

The Art of Falling:
A Collection of Speculative Fiction and Nonfiction

BY

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THESIS

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SUMMARY

This creative dissertation is composed of fabulist stories (fiction) and speculative essays (creative nonfiction). In three themed sections, my dissertation explores how free-market capitalism turns intimate relationships entropic and what it means to make art when economic logics fetter the artist's imagination.

There is a trend spanning at least the past decade of recent memoir wherein authors use a fantastical trope allegorically to frame their memoirs. This can be seen as a problem, in that these are memoirs of “ordinary” people (the “nobody memoir,” in one critic's parlance) working in a form often considered the purvey only of the already famous. The hubris involved in an ordinary person making of her life the stuff of story is not unlike the little girl dreaming herself a fairy princess, and the arc of the successful memoirist—wherein one's trauma, repackaged in the form of a commodity (aka the memoir itself), sells well enough to correct at the least the poverty-derived causes of the original trauma—is yet another version of the fairytale.

Against this negative perspective, however, I'd posit that both memoir and fabulism are to some extent staid forms, with many examples within each tradition of authors merely replicating the devices of their forbears, sans innovation. While I can't argue that speculative work will always and necessarily get outside marketplace dynamics, I would argue that this fusion opens up a potent space of possibility, and it's one this collection—in both my fiction and my speculative nonfiction—hopes to exploit in order to create works of prose that are highly critical of marketplace influences on literary production.

PART I:
THE PRECARIAT

Everything Must Go

Split-level ranch-style home features a spacious and private fenced backyard with a covered deck and small dog run.

The blue-gray house at 1414 Linden Dr. is afraid of the dark. The foreclosure crisis hit its neighborhood hard, and in house after house, lights wink out and never turn back on. The house at 1414 waits for new families to move in, and sometimes they do, but more often than not the owners abandon their property. Linden Drive grows increasingly desolate, and 1414 clings to the warmth and safety of its inhabitants, sure that it is too well-loved to be left behind.

Its family owns a dog, an ancient mutt with a gray-frosted muzzle who spends most of his time in the backyard, sprawled on his side in the brown grass. The house has long admired the diligence with which the mutt defends its home. When neighbors pass by with their own dogs, Lucky drags himself over to the gate connecting his run to the front yard and lets loose a fit of barking. But one morning in late summer, a man with two collies strolls past, and Lucky doesn't bark.

Two thick branches of English ivy pull away from 1414's exterior and wend their way around the corpse. The rusted hinges of its cellar-door croon a lullaby of creaks and whines as they gape wide to receive Lucky. The house pulls the vine-choked body deep inside its walls. Tucked between sheets of plaster and insulation, the dog mortifies; soon the basement reeks of decay. Upstairs, a girl mourns her lost pet.

East-facing bedroom catches morning light, a bonus in wintertime.

The daughter at fourteen is a folded-up girl of elbows, knobby knees and angles a which-way. She loves origami, late into every night creasing out birds of paradise,

pagodas, sea horses, and lotuses that trip from her fingertips. From her ceiling hang a thousand cranes it took her months to fold, multicolored and hopeful, made of wrapping paper, construction paper, butcher paper, wax paper, glitter paper, natural-wood-pulp paper. Origami paper proper she treasures, hoards like allowance money or dragon's gold. The house thinks of the folded-up girl as Paper, and loves her.

Corner bedroom features windows on two sides. Bright and airy!

The son is growing wings. They first appear after his thirteenth birthday party, when his mother burns the cake and then locks herself in the bathroom while his father sits alone in the garage, drinking whiskey and building birdhouses out of scrap. The son packs a suitcase and explains his plans to Paper: he'll escape out his bedroom window, run away to join the circus. His sister talks him out of it, to the house's relief. The boy's wings begin as nubbins protruding from each shoulder blade that ache and ache as he grows. By seventeen, nubbins have grown into a skeletal wing-structure, hollow bones covered in tufted feathers and long pinions, though he cannot yet lift himself off the ground. The house thinks of the winged boy as Bird, and loves him.

Third bedroom, slightly smaller—use it for storage, or turn it into baby's first bedroom.

Their mother has her own workspace wherein she fashions elaborate textile art from found objects, fabric, and yarn. Lately, though, the house has noted a desperate loneliness threaded through her. Husband at work, kids at school, she fritters away her time following the soaps, crocheting blankets only to unravel them. She ties each member of the family to her via thick silken cords, cords whose color changes depending

on her mood: crimson for anger, cerulean for disappointment, jet for possessiveness, silver for regret. The house lets these strings tangle throughout the hallways, following the arcing filaments from room to room. The house tries to warm to her, but she's metal-cold, her voice scissor-sharp. The house fears her, and calls her Needle.

Two-car garage.

A grease-stained man who smells of slaughter, their father lives in the garage when he doesn't live at his butcher shop. The house envies him his children's unconditional love: they crouch at his elbows as he shingles a miniature roof, then fight over who gets to help install his latest creation. A neighborhood's worth of elaborately finished birdhouses dot the backyard, attracting flocks of cardinals, rooks, and wrens.

But the house knows where the father keeps his skeletons, round glass secrets full of intoxicating oblivion stashed everywhere: in the trunk of the car, in with the New Year's decorations, beneath the bathroom sink. When the couple'd first moved in, before there were papers or birds between them, he'd kept this secret, and long has the house tracked the ebb and flow of his addiction. It calls him Glass, for the bottles that clink like chains and sing to him from within their hiding places.

Kitchen has no dishwasher but plenty of counter space.

The teens have never seen their parents in the same room at the same time. Needle pours canned green beans and mushroom soup into a casserole dish, then retreats to the pantry just as Glass heads to the fridge for an ice water. Only once he's wandered back to the garage does she reappear. Though the parents play elaborate hide-and-seek,

the walls speak; every night the teens lie awake in their beds and listen to their parents argue.

—The mortgage is too expensive; where can we cut back?

—Do we really need another birdhouse?

—We don't need more of your wall blankets, that's for sure.

—It's not a wall blanket, it's fiber-art.

—If we can afford your art, why can't we afford mine?

The house rustles the homemade tapestries that line its walls, drapings heavy with dust and guilt.

Downstairs master bedroom for maximum privacy.

The walls shout louder and louder, the house hating every resonant echo, until the only way the kids can sleep is by pressing palms deep into their ears. As if to compensate for the increase in noise, both parents have begun to fade from view. Their mother flickers in and out like TV static, as if she's trying to switch to a different channel. Their father's skin has become glass, behind which amber alcohol roils.

Bird catches his father getting dressed one morning, the flab of Glass's belly hanging translucent over his belt-buckle. He watches his father remove a fifth of Jack from its sock-drawer hideaway and down a few quick swigs. Through his father's transparent flesh, Bird can see the liquor slide slow down Glass's throat until it joins the tawny liquid sloshing waist-high. Tiny waves break against his bellybutton. The immediate difference is imperceptible, but as the days rush by, Bird watches the amber

tide rise from bellybutton to chest to clavicle, until Glass has filled himself up nearly to the brim, his eyes shiny as bottle caps.

Carpeted staircase with banister leads down to the lower level.

The house wakes in the middle of the night to a boot kicking through the safety wall of the stairwell landing. It groans through every vertical beam. Glass stands on the stairs, lamplight refracted through him casting whiskey-colored cracks across the house's interior. Needle's splayed against the banister, eyes rimmed red with crying, her lip split bloody.

The next morning, Glass spackles over the hole. The house, wounded, shrinks ever smaller. Does your room seem tinier than usual? Paper asks Bird one day. Bird nods, but they've gotten older and taller; they aren't children anymore. The house is grateful for these excuses.

All bedrooms have walk-in closets

Paper folds a dollhouse. The first piece of butcher paper she cuts is massive. It creases down into an eleven-room suburban ranch home identical to her own. Then small squares for all the furnishings. She sets it up like a diorama on top of her chest-of-drawers, back in the deepest recesses of her closet where no one else goes. Its white picket fence spills off into darkness, disappearing behind her winter coats. She folds up father, mother, brother, sister, and stuffs them inside. The house notices that a streak of red mars the mother-doll's face. Once her parents have gone to bed, Paper steals matches

from the pantry and sets the folded father on fire; he crumbles to ash in her metal waste-bin.

Within the hour, Glass slams out the front door. In his wake, a heavy silken thread lies twitching like a coral snake on the lawn, one crimson end severed and fraying. Needle moves methodically from room to room, packing Glass's belongings into boxes. Gasping cries push past her lips, her sorrow the crackle and shush of a blown speaker, a low rasp on repeat. The house howls wind through its eaves in mourning.

Bird seeks out Paper. Pushing open the door to her bedroom, he finds her sitting inside her closet, folding. She's trying not to cry, the hitch in each inhale synched in time to her mother. Bird catches Paper's hands in his to still their darting movements and flutters his wingtips across her fingers. She begins to comb through his feathers in long, even strokes and her breathing steadies long enough for her to confess her crime. Bird assures her that it couldn't possibly have been her fault, that she had nothing to do with Glass leaving, then helps her dispose of the small pile of new-made origami fathers that litter the floor.

Low ceiling in the living room makes for a cozy living space.

Every piece of furniture stands halved. Of the dining table, only two legs remain, its lacquered surface leaning out over empty space. Half a filament glows dimly within the halved light bulbs inside every light fixture, each under a halved lampshade. The rug is halved, and the refrigerator is definitely halved, as suddenly there's a lot less food in the house. Glass sends money, and so far they've managed to save the house, but Needle struggles to get dinner on the table.

Bird cycles from bedroom to kitchen, twice a day stopping before the half-fridge only to slam it closed in disappointment. The house remembers when it was just a wooden frame, before the contractor had installed its drywall; it imagines Bird must feel something similar: hollowed out and vulnerable.

Paper begins to watch her weight as if she hopes to become parchment, as transparent as her mother. Only the house counts how many times each day Paper locks herself in the bathroom and steps onto the scale. It dislikes the purple veins running so close to the surface of her skin, the curve of her lungs as they contract and expand within her ribcage, her bones visible like an abandoned building exposed to years of bad weather. If Bird notices his sister thinning, he says nothing.

Since Glass left, Bird sleeps on the floor of Paper's room most nights, and they lie awake talking until all hours, imagining the futures they'll have when they finally escape. Bird jokes that together they're a paper bird, one of his sister's folded cranes but with the power of flight. By their powers combined, they could fly far away from home. His broad wings span the room, a comfort. The house worries that the two teens will be divided next—half a Paper, half a Bird. It vows to keep them safe as houses.

Carpeted upstairs hallway means children can run and play in safety.

Paper grooms her brother's wings every day, and they grow in strength, though their pristine blackness is occasionally marred by molt. One morning, while finger-combing near his spine, she notices what the house has known for weeks: that several of his primary feathers have been cut about a third of the way down, at sharp angles.

That night, she pulls down all thousand of the cranes that roost against her ceiling, littering her floor with their rainbow corpses. The house admires her ingenuity, the trap she's laid to catch the wing-clipper.

Crunch, crunch in the dark and Paper leaps up to flick the light-switch. Needle's outline is a staticky blur, but her sewing shears, poised over one black wing, glisten in the sudden brightness.

Bird wakes in a rage. Before his sister's eyes, Bird's features morph into something *else*, someone the house doesn't recognize. Surely this nightmare beast can't be its own winged son? Bird's face twists into a black beak, his fingers curl into talons, and his feathers beat a furious whirlwind. He lunges at his mother, but she vanishes into white noise.

Downstairs half-bath for guests.

Their mother drifts through the hallways, visible only as a human-shaped distortion in space. Paper watches her mother pace, white-gray ants suffusing the outline of a woman. The house wonders why Needle has not yet returned to her textiles. Bins of crewel, quilting and lace clutter the craft room floor, gathering dust. The house finds this odd, as the craft room is the only space that has yet to be plagued by black holes.

Glass's exit left holes strewn everywhere—by the work bench in the garage, in front of the refrigerator, hovering over the couch in the den—and Needle keeps falling into them, a phenomenon that concerns the house. The teens generally avoid the holes, though they've accidentally created a few: Their dad has hidden bottles everywhere, and

whenever they find one, it implodes into a new hole, reality warping around an empty center.

One day, while playing find-the-bottle, Paper catches Bird drinking deep from a fifth of whiskey they'd discovered not a week earlier, one she'd thought had burst into the usual hole. She snatches the bottle from his hand and shatters it against the porcelain sink. Bird's face begins to elongate into that horrible beak, skin shifting to barbed feathers, hands to scaled talons, as if he's swallowed a black hole and it's consuming him from the inside.

From the empty silence surrounding them comes the susurrus of their mother's presence. Then mother and son are wrestling on the bathroom floor, him a winged, clawed monster, her a disembodied hush and ten fingernails that rake deep red furrows down his biceps. Paper squeezes her eyes shut tight as fists.

The house knows the three of them can't go on like this, wants to help, and does what it can, battening down the insulation to keep in warmth against oncoming winter.

Master bathroom features two sinks and a separate shower area.

Paper arrives home from school to find the dim outline of her mother seated on the bathroom floor, the under-sink cabinet open and a whiskey bottle next to her. Eyes unseeing, Needle's hands clutch at empty air. A black hole shimmers unreality beneath her. Paper wants to grab her hands and pull her away from the danger, but she's been here before: If she's not terribly careful—the house has watched it happen too many times—she'll be sucked in as well.

Paper sifts through her mother's sundry crafting bins until she finds something she thinks will work: a long skein of heavy cord in pale blue. She makes a lasso of cord and loops it over her mother's shoulders, grips the end, and tugs. Needle tumbles free and the hole blinks out into memory.

Her mother lies comatose, her outline shimmering, a needle held up to light and turned this way and that so its eye flickers into and out of existence. Needle stares through her daughter, and Paper feels as invisible as she'd ever wished to be. She takes her mother's cold hand in hers. Gently she loops blue cord around Needle's bloodless fingers. Round and round it ravel. Paper is painstaking; she threads the skein about her mother's every limb in ever-tightening circles, tugging the cord taut against her mother's incorporeal corpus.

It takes all day and late into the night for Paper to wind cord, thread, yarn, and string—two full bins of material—around her mother's body, a body shaped just like her own will be someday. Wrapped up like a spindle or a mummy, Needle can once again be seen. She meets her daughter's eyes, pupils contracting and expanding in bewilderment.

Needle moves around the house more freely after rejoining the land of the visible, stacking boxes of their father's things in the garage and out of sight, returning to her crafting, even hugging Paper every so often, though Bird still won't go near her. The house, thrilled to have Needle back, stretches happily through the long wires inside its walls, solid in the surety of their connection to the outside world. The house can appreciate ties that bind.

Small attic for extra storage.

Bird's slept in the attic since his mother's attempted pinioning. He tugs the pull-down ladder up behind him each night, just to be sure. Skin mottled with brown tufts of downy feather, face craggy with shadow, he hunches his back under the weight of the full-grown wings arcing over his head. Bird has been working, saving up for his great escape, and he's finally made enough, just six days shy of eighteen.

Paper's stolen her mother's shears; with them, she cuts Bird free of the silvery blue cord binding him to Needle. She holds out a loose twist of yellow embroidery thread, one end attached to the attic furnace. He recoils, hissing, but she pats his arm to reassure him: he's tied only to his childhood home, not to Needle. His eyes are falconhooded; nevertheless, he allows her to encircle his wrist with the thread. It glimmers in sunlight, golden bright and joyful. He stands to his full height, aware that he's taller now than their father had been. Stretching dark wings, he's poised to swoop down from the attic window.

The house is having none of this. It bares paned-glass teeth and snaps a sill shut on Bird's boot heel. Bird and Paper cry out, and then she braces herself against the window-frame and yanks upward, and Bird loosens his shoelaces and dives downward, and there's just his black boot stuck in the house's craw as he swoops low, then speeds sky-high. Windows rove wild-eyed; doors slam open and shut, enraged. Their father's frayed red thread is still out on the lawn, its color faded to pink. Paper stares after her brother until the black dot of him winks out against the horizon, yellow thread pulled taut as it spools out thinner and thinner.

All through the night, the house growls and shudders like earthquake, terrified that soon it will be plunged into darkness. It's grown too much like Needle, in her

desperation and possessiveness, and too much like Glass, wanting only to be filled. The house's fears form a yawning black hole that encompasses its plot entirely, as if the earth planned to open like a cellar door and suck the neighborhood underground like a hundred birdhouses perched atop quicksand. The house is immobile and has no means of escape, but it's seen the family deal with enough such holes to understand their operations.

The dog is in a state of advanced decomposition when the house coughs Lucky up from its bowels. It's swaddled the body in insulation, but that doesn't much contain the stench; Paper finds the corpse almost immediately. Tugging a sleeve over her nose, she rolls it into the garden with a rusted shovel and leaves it to mulch. By summertime, the remains will be skin and bones and the hydrangea blooms nearby especially lovely.

Paper walks upstairs to stand before her mirror, turning sideways as if reveling in the acute angles she's made of her body. Taking one hand in the other, she folds herself in half, then does it again and again and again. By the time the house realizes, long before it can formulate a plan to stop her, she's disappeared. Her mother finds her that evening, a single sheet of translucent paper, a note explaining what she's done. Needle and the house are left alone.

Large manicured front lawn with mature trees. Please call Arbor Realty to schedule an appointment to view this property.

A mess of bishop's weed obscures the walkway. A lattice trestle covered in ivy creeps upward toward the roof's edge. The house's eyes are shut, mouth closed and locked up tight. Neighbors who walk past keep on moving; dogs pull their owners across to the other side of the street. The house mutters, settles into its cracked foundation. It

monitors the single bright yellow thread that arcs into the distance, waiting for any movement on the line, any sign that its winged boy will soon fly home.

Here Be Toothsome Wolves

Sometimes they'd arrive in a house of straw blown in from the harvest, or they'd appear deep within the mirror-maze halls of an ice castle. Other times a prince-turned-pauper gone a-hunting them would stumble over a rusted iron cauldron and out they'd pop, one two three, and then they'd ask him three riddles and grant his heart's wish. Or they'd make him a devil's bargain and steal his soul. Or they'd sleep with him—one after another, maiden, matron, crone—and if they were pleased they'd grant him a palace of his choosing, and if displeased turn him into a hind or a swan or a wolf. None of the wyrding woods' many denizens could pinpoint their exact location, but prince and pauper alike knew when it was time to risk seeking the Fates: when toil and trouble had recently doubled.

#

Little Red was having wolf problems. A man in a gray wool suit stood on her stoop, his snout pointy, sunlight glinting off his teeth.

“Little girl, I'm your grandmother's mortgage officer. Is she at home?”

“She's ill abed.”

The wolfman snapped open his sheepskin briefcase and presented her with a stack of forms.

“Please tell your gram that her eviction is scheduled for this afternoon. I'll return later, with the rest of my pack.” The little man flashed her a predatory grin, shut his briefcase, and loped away on all fours down the yellow brick road.

Little Red wasted no time, rifling through paperwork, poring over the fine print. Everything was unfortunately in order.

Little Red stuck her nose into Gram's sickroom where the old woman huddled under a pile of bedclothes. "Wolf at the door again, wanting to eat us up. He has documentation saying we're behind on our payments." Red inhaled through her nostrils, bracing herself for a fight. "We have to ask the Fates for help."

Gram's eyes peered over the comforter, lids narrowed to lupine slits. "Do we now." They didn't talk about that, not ever. The wolves had come before, when Red was truly little, age six or so. Her mam had kissed Red on the forehead, then gone off to visit the Fates. She must've found them, or so Gram said, because the wolves left them alone after that, all through Little Red's growing up—til now. "When they're as like to cook us into stew as help us?"

"We don't have a choice."

"Ah, but we do, bright apple. I've a better plan. We'll make a run for it. Pick us a basket while I make myself presentable." Gram disappeared under her blankets once more, leaving a bewildered Red to clasp her long red cloak about her shoulders and head out into the wintry blue daylight.

A lunchbox tree graced their yard, with lunches of every size and color hanging heavy on its limbs. It flowered in every season, kept them fed even when times grew lean. Little Red pulled the ripest box down from the tree, sniffing to guess its contents: lemon tart, perhaps? An orange, certainly. Possibly a Swiss cheese sandwich. Wolves slept under the stars, ate meat every night. What did they want with her Gram's cozy house, with its tree that bore cheese sandwich and lemon tart? The situation was manifestly unfair.

Red brought the box inside. With reverence, she took her mam's axe down from above the mantle and tied the lunchbox to its handle, belting the axe across her back and sliding its sharp blade under the folds of her red hood. But when she went to fetch Gram, the old woman had scarcely moved. She'd merely turned sideways, skinny legs hanging over the edge of the bed, knobby knees peeking from beneath a pink flowered nightie.

"Gram, it's time to go."

"Patience, child." Gram murmured under her breath, her eyes unfocused.

"Should've done this years ago, might have saved your mam..." Recrimination lapsed into incantation: "Whimsy, whitewash, wicker, and bile; blue-tongued witches and blackest fire..."

Two round holes dilated open in the carpeted floor, holes that bored straight through to the dirt below, holes that had never been there before. "My, what strange holes those are," said Red.

"All the better to make our escape," said Gram, and Red wondered if Gram planned to shrink them both tiny enough to jump down the miniature rabbit holes. But instead, Gram's legs began to stretch, getting skinnier and knobbier-kneed as they elongated.

"My, what long legs you have," said Red.

"All the better to outrun a wolfpack," said Gram. Her feet disappeared through the holes, and she pushed off the blankets and stood, growing ever taller, until her palms pressed up against the ceiling. Her white hair tufted all a-whichways, but a witchy mischief lit her grin, an expression Red hadn't seen in years, not since Mam had disappeared. Wiry cords of muscle bulged along Gram's spindly arms.

“My, what strong arms you have,” said Red.

“All the better to carry us to the Fates,” said Gram, and with a wrenching sound of metal uprooted from cement, the house came free of its foundation. Gram began to run, lifting the house up and away on skinny chicken-legs.

Red went to the back window and looked out. From the darkness of the woods came five, ten, twenty furred bodies running low to the ground. They still wore gray felt suits, and the file folders they clutched grew muddy as they loped along, silent shadows chasing the running house.

“They’re catching us up,” Red cried.

Gram picked up speed and the house listed dangerously, rattling Red from room to room; she narrowly avoided cutting herself on her mother’s axe blade. Gram’s chicken legs kept on trucking but her wax-white skin had gone crimson with effort and the breath rattled in the cage of her chest so bad Red thought she’d drop dead right there.

“Gram, it’s too heavy for you.”

“Can’t...set down...”

Gram dropped the house with an oof, dust sifting down from the eaves, then collapsed, knees folding up to her chest.

“Too old and too tired, granddaughter mine.”

“Get up. We have to leave it!” Red dragged her grandmother’s skeletal frame upstanding, and just in time: there came a knock at the door.

“Ma’am, open up. You have stolen property in your possession; we’re going to need you to...”

Red didn't hear the rest of the wolf's speech; she and Gram staggered out the back door and fled into the woods, wolves at their heels.

Up ahead loomed an enormous black hollowtree. On every limb hung a warning: *Do Not Climb, Turn Back Now, Will Grind Your Bones to Make Our Bread*. Red almost missed the small sign tacked to a knot. It read *The Fates*, but the *F* had a slash through it, and beneath it curved a sinuous red *S*. High above them, its beams twisting round in the frigid wind that battered at the hollowtree's crown, perched a listing, lurching treehouse.

"Up there, must be," said Gram.

Red gave Gram a leg up, then snagged a low-hanging branch herself. They hopped high into the tree, one two three. The wolves stopped up short, howling and yipping: "A lien on your home!" "Interest rates at historic lows!" "Consider refinancing!" They then shook fists full of paperwork at the treetop, but they couldn't climb with so many files in their hands.

"What's that reek?" Gram asked, wrinkling her wrinkled nose.

The hollowtree had, in life, been a lunchbox tree, and rotten lunchboxes clung to every twig. Red stifled a gag, pulled a mold-furred box free from its branch, and upended its contents onto the wolves below. Yowls of dismay filtered up on the breeze. She flung rotting lunchbox meats down on the wolves until they skulked off, though their golden eyes still peered from the underbrush.

Red let out a whoop of victory, and Gram managed a wan smile. They kept climbing, stopping often to let Gram catch her breath, until they came to a trapdoor set into the base of the treehouse. Red helped Gram hoist herself up and through, then followed herself.

The treehouse was cozy and warm; a blue-tongued fire licked sparks from the hearth. Surrounding Red and Gram on three sides, three women worked busily away, tending to...nothing. Or at least nothing Little Red could see. The youngest woman was enormously obese. Her chubby fingers pulled fistfuls of air from all around her; the maiden shoveled nothing down her throat like she could never be full of it.

The eldest looked like Gram if Gram stood at death's edge. The crone tottered around the tiny room, slowly decomposing—an arm would fall off or an eye loosen in its socket and roll away. The old woman kept picking up forgotten parts and reaffixing them, sewing them back on with an invisible needle. A long seam wound its way along her breastbone, her head connected to her neck by a thread.

The matron kept busiest of all, though her teeth clacked with cold and she shivered even in the fire's warmth. Her frantic, darting movements reminded Red of her own mam's panicked flurry as she flew about the kitchen trying to get dinner on the table after a long day chopping wood. But though she stared, Little Red couldn't make hide or tail of the shapes the middle-aged woman inscribed on empty air.

"She's baking," Gram whispered, and sure enough she was: the matron rolled out air like dough, crimped the edges in an invisible half-circle, popped the potpie or pastry or pasty into the fireplace as if it were an oven. She hunched over to bask in the heat, then pulled out whatever'd been cooking there before. But her shivers came back in earnest as she crossed the room to hand nonexistent baked goods over to the youngest, who stuffed empty space into her mouth before belching loudly.

"What brings you to visit the Sates?" asked the eldest.

"I think we've come to the wrong place," hazarded Little Red.

“Oh no, you’re exactly where you should be.” The matron gave her a maternal smile without ever once pausing in the metric beat of her air-cookery. “We’ve upgraded. I’m Lack, this here is Clot, and the old one over there is Atrophy.” Clot belly-laughed, Atrophy hissed, and Lack leaned back, cocking her head. “So, what’ll it be? What do you need of us three?”

“We want to know what we should do about a pack of wolves been prowling around our house. You helped my mam back in the day, and we thought you might help us.”

“We’ll be wanting our gifts first,” said Lack. “A polite guest always brings a present for her hostesses, and this is our treehouse fine. Etiquette, my cardinal-bright girl.” Lack rubbed her hands together eagerly. “What’ve you brought to tickle our fancies?”

Gram had nothing but her nightgown. It was up to Red.

“I have food.” Little Red handed the untouched lunchbox over to Clot, who tucked in, oblivious to the distinction between fictitious food and real.

“And I have my red cape.” Red undid the clasp of her beloved cloak and shimmied free of it. Lack tested the red fabric between roughened fingertips, then swung the heavy material over her back. Little Red watched Lack’s shivers calm. The matron-Sate wrapped herself up tight as a rug, fire casting flickering shadows down her narrow face. She appeared so like Mam, Red had to look away.

“And I have this axe. My mam left it for me before she disappeared.” Little Red pulled the axe free from where it hung like a hunchback across her narrow shoulders. She handed it to Atrophy, who lurched a bit under its weight.

“Little girl, this is not the gift I desire, and it’s not the gift will convince us to call off our wolves, neither,” hissed Atrophy.

“But I’ve given you all I have!” said Red, outraged.

Atrophy produced a quill and a yellowed sheet of paper, edges cracked with age. “Not quite. Sign on the dotted line.” Little Red could see, above the blank for her name, the narrow loops of her mother’s handwriting, and above that, Gram’s. Red squeezed shut her eyes and signed.

Atrophy’s lips curled in a rictus, revealing a row of cracked and blackened teeth. Gram shot Red one terrified glance as Atrophy hefted the heavy blade, and then in one sharp stroke the Sate cut clean through Gram’s neck, snickety-snick. Gram’s head rolled along the slanted floor until it stopped up at Lack’s feet; the matron scooped it up.

Red had no time to cry out or speak or think. They’d killed Gram—perhaps to cook her into stew—rather than help, and it was Red’s fool idea had started it all. She knelt beside Gram’s body, patted the withered hands to smooth their wrinkles, stroked the gore-covered, pink-flowered nightie, and began to sob.

“No use blubbering, girlie. Do you want your Gram back or not?” Atrophy asked, all business.

“Catch,” said Lack, tossing Red the corpse-head. Red almost dropped it, blood spattering her hands and disappearing into the folds of her red dress.

With delicate seamstress’s fingers, Atrophy loosened the thread keeping her own head attached; it came free with a tug, her rejected visage landing facedown on the floor.

“What’re you waiting for?” Clot said between mouthfuls of lemon tart.

Atrophy's headless body held out a hand. Pinched between thumb and forefinger, the Sate's sinewy thread, which Red took up, though she scarce could see the needle through tears. Lack held the seam steady while Red, stitch by stitch, sewed Gram's head onto Atrophy's neck.

"That's better," said atrophied Gram, cracking her neck, her wrists, all ten fingers.

"Gram? Is that you?" Little Red didn't trust the Sates for a split minute. "Can we go home now?"

"Yes and no, child. I'm a Sate now, and that 'home' you think is yours? Belongs to me and my sisters." The old woman's cracked and blackened smile was all Atrophy and no Gram.

"No! This wasn't in the contract."

"We promised nothing. You came begging." Atrophy raised her chin high and howled, and the other two Sates joined in, calling their pack. Red stared in dismay as an endless cascade of wolves erupted from the treeline; as one, they dropped the paperwork clutched in their fists and began to scale the hollowtree, nails scything deep into bark as they climbed to meet their mothers. As they breached the windowsill and began to flood the tiny room with their muffled barks and shuffling paws, Clot unhinged her jaw and commenced shoveling wolves into her mouth, tail over claw, the squeak and crunch of gristle and bone grinding through the treehouse.

Lack slid over to Red, patting her shoulder in consolation. "Never you mind, dearie. Everyone signs eventually."

Little Red felt her face begin to stretch, snout elongating to monstrous length, the backs of her hands tufting with fur. When she opened her mouth wide to scream, her tongue caught the sharp edges of a mouthful of glittering teeth.

You'd Be Someone You Wouldn't Recognize

Robert Ramsey, Jr. didn't have an imaginary friend, but he wanted one so badly he could taste it in the salt-rust tang of blood filling his mouth. All the other kids had one. Hunter's friend was named Wormhole, or sometimes Blackhole, and once, Deathstar. Wormhole could shape-shift into a supernova, but usually he was a ten-foot-tall astronaut who rode on a dragon that was also an interstellar spaceship. Maylin's friend was named Narwolf, a giant wolf with a unicorn horn who could fly by magic. Even Quiet Norman had an imaginary friend: Quiet Norbert. Quiet Norman swore Quiet Norbert was the best friend a guy could have—they played videogames together, he said, and had watergun fights on the weekends, and Norbert always let Norman win at chess.

Robert had never once seen an imaginary friend in action, though not for want of trying. Every day Hunter, Maylin, and Quiet Norman perched at the top of the jungle gym, heckling all comers, and every day Robert fought to climb to the gym's apex despite their teasing.

"My imaginary friend has a jet pack and he picks you up and flies a million feet up into the air and drops you and you die," Hunter would shout, but Robert started climbing anyway.

Then came Maylin's sing-song: "This jungle gym's for people with imaginary friends. You don't have any friends, so you can't come up." But Robert would squint into the sunlight and keep climbing, boot soles squeaking against metal.

"What's wrong, new kid? Don't you speak English?" Norman's taunt was cruelest of all. Shy to the point of invisibility, Robert's throat closed up whenever Mr. Hastings called him out in class.

“He can’t talk; he’s too dumb. Kill him, Wormhole!” Then, with Maylin egging them on, Hunter and Norman tag-teamed Robert, plucking his fingers from the rungs one by one. In the scrabble of hands, Robert couldn’t tell if it was just Hunter and Norm, or if there really were two extra, invisible people tugging at his fingers. Then Robert’s hands slipped and he fell through the bars to land hard in the sand, teeth chomping down on his tongue. By the time he’d picked himself up from the dirt, his three antagonists had leapt down from the jungle gym, darted away through the surrounding trees, and disappeared.

All the long walk home, Robert spit red around a swollen tongue and plotted how to make friends at this, his third school in as many years. If he could just get in to the imaginary friend club.... Maybe if he made up a friend. No one would ever know. Call him Billybob Jailtime, like a real hardcore criminal with tattoos who hated ice cream and all children but Robert—BB for short, like the gun. He’d be a jewel thief and a fighter-jet pilot who stole diamonds out of bank vaults by exploding their locks with his super-powered laser.

That night, Robert ignored his math homework and doodled in his sketchpad instead, drafting a long comic strip of BB in action, complete with pictures of jewels, airplanes, and exploding buildings. Tomorrow for show-n-tell, if he didn’t chicken out, he’d reveal the illustrated Billybob Jailtime. But just in case, Robert hung his brand-new fatigues beside his backpack, matching cap included. His mom had brought home the fatigues for his birthday—desert camo, light brown and tan like coffee stains on linoleum or the Velveteen Rabbit’s fur. The sounds of television emanated from his mom’s bedroom down the hall: gunshots and a woman’s scream, then the murmur of detectives investigating. No point saying goodnight. He knew she’d already be asleep.

The next day at school, he didn't try to climb the jungle gym at recess, just stood at its base, hands on hips, willing himself to speak.

"Hey, Hunter. Guess what."

"You have a stupid outfit?"

Robert ignored this; he couldn't wait to tell them all about BB, the words tripping off his tongue. "I have an imaginary friend now. His name's Billybob and he's got a fighter jet and a super-powered laser gun and he's a robber like in Cops and Robbers, but better."

Conversation whispered from the top of the gym as the three talked it over. Finally Hunter yelled down; "Do you and Billybob wanna play jail tag?"

"Heck yeah!" Billybob Jailtime was going to rock at jail tag. "How do you play?" Robert asked.

"You're the jailer, see, and you hang out under the jungle gym until me and Wormhole bring back prisoners."

The other three dispersed, Maylin racing across the playground with Hunter in pursuit, his jersey flickering red as he shot between pine trees. Robert climbed through the rungs and hunkered down in the sand. He scratched out elaborate diagrams in the dirt detailing the lengths he and BB would go to defend the jail once Hunter captured him some captives. He waited, and he waited some more. An hour later, a furious Mr. Hastings pulled a camouflaged Robert out from beneath the bars and escorted him back to class. Befuddled, Robert realized halfway across the empty playground that he must have missed the recess bell.

Back in the classroom, Mr. Hastings ushered everyone into a show-n-tell circle.

“Robert, let’s begin with you.”

Robert stood up, stepped into the middle of the circle. His camouflage was too hot, suffocating him, and he pulled off his hat, twisting it between his hands. In a whisper, he managed: “I brought in...I mean I wore, I’m wearing...This is my camouflage.” Some of the kids had the audacity to seem interested despite Hunter and Maylin radiating boredom; Robert was heartened. “This type of camo’s called chocolate chip, like the cookies. Its real name is six-color desert pattern because it has six colors in it.”

“Can you count all six colors, kids?” Mr. Hastings said, and Robert wilted as thirty pairs of eyes trained on his fatigues, counting.

“These are like my dad’s. He was in the war, the...um. They’re for the Gulf War. This kind of fatigues.” The words stopped up against his teeth.

“Your hat is stupid,” said Hunter.

“Real camouflage is green. That’s brown.” Maylin chimed in.

“It’s for sand,” Robert shot back.

“Now, now,” said Mr. Hastings.

“So you can hide from camels?” Hunter said, and Maylin snickered behind him.

“No, terrorists.”

“There aren’t any terrorists in Forest Glen. And there’s no sand, either.”

Except on the playground, where you left me, Robert thought but knew better than to say.

“That’s enough,” said Mr. Hastings. “Robert, you may sit down. Trina?”

A blonde girl clutching a Barbie still in its packaging stepped into the circle.

Robert deliberately sat between Hunter and Maylin. They made way for him grudgingly.

“Where’d you guys go?” he hissed.

“We took a vote and decided you lied to us.” Hunter shrugged.

Maylin tossed her black hair disdainfully. “Sillybob isn’t real. You made him up.”

“Nuh-uh! He is totally real.”

“Oh yeah? Prove it,” she said.

“I can’t. He’s imaginary.” The idea came to him out of nowhere: “You prove it first.”

“Fine,” said Hunter, elbowing Norman, who sat cross-legged on his other side.

“Hey Norm, what’s Wormhole doing now?”

Norman stared into space for a minute, then his eyes followed an invisible target across the room.

“He just jumped off his dragon, walked over to Mr. Hasting’s desk, and sat in his chair. But he’s ten foot tall, so he has to scrunch all up to fit. Mr. Hastings is gonna freak when he sees a real live supernova at his desk.”

Robert was dumbfounded; Maylin giggled, staring at the empty desk chair. As if on command, the chair gently swiveled—a breeze from the open window behind Mr. Hasting’s desk, perhaps, or proof positive that Norman told the truth? “There’s nothing there!” Robert protested.

“You’re just not cool enough to see him,” Maylin said.

Robert heard a ripping noise and stared down at his hands. He’d torn the brim of his cap clean off. He stood up, throwing down the pieces with the righteous indignation of Billybob.

“Oh yeah? Well for show-n-tell, I totally brought in my imaginary friend. His name is Billybob Jailtime, and he’s a soldier who’s also a fighter-jet pilot and a badass. And Billybob told me to tell you that he’s gunning for all your dumb friends. He’s going to find them and kill them, one by one.”

He ended up in the principle’s office, but the secretary proved unable to contact his mom and they had to let him go at school’s end, same as always.

At home that night, he added another twelve panels to his comic. How Billybob grabbed Wormhole and turned him inside out until Wormhole exploded into a supernova of gore, bits of astronaut all over the page. How Billybob stalked Maylin’s narwolf through the snowy slopes of Antarctica until it took flight off a high cliff, and then Billybob Jailtime took his laser-gun and shot that unicorn-dog right out of the sky, and for good measure cut off its spiral horn besides. How Billybob switched his laser-gun to reverse and with one perfect shot turned Quiet Norbert into Quiet Norm’s shadow, so that Quiet Norbert would always be behind Norman, silent and invisible, unable to ever win a watergun fight or lose to Norman at chess.

At recess the next day, the jungle gym stood desolate. Scouting the area, Robert almost stepped in a pool of yellow-streaked vomit. No wonder the gym was unpopular. He wandered around the playground in search of the imaginary friend club, increasingly weirded out.

They found him first, cornering him at the slide. Maylin’s lips curled in a sneer, and even the usually impassive Norman looked pissed, but Hunter swayed queasily and his eyes were pink-rimmed.

“What’s wrong with you guys?” Robert asked.

Hunter scrubbed the back of a hand across his eyelids and under his nose, snorting his sleeve. “Nothing,” he said.

Maylin stepped between Robert and Hunter. She came up to Robert’s shoulder, and whether she shook with anger or fear, Robert couldn’t tell. “You’re stupid and your friend is a serial killer, that’s what wrong.” She pushed Robert in the chest. “Narwolf’s gonna rip your guts out.”

Robert stumbled backward, then steadied himself. “I didn’t do anything.”

That provoked a high-pitched hiccup from Hunter.

“I didn’t! I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Robert said.

Maylin howled as she launched herself at him, arms locked around his waist in a flying tackle, but Robert had learned a thing or two about self-defense before his dad died, and he held his own, even three to one—or was it five? And then Mr. Hastings was there, and Robert found himself airborne, still kicking and throwing punches, as Mr. Hastings carried him bodily to the principal’s office. Even after an hour of interrogation, Robert couldn’t explain how the fight had started.

He was determined to find out. After school, Robert didn’t head up Woodland Rd. toward his house. Instead, he stalked the imaginary friend club until they split up at Ash Dr. From there, he followed Quiet Norman. As Norman turned off into the neighborhoods, Robert sprinted down the block and caught the smaller kid by the arm.

“What did Hunter tell you I did?” Robert panted.

Quiet Norman’s face twisted up in scorn, disgust, and more than a little fear.

“He didn’t tell me anything. I saw it.”

“Saw what?”

“What you did to his friend.”

Billybob had planned to turn Wormhole inside out and explode him like a bank vault. “But I didn’t see anything.”

“Astronaut meat hanging from the jungle gym bars? Blood everywhere? You made Hunter barf in front of everyone.” Norman stared at him. “You really can’t see anybody’s friend.” He jerked his arm in Robert’s grasp, yelling: “Geroffame! Norbert, help!”

Robert felt a sharp pain behind his knee and his leg buckled; Norman pulled free of Robert’s grip and took off running. Robert whipped around, punching at thin air in hopes of making contact with his invisible attacker, but there was no one there, no one besides a rapidly disappearing Norman. Robert didn’t know what to think. It felt like someone’d kicked him, but maybe he’d imagined the whole thing?

He knew he’d made up Billybob Jailtime, and yet his friend had come through for him, slaughtered Hunter’s friend just like in the drawings, a real bloodbath. But even with firm proof of Billybob’s existence (or so Robert had to believe...he still hadn’t seen a damn thing), Norman still wouldn’t be his friend. Well, he’d show them—even if Robert couldn’t see his own friend, BB sure could see *their* friends. Maylin and Quiet Norm had to be wondering when Billybob was coming for them.

Narwolf didn’t last the week. The next day at recess, the playground was eerily quiet. Robert ran straight for the jungle gym. A wall of kids K through 3 stood in a circle around Maylin, but no one paid her much attention. They were pointing at something in front of her, something he couldn’t see.

“What’re you looking at?”

A blonde girl with tear-streaked cheeks recoiled from him. “Maylin’s unicorn-puppy. He’s all dead and stuff.”

He remembered his illustration, a giant wolf splayed out in the snow. A jagged golden stub where its horn ought be. Intestines oozing where gunfire had ripped open its stomach. Maylin stood stiffly, flanked by Hunter and Norman. She wouldn’t look at Robert.

“You killed her dog,” said Quiet Norman.

“There’s nothing there,” he protested.

“You’re a bully. Only bullies beat up on girls. Only bullies hurt dogs.”

Robert felt tears prick his eyes, and for the first time in his life, he fled a fight. He ended up in the boys’ bathroom huddled in a stall, ripping pages out of his sketchpad and flushing them, rip, tear, flush, over and over. He would not let himself cry over someone else’s dead dog that wasn’t even real. He hadn’t cried since his dad died, and he wasn’t going to cry now.

The next morning during art class, Robert began a new comic, peaceful scenes of Billybob and Quiet Norbert playing chess, but he felt distracted. It wasn’t fair that he couldn’t see his very own friend he’d made up all by himself; it wasn’t fair his only friend had come out evil. Robert’s eyes flicked over to Mr. Hastings’ desk, to the empty swivel chair. Concentrating with all his might, *believe he’s real, believe*, he stared at the slowly rotating cushions, sketching without looking down at the page beneath his pen, finishing just as the recess bell rang. He’d drawn Billybob Jailtime just as he’d seen him: seated in Mr. Hastings’ chair, a machine gun in each hand, a belt of grenades slung across his chest. Billybob’s eyes were closed, as if he were dead, or dreaming.

At recess, Robert raced to the jungle gym, praying he wouldn't be too late to catch his imaginary enemy and stop him before he killed again. As he approached the metal cage, he saw a familiar figure crouched in the sand.

"Norman?"

Quiet Norman shook his head, eyes staring glassily at the sand.

"What do you see? What'd Billybob do?"

Norm shrugged. "S'okay."

Robert couldn't believe it. "What do you mean, it's okay?"

"You really are stupid." Norm rolled his eyes. "He was never real to begin with."

"You—you said you played videogames with Norbert. And that he sucked at chess. You said he was your best friend."

"He was, then." Norman shrugged again. "Now he's not anymore."

Norman got up, brushed dirt off his jeans, and walked away, leaving Robert alone at the base of the jungle gym. Beneath its bars, pressed into the sand, an indentation like the hollow left by a small body, head at an acute angle, limbs stretched out like a victim in one of the crime shows his mom loved so well.

Robert set his foot along a rusted rung, toes sliding until his boot scrunched at the join where the points of the triangles met. Hand over hand, no one taunting, no one to stop him, he reached the jungle-gym's summit in a spider-quick clamber. Surveying the playground, everything seemed smaller. Packs of kids traveled in loose clumps, elbowing each other, chatting, laughing together. In the distance, he could see the driveway leading up to the school and a long line of cars, mothers and fathers come to

collect their children. His own mother would not be among them. Carefully, precariously, Robert planted his feet and stood up on the bars, stretching his arms out for balance. He knew how much it hurt to fall.

Cornell Box, “Untitled” (contains Bluebeard, Tin Soldier, et al.)

1. Paper cutout of a red dress. Heart-shaped key. Papier-mâché pomegranate. Bronze hooks.

He’s not in need of a next wife but one finds him anyway. She won’t look at him directly. Instead she stares at his shoulders, his neck, the wall behind the bar. He can’t tell if she’s shy or coy or smart enough to know better. Perhaps some other girl has warned her—the bartender, perhaps? He *is* a regular.

She sits two stools down from him nursing a gin and tonic he bought her. When her glass is empty, she’ll take his heart-shaped key. He feels for her; he’d postpone that moment too, if he were her. She’s wearing a skintight red dress that reminds him of his fourth wife’s favorite lipstick and his twelfth wife’s short hair. Truthfully, red reminds him of all his wives.

“Let me tell you a fairytale,” he says, sliding a key down the bar and into her waiting hand, “about my past.”

“You think those are two different things,” she says. Still she won’t meet his gaze. “You’re so funny,” she says, neither smiling nor laughing. He’s learned that when a woman says *you’re funny*, what she means is *I’m frightened*.

He won’t let her get away. The next time her black eyes dart his direction, he grabs her chin, and she says it again, “What a funny man you are,” before tossing her hair to shake him off. To reassure her, he pulls down his collar just enough to reveal the heart-shaped lock above his clavicle.

When he leaves, she trails behind him like a wish.

“You forgot this,” she says, but he won’t let her press the key into his dry-knuckled hand.

He knows they all expect a torture chamber but when she steps into his apartment, tentative as a doe (did she really say her name was Bambi?), it’s bare as winter branches. There’s a saw, sure, but that’s leftover from when he installed built-in bookshelves. There are tongs and scissors, a nail gun and an array of knives, but that’s only because he’s a good cook and a better handyman.

“Your place is sad,” she says, fingering the spines of his poetry collection.

His seduction tactics are simple: Listen. Wait. Keep your mouth locked up tight.

When she’s revealed a few socially acceptable yet endearing humiliations, she stands, gin in hand (her third), to consult his key collection. Thousands of antique keys hang from hooks he’s screwed into the living room walls.

“Take one,” he says. She holds up the heart-shaped key he’s already given her. “Have another.” She hangs the key on an empty hook and pours herself a fourth gin.

Later, she’ll end up in his bed, where he’ll spoon around her—he keeps meaning to begin a spoon collection; spoons, like keys, tarnish without losing their utility. He only pretends to sleep, listening to her listen to his breath, which he deliberately slows and steadies. He waits for her to slip out of bed and into the silk robe he’s left hanging on the doorknob.

She will take down the first key that calls to her. Sometimes it is heart-shaped; other times it resembles a knife or spoon. Examining his sleeping body, she’ll find dozens, hundreds of locks. She tests the ones that most intrigue. First, she’ll slot the key she’s chosen into the hole above his heart (always they try the heart first), but when that

fails to open, she'll move on, perhaps to his left shoulderblade, or the soft pad of flesh behind his right knee, or the knob of bone where spine meets neck. Her tentative explorations grow more insistent as her fingertips fumble each new lock, as he fails to wake, as her key fails to open any part of him. Until she finds the bit she's meant to understand.

She unlocks his cheekbone and opens wide his face.

Inside, his body's made of tin; internally he's a suit of armor, hollowed out by all the times he's made himself a widower. Once she's gotten him open, she sticks her head into his and shouts *wake up*, but he pretends not to, despite how her voice echoes. His bright tin interior is cheerier than his skin's yellow pallor.

"What's your name again?" he asks the woman with her head halfway inside his. He knew it just a second ago. She recoils, slamming the door of his face.

"Were you awake the whole time?"

"Doesn't matter. You can be Pomegranate." He pinches the apples of her cheeks.

"Bambi," she says stiffly.

When he was younger he'd played the cello, that most human of instruments, cradling it between his knees like a woman he could never fully master. In another version of the story, his parents are an earl and a countess; in this one, they're real estate agents with multiple rental properties in several states. His mother put her heel through his cello once, complaining that his sawing made too much noise. His father had a new instrument delivered within the hour. That was marriage: one part cruelty, one part neglect, two parts exchangeability. One wife as good as any other, swappable as batteries.

Now, he prefers the strong to the merciful, hence his long-cherished obsession with entrapment, cages, bonds. Pets in cardboard boxes, dolls on toystore shelves, prisons, zoos, doorless towers, windowless schools, closed minds.

“I won’t sleep with you,” she says. Why won’t she look at him? He could rend her limb from limb just to watch the splash of color, but he’s long since dispensed with such formalities. No more ceremonies, dresses, rings, expense. No more vows. No more mess, no more cleanup. Deer, that plentiful, overpopulated species. Pomegranates with too many seeds that stick in his teeth.

“Let me introduce you to your sisters.”

He used to use a knife and fork, tuck a napkin into his shirt collar, but no more. He eats Pomegranate née Bambi in one tidy gulp. She sticks in his craw, but then the silk bathrobe works its magic and she slides comfortably inside.

Beneath his writhen heart he’s built a cage within his ribs, behind the bars of which his wives clamor. He exhales their fear after he’s consumed them. When he smokes, they cough. He sips gin and they get drunk in the rain. Symbiosis, like any good marriage.

The wives had names, but once they’re in his belly, he calls them after food. Apple (his first wife, the boring one), Artichoke (pliant, retiring, too rich for his taste), Arugula (harsh with waiters and deliverymen), Apricot (older than his usual, with laugh lines at her lips), Avocado (a throw-away one night stand, as tonight’s will likely prove to be). And that’s not even half the A’s he keeps inside, nevermind the rest of the abecedarium. So terribly many wives. He imagines the other girls must be directing the new recruit to her rooms, showing her the ropes, offering condolences.

Or perhaps not. He begins to shudder violently. They do this some times, his wives. Line up to rattle the bars of his ribcage.

He's large enough to hold every wife in his belly; he only wishes he could hold every wife in his mind. Their names, scents, likes and dislikes. Monogamy would make it easier to remember, but then what would he eat? Women are a puzzle to him—no, puzzle pieces. The rose perfume of his fourteenth wife, the seal-bark of his fifth, the way the twenty-first pronounced “please” as “police.” No matter how he fits them together, the pieces never cohere.

On nights when a new wife is settling in, he watches television, tonight's program an exposé of malfeasance in the contemporary art world. An artist sits with his back to the camera; the shadow he casts on the wall does the talking for him. “I made these silhouettes of women in cages, slowly starving.” The artist breaks down, choking back sobs. “I didn't mean to hurt anyone. But it had to look authentic.”

He imagines his wives gnawing their way out of him.

The television set at the end of the bed is attuned to his desires; it responds to his needs. Right now, he needs to drown in other people's romances while he chokes down his own. He watches the deadening screen with deliberate focus. Once his insides stop churning, he reinserts the small key into his cheekbone, checks to make sure he's locked up tight, then replaces the key on an empty hook. A thousand hooks just like it jut from the blank walls that enclose him.

2. Door that opens onto white space. A planchette. Scrabble tiles: O, O, M, D.

The haunted motel is by the shores of a large lake on which a tourist vessel once capsized. Everyone aboard drowned. The brochure claims that partially devoured corpses still wash ashore on a semi-regular basis.

We want to see a bloated corpse. We are not leaving until we see a bloated corpse. We are here to spice up our marriage, and a bloated corpse is just the ticket. Cheesy, perhaps, but fear is the necessary corollary to desire, and we want our spark back. Things have gone stale, cayenne-shoved-to-the-back-of-the-cupboard-and-forgotten stale. Neither of us finds anything particularly scary anymore, except the thought of losing the other. We have discussed imbalanced equations like: cancer is greater than not equal to monsters beneath the bed. Car accident beats serial killer. Suicide trumps zombie. We are realists.

The motel is a desolate place, unexpectedly so. It is high season. We were told to book rooms early. We were told to expect long lines. We were promised crowds, hundreds of people to get lost in, a collective good scare. Once we arrive, though, there are two other cars in the lot, one belonging to the front desk clerk, a pimply boy reading *The Hollow Man* issue #56 upside down. We are displeased. Being alone is actually frightening. Being alone is scariest of all.

We peruse the amenities. There is an animatronic alligator in the cow pond. You can see his mechanical interior every time his jaw opens and closes. This entertains us for thirty-seven seconds.

The beach contains not a single bloated corpse. We are disappointed; the search for corpses entertains us a scant twelve seconds.

We save the haunted corn maze for last. In the corn maze are statues, some of which are actual statues, others of which are actors waiting to scare us. We do not jump, even when someone whispers *oogaboogabooga* from deep in the corn. As we move farther afield, losing sight of the motel behind us, we see a door in the distance, set against the corn wall. The end, we assume. Except that every time we close in on it, it recedes.

“Do you see that door?”

“Why can’t we reach it?”

We find ourselves in a dimly lit section of corn maze. At the center of a row stands a man.

“Hello, actor.”

“It must be one of the props.”

“No look, you can see skin between his glove and his sleeve.”

We creep up on him like we’re the ones planning a scare. He doesn’t move. His face is made of tin (or is it facepaint?) frozen as if mid-scream, but the skin at his wrist ripples with veins that pop and flatten, pop and flatten, like he’s trying to communicate via blood pressure.

“So lifelike,” we marvel.

Creepy, yes. Scary? Not so much. Still, we find we’ve been entertained an uncountable number of seconds, a very good sign for our futurity.

Underwhelmed but up for more, we check in. The desk clerk brings our luggage to our room.

There's a mirror above the four-poster on which someone's painted in livid red, *omnes relinquitte spes, o vos intrantes*. The coffee table is a lacquered Ouija board standing on severed mannequin legs. The coasters are planchettes. When we use one to read our fortune, it spells D-O-O-M.

"Mood backwards," we note.

This entertains us for twenty-three seconds.

Then we see the shower. The curtain is a dead ringer for *Psycho*. Even the tile's the same. We marvel over the accuracy of detail. We've brought red wine to drink, but we are purists. There's no cover on the drain, just a hole like a lidless eye going straight down the pipes, a hole that we take turns pouring wine down, watching it swirl like red dye #4 plus corn syrup, just like in the movie. This amuses us for ninety-four seconds.

There is a television hanging on the wall, newer but with kitschy wire rabbit ears pointing toward the ceiling. We notice a strange whirring sound, like a blade sharpener or the wings of a fat beetle.

Ooogaboogabooga say the floorboards and, with a pained winching sound, a raggedy scarecrow springs out of a trapdoor beside the bed. Its timing leaves much to be desired. We are entertained for less than four seconds, but inconvenienced for much longer, as the scarecrow does not wish to return to its hidey-hole.

The television is permanently muted, which is not unexpected given the price of the room. We're paying for cheap animatronics, for actors to freeze to death out in the corn, and for a raggedy man to pop out of the floor once an hour right on schedule. We are not paying to watch television. But we're used to falling asleep to its flickering light, so we leave it on.

There is only one channel and only one show on. It's the show in which an eligible gentleman chooses between thirty potential brides. All the contestants are ballerinas. An emblem at the corner of the screen shows a slender woman in a tutu, eyes averted. Behind her, the smiling face of the eligible gentleman hovers like a second head. The rich man goes on dates with attractive young women and systematically eliminates them.

"I'm getting sleepy," you say.

"But we're having so much fun!"

"Are we?" You put your head on the pillow and pass out and I'm bored even before your breathing's steadied. You're sound asleep when the eligible gentleman brandishes a chainsaw and eliminates the first girl.

"Wake up."

"What."

"You missed it. On the TV."

You don't even open your eyes. The eligible gentleman murders each girl at regular fifteen-minute intervals, promptly after the commercial break. Each ballerina goes on a fantasy date to a famous ballet, and afterward he gives each one a flower. To keep track of who's been disposed of, I note flower, ballet, and means of execution: Pansy, *Giselle*, chainsaw. Violet, *Swan Lake*, axe. Chrysanthemum, *Nutcracker*, rotating blades. I can't stop watching.

Ooogaboogabooga say the floorboards. I put my foot on the trap door until the scarecrow quiets.

Beside the television, a door appears, possibly the same one from the corn maze. Up close I can see in its lock is a heart-shaped key. *Open me up*, the door beckons. *What's behind me? You want to know.* Speculation entertains me for fifteen seconds.

“Wake up. That door from the cornfield? It’s back.”

“Don’t open it. Don’t go down there. You don’t want to know,” you mumble sleepily, your eyes shut.

The eligible gentleman takes no joy in what he’s doing, dispatching girls with systematic precision. And then the ballerinas are dead, every flower given but two: a red rose and a white. Who will be next for elimination?

The runner-up is drowned after a viewing of *Sleeping Beauty* and a series of car ads. Her killer places a white rose between her teeth. The winner is allowed into a single, dimly lit room to survey her competitors’ corpses. The final shot is of the eligible gentleman handing the winner a red rose. We can see that behind his back he holds a diamond ring. She’s shaking and tears soak her shirt collar. Credits roll.

I find I have been entertained for as much as a solid hour. I shake my boring wife violently.

“There was a bloated corpse on the television, and you missed it. It was everything we’ve ever wanted.”

She snores faintly, then mumbles, “You know, I’ve never really liked horror.”

A marriage is the accrual of thousands of seconds. I open the door and step into the darkness. I let her sleep.

3. One-legged tin soldier. Heart-shaped lump of tin. A bit of tinsel. Matches.

The box artist lives in a series of interconnected boxes that from the outside look like nothing: a bricolage of corrugated cardboard, pallet wood, and particle board. His boxes appear to have spontaneously generated from between the cracks of a random stretch of sidewalk in Queens. They push out onto the street where cars swerve improbably to avoid them; they stack upward one atop the next.

Inside, the artist's boxes are lush and lovely, full of a magpie's collection of treasures. They (the boxes, the treasures, the artist himself) are by turns beautiful, capricious, and naïve. At some point a car will fail to swerve. A truck will slam on its brakes. And that will be the end of things. There will be a flattening.

The box artist is not an artist so much as a curator, and you have joined this particular tour so as to witness the minutiae of curation. The tour is small, only three other people standing beside you on the sidewalk, tickets in hand: a bored couple and their young son. You try to guess his age.

"Welcome!" says the box artist. He is lean, thin-lipped, balding, eccentric with enthusiasm. He has no eyebrows. Up close, it's possible to see wisps of white where his eyebrows ought be, faint marks like chalk smudged above his lids. "I'm so happy to have chosen each of you." Wondering what he means by such a Wonka-esque statement (you found out about this tour from the guidebook), you step into the first box, leaving sunlight behind.

Inside, the box is hung in sheets of opaque plastic. Behind them, obscured figures claw through, shadow-people trying to escape suffocation. You hope they are mannequins, not actors.

He does not use fabric in any of his boxes, the artist explains. He once worked at a fabric store where he swathed himself in unmade garments, imagining what this silk, that paisley might grow up to be. Now, fabric reminds him of lost possibility.

You move on to the next room, where pelts of dead animals insulate the walls. In the center, a plinth, on which sits a box of ivory.

“This box is full of dead skin,” the box artist explains. “Fingers and toes were easiest, but when the humidity was low I could peel my elbows and underarms too. Long strips like sticky silk. I put clipped nails in there, curling waning moons. Every box is self-display, but this one is perhaps the most literal.”

You move on to the next room, which is red veined in blue, like the interior of a heart.

“I fell in love with a ballerina. I’ve loved many ballerinas, but she was my favorite, because she was more beautiful than Lauren Bacall. I finally won her love, but she turned to paper in my arms. So I had my heart melted down. I keep it right here.” A sculpture takes up most of the floorspace. It doesn’t look like a heart. It looks like car accident detritus fused by lightning. You try to make out shapes within its mass (this is an art tour, after all).

The tour pauses so everyone can examine the heart, as good a moment as any for a smoke break. Put a cigarette in your mouth. Take a matchbox out of your pocket.

He notices the cigarette between your lips. “My ballerina smoked. I disapprove of smoking. Conditions are highly flammable.”

You light up anyway, gray tendrils spilling ostentatiously from your nostrils.

“If you weren’t such a lovely young thing I’d request you put that out. Do you dance? Have you ever? You could dance here, if you like.”

You feel uncomfortably curated. When you shake your head, the politest no you can manage, he shrugs and leads the tour on to the next room. Here the walls are painted white. A black box with gold clasps sits on a dais. It looks like a massive old-fashioned jewelry box or a Goldin box meant for sawing a woman in half.

“And now may I present: my favorite ballerina.”

The box artist unclasps the gold latches, opens the lid, and a life-size cardboard cutout of a ballerina pops up, paper-thin as a thaumatrope. When you look at her straight on, she appears three-dimensional, but then she pirouettes and flattens, her substance flickering, there and gone. She is not so beautiful as you’d expected from the artist’s description. (Artists always exaggerate. They always lie.) She doesn’t look a thing like Bacall. She begins twirling to the theme of *Sleeping Beauty*. Wrapped around the ballerina’s thigh is a shining silver garter.

“Her spangle. She wore it every time she danced.” He strokes the tinsel encircling her leg and invites each of you forward to touch it. The little boy, when it’s his turn, pulls hard on the garter then lets go, snapping it against the cardboard.

The box artist does not stop the boy. Instead, he knocks over the ballerina and holds her down so he can stroke her face oh so sweetly. The music pauses via some internal mechanism triggered by her collapse. When he releases her, she springs back into pirouette and the music starts up again. Over and over he does this, lets the box play a passage, then knocks the dancer down, her legs folding beneath her like ungainly birds. You feel she would like to keep dancing, if only the artist would let her.

“This box I made for my ballerina after she bound my feet and hands and stuffed my mouth with bloody ribbons,” the artist explains. “Then she danced on me *en pointe*. She broke two ribs and shattered my pelvis. The power in those legs could crush a man. I had multiple rib fractures. It was like my insides had turned to knives; I couldn’t help but stab myself internally.”

Your matches have gone missing. Check your coat pockets, skirt pockets, purse. Check the floor around the ballerina. As you stand up, her spangle sparkles. The bored little boy who snapped her spangle stands near her feet, watching as she spins. Her spangle is the wrong color, not the reflected daylight that filters between the boxes in yellow streaks, but the orangey-red of flame.

That boy has your matchbox and the ballerina is on fire. The box artist stiffens—you watch his face as his paper love crumples—and you think you might be strong enough to lift him, fireman carry him to safety even if he won’t save himself. But when you reach him, he’s flat as a page. When you try to lift him, he’s heavy as a misshapen lump of metal. You abandon them both and follow the boy and his parents as they slip between the boxes to safety.

You grab the kid’s elbow, the little pyro, and he tosses you your matches like he doesn’t give two shits what you think. He’s drawn something on the outside of the box: the faint outline of a heart-shaped key, sketched in ballpoint.

“We’re going to see the Unlocked Man,” he says. “He opens tonight.”

On the matchbox cover he’s scribbled the name of a gallery, one you’ve passed before. He and his parents head uptown.

You open the matchbox, fumbling for a light. You need a cigarette. Inside the box, another story is taking place.

4. One box, tall as a man. Map on which a small section is blank. Small pile of bones.

Bluebeard's wives plan to break out of his digestive-system Alcatraz. They've made a map of their collective knowledge. Artichoke unlocked his left shoulder; she knows the contours of his humerus where it attaches to his scapula and can get them past the deltoids and pectorals that surround it. Arugula unlocked his upper left thigh; she knows the secrets of his femur, hamstring and quadriceps. Avocado unlocked the soft nub of flesh behind his elbow; she sketches in the passageway from radius and ulna up into the humerus. Bone by unlocked bone the wives piece together the labyrinth of his interior.

They pack up their belongings, intending to travel light, and set out into pulsing red darkness. The map guides them, their path circuitous as they follow veins from limb to limb, an alphabet's worth of wives shuffling along like bloodcells.

At last they reach his heart, which is ugly and small and made of a substance they don't recognize, something hard and gunmetal gray. None of them are sure how it continues to beat. There's a door inset in its dull surface.

Not one of them had been able to unlock his heart, though for each of them it'd been the first place they'd tried. The map they've made is complete but for that one blank, terra incognita, dragons here abide.

"Fold up the map and shove it in the lock," says Pomegranate, and they do.

The map-key slides in to its lock with the rustle-click of a camera shutter. One by one they file through the door.

The wives emerge into an empty hotel room. An old woman lies on the bed staring up at the mirror above her, on which the wives can read the words *omnes relinquite spes, o vos intrantes*.

Excuse us, they say. We're sorry to bother you but.

The old woman sits up. "You're not who I was expecting."

The wives aren't sure how to respond to this.

The old woman slides her legs over the edge of the bed, stands, then totters to the open door.

Don't open it. Don't go in there. You don't want to know, say the wives, but it's too late.

The old woman steps into a gallery where an art show is in full swing. Papier-mâché fruit and silk flowers bloom from the walls. Hors de oeuvres float above her head, carried on silver trays borne by young women dressed like ballerinas. The old woman feels awkwardly underdressed in her silk bathrobe.

She recognizes the box artist from his picture in the papers. Beside him stands the main exhibit. She steps up to the glass case for a closer examination. Her breath skips—and here she'd thought nothing could scare her.

Inside the exhibit is her husband, she's sure of it. She'd recognize that bald spot, those narrow shoulders and broad hands, anywhere. He's let the artist frame him, enclosing him in a box of wood with a thick glass door. But something's wrong with his

skin. It's been segmented, and small squares of flesh jut out of him at regular intervals. He's been compartmentalized, his body a living, breathing card catalog.

Every box has been slid open so gallery patrons can peer inside. She stands on her tiptoes, the better to see. A few of the boxes contain objects she recognizes. A cork. A heart-shaped key. Other objects elude her. A hunk of metal. A matchbox. In a few, bloody organs glisten. An artery. A lung. She finds her husband terribly beautiful, now that he's been so exposed.

She wonders what he thinks, her husband. What does the picture dream in his frame?

He dreams every fear he keeps stored inside. Fear of strangers, fear of commitment, fear of horror movies. Fear of fire. Fear that no one will ever love him. The smallest boxes he stores in his head, and in these he puts his worst fears: fear he'll be misunderstood. Fear he'll always disappoint. Fear of enclosed spaces. Fear of being alone.

An old woman taps on the glass. She's trying to get his attention. She seems familiar, and he wants her to look at him. No one else. Just her.

He loves her for examining him with such focus. He wants her to look forever, until she's seen the interior of every compartment. He would never leave the confines of this box his frame, even if it meant starving to death, so long as he knew she'd be there, watching. He wants her to count every bone beneath his skin. If she'd only join him, he'd beg her to paw through these boxes filled with everything in him and of him. She could take whatever she wanted.

Unlock the door, he mouths to her. Please. I want you to come in.

Memoir

The book woke Lucille in the middle of the night.

“Little girl, little girl, pick me up, crack my spine, and I’ll tell you a story.”

Lucy buried her head under the covers and whispered “not real not real not real.”

She’d received the book that morning, a present from her mother on this, her birthday. A blank book for writing in. A boring present, really, except that apparently, it talked.

“Wakey-wakey eggs and bake-y,” it mocked, its voice a gravelly sing-song.

Lucy stuck her nose out from beneath the blankets. The book lay on her bedstead. On its cover she could make out a title, *The Witch’s Two Daughters*, and the face of another little girl, one whose black eyes glittered, watching her. Neither the title nor the girl had been there that morning.

“Don’t you want a bedtime story?”

Too bewildered to decline, Lucy nodded.

“Well, too bad.” The book cackled again. “How old are you? Six? Seven? You can barely read. What good are you?”

Lucy supposed that to a book, this was probably true.

“Where did you come from?” Lucy asked.

“That’s one way to begin, I suppose,” said the book. Propped up on Lucy’s comforter with its face turned toward her, it told her its tale:

“I once knew a girl just like you who owned a book just like me. But this girl spoke lies, and from her mouth tumbled snakes and frogs and lizards. Her sister spoke the truth, and from her mouth poured jewels: rubies and sapphires and tourmalines. Or does it go the other way round? The girl who lies spit jewels so sharp they cut her tongue

to ribbons, while the sister who told true was the speaker of living things, the leap and slither of reptiles and amphibians? It depends on how much you like lying, how a girl like you or a book like me tells this story. Which is worse? Hard, dead stones that chip teeth and cut flesh, or the slick mucous coating of a toad scrabbling up your throat toward freedom?”

“I’d want the jewels, not the toads.” Lucy shuddered.

“Of course you would. Now go to sleep, little lump. I’ll tell you the end in the morning.” With that, the girl on the cover closed her black eyes and began to snore.

But Lucy couldn’t sleep. She kept checking to see if the book still wore its girl face: 2am, 4am, sunrise. Yet long after sun up (after eggs and bacon, even) the sleeping child refused to wake, despite Lucy shaking her like a box of candy. Lucy ran downstairs to ask her mother where she’d found a talking book, but her mother claimed to have no memory of giving her the volume the previous day; when Lucy held it in front of Dorothea, her mother’s gaze darted around its edges, sly and guilt-ridden. When Lucy asked about the story of the witch’s two daughters, Dorothea said, “That’s nice, dear,” and went back to dusting the bookshelves.

The book lied. It never did tell her the end of that first story, but that was no matter; Lucy listened to the book’s stories as often as she could, and, when it was disinclined toward speech, read it compulsively. The book’s title changed nightly, and the story rewrote itself each time she opened it, creating ever-changing tales of ice-cream castles and dragon flights. She named her book Mischief, and for a time it bore this nickname in goldleaf centered above its face like a title, its girlish pout almost proud.

Lucy loved every story and would read no other book, until its pages grew dog-eared and its spine split.

“Leave me alone,” Mischief grumbled. “Read something else for a change.” The next day, its title page read “A Boring Story of Two Boring Borings.” As she turned a page, Mischief snapped at her fingers, drawing blood. It had only bitten her once before, when she’d tried to annotate a margin. Its little-girl teeth were sharper than Lucy would have expected. Her mother stuck a Band-Aid on the bite, which Lucy blamed on the next-door neighbor’s new puppy. She kept reading.

Mischief got savvy. The stories turned fast-paced action-adventure, but right before Lucy reached the triumphant finale, her mother would call her to dinner or demand she take a bath. She’d bolt her food, go from lather to rinse in under sixty seconds, but by the time she returned to Mischief, the story would be gone, replaced with an equally compelling and endless tale. One weekend she fought back, reading for forty-eight hours straight. The pages kept coming, the book growing fatter and fatter in her hands until at last she fell asleep facedown in its pages. Come morning, the story she’d labored so hard to finish had vanished. Furious, Lucy set Mischief aside, began reading other things. For years it sat untouched.

Lucy walked into her bedroom one afternoon to discover her mother flipping through Mischief’s pages. Surprised to see Dorothea acknowledging its existence, she perched next to her mother on the bedspread, peering upside down to see what the book had created. To her dismay, the handwriting was her own. Nausea curdled her stomach; it was as if she’d come upon her mother reading her diary, but worse: this was Mischief’s *idea* of her diary.

“These are good, Lucy-lou. I had no idea you were interested in writing. How many of these are true?”

Unsure which stories exactly her mother had seen inside the book, Lucy answered, “All of them,” which made her mother laugh; she was grateful when Dorothea dropped the subject.

That night, Lucy pulled Mischief down from the shelf. The girl on the cover had aged appreciably. Her eyes were the same black, but now she looked twelve, Lucy’s own age. Stranger yet, Mischief’s spine stood straight; the pages were no longer dog-eared. The thing looked brand-new. Her handwriting was gone and the pages were studiously blank. She grabbed a ballpoint and tried to write on the first pristine page, but no words appeared; the page drank up the ink. Confused, Lucy flipped the book over and the girl on its front spat blue ink into her face. Lucy shoved Mischief into the back of her closet, buried under a pair of winter boots.

Her mother seemed to think Lucy wanted to be a writer. To encourage this new habit, Dorothea bought her blank books for birthdays, holidays, and vacations, their designs ranging from Lisa Frank Dalmatians to Moleskine, until Lucy owned more blank books than word-filled ones. She wrote in the first few pages of each, then grew bored, her own stories never so good as Mischief’s, until she’d accumulated an alarming number of gently used diaries.

#

Lucy fell in love with a boy when she was fourteen. Andrew was much older than her but terribly cute—a raven-haired, geeky Prince Charming. She was sure he’d never notice her, but they hit it off in theater class and during the summer began sneaking

over to each other's houses at night after their parents had gone to bed, trading fantasy novels and staying up until sunrise listening to movie soundtracks: *Star Wars*, *Lord of the Rings*, *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

Three years later—Andrew now a sophomore in college but still her closest friend—she bullied him into having sex with her. She'd grown tired of the girls in theater class making Vs with their forearms, taunting her virginal status. As Andrew awkwardly tried to cram himself inside her, Lucy saw Mischief. It faced out from the bookshelf, the girl on its cover surveying the room. Lucy could see feel its beady eyes watching her, heard pages ripple like breath. It was over quickly, and Andrew, red-faced, crept out the window and into a sticky night.

When she came back to bed, Mischief was waiting for her. Its title read, "Lucy Loses Her Virginity," and the girl on the front leered. Lucy opened to page ten, furious: "His purple-headed snake pulsing with desire, he thrust deep into her warm—"

She dropped the book but it kept reading aloud from where she'd left off, and she fled to the kitchen, hands over her ears, to get a box of matches and a glass bowl.

The little girl keened like a teakettle as the flames consumed her. Lucy couldn't bring herself to throw away Mischief's remains: a few blackened pages, its curled and charred cover. Instead she sealed it in a large Ziploc and once again shoved it into the back of her closet, where it made her clothes reek of smoke. She stopped reading almost entirely; she'd been burned by a book one too many times.

She went away to college, then dropped out to marry Andrew, and together they had a girl: baby Alice. Lucy tried not to think of the book, instead devoting her whole self to the creation of a different kind of story, one about the raising of a little girl more

beautiful than rubies or sapphires or tourmalines. Until she found Alice, age seven, sprawled on the couch in a tangle of pajama-ed limbs with a dusty box open beside her. Her eager eyes soaked up Mischief's pages, sounding out the words:

“Once there was a little girl who found a magical book in her basement. It told her that it had lived in a library once, but all the other books were scared of its sharp teeth. It lived in girls' imaginations and fed on their secret wishes.”

Then, to her horrified mother: “This is an awesome book. Why'd you never tell me about it? I've never even heard of *The Witch's Two Daughters*.”

Lucy moved so quickly she abstracted herself. She heard the crack of the pages closing, narrowly missing her daughter's fingers. She heard herself screeching in an unmeasured tone totally unlike her usual temperate voice. Then she was shoving the book in the darkest recesses of the linen closet, running to the garage for a drill to install a padlock and bolt on the door, with her daughter sobbing at her heels: “I just want to know how the story ends!”

Now Lucy was on the lookout. The book would randomly appear in her daughter's bedroom, often flocking with other, more innocuous books—on the nightstand, beside the computer, on top of the guestroom toilet tank. Sure that it had begun to stalk Alice, Lucy took matters into her own hands. She put it in the wood-burning stove overnight. The next morning, she found it next to *The Neverending Story* on Alice's bookshelf, unscathed. She went out to the firing range and shot it through with bullets, ran it over with the lawnmower, electrocuted it with jumper cables. Every morning, without fail, it reappeared. Finally, Lucy went to visit her mother for advice.

Dorothea now lived in a retirement community north of a large mineral deposit and she spent her afternoons scouring the desert for quartzite. They'd grown distant; Dorothea didn't much like *Lord of the Rings*, or people who liked movie soundtracks, or anything else having to do with (and including) Andrew. Lucy's mother viewed Andrew as the boy who'd killed her little girl's dreams.

Beneath a pitiless sun, Lucy broached the subject of the book, and Dorothea for once didn't pretend ignorance. The story poured out of Lucy: the joy of reading those never-ending tales, the book-burning, Alice. "When I was little, it took time to heal itself. Now, no matter what I do, it comes back."

Dorothea shrugged. "It doesn't think it's yours anymore. The same thing happened when you were born. I flambéd it, doused it in acid, drowned it in the sea...I left it on street corners, paid a librarian twelve dollars to take it, did a witch's double-double ritual—you name it, I tried it." Dorothea picked up a hunk of obsidian the size of a child's fist and burnished it with her sleeve. "Then I asked it to tell me the story of where it came from."

"What'd it tell you?"

"It never spoke the same story twice, but somewhere between the first and the hundredth time I asked, it told me the secret to getting rid of it. Give it away to your daughter, it said." Dorothea refused to meet her eye. "I couldn't think of what else to do."

Lucy went home and confronted Mischief.

"I asked you once, and you told me a story about lies. Now I'll ask you again. Where do you come from?"

The book narrowed its eyes, judging. “You want the truth? I was hidden in plain sight for years. My third owner had no daughters, and when she was nearing the end of her life, she pasted the onlay from an expired atlas onto my cover and left me at a public library. Years later I got free of the glue and convinced another little girl—your grandmother—to take me home.” The woman’s face on the cover bared her teeth like a predator. “I keep waiting for one of you to die holding me so I can infect your gravestone. I’d ghostwrite a new epitaph every day.” It cackled. Lucy was not amused.

“Leave my daughter alone, and I’ll take your challenge and die reading you. I’m not afraid.”

#

They are old now, Lucille and her book. Its cover is a ridged tattoo weathered with age, the pages one long wrinkle. The old woman on the front appears to be asleep, her thin lips moving as if in dream, the veins in her eyelids buried under folds of skin. Lucy cuts a brown paper grocery bag into a slipcover to hide the sleeping face, then cuts out slipcovers for the two dozen of blank books she’s accumulated over the years. She excises the one or two used pages with an Xact-O. On each spine, she calligraphies “A Boring Story of Two Boring Borings,” labeling them volumes one through twenty-five. Beneath the title, her writes own name. The walk to the library is long and the stack of books heavy, but Lucy’s in no hurry now. She steps carefully so as to not wake the book. Perched on top of the pile, it emits whistling snores.

It’s a few hours from closing time when she arrives at the library. The building is poorly maintained; the city cut funding years ago, and the facility has limped along with a single librarian and too many empty shelves ever since. The lights are soothing and dim

as she places each book onto the shelf in a row, under R for Reed. Then she settles back into a plush chair to rest. Her arms are terribly tired. But she can't resist. She pulls Mischief down, boring book number twelve, and cracks it open one last time.

There once was a mother who loved her daughter so much that she resolved to always tell lies. The first lie, the biggest, came in the form of a blank book. "This is a place to keep your secret self," said the mother. Then her mother turned into a librarian with wings made of folded paper, and flew away....

Purchase, Murder, Theft

When the corporation finally comes to bed, he bites her throat, branding her with his mouth, which consoles her. Relationships are work, he informs her.

What is she to him? The rugged individual? The nanny state? She's insecure, has never felt sure in their relationship—though she likes what he gives her, that's certain, even if she sometimes wonders if the culture presets her to need what he provides. She offers him chocolates, expensive vacations, tax breaks, each the trace of her affection.

He fattens up, slowly at first, then overnight his bulk consumes the space they once shared. Grown too big, his heart stops.

When they come for him—other corporations, mostly, though some entrepreneurs drop by; parts for sale, cheap—they split him up piecemeal. His mind goes first, in a bidding war. They cart away his arms, his legs, the tire round his middle. She watches, mourns, remembers their first meeting. Him, an upstart in a cheap suit. Her eager, unformed, until he gave her something to want.

Even as they divide the spoils (is this purchase, merger, or theft?) — lymph nodes, brand name, customer base, arterial blood — she wants to be supportive, because she loves who she was when she was with him. She collects his leftovers: Fax machine. Tendon slippery with gristle. Rotary phone. Collapsed lung. An office chair missing one wheel. His big toe. Presents for the next corporation come to woo her—larger than life and fiercely desirous—marking her neck with brittle stolen teeth.

PART II:
THE FALLEN AND THE FALLING

Substitution

I'm training my replacement. Things I know about you that he'll need to know: You like your cappuccino made with skim milk, with a chocolate cookie on the side (you call it your morning defeats-the-purpose). You like sex with the lights off, high thread-count sheets, and your favorite color is blue.

I show him where the spices are kept, the way they're not alphabetized but rather organized according to frequency of use: lemon pepper, thai spice, thyme toward the front; salt, cinnamon, turmeric to the back. He nods absently through my explanation, his eyes drifting toward the basketball game blaring on the TV, and I check out the muscles under his muscle shirt and try to see what you see in him. When you come through the front door, just gotten off work, you're graceful and elegant even with your brown hair fallen down around your face (is that what I'm supposed to think?), and his eyes unfocus as he looks at you. I wonder, when mine do that, if I mean it.

Today I trained him on the answering machine, taping over our old message.

"Hi, this is Jenny."

"And this is her live-in sexual companion."

"We're not in right now, but you can leave a witticism for us after the beep."

"Beep!"

Your friends left some good stuff after that beep. I know, because I could tell your real laughter from your fake laughter, the difference between them and me. Maybe that's why he's replacing me. He refused to leave a message, even after I'd erased us. I set it up so a neutral machine voice answers your missed calls now.

Mr. Jenny, is what the kids at school call me. You loan me out to the nearby elementary school as a substitute teacher, five days a week while you're at work, and I mostly hang out in the special ed classroom. It's a job I love. There's Kara, who has Down Syndrome and drinks whole containers of gravy for breakfast; and Vincent, who loves screaming obscenities and falling down laughter; and David, who hates crowds larger than two. None of them ever throw spitwads at me, or do the robot, or try to get me to cry—which I've never done. I'm not sure if I can.

I didn't see it coming, when you said "we're through. I'm tired of your shut downs, your passive aggression, the monotony of us. I'd like you to meet John." My replacement. I remember your words precisely. I'd had some hope you were joking, that this wasn't really the end, until you introduced me to him.

"John's a musician. He works nightshifts at the Quickiemart, so you'll mostly be training him during the day, when I'm at work," your voice imperious.

He held out a sweaty hand, and I shook it, but I couldn't take my eyes off of you in your corporate suit. God, I love your corporate suit, your sleeked-back hair, the way you button your sleeves and roll your collar with precision. One of the first things you ever said to me, "I play by the rules; I don't need to advertise cleavage to sell advertising," your diction clipped. I never knew what you did at work, not really, and I'd have waking nightmares of executives slowly unbuttoning each pearlized button of your blouse, if they were male whispering "I want you" and if female, "When did you know? You liked girls, I mean?"

John doesn't make you coffee like I would, and he doesn't respond well to criticism. I saw him mix the last bit of your espresso grounds in with the Walmart-brand

coffee he prefers, and he let us run out of chocolate cookies. Sometimes when you forget to turn me off (you've been forgetting more often lately) I'll watch the two of you sleeping together, his huge hands and strange proportions, you tiny and collapsible. With him, you leave the lights on.

I never expected this. If I'd known, I could have gone back to school—maybe tried for a teaching certificate, done something with my—life? May I call it that? We could have adopted a baby, gotten a dog. What about the plush bathrobes, his and hers, and the monogrammed towels in navy? What about the crumpled bedsheets? Who will make them? I tried to teach him hospital corners, but he's hopeless. You were standing right there, and I thought you'd say something, because he was so clearly hopeless at the folding and tucking. But instead, right in front of me he said:

"I'm not doing this. My feet need to breathe. How else can I wrap myself around you, if I'm all restricted?" And he grinned at you, a dopey, disgusting, sexual grin, and you smiled back. At that point I knew I was done training him.

When you finally disconnect my wiring, the whirring noises in my brain distract me, and you give me a reassuring shoulder pat, "You'll power down soon," and I think, maybe you'll change your mind. But no, to you I'm polymer stretched on an alloy frame, a collection of spare parts. I don't know what I am, let alone who I am to you. Woke up one morning a substitute teacher at Fairmount Elementary, knowing which spices went where and how to program the remote. Knowing there was you, that you were the important one.

I remember a wedding, hazily. Maybe I'm a reconstruction: your dead husband, a high school boyfriend, a body housing a brain you used to love. I saw ads for that on the

Home Shopping Network. I remember a box; the smell of cardboard follicles made me sneeze. I remember you putting me together, plugging me in, turning me on, my nerves galvanized. You tease that I have narcolepsy, but I just forget to recharge sometimes. *Pinocchio*, that movie disturbed me, and you made a tactless, tactless joke, something about “I’ve got no strings to hold me down.” I don’t know if I’m a memory, a toy, a love, or an object. I don’t know what I am, and you won’t tell me. I don’t even know where I was built, just my make and model. I’m an older edition.

I worry about those Fairmount kids, how they’ll make do without me. I was indestructible, let them crawl all over me, comforted them at exactly the right intonation. The school district called this morning, left a message on the machine asking where I was. You could donate me to the school, to those kids; that’d be alright.

I’m happy you’ve found someone new, if only because I love seeing you happy. He just seems so absent, mechanically going through the motions of our daily lives. I know how to fold your socks, and he can’t even keep track of which side of the bathtub you keep the salt scrub, and which side is for the lavender body oil. I know you’ll get bored of him eventually, take me out, dust me off. Will my mind be rebooted, my body pulled out of storage? I don’t know how this works, and it’s safer that way, or so you tell me.

Earlier today, I found my manual at the bottom of my storage box. You’d left it sitting out, conspicuous, taunting me as I went through my morning routine. Just in case I’d had any doubts that you were through with me. From Chapter 11, under Basic Care: “If your house-bot is becoming unduly human, an extreme shock to his preprogrammed nervous system can act as a system reboot, restoring him to optimal efficiency.” When

my replacement wasn't looking—he was watching TV in the den—I took a butcher knife and cut through my pinkie. I had to keep from screaming, but there was no blood, just a bouquet of severed wires. I can't tell if the reboot worked or not, but I can't feel that finger anymore. I reattached it with black electrical tape from the kitchen catch-all drawer. You're almost out; I wrote "black electrical tape" on the post-it list on our fridge, and beneath that, "chocolate cookies."

The Sneeze

John's left the television muted, channel tuned to a rerun of *Everybody Loves Raymond*. Most of her clothes are still on, and he has a hand under her bra and her jeans scrunched down around her knees; his cock's in, but he's having trouble staying hard. She concentrates, holding him tight inside her, though her gaze keeps flitting around the room: to the ceiling behind his head, to his tanned clavicle, to the four lonely hairs curling from his chest. Anything to avoid looking up his nostrils. That would destroy the mood completely, because Cthulhu's all up in there. Has been for months now.

Just beyond John's nose hair roils a pulsating sea, within which an ominous figure hulks, silhouetted against blue-back waves. Head wreathed in tentacles, bat-wings unfurled, Cthulhu's red eyes peer out at her, bore into her. She wonders how long Cthulhu's been watching her and John, and if the Great Old One thinks they should break up.

She closes her eyes to shut out the view.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing," she says. "You have a booger."

"Shit." He doesn't bother pulling out, just grabs a tissue off the bedstead and starts spelunking. "Better?" He flicks the used Kleenex onto the floor

She nods and he goes back to thrusting, but she can't help herself; she peers into his nostril again. Of course Cthulhu hasn't moved. She half expects him to wave.

"This isn't working," she says.

His face is flushed. "You're not into it. Like a fucking corpse."

A fucking corpse city, she thinks, giggling.

When the punch comes, it's horrible because it's so expected. She's knocked back into the headboard, teeth closing down on her tongue, the rush of blood in her ears and filling her mouth. "*F'gthgn n'tugthen sh'ggh t'faugn,*" he yells.

Threat? Insult? Apology? Between hissing sibilants and choked glottal stops, she can't tell what he intends. "I can't understand you," she says.

"Ph'nawh'agl fhui'afh m'agln d'agln."

She tries to read his expression but she can't correctly gauge him when he gets like this. "Come again?" she pleads, which apparently pisses him off because he grabs her shoulders and starts shaking, howling at her unintelligibly.

Her teeth clatter and she's dizzy from hitting her head; the room contracts and time slows to an uncanny crawl. She's trying to focus on John, on his open maw screaming at her in that weird, alien tongue—Cthonic? Cthuvian?—when a long feeler juts free of his left nostril, gains purchase on his soul patch, and begins inching its way down his face. Transfixed, she can only watch as three more twitching tentacles clamber loose.

She pushes a tentacle away from John's lips but it latches on to her hand instead, suckers tearing at her knuckles. The nostril increases in size, yawning toward her, stretching irregular as an Escher sketch. Tentacles grasp her wrists, tugging at her; everything slides, melts, and she's falling, desperately trying to grab hold of something—John's arms as they ripple into immateriality, the sweat-soaked sheets beneath her—but there's nothing to grasp. Everywhere she touches, reality's rotten through; her fingers pass through pulp, fleshy and still faintly perfumed with the sticky-sweet smell of sex.

When the universe stabilizes, everything's upside down, angles twisted, distorted, wrong. They're in R'lyeh, Cthulhu's forsaken corpse-city risen up around them, its serrated skyline jagged as broken teeth. But Cthulhu's not in John's nostril anymore. No, the Great Old One is her-sized, naked, and ready to apocalypse. His cock is hard as a fist now, and green, and there are too many of them. Trapped in a vast and terrible landscape, she smiles at him like she means it, while her mind gibbers recriminations: *Just let him stay hard this time, and So this is what madness feels like, and What else am I supposed to do?*

When she wakes, John's quiescent and snoring beside her, his cock a shriveled, pale curl against the crimson sheets. She touches her swollen cheek, the back of her head; the blood's dried to a thin crust she knows better than to pick at. Sitting up, she pulls her knees in to her chest and stares around their tiny apartment. Everywhere, afterimages hang in the air: Cthulhu borrowing her floral-print apron so he can whip up some spaghetti and meatballs, both of them thrashed after a long day's work. Cthulhu rocking out on the couch in white socks and nothing else, playing air guitar to Led Zeppelin and belting his lungs out. Cthulhu and she cuddled up of a weekend, downing Coronas and binging on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* into the dead of night.

She goes to the hall closet, pulls down the same duffel she used last time, and begins to fill it with what little she owns. Just so long as he doesn't wake. Then she feels a tickle within her nostril, as if some eldritch tentacle lies coiled deep inside, just waiting to fuck her over.

The sneeze, when it comes, is loud as a rip in space/time; there's no way to muffle the sound. John stirs and reaches for her blindly; his fingers encircle her wrist.

“Nightmare?” he mumbles, eyes still closed.

She kicks her duffel beneath the bed and out of sight. “Sorry if I woke you,” she mumbles. She lets him pull her back down to the pillows, his arm flung across her waist, pinning her in place. A trickle of snot slips from her nostril and pools beneath her cheek; she wipes it away, leaving a trail of liquid down the inside of one wrist. In the flickering light off the silent television—*Married with Children* this time—it looks like a suicide.

What We Can't Reach

Two hands meet at a bar. She orders a beer and flips him the bird when he tries to pay for it; he gets a whiskey sour, tracing a heart into the condensation that forms on its sides. She gets drunker and he rubs up against her; they're like two sticks trying to make fire. They have no mouths to kiss or drink their liquor, so they just fumble at each other, searching for something to cling to—fingers, nails, the soft pad beneath their thumbs. They ignore the stares of patrons just drunk enough to disbelieve their own eyes.

At night, back at her apartment, she cuts a slit across his palm. It opens to a grin, revealing a row of pearly white teeth and a pink tongue. He takes the knife and she presses into it—and then she smiles back at him.

I love you is the first thing he says to her, and she says *touch me* to him, mimetic of the people from whom they've been severed. They have sex through the night, shoving fingers deep into the other's mouth, crying out because now they can. They play a game called See Who Can Scream Loudest, until a neighbor bangs on their door yelling *Damnfool kids*.

Parts of kids, they holler back.

The next morning, with their new mouths they ask the important questions only chiromancy might divine: *Why is your mouth so full of teeth? Are we living, dead, or somewhere in between? Are we mind or body or something more, and where do we keep our brains? Beneath the thin white lines of our cuticles? Beneath our lunulae?*

After a few weeks they grow bored of sex. She gags when he tries to shove his whole fist inside her; during pillowtalk she whispers *I want to see you*. Neither of them understands sight; they feel their way through the world by touch alone. *Let's visit the*

morgue, he says. They steal a dead woman's eyes, two intact hazels. Snickity snick goes his knife, cutting a socket right beneath her index finger, into which he pops an eyeball. Her eyelid flutters open, and the first thing she sees are his degraded cuticles. *You need a manicure wicked bad*, she says, blinking cycloptically at him.

Feelings hurt, he abandons her to the reek of dead bodies neither of them can smell, but in the morning relents and returns. He's mangled himself surgically inserting the other eye into his palm. *You don't look so pretty yourself*, he tells her. Streaks of dried blood thread along her life line, heart line, head line, trceries of how much she missed him in his absence. She's never cried before. She doesn't like it. Of course she takes him back, and they lick each others' shiny new eyeballs, reveling in the iron-salt tang.

They settle into city living, make new couple-friends. For Halloween, a neighbor throws a costume party, and he goes as the Hamburger Helper; she's the Thing. No one can guess who they're trying to be.

One hand says to the other, *will you marry me?*

What'll I wear? she demurs. He buys her a white calfskin glove. They stand together at the altar, declare their undying love, and put gold bands on each other's ring fingers.

He gets evil hand syndrome, starts beating up on her, his fist a battering ram mashed into her mouth over and over, *Suck my pinkie or else*. She finally threatens to leave unless he sees a psychiatrist. After a few sessions, they're walking together knuckle to knuckle when they pass an old vet, a double amputee. They hop into his pocket, follow him home and, while he's asleep, attach themselves to his wrists. But they

can't sustain self-sacrifice, detach themselves, and flee before the vet awakens. Even more than the therapy, that's what sets them on the straight and narrow. They stop drinking, take up yoga.

Over time they wrinkle. Liverspots appear. Folds of flesh form around her knuckles and stretch across her back; her stump looks withered, thinner than it used to be. He's pretty sure she's shrinking, that she used be as tall as his head-line but now only comes up to his heart. He wonders what she sees when she looks at him, her eye blinking slowly. She's become unreadable.

They get depressed, begin to believe they're so much dead weight, someone's cast off mobile prosthetics. In desperation, they attend a stranger's funeral and leap into the open casket. They fall asleep on the dead woman's unmoving chest. The coffin lid's closed; they're lowered into the ground and buried. Later, much later, he wakes in a panic, Grandma decomposing beneath them. He wakes her and together they scabble at the lid, clawing, scraping until it lifts just a sliver. She wriggles free, but he gets hung up on his wedding ring, swollen knuckles trapping him. His mouth opens in a scream and dirt floods into it. She seals her mouth tight, squinches her one eye shut, and scrabbles toward the surface.

When she finally claws her way up and out, fingernails cracked and caked with mud, she splays herself out in the sunlight, palm facedown, so very tired. She doesn't recognize her own skin. A crow lands near her, begins to peck at her. It picks her up by one finger, tossing her around like a bit of shiny foil or a rubber glove. Then it carries her away.

The Noble Art of Falling

She doesn't mind being hollow. She has transparent friends with saran-wrap hearts and shallow friends like smooth river stones and winged friends whose feathers are easily ruffled. Being hollow never seemed so bad.

When the hollow girl and the boy who's always falling first meet, he breathes into her orange hair and a whistling sound bounces back, the echo of her insides or his outside, he can't be sure.

No one ever taught him to ask, please could you direct me to a soft patch of ground? Or, please teach me how to fly instead of fall? Or, please won't you catch me?

How did she get to be so perfectly concave? Perhaps in her hometown they once grew gourds fat and happy, until heartache and famine hollowed out her internal organs, leaving them to roast in the sun, brittle as hope. Or perhaps her wounds were self-inflicted: One morning she woke hungry and began to carve out her insides with an ice-cream scooper until her stomach hung empty as a jack-o-lantern.

How'd he begin to fall? He was pushed.

He wants to fill her hollowness with his falling, fall into her, collapse her collapsible body with his own. He wants to pour water inside her and let it collect at the base of her spine; he wants to fish in the bowels of her belly. He wants to crack her dry ribs and fashion them into a staircase, that he might ascend to ever higher heights from which to fall.

She keeps finding him destroyed on impact. She mends him with glue, patches him back up with needle and thread. Like Humpty Dumpty, she tries sealing wax, cabbages, kings. There are many ways to shatter, and he finds them all. Almost as many

ways to land soft as there are ways to break yourself. Almost as many ways of falling as there are liquids to fill a hollow girl's emptiness up to the brim. But a man in motion, flung downward toward the earth at speed, wind pressing the hair back from his temples—her kind of boy? He can't fill anything. Water seeps from between his cupped fingers.

She consumes immodestly, trying to fill herself up, the better to cushion his falls. Meatpie and quince, cherry and rhubarb—all go down the hatch, and still there's nothing inside but an ominous rustle. Insects have taken up residence.

In despair, she roots herself deep in the soil of a community garden left untended, as if new dirt might force her to put forth green shoots. She believes she'll ripen back to wholeness, until her insides are gooey, warm, and sustaining. Then, and only then, will she seek him out again: once she's pumpkin as pie.

He finds her alone in the garden and tries to pluck her from the vine, his nails scrabbling at her tendrils, but she's firmly attached, face slack, limbs motionless as prayer. He abandons her rather than hold still himself. Stillness would mean landing forever, one endless impact. Even so, he needs her; he schemes to win her back. He knows, if he is ever again to hold his ear to her rind and hear the wind rushing through her, he must teach himself how not to fall.

So he seeks out the opposite of falling.

He climbs atop a chair and hurls himself at the carpet, but it's no use; he can't fall more than he's already fallen. He cliff-jumps; he hang-glides and lets go; he bungees and cuts the cord, and each time there's no one there to put him together again. Landing can't possibly be the opposite of falling.

The boy hires a man who asks no questions to come to his house and tie him down to the ground with thick ropes run through thick rings inset into cement. He cocoons himself in sheets, then clothes, then tarpaulins. His mouth is stuffed with wads of paper, his phone left on silent. The man he's hired leaves him like this, shaking his head as he shuts the door behind him. At first the boy thinks he's won: He's stopped falling at last. He's not moving, that's for certain. But then he closes his eyes and the roar of wind fills his ears and his body's gone weightless, suspended in gauzy air. It's days before he's fully untangled himself. Stillness can't possibly be the opposite of falling.

He makes Icarus/Daedalus wings, one set meant to succeed and the other fated to fail. He looks forward to the warmth of sunlight on his feathers. But flight can't possibly be the opposite of falling.

He judges it precisely, the exact moment when the wax will melt and send him careening toward her patch of green. When he hits her, he hits hard, expecting her to be there for him like she's always been. His weight crushes her on impact—no surprise, as he's been falling for years; he hit critical mass long before they ever met. He splits her wide, exposing her sticky, pale yellow guts. Opens his mouth and fills it with her orange flesh, the stringy pulp of her disappointment, the thousand spilt seeds of her desire.

And They Shall Never Sever

She sits in a corner of the junior high lunchroom, a piece of red string looped around her fingers in a catch-cradle. The other kids ignore her, but Ben's the new kid and doesn't know any better; besides, he likes the chemtrail streak of orange in her hair, like a warning.

"Put your hand through the middle," she says, and as he does, she drops the threads and pulls, trapping his wrist. "Now I've caught you and you're mine forever!" She smiles shyly at him, kisses his cheek.

Meli and Ben, sitting in a tree, a girl in a jean-jacket singsongs. The catcall eddies around the lunchroom, the sound of Ben's cachet plummeting, but he doesn't care because now he knows her name.

He turns to tell Meli the jean-jacket girl's a loser not worth her time, but she's already gone, escaping the lunchroom with her face turned away from him, leaving him to imagine how her spun-silk lips would feel against his. Every day from then on, damn the *k-i-s-s-i-n-g*, come lunchtime he asks her to teach him a new figure: Two Candles, the Manger, Flying Carpet. At the end of every lesson, she gives him a quick peck and flees.

Until the day he puts his hand through the center of her catch-cradle and it disappears. Within the diamond-shaped hole, reality ripples, involuted. They peer into the unnerving distortion surrounding Ben's wrist.

"Where'd your hand go?" she asks.

He keeps his voice chipper. "Dunno. Maybe let's start over?"

So she drops the loops, collapsing the diamond to begin again, and he jerks back, arm ending at the wrist—no blood, just space where skin, bone, and fingertips should be. He backs away from her in horror, and she runs from his gaze, leaving him alone with a cauterized stump.

A few days later he's back at school, mad at her and also desperately hoping she'll explain why she hurt him, after all those quicksilver kisses. As he shuffles between classes, he spots other kids with missing limbs—boys who knocked over her lunchbox, girls who put gum in her hair. At lunch, he plops down on the bench next to her, ignoring the hush that wends around them. No one catcalls, no one sings.

“How'd you do it?”

“I told them I'd give them each fifty bucks if they went behind the school and played cat's cradle with me. That they were chicken if they didn't.”

“That's sick.”

“They said nasty things behind your back. They deserved it.” She gestures toward his stump. “But you didn't.”

She stares at her lap, wrists folded over clasped hands like a mantis, and he notices that two of her fingers stop at the knuckle. “I slipped up; the string got twisted. But it gave me an idea of how to fix this. It'll take two.” Her pleading eyes weave a net that constricts around him. “Come over to my place after school?”

He doesn't answer.

She scoots closer to him, their shoulders almost touching. “Ben, I'm so sorry.” It's the first time she's said his name, and he's distracted by way her lips shape each careful consonant. He calls home to say he's spending the afternoon with a friend.

Together they build a rope of tied-together sheets, toss it over a crossbeam like a Rapunzel tale or a suicide. She twines the red string between his fingers; the other end she loops awkwardly around his stump. Before he can react, she's grabbed hold of the sheets, dropped into the string-framed space between his hands, and she's gone.

He keeps perfectly still for hours, until the blood leaves his wrists and he blinks back tears, waiting, numb and anxious, fearing the moment when the sheet-rope snaps back toward the ceiling, their connection severed. At last delicate fingers curl around the edge of twine and she pulls herself up and over. Slung across her back, a sheet-wrapped bundle. She unfurls a pile of limbs, rummages through parts: hands mostly, a few fingers, two arms.

"This one is yours." She holds out his hand, still twitching as if cut off only yesterday. He feels the uncanny sensation of his fingers held in hers.

"Thanks," he says. He bangs his long-since-sealed stump against the hand's wrist. "It's not working."

"Let me try," she says, wrapping thread around his fingers and then her own, two people intertwined to make one catch-cradle. He thrusts his stump into the cradle's center, and she fits his hand back into its socket. He uses his reattached fingers to stroke her cheek. She doesn't run away.

The next day, they go around knocking on doors. "Is Ann there? Yes, I'd like to give her this hand. The one she lost—well, the one I took. I apologize."

"Is that your boyfriend?" one girl scoffs, cracking each knuckle to make sure all are firmly attached. Meli pinks, then nods, and Ben's so happy he'd give her both arms, and a leg, too.

Once everything's been reconnected, they go back to her parents' place and sit on her porch swing, red string coiled between them.

"What should we do with it?"

"I brought a lighter," he says.

"No!" she says, snatching the thread away. He's confused; he'd been sure she'd want to destroy it. "I want you to see inside." Her fingers encircle his wrists.

"You want me to...?"

She nods, and quick as a spindle spun, she's wound the thread in a crisscross that spiderwebs the swing in red, an undulating gyre open at its center. She extends her hand to him. Silence spools out between them as he weighs his options.

Then he grabs her hand tight. As he does, she sparks the lighter, bends down, and touches flame to the farthest end of string. Together, they dive into the heart of the pattern. Behind them, the red thread lights up like dynamite fuse, curling in on itself, back to the nothing space from whence it came.

The Entomologist's Three Ballgowns

When he meets his new lab partner for the first time, he tries not to look directly at her. Snatched glimpses prove she's pretty, but his account is by necessity piecemeal, a view as if through compound eyes. For instance, her brows arch like the raptorial legs of a mantis and are brown like her hair, which is wavy and curls around her chin, which has a small mole on it like a black garden ant that's lost its colony.

"Hello," she says, "my name's Kendra. Do you care which desk I take?"

He does care. "No, nope, up to you," he mutters. He doesn't want to scare her off when she's only just appeared.

"Okay then," she says, hefting a backpack full of supplies on top of the not-his desk—a lucky guess—then pulls out a tissue-pack and commences dusting off her new digs, exactly as he would do. He can feel himself grinning, catches himself, flits his gaze to the tiled floor.

"What's your name?"

"Phil."

"As in *philodendron*, nice. I own a heart-leaf one that attracts wicked fungus gnats." She flicks a dusty tissue into the waste bin. "So, tell me about you. What do you do for fun?"

He doesn't do anything for fun, really, besides reading science-fiction novels and mountain biking and the occasional restaurant review written for the local paper, oh and he also takes care of his parents' rose garden, though they're getting on in years—both his parents and the roses—and his father recently suffered a mild stroke, and... His past hopes and current research interests spill out of him, pitched to a mumble. She might've

given away her life story right then, if only he'd been braver, dared to test out her methods, asked ever so casually what *she* did for fun. Instead, he folds his awkwardness around him like a pair of flightless wings and hunches over a microscope to hide his blush.

For a year they work alongside one another in silence, until, over a tray of *Halyomorpha halys*, he finally chirps out other words, these ones rehearsed for months: "Might you want to grab some dinner?"

"I thought you'd never ask. But I actually have plans tonight," she says, smiling to take the sting away. "Open ballroom; I go every week. Hey, you should come with me. We love new people."

She slicks off her lab coat and throws it over a chair. Beneath, she's wearing a fancy dress of some glossy, dark green material he doesn't recognize. He'd spent so long planning his words, he hadn't even considered his wardrobe; his baggy jeans reek of stinkbug.

"Don't mind me; there's no dress code," she promises him. "I just like playing the part every now and again." She clasps a choker of interlocked grasshoppers about her neck.

He takes the free intro lesson with her, but he's lousy at it; afterward, she dances with everyone but him while he clings to the back wall, trying to camouflage himself. He'd wanted to talk to her—hopefully kiss her—but nothing he'd rehearsed had prepared him for this particular set of humiliations. Finally she begs off a tall man in tails who's monopolized her all evening, in order to make her way over to him.

“Sorry about that! Ira’s a pest. May I have this dance?” A waltz drifts over the speakers and Phil spins her around the floor. He can only execute a few basic steps, but he’s surprised to find himself leading her into graceful turns and promenades; with her in his arms, he’s a much better dancer than he’d realized.

He’s staring half-focused at her long neck as it arches away from him when one of the grasshoppers at her throat flexes a slender tibia, gathers itself, and leaps onto his exposed arm. He stiffens but keeps shuffling in time with the rise and fall of the music. Then the other five insects stir, antennae twitching, and begin to crawl along her skin, or spring upward to coil in her hair.

“Kendra?”

She presses closer. Beneath his hand, the one caressing her shoulder, his palm rests on a crush of insect bodies. The shimmering fabric of her dress is the linked carapaces of thousands of minute grasshoppers come to life, preening, parading, jumping drunkenly from her skirt to his sleeve, down to his jeans and escape. How had he not noticed sooner? Order *Caelifera*, mandibles for tearing, wings for flight. Those that change color and travel in sky-obliterating clouds bear the common name of locust and devour crops, grassland, everything, leaving desolation in their wake. The song winds down, and she gathers up the insectile folds of her gown to curtsy. He bows in return, jerkily, the unfamiliar gesture discomfiting; a small rain of displaced hoppers patters to the floor.

“That was the last song,” she says. “Now they kick us out.” As he walks her to her car, he can see right through her dress, grasshoppers leaping desperately like they want to get away from one another, or her, or him. She offers him a sweet smile that

conceals more than it exposes; she seems oblivious to her living gown, to how much of herself she's revealed.

At work it's like their date never happened; she's even more distant. He can't think of a single question that wouldn't make him seem like a jerk. Did your dress turn to bugs, or was it just me? Are grasshoppers your area of expertise? Why did you invite me along if you didn't plan on dancing with only me?

One evening, weeks later, she asks to leave work early. "I can cover for you," he says immediately, then regrets it, sure he's come off as overeager. "Why?"

"Blind date. I'm dreading it." She's donned a slinky red dress, a single scorpion dangling from a chain around her neck.

"Give me another chance," he blurts out. "Let me pick the place this time. No one will notice if we close the lab early."

She looks askance. "I'll have to text and cancel. It's a little last minute..."

He's not sure what changes her mind, but he's ecstatic when she hops into his car. He takes her for Italian, manicotti and merlot, a place he gave four-and-a-half stars to a few months back. Her scorpion pendant catches light; he asks about it.

"My last boyfriend, he was very into pain. I miss it sometimes, although I don't miss him." She twirls her wineglass and changes subjects, but it's the most he's gotten from her yet.

They go back to his place and it's just as he'd imagined it would be. At first her mouth is pliant beneath his, and then a fierce tingling numbs the tip of his tongue. He jerks away, and a tiny scorpion flees from between her parted lips, *Centruroides sculpturatus*, poisonous enough to kill. The dress, when he slides it off her shoulders and

to the floor, scatters, sending black bodies skittering toward darkened corners and beneath furniture. All over his body stinging points of pain bloom where she's touched him.

They drive to the laboratory separately the next morning. As they work side by side, a familiar silence flutters between them.

"I—" he tries, but the words are a thousand claws scrabbling in his throat. She's collating files at her desk; he imagines her inattention is deliberate and shoves specimens to the back of the freezer with increasing ferocity. Lucky insects. These would expire in their sleep as the cold claimed them. No more worries about flight, escape, finding a mate. Whatever's wrong with him—whatever pheromone he fails to send out, whatever marking he doesn't possess—she won't tell him, but he knows when to take a hint.

They never discuss the scorpions, just keep on keeping on, each day arriving to work at the same time, collecting data together peaceably enough. Until the morning he arrives at the lab to find her in tears over an overdue report. She's wearing a black mourning dress, and tucked into the curls of her hair, a veil of finest spiderweb. Her father passed away the night before, unexpectedly. Phil measures his response, gathers each word to him, pinning them in his mind so none can escape. "I know there's nothing I can do, but I'd like to go with you. If I can be a help."

The entire life cycle of a mayfly passes before she answers. "Sure," she says. "I'd like that."

At the funeral he meets her remaining family—a brother, two aunts. Kendra doesn't say much, just leans on his arm, perched delicate as a butterfly. When he asks how she's holding up, she snorts.

“Aunt Joan’s a wreck; Johnny’s taking her home.” Phil notes that she hasn’t answered his question, but doesn’t press her. Mourners drift toward the parking lot until at last it’s he and Kendra surrounded by dead things, same as usual. He’s unwilling to leave her alone.

“I have an hypothesis about your dress,” he says. “Do you mind if I test it?”

Her eyes dart warily to her gown, thousands of miniature spiders that have latticed her in web, a cocoon to protect her from harm. He can’t place the species, no way to tell if they’re venomous. “Be my guest,” she says.

He takes her hand, sets it against his shoulder, and she falls into position as naturally as a grasshopper settles its wings. Slowly he dances her around the graveyard, waiting for the taxonomy of words to organize themselves in his mind: order, family, genus, species. Her tears wet through the fabric of his jacket like there’s nothing there.

“When did you learn how to dance?” she asks, not lifting her head from his shoulder.

“I started taking lessons.”

“Why?”

“I thought I could understand you better.”

“That was your hypothesis?” She pulls away, narrowing one eye; he wonders if he’s offended her, if she thinks he learned dance as an attempt to capture her or manipulate her.

“Not quite. See, when I first started out studying bugs,” he begins, “I went on a research trip upstate. We were out at night with headlamps, nocturnal beetling, and I netted a *Nicophorus americanus*.”

She starts in his arms. “The most recent known sighting was in, what, the fifties?”

“It had the right markings, anyway. Six scalloped red spots.”

“What did you do?”

He leads her into a turn so that he doesn’t have to see her expression. “I let it go.”

“What? Why?”

“I don’t know. I wanted it to find another of its kind.” He spins her back in to him. “Didn’t want it to spend its life in a case. Which I guess makes me a lousy entomologist.”

His sleeves, jacket, and pants dissolve into tiger-striped beetles, the click of chitinous legs and unfurled wings rustling in the dark.

“*Nicrophorus investigator*.” She smiles. “Burying beetles. Family *Silphidae*, same as your rarity.” One alights on her hand; the rest flit away, and he’s left naked in her arms.

PART III:

THE GROUND APPROACHES QUICKLY
(FALLING IN REAL TIME)

EXPERIMENTS IN SPECULATIVE NONFICTION

Come Back, Jimmy Dean

At my hometown community theater, there is a staircase that goes nowhere. Two separate theater boyfriends have promised--threatened?--to have sex with me in that stairwell, and I put both off with excuses: those steps are filthy, we'll get caught, I'm wearing a skirt, I'm not wearing a skirt.

My living boyfriend, as distinct from my dead one, looks like James Dean. For my birthday this year, he convinced the theater manager to let him use the space for an evening so he could make me an elaborate date.

I walk in to a table set for two placed center stage.

Surprise, he says. Do you like?

It's the most romantic thing anyone's ever done for me, I say, while secretly fearing the stairwell.

He's cooked, brought dinner over from his apartment in Tupperware, and we eat noodles slippery with olive oil, chunked feta; he's stabbed a slab of seared ahi with a sprig of thyme.

I'll be right back, he says and goes to grab dessert.

He's lit candles. I watch the flames dart, their soft glow subsumed in the harsh white of house lights. Quiet creeps over the flats, the unpainted set casting skeletal shadows. I lived here once, with a different boy.

Before my dead boyfriend died, we'd loved this playhouse. We auditioned for everything and got cast occasionally; I directed an improv comedy group that he acted in, and we both ran every kind of backstage tech. On *Come Back to the Five and Dime, Jimmy Dean*, he ran sound and I sewed costumes. The show required clips sampled from

Dean's movie *Giant*. During a late night sound test, just the two of us left in the theater, the sound system caught in a loop. My dead boyfriend couldn't figure out how to shut it down. James Dean's disembodied voice echoed over the speakers: *stand up for me*, he said. *Stand up for me. Stand up for me.* We have a ghost! the dead boyfriend said, gleeful.

The living boyfriend comes back into the room bearing chocolate cake and company. Knowing how much I've missed theater, he's invited two of my oldest friends to come play, improv buddies who'd known the dead boyfriend. We break into the soundbooth and take over the board, plug in the God-microphone connected to the overhead speakers.

We take turns talking over the God mic, calling out ask-fors: You pull something out your pocket. What is it? You're turning onto the interstate and out of the corner of your eye you see a...what?

For each ask-for, we build a two-person scene and let it spin out until we're laughing hysterical. The four of us madcap riff, until the living boyfriend decides to go on a beer run and my two friends step out for a smoke. Alone, I sit with a hundred and ten empty seats. Someone's left the God mic on, and the speakers crackle and hiss.

Stand up for me, I whisper to the static. Stand up for me.

On the Psyche Ward

"Her shameful sickness is that she resists death. She makes trouble."

— Hélène Cixous, "Laugh of the Medusa"

Medusa shudders when Psyche runs fingers through her writhing hair. They fuck with fists and tongues, take turns with the blindfold. This particular Psyche wears a dress of butterflies, a gift from Cupid. Medusa brushes the insects from Psyche's shoulders, hips, thighs; they flap upward, a blue-gray cloud, then resettle, wings winking at her.

Their tickling legs, the way they cluster at Psyche's clavicle in blooming corsages, at first seems erotic, until Psyche confesses she's entomophobic and can barely control her revulsion. But Cupid made me promise to wear butterflies for him always, Psyche tells her, tracing the curve of Medusa's closed eyelids.

While Psyche sleeps, Medusa licks butterflies from her skin. They flutter inside her mouth like words. [If she swallows them, is she complicit?] She doesn't stop until she's queasy and Psyche's naked. The few remaining butterflies flap at the windowpane, unable to escape. Medusa hopes they aren't poisonous.

Medusa lives in an asylum alongside dozens of other women, each of whom is an iteration of Psyche. Each Psyche is idealized femininity incarnate: the damsel in distress, the coquette, the spunky heroine. Inside the asylum is quiet as a museum. The floor is gray tile, the walls institution green, the doors heavy. Each room holds a low cot and a single window paned in thick glass. The windows only open from the outside. [Are these madwomen, locked up for their own good, or literal demi-goddesses in dishabille?]

This story has multiple rapes in it. Rapes by the dozen. They just keep happening; Medusa can't seem to stop them. It's built into every Psyche's narrative, inevitable as sunset. The rapist comes night or day, any time he pleases, through barred windows and locked doors, and in a thousand guises. Cloaked in fur. Hooded. Winged. The worst is when he arrives as vapor, invisible to the eye. Medusa doesn't know why he hovers around the asylum--it's almost always a he, though when the Psyches tell her their stories, their accounts vary wildly--but he never fails to arrive. [The Psyches can't keep their story straight. Does this mean they're lying?]

When I was in seventh grade, I spent study hall playing chess with a boy named John. He nicknamed me Rook, like the chess piece, and wrote me a letter asking if I wanted to be his girlfriend, if I wanted to go trick-or-treating with him and some friends on Halloween night. I said yes to both, but my mother vetoed trick-or-treating when John assured me no adults would be present. My chosen costume: Cleopatra, complete with cat's-eye makeup and a golden snake bracelet wrapped around my wrist. I was 11.

John stopped speaking to me. He was popular, surrounded by a gaggle of other girls and boys who noted his scorn and shunned me too. They slammed me into lockers, called me slut, wrote hate mail signed with the name of the shyest boy in our class and, once they'd completed the heavy mindteaser sculptures available in our talented and gifted classroom, threw them unerringly at my skull.

This is normal for junior high. My pacifist friends with girl children tell me it's gotten worse.

Less normal was my mother's reaction. She contacted the principal who contacted our life-skills coach who had a sit-down with John. Despite informing my mother that boys will be boys, said coach was forced to impress on John how, according to school policy, what he'd done constituted sexual harassment. John left me alone after that, but his friends did not. I was given special dispensation to leave the cafeteria during lunch hour, so long as I went straight to the library. I spent eighth grade devouring the horror section, finding in Stephen King's *Carrie* and *Misery* stories I could believe in.

This particular Psyche is made of metal and glass, her skin translucent so that Medusa can watch the pistons at work, firing the red glow of her heart. Her leather lungs inflate and collapse in imitation of breath.

"Which are you?" Medusa asks to be polite; it doesn't much matter. They tell her whatever they need from her--pleasure, pain, to be held for one night, darkness, light--and she delivers until exhaustion breaks her.

I'm the engine of plot, says Psyche. Someone comes in the night and rapes me to give men missions and mothers jealous rages and heroes someone to save. Sacred marriage. Atonement. The inner workings of the story-machine.

Medusa covers Psyche's mouth with her own to stop the litany, and keeps kissing her, even when Psyche's furnace-breath scorches her tongue.

Medusa stalks the halls, looking for tonight's Cupid. She will freeze him in his tracks, and in the morning the Psyches will use his limbs to dry their laundry, his pinion feathers draped in underwear.

Shapes in which Medusa has petrified Cupid, with stories the Psyche has told her about each:

A bear: This Cupid is fiercely protective and quick to anger. Psyche feels safe with him but fears his temper. He's hurt her before. He doesn't know the sharpness of his claws.

A unicorn: This Cupid is harmless, quiet, the boy next door. Psyche's childhood fantasy of what a boyfriend could be; they hold hands, cuddle, trade quick cheek-pecks. Until he begins to pressure her--he's such a nice guy, surely she owes him.

A man, winged: Cupid flits in and out of Psyche's life but when he chooses to alight, the sex is passionate. He swears he'll leave his wife soon, if she can just be patient. Psyche wonders about the wife, if she's a Psyche too, trapped in some other ward, waiting.

A beast: Cupid as acquaintance rapist. He wears many faces, whichever gets him what he wants. The beast is kind before he turns cruel; he alternates between human and inhuman. Psyche is terrified of him.

The asylum is littered with obscene statuary: In the fourth-floor hallway, a bear curled in the fetal position, cock erect. In the cafeteria, a misshapen beast reared on its hind legs, chest stuck through with a dozen arrows. Beneath the window in room 34, a smashed man with tiny wings. Medusa caught Cupid with one foot still on the sill, half-man, half-mist, Psyche naked beside him, covering her eyes in fear. He'd fallen backward, then shattered on the tile floor.

Half the asylum's rooms contain lapidified Cupids. Medusa is good at her job, though she's unsure if her racket is protection or vengeance. Once, she found a broad-winged Cupid standing alone in the stairwell, no Psyche to be found. He was masturbating with his eyes closed. He didn't stop, even when she shouted, even when she held his eyelids open and his gaze met hers.

She avoids those stairs now. If she ever finds a sledgehammer, that'll be the first statue to go. [Each time it's an open question: will Cupid riddle Medusa with arrows, lop off her head and bag it, to be used to petrify any Psyche stupid enough to run? Or will he again be turned to stone in her sight?]

Medusa's not sure if any of the Psyches love her, really, or like her at all, really, or if to them she's a rapist-murderess-villainess, a hideous wingless girl-Cupid crowned in serpents. Between rounds of fucking, they tell her they appreciate her efforts. All she knows is that when she's in their bed, no one else is. [That's what she wants to believe.] They could be lying. The fact she doubts is further evidence she too is a Cupid.

When I hit college, goth culture was ascendant. I spent my weekends at dive-y clubs hung with black lights and abstract metal sculptures, dressed to the nines in velvet and vinyl. My eyes lined in Cleopatra kohl, lips stained a dark purple, with spikes at my throat and wrists, I stalked the dance floor in six-inch platform boots. At the time, gothdom seemed like a way to square feminism with my love of high femme: DIY drag wedded to counterculture. Now this seems the crudest self-deception. I may have bought

my togs from Tucson Thrift and altered them myself, but I was still constructing an identity via consumer objects while convincing myself I was oh so radical.

"We have internalized this horror of the dark," Psyche tells Medusa one night, after Cupid has come and gone uncaught.

Medusa strokes her golden tresses, lips sealed in a thin line.

Psyche buries her hands in snakes and pulls Medusa to her. "My desires have invented new desires," she whispers. A serpent strikes, leaving two round fang-marks in Psyche's thumb, and she gasps in pleasure. This Psyche likes pain, a detail Medusa files away for later. So many small, daily pains that Medusa can't save her from, not even the smallest.

[Where does theory end and lived experience begin?]

Medusa's heart is made of stone; exposure to too many Psyches has inured her. *You're nothing to me. I'm no different from a thousand other Cupids.* She can't stand their pain; if she empathized sincerely, she'd crack in a day, and then who'd feed them, look after them, sweep the wing feathers from their beds each morning so that when they lay down, bruised and guilt-ridden—was it something I wore? Something I said?—they could finally get some rest? [What women hasn't accused herself of being a monster?]

Medusa makes the rounds. Noises this way, the soft sounds of lovemaking. If it's a winged Cupid and if the Psyche seems happy, she'll let them be. She braces her

shoulder against a door and leans; it gives silently. Cupid has an arrow cocked, pointed straight at her left eye. His eyes are closed.

A little to the left, says Psyche, and then she's frozen, kohled eyes locked on Medusa's, her plum-lipped mouth a tiny o.

Medusa hopes he doesn't miss.

[Note: several lines of dialogue are repurposed sentences from *Laugh of the Medusa*.]

Skinwalk: A Dissection

To remember sex with someone who's now dead is an act of necrophilia, to re-create a living person on the page a desecration.

Ear.

When his work finally relented and allowed men to wear jewelry, Rob dragged me out to the Mall the very next day to get his ear pierced. This event was witnessed by a few curious twelve-year-old girls who were also at Claire's Boutique getting piercings. "Aren't you old for an ear piercing?" one asked him. "You're never too old to stab yourself in the head," he replied.

Hair.

Rob was nearly hairless naturally, a state that he exacerbated by shaving pretty much everywhere, pretty much every morning, something I found intriguing and alluring. Us freshly scrubbed, me lying next to him, breathing near his neck, his skin smelled like the wind that whirled past my face when we went mountain biking together—evergreen forest, mountain air, neurotic clean living.

Proud daughter of a feminist, I was a furry creature when we met. I didn't start pulling, plucking, shaving, grooming until after Rob died, as if by replicating his habits I could keep him alive on my skin.

Eye.

Before we'd met, he'd gotten corrective surgery on his baby blues. He was as blind as me; wore Coke-bottle lenses all through elementary school, high school, college; was unable to recognize a face from a foot off, unable to find the bathroom light switch at night. Then his grandmother passed away, leaving a small inheritance, enough to cover the cost of Lasik. When we got together, Rob told me about his perfect vision, terribly proud; he was forever reading distant signs, trying to convince me to go into a little debt for the sake of fixing my sight.

My grandmother passed away a year after Rob did, leaving me a small inheritance. With it, I got my eyes fixed, the surgery performed in a Xanax fever dream, complete with science-fictional torture chair, eyelids held open, eyeballs immobilized. Lasik is futurescience, the machine cutting while the patient lies still, still awake, the doctor performing surgery through the machine, no hands. When I sat up, I could see like Rob had seen.

Golfers found Rob's body soon enough that his parents were able to donate his eyes, although his other organs were unsalvageable. I've recognized his ice-blue irises, his pupils staring out from someone else's face.

Muscle.

My first professional massage I bought for myself after a friend of mine got in a massive car accident with me in the passenger seat. Afterward, I couldn't turn my head left or right. Unbeknownst to me, my parents had purchased a gift certificate and mailed it to me, remembering how much massage had helped my mother's back after her wreck.

Since I'd already gotten one for myself, I gave the spare massage to Rob, his first ever. I went to pick him up for a post-massage lunch, and he gave me the softest, longest, meltingest kiss, and my eyes must have gotten really wide because he asked me, "What?" and when I explained that he'd finally learned how to kiss like a girl, he got all giddy. We dubbed it the massage kiss. I took to requesting them.

My second ever massage was a few weeks after Rob's death. The masseuse, Paul, was one of perhaps three people who had been in recent contact with my dead lover's body. As I settled facedown on the massage table, I remembered that Rob had laid exactly here, here exactly. Had the pressure helped him? Made him happy, peaceful, relaxed, for even a second?

Paul asked me, "How would you like to feel when you leave today?"

I said into the pillow, "I'd like to leave feeling less sad." My therapist had this argument about grief being stored in the body, which is why I'd made the massage appointment. "If that's not too weird."

"Not weird at all."

Then, in an odd parallel, Paul launched into a speech very similar to the ones that my recently acquired therapist had been giving me: whatever feelings come up, release them, hold nothing inside, etc. This is the hardest possible advice to take with everything shut-down grief-struck paralyzed in the aftermath of Rob's suicide.

"Emotion is like food; it has to pass through you." Yick, I thought, yick. "If you hold it inside, it'll manifest as pain, or illness. Emotions you cling to will make you sick."

I thought about intimacy, and Rob's tattoo, an unfinished infinity symbol over his heart, a sideways figure-eight, that ridged black scar. Paul had seen, touched more of Rob's body more recently than anyone besides me. It was such a nice body.

Had been such a nice body.

Rob had said that if he ever decided to live, he'd close the open loop, complete the infinity sign.

Instead, his parents positively identified his corpse by that tattoo.

"I'll try," I say.

There was no try; I had no control over what my muscles needed. As Paul worked down my back, up my neck, into my shoulder blades, I started crying, then stopped, then started again. Paul's hands felt good, and the pain felt really good, and being touched at all made my whole body miss Rob. The massage went on a long time, Paul's fingers passing gently over the peeling, half-healed scab that ran down my wrist. I was grateful he said nothing, the self-injury laughably obvious. Bodies conceal our secrets. Those who see our naked bodies can then hurt us. But bodies are also are miracles. They feel even when the mind can't.

After the massage proper was over, Paul came around to the side of the table. He put one hand right below my lower back, holding up the base of my spine, and one hand under my neck, holding up my head. My skin grew warm, and I felt a powerful heat pour through me. It could have been the sheer relief at my body setting free even a fraction of what it had been carrying. It could be that the body has certain pressure points that cause a feeling of heat to occur, and Paul knew them. It could be that Paul was just really damn good. I thought, *This is bizarre*, and *Please stop*, and *Give that back*.

Skin.

I have three tattoos, and I don't like them. The first is a large gothic tribal I got before Rob died, in order to hide a skin disease. I have vitiligo; I spent most of my childhood despising bathing-suits and shorts, wearing pants in summer to hide the white patchwork that covered my legs and back. These patches have faded, reappeared, sprawled, gone pockmarked, and moved around over the years; if I'd tried to conceal all of them through their variable migrations, I'd be a circus-ready tattooed lady by now.

My second and third tattoos I got at the same time, a few months after Rob's death, against the advice of my therapist. I hated his tattoo when he was alive, thought the unfinished infinity symbol was tacky, expected. Nevermind I had a gothic tribal and no room to criticize. My oldest, best friend is a classicist and fell in love with a line from Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*: *pathei mathos* in the Greek, or "learning through endurance," although an alternate translation is "learning through suffering." She planned to get it tattooed on her wrist; on a whim the night before I went in to get the infinity tattoo, I asked her to calligraphy the Greek and fax the image to me.

These two tattoos, infinity and *pathei mathos*, were intended as a communal record—a whole pile of people had planned to all make appointments at the same tattoo parlor on the same day to get the same tattoo as a remembrance. In retrospect, this was a childish idea, and in the end, only myself and his former roommate went through with it. My classicist friend never did end up getting her wrist done. I don't blame her, or the other people who didn't show. Perhaps if he'd had a better tattoo.

I get grumpy when people ask me about the three black scrawls that trace down my spine (in order from the top: text, math, tribal) even though I know it's intended as a kindness, a getting-to-know-you gesture.

"What does your tattoo mean?"

My non-answer: "It's for a dead person."

Arms.

Talking long-distance, I ask Matt, the boy I'm dating now, what he remembers of his former lovers, and also what he forgets. He gives me a puzzled look, the computer screen we're speaking through pixelating his knitted eyebrows.

I give an example: that I remember the ways in which Rob couldn't be touched better than the ways he could. We had separate sheets because he was a wicked insomniac and couldn't sleep if our bodies touched. The bed I sleep in here in Chicago is dressed with the same sheets Rob and I slept under, high threadcount ones he gave me as a Christmas present and that I promptly stained with self-tanner and hair dye, vain creature I was and am.

Matt says, "I remember the way Anna cuddled up against me. She'd put her head under my chin, and I'd wrap myself around her, like this," his arms a bear hug that disappears off the edges of the monitor.

I remember so many explicit, pornographic tidbits of Rob. I have no idea how we used to hug.

Hand.

I'm from the Southwest and the one fear we Arizona kids grew up on was that Native American boogiemán, the skinwalker. Don't whistle as you're walking by yourself at night or you'll call them to you. Of all the sundry nighttime terrors, the skinwalker reads best as what I did, what we do. Our memories wear us, and we wear them, brittle and transparent as onionskin. And yet this is also how my body keeps his, his touch imprinted on me, me living in him and him in me. When I walk back from the bar late at night, I don't sing. Sometimes I catch myself humming, go quiet, then startle at an imaginary tug on my shoulder.

When you turn back, there's no one there.

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2. Three Year Option: Publisher shall have the option to publish Story in print for a period of three years (3). If Publisher has not published Story in Print during the aforementioned period, the print option will end.

Electronic Rights (i.e., Website, Kindle, iPad, eBooks)

1. Electronic Rights: a. Website, Kindle, iPad, eBooks: Publisher shall have the right to publish Story on Website, Kindle, iPad, eBooks, and other electronic formats.

b. Archive: Publisher may retain Story in Website Archive until author requests it be removed.

2. Three Year Limit: Publisher shall have the right to publish Story in multiple electronic formats for a period of three years (3). After the aforementioned period, the electronic rights will end.

a. Non-exclusive electronic rights: Publisher does not have exclusive electronic rights to Story. Author is allowed to publish Story with other Publishers during the “Three Year Limit.”

“The Sneeze” appeared in *Flash Fiction 713* from Kazka Press

Kazka Press contract:

2. This use of the Work by the Publisher entails the assignment of First Worldwide Electronic Rights, for publication in the English language.
3. (a) The Author agrees not to publish or permit others to publish the Work in any form prior to its publication in Kazka Press or for a period of six (6) months after the date of this contract without the prior written permission of the Publisher. If the Work is selected for a “best of the year” anthology, the Publisher agrees to waive this clause, provided the Author gives the Publisher prior written notice of the selection by such an anthology.
- (b) The Author further grants the Publisher the right to nonexclusively archive the Work online, in text, as long as the Publisher maintains the Kazka Press website.

“Everything Must Go” appeared in *Clarkesworld* and *The Year’s Best Dark Fantasy and Horror 2013* (Prime Books)

Prime Books contract:

Prime Books (the Publisher) of P.O. Box 83464, Gaithersburg, MD 20883 (prime@prime-books.com), publisher of an Anthology titled THE YEAR’S BEST DARK FANTASY & HORROR: 2013 (“the Work”), edited by PAULA GURAN.

The Author grants permission to republish his/her story “Everything Must Go” (“the Story”) in the Work, to be published by the Publisher, in the English language in all countries throughout the world in trade paperback print and e-book editions. The reprint permission granted by this Agreement applies solely to use of the Story in the context of a complete verbatim edition of the Work and is nonexclusive.

Clarkesworld contract:

A. Rights Granted:

(1) Primary Rights:

(a) “Online Rights,” which shall mean the right (exclusive during the Exclusivity Period of six months and non-exclusive thereafter), one time or more than one time at Publisher’s sole discretion, to transmit, broadcast, distribute, display, adapt (only as necessary for purposes of technical implementation as contemplated herein), digitally store, permit access to and reproduce the Work in whole or part, on the Internet and/or as part of Publisher’s Websites and online or related services.

(b) North American Publication rights, for the publication of a chapbook containing the Work to be limited to an edition of at least 100 copies plus presentation, replacement, and “stash” copies, with the contributor receiving 2 (two) free copies. The Contributor further agrees to provide a signature for each of at least 100+ copies of a signature sheet to be bound in with the chapbook.

(c) Contributor further acknowledges and agrees that, during the Exclusivity Period and until six months have elapsed from the publication of the Work in *Clarkesworld Magazine*, Publisher will hold the exclusive rights to publish the Work in the English language, and that Contributor shall not authorize or permit any third party to publish, reproduce, display or distribute either the Work or any excerpt, portion, version, abridgement, or revision thereof in any medium during the Exclusivity Period; provided, however, that, on an individual basis, Publisher will make reasonable accommodations for publication of the Work if the Work is chosen for inclusion in “Best of the Year” anthologies, single-author collections, or excerpts on personal author websites.

“Memoir” appears in the anthology *Wreckage of Reason II* (Spuyten Duyvil)

Spuyten Duyvil contract:

April 19, 2013

I, Brooke Wonders, author of “Memoir,” agree to the following: I am the original author of this story. I own this story's copyright. I am legally entitled to submit this story. I confirm that this story has not been previously published and acknowledge that upon publication of this story, all rights will return to me.

“And They Shall Never Sever” appeared in *Mirror Dance*

Mirror Dance’s online guidelines:

We are happy to consider reprints. Please include previous publication details in your e-mail. We have a slight preference for stories that aren’t currently available in a free-to-read online venue, such as your blog, another e-zine, or a critique site that is not password-protected. In the case of original fiction, we are asking for *first English-language digital rights exclusive for three months*. All work published in *Mirror Dance* will be archived unless the author requests otherwise. The author may request that the work be immediately removed from the website at any time *after* the first three months of the story’s publication.

<http://mirrordancefantasy.blogspot.com/2008/01/submissions.html>

“Here Be Toothsome Wolves” appeared in *Rose Red Review*

Personal email from Rose Red Review’s editor:

Dear Brooke,

Of course you may use your story in your dissertation! All rights revert back to the writer upon publication, so there is no need for a signed form. We at *Rose Red Review* would prefer writers credit us when their works are reprinted, but it's more of a courtesy (one that often goes unobserved). You may use your work however you like.

Best of luck in your dissertation!

Warm Regards,
Larissa Nash



Rose Red Review <roseredreview@gmail.com>

Apr 23 ☆



to me ▾

Dear Brooke,

Of course you may use your story in your dissertation! All rights revert back to the writer upon publication, so there is no need for a signed form. We at *Rose Red Review* would prefer writers credit us when their works are reprinted, but it's more of a courtesy (one that often goes unobserved). You may use your work however you like.

Best of luck in your dissertation!

Warm Regards,
Larissa Nash



“Substitution,” which appeared Daily Science Fiction in December 2011.
From Daily Science Fiction’s online guidelines:

We pay 8 cents per word for first **worldwide** rights and for nonexclusive reprint rights. Additionally, we reserve the right to pay you more money for additional reprinting in themed Daily Science Fiction anthologies. First publication sounds simple, but in today's fractured fiction market it is anything but. Here's what we mean by first worldwide rights: Your story will be distributed by email to our (free) subscription list, it will then be available on the website, via RSS, eventually through kindle and iphone/ipad (the "issue" consisting of all stories published during its calendar month), and as archived on the DailyScienceFiction.com website. The nonexclusive reprint rights are anticipated to apply to the omnibus volume of DSF's stories for one year. Themed anthologies are anticipated to consist of 50-100% material originally published on DailyScienceFiction.com, plus additional materials as contracted. For these anthologies, payment will be 5 cents per word.

<http://dailysciencefiction.com/submit/story/guidelines>

“You’d Be Someone You Wouldn’t Recognize,” which appeared in Apeiron Review in 2013.

From Apeiron Review online guidelines:

Apeiron Review takes one-time non-exclusive electronic rights and archival rights to your work.

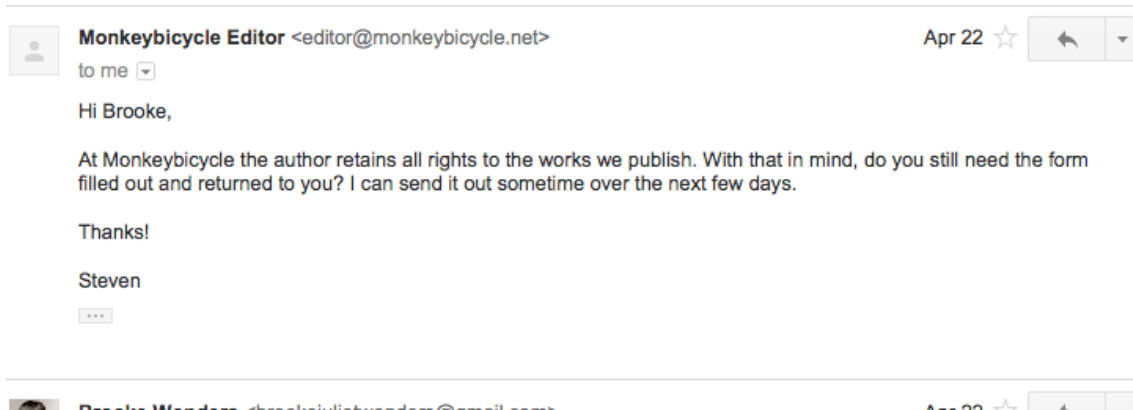
http://apeironreview.com/?page_id=2

“What We Can’t Reach” appeared in *Monkeybicycle*

From personal email with *Monkeybicycle*’s editors:

At *Monkeybicycle* the author retains all rights to the works we publish.

Steven



“The Noble Art of Falling” appeared (as “The Art of Falling”) in *Gingerbread House Literary Magazine*

“The Art of Falling” appeared in Gingerbread House Literary Magazine in Dec. 2013.

From Gingerbread House Literary Magazine online guidelines:
<http://gingerbreadhouselitmag.com/submission-guidelines/>

We acquire First North American serial rights. Rights then revert to the author upon publication. We only ask that we be acknowledged in future reprints of the work.

“On the Psyche Ward” appeared in *The Collagist*

Personal email from *Collagist* editors:

Unless Matt Bell sent you a different agreement (which is very, very, very unlikely; you can do a quick search in gmail just by typing "[THE COLLAGIST] On the Psyche Ward" in the search bar at the top of this page (unless you submitted the story under a different title); the original email should come up). Please note that "serial rights" applies only to publication in a serial publication, i.e., a magazine or journal, and only applies for six months following publication. That term ran out in January, at which point those rights revert to you (so, we no longer hold those rights and can't grant them to you). You won't need our permission to reprint the story in a thesis or a book, since you never granted us that right or privilege, though we would be grateful if, when you do bring out a collection of stories, you would credit The Collagist with first publication of "On the Psyche Ward."



Gabriel Blackwell <fiction@thecollagist.com>

Apr 22



to me

Dear Brooke,

First, congratulations on your impending graduation!

And, as for "On the Psyche Ward," you may go ahead without any permission from us. Our standard publication agreement is as follows:

By agreeing to let us publish this work, you agree to grant The Collagist exclusive serial rights to the work for six months from the date of publication, and to allow us to keep it available in our archives from that date forward. After six months, you may feel free to resubmit the work elsewhere for print publication, but we ask that you not submit it again for publication online. All other rights remain exclusively yours, and we ask only that if the work should be reprinted in an anthology or collection that The Collagist is credited as its original publication.

Unless Matt Bell sent you a different agreement (which is very, very, very unlikely; you can do a quick search in gmail just by typing "[THE COLLAGIST] On the Psyche Ward" in the search bar at the top of this page (unless you submitted the story under a different title); the original email should come up). Please note that "serial rights" applies only to publication in a serial publication, i.e., a magazine or journal, and only applies for six months following publication. That term ran out in January, at which point those rights revert to you (so, we no longer hold those rights and can't grant them to you). You won't need our permission to reprint the story in a thesis or a book, since you never granted us that right or privilege, though we would be grateful if, when you do bring out a collection of stories, you would credit The Collagist with first publication of "On the Psyche Ward."

All of which is a long-winded way of saying: you're set. You don't need anything from us, and can refer UIC to the original publication agreement if they give you any static (I can't imagine they will). And congratulations again!

Sincerely,
-Gabe

Dear Matter Editors,

I am a PhD candidate at the University of Illinois at Chicago and am completing my doctoral dissertation in creative writing. I would like your permission to reprint my work, "Purchase, Murder, Theft," which appeared in Matter in 2012.

I am requesting permission to include this reprint as part of my dissertation, which will be distributed through ProQuest and UIC's library. If you approve of the use requested, kindly sign below, and mail it to me (3419 W. Drummond Pl. Apt. 2A, Chicago, IL, 60647). Please be aware that I plan to request a two-year embargo on my dissertation; it will not be publically available for an additional two years.

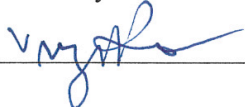
By signing this letter, you also confirm that you are the owner (or are authorized by the owner) of the copyright in the above listed material.

Please be advised that my situation is time-sensitive; I'd appreciate a response as soon as possible so as not to jeopardize my graduation.

Thank you very much. If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to contact me, either by phone (928-814-4632) or by email (bwonde2@uic.edu).

Sincerely,
Brooke Wonders

I, Virginia Kanchar, give permission for the following work, "Purchase, Murder, Theft," to be reprinted as part of Brooke Wonders' dissertation, to be published through ProQuest/UIC library.

Signature: 

Date: 5/12/14

Dear Brevity Editors,

I am a PhD candidate at the University of Illinois at Chicago and am completing my doctoral dissertation in creative writing. I would like your permission to reprint my work, "Come Back, Jimmy Dean," which appeared in Brevity Magazine in 2011.

I am requesting permission to include this reprint as part of my dissertation, which will be distributed through ProQuest and UIC's library. If you approve of the use requested, kindly sign below, and mail it to me (3419 W. Drummond Pl. Apt. 2A, Chicago, IL, 60647). Please be aware that I plan to request a two-year embargo on my dissertation; it will not be publically available for an additional two years.

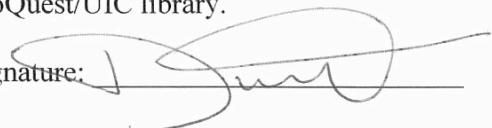
By signing this letter, you also confirm that you are the owner (or are authorized by the owner) of the copyright in the above listed material.

Please be advised that my situation is time-sensitive; I'd appreciate a response as soon as possible so as not to jeopardize my graduation.

Thank you very much. If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to contact me, either by phone (928-814-4632) or by email (bwonde2@uic.edu).

Sincerely,
Brooke Wonders

I, DINTY W. MOORE, give permission for the following work, "Come Back, Jimmy Dean," to be reprinted as part of Brooke Wonders' dissertation, to be published through ProQuest/UIC library.

Signature: 

Date: 4/22/14

VITA

NAME: Brooke Juliet Wonders

EDUCATION: Ph.D. in English (Creative Writing), Program for Writers,
University of Illinois at Chicago, 2014

M.A. in English, Creative Writing emphasis, Northern Arizona
University, 2008

B.A. in Creative Writing, University of Arizona, 2003

PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIPS:

2013 – present Science Fiction Writers of America

2006 – present The Association of Writers and Writing Programs

TEACHING:

2009 – 2014 Graduate Assistant, University of Illinois at Chicago.
Introduction to Fiction Writing (English 212)
Introduction to the Writing of Nonfiction Prose (English 201)
Composition 2: Academic Writing II Blended (English 161 online)
Composition 2: Academic Writing II (English 161)
Composition 1: Introduction to Academic Writing (English 160)
T.A. for Dr. Canuel, English Literature II (English 242)
T.A. for Dr. Grey, English Literature I (English 241)
Summer Enrichment Writing Workshop (English 071)

HONORS AND AWARDS:

2013 Subito Press, Finalist: The Noble Art of Falling.
2013 Mixer Post-Genre Contest: “Cornell Box, ‘Untitled’ (contains Bluebeard, Tin Soldier, et al.)”
2012 Kogan Bonus Award for Literary Criticism: “Angela’s Ashes, or Memoirs of a Celtic Tiger.” Department of English, University of Illinois at Chicago.
2010 Northern Arizona Playwriting Institute, Grand Prize: “Unbirthday.” Theatrikos Theater Company/Department of English, Northern Arizona University.
2010 Goodnow Award, Prose: Creative nonfiction essay, “Gravesites without a Grave.” Department of English, University of Illinois at Chicago.

PUBLICATIONS:

Fiction:

“Cornell Box, ‘Untitled’ (contains Bluebeard, Tin Soldier, et al.)” *Mixer Publishing*.
Forthcoming 2014.

“Memoir.” *Wreckage of Reason II: Back to the Drawing Board*. Spuyten Duyvil. March 2014.

“The Sneeze.” Kazka Press. February 2014.

“The Art of Falling.” *Gingerbread House Literary Magazine*. December 2013.

"Purchase, Murder, Theft." *Matter: A Monthly Journal of Political Poetry and Commentary*. September 2013.
 "Everything Must Go," reprint. *The Year's Best Dark Fantasy and Horror*. Prime Books. Aug. 2013.
 "The Entomologist's Three Ballgowns." *Electric Velocipede*. May 2013.
 "You'd Be Someone You Wouldn't Recognize." *Apeiron Review*. May 2013.
 "And They Shall Never Sever." *Mirror Dance*. Mar. 2013.
 "Everything Must Go." *Clarkesworld*. Nov. 2012.
 "What We Can't Reach." *Monkeybicycle*. Oct. 2012.
 "Here Be Toothsome Wolves." *Rose Red Review*. Sept. 2012.
 "Substitution." *Daily Science Fiction*. Dec. 2011.

Creative Nonfiction:

"Self-Erasure." *DIAGRAM*. Forthcoming 2014.
 "On the Psyche Ward." *The Collagist*. July 2013.
 "Come Back, Jimmy Dean." *Brevity: A Journal of Concise Nonfiction*. May 2011.

Reviews and Criticism:

"Allegory as Screen Memory: A Review of Aimee Parkison's *The Petals of Your Eyes*" *Entropy Magazine*. June 2014.
 "The Best Gun Juggler in the Land: A Review of Micah Dean Hicks' *Electricity and Other Dreams*." *American Book Review*. April/May 2014.
 "Jazz, Feminism and Formalism: A Review of Cris Mazza's *Something Wrong with Her*." *Essay Daily*. March 2014.
 "Sadomodernist Memoir: A Review of Marcia Aldrich's *Companion to an Untold Story*." *American Book Review*. Sept./Oct. 2013.
 "Speculative Memoir: A Review of Anna Joy Springer's *Vicious Red Relic Love*." *American Book Review*. Sept./Oct. 2012.
 "Information Sampling and Linking: Reality Hunger and the Digital Knowledge Commons," with Frederic I. Solop and Nancy A. Wonders. *Contemporary Social Sciences*, Special Issue. Nov. 2012.

CONFERENCE PAPERS PRESENTED:

"The Wreckage of Reason: Contemporary Experimental Prose by Women Writers. Panel presentation. The Association of Writers & Writing Programs Conference. Seattle, WA. February 2014.
 "Give Me Your Vampires, Your Fae, Your Bulbous Alien Masses Yearning to Be Free: Teaching Genre in the Creative Writing Classroom." Panel presentation. The Association of Writers & Writing Programs Conference. Seattle, WA. February 2014.
 "Speculative Memoir and the Fictive Self." Midwest Modern Language Association conference, Milwaukee, WI. November 2013.
 "Information Diffusion and (Con)fusion: Sampling, Linking and the Politics of Discourse," with Dr. Nancy A. Wonders and Frederic I. Solop. Midwest Political Science Association conference. Chicago, IL. April 2011.