespect that’s fundamentally tied to the exploitation of their lives. He’s like a carnival barker, feigning admiration for the freaks while collecting admission to see them. Then there’s the studio audience, not to mention the television audience… There are millions involved, all of them, in one or way or another, enablers. Talk about amplification of deviance. Shit.”

“Why not just watch Springer,” Janice said. “I’m sure there’s plenty of material there.”

“That’s what I asked him,” said Amy, wiping a curtain of hair away from her brow.

“Dammit.” Matthew had his chin tucked into his chest. He dipped his napkin in his water and dabbed it at a tiny spot on his shirt. “I got like a chunk of chutney or something on here. A brand new shirt, too.”

“Springer’s less interesting,” Berg said. “Springer knows his show is ridiculous, he revels in it. It’s presented as absurd. But Maury seems to think his show is legitimate, even important, some kind of forum where relevant social issues are highlighted and explored. It’s crazy, delusional! He takes Springer’s content and wraps it up in Montel’s sensibility, as if we can’t see the disjunction, as if he can’t see the disjunction. Truly fascinating.”

“Oh my god,” said Janice. “This is like the Tao of Maury.” She poured red wine into Amy’s glass, on top of the wine that was already in there. She held the bottle up for Abbey, who waved it away.
“This is what I live with,” Amy said, her cheeks beginning to flush, cocking a carefully shaped eyebrow.

“And besides,” Berg went on. “Maury’s been focusing pretty heavily on these paternity tests, these shows where blood tests are used to determine who some poor child’s father is, from a pool of up to like five or six guys. I mean, shit, man, think about that.”

Jackson’s smile faded a little. He picked his fork back up and dragged it across the smears on his plate.

“These are women who honestly and sincerely don’t know who the father of their child is out of two or three or four or five possibilities. When you consider that a doctor can pinpoint the time of conception within four or five days, the logistics of what’s implied in these shows is startling.”

Berg searched the table for reactions, but no one seemed to be looking at him anymore. The room had gone quiet, as if, below the surface of the table, bodies had stopped shifting and twitching, limbs fell into disuse, pulses slowed. Jackson poked at the block of fish on his plate, the inside orange and smooth like a pencil eraser bitten in half. He had hardly touched it.

“This used to be alive,” he said quietly, almost to himself. Abbey looked at him.

Matthew tapped the filter end of his cigarette on the table and slid it behind his ear. He left it there for a second and then put it back in his mouth. Berg’s eyes jumped from one down-turned forehead to the next.

“And apparently these women are everywhere, just bouncing from prick to prick—”

“Jesus, Berg,” Amy said, turning to him in bemusement.

“—without a clue as to whose sperm is the one that made it through. Not a clue. Couldn’t pick him out if he were sitting at this table.”

Janice’s fork dropped onto her plate and bounced around. Matthew was up on his feet before the echo had been absorbed by the walls. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I gotta light this fucking thing. I’ll be back in just a sec.”

Jackson watched him leave the room. Abbey was still looking at him and he knew it. “I think I’ll go too,” he said. He set his napkin on his chair and left the room.
“I’ll help clean up,” Berg said smiling. “We have quite a mess here.”

The Hole

He had only come for the footboard, but they ended up fucking in the empty bedroom. They slid across each other’s bodies and rolled along the length of one wall, the sound of suction and friction filling the sun-bathed room, and finally worked their way, gradually, in stages of leaning and bending and kneeling and sitting, dropping clothes like husks, to the carpeted floor. Afterwards, they lay side by side, breathing, their thighs and necks covered lightly in a glistening film of sweat and spit. Jackson looked up at the footboard that had been propped up against the wall near their heads. It was the only piece of furniture in the room.

“How long has this room been empty?” he asked.

Janice didn’t answer him right away. She had turned her head away from him and was chewing on her middle finger. After a while, long enough that Jackson thought she hadn’t heard him, she said, “A while now. A year maybe.”

Jackson watched the ceiling, not sure what to say, what to bring up. His body felt better, he thought. Relieved. His bones rested comfortably on each other, all in alignment, his organs hanging easily towards the floor.

“I hate it,” she said. “I hate having this room empty. It’s like having a giant hole in the house.” He watched her breasts rise and fall, her arm push against them when she moved. Her skin was pale, her shoulders and chest dotted with tiny brown freckles. Her short hair wild. He traced the line of her body from the back of her ear, along the sharp edge of her jaw, and down across her throat.

“Janice,” he said. Already he could feel the top layer of gratitude turning to crust above the more fertile levels of guilt and disappointment below, and he wanted to say something, to thank her for the comfort, the connection. The tendons in her neck tightened as she raised herself up off the floor. She began picking up her clothes and kicking his towards him.
“Jackson, I think you outta go.” She stepped into her underwear, gathered the rest in her arms and held them to herself. Jackson sat up. Janice stood there for a minute staring into his chest, thinking furiously, chewing on her bottom lip. She looked at his face, started to say something then stopped. “I don’t know, Jackson,” she said finally. “I don’t know what this is gonna be, but I don’t think I can talk about it right now. Okay?” He looked at her. “Don’t forget the footboard,” she said. She left the room and he watched her go.

Jackson dressed alone in the empty room. He tied his shoes and wondered which moments would come back to him later. Her hand, hot and damp, on the back of his neck. The light tap of her tooth on his. Watching her pull the thin straps of her tank top down her shoulders and push the material to just above her belly button. Following her upstairs, the pinch of her Achilles tendons and the dime-sized shine of an old blister on the back of one heel. But these were already beginning to fragment and fade even as he recalled them.

He poked his head out of the room. Janice’s bedroom door was shut, and he heard nothing coming from behind it.

He imagined further back to their conversation on the sofa in the living room, surrounded by Matthew’s wood sculptures and homemade furniture, her hand coming down gingerly on his shoulder as he talked about Abbey. Moving in reverse in his mind, they split apart on the couch as a tear slid up the side of his nose into the corner of his eye. Janice moved to a chair across from him, next to the wide, empty mouth of the stone fireplace, and leaned her elbows on her knees. She capped two beers and set them in the refrigerator, then walked him, backwards, to the foyer where they paused and made regular chit chat, before he stepped out onto their porch in the early afternoon sun and stood facing the door while she closed it.

Jackson picked up the footboard, carried it down the stairs and out of the house.
Appetizers

Jackson was dreaming. He felt himself receding, the two almond-shaped holes of his eyes getting smaller and smaller, and even wondered for a second what it might look like from the outside, before the holes were just pin pricks of light and then gone altogether.

It was dinner in a restaurant, the inside designed to look like a Mexican courtyard—vinyl cobblestones on the floor, piñatas hanging from strings of wire, and window shutters painted onto the walls. A celebration, a thank you. For the headboard.

“It’s gorgeous,” Abbey said.

The tables and chairs were a mesh of corrugated iron, leaving waffle patterns on their forearms and elbows. The four of them sipped at green margaritas.

“So…” Janice leaned in. The waitress set a gigantic plate of nachos between them and was gone. “The adoption? Is over.”

“What?” Abbey put her hand to her mouth. “What happened?”

“It fell apart. The birth mother got real flaky, we started having trouble reaching her. Turns out she hadn’t even told the father she was pregnant.”

“Oh no,” said Jackson.

“So, it’s officially done. Back to the beginning.”

“I’m so sorry,” Abbey said. She reached across the table and set her hand down on Janice’s. Mariachi music was playing.

“They told us not to expect much,” Janice said. “I guess things rarely work out the first time…”

Jackson turned to give Matthew a sympathetic droop of the eyes but found his gaze turned down, to a spot on the table where Matthew was picking. He looked ashamed, even a little disgusted. As the others talked, he kept his head tilted and his eyes averted. Tiny dots of white light shone in the frames of his glasses. Jackson watched as they grew brighter and larger, eating away at the scene like paper on fire, until they were huge, all that he could see, and the memory was over.

“Ten weeks,” Janice said. “I know you’re supposed to wait for twelve, but this just seemed like a nice time tell you guys.”
Jackson stood in front of the stone fireplace with a bottle of beer in his hand. Janice and Abbey hugged and Amy stood by, smiling, next to Berg, twisting the tip of his mustache. Jackson noticed that Matthew was standing right next to him. He could tell by his expression that Matthew had just asked him a question and was waiting for an answer.

“I’m sorry?” Jackson said.

“I didn’t say anything,” Matthew said. He turned to face Jackson and stood regarding him. He wore a sober expression, and had a cigarette pinned behind his ear. Matthew clinked their bottles together and walked away.

“This is amazing,” Berg said. “I mean, after all the treatments and the tests…” He pointed to Matthew, “And the stilted, robotic sex? Isn’t that what you called it?” He stiffened his arms like C-3PO and bent up and down at the waist. In a robotic voice he said, “Oh yes baby. That is it right there. Johnny Five is alive,” and everybody laughed.

“It was a total chore,” Matthew said. “Sometimes like six times in two or three days.” Abbey’s eyes dropped in embarrassment.

“But now,” Janice said, “thank god, we can finally fill the nursery. It’s such a relief. And Matthew’s already started putting some of the furniture together, so we’re very excited.”

“So how’d you do it, finally?” Berg said.

“I guess we just got lucky,” Janice said. Matthew stood nearby picking at the label on his bottle.

“Yeah, but the odds must be astronomical, like winning the Super Lotto jackpot without buying a ticket.” He paused. “Right?”

Van Morrison drifted lightly around the room like fog around their ankles. Slim Slow Slider.

“Maybe she bought a ticket and just didn’t tell anyone,” Jackson said, standing away from the group. The others looked at him. “Or maybe she found one in the gutter.”

“Do you like Matthew’s new shirt?” Janice asked. She ran a hand down the front of it, a brilliant white cotton button-down he wore untucked. “I bought it for him yesterday—he needed at least one shirt that doesn’t look like a god damn Pollack.”

“It’s nice,” Berg said. “But what is this?” He pointed at the cigarette. “An accessory?”
“I quit six days ago,” Matthew said.

“He quit smoking them” Janice said. “Now he’s addicted to holding them.”

“Second-hand holding doesn’t kill anyone,” he said. He leaned forward and they kissed, and Jackson looked away.

Janice went to the kitchen to get the appetizers and Jackson watched her go. Abbey stood looking at him, her slight frame hidden beneath a dark, loose-fitting blouse and sweater. She held the straps of her purse in both hands in front of her. She was waiting for him to join her, to say something, but he stood where he was. Finally, he walked to her. He set his beer on the mantle behind her, said, “I’m gonna go to the bathroom,” and left the room.

Janice was bent over the open door of their stove, reaching in. The kitchen, like all the rooms in their house, was full of Matthew’s functional sculptures. All carved carefully from wood, meticulously fashioned, all serving some practical purpose. Jackson stood next to Janice and leaned against the counter, waiting for her straighten. When she didn’t, he bent down next to her.

“Need some help?” he said.

“No,” she said without looking at him.

“You and I outta talk, don’t you think?”

She snickered. “No. I don’t.”

“Oh,” he said. “Well, I guess that settles it, then.”

“I guess.”

“Well fuck you, it doesn’t.”

She stood and closed the oven door, her face flush with the heat. She pulled off an oven mitt and tossed it onto the counter. She looked into the living room, then back at him. “Jackson, what’s the matter with you?”

“What do you mean, what’s the matter with me? This whole situation is fucked up.”

“Oh. You mean that day in the empty room, when you came to pick up the footboard.”

“Yes, of course.”
“Jackson,” she said. She put her hand lightly on his cheek and smiled. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

The Hole

Abbey stepped naked out of the shadows of her closet, into the light of the room. Jackson stood in front of the armoire on the other side of the bed, buttoning his blue and white striped shirt before the mirror on the inside of the open door, dressing for the dinner party. He saw Abbey’s reflection emerge and dropped his arms. She looked smaller than he’d remembered her, her shoulders more narrow, her collarbones more pronounced. He stepped back and studied her image in the glass.

It didn’t look at all like he thought it would. Beside her breast the skin was flat, flush with her sternum, like the chest of a boy, broken only by a thin, pink seam. A perfect absence. Her face was clean and natural, her hair pulled back away from it, emphasizing the shape of her cheeks and angle of her jaw. She watched him look at her, waited for him to turn and face her.

It had been weeks since their last, disastrous, attempt at intimacy. Since then, Jackson had given her as much emotional and physical distance as she needed. He could see now that the space had healed her, even as it had broken him, that it had filled her as it had emptied him. And now, finally, she offered herself.

Abbey still waited, but Jackson swallowed hard and turned away. He’d earned it once, but lost it. Abbey picked up her robe and pulled it up under her chin like a blanket. Her face was at once pale and flush like regions of depth on an Oceanographer’s chart. She coughed out a sob and said, “I’m sorry,” then rushed to the bathroom.

“No, no, Abbey,” Jackson said, but the door was already shut.
They stood in Matthew’s workshop, surrounded by his worthless creations. Matthew leaned against his workbench, a long counter of unfinished wood three inches thick, nicked up like a chopping block and splattered with layers upon layers of old paint and varnish. Piles of wood, of all shapes and in all states, lined the periphery. Axes and handsaws hung by nails from the exposed studs in the walls. The four sides of a crib were stacked together, propped upright, and leaned against the steel lathe. Jackson stood across from Matthew, leaning on a small table covered in paints and brushes, watching him fiddle with the cigarette in his hands.

“I have to thank you,” Matthew said, not looking up, “for what you did.”

“What do you mean?”

Now he did look up. “I’m not an idiot, Jackson.”

He nodded.

“I was perfectly ready to love a child that wasn’t ours. Now, at least, I can love one that’s hers.” He set the cigarette down on his workbench. “You created something that I was incapable of creating myself,” he said. “So what you gave us was a gift. Thanks.”

Jackson swallowed, not quite sure what was happening.

“But,” Matthew went on. “You did have sex with my wife, and I just feel that,” he rubbed his face hard with both hands, “as a man, I just, I have to punch you.”

“You what?”

“I have to. I don’t see any way around it. I just couldn’t live with myself if I didn’t. I’m not sorry about it either.”

They looked at each other. “Are you serious?” Jackson asked finally.

“Yes. Jackson, you fucking… you fucked her. I mean, how am I supposed to feel about that? How would you feel? What would you do? I have to do this, man. So, you know, where do you want it?”

“Geez.” Jackson thought about it. “In the face?”

“Yes, in the face. Of course.”

“Hard?”
“I think so, yeah. Yes, it’s gotta be hard.”

“Well…” Jackson thought about it some more. “I guess stay away from my nose. And my jaw, don’t break my jaw. Probably aim up around my cheek below the—”

Matthew connected, sending Jackson flailing backwards through the workshop into a pair of sawhorses that collapsed under his weight. He lay sprawled on the heap, his arms outstretched. Matthew rushed over and grabbed one.

“You alright?” he asked. “You okay?”

“Fuck,” Jackson said. “You punched me.”

“I know. Can you sit up?” He pulled Jackson’s body forward, reaching around with his other arm to support Jackson’s head and neck. “You okay?”

Jackson rolled his neck around it cracked once. He rubbed it and then brought his hand up to his cheek. His left eye was squinting uncontrollably. “Fuck,” he said again. “You nailed me. I’ve never been punched before.”

He blinked his eyes open and sat still, Matthew’s hand still clamped under his elbow. He looked at Matthew’s shirt and said, “Whoops. Looks like I got you too.” A line of red splatter crossed his chest.

“Oh great,” Matthew said. He dipped his pinky in one spot and looked at it, then scanned the room and found the pint can of scarlet paint on its side in a corner, oozing thick latex. “God damn. Brand new.”

He hoisted Jackson to his feet and sat him down on the stool by the workbench. He picked up the cigarette and dug through a drawer till he found a book of matches. He struck one on a sandpaper block, stuck the cig in his mouth and started to light it. He paused, as if he weren’t quite sure how it was done anymore. He whipped the match out and flipped the cigarette away.

“Hm.” He shrugged, turned to Jackson and smiled. “I guess I feel better.”

“I’m glad,” Jackson said. They were silent for a minute or two, then Jackson said, “So does this mean we can still be friends?”

“I thought about that already,” Matthew said. “And I don’t think so. But I don’t really know.”

“Yeah.”
They sat there for a while without speaking. Jackson kept one hand on his cheek and worked his face around to find the sore spots. Matthew cleaned his glasses with the bottom of his shirt and put them back on. He turned to Jackson. “Ready for some flan?”

The Hole

Jackson’s legs had gone numb. The fan in the bathroom was on to drown out the noise, even though the house was empty and silent. Jackson leaned back against the tank with his eyes closed, a bit of paper in his hand. Abbey would be home before too long.

Jackson shifted and sniffed. He thought back, searching through moments. He shuffled through warped bits of memories, bent and distorted, until he found one clear enough to focus on. He went back into their house, where Abbey was now, back to that day, to the dinner party, to the dusty workshop where Jackson had finally, mercifully, made a connection.
It was sometime during the fifth or sixth night of sleeplessness that he appeared and explained it all to me. I was already beginning to understand on my own, slowly, though what I was understanding I didn’t quite get. I only knew that something was inside of me—rather, something else was inside of me—that wanted to come out.

It was very late when I first noticed him there, well past three in the morning. I was sitting on my couch. I had wrapped the comforter from my bed in a tube around my body, like a cushiony cornflower blue tortilla shell. I was happy to be sitting. Some of the previous nights I couldn’t sit, couldn’t keep still at all. I was suffering restlessness. I tried to read, but after two or three minutes I felt as if an anthill in my stomach had been stepped on and the ants were pouring out, hundreds of them, climbing the walls and lining of my stomach, up into the chute of my esophagus and down into my small intestine. I had to move. So I’d pace the floor and read. I read Kafka one night, including “The Judgment,” which he wrote in a single inspired eight hour burst. I suppose if one doesn’t sleep, and one is so inclined, one can do such things. When I wasn’t reading, I watched late night infomercials.

I wasn’t sleeping because I was hooked on junk. At least, that’s the way I like to tell it. It was actually a prescription pain killer that I quit cold turkey when I went back to work. I couldn’t drive my car on them, and I had already built up a resistance after eight days anyway, so the night before I started back at the office I poured the remaining four pills down the sink. That night, and every night following, I slept less than two hours. Generally, I’d drift off at five and drift back in when my neighbor’s alarm went off at six thirty.

My apartment then was in a small building shaped like a cardboard milk carton, the inside divvied up into tiny squares. Out of nine stories I was on the fourth, wedged in between the Deluxe Corner Suite (with a view of the building adjacent and the alley
behind Sloppo’s Eatemup) and the elevator shaft. The walls were so close together I had to situate my sofa at an angle to make it fit in what was referred to in the building’s brochure as “an appropriately spacious comfort zone.”

After three days being back at work, and having slept less than five hours, I told my friend Beth I thought I was beginning to lose it. I was feeling weird feelings and thinking strange thoughts. She wasn’t invested enough to ask me to elaborate, and I wasn’t sure I could anyway. We were on our way to lunch at this Thai place we always went to called Mystic Jade Garden. Beth was in this phase where it was the only restaurant in the area she wasn’t totally sick of, even though, by some accounts, there were 129 different eateries crammed into four square blocks between Jeep dealerships and Home Depots.

“Why do they let people drive?” she asked. “People are dipshits.” She liked to talk to other drivers as if they were sitting with me in the passenger seat. “Where do you think you’re doing, buddy? Oh yeah, change lanes, that’s the solution to all your problems. Sure. If you can just slip into that left lane, all these cars will disappear. Jackass.” Lunchtime traffic was lugubrious, like hot taffy. Her car started to feel cramped with heavy air. It made my abdomen throb.

It was in her car, in fact, a week earlier, on the same road, that she diagnosed my illness. “My stomach hurts,” I told her. “But only in the car. I don’t know why.”

When we pulled up to a stoplight she lifted her sunglasses up to the crown of her head and tucked her hair behind her ears. “Where’s your belly button?” she asked. I put my finger on it through my shirt. “Lean back,” she said. She found my hipbone with her fingertips and dragged them halfway to my finger and pushed in hard. “Does that hurt?”

“No, not really,” I said. She pulled her fingers away quickly and my whole right side constricted. I wasn’t at all familiar with the sensation of that kind of pain coming from so deep within the meat of my body. It was new and exciting in the way that chopping the tip of your thumb off must be exciting, to see it lying there, separate, when, your whole life, it had been attached. I kind of wanted my mother.

“Does that hurt?” she asked.

I was still wincing. “Fuck. Yes.”
“Dude,” she said. “You have appendicitis.” She slid her sunglasses back down over her eyes. The light turned green and she drove on.

“How do you know?”

“I was a candy striper for six months my freshman year. I saw three or four of these. You better go to the emergency room before it bursts. The appendix is full of muck and filth; if it pops all that junk just floats around in your system. You can get really sick.” She turned to me. “You can die from it, Sam. You should go to the emergency room as soon as possible.”

“You mean, like, now?”

“No, not now. I mean after lunch. I’m starving.”

“How do you know its appendicitis? I think it might be an ulcer.”

“It’s not an ulcer,” she said. “When the appendix gets inflamed it’s not direct pressure that hurts, it’s the jostling around. That’s why it only hurts in the car, dude, because it’s getting all jiggled.” She shook her head mournfully. “It’s appendicitis. You’re doomed. They’re gonna carve you up like a jack-o-lantern and pull out fistfuls of your guts.” Then she threw her head back and laughed, she was so tickled with herself. But she was right. It was appendicitis, and they carved me up the next morning. They prescribed a week of convalescence on the couch and a mildly addictive pain killer. I spent the following week in a fog of drugged up daydreams and mid-afternoon naps. I watched TV until it melted. I peeled back my waterproof bandage and looked at the stitches in my skin, stark black dashes between lumps of inflamed flesh. I was too afraid to touch it. I imagined the furious activity that must have been happening on a cellular level, with long lines of microscopic bits, billions deep, struggling to join hands and stay together, all looking down in wonder and shock at the void where an organ used to be.

Back in Beth’s car on the way to Mystic Jade Garden that third day back, I was floating in my body. My insides felt shrunken and weightless, bones and all. My skin was like a jar of formaldehyde, holding it all in. I stared out the window with my mouth closed at the landscaped green areas between fast food huts, the fake ponds, the names of businesses carved into giant slabs of decorative rock. I watched imported geese shit in parking lots. After a while, I could hear my eyeballs moving.
At Mystic Jade Garden I ordered chicken teriyaki, forgetting that I’d had it before and it was gross. It didn’t matter, though, because as soon as I looked at the menu, with its unappetizing photos of glistening sushi, I felt like I’d never have to eat again and was relieved to be done with it. That was my first inclination, the beginning moment of my understanding.

On the way back in from lunch, I found a cocoon in a bush outside the front door of my office. It was small—about the size of my finger from knuckle to nail—and dirty brown like a chewed cigar. I poked at it. It hung neatly from the crotch of a twig, suspended by a dainty white cremaster. It looked very snug. I plucked it and brought it inside, holding it delicately in cupped hands in the elevator on the way up to my Designated Work Area.

My Designated Work Area was a cubicle, but it wasn’t even a cubicle it was half a cubicle. Sometime into my first year of work I found the space had been bisected by a miniature wall; my desk and all my stuff had been shoved over to one side, and a new desk had been moved into the other. It had turned into a duplex over night and the vacant side filled with a new hire named Derrick, a gleaming stalk of a guy with skin like a wet onion a streamlined shelf of gleaming black hair. Neither side of the Designated Work Space was big enough for either of us, and often I’d find that he’d gained six inches of space by nudging the wall between us forward slowly with his feet. I’d ask him what he thought he was doing and he’d email me back with suggestions for improving efficiency. Once I printed his email out and beaned him in the head with it, and he responded by emailing me a link to Getting’ Healthy With It!, a newsletter supplied by our insurance carrier, about “Maintaining positive energy during times of duress.”

I went to show him what I’d found, but he wasn’t at his desk. Instead, I pulled a book off my shelf and began digging down into the pages with a letter opener. When I’d carved out enough space, I set the cocoon inside and attached the cremaster to the pages with a drop of rubber cement and propped the book upright on the corner of my desk. The cocoon dangled securely within the shaded pocket of glossy paper.

I paced my apartment that night for hours. I tried sitting but that made the ants come out, so I walked circles around my comfort zone and watched the white and blue light of the television flicker on the walls. It cast ominous, oblong shadows across the
room that stretched out quickly and then disappeared, then stretched out quickly again. When I got cold, I wrapped myself in the blue tortilla. Already I could feel something crystallizing, something coming into focus, though on this night it remained a pure blur.

I spent most of the next day at work staring out the fifth floor window of my office, watching the suburbs expand before my eyes. I could just barely see the buildings that had yet to go up, scattered like seeds that would grow into giant glass boxes, themselves broken up into smaller boxes with even smaller boxes in those, on and on, down to squares the size of books that contained tiny cocoons wrapped around tiny bodies wrapped around tiny organs and muscles and blood vessels and single dotted cells. I could see the next suburb over rolling towards this one, closing the gap between us. I stared at the last old farmhouse in the middle and imagined it exploding with the force of the great approaching squeeze.

My boss was ghoulish. His heavy mustache and eyebrows weighted the skin of his face and made it all sag. When he talked I could peer in to the space between his eyeballs and their sockets. “Sam, could you take these items and make them actionable? These ones here are NIA, these two are NUA and this one is NA. Hey, look at that. A chrysalis. Fantastic.” The initials were priority ratings; Needs Immediate Attention, Needs Urgent Attention, and simply Needs Attention. I blinked at him.

“How you feeling, eh? How’s the old…” he patted his big belly and pointed to mine. “No overwork, remember. Don’t push it. Take care of yourself, that’s the most important thing. But see if you can get to those right away. Great. Thanks, bud. Keep me informed.” He winked and strode away.

That night I could sit. The ants were gone, I hoped for good. I read a while and watched horrific-looking people on TV, men who looked trapped inside huge orange faces. I expected hands to burst from their mouths and pry the jaws apart, so wide that they snapped and fell apart, creating a hole just wide enough for something smaller to escape. Over and over, I thought I noticed panic in their eyes as they talked about real estate and net earnings per month, as if they suddenly felt arms rising in their throats, but those moments came and went with nothing even close to that happening.

I began to think about sleep and why I wanted it so badly. I didn’t know anymore. I’d forgotten how to get it, and now I wondered if I even needed it or if maybe
I was better off without it. I was approaching an understanding of something, something primal and old, something that transcended me and the things I knew. I was just about to retreat from it when I noticed him there on the couch with me.

He was small, a narrow pink tube about the size of my thumb, and he glistened in the TV light. He was smooth all over, no features at all, and the top of his head had been gathered in a bunch and tied off with a little black stitch. His body made a little wet splotch in the fabric where he was sitting. He looked at me, wrapped in my blue comforter, and said, “Hey look at us. Could we be more alike?”

I didn’t reply. I wasn’t surprised by his presence, which surprised me.

“Well, I mean, I’m pink and you’re blue, but other than that… Hm.”

Finally, I asked him, “How did you get here?”

He looked at me pitifully. “Out of all the questions, that’s the one you ask?” It seemed a reasonable enough question to me. “Don’t you want to talk about what’s inside?”

“Inside?”

“I know you can feel it trying to get out. Can’t you.”

I could. Everything felt like it was trying to get out. I hadn’t eaten in two days because of it. I didn’t think I’d be able to get anything in with everything trying to push its way out. Even then, I felt pressure on the inside of my skin.

“How do you know about that?” I asked. My voice quick, as if even my breath was making a break for it.

“Look at me,” he said. “I’m out. I got out. Lookit.” He took a few steps back and forth, his head cocked toward me with pride.

“Yeah, but you’re vestigial,” I said. “You don’t do anything.” He looked hurt.

“I do what I want to do,” he said. “That’s the difference between you and I.”

We watched TV in silence for a couple minutes, both of us pouting. I glanced over at him and he ignored me. After a while I told him about my cocoon.

“How are you so interested in it?” he asked.

“I’m not sure,” I said. “There’s something comforting about it. Or no, that’s not quite it. There’s something…” I drifted. It was getting harder to concentrate.

“…comfortable about it. I’m not sure what.”
“Is that why you wrapped yourself up in this blue chrysalis here? Trying to make yourself as comfortable as that slug you got pinned up in a book on your desk?”

I looked down at myself. “This isn’t a chrysalis, it’s a comforter.”

“It’s all a chrysalis,” he said. “Your skin. That blanket. This apartment, this building. Your car. Your ridiculous cubicle. This city. This globe. It’s all just wrapping over the pupa. It’s a shell.”

“Why do I sleep?” I asked him.

“What do you think?”

“I don’t know. But I don’t think I need to anymore. I don’t think I should. In fact,” I said, “I want to stay awake and see what happens.”

“What do you think might happen?” He was leading me, I knew, but to a place a searching for. I looked at him.

“I think the pupa might escape from me.”

“That’s weird,” he said slyly. “I don’t even know what that means.” He did. He was toying with me, enjoying this.

“I think the spirit wants out but the body keeps it in by making it sleep. If I stay awake long enough, I think it’ll break loose, break free.” I imagined the butterfly in my book sliding out of the cocoon and flying away, and behind it, when it was gone, an idea pulling free of the pages and all the letters of all the words collapsing in a useless heap on my desk. I imagined all the glass and concrete in the world giving way and dropping off, revealing nothing but air and space. I imagined cars dissolving as they drove, like sand castles in the wind, from front end down to back, and the bodies in them tearing away from feet to scalp. I imagined miles and miles of nothing at all.

My fingers slid down to my abdomen and dragged them over my stitches.

“It all wants out, Sam,” he said. “That’s just the way it is.”

“I know.”

“It all wants out.”

I dug my fingernail into puffy flesh and felt the seam. I poked it in and felt it open up the slightest bit. Air seemed to rush in briefly, then turn warm and trickle back out. A thin black leg emerged from the tiny space. Something amazing was beginning to
happen. I tried to open the space up wider. Something was escaping from the chrysalis. I wasn’t sure if it was my soul, but I thought it might be.
Breakfast was awkward for Spencer the morning after he realized he was not Spencer at all, but a robot who had murdered Spencer two weeks ago, downloaded his memories and taken his clothes, and had been living as Spencer ever since. The Robot had been programmed not to remember the murder until the proper time, and now that he had remembered he found it slightly unsettling to sit between Spencer’s wife Shelley and their 13 year-old daughter Daphne in the breakfast nook, he their husband and father’s murderer, making small talk and nibbling on grapefruit.

The Robot glanced around the kitchen nervously, taking in details that should have been completely alien to him—the clock shaped like a hen above the doorway to the dining room, the white paneled wainscoting he remembered putting up himself three years ago, the single square of vinyl flooring that curled up at one corner, the matching porcelain canisters for flour, sugar and baking soda—and wondered at how utterly familiar they were to him.

“I just don’t think I’ll make it, that’s all,” Daphne was saying.
“Well did you drop it or something?” Shelley asked her coffee.
“I dropped it once.”
“Well once doesn’t seem that bad, for all the times you throw it up.”
“No, once isn’t bad at all. But I didn’t get good height sometimes.”

Shelley nodded thoughtfully, which meant she had started thinking about something else. They were talking about the Rifling Club, which Daphne had auditioned for at her school. This was a club where kids threw wooden mock-ups of rifles into the air and caught them over and over, all in unison. The run-up to the audition had dominated their conversations for weeks; the audition itself had dominated their conversations for exactly one night, and the aftermath of the auditions had made its conversational debut just that morning.
“Well,” said Shelley, “if you don’t make it in, it’s not because you didn’t try, and we’ll both be very proud of you either way. Isn’t that right?” She was looking at The Robot now, having given him his cue, but he was busy taking in the details of her foreign/familiar body. She was wearing her unflattering yoga clothes that stretched around her body like rubber bands around a balloon. He followed the lumpy blue lycra up the rolling landscape of her stomach and breasts, a landscape he had memories of roaming and exploring (though indistinct ones), and up to her face where he met her eyes and realized he’d been addressed.

“Yes,” he said, committing neither to the tone of a question or statement. “If Jada Ness can make it in, so can you.” His eyes widened with amazement that he could know such a thing. Jada Ness had already heard from a girl who knew a girl on the squad that she had passed the audition. Spencer’s lips curled in amusement.

Daphne let out a desultory grunt as she polished off the rest of her powdered breakfast drink, then set the glass down heavily and wiped her mouth with a napkin.

“Yeah, but, come on,” she said. “Jada Ness is like…” She chuckled hopelessly.


“What?” The daughter looked at him sharply.

“You’re worried,” he began timidly, looking from Daphne to Shelley to Daphne again, “about the uniforms?” He toggled between faces again. “That the uniforms won’t—” He stopped himself suddenly. He had forgotten all about—well, hadn’t really forgotten, but hadn’t been thinking about—the bomb tucked down deep in the wiring beneath the synthetic skin of his chest, complete with synthetic sprigs of wiry coiled hairs, and was afraid to speak. Shelley and Daphne stared at him in bewilderment, waiting for him to finish. He pursed his lips and shrugged.

“Oh my god,” said Daphne. “What a freak.” She took her glass to the sink and set it in, then skipped her pudgy body out of the room.

“Good save,” Shelley said. “It was so natural to just stop in mid-sentence like that.”

The Robot looked at her.

“But…” she started to get up, to collect her crumb-covered plate and empty mug. “Thank god you stopped when you did. You know how sensitive she is about her figure.
She probably would have locked herself in the shed again.” This was something Daphne tended to do. The Robot knew this because Spencer had known it.

Shelley leaned over and kissed the robot on the temple. “Look at your nails,” she said. “How’d you do that?”

The Robot looked at his fingers. A thick black stripe of mud was packed in under each nail, and the skin had been stripped off two of his fingertip knuckles. Instinctively, he put one to his lips.

“Better get going,” Shelley said, flipping on the faucet at the sink. “You’ll be late for work.”


Though he had been living Spencer’s life for two weeks, The Robot hadn’t realized it until last night during his walk through Chester woods. It was a walk he took every night after dinner, his one hour of solitude a day where he could breathe the frigid exhalations of the trees and watch the sun drop behind the black bars of their trunks.

Last night had felt no different than any other night, as he followed the thin brown path that trickled into the heart of Chester woods. But as he reached the innermost part of the woods, the point at which he was just as close to the other side as he was to the entrance, he suddenly stopped and listened. He thought he heard a click and a faint whirring sound coming from behind his left ear. He turned and saw nothing, and then was seized as an influx of images burst and blossomed behind his eyes. A wild barrage of crackling impulses and random sensory details—coffee, heat, water, blood, paper—sizzled through his motherboard and all at once he received total consciousness of the last two weeks.

He realized he had been holding his breath and let it out in a cloud. He looked around, stunned, as the new information shuffled itself through his memory and fell, bit by bit, into chronological order.

He was meeting someone here, he knew. He had killed a man two weeks ago.

*I’ve had a stroke*, Spencer thought. His hands were shaking. *I have to get out of here.*
He had a grapefruit-sized bomb tucked deep in his chest cavity. The man he was meeting would tell him how and when to use it.

Spencer looked around, but the woods were empty. His head was shaking side to side, just slightly. His programming hadn’t been designed to accommodate the simultaneous possession of the new consciousness and the old memories. The man he was meeting was to have erased the old memories before the new consciousness emerged. Spencer looked around again, and again saw no one.

*I’m not Spencer at all*, he thought.

He had killed a man two weeks ago and buried him in a shallow ditch. Spencer knew where it was and walked toward it.

The bomb in his chest was now armed.

Spencer found the spot where he’d buried the man he’d killed and stood above it looking down. It was all leaves and twigs. Sparklers of negative light still crackled behind his eyes, and the whirring behind his left ear droned on. *Maybe it’s an embolism,* he thought. *Or a tumor.* He knelt down and started digging with his hands.

The man he was meeting was to guide him through the recall process and give him his further orders.

Two weeks ago he had stood next to a tree in these woods for three hours without moving until the man he was waiting for came walking along the path. He held the man’s throat and the man’s mouth jerked open. He slowly lowered his head and unfurled the thick cable of his tongue into the man’s gaping oracular port, and then drank until his banks were brimming with the whole of Spencer Newman’s memories, the sum total of the man’s existence.

Spencer looked around again and still saw no one. He had pushed the leaves and twigs aside and was bailing away cupped handfuls of fresh dirt. Before long he felt the cold stiffness of dead flesh.

The bomb in his chest was programmed to detonate at the utterance of a spoken trigger phrase. The man he was supposed to meet would give him an envelope containing a single sheet of paper. On the paper would be written the target and the trigger phrase.

Spencer dug up a bare shoulder that looked like it might have been nibbled on.
If the man he was supposed to be meeting did not arrive, he was to maintain cover and await further instructions.

Spencer burrowed his hand under the neck and gave the body a jerky tug, then sat for a while, cradling the gray head in his hands, with its last expression of surprise and panic frozen on its face, wondering at the oddity of staring at his own corpse. And finally, with the last tumbler in a lock dropped into its proper groove, The Robot understood.

The Robot recalled all of this in his car on his way to the office. He had slid into the seat with such practiced precision that he couldn’t help but be impressed by the depth and thoroughness of his reproduction. He knew all the roads, and could anticipate by miles the exits he’d have to take and the lane changes he’d make to get to them. It seemed that nothing had changed at all, and this delighted him.

Still he wondered about his new importance. Would he be used as an instrument of good or evil? Was he a freedom fighter or some kind of terrorist? And what had happened to his contact, the man he was supposed to have met last night in the woods? Was he killed? Or worse—was he captured and being tortured this very minute? It was all very exciting to think about.

The Robot’s excitement turned nervous, though, as he pulled into the parking lot of Spencer’s office building and drew his car into a space. He slipped out of his seat belt but remained in the seat, drumming on the wheel with his thumbs, staring at the big glass box in front of him. He knew everything there was to know about this place, but couldn’t help worrying that he didn’t, that he’d walk in and everything would be completely different. He imagined himself staring at the buttons on the elevator while the crowd around him waited for him to push one, wandering from cubicle to cubicle looking for his name plate, saying “Hey Bob” to Ned and “Hey Ned” to Judy, walking into the office of a stranger instead of the bathroom and having to awkwardly walk back out again. He imagined he might be sweating, but rubbed his forehead and found it dry.

As soon as he was through the front doors he felt better and was able to walk purposefully across the lobby to the elevator and push the button that said 5 with an
authoritative jab. He was alone, but felt that he could have pressed the right button for anyone else who walked in before they even asked.

The Robot fidgeted with his tie, then caught sight of himself in the mirrored doors of the elevator’s interior. “I look just like myself,” he said aloud, but then instantly reconsidered. “No. I look just like this man.”

He stepped closer to his reflection and searched it. He turned his head this way and that looking for seams or imperfections, some sign of craftsmanship. He folded his ear in half and peered behind it for a dovetail joint, dragged his hand slowly down the back of his head and neck, feeling around for a point where his synthetic skin had been pulled to a bunch and tied off with wire, but found nothing. He was staring into his nostrils when the doors opened.

The Robot was able to skate through most of the morning without doing any speaking at all. He avoided people he knew were his friends and turned down one or two offers, via email, to go out for lunch. Spencer, he knew, was gone, and it just didn’t seem right, or worthwhile, to stay involved in these people’s lives. And besides that, he was growing more and more worried about accidentally stumbling upon the secret trigger phrase that would detonate the bomb in his chest. The people in his office had homes and wives and parents and children, and didn’t deserve to be vaporized by an unfortunate punch line over iced tea and Tater Crisps at Spanky’s. Maybe they’d get it in the end anyway, he thought, but not this way, and not without purpose.

By the end of the day, though, he had had no choice but to participate in the activity of the office. His coworkers stomped accusatorily from cubicle to cubicle, leaving a high wake of papers behind them, barking familiar abbreviations to each other and making tepid jokes about Tuesdays. By 2:30 the place was a madhouse and The Robot had forgotten all about his bomb and had returned almost to Spencer’s authentic self.

There was only one really tense moment in the day, just after lunch, that occurred in a meeting about the Meow Chow account. Spencer’s company, a branding agency called Imprint, was desperate to find a snappy catchphrase for the Meow Chow cat food company. The account exec, a red-faced steam whistle named Jill, called an emergency meeting and asked everyone to come up with just one marketable tagline that
they could use. The Robot came up with one mediocre offering and was instantly terrified of it. The odds that it was the trigger phrase were outlandish, but still he felt the unmistakable coldness of dread spreading through his wiring. *What if I know the trigger phrase already, and that’s why I thought of this,* he said to himself. *What if they made it so random,* he thought, *it had to be about cat food.* He could think of no other phrase, and no way out of the meeting, and so when it came time for him to speak he closed his eyes, held his breath, and said very very quietly: “When your cat says ‘Meow’ … he wants the Chow.”

Nothing. Every word had been like the flick of a lighter against the fuse of a stick of dynamite.

The Robot opened one eye to find all those in the meeting staring at him dumbly. He opened the other and looked from face to face. He was so relieved he didn’t detonate that he sputtered with joy.


After that first day The Robot began to relax. He found it easier to speak as he’d been forced to say more and more words out loud, and before long was skipping through the verbal minefield of his existence. Over the following weeks he descended quite comfortably into Spencer’s old familiar routine: breakfast with Shelley and Daphne, branding all day long at Imprint, home, a sip or two of stinging bourbon, and dinner. He had resumed Spencer’s evening walks through Chester woods, every night wondering if he’d find someone else there, leaning against a tree, waiting for him. Some nights he stayed in there until after the sun went down, standing perfectly still in the heart of the woods, listening for crackling twigs or heavy breathing. Occasionally, he’d turn his face up to the canopy and yell “Hello! What should I do now?” and the trees would shake and he’d turn and walk home.

In the mornings he muttered supportive niceties to the daughter, who bounded with unlimited energy from one drama to another—she didn’t make the Rifling Club or the Ice Dancing Team or the Flag Corps, and each disappointment was followed by days of aggressive self-pity which burned away into rigid self-deprivation—and in the evenings he muttered empty responses to the wife’s questions and observations while
they watched TV or read magazines. She demanded nothing of The Robot sexually and for that he was grateful. In fact, he tried to conduct all intimacies between himself and the women through a protective screen of distracted half-involvement. On the one hand, he wanted to maintain his cover, but always in the back of his mind was the thought that they were not his wife and daughter and therefore not his actual responsibility. For their part, Shelley and Daphne didn’t seem to notice any change at all.

In this way, The Robot’s life rolled on from one day to another, further and further from the incident in Chester woods. After a year, he began to wonder whether he might have dreamed the whole thing.

It was two years later that Spencer first experienced feelings of remorse for the dead man and sympathy for his wife and daughter, however much he was growing to dislike them. They were a noisy, whining pair, creating clutter and chaos everywhere they went. His evening walks were getting longer and longer, keeping him out more than two hours most nights, well after dark, and he was putting in more hours at Imprint as they grew busier and busier.

It was Christmas, and Shelley had sent The Robot into the attic to look for extra lights to drape across the bushes that lined the front of the house. Wandering among the detritus of Spencer’s life, The Robot was surprised to find himself suddenly melancholy, a feeling he hadn’t realized he’d been programmed for.

He dug through boxes of brittle photo books, tiny pink clothes, papers—old husks of vivid and lively memories—looked at them and sat them aside, and before long he was surrounded by the dusty mementos of a life he remembered living. He found a picture of his parents when they were young and he was a toddler, at a pool somewhere, all of their hair half dried by the sun, he wrapped in a towel and propped between his father’s knees. He stared awhile at the image of himself, his twin, the boy squinting back at him from 40 years back.

The Robot found an inoperable record player and a box of his old LPs, some of them cracked or warped. He found a trophy in the bottom of one box, a little man perched at the top swinging half a baseball bat, the nameplate at the base totally blank, bought in bulk and given without discretion by the worst coach he ever had, his friend
Eric’s lazy father Coach Doug. He found Daphne’s tooth and Shelley’s hospital wristband from the time she caught adult chickenpox. He found all these things and the side of him that was still Spencer’s claimed them as his own, bits and pieces of the life that was two years gone, a rotted skeleton in the ground in Chester woods.

The Robot sat in the middle of all the scraps and wept. It was a dry weep, free of all the usual fluids and drippings associated with crying, but did include the heaving stomach and stretched mouth and crumpled posture. *These things are mine*, he thought. *This life is mine. Maybe not in this body, but in this soul.* He wept for one minute and stopped. *I am Spencer’s memory, and I am Spencer.* He found the lights and climbed down from the attic.

As he decorated the house that day, and the tree later that night, Spencer felt his protective screen slip a little bit, and found himself, once or twice, gazing at his wife and daughter in a mixture of pity and regret. He even slid across the bed towards Shelley that night and pressed his body up against her back, laying his hand down gently on her pajama’d hip. She took this as an advance and sprang at him, the coil of her sex having been wound so tightly and for so long that this slightest nudge knocked it loose. He had no memory of Shelley ever getting so sweaty so quickly.

He had some memories of her being as happy as she was during the months after that first session of robust and passionate lovemaking (many sessions would follow, some of them so fevered and jostling that Spencer wondered if Shelley wouldn’t fuck them both to complete annihilation, and take 100 city blocks with them), but the memories were so old they had grown fuzzy and dim.

The winter was almost pleasant for Spencer. He found that he actually enjoyed sitting in a chair in the dark and watching the snow fall. He felt a warmth in his body he couldn’t account for, a level of comfort that seemed like it had been constructed out of a patchwork of old sensations that had pleased him in the past. He had given up drinking coffee because it had partly corroded part of his inner piping, so instead he drank hot tea and reread some of Spencer’s favorite books. He found new beauty in watching the uneven slope of his yard disappearing under layers of cold snow.
In the summer Spencer mowed the grass with a feeling of annoyance and satisfaction. He raked the clippings with the serenity of a Buddhist monk and dumped them reverently in the back bushes.

On one day in particular, as he weeded the flower bed, he caught sight of Daphne running to the shed and shutting herself in. He stared at the dirt and considered what to do, then finally, resignedly, stripped off his gloves and walked stiffly to the door. He knocked.

“Daphne? You in there, babe?”

She didn’t respond but he could hear her sniffling.

“You want to come out? You want to tell me all about it?” Spencer rested his hand on the clasp and prepared to whip the door open, as he had always done in the past. Daphne would always scream when the light hit her, as if she were a vampire taking refuge, and Spencer would always make her go back inside the house.

This time, though, he paused. He opened the door just a crack, letting in a thin strip of light that fell across her fleshy knee and calf. She had grown taller, but not much thinner.

“I’ll be just outside when you’re ready to come out,” he told her. “Stay in as long as you want.”

Spencer weeded for another two hours before Daphne, sweaty and puffy, slipped out of the shed and stood bashfully behind him while he worked.

One night Spencer dreamt. This was unusual for him; most nights he simply lay still and after ten or fifteen minutes would drift off into a sort of hibernation mode until he was nudged or jiggled the next morning. He wasn’t programmed to dream, so when he did it was quite surprising.

He dreamt he was walking through Chester Woods, walking the same path he took daily after dinner in his regular waking life. In his dream, it was a crisp night, the air was thick and misty and the tops of the trees swayed gently back and forth. As he approached the midway point of his walk he spotted a figure, leaning against a tree, waiting for him. Finally. The man was holding an envelope and Spencer ran to him to collect it, to meet the agent, to learn his purpose, but before he could speak the man’s
hands were around Spencer’s throat and he was squeezing squeezing. The man squeezed and squeezed and right before his mouth split across his face and opened wide, and the thick cable of his tongue unfurled and snaked its way across Spencer’s teeth, he could see the face was his own.

He woke to find Shelley’s face peering into his.

“Are you alright?” she was asking. “Spence? Are you okay?”

“What was I doing?” he asked.

“You were twitching, like shaking your head from side to side really quickly.”

“I’m alright.”

“Spencer, it was weird.” He could see she was alarmed, but this morning he didn’t much care.

“I’m fine, Shell.” He tapped her on the knee and left her there in bed.

After the dream, Spencer started to get restless. He got bored with his job and started sulking through meetings. When they got really tedious he leered at whoever was speaking and imagined the bomb in his chest going off. *Oh, if only I knew the trigger phrase,* he thought. *I’ve got the perfect catchphrase for your Poodle Caboodle. How about Poodle Ka-Boom!*

Sometimes Spencer even spoke random trigger phrases out loud, praying he’d get lucky. During a meeting for Steak Mittens, Jill asked, “Spencer, have you got the demographics analysis there? What are the numbers on white males 18-35 between 185 and 230 pounds?”

“Pickle barrel armor,” Spencer replied.

“What was that?”

“I said: nobody move, this is a stickup.”

The room went silent with confusion as nobody could understand why they didn’t understand.

“The rain in Spain,” started Spencer again, “falls mainly…” he looked from face to face. “…on the…” But he couldn’t finish this one. Instead, he got up and walked out, and two weeks later got up and walked out of the job altogether. He walked back to Chester Woods and shouted “Hey!” into the air. “Where are you? I’m still here, I’m still waiting!” He looked all around and saw no one.
At home, when he told Shelley he had quit, she assailed him with usual overbearing racket with Daphne pitching in when necessary.

“Why would you do that?” she asked. Spencer was sitting at the breakfast nook, and she was standing over him, raining down questions from above. “How could you quit without talking to me about it first?”

“Plastic papal vestments.”

“What?” said Daphne.

“I said: hey, bub, got a match?”

“Spencer, how could you do this now, with Daphne heading to school this fall?”

“It was the best of times…” he looked up, waiting. “It was the worst of times?”

Still nothing. “God dammit!”

“Spencer, what the hell are you talking about?”

“I’m not Spencer,” he said. “I killed Spencer four years ago and left him in a ditch in Chester Woods. I’m actually a robot who looks just like him, only I have a bomb in my chest that could go off at any minute.”

“Oh my god,” said Daphne. “What a freak!”

“You’re having a nervous breakdown, I think,” Shelley said. “You need to go to the hospital.” She started pacing in small circles and twisting a dishtowel she had been holding in one hand. “Spencer, this isn’t normal behavior.”

He looked at her worried face and saw nothing but irritation.

“Spencer, do you want to go see a doctor?” she asked? Daphne looked worried now too, as if she were just realizing that this hadn’t been a joke after all.

“Sure,” Spencer said. “Just let me collect some things.”

He stood up calmly from the table and put a hand on both Shelley and Daphne’s faces, smiled, and walked out of the kitchen unbuttoning his shirt. In the hallway, the shirt dropped to the floor, along with his shoes and socks. In the foyer, his pants came off, and on the front porch his underwear. Spencer walked naked through his backyard and over the path into Chester Woods. He walked to the innermost point and looked around for the shallow grave he’d dug all those years before. He found it and dug up what remained of Spencer Newman—a set of old bones and a tatter or two of clothing—
pushed it aside and lay down next to it, then drew a blanket of leaves over his clean pink body. He was programmed to feel cold and did.

Time went by, he didn’t know how much, but Spencer waited in the woods for his contact to come, waited to be given his purpose. He watched hundreds of sunsets, watched the sun burst like the yolk of an egg behind the black bars of the trees, and hundreds of moonrises. He felt rain and sun and snow and wind.

Eventually, as water crept into the cavity beneath his synthetic skin, the bomb in his chest started to break down and leak toxic fluids into the systems around it. Spencer started thinking strange thoughts, and could only watch as his limbs jerked and twitched of their own volition. After a while he could think only one thought over and over, and that thought was Daphne, and in the moment before even that thought faded, and the pinprick of power was snuffed out, he thought he heard the crackling of twigs and a heavy breath.
Finally, I broke the silence, though I don’t remember what I said. My mother-in-law, across the bed, lifted her head and looked at me as if she hadn’t understood the words. She held my gaze for a pause, her small mouth pursed, and looked away, back down at my wife, her daughter, asleep between us.

Our corner of the room was dimly lit and beyond us was a black curtain of shadow. The bed rails were up. I leaned forward in my chair, my heels against the legs, my elbows on my thighs, and listened to the sound of breathing. Outside our door, two nurses spoke in a series of SH and SP sounds; one jangled her keys and walked away. Fingers together, I ran my hands back and forth through my hair.

It felt very late, the time of night when being awake was a transgression, some kind of act of defiance. Everything around us slept, including the cars in the parking lot where the pavement had cooled. Occasionally it dribbled rain.

Under the sheets, Abigail twitched and I looked up. Her expression hadn’t changed; her mouth hung open slightly, and her head was tilted back and towards her mother. Her skin was yellow and she was swollen all over. Her cheeks, her eyelids.

I looked at my mother-in-law again, but she did not look at me. She kept her gaze fixed on Abigail, nervously, as if afraid that her daughter might wake up. She reached in and stroked the back of her daughter’s hand, her own hands swollen with worry and arthritis. I began to reach in too but stopped. An IV tube ran the length of Abigail’s arm, across her wrist, and disappeared beneath a stitch of tape just below her knuckles. A purple bruise had formed where the needle irritated the skin. A brown smudge of dried blood was beginning to crack and flake off.

In my mother-in-law’s face I saw the hands of a clock, spinning backwards towards the start of the day. She was pale. Her eyes sat upon deep, dark pockets and her black hair fell wearily from behind her ears.
“Alice,” I said to her. “You want to sleep for a while? I’ll wake you if…”

She looked like she was considering it, although I knew she wasn’t. “No,” she said. “I’ll just stay up a little longer. I’d just really like to be here when she wakes up.” She looked up now to see if I’d accepted that much, or if she should go on. I nodded and she nodded, and we both looked back down.

I sat back and scratched at the meat of my thumb. I opened my hand and noticed a spot of dried blood on my palm. I held it close to my face and ran a finger lightly across it. It could be all that’s left, I thought. All that I have to hold. I dabbed at a tear in the corner of my eye and rubbed it on my palm in a circular motion like paint on a pallet, trying to make the red spot bigger. After a while, I lay my open hand down on my knee and leaned my head forward against the bed rail.

I’m not sure if I slept just then, or if my neurons fired instinctually, flashing random images across my mind, to keep me from collapsing onto the floor. I saw the broad side of our house, where the ivy clings to brick, and our bedroom window. I saw the wooden birdfeeder that hangs by a rope from one of the lower branches of the maple tree twisting slowly in the wind, one way and then the other, empty. I heard wind chimes. The sun shone but the tint was off, casting our house in a dirty yellow light, making it look old, worn, abandoned. It felt prophetic and wrong.

I saw Abigail contort and stiffen, pulling the IV stand over. I saw one of the nurses lunge for it clumsily. I smelled blood and feces. Tasted panic in the room. I saw myself watching the obstetrician pull an arm out of her.

I saw our bedroom from the inside. The sheets and covers kicked into a heap near the footboard. A damp towel, some worn clothes. The dirty yellow light slid across the carpet and over one corner of the bed.

My head bobbed up from the rail and I was awake. In the black glass of the window I saw my reflection blinking at me. I checked my watch.

Abigail was still, and then her chest rose and fell. Under the covers, her stomach was still big. Alice was leaning back in her chair, her head against the wall, resting her eyes. I shuffled my feet and she opened them. She had been holding a book on her lap for hours, which still sat there unopened.
I stood and rubbed my eyes. My contacts had been in too long and felt sandy and stiff. My knee ached. I stretched and my back popped twice. Alice didn’t move, hadn’t moved in hours. Hadn’t slept in probably twenty. Had hardly spoken a word since we last saw the baby. The obstetrician had brought us both into an operating room to see it 25 minutes after they wheeled it away from the birthing room. Its naked body was small and gray. I looked at the doctor; he was speaking but there was no sound coming out of his mouth, no sound coming from anywhere. His mustache bobbed and twitched. He made small gestures with his hands that looked almost comic out of context, and a four-fingered smear stretched diagonally across his scrubs. The light above the baby began to brighten and I looked up at it, squinting. Next to me, Alice held her brow and wept, her shoulders bouncing up and down. The doctor’s hands moved faster as he gesticulated and he shifted from one foot to the other like Charlie Chaplin. His mouth jerked around his face recklessly. A flash of tongue and teeth. Alice’s shoulders beat up and down like a paint mixer and the light grew brighter. I held my hand up to it. I looked to the doctor and he stared back at me, his tongue frozen between his lips. He stepped towards me and the room went white.

“Alice,” I whispered across the bed. “Can I get you anything?” She squeezed her face into a taut smile and shook her head no, then let the muscles fall slack.

“You’ve done plenty,” she said finally. Her mouth was a dark crease across the horizon of her face. “Haven’t you.” I could see two squares of light in the lenses of her glasses. She sat perfectly still, one hand tucked underneath Abigail’s forearm. I opened my mouth to speak and she turned her head away.

Along one wall was a table that, much earlier in the day, Abigail’s family had covered with bags of chips, boxes of doughnuts and a premature bouquet of flowers. I walked over and flicked at the doughnuts. That afternoon, finding myself standing next to the table on my way from one place to another, I’d eaten four out of nervousness, with a cup of black coffee. They churned in my stomach. In the dim light, they looked gray and rotted, like wheels of mold. I felt my insides flutter and moved to the bathroom. I squatted in front of the toilet and waited, but nothing happened. I got on my knees, crossed my feet at the ankles and lifted the seat. I propped my elbow onto the rim of the bowl and nestled my head into the crook of my arm.
It was the sex that saved us. Otherwise, I would have left. Had been leaving, actually, little by little for months. It was in the kitchen, in our apartment. We hadn’t made love in eight weeks, and I didn’t miss it. I had taken to opening beers but didn’t have the passion to drink them, so I tapped the sweating bottle with my fork instead of eating. The ceiling fan ticked above us.

Abigail sat across from me with her hands in her lap, staring at the floor where the tile had rippled and split, her long, dark hair draped down around her face. Our plates of rice and vegetables had gone cold and lost their smell. Abigail nibbled on the tip of her thumbnail.

“Are you finished?” she asked.

“Hm?”

“I said, are you done?” She looked at me, her mouth ajar. Her mother’s teeth, the bottom two angled in just slightly.

I looked at my plate and back up at her. I swallowed.

“Yeah, I think I might be.”

Her lip trembled and she came towards me. I thought she might hit me but she put her hands on my shoulders and kissed me, roughly. Her spit was cold on my lips and chin. She smelled of baby oil and cooking grease. She went right for my pants, undoing the clasp and shoving her hand down inside. Her breath was erratic, her eyes open. With her lips rubbing across mine, her tongue on my teeth, she pulled her t-shirt up above her breasts, her hand still down the front of my pants, squeezing, and undid the clasp on her bra. She pulled me to my feet and slid my jeans and boxers down towards my knees, then did the same with her own jeans and underwear. She wrapped her hand around the back of my neck and dropped backwards towards the floor, looking up at me to make sure I was going down with her, and lay back on the dusty tile. The cold floor offered no cushion, no give, and she did her best to look like she was enjoying herself.

I finished quickly, and collapsed on top of her. Neither of us spoke. She wrapped her arm around my neck, put her hand over her eyes and cried. Warm tears slid down the back of my ear.

I covered the rip in the tile with a strip of duct tape. We ate ice cream and pretended to love each other. Abigail dug in the garden in one corner of our communal
back yard, planted her sweat in the soil. I stopped opening beers. On the couch, she put
her hand on the cushion in between us and told me about the baby. The fabric had worn
thin but still held together.

The baby.

I lifted my head from my arm and backed away from the toilet. Jesus, the baby. I
saw Abigail in the sun, wearing a hat and gardening gloves, talking to our neighbor. We
haven’t picked a name yet, she said. We don’t want to name it until we see its face. I
saw its face. I saw the obstetrician pull an arm out of her. A head, a blue shoulder. He
set it down and the arm flopped heavily. He put his hand on his heart and wiped his
glove down diagonally across his torso, and began pumping its heart with his index and
middle fingers. I saw Abigail contort and stiffen, her pupils dilate, her face go white.
She inhaled deeply. I smelled blood and feces. Tasted panic in the room.

My stomach caved in on all sides. I lurched towards the toilet. My lips curled
away from my face and I vomited, once, twice. I held on to the rim of the bowl with both
hands, my mouth open, a string of mucus hanging from my bottom lip. My neck
tightened and vomited one last time.

I stood. My hands shook and my legs were unsteady. I leaned on the sink and
turned on the hot water, brought some up to my face and into my mouth. I splashed my
face again, and looked down at my palms. The red spot of blood was gone. I’d washed it
away.

My face in the mirror looked pale, my eyes sunken. I felt hollow and abandoned.
It was nearly dawn.

Alice stood over Abigail, her fingers laced together across her stomach. She
stood as if at the foot of a grave. I looked at Abigail. Her head had drifted further away
from me, her chest rose and fell.

“Are you alright?” I asked. Alice looked at me wearily, her lids half down and
puffy, frowning. She lacked the energy to do anything else.

“Why are you here?” she whispered. I moved my lips to speak, but she spoke
again. “Why?”

I looked at Abigail for some kind of explanation. She would be waking up soon
in pain, confused, wondering what had happened.
“She did this for you.” I looked back up at Alice. “And now look…” She held her palms up and scanned Abigail’s sleeping body. “Look what’s left for you.” She held her brow and wept, just like before. I stood there blinking, my arms at my sides, imagining the devastation beneath the covers. The ragged ends of split flesh pulled together and stitched, already bruised, puckered around the thick black sutures.

Alice put her face in her hands and breathed in, then rubbed her cheek with her shoulder.

“So why are you here? What are you waiting for?”

I looked at Abigail, swollen, yellow, her hair a greasy mat against the stiff hospital pillow. I took a step towards her. I didn’t know what I was doing.
On Sunday night I sat on a rock in the moonlight and watched Evan piss into the void, the toes of his battered sneakers curled over the edge of the bluffs we climbed as kids. The laces on his right shoe were untied and the soggy ends drooped haphazardly around his foot like wet noodles. He swayed with drunkenness, staring straight ahead.

The drop was about 30 feet, give or take, but not completely straight down. The angle was slight but rocky—he’d do more sliding than falling, get more scrapes than breaks—and I knew that, at the bottom, a shallow tepid creek would cushion his landing. He stood well out of my reach and I was happy for the distance. When he started to lean forward and then caught himself, straightened up and rotated his shoulders, the only part of my body that moved were my eyelids, which closed.

“You remember when we scaled this thing?” he asked.

“I remember when you scaled it,” I said. “I walked up the side like a reasonable human being.”

“Like a pansy.” He twisted his head around to try and look at me while he zipped himself up. In the clear, black air I could see his snotty grin wrapped around a cigarette that was mostly ash. His hair was long and stringy, heavy with its own oils. The breeze could hardly move it.

“You lost your footing five feet from the top and slid the whole way down,” I said. Evan crossed his arms but didn’t turn around. His face had gone blank—he was thinking, but I got the feeling it wasn’t about this. “You landed in the fucking creek, which was frozen.”

The cherry on his cigarette lit up and he smiled again. “Oh yeah.”

“You almost broke your ankle. You skinned the whole side of your leg, and you got frostbite.”
He turned and pulled the cigarette out of his mouth, flicked it into the empty space. “That’s right.” He shook his head pitifully, said: “And you walked up the trail. What a fucking pussy.”

I snorted my response, and that was that. We stayed frozen in our positions for a minute or two, Evan at the edge and me on my rock.

“You didn’t help me back,” he said finally.

“You wouldn’t let me.” He had limped the full mile back to the main road, and half a mile down that, back to his house. Every time I touched him he shoved me away. When he peeled his shoe and sock away and pulled up his pant leg, his ankle was as thick as his calf and every nail on his foot had fallen off.

“You were my brother once for two weeks,” he said. “Remember that?”

“Yeah.”

“You should’ve looked out for me. That’s all I’m saying.”

Evan sat down in the dirt with his legs hanging over the edge. He twisted himself around to me and said, “Echo and the Bunnymen.” I smiled and nodded and we had our little moment. But then he planted his hands at his sides and pushed himself forward, and all I could hear was gravel sliding as he dropped out of sight. For a second—before the electric iciness of shock gave way to heavy stultifying fear, before I stepped to the edge and shouted “Hey!”—I felt a single pulse of honest relief.

Friday night, two nights before all that, I wandered through a mass of bodies in motion, everybody sweating beer and nicotine, searching for Evan in a stranger’s house. It was only 11:26, but the rickety walls were already starting to throb with energy. The music—I think it was “Love Will Tear Us Apart,” a throwback—was loud, and people were leaning into each other to try and speak beneath it. The rooms were dim, and grubby tapestries had been hung half-heartedly on the walls, probably to cover mold or rotted drywall.

The house was on a street I’d never been down before, a stubby squiggle of pavement that dead-ended into a field full of old trash. Amy Luftig had given me the address earlier that afternoon, right after Evan’s mother’s memorial service in the outdoor amphitheater. She told me I had to at least stop by, that she wanted to catch up. I didn’t
particularly feel like it, but she has these giant eyes like pools of black coffee, and when she looked at me I felt my frontal lobe get all soft and warm, and all I could do was nod and say yes.

It had been probably eight years since I’d last spent any real time in my hometown—I went away to college and never really came back—and wandering through the house on that first night of the long Memorial Day weekend I realized that time is like an ocean, and that some people are carried off by the current only to wash up on the shore years later looking pretty much the same except bloated to twice their original size. In every room I passed through I saw familiar faces that had been transplanted onto unfamiliar heads, perched atop unfamiliar bodies. I walked through as quickly as possible, nodding and waving but never stopping, always looking to the next face for Evan’s.

I had seen him earlier that day at the memorial service, where he sat quietly in the grass in his bare feet next to his two sisters. He hadn’t changed much since the last time I saw him, years ago, before our friendship, I guess the word would be deteriorated. His hair was still ropey and long, his cheeks still hollowed out like grooves in stones where water has trickled past for a thousand years. If he saw me at all during the service, he didn’t acknowledge it.

The service was nice, but I did a lot of daydreaming. I thought about the time Evan and I ran from the rain when we were maybe thirteen. We heard it falling two blocks away, and when we looked we could see it, could see the pavement turn dark, and heard the heavy drops pelting parked cars. It was like a curtain of water and sound had been drawn just beyond where we stood, and we stopped where we were and watched it. And when we realized that the darkness was spreading, that it was heading straight for us, we panicked and ran because we didn’t know what else to do. We were only a block from Evan’s house, and even though I was always the slow one, the clumsy one, the idiot, I made it to the front porch perfectly dry while Evan came up paces behind me, soggy and pissed.

In the house, I gave up looking for Evan and started looking around for Amy, who was nowhere to be found. But at a small, round breakfast table in the far corner of the kitchen, Drew Slansky was playing cards with three people I didn’t recognize, crushed
empties of Keystone all around him. He screamed “ANUS!” and whipped his cards at
the guy sitting across from him, then stood up and hit his head on the light fixture above,
sending it wobbling around in small circles. He steadied it and saw me standing there.

“Yeah!” he screamed at the ceiling. He slid out from behind the table and did the
running man towards me with a beer in his hand, yellowish foam gurgling out and onto
the floor. “Jackus the Mackus, what’s up, man?”

I smiled. How could you not? “Hey, Drew. Good to see you.” I held out my
hand for him. He grabbed the meat of my thumb, leaned in and bumped my chest with
his shoulder. After Evan and I split up, Drew fell into Evan’s orbit and had been circling
ever since. I had assumed they were best friends, and I guess they were about as close as
you could get.

“You come for the memorial?” he said.

“Yeah. You go?”

“Naw, I had to work. But I heard it was great.”

The entire kitchen seemed to be coated in a film of hot breath. All the fixtures
were old and corroded, the counter was crumby, and the vinyl flooring looked like it had
been ice skated on. It seemed to be the only room in the house that was adequately lit—
the kind of room you de-seed your pot in.

“Have you seen Evan tonight?” I asked Drew.

“Not yet. I think he’s coming, though.” Drew put his beer to his face and drained
it, his head all the way back, then belched. He crushed the can and tossed it towards the
trash, missing. “You want one?” he asked, leaning into the fridge. I nodded and his head
disappeared behind the door.

Whatever song had been playing faded into the opening chords of “Under the
Milky Way” and Drew pulled himself out of the fridge, his arms loaded with beers.

“Oh, fuck yeah,” he said. “You remember this shit?”

I took one of his beers and cracked it.

“Evan gave me all his old mix tapes,” Drew said. “A whole big box of them.”

I drew the can halfway to mouth, but let it drop. “Why would he do that?” I
asked.
“I don’t know, but they’re fucking sweet, dude.” He took the cans and dumped them on the kitchen table. He asked me if I wanted to play some cards, but I’d wandered away by then. I went to the kitchen window and peered outside. Out in the empty field, someone was pissing into a junk tire.

Halfway through the memorial service, I spotted my dad standing in the back in his blues, still on duty. He had told me he probably wouldn’t go, but I figured he would. When I was in fifth grade, it was my dad who sent me over to Evan’s house, at Evan’s mother’s request, to occupy his time. Evan was an only son, living with his mom and two older, adopted sisters, his parents divorced, his dad gone. He had apparently grown bored and restless—had started picking fights and breaking things he once loved, like his Ewok Village—and I was sent to mollify him like a kitten set down next to a frothy puppy.

At the service, my dad stood listening with his thumbs clipped to his belt, stoic as a totem pole. From my seat in the grass I watched his lips, but they never trembled, not a flicker. After about ten minutes, he climbed back into his cruiser and drove away.

We met for dinner later that night at Pizza Hut, where all the cops get half-off. It was between slices four and five that he told me I might consider keeping an eye on Evan this weekend, that he was afraid Evan might do something stupid.

“I don’t even know if I’ll see Evan this weekend,” I told him. “I don’t have any plans to.”

“Well, maybe you should make a special effort,” he said. He wiped the oil out of his mustache with a napkin and sipped on his water. “No one’s going to do it now. His friends aren’t going to do it, those idiots, and he’s sure as hell not going to look out for himself.”

“I don’t see why it has to be me.”

“It doesn’t.” My dad picked at a fleck of red pepper that had become wedged between his teeth. “But it isn’t going to be anybody else.” He looked at me for a second or two with his eyebrows raised, then sucked at his teeth and said, “So.” He picked up the fifth slice and took about half of it down in a single bite while I stared out the window.
“I’m just worried about him, is all,” he said through his food. “This weekend especially.” I nodded, and that seemed to be good enough.

“Did you know we found him passed out in the street last weekend? You hear about that?”

“No.”

“Denny picked him up, five thirty in the morning. He was passed out in the curb with his head in the street. He was carrying a bottle of beer in his pocket of all places… shattered. We took him to the ER; they dumped charcoal into his stomach and picked tiny bits of glass out of his thigh for three hours.”

I balled up my napkin and tossed it on my plate. I wasn’t surprised by anything he was telling me, and that was depressing. I don’t know why I felt responsible for Evan still, after so many years, but I just couldn’t help myself, and hearing about my failures made the acid in my stomach churn.

“So how’s your mother?” dad asked. “Still rich?”

I drank three awful Keystones waiting for Evan to show. Amy Luftig came and went in a flash, looking dynamite in a brown suede jacket, the ends of her black hair swaying across it like a brush on a canvas. She gave me her cell phone number and asked me to call her for lunch the next day, and when she left I dumped my beer down the sink and went to the bathroom.

As I washed my hands, REM’s “South Central Rain” came on and it put me in a melancholy mood. I wiped my hands on a towel and when I opened the door there he was. He stood just outside talking to Drew, with a tiny brown-haired girl leaning into his right shoulder. They were illuminated in yellow bathroom light.

Before I could step out, Evan shrugged himself away from the girl and stepped in, pushing me backwards with his presence like a magnet. He closed and locked the door behind him and we stared at each other for some indeterminate length of time. He looked at me gravely and I tried to read his face. Even when he finally smiled it meant a hundred things at once.

“I always knew you’d come back to me, you fucking dick.” He blinked and his eyelids struggled to rise. He was drunk, but I couldn’t tell how drunk.
He stepped towards me and I felt like Han greeting Lando for the first time in Cloud City. I braced myself for a blow, but he stopped in front of the mirror and considered himself in the reflection. He turned his head one way then the other, wiped his hand across his cheek and along his jaw. He put his hands in his hair and pulled it back away from his face, gathered two bunches of it up in his fists.

“How you doing?” I said lamely. I was relieved when he ignored me.

He let his hair go and rooted through the drawers below the sink until he found a pair of scissors. He gathered up his hair again in one hand and brought the scissors up near his scalp, held them there, sighed, and let his hands drop. He turned to me. “No,” he said. “Doesn’t feel right tonight. Maybe tomorrow.” He slid the scissors into the breast pocket of his t-shirt. He regarded me for a second, and then hugged me. I felt the sharp points of the scissors between us.

When he pulled away I could see that his face had gone flush, and I relaxed a little bit. Evan put his hands in his back pockets and looked me up and down.

“It’s good to see you again, Jack. I missed your calming presence.”

“Good to see you too.” I nodded towards the door. “I see you found another girl to ruin.”

He gave me a coy smile. “Yeah, but Dani’s a fighter.”

“Dani? Your girlfriend has a man’s name. That’s very interesting, isn’t it.”

His eyes went dark but his smile remained, and again I felt unpredictable tension coiling up inside of him. “It’s Dani with an I,” he said evenly. “Short for Danielle.”

I nodded, done with the subject, and we both let it fall away. I shifted my weight and said: “I was really sorry to hear about your mom, Evan. Um…” I wanted to go on, but the subject was done with me.

Evan knocked a cigarette out of the pack, slid it into his mouth and lit it with a match. “Mm. Yeah, I know. I got your card.” He tossed the match into the sink and looked up. “Postmarked Pensacola.” My mother—I certainly appreciated her thoughtfulness, but would it have killed her to let me know she’d sent it? “It was very sweet, and the handwriting was gorgeous.”

I swallowed hard and tried to hide it. “Well…”
“I’ll take you to see her later,” he said. “My mother.” His hair had fallen into his eyes and he shook it away. “What do you say.” It wasn’t a question. He pulled on his cigarette and we maintained our places until someone pounded on the door. Evan opened it up and it was Drew.

“You guys done making out in here? I’ve had nine beers, man, I gotta fucking pee.”

“We’re done,” Evan said. He wrapped his arm around the girl and was absorbed by the noise of the party. I tried to follow him, to shadow him like an undercover chaperone, but a curtain of cigarette smoke curled in behind him and when I passed through it he was gone.

I saw Evan intermittently after that; every half hour or so he’d appear next to me as I leaned against a wall or sat on the couch talking to chubby faces from the past, always taking spittle to the cheeks and lips, and he’d be holding a can or a shot or, once or twice, a joint. I tried to beg off the first time he hoisted a mug full of whiskey under my nose, but he just looked at me gravely, said “Not tonight, Jack,” and held it closer. After that I stopped resisting, and by the time I heard Romeo Void come pulsing through the stereo (I might like you better if we slept together) I felt pretty good about being there, about being home again.

I’d catch slide show glimpses of him like images caught in a flash: cupping his illuminated hand in front of his mouth as he lit a cigarette; scrolling through photos on someone’s digital camera, grinning; looking away with his arms crossed as Dani clutched his chin; drinking whiskey from a bottle, adam’s apple out; brooding next to the refrigerator; sitting in front of the couch, laughing in someone’s face who looked like they weren’t enjoying it very much. Through it all his face never really seemed to change; he seemed preserved in a kind of oily lacquer. Occasionally he’d catch me studying him and would hold my gaze until I looked away.

At what must have been four in the morning, I decided to leave and went to the bathroom to take my exit piss. While I was in there the door opened and Evan walked in. He saw me and chuckled. “People keep saying you haven’t changed at all, and now I see that’s true.”

“The fuck, man? Get out.”
He put his arm around my shoulders and said, “Come on, let’s go.” I was still peeing when he pulled me away, and was barely repackaged when we got to the living room. There were only a dozen or so people left and they were all in there, sitting in a circle passing around a pipe full of hash.

“Evan, man, I’m not up for this,” I tried.

“Well get up for it. Don’t be a cunt.” I flashed back to that very phrase passing through those very lips as he looked back at me from his bicycle, to which I was tethered by a nylon rope, as I struggled to keep my balance on a rickety skateboard and he peddled at top speed toward a railroad crossing. He seemed to watch the scene play out on my forehead because he smirked and changed tacks. “Do it for me, alright? Do me this favor tonight.”

I agreed. I would do my penance tonight and go home with a clear conscience.

The pipe went around twice and I took the shallowest hits possible. Dani passed out after one, and Evan and Drew stacked empty beer cans on her stomach. The room filled with a haze you could see in the lights of the stereo and feel against your skin. Someone turned out all the lights and put on Ministry and I could feel bodies moving in the room, smelled sweat and incense.

Across the room I saw Evan lunge and flail and go down. When he got back up he was entangled in limbs and I didn’t understand what was happening, but then he fell into the stereo and suddenly there was motion everywhere. He fell backwards onto half of the coffee table and two of the legs buckled and collapsed. Evan hit the floor and everything on the table—beers, ashtrays full of lit cigarettes—slid down on top of him. He looked like he was digging his way out from under a pile of clothes and I realized he was fighting, with at least one person.

A handful of people, including Drew, pulled the pile of clothes off of Evan, who came up laughing and spitting. The lights came on and he put his arm up in front of his eyes. He was sweaty and panting, his clothes and hair wet with beer, with a mouthful of blood. Gray ash powdered his hair and ear. His shirt was ripped; I looked for the scissors but they were gone. The pile of clothes was actually one guy with a buzzed head, wearing a flannel shirt over a dirty v-neck T.

Dani stepped forward looking bleary. “Jesus, Evan,” she said.
“Hey, baby.” He pulled his hair away from his face and worked his jaw back and forth.

“Let’s go,” Drew said. “Evan, let’s get out of here, man.”

Evan wiggled one of his teeth and it popped out. He threw it in the buzz cut’s face. There was a surge, and Drew shoved Evan out the front door laughing and hooting.

Dani collapsed to her hands and knees, unable to stand. “Wait,” was all she could say before she vomited all over the carpet.

That was my first night back.

The next morning I found myself in a sofa bed, lying under a ratty gray blanket with Dani, who was totally naked except for her socks and sneakers. I started to slide out and heard a crinkling sound, and discovered I had slept on top of a brown plastic camping tarp, which had been laid out over the mattress. Dani had her head thrown back, her mouth wide open, and was pumping stale puke breath into the room. It was the same shithole house from the night before.

I peered under the covers and was relieved to find myself fully clothed, and maybe I lingered too long on Dani’s slim white body, which radiated heat and light, but I figured all was fair considering all the girls Evan had stolen from me and then cast aside. At least I could have loved her if I wanted to.

“Don’t worry,” a voice said from the foot of the bed where a tall guy with buzzed hair was standing over us, his arms crossed. One eye was puffy and purple. “I’m pretty sure nothing happened between you two. We put the tarp down in case she shit herself.” He shrugged. “And she insisted on getting naked, so, that’s why. Just so you know.”

“Okay,” I said. He left the room and I got up to look for my shoes.

I went to the bathroom, and when I came out Dani was awake and dressed and sipping on a glass of water. She looked surprisingly good—her eyes were clear, her skin was even, and her hair hadn’t even gone greasy. My hair, on the other hand, had sloped all towards the center of my head and I spent a good ten minutes in the bathroom trying to tease it back down.

“Come with me to breakfast,” she said, and we went.
She drove us to a diner where they make French toast with banana bread. We split a plate and each got coffee.

“Evan adores you, you know.” She said it like it irritated her.

“No, I don’t know that.”

“He talks about you. Not a lot but at odd times, like when I try to get him to have sex and he doesn’t want to.”

I rubbed my brow. This was shit I didn’t want to hear.

“He says you devastated him, but he says it like a lover would. Not like friends.”

“Do you have, like, a Tylenol or something? Some aspirin?”

She pulled her purse up onto the table and started digging through it. “So what’s the deal? Where you guys, I don’t know, lovers or something?”

“No, Dani, we were just friends. Okay?” She dug two unmarked pills out of her bag and handed them to me. I gave them a good look and set them aside. “Evan’s a dramatic guy, right? We both know that. He and I haven’t been friends for a long time, so…” I scratched my upper lip. “Whatever thoughts he has on the subject, he’s had plenty of time to spruce them all up in his mind.”

She looked at me skeptically, took one of the pills and set it on her tongue. When she started talking again there was no sign of it. “Well, this whole thing with his mom has got him all fucked up.”

“I can imagine.”

“No, I don’t think you can imagine.”

The waitress set our plate down in front of us and I waited patiently for her to go.

“What do you mean?”

Dani unrolled her silverware and wedged a big wad of syrupy toast into her mouth. “Well,” she said. “You should see his thighs.”

“Yeah, and why’s that?”

“Because he’s been cutting them.” She sprinkled powdered sugar on the food and raised her eyebrows at me. “With a razor blade.”

I didn’t say anything, and that seemed to be the response she wanted. She took another satisfied bite.

“And…” She paused, it seemed, for dramatic effect. “He’s shaved himself.”
“Shaved himself? What’s the big deal about—” She was smirking at me. “Oh. You mean he shaved… himself.”

“Yeah. I don’t know what that’s all about, but wow. He’s a clinical case, honest to god.” She sprinkled powdered sugar in her coffee and gave me an adventurous look. “It’s a good thing you’re here to save him,” she said. She picked up the coffee and toasted me with it, then sipped it. “Mm-hm. That is good, Jack. You gotta try this.”

After breakfast, Dani drove me back to my car and I spent an hour or two driving around town, getting reacquainted with it. Someone, Drew maybe, had left two of Evan’s mix tapes on my hood. I popped one in and the music still fit. The Smiths, The Clash, The Psychedelic Furs. Depeche Mode, Violent Femmes, Joy Division. Echo and the Bunnymen.

When the second tape ended I went back to my dad’s place, showered and slept for four hours.

My parents got divorced when I was in the seventh grade. At the time, it went around that my dad had slept with Evan’s mom, and Evan was convinced that he and I were secret half-brothers. For two weeks, he told everyone we knew. At the end of the two weeks, my dad set us both down at a table outside the Baskin-Robbins and told us that we were unequivocally not related, that if we did the math and checked the dates we’d see that it wasn’t even geographically possible, that we didn’t live in the same city then. Just as well, I thought, since I had two brothers already. But Evan was a kid without a dad and two sisters, and even those sisters were non-biological (and weren’t anything like him anyway, at least not physically, one African-American and the other Korean), so he pitched his double-scoop into traffic and took off running. It was after midnight when Denny drove him home in his cruiser, the lights on to let his mom know they had arrived.

But that Saturday of Memorial Day weekend, as I sat with my dad in his living room and ate Pizza Hut for dinner yet again, I wondered if he hadn’t lied to us that day, wondered if there was any possible way two acorns could drop from the same tree and grow up on different sides of the forest. As illogical as it seemed, I couldn’t help thinking about it because I’d never seen my dad so preoccupied with the well-being of
any other individual as long as I’d known him. He urged me to take better care of, to keep a closer eye on, Evan.

And so I spent Saturday night with Evan too, and all was going well until he grabbed my head in his hands while I was driving and pulled my face onto his, smashing my nose and sliding his tongue between my lips. His breath was hot with beer and I could feel every bristle on his face digging into my chin and cheek. Mashed together, we lit up in the headlights of oncoming traffic as the car drifted left. I shoved him away but he clung to my hair and the back of my neck and pulled me to him like a wrestler. We drifted right and clipped a park car, and the side mirrors on each one exploded.

I was beginning to suspect that the caffeine pill Evan talked me into back at the bar was actually something more like speed, because we both tightened up like electrical currents and I felt like I was seeing everything in hyper-detail. We passed houses at breakneck speed, but I was seeing cracks in their siding, recognizing commercials on the televisions in their living rooms.

I managed to work my arm up in between us and planted my hand on Evan’s face, and as I pushed his head back I felt the tip of my finger slide into the soft tissue of his tear duct. Evan stomped his foot down hard on top of mine on the gas pedal and we lurched forward, skittered back through the left lane, popped the curb and drove into a hedge. We bounced around in our seats and were knocked loose of each other. When Evan detached from me my head flew backwards into the driver’s side window and everything slowed. I could see the entire neighborhood in crisp detail. My eyes drifted upwards and I saw a giant cube of glistening raindrops descending slowly towards the street. And then they hit and it was all sound.

Evan pulled the emergency brake and we jerked to a stop in the middle of the street. Rain pounded down on the roof as we sat in the car and blinked. Finally, Evan got out and walked away.

That was the second time Evan kissed me. The first time, we were sitting on the roof of his house, his speakers in his window, listening to “Killing Moon,” tossing cherry bombs into the street. When he leaned in and planted it, I jerked backwards and slid right off the roof into his backyard, breaking my collarbone. I guess you could say that was the beginning of the end of our friendship. We were freshman in high school.
I drove to Evan’s mother’s house, found the front door open and walked in. It hadn’t changed all that much since the last time I’d been inside, but it looked like Evan had been camping in the living room for a week or more. There were clothes and blankets and crusty dishes everywhere, and things had been recently burned to ash in the fireplace.

I found Evan in the kitchen. He had opened a bottle of beer and was leaning up against the counter by the sink, utterly soaked, standing barefoot in a puddle of water. He tapped on a 39-ounce can of Chock Full o’ Nuts coffee.

“Here she is,” he said.

I looked at the coffee and back up at him. “What?”

“She asked for this. She asked to be put in this. She thought it would be funny.”

I looked at it again. I couldn’t tell if he was serious.

“You want to hold her?” he asked. Before I could answer he picked it up and shoved it into my arms. It was heavy, and things rattled around inside when it hit me.

“Go ahead,” he said. “Give it a shake. I know you want to.”

I set it down and took a couple of steps back. He peeled off the lid and set it down, glanced inside. “I’m thinking about making her. You know, brewing her up and then drinking her with a little sugar. Maybe some cream.”

“It’s not funny, Evan.”

“Who’s laughing?” He put his hand inside, then the other one. He kept his eyes on me as he worked his fingers into the mass of ash and bone. I could only shake my head. I felt dizzy.

He pulled his hands out and looked at them. It was not as dry as I’d expected; it was more like wet sand, and it was black. He put his hands over his eyes and dragged them down his cheeks, leaving thick gritty smears of his mother on his face. When he opened his eyes he looked like a Maori warrior.

“Jesus Christ, Evan,” I said. “What the hell are you doing?”

He smiled a tragic smile. “I’m the phoenix,” he said.
By Sunday I was feeling pretty spent, both physically and emotionally. I wanted to lie in bed all day and forget, but my dad woke me up early on his way out of the house and asked for a progress report.

I left Evan shirtless, looking ghoulish in his grisly war paint, hopping around his mother’s house, smashing curios and picture frames with a stick he’d dragged in from the yard. He asked me to punch him so he could draw on his chest with blood and I walked out.

I crept in the house and up the stairs, and when I’d peeked through my dad’s cracked doorway I found him sitting at the side of his bed, crying. At what, I’ll probably never know exactly, though I guess with Evan’s mom he had lost, at the very least, a friend.

“He’s fine, pop,” I said from the bed. “He just needs to work through his grief, that’s all.”

My dad nodded, looking relieved, said, “Thanks, buddy,” and shut the door.

I got up at noon and made coffee and was slumped down in a chair with it, watching TV, when Amy Luftig buzzed on my cell phone. I’d forgotten all about her, I realized, but to tell you truth I was bored by the prospect of sitting across the table and listening to her chatter, so I let her go to voice mail. I felt a little guilty about it, but not too much.

Interestingly enough, I found myself thinking about Dani and imagining a scene where, to get back at Evan for lunging at me in my car, she shows up in my dad’s guestroom wearing the same outfit she wore that night when we slept together. It was a pretty satisfying fantasy; I used up all the hot water in the shower thinking about it, and it even passed through my mind as I peeled the skin from my arm while sliding down the face of the bluffs after Evan later that night.

It was a short trip down the side, controlled at first but then dissolving into a disorganized slide down an almost vertical bed of gravel and ragged brush. The last five feet was little more than a freefall into the shallow creek at the base, and when I hit the water and went under, a brief torrent of pebbles falling in on top of me, I thought of the day Evan and I were chased by the rain. And when he grabbed my arm and pulled me
up, and I saw him towering above me smiling with his face like granite and his hair like seaweed, I wondered if he hadn’t let the rain catch him on purpose.

He dragged me up onto the sandy creek bed and laid me down on my back. “Take a second,” he said. “Then see if you can stand.” He paced around me excitedly, all worked up from his fall and mine. When he hit the bottom, as I stood at the top and listened, he screamed so horribly I thought he must have broken his leg, that the bone split and tore through his skin and through his jeans and maybe he even impaled another part of his body on it. I panicked and followed him down. But laying there soggy in the mud, my chest heaving, I could see that he was perfectly fine.

“You’re such a dick,” I said.

“I know it.” He looked so pleased.

I rolled onto my side and struggled to stand, and when he tried to help me I shoved him away. I put pressure on my leg and could tell my knee was all fucked up. The joints felt loose and wobbly, and it was frightening.

Evan tried to help me straighten up and I shoved him away again, and when he took another step towards me I lurched and caught him in the side of the head with the palm-side of my fist.

“Yes,” he said. “Again!”

I swung. His face felt like meat.

“Again.”

I swung.

“Again!”

I swung. He dropped onto his ass and held his hand up. “Alright, alright,” he said. He dropped his arm and panted. “Now… Was that so fucking difficult?”

I slumped my shoulders in defeat and started walking away. I couldn’t get him, couldn’t help him. He put his arms behind his head and reclined, gazing up at the stars contentedly.

“You were my brother, Jack. You should have looked out for me.”

I limped back to the path, filthy water streaming down from my arms, and left Evan where he was. He’d catch up to me anyway, I knew. All the things that hadn’t killed him had made him stronger, and by now he was indestructible.
I wasn’t twenty yards away before I heard him jogging towards me, and when I
turned I saw him that day in the rain. He’d wanted it to fall on him, and now it was
falling on me too.
One day, a Tuesday at 4:44 in the afternoon, a flash of white light illuminated the Earth for two tenths of second, erasing shadows where it was sunny and creating new ones in the dark, and suddenly everyone, everywhere, remembered everything they had ever forgotten.

Some people understood what had happened right away; they were the ones standing in crosswalks and half out of elevators, frozen in delis with spoonfuls of steaming soup poised in front of their open mouths, or sitting in their cars blinking, coasting leisurely towards telephone poles. Others didn’t. They were the ones who rubbed their eyes and continued with the presentation, swallowed ibuprofen, or darted into emergency rooms thinking they’d just had a mild stroke. Later it would hit them. *My life feels longer,* they’d think. *Deeper almost, as if a square has shifted and now I see that it was actually a cube all along. Why would that be?*

Many would speculate about the source of the white light, chewing their thoughts like tobacco before hocking out theories. A nuclear mishap. An electro-magnetic burst sent sizzling through the upper atmosphere. Mass hypnosis. A comet. Zeke Grabel, whose chubby fingers were nicked from slicing cold cuts at the grocery store, speculated that he, and everyone he knew, was now a zombie, and maybe this is just what it felt like to be a zombie. He wondered if he’d be killed by the last remaining non-zombie for doing whatever it is that zombies feel they have to do. But for each theory there were ten ways to disprove it. And not a single skilled scientist or physicist or psychiatrist could be found to consult about it, all of them having run off to luxuriate, to absolutely bathe, in their remembering.

Dr. Annabelle Gish raced to retrieve the key to a car she drove three cars ago. Dr. Allistar Dugan, whose brain was like a sheet of greased wax paper when it came to remembering names, hustled through his office and lab, pointing at each assistant he saw,
saying, “You’re Alice! And you’re Sam! And you’re Lynda with a Y! And you love the Beach Boys! And you make your own hummus! And you wear orthopedic shoes but you don’t like to talk about it! And you’re Gretchen but you go by Sally!”

Dr. Benjamin Chow drove three states over and knocked on the door of a stranger’s house, the house he lived in with his wife many years ago. When the door opened Dr. Chow stood very still on the doorstep with his hands clasped behind his back, a small man, shrunken in the cold air, wearing rimless glasses. The new owners, a young couple, stepped aside. Dr. Chow walked straight up the stairs, into the bathroom off the master bedroom and stood before the milky white pedestal sink. He stared into it. His initials were engraved in the tops.

There was a rash of marriages after the flash and a spate of bitter divorces. Sons slugged their fathers and mothers smacked their daughters. For days, the remembered walked the streets marked with scarlet handprints across their cheeks, wearing sweaters that had been clenched up in fists and jerked around, hair disheveled, eyes blank. Some of them had forgotten their own deeds, but most hadn’t; they were only surprised to be reminded of them.

Ted and Lisa Powell, high school sweethearts, surprised everyone at their divorce hearings when they tossed aside a bailiff and the court stenographer and made furious weepy love on the carpeted floor of the small courtroom deep in city hall, blending tears and snot and spit into a glistening film they spread across each other’s faces. They had been overcome by the spontaneous overgrowth of their deep, dense history, leading each back individually to a distant, simple memory: for Lisa, it the was time Ted—as a young man, smooth and angular, his eyebrows thick and dark—choked on a maraschino cherry
from a sundae they were sharing and threw himself on the back of chair until he vomited up the cherry and ice cream and even the little colored sprinkles. For Ted, it was the first time Lisa—her skin an unblemished sheet of stretched silk—took him in her mouth in the cab of his dad’s useless pickup, parked behind the barn.

The memories came in floods and trickles, for some in random order and for others chronologically. Some heard the muffled sloshing of placenta in the womb.

Gretchen Moss introduced her fiancée to her parents over drinks in an outdoor bistro when she and her father, simultaneously, remembered the time when she was three and her father placed her little hand on his penis in the bathtub and smiled. When she took her hand away his smile faded and his face crumpled into a pathetic grimace of shame and self-disgust. He rubbed shampoo in his eyes until they swelled and refused to wash it out. After that he called her Sally and let his wife do all the bathing. Remembering this, Gretchen’s father’s eyes again began to swell and water. She looked at him. Realizing for the first time in her life that she had total control of their relationship, she placed her hand on his face and said, “It’s alright, Daddy. I forgive you.”

Ronald Waterman was teaching his sophomores how to calculate risk when he remembered how, when his brother was nine and he was seven, and their mother left them alone to go shopping, his brother would climb the kitchen counter and pull sticks of incense and Fig Newton’s from the high cabinets. He’d slide the incense into empty soda cans and they’d eat cookies and pickles, watching the chalky smoke form question marks in the air.

Gerald Buttery had just finished confessing his most recent sins to Father Jude, and was politely, if not mechanically, absorbing the Father’s instructions for absolution, when a litany of unconfessed sins came marching through his brain, one after the other, like a horrible parade of unrelenting degeneracy. Oh my God, he said, cutting the Father off. Hang on just a sec, I’ve got some other… Oh shit. Oh yeah, he said with a little
smirk, and then, Oh shit… He began to amend his confession, but was repeatedly interrupted by his own memories, springing in quick succession from the clown car of his mind. He inventoried them as they appeared. Oh yeah, I punched that bum for no reason when I was drunk... I smoked grass that time before I substitute taught fourth grade... I threw a bottle of piss out the car window and hit that girl... Jesus Christ...

But Father Jude was no longer listening; he was thinking about the time, long forgotten, pushed to furthest corners of his memory, when he stepped off the bus after school.

I lied to my father... I lied to my mother... I lied to my Uncle Joey... Man, they’re so well organized...

He was only a boy, maybe ten. It was fall. The sky was a thick, metallic shade of blue and the air smelled like wet leaves. He stepped off the bus and onto the foot of his driveway, and from his house came his little dog Smacky, running as fast as he could towards young Jude and the heavy black wheels of the bus.

I kicked Rachel in the stomach when she told me she was pregnant… He wept now. I told her I didn’t mean to, but I did...

He remembered quite clearly now. Smacky ran straight to the front wheel, his small shaggy body pumping its tiny legs deliberately and earnestly, just as the bus lurched forward. The gigantic tire pinned Smacky’s front half to the pavement and crushed it, right before Jude’s very eyes. Smacky let out one surprised squeal that was louder and shorter than any he’d ever produced before, and the driver of the bus, oblivious, drove on. Smacky’s back left leg twitched once before the rear right tire caught him again.

Oh God, I didn’t understand until now… I didn’t get it… I’m sorry, I’m sorry… What should I do? Oh God...

Father Jude gave Gerald Buttery a sidelong stare, considering him, then left his seat in the confessional, opened the door on Gerald’s side, and beat the shit out of him.

Many people remembered their mothers and wept, either for the tender moments or for the moments that had previously been filtered out and conveniently removed. For many, the dial had been twisted and their mothers came, at long last, into clear clean
focus as regular human beings. And they wept. They remembered odd, random moments of their mothers flirting with their fathers, or their girlfriends’ husbands, or even other men who must have populated other memories but, for some, only made one appearance in that particular scene. They remembered mothers spilling drinks on themselves at parties and laughing through their lips, sending spittle and gin in a mist through the air. They remembered their mothers saying ridiculous, meaningless things, acting inappropriately, impolitely, being wrong. And they wept.

Steven Laughlin was having sex when he remembered walking in on his mother in the bathtub eight. He had walked halfway to school, but turned around when he realized he had forgotten his ball cap that the teachers let him wear during recess. Stevie expected to find his mother—her robe, sitting at the kitchen table with her coffee, reading the paper—but the kitchen was empty, the table and paper and coffee left abandoned. He walked through the master bedroom and peered into the bathroom. His mother’s robe had been tossed into the milky white pedestal sink. She lay masturbatating in the tub, a single candle lit on the soap rack, a glass of white wine on the floor next to her. She had one leg propped up on the ledge of the tub; it looked stuffed with wads of stiff newspaper, pale, and fleshy like raw chicken. Stevie closed the door and hid in the basement until his mother came down, redressed in her bathrobe, and then told her he was sick. Recalling all of this, Steven, barely a man yet nearing the end of his manly endeavor, couldn’t prevent himself from coming. He lurched and spasmed, horrified but unable to do anything about it, the end of the journey he began when he was eight having hurtled by before he knew it.

When the remembering had faded, people, for the most part, were grateful. Some had written down as much of it as they could before their memories receded into void again. But most people were happy to see them go, relieved to be once again unburdened by memory and experience. Some, like Benjamin Chow, put their newly retrieved memories in a box, taped the box closed, and set it in the furthest, darkest corner of their attics, where it would be available if needed but out of sight until then.
The first thing Molly noticed was that the table her father’s body lay upon was made of porcelain, not stainless steel as she had expected. They rarely made them out of porcelain anymore, the mortician explained, although this one was relatively new. “They’re just not as popular within the field right now,” he went on, as if he were talking about a piece of office equipment he had ordered from a business supply catalogue, which, of course, he was. Porcelain, he said, was preferable, with its smooth contours and rounded edges. He never caught the sleeve of his jacket on the corners of this one, never scraped a knuckle or snagged a button as he worked.

The second thing she noticed was that the sides of the table, instead of being wrapped in a bumper or curb, like a cutting board, dipped slightly downwards to prevent water, and other liquids, from pooling up. And below the table, in the center of the smooth, blue floor, was a drain. She swallowed.

Molly kept her distance from the table. A wave of cold panic washed over her and she remained where she stood, letting it run down her shoulders and arms and drip from the tips of her fingers. She took in the room as if it had no focal point, no center, as if it were dark instead of clinically bright, as if it were cluttered with charming detritus instead of orderly and neat and spare. Harold, the mortician, backed quietly to the periphery of the room. He leaned against the countertop near a sink and folded his arms, then pulled his chin down and out and rubbed it methodically with his thumb, watching patiently from the tops of his eyes. When she had recovered, Molly looked at Harold and chuckled stupidly. He arched his eyebrows in reply and she stepped further into the room, indeed walked right up to the table and set her hands down on it.

Her father was in a state of undress; still wearing the charcoal slacks and leather belt from the day before, but stripped down on top to a white v-neck undershirt that
exposed the tips of his clavicles and the pale space in between. She noticed, on the other side of the room, his jacket, shirt and tie had been wrapped in clear plastic and hung from a hanger on the coat rack, as if fresh from the dry cleaner. And on a smaller table, this one made of stainless steel, she saw his watch, his ring, a pair of engraved cufflinks and his shoes.

“Will he go naked to the university?” she asked.

“Not completely,” Harold said, pulling upright from the counter. “They provide a garment we’ll dress him in before he goes. A medical gown, more or less.”

She nodded, then turned back to her father and put her hands on her hips. He looked smaller, in general, than she ever remembered him being, a reproduction of almost original size. And he had begun to flatten, she could tell, the empty space beginning to sag into its own hollowness. He looked waxy and colorless, an amazing likeness carved out of soap.

Molly looked at the back of his right hand—a smooth stretch of flat, hard skin, unmovable, uninterrupted by the shallow piping of blue veins she knew should be there, unblemished by coffee-colored age spots. She scanned his bony wrist, his nearly hairless forearm, his insubstantial bicep, all practically the same girth. His skin had drooped and locked into place, dry as old clay.

Her father’s face had bloated in the hospital after he died, but returned more or less to normal size the next day, leaving him with slightly inflated cheeks as if he were holding his breath. His eyelids, held together by a thin translucent glue, seemed flatter than they should have been, like a shade pulled over an open window, and his lips, obscured by wiry white hairs, seemed stretched over an endless, lightless pit. Molly eyed him objectively, the empty shell of her father, nibbling her bottom lip. His beard, which had grown as tangled and dense as roots into soil, was the only part of him that remained authentic, a rich system of tiny white tendrils draped across his chin and most of his neck.

Molly took one hand off her hip, reached out and stroked it once, twice.

“So,” she said, looking at Harold. “Do you have some kind of special instrument you use for this sort of thing, or…”

“Well…” Harold turned and pulled an electric shaver from the cupboard above the sink and held it up. “We can take most of the hair off with this. For the rest…” He
turned again and lifted two items from a plastic bag on the counter, and carefully tore the packaging away from one. “We can use these.” He handed her a container of Barbasol and a Gillette Sensor Excel disposable razor. She looked at the items in her hands in turn—first one, then the other, then back again to the first—and looked back up at Harold, who blinked. His own face, boyish but serious, was itself shaved clean.

“Are you kidding me here, or what?” she asked him.

He shrugged, not sure what she was expecting. He reached into the pocket of his white coat and pulled out two fresh pairs of surgical gloves. “Would you like a pair of these?”

She stared again at the white beard, the hardened, empty face, and considered the question. “Yeah,” she said slowly. And again, with more conviction, “Yeah, I guess so.” She snapped the gloves out of Harold’s hands and wedged them on to her own, then clapped her hands together leaving a puff of dust in the air.

“Okay,” she said. “Let’s shave this bastard.”

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The first hair of my father’s beard sprouted on March 17, 1959 at 12:29 in the afternoon.

It was sunny and warm; he was eating his lunch—a salami sandwich on potato bread, a pickle, and a thermos of black coffee—in the grass outside his boarding house. His only jacket, an ashy brown corduroy two-button, pulled from his father’s closet a year earlier because the elbow patches made him feel collegiate, lay spread out beneath him, damp from the earth and speckled with bread crumbs. He sat cross-legged in his shirt and tie, chewing, his sandwich in one hand and the pickle in the other, his thermos propped against his crotch, when the girl with skin like a china tea cup walked by.

Flanked by two friends (who would become smudged by time and memory), she held her books tight to her chest. Her hair, black as an absence, fell cleanly away from all sides of her flat and elegant face. She did not seem to notice my father there in the grass until she had almost gone past him, and even then she only slid her eyes to the side and held them there for a second before they set beyond the horizon of her face and she was gone.
Part of him sprang to his feet and ran after her, and my father let that part go, knowing he wouldn’t get far. And he didn’t.

Acne scars and pock marks dented the hollows of his cheeks. His bottom teeth stood at odd angles like dilapidated headstones. His hair was already thinning on the crown. He was simply too unattractive to approach such a woman. Disgusted with himself, with his puny, cowardly soul, he threw the gnawed end of his pickle at a chipmunk and covered his face with his hand. If only, he thought. And suddenly it occurred to him.

He wrapped the remains of his sandwich carefully in plastic and set it aside, then turned his face to the sun. He concentrated all of his energy, all of his willpower, all of his shame into his stomach. He raised it higher, into his chest, up into the narrows of this throat causing his adam’s apple to dip and bob, and finally into his face. His pinched his eyes and squeezed hard, and, at long last, a single, translucent hair wedged itself from the skin of his left cheek.

He was 19 years old.

●

Molly had not seen the prep room before. Up until the actual visitation, in fact, she had made it no further than Harold’s office on the main floor, in an alcove beyond the stairs, where she stopped by the day before to drop off her father’s suit and discuss the ceremony. Her father had already picked his music and several preferred readings, and asked that he be displayed wearing the watch his father gave him, the ring his wife gave him, and the cufflinks his daughters gave him. Molly hung the suit on a coat rack in the corner of Harold’s office, and then dumped her purse on his desk to find the other three items.

Harold had drawn up a sequence of events for the ceremony and pointed to the only blank spot. “Now,” he said, “will you be eulogizing your father, or have you decided that yet?”

“No,” Molly said, picking through the lost and discarded relics of her life—pieces of gum, a tube of lip balm, old black pennies. “I wouldn’t know where to begin with my father. I mean, what could I say that other people want to hear about, you know.” She
plucked a cuff link from the mess and set it down near Harold. “My mother would have done it if she was still with us. She was good at leaving things out.” Molly found the other cuff link and set it next to the first. “No, my younger sister, Ellie, she’ll be speaking. She’s worked something up.”

Satisfied, Harold made a note on his itinerary. Molly pulled old tissues from the band of her father’s watch and set it down next to the cuff links.

“Thank you,” Harold said. “You can pick these things up the morning after the ceremony. The university is sending someone to pick him up at 11; I’ll have him shaved and dressed by then.”

“Uh huh,” Molly said absentmindedly, refilling her purse of its contents. But then she paused, her hand stuffed deep in her bag. “Wait,” she said. “You’re going to shave him?”

“Yes. The university asked that he be shaved as part of his preparation.”

Molly considered this for a long time, her head drifting slowly to the left. Finally she asked, “Is there any way…” She broke into a crooked grin. “Could I do that?”

Harold’s face immediately filled with tension.

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It would be eight months before my father approached the girl with the china skin. By then, his face lay hidden beneath a mossy covering of soft reddish-brown fur. The girl’s name was Madeline. She didn’t care much for the beard, but found his goofy discomfort somehow charming, and took a little bit of pity on him. When he was 22, and she 21, they married.

Over the years, my father’s beard evolved and grew, its progress charted by photographs and home movies. It gradually lost its color, going from the extreme reddish-brown of a brush fire to the reddish-blonde of a cooling ember, to a blondish-brown, a brownish-gray, and finally a deep, refined white. He kept it trimmed close to his jaw through the sixties, during his graduate work and field studies in avian biology; let it grow long during the seventies so that it hung in ribbons from his chin, in an attempt to relate to his students who themselves were as shaggy and unkempt as stray dogs; pulled it back in during the eighties to offset his comb over; and finally, during the
last ten or fifteen years of his life, my father let the beard settle into a medium-length, well kept, refined white cascade.

It was older than his marriage and older than his two daughters, my sister and me. We never knew him without it.

Molly leaned forward over the porcelain table and tucked her long hair behind her ear, leaving a streak of white shaving cream like a slit in the darkness where light peeks through. She had already left a dab of it in her right eyebrow and a smudge on the side of her nose. She’d been working noiselessly, the only sound coming from the abrupt scrapes of her short, aggressive strokes against the right side of her father’s face. She’d cut into him once or twice, producing little flaps of skin that didn’t bleed. His skin did not wield to the pressure and the toughness of it, the resilience, made her feel like she was shaving a stone.

Harold watched silently from the foot of the table. He had shaved most of the beard away already with the electric razor, and had wiped Charles Walter’s face lightly with a damp cloth to remove the trimmings. Now he stood with his arms crossed and his brow furrowed, clearly uncomfortable, Molly thought, with the whole scenario. He looked poised to step between her and her father the moment she sliced too deep beneath the skin of final rite and into the lower levels of desecration. Molly tried to be careful.

“So,” she said, not looking up. “They call you Harry or what?”

“I’m sorry?” he said, arching his eyebrows.

Molly stood upright. She had her sleeves rolled up and was beginning to sweat. “I said: do they call you Harry or what?”

“What do you mean? Does who call me Harry?”


“Oh,” he said. “No. People call me Harold.”

“I see,” she said, holding the razor up in one hand. “Well, Harold, I’m nicking the hell out of his face.” She stepped aside and Harold walked over to examine Molly’s
father. He leaned in very close and ran his finger delicately across her father’s skin below the ear.

“Yes,” he said, concerned. “Well, try and slow down a bit. Maybe use a little less pressure. Like this.” He took the razor from Molly’s hand and slid it gingerly down her father’s jaw line. He looked up at her to make sure she was watching, and then shaved a bit more using short, light strokes. He wiped the razor on a cloth and handed it back. He stepped aside and Molly resumed her work. She felt like a child leaning over a sloppy finger painting.

“You don’t look like a Harold,” she said. “I’d probably call you Harry.”

“That’s fine,” he said. She couldn’t tell if he cared or not.

“My father liked to go by two names, Charles Walter. His father gave him two middle names; he claimed they were two first and one middle. Gave us all two middle names, my sisters and me.” She looked up and Harold smiled and nodded. “Grace Anne,” she said. “Not too bad.”

“No.”

She worked the razor down her father’s jaw line, following the path that Harold had started, wiping away the hair with her free hand as she went.

“Your father,” Harold said, “he worked at the university?”

“That’s right.”

“Was he a scientist?”


“Oh,” Harold shrugged. “In eight years I’ve only ever had one other donation, a woman. She was a dermatologist. Passed away from cancer.”

“Skin?”

“Cervical.”

“Ah,” Molly said. “That would have been pretty ironic, eh?”

Harold didn’t answer this question.

“My father studied birds,” Molly said. “He loved birds. He said the first time he cut one open and pulled its little ribs apart he couldn’t believe how beautiful it was. All those bones in the wings, the muscles, the intricate system of little bird organs… perfect artwork. Beautiful. He loved it.”
This made Harold smile. Molly pretended not to notice.

“He tried to show me, once, how a bird flies when I was about eight. He had this pheasant he found dead in the field behind our house, and he brought it into the garage. He started explaining all the different types of feathers, the remiges and retrices and whatnot, the filoplumes around the face, all that shit. I didn’t care. I just knew that birds flew, and that was enough for me.” She scratched the tip of her nose. “But then he started ripping all the feathers out, just grabbed handfuls and started yanking. He wanted to show me how the feathers are layered, how the bones are structured, but it was horrifying. I got the hell out of there. I still don’t know how birds fly, still don’t care.”

Harold chuckled once, then scratched the back of his ear and set his hands lightly in the pockets of his jacket. “So what do you do?” he asked.

Molly had shaved away almost half of her father’s beard, and straightened up to consider it. She tilted her head to the side and gave him a long, thoughtful look.

“I tell stories,” she said.

The first thing Molly noticed about her father’s apartment was how packed it was with the remnants of an unfamiliar life. She knew nothing about the person who had lived in it.

When her father left her family, unexpectedly and unannounced, on a Sunday afternoon six years ago, he left most of his belongings behind like a shed skin and, for the most part, they remained in the house as they were when he was there. Instead of Charles Walter, they had Charles Walter’s dilapidated stacks of scientific journals in the basement, worn out walking sneakers in the laundry, binoculars by the picture window, and reading glasses on the kitchen table. Eventually, the artifacts became as good as the man.

Molly realized she was expecting to find these same items in the apartment, was expecting some kind of simulacra of her memory of her father, only when they came up absent. She waded through the room, looking for anything she recognized, anything that would indicate that this apartment didn’t belong to a stranger.

There were pictures on the wall of people she didn’t know, pictures of her father in places she didn’t recognize, doing things she’d never imagine he’d want to do: scuba
diving, bowling, shooting a bow and arrow. Six antique cuckoo clocks hung motionless on one wall in two vertical rows of three, and in one corner an old 12-inch television set sat dormant with a gigantic antenna growing out of the back like a pair of steel feelers.

The kitchen looked brand new. Molly opened the stove and found a stuffed cockatiel on the rack. “Christ!” she said, and whipped the door closed. She peeked in again and saw that it was stuffed. She opened the cupboards and found no food but four bottles of Glenlivet malt scotch, one of them opened and mostly empty.

“I don’t believe this,” she said. She pulled the bottle down and opened it, swirled it around and sniffed at the neck. She’d never seen her father take a single drink in all her life.

The bedroom had been converted into a study, and on one side she found a desk half buried under boxes, old newspapers, documents she didn’t understand, and framed photos of the same set of people. One of them, the biggest, was of a woman who looked to be in her mid-50s, standing on a path in the woods, shielding the sun from her eyes. Molly picked it up and stared at it, her jaw tense and pulsating beneath her skin, and placed it back carefully where she found it. The same woman was in all the other photos—photos of vacations, weddings, holidays—with assorted pairings of younger adults who looked like they could be her children.

Molly ransacked the desk after that, pulling the drawers out and dumping them on the floor before tossing them against the walls. The bottom drawer on the right side was locked, but she found the key taped to the underside of the pencil drawer. When she opened it up, she found it stuffed with envelopes addressed to her father. The envelopes had all been sliced open and all contained thick, folded handwritten letters. She pulled one out and it began: Dad.

Eventually, my father’s beard became so thick that my father’s face disappeared and the beard was all that was left.

Sometimes, the beard spoke to us in our sleep. It would float into our room, a ghostly white against the black, hover over our beds and tell us it loved us. It would bend over and rub our backs until it thought we weren’t watching, float backwards and out the
door. And sometimes, when we fell asleep in the chair or on the floor in front of the television, the beard would stretch and grow and curl around us like a downy hammock and carry us up the stairs.

There was a hole in the beard where the words came out, and when they did the hole would bend and bounce and the ends of the beard would sway like a hundred white tassels. And when the beard smiled you couldn’t even tell.

The beard took pictures of us on our birthdays, would let all of our friends cling to it and then spin around until, one by one, we rolled into the dirt. And when the beard ate cake it got frosting all over itself.

Sometimes, I would look at the beard and try to remember my father’s face beneath it. And I would wonder: Is my father still in there somewhere? Is he trying to get out?

●

When she had finished, Molly straightened up from the porcelain table and took two steps backwards with the razor held up. Harold, standing near her father’s stocking feet with his arms crossed, perked up.

“Finished?” he asked.

“Think so.”

“Okay,” Harold said. He approached Molly’s father and leaned in to study the work carefully. He ran the tips of his fingers along Charles Walter’s skin, checking for nicks, scrapes, missed hairs.

He attached a hose to the sink and rinsed the cream from Charles Walter’s face, then picked up a towel up and gently wiped him dry. He looked up once at Molly and then pulled the towel away.

Molly stepped forward. Her father’s face looked shriveled and neglected, like a rotten grape. His head looked unnaturally small and asymmetrical. His jaw was crooked, and his lips, which had begun to separate when the water hit the glue, were beginning to sink in on one side. Her father’s neck, which she had never seen before, was ringed with a series of horizontal wrinkles, and just below his chin a small mole had turned a nauseating black.
His cheeks, still slightly swollen, were dented with scars and imperfections.

Molly took him in for as long as she could, then pushed past Harold and vomited in the sink. She held herself there for a while, not wanting to turn around. She let herself heave a couple of times, and then rinsed her mouth with water from the tap. She took off her gloves and dropped them in the trash.

“Sorry,” she said to Harold without looking at him, and then spat into the sink. She rubbed her eyebrows and started to cry, but her throat constricted and she vomited again. She let the water run and leaned over the sink with her eyes closed, her ears buzzing, her head feeling like a balloon filled with concrete, struggling to drift. She cried in earnest then, but out of abating shock, the way one does two hours after a car wreck, at the memory of the sound of shattering glass.

At the apartment again, Molly sat at her father’s desk, sipping scotch and scribbling notes on his letterhead. All around her was the havoc she’d wreaked just two days before. She’d pulled out the drawer where Charles Walter kept his letters, but she hadn’t read them and didn’t know yet if she would.

She’d been asked to eulogize her father and declined. “How do you eulogize a person you don’t even know?” she said. And now, with the memorial over and her father’s body on the way to a research lab, she thought she’d give it a try.

_I don’t know the man_, she wrote, _so I’ll eulogize the beard._
When I woke up, the number 1:17 was floating in the darkness in front of me. It glowed like divine prophesy and I struggled to understand its meaning. It seemed to be moving towards me, and for a second I thought it might slide between my gaping jaws, which had fallen apart while I slept, float down my throat and settle in my stomach in a blue pool of energy that would overtake me.

I blinked twice and rubbed my lips together. I’d been asleep for twelve minutes: long enough to forget where I was and what was happening. Also long enough for a thin stream of drool to leak out the corner of my mouth and form a bond between my cheek and the back of my mother’s burgundy armchair. I peeled myself away and sat upright. The TV was a cold black box in front of me, dead like a relic, but above it the VCR displayed its time like a stubby row of robotic teeth. I seemed to remember, vaguely, the sound of a closing door.

The house was entirely silent and still. I’d been sleeping in half hour increments for about the past four days and my perceptions were beginning to warp. The walls were stretched and bowed, and bars of grainy shadows climbed them like ribs. I drifted through the house, a microscopic bit in the frigid insides of a dying animal, and thought about Chloe.

In the kitchen, the only light left on was the one above the stove. It cast a cirrhotic yellow murk that dissipated before it could illuminate much of anything. I stood and listened to the clock tick and realized I was not alone in the room, that Death was in there with me, waiting like I was. I could see him in my peripheral vision, sitting in the breakfast nook, tapping his bony fingers on the table, but when I looked straight at him he disappeared.
I sat down across from him, but at an angle so I was looking off to the side. Being so close made my head ache, a dull fog of pressure between my skull and my brain. I dug my knuckle into my eyebrow and ground it down until my eyes watered.

“You okay there?” he asked.

“Oh,” I said. “I’ve been getting these tension headaches lately. With all the stress, I guess.

“Mm. Are you sure it’s stress?”

“I assume it’s related to all this, you know.” I nodded towards the empty kitchen as if that explained anything. And then I wondered what he was getting at. “Why do you ask? What—do you think it might be serious?”

“Well, truth be told, Ethan, I’m kind of here for you.”

I swallowed hard and looked at him. He faded. The clock ticked and then he snorted.

“Fucking dick,” I said. I turned away and he reappeared.

“Sorry. I get so few opportunities.”

“Nah, it’s alright. That was a good one.”

“Oh, thanks.”

We both shifted and relaxed, and then I asked him: “So how much longer?”

“No much.”

I nodded. My stepfather, Henry, was dying in his bedroom. If I looked through Death, I could see the closed door from where I was sitting. “He’s a good man,” I said.

Death nodded respectfully and, in a gesture that was oddly polite, removed his hands from the table and put them in his lap.

I pondered things for a while, sifting through the silt of my thoughts until dirty hardened clumps of unpolished truths emerged, truths I didn’t even recognize. I picked one up and offered it to Death. I can’t tell you why I felt like I could. “I’m happy you’re here,” I said. “Honestly.” I looked at him again, and from within his hood I saw two pinpricks of bright light that grew bigger and more brilliant until they became a single white flare that consumed my vision.
And I was driving. The streets were desolate, but it was late and probably a week night to boot. My mom had found me sprawled all over the table like a mob hit and sent me out to find my younger brother, Buck, who must have snuck away while I was dozing on the armchair.

“Go find him,” she said. “Bring him back here tonight.” She was puffy and red, which was how she was starting to look all the time. “I don’t care if he wants to be here or not, whether he thinks he can handle it or not. He’ll be here for this because he has to be. The little shit. The little shit.” But the last “shit” wasn’t all the way out before it turned into a wide, silent weep. It terrified me to see her cry, and as much as I wanted to comfort her I was paralyzed in my seat. I looked to Death for help, but he was long gone.

Chloe was there, and she held my mom with the care of a parent. She put her hand on the back of my mom’s head—her hand with the wrinkled palm, with the knuckles like dovetail joints, with the crooked pinky and the nails with spots of white—and whispered in her ear until my mom nodded and settled down. Chloe the Doula, the Death Coach, in faded jeans and Doctor Martin’s; Chloe in the suede blazer, with the jagged wisps of black hair; Chloe with the crooked tooth and eyes like stained glass. Chloe who followed Death wherever he went, the Reaper’s Sancho Panza.

She worked the third shift, midnight to six, and I loved her—as a distraction, I recognized, a defense mechanism, but it mattered not to me. She was a caregiver, a pain reliever, a stress reducer, and this was how she relieved my pain, reduced my stress. I wondered once if it was just part of the program, another number in her repertoire, then decided I’d rather not know. The fantasy, as pedestrian as it was (a tongueless, breathy kiss against the pantry door after wiping my tears away with her sleeve in the deep hours of the night), was therapeutic and something I had grown to covet.

Buck wasn’t answering his phone, which is what he did when he didn’t want to be found, so I figured I’d go straight to his apartment. Something about the night, though, was thick, the atmosphere like syrup, and I found I couldn’t go anywhere or do anything very quickly. I drove thirty-five through the streets but felt like I was getting nowhere, slowly. Everything was hushed, all the houses dark, the kind of night you could disrupt entirely with a tin can on a string.
My mom gave me her car, hulking and boxy, and the interior glowed with a greenish-blue hue. The clock was round, not digital, and lit from within. It stared at me from the middle of the dash like a zombie eyeball. By now it was 1:49. Mick sang “Can’t You Hear Me Knocking” and I thought of Henry, then myself and Buck and ultimately of Chloe. My head reeled.

I had a key to Buck’s place, and walked right in. His apartment looked like an architectural dig: isolated sections had been carefully partitioned and cleared, and all the debris had been gathered up in armloads and tossed into the corners. It smelled like a toilet full of sweat and I felt myself grimacing as I looked around, unable to fully cross the threshold.

“What a shithole,” I said out loud.

I kicked around through piles of clothes and beer cans and checked out the bedroom, which was dark and stale as an ancient sarcophagus. Buck was clearly not home, so I looked around for clues as to where he might have gone. I flipped through the mail on his kitchen counter, hoping, I guess, that he’d mailed himself an itinerary of where he planned to be on this particular night, including times and addresses. He had letters from creditors and a couple from the city, probably unpaid parking tickets, but none of it was much help. I tossed the stack back where it was and rubbed my hands together, with no ideas about what to do next. I was just about to walk out when my cell phone buzzed, and Buck’s girlfriend, Z.Z., told me I better come get the sad sorry son of a bitch before she punted his nuts up into his throat and let him choke to death on them.

When I opened my eyes I saw the stars and they were dazzling. They twinkled, I swear to you; I’d never say it if it weren’t true. The sky shimmered like the black surface of a mountain lake at midnight. I thought I could reach out and dip my finger in, sending ripples of light through the universe, and I tried to but when I raised my arm I felt dizzy and nauseous, pinned to the ground by centrifugal force.

A voice said: “Are you okay?” I couldn’t tell whose it was, whether it was a man’s or a woman’s. It seemed to come from nowhere at all.

I felt, then, like I was floating, though I could feel blades of grass smashed into the back of my head. The moon was big and close. It grew arms from its middle that
stretched outwards and started to rotate, and I thought I could hear the tides shifting, not from far away but so closely that I wondered if the oceans weren’t inside me, deep and concealing.

The voice wanted to know what happened, so I told it. And I left nothing out:

Z.Z. was hysterical, a tiny rod of destructive energy. When I walked in her apartment I found her standing on the couch, her face puffy and shiny as a pumpkin, clutching a Precious Moments Hummel figure in each white fist. Buck was pacing the floor across from her, as tightly wound as I’d ever seen him, his thick body tired and sagging. He looked like a bear at the circus who’d simply had enough of juggling on the god damn unicycle.

“You better get him the hell out of here,” Z.Z. said to me. “I can’t believe you left that house, you selfish asshole!” Her elbow flung out to her side and she whipped a Hummel at Buck in a quick, girlish motion that packed surprising power. It exploded against the wall next to him and he only turned his head away to avoid the shrapnel. The base of it landed at my feet and I could read the word “Serenity.” Buck was bleeding from the brow.

They were both drunk, I suspected, and maybe high too.

“Ethan, how could you let him leave? I mean, what the fuck were you thinking?” I panicked and shrugged. I hadn’t anticipated a frontal assault.

“Your poor mother. And now she’s there all by her…” she drew back and pitched, “…self!” The last Hummel shattered between Buck and me, and a chunk of it hit me in the ear.

“Dude, let’s go,” I said to Buck. “Get your shit, man, and let’s get out of here.” Buck stood and looked at me, and then looked at Z.Z.

“Go!” she said. “You shit.” She hopped down from the couch and ran to him, wrapped herself around him and wept into his armpit. “I’m so sorry, baby. I’m so sorry.” She pulled herself way and said, easily: “Now go. Please go.”

They kissed each other sloppily and I turned away. Then Buck slipped his bag onto his shoulder and we left.
He fumbled with his keys and started to get in his truck, but I grabbed the back of his shirt and steered him towards my mom’s car. “Leave it here,” I said. “I’ll drive us back.”

Buck wanted to clean himself up before we went home—his brow had been nicked up pretty good—but his apartment was too far away, and it was already past 2:30, so I refused. I wanted to get back; I felt all the things waiting for me at the house stacking up like a shaky human pyramid, ready to collapse in a heap at any minute, and it made my head throb and pulse. But Buck said he couldn’t possibly walk in the house the way he was, drunk and bloody, so we stopped in a Waffle House for coffee and a wet nap.

The lighting inside was gray, casting an unhealthy pall that made everything and everyone look diseased and miserable. Every surface glistened with the sticky accumulation of sickly breath. In the corner, a cadaver of a man sitting by himself alternated hits of cigarettes and oxygen.

Buck ripped a handful of napkins from the dispenser and tapped them against his head, wincing lightly.

“What a night,” he said, as if it were over. “Well, that’s the last time I ever level with a girl.”

“That’s the lesson you learned? What a douche bag.”

When our waitress appeared I ordered a coffee and Buck ordered a number six smothered and covered, with a side of linked sausage. I tipped my hands up in disbelief.

“I guess we’re staying then?” I said.

“What?”

“Buck, we gotta get back, man. Don’t you know what’s happening? Don’t you get it?”

“Yeah, Ethan, but just let me eat first. I didn’t have dinner. I can’t eat at the house, you know that.” That much was true; we’d had an endless supply of hot casseroles coming into the house over the last week, at all times and containing all combinations of meats and cheeses, but Buck had eaten none of it. It was sick food, and he just couldn’t get it down.

“Christ, Buck, mom’s waiting for us.”
He got sullen and stared at the table. Mom was waiting for us, yes, but maybe Henry was too, and maybe if we never showed up… At least, that’s my guess as to what Buck was thinking about. Had we been better at communicating I would have asked him. Instead, like a dope, I let him be, let him have his own headspace. I stared out the window feeling useless. Then again, at least I had him and was bringing him home.

“I’m gonna go wash this out,” he said, tossing the bloodied napkins to the side. “Be right back.”

While he was gone I thought about Chloe and about how, in the deep hours of the morning, she’d find me on the couch in the dark and would sit down next to me so closely that we’d be connected at the shoulders and knees. She’d match her breathing to mine and we’d sit without speaking. After a while I could see radiating waves as they passed through me, and through the furniture and walls, and out of the house and into the street and on to the world outside. And when I’d wake up, she’d be gone.

My coffee arrived and I sipped it. Buck had left his black backpack on the seat across from me, and the longer he was gone the more I wanted to search it. I took another sip and looked towards the bathrooms. How long had it been? Ten minutes? More? I slid over to his side of the booth next to the bag and opened it up. Inside were five or six prescription pill bottles, all of Henry’s unused pain killers. Vicodin, fentanyl, percocet, darvocet, percodan, morphine. I felt a fault line open up across my brain, a bolt-shaped schism that filled with light and heat. My eye twitched and watered.

And when our waitress set Buck’s plate of food down in front of me, I looked up in time to see him sprinting down the street into a curtain of darkness. He’d made a break for it and was gone. My cell phone buzzed and I could see by the caller ID that it was my mother. “Oh, that son of a bitch,” I said. It broke my heart to do, but I sent her straight to voice mail. I held my skull and squeezed. “That slippery son of a bitch.” The cadaver in the corner began to cackle or hack, I couldn’t tell which.

I debated about whether to go after him or just go home. Either choice made me feel doomed. I considered leaving town altogether and returning ten years later covered in scars, with a full beard and a past so mysterious no one would ever think to ask what happened to me tonight. In the end, I shook a percocet into my hand and swallowed it
with coffee, dropped eight bucks on the table, then got in the car and drove in the
direction that Buck had been running.

The zombie eye glazed and I lost all sense of time. The city turned into a grid of
the same street repeated over and over again, and no matter how many times I turned I
found myself back on it again. Rod and The Faces sang “Had Me a Real Good Times”
and I didn’t think about anything.

I caught Death out of the corner of my eye, sitting next to me in the passenger
seat, and jumped. The car skittered to the left and when I jerked the wheel we lurched
back over to the right.

“Jesus Christ, man,” I said. “You scared the piss out of me.”

He said, “I’m so sorry,” but he was chuckling and could barely get it out. “I
didn’t mean to startle you.”

“My ass you didn’t.”

He laughed at this too. He really seemed to be enjoying himself.

I glanced at him out of the corner of my eye to try and get a look at him, but if I
lingered too long he started to disappear. He was all black cloak anyway, thick material
with a big hood. I noticed he was buckled in, which seemed unnecessary.

I told him all about the night I’d had—Z.Z. and the Hummel figures, the chain-
smoking corpse at Waffle House, the pills, Buck’s escape—and sighed. “The one thing
my mom asked me to do and I fucked it all up,” I said. “I’d like to kill that little snot.” I
shook my head and frowned; I was feeling dejected as hell.

Death cleared his throat. “Would you like me to, um…” He dragged his bony
thumb across his neck and went “keeeeeeek.” There was a pause and he went on: “You
know, maybe—” He made a fake noose over his head and pulled it taut, then gurgled and
spasmed in his seat, shaking the whole car. Then he grabbed the air in front of himself
and throttled it so violently I could hear his jaw rattle like two coconuts. He grunted and
strained, squeezing the air until his arms trembled, then ended with an orgasmic “bah!”
and let his hands drop down to his lap. He said, casually: “Something like that, maybe?”

I smirked, looking just off to his side. He was trying to cheer me up, the goof. It
was sort of endearing. It started to work too, but then I thought about it and suddenly it
wasn’t very funny. He must have seen my face fall, because he looked a little deflated.
“Maybe that was in poor taste,” he said.

I smiled and shook my head dismissively. I was thinking not about Buck anymore, not about my mom, not even about Chloe, and no matter how many times I drew her to the center of my thoughts she insisted on stepping aside. I tried focusing intensely on small parts of her—my favorite parts, the parts my eyes would linger on when we were close and she looked away—but when I pictured her eye I felt myself free-falling towards it and dropping through it, into the empty hole of her pupil, where a smudge of light expanded and became tiny shriveled Henry, fading away in his bed.

I tried to smile but my lips twisted all over themselves and started to shake. I stopped the car right there in the middle of the street and hung my head out the door. My stomach bobbed and I retched, but all that came out was a little coffee and some stomach acid. I retched again and it was totally dry. I leaned back into the seat and shut my eyes.

“Are you alright?” Death asked quietly, soothingly.

I didn’t answer.

“Ethan?”

“Yeah, man, I’m just great. I feel like a hundred dollars.”

I didn’t feel like driving any further, so I put the car in park and we idled in the street with my door open. It was a noiseless, windless night. Nothing budged; all around us the world slept, wrapped up tightly in blankets of normalcy. There was one breath that everyone breathed together, deep and rhythmic, and I tried to match myself to it but couldn’t. It was the breath of life, and I was in the company of Death.

We put our seats back, opened the moon roof and enjoyed the quiet solitude of the night. With Death sitting next to me, and with nothing to offer, I didn’t feel as anxious to get back to the house. My mom had called twice and I hadn’t even noticed.

“You ever have people tear ass down the street when they know you’re coming?” I asked him.

“Of course. It happens all the time.”

“Yeah? Even if they know you’re not coming for them?”

“Sure. I freak people out.”

“Yeah, I guess you would.”
He nodded beneath his hood, a little regretfully it seemed. “Everyone deals with me in their own way. They always have. Some are relieved to see me. I always enjoy my time with them, but they’re the ones who go the quickest.” He pulled a nickel-plated pocket clock out of his cloak and looked at it.

“What time is it?” I asked.

“Oh,” he said. “You wouldn’t understand this time.” The pocket clock beeped once and a possum dropped onto the hood of the car with a resounding, hollow thud. I jerked forward and honked the horn.

“What the fuck was that?”

The possum twitched. He’d made an indentation where he lay that was filling up with fluids. Death got out of the car and leaned over the thing as it writhed and twitched. I got out on my side and stood across the hood from him, keeping my eyes on the possum so that Death wouldn’t fade from view. He put his elbow on the hood, dropped his chin into his hand and regarded it for a while, turning his head this way and that. Then, calmly, he reached out and set his hand on its side where its ribs bounced up and down. I could hear him murmuring softly, but couldn’t understand what he was saying. The bouncing slowed and then stopped altogether, and Death exhaled wearily.

Finally, I asked: “How do you do it?”

He thought about it a moment, then said: “It’s pretty simple, actually; I just love it more than it’s ever been loved before.”

I felt like I could have looked directly at him without him fading, but I was too ashamed to try.

He grabbed the possum by its tail and flung it into the bushes. “Ready to go?” he said, and we piled back into the car.

We drove two blocks, and Death started telling me which turns to make. We made a left and a right, and then he stuck his arm out his window and pointed. “Look there,” he said. “It’s your brother. There’s Buck.” And, sure enough, there was Buck, sitting on the curb next to a trash can reading a book.

I was stunned, and stumbled over a handful of words before managing to say, “Well alright. Nice work. You’re like a bloodhound.”
Death stuck his hand out and I gave it a jocular slap. His bones rattled like bamboo wind chimes and he was gone. I missed him almost immediately.

“Get in the car,” I said to Buck, who didn’t seem surprised to see me pull up.

“I don’t want to.”

“I don’t give a shit. Get in the fucking car.”

He looked both ways down the empty street and stood up, tossed his book into the garbage and climbed in. He was too sleepy to be combative or difficult. It was 3:43.

We drove in silence for a while, both of us moody and irritated. He had dried blood in his nostril and I could only imagine what kind of night he’d been having back at Z.Z.’s or elsewhere.

“Thanks for ditching me at Waffle House,” I said.

He dropped his face down onto his hand and his eyelids drooped. “Yeah well… Sorry.” He looked close to crashing. We filled the inside of the car with our heavy breath and he cracked his window. “You still have my—holy crap, what happened to the hood?”

“Your bag? Yeah, I have it. It’s back there.” I shook my head. “Unbelievable.”

“What.” He was reciting words, uncommitted to the conversation.

“That’s what you’re thinking about, your bag full of stolen pills.” His eyelids rose up. “You should be home right now, keeping your mother company, but instead you’re running all over town, getting smacked around by your girlfriend and searching for your…pharmacopoeia.”

“Oh, fuck off,” he said. His blood was starting to flow again. “Where’ve you been all night, Ethan?”

“Out looking for you!”

He waved me away. “You could have gone home anytime. I called mom, I talked to her. She said she can’t get a hold of you, she doesn’t know where you are, that you’re not answering your phone.”

I swallowed and pretended like I hadn’t just been called out.

“You’ve spent more time with Chloe these last three nights than with any of us, especially Henry.” He wasn’t shouting, he wasn’t overly upset. He had me and knew he didn’t need to work for it. “So don’t lecture me.” He drove the point home with a
pointed stare, then settled back into his side of the car and shut his eyes. We drove the rest of the way home in silence.

We pulled into the driveway a little after four. I grabbed Buck’s bag and we both walked into the yard. Halfway in, we stopped and stood in front of the house, tall and dark as a monolith, both of us exhausted, neither of us quite sure about what we’d find inside. I walked on but Buck didn’t move.

“I can’t do it,” he said. He shrugged, walking backwards, and his face was all shame. “I can’t go in.”

I grabbed his arm but he ripped it out of my hands. I lunged at him, tried to wrap my elbow around the back of his neck, and we flung each other around the yard, slipping in the wet grass, driving shoulders into ribs and shoving and kicking at ankles. I grabbed a handful of flesh at his lower back; he twisted and clobbered me in the side of the head with his big open palm and the earth pulled me to it. I felt the backpack slide out from under me. I saw Buck jump a fence two yards over, heard a dog bark, and was out.

And so I told the voice everything and it listened very patiently. I felt sick and limp. I thought I could hear, or even feel, the rumbling machinery of the earth as it rotated beneath me, and realized that, even when everything’s perfectly still, we never really stop moving.

I felt a hand on my forehead and was sure that it was Chloe’s. It was soft and warm against my skin that had gone cold and rigid, but when I cocked my head back through the grass it wasn’t Chloe who was crouching there, it was my mom. She had Death’s dark face in the hollow pits of her eyes, and fixed me with a shattering look of pity and antipathy. It was enough for me; I went blubbery and wept. I covered my eyes with my palms and hot tears fused them together.

She watched me cry with the same indifference she showed to television commercials, but stroked my hair gently, and when I started to taper off she said: “Ready to sit up?” I lurched forward and tried to let my head clear. When I sniffed it sounded like radio static.

She looked at me wearily and once or twice I thought she was going to say something, but she never did. She worked her mouth around the bottom of her face and
shook her head almost imperceptibly. I’m not sure what she would have said, but had it been earlier in the night or later in the day I’m sure she would have said it. As it was, though, we existed in the eleventh hour—the hour beyond reproach—and she had no more energy to waste on me.

We went inside and my mom drifted off with her hands buried deep in the pockets of her robe. The house was as dark and quiet as it had been when I left. I found Chloe in the living room sitting shoeless on the couch, legs crossed, hands on her knees, with her chin tilted slightly upwards, engaged in a deep breathing exercise. She’d lit scented candles, and in the light her neck looked as long and smooth as an ivory tusk. She smiled at me sweetly and I flushed with embarrassment; I knew my love was a sham, knew that I’d constructed it one place to avoid it in another, and yet I still took comfort in it all the same. And I knew that, in an hour or so, her shift would end, and that she’d probably never serve another shift in this house again, and I knew that it wasn’t the thought of her absence but the reason for it that was making me so tense. Then again, maybe it was both.

She stood up off the couch and I hugged her, and for the first time since I’d known her we were just two people in a room. I felt some kind of love for Chloe, something pure and somehow fulfilling, but precisely what it was I honestly couldn’t understand.

Out of the living room and through the kitchen, I walked to Henry’s bedroom and put my ear to the door. From inside, I could hear the ticking of Death’s pocket clock. I knew my friend was in there, and I went inside to see him.
Appendix A: Rationale

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**Thesis and Reading List Rationale**

Margaret Luongo: Committee Chair  
Brian Roley: Reader  
Rich Erlich: Reader  
March 1, 2006

My Master’s Thesis is a collection of short fiction, titled *The Hole*. The stories in this collection are what I would call “free-standing,” in that they are not designed as an interconnected chain of stories but function independently of one another as a series of self-contained pieces of writing. The collection includes seven stories (though more may be added as the project develops): A Narrow Blind Tube, Rippled and Split, The Remembering, Filoplumes, The Bomb, The Katabatic Winds, and the title story, The Hole.

While the stories that make up *The Hole* as a collection are not interconnected, they are linked, in a somewhat broad way, by a single unifying theme or idea. In the story, “The Hole,” the four main characters experience some form of emptiness that they are all trying desperately to fill. For Jackson it is the loss of connection to his wife and, to a lesser degree, his friends; for Abbey it is the physical and emotional gap left behind after a partial mastectomy; for Janice it is the persistent void of childlessness and a perpetually empty nursery; and for Matthew it his own inability to create life as he can create art. Each character has a hole to fill, and each must find his or her own way to fill it.

In many ways, almost every character in each of the stories in this collection are faced with holes of their own—gaps in their lives where something is missing—that they struggle to identify and to fill. Sam, in “A Narrow Blind Tube,” has a literal hole inside of him that, figuratively, grows so large as to eventually overtake him; the narrator of “Rippled and Split” must consider how the death of his newborn child, and a tear in his
vinyl flooring, will contribute to the deterioration of his marriage; all of the characters in “The Remembering” struggle to keep up as the holes in their memories are suddenly and mysteriously filled; Molly of “Filoplumes” uses fiction to reinterpret the hole left by her father’s death; Doug and Maggie circle around and around the gap of their missing wife and mother in “The Katabatic Winds”; and the robot in “The Bomb” appeals to the heavens for direction as he assumes the identity of Spencer Newman. It seems only natural, given all this, that the entire collection should adopt the name, and with it the central theme, of “The Hole.”

That’s not to say that each story is about the hole; in fact, each piece has its own concerns and ideas. Just as each story is disparate in terms of its subject matter, so too is each story distinct stylistically. While some stories—“The Hole,” “The Katabatic Winds,” “Rippled and Split”—are approached in the traditional or conventional (or what some speculative authors might even call “mundane”) manner of literary fiction, other stories in the collection incorporate elements of surrealism, fantasy, or magical realism. These stories have been heavily influenced by the modern magical realists, such as George Saunders, Jonathan Lethem, Aimee Bender, T.C. Boyle, and others. Many of the books on my reading list are there because of the author’s willingness to challenge what is “acceptable” in literary fiction, and to build upon what authors like Kafka and Vonnegut and Marquez made popular.

The stories in George Saunders’s *Pastoralia* (the title story in particular, as well as “Sea Oak”) and Aimee Bender’s *Girl in the Flammable Skirt* (“The Rememberer,” “Marzipan”) seem to best represent the current movement towards experimentalism in modern short fiction, though one could easily include pieces like “Super Goat Man” by Jonathan Lethem, “Bloodfall” by T.C. Boyle, “The Ceiling” by Kevin Brockmeier and many, many others. In these stories, an easy going aunt can return from the dead as a cantankerous, sex-starved animated corpse and a woman can give birth to her own mother, and the characters around them react with mild bewilderment and move on. In these stories, the figurative becomes literal and metaphors inhabit the space of everyday reality.
Reading stories like these has been exciting and liberating. More than that, it’s been inspiring, leading directly to stories like “A Narrow Blind Tube,” where a surgically removed appendix returns to have conversations with the man who lost it, and “The Remembering,” which features an unexplained cosmic event that causes people’s long-lost memories to return in a deluge of recall. Jonathan Safran Foer’s novel, *Everything is Illuminated*, with its experimental structure intertwining realism with magical realism, was extremely influential on my story “Filoplumes,” which attempts to accomplish some of the same things.

Though I have an interest in experimentalism, I am also extremely concerned about simply telling an engaging story in a clear and interesting way, and I’ve chosen many of the selections on my reading list because they contain well-crafted stories. Sherwood Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio*, Tobias Wolff’s *The Night in Question*, and Stuart Dybek’s *The Coast of Chicago*, among others on the list, are all books that have achieved success within the traditional forms of the character-driven story. Similarly, Don DeLillo’s *White Noise* and John Irving’s *The World According to Garp* provide fascinating character studies that develop slowly and subtly, which is something I’d like to be able to do well with my own fiction.

I’ve chosen several books for my list based on what I consider to be their deft balancing of artistic merit and commercial marketability. To suggest that I have no interest in selling my work would be disingenuous, and it therefore seems completely worthwhile to take a look at books that have been commercially successful and consider why. For me, the novel that most effectively combines these potentially conflicting elements is *Wonder Boys* by Michael Chabon, which is beautifully written and thematically very layered, and yet seems perfectly suited for a movie adaptation. And Charlie Kaufman’s *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, written expressly for the big screen, is a stunning achievement even as a text.
Ultimately, I feel that my goal as a writer is to find the hole and fill it. Which stories still need to be told, and what are the best ways to tell them? By working within and without traditional forms, and by reading authors who have been successful at both, I hope to give weight to my ideas and communicate them in ways that resonate with an audience. If I happen to make art that sells, well then that’s fine too.
Appendix B: Reading List

1. AMERICAN SHORT STORIES (10)

* Paley, Grace. *The Little Disturbances of Man* and *Enormous Changes at the Last Minute*.

2. POSTWAR AMERICAN NOVELS (14)

* Fox, Paula. *Desperate Characters*.

3. ANGLOPHONE FICTION (5)

Atwood, Margaret. *Alias Grace*.

4. FICTION IN TRANSLATION (5)


5. THEORY & PRACTICE (3)


6. MULTI-GENRIC & HYBRID TEXTS (3)


7. INDIVIDUAL PICKS (12)

* Packer, Z.Z. *Drinking Coffee Elsewhere*.