

Long Stories Short

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Abstract

In the mid 1980s flash fiction began to be anthologized as a form distinct from the traditional short story. We now have entire periodicals devoted to this very short form. Usually each piece falls below the 1,000 word mark, meaning they take less than five minutes to read. This quality shows why it is gaining popularity. As our attention spans shorten, why should our literature not follow suit? Is this a replacement form for the novel or does it occupy its own niche in the literary community? Are these very short, nicely condensed novels or something different? The following is a collection of original, very short fiction, preceded by an essay that works to define and describe this new form of fiction.

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Introduction: A Piece of an Explanation of the Form

These days, in order to name a new form of literature, it seems necessary to resort to compound nouns like short story and prose poem¹. To quote Russell Banks (not for the last time in this short essay), “(N)aming is how the world enlarges itself” (Shepard and Thomas 245). One would have to go back to Latin roots to come up with something as elemental and convincing as *poetry* or *fiction*. The complications abound when the unnamed form in question resides in the vague demilitarized zone between prose and poetry, and when it is debatable whether this is a new form at all, rather than a shrugging attempt at both. All this being considered, we will settle for flash fiction, since it suggests a kind of urgency I think suits the best of this new form.

There is nothing new about this length (1,000 words or less); some of Hemingway’s work collected in *The First Forty-Nine Stories* meet that criterion, as do many of the fairy tales recorded by the Brothers Grimm and Hans Christian Anderson. After Kafka’s death many such pieces (then called fragments) were released. The parables of Jesus are of similar length; in fact, most any story we tell orally falls under that word limit. When one friend turns to another and says: “you’ll

¹ Some writers fret more than others about what to call these things. Philip F. O’Conner remembers describing them to friends as “mood pieces, experimental stories or non-traditional stories”. He recognizes them as separate from the older short-short form, and sees them beginning to appear in print. This was in the 60’s. In the 80’s he (perhaps jokingly) suggested a system like this: Sto (new form), Story, Stovella (long story), Novella, Novel. The point is well noted that what to call these little stories is in some ways a trivial issue, but language driven as all this is, it seemed worth worrying about.

never guess what happened,” the story that follows usually will go on no longer than 1,000 words. If it does the listener – even the most attentive sort – will begin to stir in his seat and watch his beer go flat in his hands. The stories told to and by Beowulf could be called flash-fiction, were they removed from their framing in antiquity. Literary stories of this length were not anthologized, however, until the mid 1980’s. As a recognized form or genre, then, it is relatively new, and rapidly gaining popularity as more and more literature is published and read online.

According to the nature of each piece, the arch (the piece’s movement from beginning to end) can be plot or language oriented. A character can be changed, an actual mystery solved, a conflict resolved, an image can be redefined, and in some cases a static and striking portrait can be painted which, while it in itself moves very little, it renews and turns an idea or image already known by the reader. In the anthology *Sudden Fiction*, Charles Baxter offers a striking reader-response arch concerning this kind of story;

In the abruptly short-short story, familiar material takes the place of detail. Oh yes, the reader says: a couple quarreling in a sidewalk restaurant, a nine-year-old boy stealing a Scripto in Woolworth’s, a woman crying in the bathtub. We’ve seen that before. We know where we are. Don’t give us details; we don’t need them. What we need is surprise, a quick turning of the wrist toward texture, or wisdom, something suddenly broken or quickly repaired. Yes, we know these people. Now just tell us what they do. (Shapiro and Thomas 229)

Taking the above reader-response formula, one might call flash fiction a post-modern form, not only because it is so new, but because it fits the only criterion set forth by Jean Baudrillard for postmodernism; it plays with the pieces of what’s come

before². The idea of troubling, upsetting and redefining established tropes and conventions is a common function both of postmodern art and of this new short form. A writer must either use or be crippled by the unoriginality of the stories to be told.

One excellent example of this Baxter Formula (if you will) is a piece by Dave Eggers, author of *How the Water Feels to Fishes*, a full collection of flash fiction.

Found below is one of his stories in its entirety;

No Safe Harbor

There are three people in a living room in Montreal. There is a young couple, Thom and Justine, and there is Justine's great uncle Grant. Six months ago Thom and Justine lost their seven-year old daughter when she fell from the roof of a friend's home. Thom and Justine worked together, doing consulting at home, before the accident, but now they don't work much. They watch TV and rent movies, and they've repainted much of their house. Thom drinks aquavit and orange juice at night, to help bring sleep, and Justine naps during the day. In Florida, two months ago, Grant's wife, Hattie, died, and he has come out to Montreal to see friends he has not seen in years, and to see Thom and Justine. He called them two hours prior to his arrival and they greeted him at the door. But now they are all in the living room, and no one is talking. Grant, looking at his hands, comments on the new-paint smell in the house. Justine and Thom apologize and suggest they sit outside. Grant insists they stay where they are, that the smell is fine. So they say and sit, and they don't eat or drink, and no one says much. For ten minutes, they watch the cat try to remove its claws from the Persian rug. Within an hour, with a sigh, Grant leaves, shuffling to his rental car and then away. Years later, when Grant has passed on too, Thom and Justine will remember that day, when Grant came to visit, the last time they saw him. He came looking for comfort, Justine will say. I think so, Thom will say. But we didn't even offer him a glass of water, Justine will say. We were useless, Thom will say. To be honest, Thom will say, I just couldn't muster any feelings about Hattie's death. I figured she'd lived long enough. Grant wanted to commiserate, and I didn't find the two deaths even remotely comparable. Yeah, I wanted him gone, Justine will say,

² The fact that every story has been told countless times before, that all a writer can do is play with the pieces, is something that only bothers writers and critics, not readers. The final flaw of popular postmodernism is that everything man has ever made – from a story to a chair – has been composed of unoriginal parts. Rearranging is creation. Either originality never existed or it always will.

nodding, remembering. Gone-gone, Thom will say. Me too, Justine will say. Yes. Me too. I wanted all those types of people gone. (41-42)

The opening sentence can fairly be described as flat, unexciting, informative in a strictly functional sense. As the reader continues through the story, the information given builds a scene that is very recognizable, populated by nearly stock characters. The details of Thom and Justine's prior profession, of the way their child died, does little to set them apart from countless other bereaved parent characters.

In the last quarter of this single paragraph, though, the tense changes to future and Justine and Thom reveal the hostile, unsympathetic aspect of their grief. The best trick of this story, I would argue, is that the future tense conversation reveals those strange, alienating feelings but also shows that these characters have grown beyond that. Though narrated in the future tense, their discussion of those feelings is in the past tense, suggesting they are different people, no longer sitting in stifled quiet. The death of Grant serves as a marker for them to look back and remember. Since this is years later and they are only just confessing these things to each other, that future tense conversation becomes not only an analysis of the scene depicted in the story, but also a turning point, as Thom and Justine are now able to communicate. At the top of the story the narration seems flat and mechanical. By the end, though, the reader is given layers of character development in a very brief, condensed section. If read too

quickly, one might mistake this story for a strange and depressing anecdote or a sketch on how people deal with grief in different and often incompatible ways³.

The discrete significance of this ending was not apparent to me at first, but from the first reading I felt I had read a full story. My eyebrows did not go down, nor did I resign to appreciate the piece strictly as a language-driven work. Baxter compares 18th century novels to estates and flash fiction to efficiencies near the top of a blocky building. Like one room flats (perhaps), the worth and the home-ness of these stories is often less apparent.

While the Eggers' piece represents the more plot or character driven aspects of flash fiction, the strange, unclassifiable work of James Tate stands as a landmark for the opposite pole of this field of writing. On paper they look like poems, though they often read as very short stories. Poets claim him and some of his own titles acknowledge that claim. Still much of his work might be called flash fiction. Below is a piece from his *Selected Poems*;

Teaching the Ape to Write Poems

They didn't have much trouble
teaching the ape to write poems:
first they strapped him into the chair,
then tied the pencil around his hand
(the paper had already been nailed down).
Then Dr. Bluespire leaned over his shoulder
and whispered into his ear:
"You look like a god sitting there.
Why don't you try writing something?"

³ How, then, ought one read flash fiction? If the story is a good one, a reader should get out of it whatever he puts in. The story should function on more than one level, should do more than one thing, no matter how miniscule the action.

In such a brief block of text, Tate moves against expectations and assumptions more than once. The title and first two lines give away any tension as to whether or not this strange experimental education is a success. Not only do “they” succeed, they have very little trouble doing it. The remaining seven lines are devoted to telling us precisely how it was done. The details are stated simply and not until the sixth line – with the mention of Dr. Bluespire – do we find any personality beyond the nouns *they* and *ape*. The two lines, spoken by Bluespire, perform the “turn of the wrist” described by Baxter. The “joke” (not the right term but neither is “point”) is not that if a primate taps a keyboard long enough he will write Shakespeare, but rather all that is needed for writing poetry are the materials and a god complex.

At times, praise of this new form goes too far and I find myself disagreeing with some of the masters of the form. Charles Baxter and Mark Strand both have said that flash fiction does in a page what novels do in hundreds. The problem there is that neither stops to define what exactly the flash piece is *doing* so quickly that the novel takes so long to do. If the action is simply telling a story, in the most basic sense, then they are right, though the same comparison could be made between a TV commercial and a feature-length film. If they mean something more specific, such as taking a reader to a new world or into a new mind, then hopefully they are wrong. If the short story is simply a long flash piece, and if a novel is a very long short story, then the novel is nothing but a loose, inefficient literary beast. There must be more than length that separates one form from another, something other than word count.

It is difficult to define a form as new when it is so clearly made up of pieces and references and revisions of existing content. James Tate's prose poems or flash pieces and Tobias Wolff's quiet, tiny stories speak for themselves. They are fun to read, they defy categorization and somehow they leave the reader feeling he has read a full something. To once again quote Banks, "it's clear that the thing at hand is not a diminutive version of anything. It's its own self, and it's intrinsically different from the short story and more like the sonnet or ghazal – two quick moves in different directions, dialectical moves, perhaps, and then a leap to a radical resolution that leaves the reader anxious in a particularly satisfying way" (244). Naturally none of this should be taken as my estimation of the quality or effect of this collection of stories. Nor do I think written work should require this kind of rhetoric in order to be enjoyed. Rather I hope this essay will help some readers understand what they are enjoying (and, perhaps, why) when they read a piece of flash, or a short-short, or a sto, a poe, a foem.

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I Imagine the Stars Wish That Too
A Collection of Very Short Fiction

Bait

I found a manuscript titled *My Life* with a photo of my mother paper-clipped to the cover-page, full of things that maybe should be true.

There's a chapter that makes it seem my father didn't leave us, but was mugged on the subway and lost most of his memories, and lives three stops from our old apartment and rides every day looking for his attackers, the faces of whom he's confused with mine and my brother's. If he ever meets us he'll try to kill us. There's another that tells about a lake house we never actually owned but I can see the dock where Mom never actually taught me to run the hook down a cricket's back, saying how catching fish is like falling asleep on a train.

I'd heard mom still lived about an hour away, where at night she could hear freight trains moving through back yards like a blue whale beneath rowboats. I took the manuscript out to see her. There she sat, reading a book titled *My Life* with a picture of me grinning on the cover. When we'd said our hello's she asked me if I really had an illegitimate child currently attending preschool in Nevada. I told her I wasn't a writer, and asked to see the book, apparently my autobiography. She took hers in hand and from there we were alone, and the pages gleamed.

The respective last chapters are exactly the same; we hunt for the fraudulent writer, Mom and I, and we stop to eat at a diner, looking suspiciously around us, and Mom says to me that she hopes we don't catch him so we can have lunch again tomorrow.

Clear Full Smile

You know her by her hair, which is long and light, and by her dark thin sweatpants, which hang from her. You walk together to her home. She is crying because you're following her but she says it's really okay.

Her hardwood floors sigh like gently disturbed sleepers. You move to her room. She goes to say goodnight to her tetras fish, off in some dim lit corner. While you're alone you do nothing. She returns in her socks and she smiles. You see the end of her back when she curls into bed, facing the wall. When you make a joke, something sarcastic but not unkind, you know she opens her mouth in full smile, takes a breath, her inhaled laugh gathers under her ribs.

In your dorm the alarm goes. You use your heel on the snooze button and roll back into her room, where you're ready to leave. Her lights go off because you flip the switch. Your shoes are still on when you sit on her bed. She reaches back without turning, you are on your side. Her hair covers your nose and mouth until your alarm goes again.

You see her on campus. It's late November. Her coat is blue, behind her the sky is completely clear, one thousand miles away, and you can taste it in the air. Wet gravel, thawing leaves and this girl; all these things, if you touched them, would stick to you for a second.

Fame

Early on July 2nd, 1937, on her way to her plane Amelia Earhart tripped on a discarded jeep wheel and nearly fell. Just in time she reached out, steadying herself on my grandfather's forearm.

Seventy years later he called my daughter into the den. He unwrapped his arm and told her the story of Amelia. He then held out his arm and let her touch the sweaty, sacred dough-skin around his wrist.

"It's you now, Linda," he said, "you are the last person Amelia Earhart touched before she took off forever."

Linda had tears in her eyes; no doubt she was awestruck or grossed out.

"It was your left hand, that's just right. Put on a glove, leather and thick, keep it safe. You'll never have to work a day of your life."

Linda ran to me and told me what had happened. She held her hand like it'd been burned. I went to my grandfather. Both my hands were fists.

"She's left handed, Gramp," I said.

"Well she'll have to learn to use her right hand now. She'll never have to work."

"I don't want my daughter spending her life in that museum, letting people smell her hand. She's not like you."

"Why are you angry?" he asked quietly. My eyes closed. My jaw shuddered.

"Why not me? I mowed your lawn twenty-years for ten bucks a week. I had to go to college and kiss people's feet."

"Linda was the right one, son. I did the math."

"What math."

"All of it."

He passed away the next day.

One night too foggy for birds to see each other branch to branch, Linda came home and fell into my arms. She confessed that several weeks ago she'd taken her glove off and let her boyfriend hold her left hand. He'd appreciated the gesture, but it wasn't what he'd imagined, just white soft skin on bones under her glove.

"It's alright, baby," I told her.

"I'll have to go to college now. The museum won't want me anymore."

"The museum doesn't have to know."

She shook her head, her lips tense and stretched in a long sob.

"You're still the last person your Great grandfather touched," I said, "that might be worth something to a WWII museum somewhere, or something, darling."

"It doesn't work that way, Dad. There were lots of soldiers. He wasn't Amelia."

I argued with her, but I knew better. She was dead or about to live.

Not Dark

Two boys fighting at the end of a cul de sac. One boy's face pressed against the pavement, a little blood in the dirt and gravel. On top of him his big brother, nearly twelve, full weight on the boy's back. The collars of both their shirts – easy things to grab – stretched thin and loose.

The smaller boy has said something about his brother's new acne and is refusing to take it back. The big brother waits, acting comfortable, pretending to rest.

Now their neighbor's new boyfriend hurries to his Duster and without looking around swerves out of the driveway. The long fender swings like a bat. The big brother is hit, rolls onto his back. His lips touch his shoulder. On the way to the hospital the little brother, Pete, still bleeding and crying from the fight, says more than once how he hopes his brother Aaron will die or have to live in a wheel chair.

"You say things you don't mean that's your weakness," says their mom, and she wants that to be true, that Pete doesn't mean what he says. She hasn't buckled her seatbelt, but her face is calm. She wants Aaron to come out of the hospital laughing and stuttering as he tells her that the accident wasn't his fault and that his brother started the fight. Then she wants the brothers to hug and, when they're grown, to talk deeply of their childhood, saying things like "we basically raised each other," at parties. She wants their wives to be friends. Her sons know about these dreams of hers because she talks about them at home.

On the highway, almost to the hospital, Pete notices how close they are to the opposite lane of traffic, how easy it would be for his mom to stick her hand out and have it knocked off by a passing truck.

The doctor speaks very quickly. Pete doesn't understand and his mom asks him to repeat himself. She pinches her neck, rolls the skin like a beard around her finger. Pete imagines that if he used the doctor's stethoscope to listen to his mom's heart his eardrums would explode. He makes the noise he imagines, puffing up one cheek and then spitting out the air. His mom tells him to calm down, tells him this is serious.

What she doesn't know, as they enter the room and smell fever and sweat and take turns saying hello to Aaron, is the good that happens next.

Months later Pete will lose a shoe in the creek and Aaron will go completely under the water to find it, and then he'll use it to slap Peter in the face. Another day their mom will actually use an old belt on Aaron and send him upstairs and Pete will bring the stereo into Aaron's room and they'll listen to their father's music until bedtime. He'll ask to sleep on Aaron's floor.

"I'm turning out the light," Aaron will say.

"Don't."

"Yep," and putting his hand on the dimmer switch, he'll ask, "how dark do you want it?"

"Not dark."

Aaron will set it halfway.

None of this has happened yet. While their mom leaves the hospital for a walk and a cigarette (which is supposed to be a secret), Pete tells his brother that he saw the car coming and didn't say anything on purpose. Aaron is sleeping. Pete is sure Aaron will either die or get better and kill him. With his hand he touches the end of the bed. He doesn't know he'll grow up safe from everything.

Investigation

My wife stopped me before my coat was off. She held the phone against her chest. It was her father on the line. His called himself Alex - he lived in Chicago - he wanted to finally meet her and he'd used a private investigator to track her down.

I asked her how she knew it really was her father.

She put the phone to her ear and asked the man that same question. She listened, her hand on my shoulder.

"The name fits," she said, "Mom always talked about Alexander."

I made a face.

"He could've just found that out."

She nodded and told him just that. While she listened I slipped past her and into the kitchen to make our tea.

"He described my Mom and told me about her snoring," she called from the entryway. She was too worried to move, obviously.

"Lots of women snore," I called back.

In our house, which is actually just a flat, we like loose-leaf tea. The kettle was about to whistle. Then I'd put the tea right in and let the whole pot steep. My wife, used to teabags, was slowly being educated.

"He told me her middle name and knows where she's always wanted to live. He wants me to come out there."

"Is he willing to pay for the flight?"

"We could drive," she said.

"I'm not gonna go."

She walked into the kitchen and looked at me.

"I can't go without you," she said. I put the leaves in the pot.

"Well is he willing to pay the gas?"

She shook her head no.

I pointed to my temple and mouthed the word think. She looked helpless so I told her to ask him more questions.

"How old was Mom when I was born?"

She listened. Her brow gathered in little folds above her nose.

"He says he doesn't remember."

I made a gesture with one hand that meant I told you so. She went on, pacing.

"Which of my Mom's arms did you twist that time and then you said you were just joking? ... Were you joking, really? ... What'd you take from her sock drawer when you left?"

I tried to focus on the tea. More than ever I wanted bars on our windows, chains across the door, a gun under my reading lamp, dogs in the hall, no phones no emails. To think of her coughing or dying or sitting up at night in pain but quiet. I wanted arms long enough to wrap twice around her.

"Any private eye could find that stuff out," I said. "Doesn't your Mom have a blog now? He could be reading that right now. He's trying to steal your identity or

export you into slavery. Tell him not to call again.”

Her eyes got big. Her brow went flat.

“He can hear you. He wants to talk to you.”

I put the teapot down and took the phone.

“What,” I said.

“What are you doing, man,” he said. I recognized the voice. He'd called before and left messages, which I deleted.

“Who is this,” I answered, “and don't tell me it's Alex. We're not stupid.”

“Why're you doing this?” he groaned. “I want to meet her.”

“It's too late,” I said. And when he didn't answer, I gave the phone back to my wife. I whispered:

“Now he'll tell you something about you, something about when you were born. He'll say to just to give him a chance.”

She watched me put our mugs on the counter and pour. She watched, listening to her dad for the last time.

Benevolence

Mrs. Barton explains to her class that all the stars burn for Brian. Their great and only act of worship. Little ugly Sandra asks what about her and the others laugh. Brian takes notes in pencil and then at dinner his mother tells him that is only one very modern theory on who exactly the stars die and shine for. There is apparently an opposing view that it is Barry, who goes to public school and is actually spanked when he does wrong. She says people can't agree and so they hurt each other over it.

His father calls that nonsense. He then looks at Brian - his eyes ebbing love - and tells him that many stars die centuries before their light reaches Brian, and what a thing that is, what devotion, it's like an old man dying on his way to church, his dog, chewing out of his leash and going on to the red doors where he barks his owner's confessions and howls his owner's worship.

"See?" Says his father.

His mother quietly asks how those stars know with which boy they are in love. His father says there's a very simple explanation that nobody knows.

Brian refuses to eat his greens and is sent to his room. Later on he feels guilty and climbs out his window so as not to appear ungrateful, which is more than most gods do, showing up to enjoy the burnt sacrifice.

Barry is there too, with a video camera in his hands pointed at the sky. Its red light is blinking like a tiny happy city.

"I wish I were more like you," says Brian to Barry, "and I imagine the stars wish that too."

Pieces

You said when the coffee was done we'd play chess. In the meantime you had other things to do. Finally the coffee maker gurgled and I called you. I was black, and white goes first, so you needed to come on.

I was nine and sat waiting. Every piece set in place, my arms folded and my legs across the table.

After a while my socked feet hit the tiles, I overturned the bucket and my Lego's spilled across the floor. I remember Grandma thought Lego's were too expensive so you never got any. From the other room, leaning sideways to look down the hall, you asked me what I planned to build. I answered without looking up.

Last week I walked by the Lego store in a shopping mall outside of Chicago. My fiancé went on to buy a new collar-shirt to replace the one you gave me, the one I won't throw away and which is frayed and green plaid. I hesitated at the bright doors and then went in. Huge plastic-block constructions shined red and blue. Han Solo's Millennium Falcon, Darth Vader's Tie Fighter, a castle under siege by an army of grinning skeletons. My taste buds misfired and I thought chocolate milk was in my mouth. Something in the toys made me think of your hands and your hairy shins showing between socks and shorts. I remembered watching movies with you as late as ten o'clock on Friday nights and thinking I was small and clueless like Luke Skywalker and that you were thick and sad like Darth Vader.

I reached out to touch the castle and my hand hit the glass. The noise embarrassed me. An employee asked if I needed anything.

I wavered away.

When my fiancé found me I had dried my eyes with the sleeve of my old shirt. She took me by the arm and sat me in the dressing room to comment on her new skinny jeans.

This is all very good, which is why you shouldn't feel bad for beating me in chess when I was a child, or for forcing me to shake your hand over the board like a good sport.

Ghost Story

Even as their marriage stretched and twisted and wore down into a beaten up thing that looked better in the garage than on the mantel, he knew how to lose his breath when he held her. He imagined every embrace was the last, that she was already gone, and that he was remembering the present moment. He pretended to look back on the way she smelled, and the way her hair irritated his eyes during allergy season.

But whenever she asked him how he stayed so in love for so long, how her ugly sunburned gardener's face still set him on fire, he never told the truth. When she began to die, less than a month before their golden anniversary, he decided to confess. As he carried her to the car on their way to the hospital, her fever burning him through his thin pajamas, he said

“I stay in love imagining you are already gone.”

“What will you do if I die?” she demanded.

“I'll imagine you are still here.”

He never believed in ghosts, but for the two years he lived on without her, he heard her feet in the kitchen, her gentle snoring in the night, and he saw the light of her blow-dried hair in the sunshine before dinner.

The Way Things Are

On Sunday they were tickling and sleeping in the grass when Marsha noticed a bee on her stomach.

“Oh death, where is thy stinger?” she said. The bee showed her all of a sudden, straight into her belly button. “We should go,” she said. On the way to the hospital Isaac kept his hand on the top of her head. She worked hard to breathe.

“What’s wrong,” she asked.

“Nothing.”

“Don’t shut down on me,” she pleaded. Her face lost all color. Bluish veins fluttered in her neck.

“We were just having so much fun,” said Isaac.

“I know honey, I’m sorry, I really am.” She put her head back and fainted. Isaac sighed heavily as he parked in the yellowy street beside the emergency room. He carried her in his arms and called for help and of course he would forgive her, though this was his only day off.

Sacrifice

To Ben it was necessary to delete Marsha's novel-in-progress from her laptop while she was sleeping. In the morning she asked him why. He wasn't a writer, didn't care to be, he didn't hate her. He said he'd read that first drafts are always terrible and that the best thing a writer can do for himself ("or herself", he clarified, his hands spread peacefully before him) is get rid of it and start afresh. "The stuff that matters will come back to you", he pointed a finger at her, and closed his eyes for the last few words. She believed him and got back to writing, which kept her busy every night, which set him free to play first person shooters again.

The Link of Nature

“Question,” she said, “Why don’t we skip the movie and go for a walk?”

“Are you sure?” I cautioned, “the posters say ‘this time it’s personal’”.

She took my hand.

“I’ll bet I can pick more dandelions with my toes than you can.”

“I’ll bet you can too,” I said, and bought one ticket to *The Return of the Afternoon Killer*.

I went into the theater. She hurried off to the river.

I was in line for popcorn, my shoes stuck to the floor and my eyes wet with anticipation.

Meanwhile she put her feet in the grass and started to run. As I reached out to pay for my refreshments the link of Nature around my waist went taut and yanked me across the lobby.

“Look out,” I yelled to a group of teenagers and then I bowled them over. On my way out the door I told them they would understand someday, don’t worry.

Fortunately the doors swung outward. I rolled and skidded along the sidewalk, over the curb, across the road, away from my movie and always toward the sunset and the riverside and the grass and this girl.

JFK

I'm sorry when we were in the New York airport for three hours we didn't get out to see the city. The map of subway lines just seemed tangled and I worried. I know you've forgiven me but also how you wanted to stand on flat, broad sidewalks and hold hands. Didn't you enjoy lunch in the tubular cafeteria with white floors glass railing and frosted glass ceiling with tiny brown birds in the metal rafters waiting for us to leave our crumbs and get on the plane? One of them landed on my thumb it seemed to be the kind that knew what it was doing.

I let it perch, and when it took off, in that sliver of effort it clenched my knuckle too hard.

Later on I left you for another security line in case the ring in my pocket set off any detectors. On the other side you took hold of my arm. Then on the plane you told me the thought of living with me forever didn't make you want to jump off a building anymore. And as the plane pushed across the strip and shuddered up off the ground you put your head on my knee, the bird's footprints- the only subway line on my body. Eight stops in pink.

Both Arms Waving

At the traffic light that looks down to the bridge, my radio on and my windshield thawing out in sunshine, my cell phone empty as a flask, holding only one text from my son, who wasn't missing me enough his first year of undergrad. But that one text message from him made things better.

He still calls me superman, though now he does it to be funny, because I'm shorter and fatter than him. I didn't mind waiting with my foot on the break, watching the cars around, tailpipes fuming like people out in the cold.

Then this pair came jogging to the end of the bridge, and the girl, probably the kid's girlfriend, maybe just study buddy, maybe wife, the slim redheaded girl, her legs just buckled and she rolled onto her back, her arms curled up over her chest, her legs, which were in black tights to keep her warm, shuddering.

Well I was at that red light, still, but one car to my right turned on to the bridge just as the girl's running partner stepped off the curb, both arms waving. The girl needed to get off the concrete and into a hospital. This car, I won't tell you what kind it is because I'm not one for stereotypes, but this car swerved to avoid the kid and sped on. Where I was I could see that his brake lights never once went on.

I rolled my window down and waved at the black woman in the car beside me. I heard her radio was on NPR, and so was mine, good for us, I thought. That was what I thought about.

"Hey, ma'am, can you pull over and help that couple on the bridge?"

"Well," she said, "are you not going to help?"

"You don't mind do you?" I said, the traffic light was about to turn, "pull over and help them out?"

She pressed her lips together and did not say no.

The light turned green and I stepped on the accelerator, after that car, which was about to turn off the bridge on the other side of the river.

My wife and I used to play tennis once a week, until she had a tiny heart attack on the court. And, listen, I ran to the street, this was before everybody had cell phones, and waved my arms. The first car stopped. What would I have done if the hadn't stopped? If they'd cruised by, even swerved to avoid me? I would have hunted them down, that's what, and prayed they had kids I could kidnap and hold them hostage, take the ransom, burn the money and the kids too. But the first car stopped for me, and my wife survived.

The car I was following was not fuel-efficient and he was not carpooling. Also, he never once used a turning signal. This guy was a villain. I gripped the steering wheel and it made a creaking noise, as if I were slowly crushing metal.

I followed my quarry to the library. Of all places the library.

Out of the car stepped a man in a suit, of course. He had his arms full of books. I pulled myself out of my car. “What kind of man does that,” I said, “you’re busted you son of a bitch.”

The man looked at me unfortunately he was about my age, and I knew using language made me seem like the villain.

“Busted?” he said, he was probably a teacher or a writer, I could see it in the books he carried. I wanted to kill him; teachers should know better, same way a doctor or priest or mechanic knows to pull over when someone waves both arms at you on the side of the road.

I yelled. I was yelling. I had a bunch of his shirt in my fist. His books hit the ground the way a dog lands in water. We bought my son a dog when he was young. It never really learned to swim and during the summers I had to sit there, reading at the pool side, not swimming but already in my suit, waiting for the diving bell, which - at our house - was the shriek of my son calling:

“This is a job for!”

And me answering.

What She Doesn't Need

My girlfriend hates space and she's stuck there thanks to me. Just to get her on the ship (which my father named *Death and Taxes*) I had to put in a satellite that picks up TV programs from Earth. I'd been sure the war (now over, we know from the TV) would force a nuclear solution. So we escaped. Since then my girlfriend has said again and again I should've chosen some destination. In response I ask her what the hell kind of destination she has in mind. Mars? The Moon? I put everything into this ship: a hot-tub-pod, board game-pod, ipod, a cuddle-pod walled completely with quilts and pillows, but all she did was sulk and eat. She said drinking without gravity was no fun. She hated floating in her sleep but she also hated being Velcro'd down. I slept in the board game-pod.

Hundreds of days into our drifting, I was carefully applying adhesive to our chess pieces so they'd stay on the board. On earth we'd played a lot of board games, so I thought chess might help bring her out of the TV pod for a while. I was nearly done when a little meteor punctured two layers of our hull. Right away my ears bit me like parasites. I quickly pushed the button that closed the door to the TV pod, cutting my girlfriend off from any pressure change.

The breach was in our eatery. Sealing off that section would be easy enough, but I needed to get food out first, enough to last us the week it would take me to patch the hulls.

Climbing up the corridor, I used one hand to pull myself along and the other to activate my microphone. I asked my girlfriend to pause her show and get into the pressurized suit under her couch. No answer came. I turned the corner and saw the eatery shuddering. There was one metal panel left between my body and the galaxy, now. I thought of wet sand shimmering between waves.

It felt to me my eyes were inflating. Finally my girlfriend's voice came over the intercom, saying she was cold, that the temperature was never right, that she was lonely, where was I, I needed to stop searching the sky-wall for UFO's.

I kicked three crates of food into the corridor and swam after them, ready to seal the door and give our eatery over to space, when that last panel cracked. My nose-hairs froze, I got hold of the doorframe and there I was, flapping in the wind, like a sliver of ice, stuck halfway up a straw, one slip away from the titan mouth and breath of God. The quiet of space rushed in while the glow of atmosphere drained out, I could just make out my girlfriend's voice on the intercom, asking why her ears were popping, asking why I wasn't answering, why we'd left all our friends behind to be blown up and why I hadn't built something to simulate gravity.

This struck me as funny and I laughed. In my brain I reviewed the better moments of our time in space, mixed up with our days at my father's pool, driving my father's car to a motel where we sat in the parking lot, too afraid to try and get a room. In the end, that night, we drove through Taco Bell and fought over the last few cinnamon twists. She got really angry when I stuck them into my mouth. In the silence of the car my chewing was explosive.

As space went on sucking the temperature dropped and my fingers began to weaken. Before long our entire ship would crinkle like an empty coke can. With one hand I let go of the doorframe, reaching for my microphone. This was too much for my fingers, though, and I lost my grip. On my way toward the fist-sized hole in the wall I grabbed at the strap holding a case of crackers in place. The strap came undone, the case flipped up, struck my face and I remember saying into the microphone that this wasn't entirely my fault.

I awoke in the cuddle-pod. My girlfriend explained she'd found me floating and bleeding, a case of crackers stuck against the wall, blocking the hull breach. The eatery was sealed off; everything was fine. She said I'd been brave, said she didn't need gravity. She then opened a tiny, travel-chess set. The pieces were kept in place by magnets. Without gravity the bigger tears took off from my cheeks like explorers, soon sucked up by the ventilation.

Pressed Against the Center

Sitting in the passenger seat for the first time in more than a year, Amber asks Billy if he minds her without makeup. They're out on their first errand since his return from Iraq. He answers:

"Hey you can go swimming or running like that, or go to work. Makes you battle-ready." He lightly pinches her jaw and then he gives a brief, galloping laugh, the kind other young men might give before going to war, not just after returning.

While he was gone she watched frightening, exciting movies and imagined such scenes around Billy. She couldn't help coming up with ways he might die. Each time they were complicated, heroic situations, and each time he died in another soldier's arms, saying something totally Billy, like "last one out get the lights" or "tell my love I wife her." These scenes kept her, though she prayed against them, to herself, and also along with her women's prayer group.

Billy's first Sunday back, Amber stopped on their way out of Church to talk quickly with the pastor. She told him about Billy coming home without scars or nightmares, just short hair and big arms, and he responded by comparing Billy to the three young men walking through the fiery furnace unchanged. Amber's eyes welled, and she held the word in her mouth the rest of the day: *unchanged*.

In the car he chews on his lip. He lets her hold the ipod. All these things are familiar, just right. The only difference she sees as he drives is that he keeps his fist pressed against the center of the steering wheel, one flinch away from honking the horn. He does this not just at intersections or around other cars but at stoplights, while turning, even when looking away from the road to smile at her, which he does occasionally, not too often, and never for too long. Just right.

In the bank Billy spots a clerk without customers.

"That one," he nods. He's always been a good judge of character. He reads the nametags of waitresses and shakes hands with mechanics and asks helpline operators how they're doing today.

When the clerk sees them coming she licks her teeth, probably to clear them of lipstick, and puts her elbows on her desk.

"Welcome to AmBank," she says. Amber thanks her, but then a pink cell phone beside the keyboard on the desk begins to buzz. Billy squints. It's easy to tell the difference between a personal call and one that is work related.

"Oh, shoot, sorry I need to get this," and she answers. She lowers her head to the desk rather than bringing the phone up to her.

Billy tries to give Amber a look. Amber keeps smiling, though, and watches the clerk. Billy notices the plaque on the desk. The clerk's name, of course, is Spring.

"Yes? I'm at work. No. You need to meet me at the school. That's your part to pay. I'm at work." She ends the call and straightens in her rolling chair.

"Sounds nasty," Amber's smile widens.

"We need to add my name to my wife's bank account," says Billy.

The clerk, Spring, pushes back from her desk as Billy speaks.

“Okay,” she says, “okay they can do that for you at the counter, actually, I’m sorry,” and with a squirming chuckle, “I’ve got to get going.”

“No problem,” says Amber, rising from her seat, and she is about to ask if they can pray for the clerk.

“You want us to go wait at the counter now?” says Billy, “you could do this for us right here.”

“I could, sir, I’ve just-” says Spring. She licks her teeth.

“Got it,” says Amber. She waves her hand as if moving steam from a plate of food.

With a swivel of his eyes Billy notes the clock on the wall.

“So your shifts here end at two forty-nine,” he says.

Spring exhales through a bitten smile and is out of her chair. As this happens Billy recites Spring’s full name out loud, then he picks up one of her business cards and says “understood, yep.”

In the time it takes Billy to rise from his seat, sticking the card into his hip pocket, Amber imagines a pair of robbers kicking through the sunny doors and shooting the security guard leaning against the counter. She imagines they have masks and automatic weapons and the other security guard, realizing he’s next, grabs the clerk, Spring, and holds her by the sleeves of her blouse like a shield, and then Billy, who would already have Amber hidden behind a desk and wrapped in his arms, would look at her as if for permission, and she would nod sadly, and out he would rush and in a dive he would take three bullets meant for Spring and as he bled on the carpet he would take Spring’s hand in his and change her and everyone forever. She doesn’t wish it, of course, and Billy is alive, all his insides still inside him and as they leave the bank, their business done, Billy laughs and puts an arm around Amber.

“I’ll get that place cleaned up,” he says, and his nostrils flare.

Day After My Nightmare

About a Sea of Identical Children

In roll three strollers and the three moms, backing through the double doors of the ice cream shop. The back pockets of all their jeans are too far apart, giving their butts a stretched, worried look. Ellie is among them, her shirt oversized, and her baby, therefore my son, with legs, arms, a belly and head. I rise from the booth and clap once, staying calm. A drizzle of hellos without eye contact and the moms all bend at the waist and begin taking coats off the babies.

Stepping around a stroller I say softly to Ellie: "It's twenty past."

"Past what?" asks the mom who married my ex-bassist. Her baby's mouth slopes on both sides with the weight of its cheeks.

"Nothing, it's fine," I say. "Ellie just said one o'clock and I've got work at two."

"Well," says the mom with red hair, the one I don't know. She smiles up at me. "The lawnmower can wait, right?"

I lean back into the booth while Ellie's moral support push their strollers to the counter for ice cream. Ellie sits across from me. By accident we touch shoes under the table. The way we used to.

My son stares at my left eye, the one with the lazy lid. He kicks and then bends his leg, pinches of fat moving around his tiny kneecap.

"He have teeth yet?" I ask.

"Do you want to hold him?" says Ellie.

"Some moms refuse to talk to their kids in baby-talk. Think you'll do that?"

"You smell like grass."

"I've been working, Ellie," I leave my mouth open.

"I realize," she moves in her seat.

"And we're just in an ice cream shop."

"Anyway. Don't you want to hold him?"

"I have nightmares about babies now," I say as I open my hands. I wait that way for a full minute while she unstraps and unbuckles the baby before rolling him into my arms. My son stares into the middle of my face, blushes, and begins to grunt faintly.

"I think he's going to the bathroom," I say.

Ellie nearly smiles. I resolve to be okay with holding my son as he does what he's doing.

I look at the baby but in my peripheral vision I can tell what Ellie's doing; she's gazing like a mom with a helper: a mom who can look out the window at the changing traffic lights and hope to see a fender bender. The way we used to.

The moms are on their way back with the ice cream.

Smiling, I say quickly:

"You want to marry me?"

"Do you feel any connection with the baby at all?" she asks.

“Totally. He’s like a dream.”

“He’s a she,” says the redhead mom. She laughs deep in her throat as she hands Ellie the baby from her stroller and takes the one from me. I just failed a test. They had my son hidden. He’s the one with the huge cheeks. He looks like me after having my wisdom teeth cut out. The girl-baby I was holding squirms, stirring the filth in her pants. The way we all used to.

“I’m disappointed,” says Ellie.

I turn to her, then down to my dirty clothes.

How to Survive Madmen

Too bad not many kids showed. I guess none of the teachers made it compulsory, which is alright. I don't want anyone forced to listen. Without lights on this auditorium looks purple.

Rule number one: never get into a car with a stranger. And if someone forces you in, and you're ten years old and it's a hot Halloween night and the strangers drive away with you confused in the backseat with your batman mask lopsided and your friends step off the curb, not sure if they should wave at you, don't just sit quiet and hope nobody gets hurt. Tell them to let you out. Try the door handles. Try the windows. Bite the upholstery. And definitely don't do what I did. You should know that night, the sky was the color of dead cheeks and on the wind was the scent of sugared bread and rotting road kill. My best friend was dressed as Robin, my sidekick. But he didn't do a thing. My little brother was the Joker and he just laughed. Or he should've been the Joker he was dressed as Superman.

"Don't cry or anything," The mask from *Scream* (this one was glow in the dark) loomed at me from the passenger seat. I looked down into my plastic pumpkin bucket and found a Milky Way candy bar as a defense mechanism.

"He's not crying," the Stormtrooper mask answered from the driver's seat. "He knows everything's fine. This is no big deal. Right, Batman? Hey let me see your mask."

"I recognize your voices," I lied, with half the Milky Way in my mouth. Don't ever do that. Don't say you recognize them.

"You don't know us," the *Scream* corrected me.

"Let me see your mask, buddy," the Stormtrooper reached out his ungloved hairless hand.

My parents put me through a safety class just like this one, guys. I was bored but I remembered they told me to make a fence with my hands. I put the rest of the bar in my mouth and waved my hands in front of me. In my head, behind my mask, I thought about my body being my own space. I hoped this meant my mask was my own space too, like my hair, like my soul, that's what they said in the safety class. My soul is my own.

"My mask is my own space like my soul," I said, even with a full Milky Way in my mouth.

The *Scream* looked at the Stormtrooper. The Stormtrooper's helmet didn't move. His eyes must have, though, and I know his mouth moved, because he said

"Get his bleeping mask," of course he said something else but we're at a school here, guys, you can imagine it.

The dead cheek sky got worse. Showed its teeth a little; lightning that made the *Scream* look heartbroken and made the Stormtrooper look like stone.

"He said something about his soul," said the *Scream*.

"You get that mask, check his pockets, get it over with."

"He said something about his soul. You know what time of year it is."

They started arguing, which was great, I think. Always make your captors argue. The Scream seemed to think I was a kid who was murdered in the basement of a church. They never found the killer. The Stormtrooper said he was wrong, but don't be too sure. Ghosts can grow up, they can get married and be unfaithful and they can lose it one night and punch the wall and when his wife tries to calm him down a ghost can push her away and she can fall and hurt herself on the counter and the ghost can spend the rest of his life drinking guilt on the rocks with a dash of confusion. A ghost can haunt a wooden auditorium.

To sum up, and, on second thought, don't try and get away from your captors. For all you know they might be playing a big joke. The Stormtrooper might be your older brother. The Scream might be his best friend. Don't panic and jump out of the car when they slow down at an intersection. Your pumpkin full of candy will go everywhere and your skin will get sandpapered. Your captors will stop but another car will hardly see you. In the middle of the street, green lights here and red lights there, headlights at eye level, you'll wonder what place you'll haunt if the car doesn't manage to stop.

See the scars from the concrete? Here? The light's bad, maybe you can see where the fender got my head? The lights aren't great, I'm sure we could get them on.

Henri the Jackal

Jonathan Faber was seven, sneaking chocolate cereal and watching television in the middle of the night, when he first saw one of his mother's death scenes. In the film she is too busy for her boyfriend, too powerful for her male coworkers and too proud to let anyone walk her to her car. Then her thin glasses fall off, her mouth opens to scream and one side of her long skirt rips as the Egyptian jackal, just escaped from a museum, puts his mouth around her neck.

As this went on Jonathan's hands felt around for the remote, but his eyes never left the screen. At breakfast hours later (an eternity), his mother came home from a night-shoot and thumped into a chair beside him. Jonathan tried very hard to keep still. If one of sisters found out what he'd seen, and what he'd thought, they would laugh. He stuffed his mouth with cereal and watched his mother massage her own temples. On the side of her throat, there was something like a heartbeat. He didn't know the word *pulse*, but he knew that was blood moving under her skin. He wondered how they'd made her bleed so much in the movie without leaving any scars. Later that day he asked his mother, who thought it was cute and repeated it to the family. Jonathan's sisters beamed.

The Faber parents very rarely stayed in on Saturday evenings. They employed their neighbor, Madame Zalare as a sitter until one afternoon their middle child, Clemence, insisted that Susanne was old enough to look after things. Susanne, who never argued with her sister and hardly ever spoke to her father, made no objection. Madame Zalare was given the night off and Susanne stood in the doorway, nodding at her parents as they sparkled into a cab and out of sight.

At this point Jonathan was nine. The secret of the jackal and his mother was long out, and his sisters had been ordered not to tease him about it anymore.

He was happiest sitting beside his mother, watching her curl her hair or helping to crack eggs. The night she went away and Madame Zalare did not come to read him books, he lost his composure and kicked Clemence in the knee. In response, Clemence told him that she's seen old Henri the Jackal, who slept behind the shower curtain in the bathroom and waited for darkness.

Susanne sat in the kitchen, reading. From there she called;

"Jonathan do you need the toilet?"

"He eats babies and sheep, yummy," said Clemence, "but if he can't find those things he eats boys... who wear khaki shorts!" she pointed with wide eyes.

"No," Jonathan looked down at his clothes.

"Do you need the toilet?" Susanne called again. "Stop standing that way if you don't."

"I think he does need the toilet," said Clemence.

Jonathan shook his head no.

"You don't?" she said.

"No, I do not," he said.

“Oh okay,” Clemence got up and walked slowly to the entryway, then up to the light switches.

“Clem?” said Susanne.

The lights went out and Clemence shrieked

“Jackal! Jonathan take off your shorts! Ack, ugh, he’s got me! My heart!”

It was Susanne who brought back the light, which found Jonathan pulling frantically at his belt buckle, the center of his shorts dark and wet.

“Oh come on, Jonathan! I asked if you needed the toilet.”

Susanne helped him out of his shorts and underwear.

Between chuckles Clemence said she was sorry.

Then with nothing on but socks and his sweater Jonathan pushed Clemence so her head hit the bookshelf. Several framed pictures fell to the floor.

Both sisters barked at Jonathan, who tried to bite Susanne, but not really. It was a game, though he really was angry, and his sisters put him in the bathroom and held the door shut as he roared and kicked because that was part of the game, though even Susanne was afraid anytime he grew quiet and Susanne cracked open the door to peak in, Jonathan lunged like a diseased pet. They slammed the door and screamed, laughing and afraid. After nearly half an hour Susanne heard Clemence gasp. She asked what was the matter.

“I really really need the toilet,” was the answer.

Jonathan roared. Their hands slipped and flinched on the doorknob.

Straight

That summer my computer counted down the days until our wedding. When I wasn't working at the ice cream shop, I spent my time at the new apartment. Two bedrooms, a little balcony, dishwasher, central air and heat, plenty of wall space for pictures and paintings we planned on buying. June stayed in one room, my sister, up for the summer, stayed in the other, which I planned on turning into my growlery. June and I weren't married yet, of course, so I slept two hundred yards away at Michael and Annie's.

I rarely went there before one in the morning. Michael and Annie went to bed before eleven, most nights, and slept with their door open to help with the heat. This meant there was really no way to stay up reading or watching movies with popcorn or coffee without waking them up. My first morning there I made my bed, knowing Annie and June's mom always demanded that. At breakfast Annie came out smiling and thanked me twice for leaving the room so nice.

There is a gap of several years between the two older Murrion kids and the younger two, Annie and June. Unlike my June, the baby of the family, Annie is what other women would call beautiful, "tiny", and (what some might even whisper) "too skinny". Her cheekbones and chin are small but sturdy as teeth. Her eyes are bright and big. She likes to discuss others and then, with a gentle exhale and apologetic smile, give her opinion or recite the kind of advice no one ever wants to hear. The summer of my marriage to June, Annie was finally out of nursing school and taking her turn as the bottom-rung employee, working three twelve hour night shifts a week.

This was a new experience for her husband, Michael. Married nearly a year now, he confided in me recently that he had yet to pass gas within earshot or nose-reach of his wife. There was never beer in the fridge, cigarettes on the porch, wine in the living room or horror movies in the DVD player – when Annie was home. On the nights she spent at the hospital, however, Michael indulged, drinking lagers, watching terrible movies, taking long walks with cigarettes and a Frisbee, mentioning once or twice during the night how he missed his wife.

One such night we found we had wireless in their apartment and spent two or three hours looking up videos of kids falling or hitting each other with toys. Michael laughed so hard he hurt his throat. He loves his little wife and spends most of his time with her. During the day he cares for her, works through his to-do list, giggles and lowers his head when she smiles a tired, airy smile and tells him he's not funny. Then three nights a week, for now, he pokes his head out of water.

So that was not the place to take off my shoes and let the sweat in my socks evaporate into the air as tapped at my computer after hours. And anytime I took off my shoes with June and my sister I naturally curled up and at that point leaving was

nearly impossible. Already once I'd fallen asleep on our chaise lounge and decided to stay the night. I even got up to find a blanket. Fortunately June left me for her bed. I quickly found my place to read and write. Halfway between apartments was a gravel parking lot, owned by the school, which shared a border with the Jewish cemetery, which shared walls with a confederate graveyard. At night, before driving to bed, I parked in the middle of the parking lot, at the foot of a yellowed streetlight. With my back against my car door, facing the cemetery, shaded from streetlight and moon by trees wealthy and broad. One or two cigarettes, my only of the day, some Truman Capote or Tobias Wolff. I listened for anyone coming up behind me. Since the attack on campus, I was in the habit of paying attention to anything around that might punch me in the head or take my money.

Once, as I read Capote in the parking lot, a gray, thin black man appeared out of the darkness around the cemetery and asked me for a cigarette. I told him I'd just smoked my last one, which was true. I got to my feet and told him I was sorry. "Straight," he said, "I just got out of jail, so." "Good luck, pal." Though I was smiling, I looked away as I spoke, busying myself opening my trunk to put my book away. In the trunk was my black nightstick, which fits like a tennis racket in my hand.

The gravel parking lot was my favorite place. I was a guest at the Michael and Annie's; at June's I was a friendly neighbor. The gravel parking lot was quiet, just dirty enough to receive the seat of my jeans and the heels of my shoes with a happy scratch. Reading in the yellow light was intense. I never stayed there more than fifteen minutes.

When I finished one of Wolff's perfect paragraphs I closed the paperback on my thumb and looked up into the cemetery and took a breath. My sanctuary, the shrine of my single life, which I built one cigarette butt at a time.

A Moment of Clarity Between Hero and Victim

Tim Stillman, bookseller these two years, tells his coworkers about his great secret dream over steamed flavored milk. His hands jitter around the cup. Later on his coworkers Matt and Nathalie will widen their eyes at each other and Nathalie will say: “bless his heart, though”. We know she will because this kind of thing always happens.

Tim dreams of seeing his biography displayed, hardcover, bright and centered on an endcap. The cover will be a close up of his eye and the bridge of his nose. The title will be *Tim*. Simple and universally acknowledged as a good read.

“There will be certain things they won’t know for sure about me, yeah, and they’ll say some argue he this or that, but so and so contends that he always loved her. Or something like that. They’ll use serious historical language.”

Matt speaks up.

“Usually a biography is written about somebody who’s dead”. As he sips his milk he is careful not to put his nose in the foam. Tim scowls at him and notices his long Indian eyelashes.

Nathalie speaks up.

“They’re usually about someone important and dead.”

“I’ll change that if I have to. I’ll be a first.” Tim gulps his flavored milk, wipes his chin with his sleeve, and takes a breath with all the quickened strength of a preteen at the start of rollercoaster.

In Nathalie’s lap sit two bridal magazines she had planned on reading during her break. Matt has yet to buy her a ring. His eyelashes curl and hide his eyes whenever she mentions it. He doesn’t work enough hours. He drinks on weeknights.

Tim smiles.

“What do you guys think. Crazy?” Nathalie finishes her drink and stands. Her khaki pants are wrinkled and her hair is up in one dark knot. She asks Matt to please come pick her up at the end of her shift. He leaves.

Tim is left alone at his table, feeling much better having shared his dream with his friends. He licks the foam from the lip of his cup.

It is hardly an hour later that a young man enters in a white ski mask, pointing a six-shooter at Nathalie, who stands alone at her register. He yells without really opening his mouth. The barrel of his gun touches Nathalie’s forehead as she puts in her four-digit code to open the drawer and begins to stuff twenties and tens into the young man’s plastic bag. Her eyes are down. Her lips are pressed together into a straight, lush line.

Tim grins on the floor of the non-fiction section. *This* is his chance. The shoppers are static on their feet watching the little drama. The young man’s finger is definitely on the trigger. They all will talk about this, journal about this, blog about this.

The young man barks at Nathalie to open the other registers. Nathalie explains you have to have the other codes. He asks her where they can find those other codes.

Meanwhile Tim writes a goodbye text to his parents, picks up a thick copy of Donald's biography on Lincoln and runs across the book-floor. It really won't matter in the end, but maybe he'll take the bullet in the head and die instantly, which would work just fine. Maybe he'll fall over and claw at his stomach and have the chance to spend his last breath asking if Nathalie is hurt. He can't believe his luck that Matt, who would do anything for his fiancé, is not here to take the moment away.

When he is within ten steps of the young man he calls for him to let her go. The young man whirls around and aims his gun, doesn't fire. Tim reaches him, doesn't swing his book. Long beautiful lashes wave black against the robber's white ski mask. Tim is confused. The robber hits him and he falls back into a display of bookmarks. Then it's over. The robber got away with nearly six hundred dollars but no one is seriously hurt. Tim might need a stitch or two. Maybe just a staple. Nathalie sits on the red carpet behind the counter waiting for Matt. When he finally comes he takes her into his arms and they go for a walk around the parking lot.

"Did he mess with you?" he asks.

"He just wanted money," she says.

Matt holds her tight. He wonders how long he should wait before giving her the new ring hidden in the glove compartment of his car. He shakes his head and lets out a breath of laughter.

"Is Tim okay?"

"Yeah I think. They took him to the hospital. I'm not sure what he thought was gonna happen. He tried to rescue me."

They widen their eyes at each other. Just like we knew they would.

"Bless his heart, though," she says.

Upright

Our Granddad used to play piano at Christmastime and Dad dreams of having an upright in our living room. He doesn't take us on vacations or buy Pick a new hunting rifle. He saves up.

We'll get an antique. And it'll look great. We'll get you lessons, he says to me. For some reason he's decided I should be the one that learns to play, maybe because I figured out the X-Files theme at Grandpa's house once and made everyone laugh.

When Dad has his car accident and fails to wake up, his insurance pays for everything. Mom thinks we should use the savings to buy an upright. *For when he wakes up,* she says. We're on the way home from the hospital. I'm driving.

How about if he never wakes up, says Pick. He's in the backseat and I swing back to hit him. I miss and he slaps the back of my head. We're both too old for that. Dad always hates when we fight and never laughs at Pick's funny hunting stories. And he never lets me go hunting. *You're the artist in the family,* he says once or twice a day. *Like your Grandpa.*

Well, Pick, if he doesn't wake up the piano will still be good to have, says Mom.

Pick says he should get a new rifle and Mom should get some massages downtown to chill her the hell out.

While Pick and I are at work the next day Mom goes out and buys an upright piano. She hires men to move it in and has it tuned. Pick curses at it when he comes home. It looks very thick and heavy. Mom tells us the dealer said it was made before the First World War. I sit on the tiny stool. It's too low for me. I half stand and twist the seat. It rises up like a screw out of a wall. I sit down and it's perfect.

Pick is in the kitchen with Mom. I hear him yelling.

You could've been at the hospital with Dad instead you went shopping.

That's not even why you're mad, I say. He tells me to shut up and I call him a stupid redneck. Nothing else comes from the kitchen so I play the X-Files theme on the upright. It sounds great. Like the music played on top of a silent film, the kind Dad and I might rent while Pick rented something with bikinis on the cover.

A few days pass and Pick mopes at meals. Mom's taken to holding her cell phone to her ear and pretending to be listening to someone. She paces round the house, her eyes shut and her hand on her back as she sympathizes with the dial tone.

One night Pick yells at me to stop playing the X-Files theme, that he's watching 24. I tell him to shut it. A ruffling noise comes from the kitchen and then Pick is behind me and something brushes the back of my head. I grab it and I can tell it is Pick's soft-air pistol, less dangerous than a BB gun but still scary and fun for him. When I grab it he fires and it hits my shoulder. I lose my temper. With my feet against the piano I push back on top of Pick. He's surprised but makes a chuckling sound to make me think he's not trying very hard. I get one arm around his neck. We struggle for the pistol. I put my knee into his back. He yells and fires even though I'm behind him and his face is in the carpet. The plastic BB hits the swirling design in the

upright. A little piece chips off. Mom starts to cry and fall back into a chair. Pick and I stop fighting. I help him to his feet.

I need him awake now, he'd be so happy and he'd make you both calm down, she says. I put my arms around Mom and Pick goes to look at the damage on the upright.

Is it bad? I ask him.

Rug-burns have turned his forehead red. When he stands up to shrug I point at him and mom's cry turns halfway into a laugh.

Dad sleeps and sleeps and the monitors beep and beep the same ugly note. Mom can't go to work and her hands shake so she can't drive, cook or comb Dad's hair. I do all except the combing. The nurses are cranky and I'm sure they make fun of Dad when we're gone. After a week Pick gets the idea that if he's at home he might want to wake up. Mom loves that. *You can play the upright and maybe then he'll wake up.*

Pick reminds her I can't play worth crap. I don't hit him or tell him to shut up because he's right. Then one of us has the idea to hire a professional.

At the university downtown Pick and I walk right into the fine arts center. In a little soundproof room Pick sees a thin redheaded girl playing piano. She sits up straight like someone's poking her in the small of her back. We knock on the glass and explain ourselves. Her eyes are like cartoon beauty eyes. Green as paint.

What kind of piece would you want me to play?

We'd pay you, says Pick. It's the first thing he's said since we found her.

No, she says, *I don't need money. Too insensitive.*

Pick looks at the floor.

You play anything. Something you'd like to wake up to, I say.

She smiles, but is careful not to show her teeth.

When do you need me?

Now, says Pick.

A nurse rolls Dad into the living room feet first. Pick sits with Mom on the loveseat. I stand at the upright beside Sandra, the redheaded pianist Pick keeps staring at.

I turn the pages for Sandra while she plays two beautiful pieces, so beautiful the nurse wipes her eyes with her sleeve. If mom's hands were steady enough to put on makeup, her mascara would have run. But Dad doesn't move. Still, watching Sandra play makes me want to get real lessons. When she stands to say her goodbyes to Mom and Pick I sit down and play the X-Files theme again, this time my left hand hitting the bass notes, as far as I can tell. Mom says Dad looks very happy. The nurse says he looks awake. He's not, it turns out, but I think his face might move when I play.

Mom's forbidden Pick from driving. She's afraid he'll crash into a coma. So she lets me go for groceries and drive us all to work. Mom has hired Sandra to give me lessons. We have fun, and Mom's sure we'll fall in love. Pick has other plans though, and always sits in on the lessons, snickering at me when I mess up.

Why don't you try it then, I say.

He laughs more and doesn't attack me. Sandra tells him he's a jerk, but she's smiling when she says it.

Locked Out

Ken pauses his game and answers the door. Two people from across the hall, his neighbors, a mother and a little girl, have locked themselves out and the mother urgently needs a bathroom. The husband won't be home until dinnertime. Ken lets them in. He tucks his t-shirt into his sweatpants.

The little girl makes her way to the couch. Ken asks if the girl wants some chocolate milk and that stops her crying, but all he finds in his kitchen are coffee and soda. He decides to make coffee, and he does it very slowly, measuring every spoonful of grinds. He hopes he can stand there in the kitchen until the woman takes her kid and leaves. But when he's done she is still in his bathroom. He moves to the door and asks if everything's okay.

Her voice comes through, apologizing.

Ken says it's alright, offers to call a locksmith.

She says no thank you, that they can't afford it. She says it would be wonderful if she might take a bath, just rest a minute.

"I'm sure my tub is filthy," he says. When no answer comes he tells her to take her time and moves around the corner, back into his living room. The girl has unpaused his game, and is using the mace he earned the night before to murder peasants at a market near the foot of the mountains. With a kind of smile he pulls the controller from her.

"You have this at home?" he asks.

The girl shakes her head no, still staring at the screen.

"I must've finished off my chocolate milk this morning," he says. He notes she has no cuts or bruises on her face. Neither eye is black. She looks like she gets plenty to eat.

It's just before two. It could be hours before the husband gets home. He wonders how long it will be before the girl asks about Alex, who's in a picture on the wall, and he wonders how he'll sum all that up for a nine-year-old. She used to live here now she doesn't. Then the mother will come out of the bath, her hair all wet and her makeup gone, maybe even using the green towel Alex bought, and the girl will tell her everything.

The quiet has gone on nearly a minute, now. He knows he ought to ask the girl her name.

Instead he gets an idea. He notices his window has no lock on it. Why would it; they're four floors up. There is a ledge, and a drainpipe halfway between his window and the neighbors'.

He saves progress on his game, starts a new campaign and gives the controller to the girl. She squeals very softly and bites the tip of her tongue. That's cute, he thinks, and he imagines this happening again and again, the girl knocking on his door in the middle of the night, once her parents are asleep and asking to play more, and he imagines buying chocolate for chocolate milk and keeping it on the low shelf so the girl, whatever her name is, can get it for herself. He imagines this being the end of his

solitude. Any friend is a friend. But if he can shuffle across the ledge and into their apartment he can open their door so they can leave and he can go back to that coffee and his game.

There is a little wind on the ledge. For one full step he has to let go of his window and reach for the drainpipe. His stomach jolts and forces him to laugh. His fingernails haven't been cut in a while and he is able to get them under the window and pull it open. He is moments away. Their apartment is dark with carpets and curtains. Photographs in frames sit on shelves screwed into the wall. He leaves their door ajar but then, moving across the hall, finds his locked. He hasn't brought his keys. He knocks. From inside, the game roars. He can tell the girl is killing peasants again. He puts his face to the door and calls for her, now wishing he knew her name.

Malchus

The walk to work is all dirt and regret. My sandal straps cut my feet. Because of this I spit in the palms of beggars. They growl after me and wipe their hands in the dirt. The sun stomps on my shoulders and on every clay roof. I hear vines hanging themselves. I hear the new bestselling gospel read aloud. My name is missing. Between errands I sneer at the population. My thumb is deep in my ear. My nose is not clean. I buy a toy from the temple steps. I break the bread unevenly and much of it crumbles. I spill wine on my master's hands. His fist lands solid on the same ear a fisherman severed once.

Religion

Perry is not hateful to the toilets he cleans. On the contrary, he hums to them as he scrubs and sanitizes. His songs echo miniature in their bowls. When he flushes bleach down their metal throats, they gurgle with gratitude. This job pays for his room. He is gentle with that room because he still has a decade to live, he figures, and Rebecca might come back. It's Saturday night when she finally returns his call. "When did you start painting?" she asks. "Same time my knees went bad," he says with his hands on his head, alone in his room, watching the canvas of Melissa the meek on her bicycle riding outside above greens and below blues and purples, away from her school teachers and towards her grandfather. He thinks he should paint the girl again, let her rest at the hilltop. Rebecca asks if he has a digital camera, maybe he could send her pictures of his work. Or, she says, she could come over and see them after Church in the morning. In bed Perry drinks and reads John's gospel. He breathes and thinks of miracles spinning in that same air. There is no new air. He returns to work on Monday, picking long thin strands of Rebecca's hair from his jacket. He puts on his gloves and enters the bathroom and something is different. When he begins scrubbing the first toilet, when he hums into the bowl, the echo is like a dried out paintbrush. When he flushes the bleach their gurgle is mechanic.

Foley Speaks

I shave every morning before coming in to stack deli sandwiches into colorful boxes along with chips and a pickle. Before anyone sees our stock is even low I bag pickles, wet from their tub of juice, and stack them in the fridge ready to go out to the bored clients sitting in board meetings and seminars across the city. My boss takes no notice. When he leads me out back to throw stacks and piles and puddles of trash into the compressor and hollers over his shoulder,

“C’mon Foley don’t be such a candy ass”. I chuckle as if to myself but loud enough for him to hear. He limps by and the light off his manila scalp warms my face. I am the earth and he is the moon, which would make the fluorescent lights the sun, collectively.

My boss does not love me despite the fact I defend him when Terry, Jonathan and Ben laugh at his tired blue centered yellow lined eyes. “I think he is a good leader, always the same,” I say to them, and I show them a few photographs of the way he heaves his children over his shoulders to make them laugh. I show these to my parents at Thanksgiving. My Mom does not understand. My boss does not love me despite the way I polish the bar stools. My boss does not love me despite the years I have been here, missing promotions with a shrug and smile. I slip notes under his office door and then at closing I sweep them up.

Together at Last

Our suburb houses as many dogs as it does people. At least it did until I skipped the curb and killed five pets. They were all tied to their owners' mailboxes one Thursday afternoon, waiting for the *Fast Foam Pet Cleaner*. In, my dad's truck on my way to school I got a text message from a certain girl and looked down to read. One terrier, one golden retriever, two beloved mutts and one prize winning Rhodesian Ridgeback all yipped as I ran them down. The mailboxes were crushed too. The neighbors ran out to a colorful display of splintered wood, fluff, gore and me with my hands in my hair.

My name is Adam, but when I met Eve I introduced myself as Peter, which is Spiderman's real name.

Eve works at the only Internet café in town. I saw her a few times a week and always appreciated the way she crossed her legs behind the counter. We talked and she watched me play games online.

The neighborhood came together in their grief and in their rage against me. My mom looked at me with disdain as she poured milk over my cereal. She burned my toast and forgot to make coffee.

There was a memorial service for the dead pets. I wasn't invited. My dad thought the whole thing was stupid but my mom wore black. I sat on the roof of our house and watched the weird little procession. A cluster of neighbors walked from backyard to backyard, paying their respects to each tiny grave.

Every Thursday for several weeks those who lost a pet gathered at the fateful curb and watched me drive by. The gore had been pressure washed. They hid rocks in their hands. They moved their lips and kicked at the grass.

One Saturday afternoon Eve called. She had had a fight with her manager. Her voice was wet and shallow. Her car was in the shop, apparently, for the rest of the day and she wanted to get home. I sped a little, getting to her. She stood outside the café waiting. I pulled up and she climbed in and slapped my knee. I drove on with a feeling of absolute Christmas morning happiness in my stomach. I told her about it. She knew exactly what I meant. The truck bounced gently on its suspension. The windows were down and the sun was behind a cloud. No hot tub or king size bed compared to Eve in the passenger seat of my dad's truck. Suddenly I ran over a gray cat.

"Oh no," I said, and pulled over. We could tell from there it was dead, or so we told each other. Eve was shaken. As we drove she put her head on my shoulder.

"There, there," I said.

"There there what?"

I clipped a buck in the antlers as it sped out of the trees.

"Peter?" she said.

A hedgehog stumbled into the path of my right front wheel.

"Shouldn't you slow down?"

I hit the brakes. We caught our breath.

“I’m sorry, this has never happened before,” I said.

Even as we sat still on the side of the road two blue jays slammed into my windshield and fell down dead.

“Except a couple weeks ago,” she noted.

“Yes. Do you want to walk?”

“I like it in here. Did this happen on your way to get me?”

“No. Also I hit those dogs right after you sent me that text message.”

“Sounds magical. I’m staying in the car,” she said. “It’s worth it, riding with you, Peter.”

“My name’s Adam, actually, to tell you truth,” and I sped back onto the road. Another dog, another cat, a snake, a few more birds, bug after flying bug, all these slammed into my mighty truck. Eve and I looked on, together at last.

Abbey Sherman's Account of Hyde

To start with, and I hope you won't think of me trying to get more out of you than you promised, sir, it's not that. But, it so happens, my old man's feverish and it falls to me to keep the four of us. He's a man of mysteries, my old man. He's a performer. When he's well, he disappears a coin, pulls it out your nose and he dresses me and my sister up and puts us under spells, only we're putting it on, and people empty their pockets into his hat.

As he's been sick he taught me two tricks for coins and also how to juggle socks tied into knots. I've found the corners where people tend to bring their eyes up off the road and their hands up out of their pockets, and I make a go of it.

Not to try and get more out of you. I've got a story, I have. There I was on the corner. The fog was in and I'd say the fog makes it easier to believe I'm a dwarf with magic up to my chin. What with the fog, and the crowds making their way home for supping and sleep, my cap was full of pence and twice already I'd emptied it into my pockets. When I twirled, or bowed for a lady who stopped to watch, my trousers rang like Christmas morning. I can make a lively show when it's not too cold.

The sun was gone and this does happen sometimes, that a fellow stops with a big red face and a walking stick. He watches and I decide to tease him and I get up on my toes and pull the disappeared coin as if out of his hair. Somebody laughs and the man's face goes redder. Red red, like coals at the bottom of a fire. I should know better than to use his hair as the hiding place, you can tell his sort, the sort that gets mixed up and goes red in place of laughing along and dropping a coin of his own into the cap.

Do it again, he tells me, and I tell him back that a wizard never does a thing twice without encouragement. And with my toe I nudge my cap on the ground beside me.

He says to do it again or he'll yell thief and say I picked that coin right out of his purse.

So we go on this way. His face is red and I know I ought to up and do the trick again, and do it easy and slow so's to let him see the secret and call it out but I never do, because my old man only showed me two tricks and if I give them away I'll be out before long.

You're probably out of ink by now, but I'm finally here, this is the part you want. There comes a scream and someone says body and someone else says police and whereas I'd be heading in the other direction, the crowd floods down the road and around the corner. Like spilt milk on a hill, you might put that down. The man with the red face stayed, though. He ignored the noise.

Well now, he says.

Through the fog like fish underwater, you might say, I see the people running in circles looking for somebody, I don't know who just yet, and I've just decided to give the man what he wants. And then there's a third figure, just over my shoulder.

Just appears. Breathing heavy and leaning against the wall, and in his paw a bunch of black hair like a horse's tail.

Yes I knew this man must be the reason for the screams down the road. Did I call out for police? No, I stared. Just watched the way my sister does when the old man tells stories, and when he tells the worst parts, about Abel falling for a trick and getting clubbed in the head, her mouth opens to one side and her nostrils flare. I imagine that's the face I made. I must have tried to move away, for my pockets jingled and then he saw me. The hair he held, it had the look, this hair, of having been plucked straight from the head it grew from.

This man looked at us, the red face and myself, and I must have sobbed, because the man smiled black and big and laughed, I think. He held up the hair as if to make me feel better.

I'd understand, and I'd take it as no offense to me, sir, if you went on writing with one hand and covered up your mouth with the other and laughed to yourself. It may be you'll let me finish and then when I'm gone with my coins you'll set the page to fire. I won't complain and I won't argue. Won't beg you believe me. It doesn't matter to me one way or the other does it.

The red-faced man, he stepped between me and the monster. He was much bigger, my new red-faced friend, and I thought he might catch the monster.

But if I say the hair in the monster's paw caught fire, and that with a swing the red faced man was down, and if I say that as I called for help the monster flew over me and away, yes that wings hid under his coat, you will, as I see you doing now, smile and stop your pen.

That Light Needs an Eye

Anytime I walk alone from the parking lot to my dorm room between midnight and sunrise I hear this mockingbird singing bright as the flashlight in the eyes from my brother across our old black bedroom when we were kids, just before his friend came in through the window, her hair hidden in a sweatshirt hoodie, and then his breath like a rusted bed-spring.

I imagine that bird like an ant in unlit furnace. I've never actually seen it. But I worry about it – lamenting the daylight – maybe she forgets it comes again soon – or maybe she's sure without her whistling at night the others will have no morning to sign about – like a hunter who begins to think elk would vanish if he weren't around to shoot them. It frightens me, that this wisp of feather and bone might be so important.

My big brother might've known that the light in my eyes would mean all I would see where shapes with no color or detail. I squinted as best I could and saw that under the hoodie her hair was very long. In the morning I told Mom about the girl and she told Dad, who grabbed my brother by the shirt collar. But later, on our way to school, he didn't punch me or unzip my backpack. He asked for the pudding cup Mom put in my lunch, and when I gave it to him he said "thanks".

Sister Mary

Mary's only brother, Gabe, is mentally handicapped and strong enough to bend a parking meter into a boomerang. He is twelve and has never said a word, but needles and bullets and cars buckle and crumple up against his skin. The U.S. Army hasn't bothered him since he kicked a national guardsman through a chain-link fence.

Mary loves him and is usually able to keep him calm. Because of her the country is still standing and no one has quite been killed. Arms have been broken, though, and buildings destroyed. Recently a dog barked at Gabe, who was throwing bread at the ducks. Gabe, unable to filter out sound, he uprooted a bench and crushed the dog. The little girl holding the leash was speckled with blisters or acne.

"Gabe, say you're sorry," Mary held Gabe by his shoulders. Like trying to turn a tree in the ground. Gabe knew to hug the girl. "Not too hard," said Mary. On the other side of the pond, the photographers fired their cameras.

Mary would like to paint. Once, while Gabe watched a dance video, she paid a neighbor to go and buy all the equipment she'd need. She had the money, since the government pays her a secret salary to stay with Gabe and keep him calm as possible. She's yet to find any time to try her equipment, though. Gabe only sleeps two hours a night. She's never alone; she's got to be careful. Gabe once found her crying and put his head through their bathroom wall. When he sleeps his breathing moves her hair back and forth across her face.

Bright red spots appear on Gabe's face and shoulders one morning. By dinner he has begun to scratch. He develops a fever. Nothing like this has happened before.

"Gabe," she says. "Remember the girl with the dog? I think she must've had chicken pox. I guess you're sick."

Hours and hours before midnight she finds him in bed, already falling asleep.

"Wow, superman. You sleepy? Don't scratch."

Every sore is opened. The tips of his fingers are wet.

"Don't scratch, please."

There are some doctors who still visit houses. Mary calls one, doesn't give him any names.

He arrives and is very young. He looks like a medic in a war movie.

Moving into the bedroom he seems to recognize Gabe.

Mary says quickly that he's sick.

"He can't get sick is what I read," says the doctor.

"Well," says Mary.

Gabe begins scratching his neck. The sound is like paper rustling.

"Chicken pox," is the doctor's diagnosis. "He's hurting himself."

"You can't stop him," she says. "Is there medicine?"

"Really just ibuprofen and certain creams. I brought a tube of something. Have you had chicken pox?"

Mary nods.

He steps toward the bed.

“There’s a lot of bleeding,” he says.

Mary thinks of war movies, when the medic is overcome with sympathy and walks into the line of fire and his chest just pops open.

“Is he strong enough to break his own skin?” he says.

He asks Gabe to stop scratching. He tells Mary to draw a bath and add some oatmeal. She leaves the room. He then takes hold of Gabe by the wrists because he thinks he has to try, and he is not thrown across the room or torn apart. He controls the boy.

The bathwater is running. Mary is seen crossing the hall, going to the kitchen to find oatmeal. The doctor calls, without thinking,

“He’s weak, I’m holding him down.”

He watches his hands, which are in control of Gabe, the human plague. The fever has weakened him, and the doctor knows this probably will never happen again. Very quickly, like the sun rising and setting in fast motion over a desert in a nature special, the ideas and conflicts and foundational philosophies pass through his brain and he finds he has decided. He knows the boy hasn’t killed anyone.

“It’s only a matter of time,” he says. He begins to visualize moving one of his hands from the boy’s wrist to his throat. He listens to the sister, now in the bathroom again. He moves his hand and begins to squeeze.

After finding the doctor trying to kill Gabe, after chasing him from the house using her easel like a bat, after giving Gabe ibuprofen and letting him stay in the oatmeal bath until he’s fallen asleep, after carrying him to bed, Mary sits and begins to paint. She works for hours, starting over many times, rinsing all her brushes over and over in the sink. Gabe sleeps through the night and spends all day in oatmeal baths. He doesn’t regain his strength and temper for a week.

Mary’s favorite piece, the one she works on the longest, is an illustration of a kind of wind turbine, only rather than wind it’s driven by a wheel at its base, which someone strong as Gabe could spin for just an hour a day and he could generate enough electricity to power a block of hospitals - maybe the whole city - for a month, and save the world.

Seventh Anniversary

It takes them several minutes to make the pretty key work. Finally inside, Amber shrugs their bags onto the bed. The mattress hardly gives at all.

Billy looks at his wife with an intentional grimace.

“Uh oh,” he says.

Amber makes a fist and presses into the bed.

“It’s fine,” she says, “give me a break”.

Billy sits. He bounces once, shakes his head, bounces again, and finally crosses his arms.

“I’m sorry. I’d say I’ll try it but we both know I won’t sleep on this, Amber. Am?” he reaches for her, his head to one side. Since the break-in he never thinks to carry the bags or tip the taxi driver. “Will you see about another bed?”

“You need to practice your French, see about it yourself,” she shuts herself in the bathroom. The door won’t latch, though. Slowly it swings back so Billy can see her on the toilet. He watches with a tiny smile as she stays seated but rearranges her shirt so it covers most of her hip.

“Did you see the bellboy? He had a look,” he says.

“That’s why you said no thank you to his carrying my bag.”

“I didn’t like him knowing quite what room we’re in.”

“He works here, though,” she’s up, washing her hands.

“I know.”

“There’s like ten rooms I’m sure he knows where we are anyway.”

“Do you feel unsafe?” he asks.

“You need to check on getting padding for the bed,” she says, instead of answering the question.

“You’re right,” Billy sits on the side of the bed nearest the door, always his side, and picks up the phone. He straightens with a grunt.

“Is anyone there?” asks Amber.

“Hello? I don’t think so.”

“You have to dial something.”

“What should I dial? Zero?”

“You know just leave it, Billy, I’ll do it.”

“I need to do my part. You carried the bags.”

“This doesn’t have to be your part just wait a second. Just wait,” she doesn’t want him to call. His French is terrible and when confused he raises his voice, not to be rude but in an attempt to plow through. If he calls asking for a softer bed, using his twenty or so words and forgetting the formal pronouns, she knows the hotel staff will complain to each other and treat them stiffly the rest of their stay.

“You don’t mind calling?” he asks, still holding the phone.

Amber sits at the foot of the bed and begins working out of her shoes.

“Can’t we just try extra blankets under you?” she says.

Billy looks behind him at the bed. He hangs up the phone.

“We sure can.”

“Let’s just try that,” She scoots around to sit beside him. “If you can just get yourself to sleep.”

She waits for him to say something sarcastic, or to simper and lean against her and let her scratch his scalp. Instead he looks up and out the tiny windows. She thinks that, just then, he looks like the kind of man that might build his wife a house and carry her to bed and sleep with his arm over her. She whispers.

“Thanks for this trip. I’m very happy.”

“I’m glad,” he says.

A little while later, with the silvery dinner cart rolled into the corner, their glasses of sherry emptied and extra blankets and sweatshirts beneath them to soften the bed, Billy turns on the television.

“I’m not tired,” Amber tells him, and she gets out of bed and goes to the mini bar. Their train to the next city is in the morning and she’d like to go out and see more of this place. None of it scares her; the building they’re in and the ones just out the window are like damp corners of a cathedral.

She pours another sherry for herself. When he notices, Billy will be sad she’s finished it off without him. She’ll say she didn’t realize he cared and then apologize and he’ll ask if they can just get another bottle.

“You make the money,” she’ll say.

This plan exhausts her. She moves through the dark and opens the windows. She shivers, looks down and pours a little from her glass, sharing with the street. It splashes, only just missing a young couple. When they look up she waves. The girl waves back but the boy looks angry. His voice bounces off the buildings and into the bedroom.

“What’s wrong,” asks Billy. Looking over her shoulder Amber sees he’s still watching the TV.

“What,” she says.

“You used to complain.”

“I used to complain?”

“When you weren’t happy about something.”

“So you want me to complain?”

“Do you feel safe here?”

Amber gives the smoky reflective street a last look. A moped turns the corner stacked with two boys in sweatshirts, their hoods pulled tight around their faces. Neither looks up to see her waving.

“Answer me,” says Billy.

“This place is great,” she says.

“I almost hope that bellboy tries something tonight, tries to go through your bags when he thinks I’m sleeping.”

“Don’t hope that,” says Amber. She shuts the window. It clatters, pane to pane.

“I’m sorry but since the break-in I’ve been dying for something like that to happen. If those kids had stayed in my house two more minutes...”

“Whatever,” she smiles. She finds herself remembering drool on her shoulder that night and the tap left dripping in the bathroom.

“I know you hate it, Baby, but they are so lucky they got out when they did. Hey would rather go out?”

Amber sits down in the only chair in the room and lets her eyes settle on the TV. Quickly she imagines the bellboy breaking in and Billy pushing him out the window. She thinks of his drool on her shoulder that night, and the tap left dripping in the bathroom, and then Sunday mornings, Billy’s shirt done one button too high and the notes he takes about the sermon on the back of his hand.

Billy stands up suddenly, his arms folded, and he stays that way, in the middle of the room, watching Amber. He guesses out loud that she would rather go find drinks in some tiny weird bar than stay here, cozy and warm with room service open for another twenty minutes. Amber doesn’t respond, and so Billy begins crawling like a toddler around the bed, looking for his shoes. Amber speaks very quickly:

“I woke up when they broke into our house, and I shook you and you wouldn’t wake up so I had to scare them off myself. I was in bed crying five minutes before you woke up and ran around looking for bad guys. You slept through your only real chance to save me from something.”

Billy is still on his knees. He looks over at her, looking like he should make a joke. She speaks again:

“Sweetie, you went to war and came back and didn’t change at all. I don’t know that kind of person does that.”

Billy gets to his feet.

She moves across the room and lifts his arms so they fall on her shoulders, and it’s as if they’re hugging.

“I feel better. Can you still take me out?” she says, and she knows how that sounds. She’s aware the Bible never condones saying everything.

The break-in happened in Billy’s second month home from the war. They got in by forcing the garage door up several feet. Once inside they let the door fall a little too fast and the noise woke Amber, who sat up in bed and put a hand on Billy’s arm. A certain stair halfway up always creaked underfoot, and she listened for it. She squeezed Billy’s but had no breath to say his name. He stirred, snorted, but didn’t open his eyes. The stair gave its creak twice. There was movement down the hall. Amber thanked God their guest room was empty.

Again she shook her husband and then, breathing through her open mouth, she rolled to her feet and flipped on her reading lamp. They must’ve seen the light under the door, because the stair creaked again and she heard their front door swing open.

When the police came, Billy described the incident as if he’d woken up first. When he said this Amber looked at him and Billy reached for her with arm, and she knew he wasn’t lying; that was how he remembered it. He went on to tell the police about his two tours in Iraq, showed them the license for his handgun told them how lucky those kids were for leaving when they did. The officer’s both shook his hand and were gone.

When Amber climbed back into bed Billy stood in the doorway, at attention.

“You can go to sleep,” he said.

“Come to bed nothing’s going to happen.”

“You better believe it.”

“I’m safe,” she said.

“You know it.” He told her the things he would do to the burglars if he had the chance. He left the room, and could be heard moving through the house, the floors popping under him. It was nearly morning, the blinds starting to glow when he came back in, breathing steady through his nostrils, to ask why Amber still wasn’t asleep.

Reading to Alk

I read the first twelve words of my story, when, right about here, the building's alarms went off. We moaned, pulled our books to our chests and began to evacuate. On our way to the street-side I asked Professor Alk how he liked it so far. I described to him the pieces of my laptop that I'd worn off with my typing. As we jogged he told me so far he wasn't sure but that I should go on.

I read to the end of the first paragraph and in the parking lot a car burst into flames.

"Was anyone in it?"

"I don't know, I hope not."

"Was it a bomb?"

"I don't think it was a bomb."

"Should I continue?"

"Yes, Brian, go on."

By the end of the block of dialogue, Alk and I were hostages, down on our knees, our hands behind our backs, Mrs. Alk standing beside our captive, his gun shoved into her mouth.

I paused before the last paragraph to ask him if he cared anymore, if I should just stop.

He told me a story should solve at least one problem, however small, and make something better. Just some thing. He told me to always finish. He stared at his wife, whose nose and eyes brimmed with panic. She looked back at him, then at me, I knew she wished I would stay quiet. But Professor Alk said again to finish, and I did, and looked up in time to see a bicycle skip the curb, an unnamed police officer rolling to his knees to save us.

The Blurbs of Eric Demp

Eric Demp inherited his father's dollar video rental store. He hoped to be a writer but his stories always ended with kisses. He couldn't afford a clerk for the store, and in extensive readings of the back of tapes and DVD's it occurred to him that movie companies might be in need of fresh and great blurbs for the covers of new releases or special editions or director's cuts. So he watched every new release every month and then emailed his blurbs to the production companies. Below are the first, three from the middle, and then his last, before he took to painting and jogging at sunset.

Dear Flight and Fall co,

Please find my blurb on your new title, *Midafternoon*. If you would like to use my blurb you may respond to this email and I will receive it. I do not charge very much per blurb. I've also included my star rating so you can add it to the count if you like. You can use just a piece of my blurb if you like, but my price will stay the same. Thank you.

Open mouthed, riveting happy and weird. Kyle's performance is very funny and, in some parts, sad. He reminds me of every construction worker I've ever met, which is funny. But he also reminds me of my dad in his forties. Which is sad. I brought the DVD home to my wife who loved it and called in sick the next morning (she's my accountant for the rental store, so calling in sick means telling me she doesn't feel good), the movie made her sad but it also put her in a comedic mood, and when I came home I found a note saying she'd gone trampoline shopping with my neighbor, Aaron, who knows about those things, and looks like the preacher character in the film. His eyes are opened all the way instead of halfway like mine. She came home and explained to me that wine made her tired and she went to sleep on the couch. In the morning we'll talk about her joke and laugh, and it's because of your film, Midafternoon.

Five stars.

...

Dear Penundrum Studios,

Your movie, *How to Properly Use Men and Condoms*, was gross. It belongs in adult movie stores, not in theaters near me. Please find my blurb attached. Thanks and no thanks.

Upside down. Wrong side out. Boring. This movie belongs in an adult movie store, not in theaters near me. Thanks but no thanks.

No stars.

...

Dear Circletop Media,

Please find my blurb on your wonderful new title, *Sticks and Guns*. I don't charge much per blurb, you can reply to this email and I'll read it. Let me know. Thank you.

McCleary has fashioned a masterpiece, here, though I wouldn't call him a master quite yet. Take it from me, masterpieces can come from anywhere, making stories is like playing roulette. One of the numbers is "masterpiece" but all the others say things like "that's a very nice story" and "you should keep writing" and "read it to me later, darling". I gave my wife the DVD. She was on her way out to do some shopping in Atlanta, which she does about once a week. She stays overnight because she doesn't like driving more than two hours a day, which I can understand. When she came home the next day she had two bags of clothes and she kissed me on the head and thanked me for letting her spend so much on room service. That was a good feeling, that kiss, and that is what watching Sticks and Guns is like. I'd watch it again if my wife hadn't forgotten it at the hotel, but hopefully the cleaning lady will pick it up and have a good time.

Four stars.

...

Dear Flight and Fall co,

Please find my revised blurb to the director's cut of *Midafternoon*. Stuff has changed in my house and my feelings have changed too. Even if you decide to use my first blurb for the new DVD, I hope you'll read this one if only so you can better understand the work you put out there.

*Kyle's performance is very dangerous and, in some parts, evil. He reminds me of me the entire time, except his arms fill his sleeves. I took the DVD home to my wife who really liked the part about the woman hiding in coffee shops rather than going home to see her husband. Next morning she told me she was sick so she could spend the day with Aaron. His eyes are opened all the way instead of halfway like mine. She came home and explained to me that wine made her tired and she went to sleep again on the couch. She's pregnant and we've known for a long time I can't make babies. I was watching the director's cut and our neighbor came over to see me. He had two beers from his apartment and he wanted to talk. I belong in *Midafternoon*, I'd fit right in, me and the husband character could have drinks.*

Two stars.

...

Dear Flight and Fall co,

I've just been to see your new movie, *The blurbs of Adam Temp*, and I can't help thinking. That is my story, Flight and Fall. What the hell. You never wrote me back about the dozens of blurbs you've gotten from me and then, suddenly, here I am, the subject of your new surprise hit!

Rather than finding my blurb below, you'll notice this email in fact is the blurb. (I blurb all the time now, whenever a customer comes in I follow them through the store blurbing about whatever he or she picks up.) The main character, whose name is Adam but who writes blurbs a lot like mine, is a selfish guy. When the wife comes back to him because the neighbor (who seems to have no eyelids) has left her, he refuses to take her back. Doesn't he know what it'd be like to have her back, and have her grateful and glowing and then to have this baby and never tell the baby the truth about his history and when he asks why he doesn't have any brothers or sisters we could tell him that he was plenty for us, and then we'd tell him about what a crazy two year old he was. I like the music, though, and the magical way you make the wife beautiful and mean at the same time. Please make a sequel and let him take her back. Let the boy hate him at first but then get used to him and call him dad. Let the credits roll with them jumping on a trampoline together in the background, and the kid bouncing ten feet in the air and Adam catching him by the ankle to make sure he doesn't land in the trees.

Twenty stars.