

Summer 8-2-2012

As Things Should Be but Never Are

Justin Burnell

University of New Orleans, jmburnel@uno.edu

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As Things Should Be but Never Are

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

A Master of Fine Arts
in
Film, Theater, and Communication Arts
Concentration in Creative Writing - Fiction

by

Justin Burnell

BA University of New Orleans 2007

August 2012

Acknowledgments

I cannot express my full gratitude to my thesis committee: Barb Johnson, Joseph Boyden, and Dr. Doreen Piano. I've learned a great amount while working on this project and from Barb Johnson's guidance. I'll always be indebt to her and the other members of my committee.

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Non-lexemic Translation

On a normal Thursday, I got home from work to find a box stuck between my front door and screen door the way the post office does, as if that hides the package instead of making it more obvious. The return address said CA and above that, “Delia.” I took the box in and set it on my glass coffee table. I got a beer from the kitchen. I like to have a beer or two after work each day. I don’t think it’s trouble. Every once in a great while someone sticks their nose in and says maybe it is. I guess I spend a decent amount of time alone. Back in my living room—some might call it a TV room or a sitting room, but I like the idea that of all rooms in the house it is the one I live in—I popped open the beer and stared at the box. I’d met her in Denver where I worked a just-out-of-college internship in logistics. We got along so well, I applied for jobs in the area,

but when the internship ended none of those organizations had buzzed my phone. I moved to my current employer where I plan direct routes of transportation, which I enjoy.

I thought she might have found something I'd left behind when I moved. Maybe she had just completed her move to California and in unpacking she found something of mine. At that sad thought, I hesitated further. I'd rather her keep whatever it was. I'd obviously long forgotten about it, and I'd be happier if something hung around her new place reminding her of me. A little reminder fit us more than a note or a lingering voicemail. Delia and I could not talk for hours, or, rather she could not talk for hours. I tend to get nervous in prolonged silence and blurt out some half-thought without any context as if in mid-conversation. She'd smile with a symmetrical part between her lips and tell me I talked too much. I remembered her voice as I stared into the box. I saw all the time I'd lost and got up to leave. Feldman and I had a standing agreement to meet at The 13th Step on Thursdays.

“Yeah, the box. I assume you opened the box.” Feldman asked.

“I open the box and, well, it's a hand.”

“What? Like off a model or a prop?”

“No. A human hand. A severed human hand.” Feldman stopped twisting his pint glass on the table.

“A real, once-on-a-body hand?”

“Yes, like that.”

“What the fuck?” Feldman finished his beer in a long drink. “You think she went psycho, and it’s, like, a hand from her victim. She sent it to you because you’re her ex?”

“I’m not terribly sure. I didn’t think of that.”

“What? I mean, she might be sending out body parts to all her ex’s. Maybe she’s killing her ex’s and sending the still living ones the parts, like, as a warning.”

“I seriously doubt that. Delia was always pretty even keeled.”

“I need to think about this. Do you need another? Never mind, you need another. Vodka today?”

I nodded. I drink beer at home. At bar’s I order vodka tonics or cape cods or ginger and whiskies. Feldman went to the bar to order drinks. We sat at a table instead of the bar, as I must request each time he and I meet up. I think he likes the idea of two buddies sitting shoulder to shoulder, drinking a couple beers, facing forward, and talking without directly looking at each other. Along with the lack of facial cues, sitting at the bar invites people into your conversation or at least makes it much easier for people to listen. And they do listen—especially in a conversation where someone like Feldman gets so instantly excited—until the temptation to join what should clearly be a private conversation is too great, and they tell you exactly what you should do, or some personal story impossible for anyone but themselves to delineate the connection to the previously private conversation. Feldman put the drink in front of me. “Man, so what are you going to do?”

“What do you mean?”

“Like are you going to get in touch with her, or, like, give it to the cops?” Feldman pushed his hand through his hair as if trying to solve a complex equation he’d eventually give up on. I just wanted a rational conversation, to get some advice from a friend about what to do or what it meant. I admit a lack of focus on the actual item sent. Delia and I tried to stay in touch, but the phone calls got awkward. An hour of silence on the phone is different than an hour of silence face to face. I don’t mean to make her sound like a bore. She chose her words carefully. I didn’t think it’d be useful to call her.

“I know this isn’t a normal situation. I think you’re not understanding me. I recognize that. But Delia has never been exactly normal. On our one-month anniversary, she brought me a bird’s nest filled with unhatched eggs. Meaning, she killed or I guess she prevented those baby birds from being born. Do you know how that works with eggs? Is it the same as a fetus?” I tore away the excess napkin that stuck out from under my drink by feel.

Feldman leaned back in his chair and made a theatrical motion of looking away from me. “No, I’m not sure when life begins in the egg. So you are going to . . .?”

“Well, she didn’t write a letter or anything. Now that you mention it though, do you think I should send her something back? She might think I missed the point if I just write her. I think I’ve told you a little about her. Delia was the not very talkative girl.”

“Yeah, ‘not very talkative.’ You mean the girl that liked to sit in silence, who told you, of all people, that you talk too much. I mean, with all due respect, she sounds not all there. Before, I thought she sounded boring, but now, I understand she’s insane.”

“Okay, there wasn’t any respect in that comment. Delia wasn’t boring, anything but. She had a different way of interacting. I guess I’m not saying this very well. I will admit, her way of

thinking seems off, out side of the box. Anyway, should I send her something?” In lieu of verbal communication, Delia and I went for walks or “little adventures” as she called them. We gave each other gifts. She gave more to me than I to her. She’d make small things—a print of a leaf, a chain of daisies—or give me things she found.

“What are you going to do, send her a foot? An elbow joint?” He tilted his beer until the liquid reached the rim. I glanced around to be sure we weren’t attracting attention.

“Okay, firstly, an elbow joint? That’s not even a self-contained thing. It’s part of the arm. So, no to that. Secondly, I don’t know where to get stuff like that. I was thinking a stuffed bird. Maybe a cat’s head. I’m not sure how comfortable I am with cutting a cat’s head off though or looking for a dead cat.”

“Okay, firstly, what the fuck is wrong with you? You’re like sitting here telling me this isn’t way, way fucked up. Now you’re asking me if you should, I don’t know, maybe cut the head off a fucking cat.” The beer in his glass sloshed side to side in a swirl.

“Feldman, friend, there are all types of weird things that go on. You told me the story about that guy in London who found someone who would eat his leg. You said it was some sort of fetish. Not to mention all the body modifications people make. It could be from a cadaver. Maybe she bought it online.”

“Online? Like, there’s a service that will send body parts to your ex-lovers? I haven’t heard of that, could you please give me the web address? I’m sure I know someone who could use an ear. You, Gabe, friend, are missing the point.”

“Please, don’t mock me.” I spun my glass with the tips of my fingers. “I don’t know how exactly to say it. You’re sitting across from me, telling me Delia is insane, a horrible person,

someone who murders. This is or was an important and good friend.” I felt around my glass. It now sat on a fitted circle of napkin.

“A severed human hand, sent to you unceremoniously in a cardboard box. Gabe, I don’t think it’s a far stretch to question her mental state. That’s crazy.”

“You’re presuming without context or any outside knowledge of this person aside from this and the few things I’ve told you about our relationship. I don’t think it’s bad or wrong of me not to instantly assume the worst about someone I knew very personally. Am I expressing all this?”

I could tell from his face I wasn’t using the correct words to convey my meaning. I started to think this must be fun for Feldman, getting to talk at me like this, and talk about what a boring yet simultaneously crazy and murderous sadist Delia must be. His hands running through his hair, all his gestures were all melodramatic signs of frustration, whereas, he probably felt rather proud of how right he assumed himself. His eyes shone with each point he exaggerated with his active hands. He laughed with a small sneer. He’d decided his position correct, and I must be enlightened. If he were right and Delia killed me in the coming months, I’m not sure he could help thinking ‘I told you so.’ He might sit at this bar with another person and through sadness and even tears say, ‘Right there, at that table, I told him.’

“Fine,” Feldman said. “I guess I’m the one who should calm down. Because, I guess this is, like, a perfectly normal thing to do.”

“Thanks. So about the bird. I remember she had this old wrought-iron birdcage. The type with a chain to hold it up. If she still has that, a bright, stuffed bird would look nice in it.”

Without the extra napkin, condensation ringed my drink.

“You understand I was being sarcastic, right? Like, this is not normal. I’m starting to wonder which of you is crazy. We have the girl who probably has a larger cage where she keeps people to harvest body parts from, and a guy thinking how best to reciprocate the gift of a severed hand. A human fucking hand.”

“Listen, I don’t want to be mean here, but I think you’re being a little sensational about this. I’m not saying this is normal. Sure it’s not something one would expect. It’s shocking. It’s outside of expectable gifts, but haven’t you dated a few odd ones in the past?”

“Who? Mina? The girl who slashed my tires when she caught me cheating? Honestly, don’t you think that’s, like, a little more cliché? I was pissed and thought it was childish. I think this is more like if she, I don’t know, sent me pictures of her fucking animals or something.”

Mina is exactly the odd one. Feldman’s former girlfriend/partner/lover, who asked him why he needed to spend time with his friends if he had her, and what was there he couldn’t talk about with her? When he could get away, his chief complaint was she talked or wanted to talk so much. It’s this kind of thought that lead to Feldman’s drab joke about Delia sounding like the perfect woman. Re: her quietude. Delia and I did have conversations. I imagine Feldman has this idea she and I sat in a room staring into each other’s eyes not making a sound. In a popular film, an attractive and odd character herself said you know you’ve found someone special when you can shut the fuck up and comfortably enjoy the silence. I repeated that quote to Delia. She laughed. I didn’t make her laugh very often. She said people too often don’t listen. She’d cite this conversation with Feldman as a good example. She thought that people think of words as precise little tools, which, if perfectly linked, acted like a scalpel lined with diamonds, each sharp word ready to carve out meaning, but really those well thought out verbalizations were ham-fisted and about as precise as a bulldozer. She said all of this to me while we watched the snow fall over the

parking lot of my apartment complex, with her face very certain and serious. Then she looked over and said, bull in a china shop. We both laughed like it was the wittiest thing we'd heard. Feldman stared at me. His hand clutched his beer, his back off the chair.

“That’s different.” I told him. “Animals can’t consent to sex with people. So technically it’s abuse. Either way, both actions are irrational. In fact, don’t you think slashing someone’s tires is more aggressive, more threatening?”

“What about where the hand came from? Are you trying to convince me that someone said sure, please, cut my hand off?”

I suggested maybe we should play darts or something. I’m not very skilled at bar games, but this conversation wasn’t headed anywhere.

“How do you think a normal person would react? Not you, a rational human being. How would someone normal react at getting a fucking hand in the mail from some girl they dated for five months, what, six years ago?”

“I hope they wouldn’t react like you. Pushing their hair back and waving their arms in the air. Embracing worst-case scenarios. So, could we please drop the subject?” The condensation expanded. Each time I set my hand down it came back wet, and I had to discretely wipe it on my pants.

“Seriously? I can’t drop this. What am I supposed to do, talk about work? Tell you about getting new tires? You brought this up. This is what we’re talking about.”

Feldman stopped listening to anything I had to say, he was more preoccupied with how right he was, or my foolishness. I thought of leaving without a word to see if he’d even notice, which of course he would, so I sat across from him, but the need for my participation in the conversation had ended. I waited for a moment then told him it was getting late, and I had some

chores to do the next day. We both knew this was probably a lie, a manufactured, meaningless something to excuse myself from his company. I don't like these social grace lies, but I was tired of talking to him and wanted to leave but not further either of our annoyance at the other, which from the spiral of our conversation I assume he understood as well as I.

When I got back to the house, I popped a new beer and sat down on the couch, bending at the knees then letting my back sink into the cushion, so I could feel the bend of each joint in the controlled way I sit anytime I'm annoyed. What Feldman didn't have the patience to pause and realize was even if one of his absurd—to me anyway—scenarios proved true, I'd rather help Delia than turn her over to the authorities or shun her. I should have sat straight, looked him in his eyes, and said, Look now, this is my friend. What if you, on one of your not-so-sober trips home, nodded off or lost control of your car in some way and wrecked your car, or caused injury or death in some fashion? Wouldn't you want me to honor our friendship? Oh and he'd say something about this hand situation being different and not an accident. To which I'd say, No, no. We're talking about assumptions here. The assumption some people would make about you in the case I just proposed would be you were a person who had so little regard for human life, your own and others, you couldn't even be bothered to take a cab or ask a friend—me—for a ride. And although I'd agree, through your own foolishness, you caused harm or death by an extremely avoidable accident, I'd still say it was an accident, and you are a person who has the utmost respect for human life. Re: this conversation. Or maybe a simple, stop being such a dick about someone who, while I haven't spoken to in years, I obviously care about. I think that would have sufficed, but even simple phrases always eluded me when I'm presented with the time to use them. In French it's called *l'esprit de l'escalier*. The feeling of knowing the perfect phrase to shut someone up, but putting together that sequence of thoughts long after they're due.

Although, any snarky retort from me would have been steamrolled by him and deliver the inverse-action of shutting me up. I'd leave annoyed. Come home, pop a beer, and sit down in a careful motion, focusing on each joint bend and the feel of my back absorbed into the cushion of my sofa. Which, more or less, is exactly what happened.

The box sat on my coffee table with the hand inside. I'd been so flustered by the opening and the finding, I'd completely lost sight that I should put the hand in the refrigerator, if not the freezer. When I'd opened the package it was not noticeably cool. I assumed the USPS did not climate control the shipment. The questions raised by asking for an air-conditioned freight might have been too invasive for Delia. The USPS may have codes and restrictions on sending body parts, given the possibility of health risks. Not to mention the overall creepiness of the contents and, compounding the creepiness, her lack of viable reason to send a hand to a residential address.

I opened the box flaps one at a time, carefully as if a small animal lived inside and would escape at the first chance. Instead, the hand was poised on its fingertips, slightly arched, the palm's center hovering. The hand had been removed in two diagonal cuts, one from the top, and the other from bottom. This left exposed meat and bone and made the hand look small and incomplete. Visually, the wrist is part of the hand and cutting at the wrist hurt the aesthetic. Where the skin broke, it curled in and wrinkled. It had grayed even more since I first opened it. I should have put it in the refrigerator. Despite this, the hand was free of dirt or blood flakes. Even the exposed meat looked wiped clean but had darkened to the color of old steak. With the hand removed, there was no way to tell what the box had carried. I'm not sure what enabled me to hold the hand and review it in such a detached way. I didn't cup it or intertwine my fingers with it; I held it as a delicate thing. Somewhere in my mind, something retreated from the thing as a

human hand. The knife strokes so precise they removed all trace of gore or instance of horror. Neither of the cuts had the jagged signs of hesitation all the crime scene investigation cop shows talk about. Although, all my forensic knowledge comes from those shows and must be taken with a TV-sized grain of salt. I guess because it was so well removed from the body and the action of removal, I held it as if I were in a lab or what I imagine med school is like when students practice on cadavers.

A light scar marred the back, behind the knuckle and a thick callous bubbled under the pointer finger. The thing wasn't as large as my hand, but I didn't lay it flat and splay the fingers to measure it. It felt frail. The skin like putty, it weighed in my hand. I touched the back and softened my grip. I feared the bones might break and the stiff crack would clack through the skin. That gave me a chill, realizing again what I held had bones, and those bones once attached it to an arm and that arm to a human body. I put it down on the table and sat back to finish off my beer. I didn't turn the television on, as I usually do.

When I left Denver, Delia was the last person to see me off. My car packed, the backseat filled with my possessions, the rearview mirror useless. The two of us stood on the driver's side. She put her hands on my hips and kissed me. An abbreviated, small good-bye kiss. If I remember it correctly, we didn't say good-bye. I'm not sure we said anything. I assume we must have, but retrospect is fallible. In my memory of it, we don't say anything. I got in the car, and she walked away. She didn't turn back once. I completely recall her not turning to look back. That part might sound cruel, but it fit with us. I watched her walk away, as if I weren't the one leaving.

I leaned forward on the edge of my sofa and picked up the hand again. I looked over to the door and to the TV, as if someone might interrupt, before I raised the hand up to my face. It

smelled sour and musky, like old, sick meat. My stomach turned with the scent, but I brought the hand closer until I let the fingertips drag across my nose and cheek.

I'm not some sad hump, pining after the last love he ever felt, in fact, Delia and I never used the word. Until now I don't think I've ever used that word in conjunction with her name. I've had relationships with women since I left Denver, a few, I would say a respectable amount. A couple were serious. I took them out to meet Feldman and a few other friends. They put their arms around the small of my back at social events. What I mean is, I'm not a person who ever worried about ending up alone. I don't think I've ever thought about it either way.

I dated one for a year. I said, "I love you." It wasn't the first time, but it was the most recent. She said it to me one night, and I paused unsure how to respond. I said it back and smiled because it didn't feel completely unnatural. From then on it became our idiom for good-bye, like "aloha" means "hello," "good-bye," and "I love you." But the Hawaiian word means more than that. It means a general kindness for others, goodness. "I love you," meant that for us or at least for me. We said it at the end of phone conversations or when we left each other's apartments. I liked saying it to her because I meant "good-bye with a great level of care and affection." I tried to explain to her one night that it was nice we had a phrase that meant so many things and fit different situations. I guess I didn't do a very good job of saying what I meant. We got into a fight about it that night and a few more over the next week. She said she didn't think I understood what love was, and the word meant one very real, very specific thing, and if I didn't understand that I was a fucked up guy. I tried to tell her I thought it was much bigger and better than one thing, but I realized we were talking about different things.

Feldman laughed at me when I told him the story. He said I needed a friend. I shouldn't be alone at a time like that. He took me out, pushed drinks on me, and said, "Okay, tell me

everything. Anything you want.” He said I was an idiot. But there would be others. I like Feldman and accept our interactions, but I still get annoyed when he calls me an idiot or when anyone insults my intelligence, so I asked him how exactly he defined “I love you.” I said, “What do you mean when you say it?”

He said, “Okay, I think you need a good dose of honest simplicity sometimes. Really, it’s just something you say to make a woman feel special. Sure it means something, but really it’s just the next level of ‘I like you,’ which you only say to make someone feel good. I mean, I don’t tell you I like you because it should be pretty obvious. I guess I’m agreeing with you.”

I told him I didn’t think he was getting my point, but I did agree with what he said about the unstated emotion of our friendship.

I felt something more than ‘the next stage of like’ for the person, but the best definition I could come up with, even when said to a person I would tell others I loved, meant little more than “I really like spending time with you. There are few others I’d rather be with,” which doesn’t sound much different. Delia and I never even thought to say it.

I couldn’t think of the right gift to send back to her. I could buy her a stuffed bird and a cage in case she had lost hers or used it in some other way. Given Feldman’s thoughts on the hand, I thought it might be better if I killed a bird myself and put it in the cage. That felt closer to our conversations, more personal, but the thought of killing something revolted me. I couldn’t decide, so I gave up for the night. I put the hand back in the box and into the refrigerator. Falling asleep, I thought of lying in the snow with Delia outside my apartment complex in Denver, with no urge to speak or need to fill the air with sound.

Even on Saturdays, I wake up early without an alarm. I make coffee using a plastic tablespoon measure, adding one for each cup of water. When I opened the refrigerator to retrieve

the cream, I had to reach past the box. I lost my appetite and skipped breakfast. Normally, I'd cook a nice meal to start the morning, something like eggs with spinach and toast. I couldn't think of the last morning I hadn't woken with a raging hunger. I sipped my coffee and got out my running shoes. I go running on the weekends, especially if I've gone out to the bar. It helps clear my head, and I thought today I could go for an extra long run. Maybe a thought would pop into my head, and I'd have my answer for how to respond to Delia. Although, it was during a run I got the idea for my relationship ending articulation on love.

There was a knock on my door while I washed my breakfast dishes. I thought it was Feldman coming to prod me. Delia stood framed by the early sun. She looked tired, circles fringed under her eyes. Not dark, ugly circles, faint ones that hinted at worry or fear. Her arms hung at her sides. She stared at me, and I stared at the place her hand should be. The abbreviated limb ended in a stitched nub, instead of the hand, which was cooling in my refrigerator. She said a shallow hello, and I remembered to look at her face.

“You're here,” I said.

“Yeah, I took a plane the day after I overnighted the package.” She stepped inside the doorway. The sun crested behind her. It was dark in my house, and the dust-fattened light fused

around her, through her brown hair that absorbed the sun. It was a moment you remember as it happens.

“Your hand.”

She looked down at her wrist. “I didn’t know any words for it.”

I told her I was never actually sure how to say anything.

She nodded. Her eyes flicked down and shone wet. I decided she was happy.

“What?”

“You’re grinning.”

I hadn’t noticed, but I couldn’t stop. “You know you could have just come. You didn’t have to, you know.”

She smirked. “I’ve always been a little dramatic. Better to show than tell, and all.” She stepped forward and put her arms around me. Her face pressed against the cheek I’d put her unattached hand on. I felt where her hand should be on my back. She made a sound. I kissed her. I felt her warmth against me. One hand across my back, its fingers curled around my side. And the missing hand left an absence of pressure, like the relief of putting together something you’ve been trying to say.

Southern Female Writers

In NYC Flannery O'Connor still drank Coca-Cola and coffee. A coffee cup sat by her typewriter always at least a third full. She tried not to consider how many cups she drank in a day. Items others called essential, she considered unimportant and not worth the distraction. If she ran out of soap, as she had days ago, she stopped bathing. Bathing itself fell on the wrong side of this division of time and labor.

O'Connor didn't smell as sweet as the women she passed on the street. In grade school, her mother let the water run until it burned her skin. She'd sit next to the tub and chat while O'Connor winced in the bath. Her skin would turn red. Her mother said big cities smelled awful, which proved true for the actual streets and alleyways, not so much for the people themselves. The people, her mother said, would just as soon push you off the sidewalk as help you. Mothers only wish for their children's safety. O'Connor moved after that skin-scalding mother died of

lupus at Baldwin County Hospital in a strange turn of events O'Connor bottled in an abandoned part of her mind.

O'Connor spent her days looking at the window that would have shown a six story building that mirrored her own, but instead framed the yellowed map of the Smoky Mountains she found at a dime store. An impulse buy that reminded her of home even if it wasn't exactly where she came from. She sat in front of her typewriter starting and stopping. She prematurely stubbed out cigarettes or stood up to brew more coffee. Down to one Coke, she crossed her arms and stared at the typewriter. She should run to the store now. It would be much more trouble if she started her New England/New York story then had to stop to buy more. The corner store was only a block away.

In the store, down the third aisle, on the second wooden shelf, sat the twelve-slotted crates of Coca-Cola. She slid one off into her hands. O'Connor had grown used to the store, of walking in to no greeting, passing down the aisles by herself, and no offer of help from the man behind the counter. She debated asking for a pack of Old Golds. The slender, rat-faced man rested his arm on the cash register. O'Connor smiled, thinking that in this place transactions were what roused people from inside themselves. He asked if that would just about do it for today. O'Connor sucked in a breath and said, "A carton of Old Gold cigarettes, please." Old Rat-face raised his chin and showed his yellowed teeth, which made her think, "Old Gold."

She savored the walk home with its moments of thought, which felt inspired until she typed them out and saw them for the hackneyed meanderings everyone has while walking down a noisy street full of people, their acknowledgment economized for sales and scams. Her street wasn't so busy by NYC standards. She lugged the crate of Coke by its handholds, the bulk pressed against her waist, her back arched slightly. People sidestepped out of her way as she kept

to the inside of the sidewalk. They might not offer help, but what her mother didn't understand was people here respected anyone involved in a task.

A man in a nice black coat walked toward her. A boyish roundness still clung to his cheeks. He gave her room to pass and grinned with gaps between his teeth. "Careful, you got a full load there, ma'am." His gruff voice contrasted with his full face and kind manner. O'Connor let the smile linger in her mind. She remembered his eyes as calm and reflective, like a mirror.

In her room, O'Connor filled her cup with Coke and coffee then lit a fresh Old Gold. She didn't look at the blank page in front of her. She could feel what it would feel like to look at it. It wouldn't help her think of a character. The man in the black coat had not been pretty. His gapped teeth and round cheeks too silly for beauty. She suspected something about his reflective, deflecting eyes. They echoed what a person wanted to see—themselves—instead of a killer, scary because of his charm rather than his criminal record. With eyes like that even a touched man could make a girl flutter. Coach her to let him in. He could talk himself out of, but more often than not into, trouble. Quick to anger and eager to breakout, this alluring gangster killed a guard in his escape from the state pen a few miles outside the city. He stabbed the guard in the throat with a broken broom handle.

He grew up in the noise and bustle of a city, but he slept easy in a ditch after his escape. He looked up at the stars and thought, if the sky looked down at him, he was something small and no matter how bad, nothing he did mattered to that sky. He hitched a ride into the city from a man who didn't ask questions. Once there, he found the people who held his money. He bought a new suit and a silvery pistol that took a clip. The cops started breaking down doors, putting billyclubs to his partners' heads. The gangster turned and headed south, like they always do.

Barb Johnson was finished with high school and small Louisiana towns, tired of shitty drugs and Cajun phrases. At seventeen, in the grip of wanderlust and alienation, she could not comprehend her death or any limits to her ability or knowledge, so the phrase “better or worse” had no concrete meaning and “only what she needed” translated to money, a few clothes, marijuana, and the family guitar, which is what she carried to the bus station.

The bus ticket took half her cash, but she could find work in a real city. She convinced the luggage man her guitar wouldn't be in anyone's way. Putting it under the bus was not an option. He said the bus would leave in thirty minutes. Barb Johnson, unconditioned to and informally against sobriety, walked around the building and shook her stash from the guitar and rolled a bus-trip-sized joint. Barb hot-boxed it and boarded. She let her head fall against the window and dozed as the South rolled by. She smiled and thought good riddance to it. And as the picturesque trees and grassy hills rolled by like a cliché, Barb dreamed of finding her way in NYC, meeting other musicians and poets. People who honestly lived, who took life and grabbed it like something a person could take and grab.

Flannery O'Connor stopped typing. She drank from her stained coffee cup, lit a cigarette, and leaned back from the desk. She pounded the spacebar to the ding. The same story, the same words, the same ideas over and over until the same words, the same story, and the same ideas contained no meaning and gripped nothing. She looked up at the map and imagined a thick line tracing her gangster's travel south until it reached the bottom and he fell to his death from the edge of the window. She sucked the Old Gold. The typewriter offered no help. "Fuck," she said. O'Connor only swore when writing and alone. Her body tensed in anticipation of her mother's tut-tut preface to "I-didn't-raise-my-daughter-to" lashings.

She fingered the cross on her neck. O'Connor kept her faith, but seldom attended church in NYC. A change of setting could be a change in character. The cathedrals were beautiful monuments to God, but kneeling in those massive, hollow buildings, she failed to find the solace and peace she knew in childhood. Instead, she socialized. She had dinner with established writers and up-and-comers. The published ones droned on about their work. She couldn't take another anecdote about editors or agents. The latter group spent their time pitching their stories, as if she could help them. Worse were the salons, where they sat in nice rooms and ate tiny sandwiches. They made her self-conscious about her hands, which at the last gathering, she hid while listening to a twenty-something man in a stiff suit speak about a story she'd never read. All sex and drugs, the character had to choose between "junk" and his lover. In the end, he chose drugs because he could buy them. The stiff young man grinned and said it commented on our dependence on commercialism. He looked very proud. The others didn't leave him alone in that pride, either. He asked her about her own "graphic" writing in relation to the story. O'Connor felt pride then. She didn't even roll her eyes. Their writing was banal aside from its provocative

scenes and absolutely graceless, but even the worst stories magnified the fear she was a one trick horse, circling its pen.

Even her room worried her. She'd found a small place with only a bed, a counter top, and a two-burner stove. It was familiar. The same efficient use of space, bare and functional, smaller than any room in her home, but similar enough that she flinched when she swore or, sometimes, waited for her mother's knock. Perhaps all such rooms were interchangeable. She had no history in this new room. It filled with a mixture of her memories of other rooms like the convoluted setting of a dream.

O'Connor didn't think NYC was soulless, but it bore down on a person. The buildings and crowds pressed in and pushed anyone not fast enough to the side. There wasn't any time or space to move around someone slow or in trouble. She rested her fingers on the keys. They sunk halfway under the weight, and she closed her eyes. Often, on her walks, she saw young kids, some no older than twelve, havelled on the streets and alleys, a hand held out for change or some small mercy. She saw a boy leaning against a brownstone, an older ragamuffin in his late teens. His clothes filled with the translucent dead-skin city dust. His pants black and vest brown, both thick to abide thorough use. He held a crumpled bowler. O'Connor thought he'd use it as prop in his hand rather than a hat on his head. When people passed by he held out his hand not too far from his body. Just from looking at his posture and weak attempt to beg, it was clear he made his living some other way. He didn't waste a smile for pleasantries. She knew his eyes might not always gleam, but for the right person, with something to gain, they could shine.

A cigarette hung from O'Connor's lips. The boy came off the wall. He sauntered in an oval in her mind, showing himself off. She replaced the page in her typewriter and typed. On the map, her eyes traced north. Her character, a girl, could look to escape. This girl had never felt

home in the South. A change of setting could be a change in person. She'd take something with her though, a thing that held her past close to her chest, a grace-retaining instrument, important to her for other reasons. It should belong to her family.

Barb Johnson bought a ham sandwich at the stop in Atlanta. She ate as the station hummed around her, travelers moving at all paces to board. One man ran by with a briefcase, his hand on his hat, silver hair poking out from under it. Barb laughed. No reason to hurry. On the way to her bus, she bought a copy of *The New Yorker* from a magazine stand.

On the bus, Barb clutched her guitar between her knees and opened the magazine. The articles sounded like they poked fun at something she didn't get, and assumed, since she didn't get the joke, she was the joke. An article on Arte Povera was written for an audience she couldn't imagine and didn't want to imagine. The story said non-political art was a waste of time. Each sentence folded over on itself and used five-dollar words like the writer was trying to confuse her. Barb thought people should say what they meant, instead of just winking at it from across the room. She picked the magazine back up and flipped through the pages. She decided she'd read the whole thing twice if needed.

Flannery O'Connor never mapped out her stories. She heard other writers say much the same, but a little guilt remained for not putting forth more effort at the start. Sometimes, she dreaded her characters. O'Connor wouldn't let herself smile about it, but that dread excited her. She wrote a girl into a bus seat. It headed to the Atlanta station. Another bus would take her to NYC. The first station would be a preamble to the big city. The character traveled to find new ways of thinking, to meet musicians and writers, artists of every ilk. She'd fit in with the people who filled the salons, or, better, the people who would never be invited. No big dreamer's dreams of fame, just a person who wanted everything, all the time. In the Atlanta bus station, the young woman carried her suitcase of clothes and a guitar. The guitar belonged to her family. She'd taken it from the living room because she was the only one who used it anymore. Even leaving her home gladly, when looking at the guitar she imagined her living room and playing it on the old floral print sofa. She'd started playing to learn songs that told stories, and as she sat on the wooden church-pew-like bench watching the people hurry by to catch busses, she thought a song about the place should be fast and hurried, sung at jibber-jabber speed. Barb left behind her family's white plastered rooms and dusty wood floors that swelled in the summer and stole warmth from her feet in the winter.

O'Connor smiled at the typewriter's ding. She looked around her room. This transplanted Southern girl character would rent a room smaller but similar to the one she left behind. A cheap

boarding room with cool wooden floors and yellowed plaster walls. The young woman watched the clock for time to board her northbound bus. The woman told the driver she could ride with her guitar. He said there wasn't much room, and she'd be much more comfortable without it. She said she wouldn't. She found her seat and sat with the guitar riding on the floor, her knees over the body, hands resting on the base of the neck. That was all O'Connor wrote about the bus ride.

Barb Johnson stepped out of Grand Central Station into exhaust, stagnant gutter water, and people. Hundreds of people. Dazzled by the mass moving around and dodging her, she stood in the middle of the sidewalk. The sky-breaking buildings. Keys and cars rattled by her. Men wore hats and suits or sweaters with diamond patterns. Women dressed in mid-thigh length skirts with dark blazers. She caught fragments of speech, but saw no one talk. A body bumped her from behind. A voice passed her. "These people get off the bus and just stand around like no one has any place to get to." Another body ran into her shoulder, and she merged with the crowd.

After a block the mass thinned. Barb slowed to take in the vast city. A maze of stores and people and streets clotted with traffic, small alleyways every few blocks, and a million places to hide. Another group of faster moving people enveloped and passed her. She forgot to look at street signs and found herself with no idea where she started. A city bus roared by on the street

creviced between skyscrapers. The buildings measured how far she was from the sun. At home it felt much closer. She wasn't intimidated by the city's size or its towers or its people who sped so fast their faces blurred. This was all or nothing, and she'd already seen what nothing had to offer.

She found a diner with big windows where she could watch the city out of its way. The waitress looked her down as she walked in the door. Barb was only slightly self-conscious of her faded jeans and farmer's shirt. In the '90s when the Northwest would make this look popular, Barb would tell friends how ahead of the curve she had been. "I was an alternative girl before Nirvana, baby," she would say. *The New Yorker* would quote this statement out of context, making it seem as if she took credit for grunge counter-culture.

"Gonna order?" the waitress asked.

Barb set her guitar in the booth and her bag under the table. She asked for a Coke and ordered a pastrami sandwich, because it was a day for new things.

The waitress told her it would be two dollars and sixty cents and stood over Barb waiting for the money. Barb tugged at the cash in her pocket. The waitress took the bills into her apron and turned away without a word. Outside the window, the crowds made the Atlanta bus station look like small change. Barb ate her sandwich without noticing at the orange sauce dripping over her hand. A well-dressed man smiled and tilted his hat as he passed women. He glanced through the window and stared into her face for a half moment. Without smiling, he brought his hand to his hat's brim and nodded. Barb glanced down to her hand covered in Russian dressing.

"Need anything else," the waitress asked. She looked back over her shoulder before Barb answered.

"Do you know a place to stay around here?"

The waitress maintained her frown. Barb explained she had just arrived and needed a place to stay for the night. It didn't need to be anything special.

“You mean cheap? Not ‘round here. Tell you what, take the 39 down to Brooklyn and find some flophouse. You’re gonna need to find work, and fast. From the looks of you, you’ll have to take what you can get.”

“Yeah, thanks.” When the waitress walked away, Barb pocketed the fork just to steal something and walked out the door. She maneuvered through the crowd to the nearest subway entrance. The subway map’s colored lines crisscrossed over each other like a child’s drawing. Barb traced her finger on the glass above the map but couldn’t get from one end to the other. She got on the line that seemed like it went out to Brooklyn. She had enough sense to know she would probably be looking for the shoddy part of town.

The subway platforms looked much the same. Each one appeared equally rundown. They only differed in the amount of people waiting. The crowd thinned at each stop. The subway train halted at an empty platform, and Barb stepped out. A few men in earth-toned clothes sat against the wall. From the corner of her eye, she watched two black men laugh. They talked by the exit. As she neared them, they grew quiet and eyed her. Her hand tightened on her backpack’s strap.

Flannery O'Connor lit another cigarette. She set it on the edge of her desk. Two tapered burns marked where others had been forgotten. Her mother would have tanned her hide. She reset the page.

Barb Johnson found a place that said "Vacancy." The lobby wasn't much more than a window and a clerk. The man in the window kept his sour face on his newspaper. "Fiver a night. Two dollars an hour."

"Do I get a washroom?"

He folded and pushed the paper aside and raised his head to look Barb over. "There's a shower and a toilet at the end of every hall. I don't get involved with when you get to use it."

"That'll work. Can I get a room with a window to the street?"

"Why you need a way to the street?"

"Oh, I just got into town. I want to look out at the city. Get a feel for things."

"Yeah. Fine. Anyway, it's cash up front. Always." He rested his arm on the table and looked her over again. "If I don't see you leave by noon, I'll be up to collect for the night."

Barb nodded. She put her money on the table. The clerk dragged his grubby hands across the counter, reached under it, and handed her a key. He smiled with yellow-filmed teeth.

“I need to sign something? You going to kick me out in the middle of the night?”

He frowned at the question and lifted his head back in a tired motion. “We work on a kinda honor system here.” He laughed. “Look, as long as you ain’t trouble, I won’t even notice you. You pay me. I give you a place. That’s it.”

The third floor room was as meager as she’d imagined it on the bus ride. An old wood chair and a small table took up most of one wall. The bed was a thin mattress on a metal frame. So taken with having a room, her room, she didn’t mind much the absence of blankets, sheets, or a pillow. She switched on the lamp that was screwed to the desk and rested her guitar in the corner. She took off her shoes and felt the wooden floor through her socks.

Barb wondered how many people had stayed in this room. How many others had just walked into the city and spent their first few moments in their first New York room. She walked down the hallway to the bathroom. The wood floor was worn pale. Once white walls were now yellowed. Smoke collected at the ceiling. It leaked from opened doors along with radio music and voices. The other boarders’ lives seeped through the thin walls and overflowed into each other. A man sweetly said he needed someone. Said, Baby you’re all I want in the whole world. Come here. A woman sang along with a song in an off-pitched howl. A match struck somewhere near. Then another.

Barb returned to her room to sleep. She unpacked a jacket to use as a blanket and fluffed her backpack for a pillow. She curled under the jacket and listened to the plaster-hushed voices.

The morning din came through the window and woke her. People talked in loud, quick voices. Cars rattled by and honked. It was joyfully overwhelming. Barb smiled because she had done it. She didn’t know a person for a thousand miles. In celebration of the first day, she rolled a joint. While smoking, she watched the street buzz with life. Street vendors stood behind small

carts. A man ran across the road, his hand held up to traffic. A woman in a beige dress sold roses. Barb couldn't read the price from her window. The woman offered one out to each person who passed. Some waved her off. Others made no motion of notice. A person could rewrite themselves here. Not a soul to say what she should have been or mention what she used to be.

She set her smoke down on the edge of the desk and picked up her guitar. Her hand slid over the nicks in the neck. Her fingers remembered the frets as she picked out chords, searching for something to match the voices outside. Once she found it, the music swam around her head and became words. She sang in a low mumble. Her eyes closed, and she barely heard the creak as her door was pushed open.

The boy wore thick black pants, a dark, tattered shirt under a brown vest, and a crumpled fedora. He was dusty and unwashed. Barb stopped playing.

"Don't stop," he said. "I heard you from down the hall. I would've stayed outside if I thought you'd stop."

"What?" Barb put down the guitar and stood. "You can't knock on a door?"

"Well, yeah, I could, but if I knocked you'd have stopped playing. Besides, most I'm risking right now is that you, someone I don't know from Eve, might tell me to scat." He closed in and stuck his hand out. "Also, people shouldn't be so scared. Be a better place if we popped in and said hello to each other. So, hello, I'm Soup."

Barb frowned. "I'm not scared, but I don't like being barged in on." She shook his hand. His uneven grin spread at an angle. It gave his face a goofy brightness. He stepped farther into the room. He glanced down at the desk and the burning joint. "I paid for a private room. I assume you know what the word private means."

His eyes moved over the room.

“Wait, did you say you’re named after soup?”

Soup picked up the stick. “Do you mind?” He took a long, practiced drag and exhaled so the smoke stayed close to his face. “Soup is the name I gave myself when I rejected the normal track and left behind all that had been my life heretofore.”

“And part of ‘rejecting the normal track’ is barging in wherever you see fit?”

Soup sat down on the floor, crossed his legs and continued to smoke. His eyes stayed on Barb. Smiling a bit, she reached for the joint.

“Well, I don’t think I’d put it that way. Let’s say maybe I don’t want to risk the chance of not meeting someone interesting just because they’re behind a door or otherwise occupied.” He spoke fast but pronounced each word. He didn’t rush the point or point his voice, as Barb had heard when she stepped off the bus. The light angled through the window, and she saw a faint reflection of herself in his eyes. She wondered how he saw her.

“And I’m interesting to you somehow, even though a moment ago I was just a few chords?”

“See. I knew it. That’s an interesting way to put it: ‘I was just a few chords’ like you didn’t even exist in anything but music before I walked in and saw you.” He scooted back against the wall and let his arms hang on his knees. “And in that case, I had to come in because I haven’t heard anyone play guitar in here before. I had to make sure there was someone in here playing and not just a few chords coming from nothing.”

Barb laughed. “You’re a little off, aren’t you?”

“Isn’t it a little better that way?” He took off his hat and gestured a greeting to Barb. “I was about to go to the diner and take some breakfast. Would you care to join me?”

Barb agreed and introduced herself. “I assume you’re paying, seeing as you barged in on me.”

Soup took her to a nearby diner that had cheap food and didn’t mind people who took their time with coffee. They ate egg sandwiches and sipped their coffee until it was lukewarm. Barb related her story, leaving out any familial details. Soup only asked questions and listened. The waitress called him by name. Unlike Barb’s first diner interaction, the server smiled and welcomed her.

“What about you?” Barb asked.

“What about me?”

“Well how long have you been in NYC? How long you been at that flop?”

He cracked his knuckles. “I’ve been here for a while. Long enough to know my share of tricks. And as it stands, I’m between roofs.”

Barb watched him shift his shoulders as he talked. She wasn’t sure she should trust him, but this moment wouldn’t have happened if she hadn’t had the mustard to get on that bus. She eased back into the booth. “I figure I’ll be in the same boat if I don’t find some work. I think I have about a week to find something.”

Soup’s glanced caught her bag for only a moment. “Well, that’s the rub. The thing that’s been forced upon each of us. Money drives everything around us, and it drives us into the ground. But, anyway, what type of work are you looking for? You have a trade? Sorry to say it, but there ain’t much work for guitar playing.”

“I was told by some waitress I’d have to take whatever I could get. But, I don’t know really. I work hard when I work, you know?” Barb grinned. “I could wash dishes or something. If somebody’s willing to teach me, I pick up things pretty quick. You have a trade?”

“See, I don’t subscribe to any systems of oppression or capitalist empires. Have you read Karl Marx?”

Barb thought of lying for a moment. “Nope, I guess there’s a lot of stuff I haven’t read.”

“Don’t be embarrassed—

—I’m not embarrassed.”

“I’ve been a lot of places and met a bunch of really smart people. It’s pretty easy once you hear it. See, jobs all have managers. And a lot of times they’re no better than you at the work, and they sure aren’t no better a person than you. But they all think they are because they’ve been told they are. Just like they’ve been told that the person above them’s better. You know what the difference is between people like us and some richy-rich? Well the difference is he’s stepped on a whole lot of backs to get his money. And you can bet he’s holding onto it like it’s his dear life.”

“I guess, but he’s worked hard at some point.”

“Maybe he has, but if you’re hungry, I bet he’s not going to feed you. Even if you’re dying. If people helped out those worse off than they are, we could all live easier and better. What would it be like if you didn’t have to work, and you could sit on a street and play your guitar for people? So people walking by might slow up and listen, maybe then they wouldn’t stay so stern. Lighten their mood a touch. Doesn’t that already sound better for you and them? You’ve only been here, what, a day, and you know how people ignore everything.”

Barb thought about that for a while. It sounded about right. The street might be a nicer place filled with free music. Not busking. One less person selling. Soup said he’d show her around the city if she promised to play guitar for him later. She agreed. His pupils expanded, and Barb felt excited.

Flannery O'Connor had forgotten the room around her in its familiar and interchangeable comfort. Two cigarettes had burned out on the desk. Her fingers moved over the keys. She wrote of tall buildings and rattling cars. She peppered her scenes with trees on streets teeming with people, the vast man-made, manicured park where couples walked hand in hand while others slept on benches. Her character admired the manufactured pastoral scene, but, unlike O'Connor, she walked looking upward at the skyscraping buildings.

O'Connor shuddered. She tried rationalize the towers. She remembered they were the work of people pulled together to create, but she felt them leaning over her. They rose too tall, too close together, crowding and ready to collapse. She looked back up at the old map covering the window, took a deep breath and let her hands hover over the typewriter. Her character let a con artist, a thief of a boy sleep in her room. He talked fast but listened to her music in the disarming silence of full attention. He watched her close and tallied her belongings. His eyes always fell back to the guitar. The longer O'Connor kept the two together, the more she thought of the boy curled up on the floor using his jacket as a pillow. Her character had a curious lack of interest in the slender, street-savvy boy. Her young woman's interest lay in becoming savvy like the boy, not becoming his.

Barb Johnson played her guitar and sang about the Atlanta bus depot. Soup slept on the floor of her room that night. The next day he taught her how to distract desk clerks while he snuck up the stairs to steal anything of value he could find. She'd walk in, and ask the clerk the price of a room, and about the accommodations. Then try to haggle.

“Do whatever you can to annoy him and get him frustrated with you,” he said. “Once I’m up the stairs you can leave. Maybe sit outside and play your guitar, so the whole time the clerk’s wondering how to get rid of you, but he’s tied to the desk. We want him just the right amount of annoyed.”

Barb stumbled through her haggle with the first clerk. She asked for a cheap room and said the price was too much before he'd finished telling her. She saw Soup on the stairs and reached for the door. She mumbled an apology, leaving before the clerk could respond. She sat against the building and tried to play. She missed chords and her fingers muted notes. She wouldn't let herself glance at the door. She could picture the clerk dragging Soup out by his collar, screaming for the police. If she left, Soup could find her back at the room later, but he might figure she wasn't cut out for any of this and left. She stayed and struggled to play through the dead notes. From the corner she heard something. Soup walked away from her. He tilted his head without looking back. She went after him quickly, her eyes straight ahead.

“It worked,” she said straight-faced. “You get anything?”

“Of course it worked, worked like a charm. Nothing to be nervous about.” He pulled some change and a ring from his pocket. A small radio slid out from under his shirt.

“That’s all?”

“People are attached to their possessions. It ain’t bank robbery. You’re not going to solve all your monetary problems stealing out of people’s rooms in one hotel, but it’s a whole lot safer than running in, guns raised to take the vault.” Soup laughed and mimicked guns firing with his hands. “I know a place we can sell the ring and radio. That’s a couple meals and a night’s rest.”

Barb said she knew that. She just thought it might be a little more.

“Here, put this stuff in your bag.”

At the second hotel, Barb walked in and asked the clerk at the desk how much for a room.

“We charge six dollars for a night.”

“Look here, I know I can get a room for a dollar less than that.”

The clerk raised an eyebrow. He scratched at his high hairline. “Well, why are you here then?”

Barb smiled at the man. “How about this, I can play you a couple dollars worth of room, and then I’ll pay you three.”

The balding man raised his hand to say something, but Barb was already on her second chord. She sang a song about the finest hotel and clerk a girl could ever meet. “Well, the rates are high and the hairlines, too. But the beds are warm and made for you. Walk right in, get a fair shake. That good ole clerk says, ‘Come on in for heaven’s—’

The clerk shook his head and laughed. “Stop. Stop! That’s great, but I can’t just give these rooms away. If you don’t have any money, I can’t do anything for you.”

“Did you at least like the song?”

“Sure. You can stand outside and play it as long as you want. Maybe you’ll make enough money for a room.”

Barb flashed a grin. “I might do that. Thanks for listening, anyway.” She walked out and strummed loud and fast. She wanted people to hear for miles. Soup came down, and they met at the end of the block.

“You took right to this, Barb. I have to say I’m impressed. I’d never have thought to sing someone a song to distract them.”

“I was thinking about what you said at the diner, and it seemed like a good distraction.”

“More flies with honey, right? I bet he might not even think you had anything to do with it.”

The sun crested and the street filled with people rushing off to lunch. Barb nodded and said hello to anyone who made eye contact.

“What do you say we hit one more place then have some lunch? Noon’s a good time because everyone’s in a hurry to eat and get back.”

Barb said they could do a few more. Then, maybe, take the rest of the day to see the city. “I’d like to see the big park.”

“Sure. Barb’s a real go-getter, huh? How ‘bout this, go-getter, you want to make the run this time? Go up in the rooms? Everybody’s out eating. It’ll be an easy introduction.”

“Um, I mean, sure. I thought you said I was good at distracting the guy.”

“Oh, you are. I’m gonna steal your move. I know a couple chords. I just figure we can switch it up a little so people don’t start expecting anything. Besides it’ll be good for you to learn all the ropes.”

Barb nodded and said sure. She said she guessed that made sense.

“Now, it’s a whole other thing to break into the rooms. Sometimes the halls and doors all look the same. You can’t get lost. You have to know where the escape is.”

“I’m not stupid, you know,” she said, annoyed at his warning. “I can figure out where a ladder’s at, and I can tell if there’s noise coming from a room. Besides, people more likely to go easy on a poor girl just trying to afford something to eat.”

Soup said, yeah, that’s the attitude. “Here, look at this.” He pulled out a metal T. Its top bar fit in Barb’s palm and a flat-head screwdriver stuck out between her fingers. He told Barb to jam it into the lock. Then twist it hard, and the lock should pop open.

They stopped a half block away from the hotel. “Give me the guitar and your backpack.”

“What?”

“I told you I want to use your trick. Besides you can’t exactly crawl around while lugging a guitar. I’m gonna play a song while you get upstairs. It’ll be the same as before. I’ll play until you’re down. I’ll meet up with you a block or so away.” His eyes sucked in the light and shined. “Barb, I believe this is the start of a very good partnership.”

“Yeah, of course.” She handed him her bag then her guitar. “Listen, be careful with it.” She nodded toward the guitar.

Soup walked into the hotel. “Hello there sir. I have a promising proposition for you today.”

As Soup told the man behind the desk about playing a song for rent or to convince people to come stay at the boarding house, Barb inched behind him and moved under the desk window.

O'Connor pulled her hand from the keys. In the next words his eyes would lose their shine because the con was over. O'Connor didn't understand why her secondary character's grin pointed so sharp. Her girl could run out into the street. O'Connor brought her hand to her mouth. It held no cigarette this time. And she knew. He'd been after the only thing she valued. The guitar could be sold for a decent sum to a pawnshop, but he wanted to take it from her. He could sense something about her that made him want to hurt her. Something in her was different and strong. O'Connor placed her fingers on the keys but didn't type. She thought the two could have made good partners. O'Connor did find her female character strange, but only the boy wanted to take something from the girl. She hadn't given in to fear or weakness yet. O'Connor shuddered at what the girl might do if she found him.

"Kid, it's money for a room. Songs don't pay bills," Barb heard the clerk say. She paused on the stairs to look back at Soup. He brought the guitar up to play. His angled grin spread over his face. Soup fixed on her. His blank eyes leveled at hers.

"Looks like you've got a thief sneaking up your stairs, sir."

Barb froze huddled halfway up the staircase, staring at Soup. His shoulders back, he stood as if the backpack held none of her possessions.

“What the fuck?” The door next to the desk window swung open and blocked the staircase. Barb couldn’t get out. The clerk pulled himself around the door to get at Barb.

“I’d run,” Soup said to the frozen room.

And Barb knew he’d planned this, just not how far the plan stretched back. She grabbed the next stair with her hands and pushed off of her feet. She rabbited up the staircase. She stood when she reached the hallway. A few doors were cracked, and voices issued from behind them. Somewhere ahead of her, a match struck against its sandpaper.

Barb Johnson measured the hallway, focusing on the end. The layout provoked a memory of her first night with a familiar discomfort. Now, with added fear. She flitted down the hall listening at each door for sounds of inhabitants and for footsteps behind her. Rhythmic clicking echoed farther down the hall. Labored footsteps vibrated from the staircase to her feet. Barb ran on tiptoes. Down the hall the clicking stopped. The footsteps did not. She reached a door that looked like any other. The same scratches and nicks left by the traffic of unknown, short-term boarders bruised the wood along the edges. The worn knob fit comfortably in her hand like something taken for granted. Without waiting for precaution, she turned the knob, and the door opened with a small pop.

Inside, the room could have been hers. A small bed on one side. A window and a desk. A typewriter sat on the desk next to a coffee cup and an ashtray near the desk’s edge. A few long tapered burns marred the wood. The sheet of paper in the machine was half-filled with words. Barb gawked for a moment. The footsteps outside stopped. Someone knocked on a door down the hall. She heard a rushed, breathless voice but not the words. The room’s air still held

someone else. A trace of tangible history loitered in the room, not unlike a memory, but more part of the room than her. She looked at the corner and thought her guitar should rest there.

Another knock, this one closer. The clerk was checking all the rooms. Barb ran to the window. It didn't have a fire escape, and the jump would break her. She touched the typewriter. It was heavy enough to bring down and crack a person's skull. The footsteps closed in. She might not have to. The threat might be enough. She picked it up by its body, her fingers curled around the chassis and under the letters and all their possible combinations. She held it in front of her. The frame dug into her fingers. Part of her mind thought "typewriter." Another part thought, "weapon." She watched the doorknob. She waited for even a slight turn.

Ballard-Sparrow Resigns
by Jude Dorsey

Nebraska Chase Ballard-Sparrow issued a detailed speech one week ago today, in which he announced his resignation as friend, lover, and confidant. He cited emotional distance, lack of communication, and the fatigue of secrecy as cardinal points but said, “There are too many issues to go into.” Through the duration of the past year Ballard-Sparrow vocalized many similar sentiments, but the tenor of his speech differed from others, with its note of doleful

finality. Asked if there were a chance for reconciliation or further involvement on any level, Ballard-Sparrow bowed his head, avoided direct eye contact, and said at this time “there’s not space in my life for anything so broken. Right now, I just can’t. I’ve kept this going by myself for too long already. It’s time to be honest, and I’m not sure it hasn’t been over for a while.”

Ballard-Sparrow’s partner responded in an emotional outburst including ill-conceived accusations of betrayal and breach of verbal contract. Before his final exit from the building, Ballard-Sparrow turned to add, “Despite this mess, I still care deeply. It’s never too late to be honest with yourself and the people you’re involved with. Try to remember that.” The departure left a cavity, which grows more apparent with each day. It is unclear if another can approach the standard he set.

At a New Years Eve party, Mr. Jude Dorsey was introduced to Ballard-Sparrow.

Dorsey's long time friend—who will not be named here per assumed preference—brought Ballard-Sparrow to this newspaper's informal party thrown by the interns. Dorsey was taken by Ballard-Sparrow's easy laugh and thin frame. When asked personal questions, Ballard-Sparrow brought his hand to his Romanesque nose. The hand glided over his high zygomatic bones as if brushing something away. Dorsey's female date—also unnamed here—commented on Ballard-Sparrow's lanky beauty. Dorsey stated he seemed a very put together and sure man. Someone he might like to know better.

At the party, Ballard-Sparrow told Dorsey he was researching his thesis on the correlation between Art Deco industrial design and 1930-40's literature, with a focus on the work of John O'Hara. While Dorsey had no expertise in art or the work of John O'Hara, he used this as a reason to request Ballard-Sparrow's phone number from the

unnamed friend. Before calling, he read *Butterfield 8*, *Appointment in Samarra*, and *Pal Joey*. *Appointment in Samarra*, a tale about a man destroyed by his own reputation and inability to correct that reputation, proved the most enjoyable and personally salient. On February 3rd, Dorsey called Ballard-Sparrow to invite him out for dinner and discussion of the book. The dinner went well, despite Dorsey's fear he was out of his depth on the topic, and the two men went out for drinks after the meal. The evening was cheerful, and both men found they shared a similar outlook on life and writing. Dorsey later revealed that, while he received much well earned praise, nothing excited him more than when Ballard-Sparrow said, "I never thought I'd be drinking with a newsman I read every day. I'm so glad you called."

Jude Dorsey was used to becoming infatuated with men and with people in

general. In his acceptance speech for the Keystone Press Award, Dorsey said, “I must also attribute my success to an insatiable lust for people and their lives. I’m obsessed to a fault with learning and infiltrating individuals’ stories. It’s true we are not all that different from each other, but I find each person deals with hardship, glory, or life’s near misses with quite different logic and ethos. That is my passion. That is what keeps me up at night.” This and the scope of his human-interest column gave Dorsey precedent to ask a person for contact information “just out of curiosity” and spend a month meeting with him.

Dorsey’s co-workers occasionally asked about his personal or romantic relationships. Dorsey was evasive and coy. He said he imposed a no-kissing-and-telling policy and a separation between work and pleasure. Because they witnessed his ability to approach a stranger and ask for a phone number in relation to a possible story,

Dorsey assumed his co-workers took for granted an ease with personal relationships. Now Dorsey fears these small lies were the start of many further problems. To fill a cavity with emptiness is much harder than a person might think, Dorsey would say to himself with sick humor. It has a great weight, which belies the word “empty,” but he couldn’t find a more exact term.

Ballard-Sparrow asked Dorsey to meet him at a local bar a week after their first dinner. On this occasion, Ballard-Sparrow invited Dorsey back to his apartment under the laughably thin guise of reviewing his research. Ballard-Sparrow later confided he “was so nervous, [his] palms were sweaty. [He] was sure [Dorsey] could see right through him.”

At the apartment, Ballard-Sparrow placed his research on the coffee table. Dorsey looked it over and pretended he could focus on the page rather than the

proximity of their two bodies. Ballard-Sparrow said he'd thought about their previous meeting all week. Ballard-Sparrow placed his hand on Dorsey's knee, and they kissed. Dorsey had no estimation of time before he pulled away and stated his lack of interest. He did not divulge that, previous to that moment, any hope for serious romantic fulfillment or happiness had seemed foolish.

Ballard-Sparrow preferred men older than his 27 years and had been in similar situations. In this particular situation, he proved to be extremely persuasive. Dorsey's hollow argument failed to convince the younger man. The resulting act left Dorsey shuddering. He lay next to Ballard-Sparrow and dozed comfortably.

In spite of this comfort and warmth, Dorsey hesitated to see Ballard-Sparrow again. He ignored Ballard-Sparrow's calls in a sophomoric ploy to inflate the other man's interest. Finally, after screening all calls

through his answering machine and ignoring one Ballard-Sparrow message, Dorsey answered. He said he'd been extremely busy with a story but could make time to meet up in the next week. Often in this period, Dorsey asked himself what exactly he was playing at, confused by his behavior but unable to "act like a normal person." At their next meeting, Ballard-Sparrow greeted Dorsey with a smile and during dinner offered reassurance when Dorsey stumbled through sentences. His laugh came easily and lent Dorsey the same kind of ease.

Much later Ballard-Sparrow told a friend, "It took forever. He was anxious and gawky, but he seemed worth it, you know? He could never ask me to leave his apartment even when I knew he had work to do. I used to lie in bed watching him type, hunched over his desk, talking to himself softly. That's how I fell for him."

Dorsey will argue he knew. He typed, empowered by his new audience to

do his best work. Those mornings grew longer, until they turned back to night.

Ballard-Sparrow used to lie in bed, the morning sun muted on his skin, a sheet falling just below his loins. His barely muscled stomach twisted as he reclined on his elbow. His hair just long enough to be mussed. He'd stretch out and spread his research across the bed. When Dorsey looked back at him from his work, Ballard-Sparrow's face would be lit up watching him.

In recent comments, Ballard-Sparrow implied Dorsey blocked out the world and detached from the people around him. Ballard-Sparrow neglects to mention the moments when no matter how involved, Dorsey's attention could be ripped away by a glance from Ballard-Sparrow.

The relationship grew. Each man's smile beamed across tables. At such a table, Ballard-Sparrow said he didn't "want to be

with anyone else." Elated, Dorsey made a spare key. Ballard-Sparrow did as well.

Soon Dorsey wasn't surprised to find Ballard-Sparrow waiting in his living room, nor did it disturb Ballard-Sparrow when Dorsey stealthed in and slid into bed. Both men stated, eyes toward the floor, that they counted those months among the happiest in their lives. If anyone had seen them, they would have looked like a happy, functioning couple.

For nearly a year Ballard-Sparrow and Dorsey ordered in, watched movies, or spent quiet time at each other's apartments. On occasion, they did go out to dinner or gatherings with Ballard-Sparrow's friends. Once, Ballard-Sparrow noted, Dorsey procured tickets to a rare stage adaptation of *Appointment in Samarra*.

Dorsey admits placing the bulk of decisions on his partner. When Ballard-Sparrow proposed they go to the businesses

Dorsey and his co-workers frequented, Dorsey deflected with, “I’m around those people enough. I don’t want to have to get into work conversations when I would much rather talk to you or meet your friends.”

For an amount of time that now surprises Dorsey, Ballard-Sparrow attributed this to Dorsey’s obsession with individuals. As stated before, Dorsey showed a history of becoming engrossed with men. He joined them for nightly dinners, drinks, and prolonged interviews then distanced himself from the person. A pattern Dorsey was not, at that point, acutely aware of, but something a colleague might have warned Ballard-Sparrow of, had he ever met such a colleague. He would often joke, “It’s going to be terrible when you get bored with me.” Dorsey responded to this question with a kiss because the absurd sentence didn’t deserve a response, which is the kind side. Dorsey admits the other, perfidious side, held a hope to stave off the conversation

about Dorsey’s separate lives.

Ballard-Sparrow pressed for more time spent outside their apartments. Dorsey blamed his workload, but the excuse’s expiration date had come and gone to the point that each time Dorsey repeated it he felt a strong urge to brush his teeth. This began the downward spiral of the last year and a period of intense personal hygiene. While Dorsey redirected conversations and sharpened his rhetorical skill on Ballard-Sparrow’s accusations, he showered at least twice per day, washed his hands at each pass of the restroom, and brushed his teeth often enough to recede his gum line. Common aggressions included: “Are you embarrassed by me?” “You think I’m not good enough for your over-paid, hack co-workers?” and “Go do whatever you want. Just crawl into my bed when you’re tired of it.” Each was met with virulence from Dorsey, followed by a shower then vigorous brushing and

flossing. Often in the make up session, Ballard-Sparrow pulled away and commented on the taste of blood.

The fights increased in frequency and variety. After an appointment, in which Dorsey's dentist warned him about drastic gum recession and the great possibility of tooth loss, Dorsey broke down mid argument. "No one knows," Dorsey said. Ballard-Sparrow stopped and sat. He raised his hand to his full mouth. The full stop meant he knew precisely what those three words implied. He listened while Dorsey explained he knew it was nearly 1995 and a different place, but the word "faggot" still rang in his ears from his youth, from before he knew what the word meant or noticed any difference in himself. "I think most people knew before I did."

Dorsey said he left it all behind. Friends, a father who never eyed him straight, a mother who pushed him toward

any female in the vicinity, and all the rest exchanged for a new life where no one had reason to think anything off-color. Ballard-Sparrow showed compassion toward Dorsey's cowardice, but said it wasn't that time or that place. "Things are getting better for us," he said. It would be hard, but Ballard-Sparrow would help.

Dorsey said he needed time and support. He apologized and admitted this was his first real relationship. He didn't have much instinct for the situation. Ballard-Sparrow said, "I know. I'll be here for you at each step."

Dorsey found power in prostrating himself to Nebraska. Humbled and pitiful as he was, Dorsey gained exactly what he sought. Nebraska no longer hounded him to go out or to integrate the sections of his life.

Before, Dorsey felt tied to decorum and dignity. Post-surrender, all Ballard-Sparrow's requests for progress met

emotional outbursts about fear, abandonment, and blackballing. Dorsey convinced Ballard-Sparrow this outpouring of emotional drivel was a step in the right direction. More with each instance, the showcase became a trap to hold Ballard-Sparrow in the relationship. For a time, things resembled the previous months of in-home bliss, but, with each new trap, the hold grew looser and the time between shorter.

I told myself I'd tell people. I imagined taking Nebraska (Ballard-Sparrow) to office parties or after work functions. I'd integrate the two sides of my life. I envisioned the two of us walking in the sun, using the whole of my wit in retort to anyone who saw fit to judge.

I let each opportunity pass. I knew in the place we all know and hide from ourselves, none of it would ever come to pass. Also in that place, I knew my course of action wasn't sustainable. As I stifled the

thought, I said I bided my time. At some point it would feel natural and easy. It always felt natural, but the ease never came.

I safely assume this column doubles as a resignation/farewell. The subterfuge needed to publish this outweighs any favor I've garnered over the years and will napalm any bridge for an incalculable radius. I've spent my life writing about people, their happiness and devastation, their triumph and terror.

I've become a joke, a cliché: the observer that's missed the point of observation. I kept myself separate and internalized nothing. I applied to myself none of the courage or strength I've written in these pages.

Nebraska was correct. A man in his mid-fifties should be honest and accept himself come what may. Instead I've been a conduit, a hollow instrument used to convey words, ideas, and the acts of others. Then used that skill to lie with every breath and ensnare the

person I should have tried to live up to or, at least, not have disappointed at each turn.

Understandably, you (Nebraska) no longer answer or return my calls and changed the locks on your door. I'm sure even my most avid and heart-broken readers can empathize with your decision to change the locks after you found me waiting in your living room. I want to end in wishes for your future happiness. I'd like to use my skill to express my understanding of your position, of how I cornered you. I could pen bravery by accepting your departure from my life, but as I hit each key I can't even tell if this is just another ploy, just another trap I've set for you.

Before The Loving Begins

Identical, leather, rolling office chairs line both sides of the wooden conference table. I take one next to the white board. Phosphorescent light glares across the black plastic tray of crustless triangle sandwiches that alternate in turkey with mayonnaise and chicken with white cheese. The room is warm, and the mayonnaise and cheese are translucent and indistinguishable. The cheap eggshell walls don't counteract the fluorescent tubes nor does their diamond-textured cover. I lean back and look directly into the diffused artificial light. No one will arrive for five minutes. Count on one person to open the door just wide enough to slide through, three minutes late. No one will look up directly. Each of us trained to ignore distraction, our palpable focus is a condemnation in itself. Whoever set out the tray of white on white on white sandwiches, the facilitator, must have run out for a moment.

A grease trail follows my finger on the tablet's screen when I open the Power Point pptx. My cuticles are irritated and fingers unwashed. Even in the empty room, I pull the tablet onto my lap to hide them. When I did real lab work, I'd never leave my hands in such shape. The Power Point's first page lists my name, "Dr. Sidney Kanser." Then "Dr. Truthlaw." "The Mercutio Complex: Relationship mapping in Web 3.0 social networking," sits on top of a bullet point list, which Truthlaw and I are here to present. Dr. Truthlaw, who should be here, who said we should meet in this room fifteen minutes before the presentation, is not here yet. The sandwiches emit a sour chemical tartness. My stomach turns with the handle to the brown door as a woman walks in smiling.

"Hello, Dr. Kanser," she says to me.

This is the second time I'd been to this room, and the second time I've met this woman. "Please, call me Sid," I tell her. I can't remember her name. It isn't listed in my tablet.

"Okay Sidney-"

"Sorry, Sid. No one calls me Sidney anymore." I worry my smile shapes a grimace.

She nods and adjusts the tray of sandwiches. She moves through the room with office efficiency, feet in close steps, hips gyring around the chairs and table as needed, her hands, one in the air, one at her side, both rest slightly open, ready to hold papers or folders. She straightens the room walking with a struthionine head bob as if the table is her nest.

The police found Eden locked in a tall dog cage in a backyard in rural Ohio. Neighbors reported the house derelict. According to all recorded accounts the neighborhood was upper-middle class, the type of neighborhood with nice houses and quiet families, where children ride bikes with training wheels in the street. The type of neighborhood where people watch each other's lawns, and if a house shows signs of abandonment, call the police to check out the situation. Or at least I assume these things. I might be the sort of person to live in a house the neighbors would report as abandoned, were I to live in such an area. The police report said Eden did not respond when spoken to and leapt at the officer who cut the lock off the gate. In the attack, Eden bit the officer's arm through the skin. The officer's radius fractured in the tussle, if this was due to the bite or otherwise was not reported. When Eden arrived at the lab his back and ribs showed bruising, also missing from the report. He'd been in the custody of the state for a week. Even sedated, he recoiled when Dewey and Dr. Fietsite reached for him. Two officers brought him. They carried under his arms as he stumbled in shackles. Dr. Fietsite told them we could more than handle him across the room after one officer jerked Eden up into a standing position. He yelped and hid his face in his chest.

Five people walk into the meeting at once in the estimated time range. Two women. Three men. The women's suits only differ in color. One gray, the other blue-gray. Each offers a half-smile and nod. One wears perfume. The smell of it and a scent of mingled deodorant mixed with the mayonnaise. No hint of people air. After returning the nod, I look back down at my tablet. I glance up as the men sit together. One comments, but I don't hear it all and can't understand the little I catch.

Truthlaw comes in last and takes the seat across from me. He wears his jovial are-you-ready look. His face bears no notion of time nor his completely disregard of our agreement to meet up beforehand. I flash my best you-betcha smile. He narrows his eyes for a moment in a small I-don't-get-it look, and I look away. It's not like me to be openly hostile, but I'm making the effort and don't appreciate being blown off so casually.

"Okay, people," the facilitator says. "This is Dr. Sid Kanser. As you know, she's here today to give a presentation and defense of her research. Dr. Kanser and Dr. Truthlaw, if you will." She sits near my end of the table. When I look up, I'm sure the men note my smile for her introduction behind their trained-engagement faces.

I've never seen Truthlaw stand up straight He reintroduces himself with a half-grin. I'd argue he didn't hear the facilitator's intro. He wears his hair too shaggy. Not long, but too shaggy for a scientist. My hair hasn't been longer than three inches since undergrad. This project is the first we've worked on together, but I can tell his easy confidence comes from low-set goals and complacency in a mid-level job. Truthlaw is Advanced Demographics' 3.0 media expert. A field better served by a marketing degree from what I've seen. I'm paid to interpret banks of data and scan 250-character messages. In a romantic vision of my job, I look for humanity in numbers or cycles of behavior. My clip on badge reads "Data Analyst." In my previous occupation, my

previous life, my security clearance card read “Observation: Nonverbal Comm. Specialist.” I observed behavior and translated its meaning into patterns. I etched out attempts at connection between beings. Those skills help this project, but the connections we map lack the importance or gratification I thought I’d earned.

My current company and I agree this position is best for me, but we come to this conclusion from completely different paths. This for-profit research institution believes that in only viewing numbers—removed from contact with living beings—I will experience less attachment and stress, and thus be less of a liability or danger to my employer, any colleagues, or myself. Currently, I find the position refreshing and educational. On my side, I’d prefer to keep my distance, not too lessen the risk I’ll endanger anyone, but closing a not yet fully written chapter in your life can leave one disillusioned with the entire book.

Watching Truthlaw speak, I know he will look down to check a number he memorized yesterday. He brushes his finger across the tablet, places the hand in his pocket, and says our research has promising results. In this meeting, any meeting, he is the lead. I shade the numbers and add depth to graphs and charts. I’ve eliminated pie charts. I shouldn’t have to explain a deep desire against presenting facts like a game show girl.

At my previous position—I cannot name this organization due to the terms of my dismissal, suffice to say it is large—I was one of three doctors assigned to studying and caring for Eden. His home, a five hundred square foot Poly(methyl methacrylate) walled observation chamber, awaited him. We hoped for the best and modeled after a typical studio. We provided Eden with a bed, a kitchen table with a chair, and a desk. Dewey, our biology specialist, suggested a reclining chair. I laughed, but Dr. Fiestsite and I agreed a little comfort would help acclimate Eden. So when we got him in the room, a brand new La-Z-Boy sat a couple feet from the bed. He spent the first three hours in a corner. He tucked his head into his lap and arms. I took the first night's watch.

From our office I could watch Eden on the monitor screen and from our window. The lab's lights synced with satellite time to simulate a 24-hour light cycle. Eden didn't move until the lights dimmed to night. We estimated his age to be between sixteen and eighteen. I watched the monitor. The HD night vision cast him in a slight green tint. In all the excitement of the day even a well-trained scientist can lose track of herself and forget to observe. For his transfer, he'd been sedated, which allowed a good-intentioned-but-far-out-of-his-or-her-depth social worker to dress him in a polo shirt and khaki slacks. He lay curled into himself dressed like a preppy high schooler. He roused and stumbled to shake off the sedative. He sniffed then licked the table's legs. He bit at the shirt fabric bunched at his armpits. He paused and rubbed against the table leg. I thought he was scratching himself until the bottom of his shirt caught the leg, and he pushed it up to expose his side. He turned and repeated the motion. The polo bunched up to rest above his pectoral mounds. He walked in a slant, flanking the big chair. His ribs curved visibly around his sides. Twin isosceles triangles of muscle formed his back. He circled the room, slid against the walls like a drugged animal, paw-knocked them with his knuckles. He held his stomach sucked

up in a high arch. Eden walked quadrupedal. His knees peeked past his elbows, toes curled; his heels straight up. His spine curved to adapt to this posture. The controlled positioning of his stomach must have also been an adaptation. Just a small patch of hair trailed down under his waist line. In khakis, Eden appeared as a star athlete hypnotized to act like an animal.

He circled the room for hours. Slinking is the right word here. Or prowled. Eden prowled from the corner and under his kitchen table. But some of his motions resembled canine. Most likely he'd been kept with domesticated animals. Not raised by but raised with. Under the table, he chewed on the chair leg. The wood grit ripped and popped from across the room. Before Eden, none of us would have guessed the recorded audio came from a human. Through that night Eden ignored the blue polo riding in his armpits. I can't stand any kind of shirt or dress that rides up into my armpits. I shifted my shoulder blades and tugged at my cuffs all night.

Dr. Fietsite had been with the organization for years. His prestige played heavily in our faculties and funding. Dewey and I were relatively new and took to referring to him as "the Dr." out of respect. Dewey and I were perfectly set for something like friendship. Nearly the same age, we had similar resumes: good undergrad, superior grad school, elite Ph.D., grunt work internships. Dewey and I were a friendly and eager team bonded over our acknowledged competition. Dewey's desperation for prestige pushed his ideas to border on magical. "I don't mean to say Eden isn't human," Dewey said in the first weeks. "What I wonder is if, through breeding or some mutation, Eden is different. You know, Sidney, we can only test for what we know exists." Dewey said one night. I laughed and said he was reaching for the adamantium ring. I knew he'd get the joke, and he wasn't surprised I made it. He gave me a weak high five.

I had my own theories. Eden was purely human. No recessive traits. No faulty genes. Just socialized in a radically different way from anything we'd ever seen. Modern feral children are

well documented. In most cases, the children were locked in rooms alone, some tied to chairs or beds. They have little muscle development. Most can barely walk. Almost none speak and resort to yips and chirps to communicate. Identifying Eden's attempts at communication was my task. Tests and X-rays revealed functional vocal chords. Eden appeared to have more in common with artistic representations of prehistoric man, lithe with developed muscle.

Dewey and the Dr. pulled together. They studied Eden as an animal. Here, we had two male lab scientists hovering over keyboards and screens, watching digital and live footage of their opposite incarnate. Dr. Fietsite in his early sixties was soft and paunchy. Dewey had the body of a man best suited for an office chair. They watched Eden on screens and through the clear dividing walls. The wall that separated the two men from this quadrupedal David served an obvious but apt metaphor. One side the men of intellect, ruled and exalted by society, thriving in civilization. Then caged in plastic, Eden, who gave us every reason to believe if dropped in a forest, he would survive easily. I doubt either man realized the distance. They may have been embarrassed, which meant they assumed I compared them, which leads down to them assuming a woman cannot control her lust in the face of Adonis. I laughed at the idea of Dewey and Dr., timid under a sun-blocking canopy of trees. One angry because the other failed to make fire from two sticks. Dewey would assure Dr. Fietsite he could fashion knife from a rock and use it to hunt. Dewey crouched with his rock in wait for a deer. The two men freezing and staving to death. Dewey was my friend, but I'd put my money on Dr. Fietsite eating him.

For everyone's sake, I summarize Dr. Truthlaw's introduction:

We named our finding The Mercutio Complex. It states a relationship, most often and importantly to this meeting, a romantic relationship, composed of two people is affected greatly by a third party source. This third party can not only predict but also shape the out come of the relationship.

“We found, or we suppose this has always been true, but with social media 3.0 this third party can now be anonymous and of greater power.” His words.

This is my time to chime in. “With Web 3.0, social media networks have replaced the dreaded and previously mythical ‘permanent record.’ With facial recognition technology, 90% of pictures are instantly tagged with names and/or handles. We estimate 70% of all romantic relationships are recorded on social networks. Even with new privacy standards, the advent of anonymous comment and relationship voting now exponentially influence the choice and length of romantic partners.”

Truthlaw takes over. In his kicked back, what-is-this-a-business-meeting posture, he explains, this combined with the “relationship history” page has made the all-recording network a monolithic third party. While people argued over rights to privacy, they posted pictures and comments, dark secrets to blogs intended for only a secure circle of friends. The size of that circle has a negative correlation to the size of the “outside” world. Decide to let only your private RSS feed subscribers know you vomited in a potted plant? In a few days, you get a friend request

from someone you might know with a note attached saying they know you vomited on their azalea. It's amazing how small we've made the world.

The relationship history page is touted as a safety measure, not a gossip engine. A new partner should have the right to know if someone has a history of verbal or physical abuse. Or if a person is HIV positive. At least, these are the arguments. There have been some hitches, most of which could be foreseen by anyone with some basic idea of how humans process emotions or react to stress. The relationship history page predates my involvement with Web 3.0. The submission page consists of a list of yes or no questions, the person who answered them, and a small box for a 250-character comment. In the first months, the subject could not change or view the page via their own log in. Of course, people heard who wrote what was written on their page. Or accessed the page via a friend's log in. The honor system is non-existent on the Internet. Ex-lovers answered vindictively without regard to permanence. Unprepared for this, the network shut down for a month. Now a user can see her/his own history and can request an entry removed, although the process requires a mid-level understanding of data entry and selecting answers from endless drop down bars. Requests past the first must be validated by testimonials from randomly selected peers in your social network. If a person repeatedly requests erroneous claims and answers removed, that information is made public as well. Truthlaw pauses to give me the arched eyebrow.

“If we follow the explosion of Web 2.0, and the move to the more deeply personal and divulging 3.0, the data suggest this is only the beginning of relationship history data mining. Already, after one year, 20% of people have a relationship history page. This number should double then triple in the next two years. This quick growth will be substantially aided by the anonymous comment feature and the “Never or Forever” voting app. Our study shows voters and

anonymous commenters have grown at a 35% increase since we began. These may seem like meager numbers and chatter on the box, but we feel if this study continues, these comments and votes would prove a self-fulfilling prophecy. And with the rising use of the relationship history page, these votes and comments will become more influential and informed.”

Despite how my relationship page might look, if it existed yet—I’m sure it will in the future—I am still a woman who wishes to sexually attract someone. Probably not anyone in this room. I doubt anyone who sits in a meeting and daintily reaches for a white on white crustless finger sandwich falls into that (my) demographic.

We’d been told Eden ate meager amounts, if anything. Without much to go on, trial and error ruled our feeding experiments. This job came to me so I could document Eden’s body language or any verbal attempts to communicate. In other cases of feral children exhibiting animalistic traits, the children respond first to raw meat and must be trained to eat cooked food.

For the first trial, I slid a tray of uncooked, high quality ground beef through the feeding slot. I insisted on high quality for its scent. If his animal-like behavior continued, he’d be drawn by the smell of protein. He rose at the tray’s scrape. His knees barely touched the floor as he circled the plate. He took a wide berth then angled in at the food. His face hovered over the meat.

I knelt down to see his eyes. His shoulders flattened and lowered. His knees rose to shift weight to the balls of his feet, in a protective, defensive stance. I kept my eyes on him and backed away from the glass to let him know I understood.

He recognized it as food and wouldn't let it go without a fight. He raised his shoulders in warning. His posture softened, and he lowered his face to the meat. He paused, his head still, no motion at the jawline. His nose twitched as he sniffed. He dragged fingers limp over the beef's surface. His head tilted at the raw food in a signal of confusion. I clenched my fists while I guessed if he'd eat with his hands or shove his face in the meat. I shifted, and Eden looked up at me. This time his shoulders and knees remained relaxed. His eyes flicked down then back to me. I couldn't tell if he asked for permission or guidance. Caught up in the moment, out of instinct, I nodded to him. He lowered and bit into the raw meat. He chewed in a round motion, interpreting the taste. He recognized it as food, but his apprehension proved his diet was more complex than wild. That left me maybe an inch ahead of where I started. Eden took another bite, chewed faster, but not comfortably. He let his bottom drop to the ground, reached out, and loosely gripped a hunk of beef. He used the hand in a tentative manor, which suggested he'd discovered his fingers' usefulness or had watched humans from a distance.

I grinned at Dewey in the observation booth. I gave him a big thumbs-up. Either way, by discovery or mimicking, Eden ate with his hands. I suspected it was evidence of problem solving skills. If he'd been kept with other animals, his ability to survey while eating gave him an advantage. Eden stalked away back under his table, the portion only half eaten.

Each meal served as an experiment. We presented Eden with raw steak. I set the plate with utensils on the chance he might notice them and explore. Eden searched the steak but again looked to me before eating. I held still. He lowered his haunches then rose, antsy and impatient.

He chirped similar to feline pre-attack chatter. Eden's posture—bottom near the floor, hips opened—exhibited no sign of mounting attack. If he learned the noise from cats, he'd either misinterpreted the meaning or changed it for his own purpose. His posture and eye contact pointed to a request of permission. He broke away, lowered onto his haunches, and picked up the steak. Both hands sandwiched the steak. He clamped down instead of curling his fingers around as he chewed off small bites. He ate little more than half and left. He dropped the meat on the tray, not on the floor, which was notable. He understood to keep food in the place it came from. Dewey walked out as Eden left the food to sentry the room.

“Interesting he doesn't take the food away to eat it.” His eyes followed Eden.

“Also, he leaves it on the tray when he's finished,” I said. Dewey held his arm across his chest, an instinctual product of fear or general unease. His back angled away from Eden's room. Past Dewey, the boy moved to the table. His muscles flexed and relaxed with each step. Dewey's stiff hips rested on his legs, his lab coat rose over his belly, accentuated by loose posture.

“That has to be something taught, right? He's obviously most comfortable under that table. I'd expect him to eat there,” Dewey said.

“In the wild, most animals only eat in the open from necessity. Eden stays. Maybe he knows he's safe. Or he's used to being fed. I'm just throwing ideas out, though.”

“Any theories?”

I theorized Dewey feared Eden on a base animal level, threatened by a more virile body and an archaic, instinctual power scheme. Dewey and Dr. Fiestsite fit well in their world, both respected and mentally keen, but Eden represented exactly what they lacked. “Did you hear the noise he made before eating? Sounded like cat chatter, but they only chatter before attacking. He

moves in a strange canine, feline mixture. He's fluid while moving, but looks awkward while he eats."

"So no ideas?" Dewey moved but wouldn't turn his back to Eden. It put an edge in his voice, more than his competitive annoyance that I didn't have a theory.

"I want to try blanched vegetables, fruit, and grains. If he doesn't respond to those any better, I'll try cooked meat. After that I should have something worth sharing."

Dewey nodded. He'd heard the intonation I put on the last word. "That's smart, Sidney. We'd be guessing at this point." He smiled. We walked back to have the same conversation with Dr. Fietsite and watch video of both meals.

Eden bit into an apple but ate less than before. He didn't recognize a plate of vegetables as food. He pawed then ignored them. His self-possessed posture, his tranquil eyes led me to think he understood the tray should carry food. I nodded to him, but he didn't look back at the vegetables. He sniffed and circled a bowl of grains. He'd walk away then return to the bowl and inhale as if he recognized the scent, but was unsure if he should eat. His approach stayed consistent. He watched the tray enter. He circled the area near his table, his chest an inch above the floor, impossibly low. Finally, his posture tensed, muscles tightened, and he advanced on the food at an angle. He'd been fed, but he didn't trust us.

The first meal he completed was a plate of cooked ground beef. When the tray entered the room, his head rose. He sniffed the air in recognition. His ritualized advance remained, but he sped though it. He felt no need to sniff the meat. He sat and looked at me before eating. I contend this pause, over a meal he desired, showed training. He waited for permission. I didn't nod to see if he'd wait. He didn't. He glanced down and back to me. In the moment before he bent to eat, I'm sure his eyes lightened and he flashed something that resembled a smile. While reviewing

the tape, I pointed out the gesture. Dr. Fiestsite and Dewey disagreed. They said the facial tick corresponded to the food. Dewey spoke at the monitor, “Eden’s made similar ticks at other meals. We just hadn’t seen this one yet. It’s like when parents think their baby smiles before it’s capable or pet owners project emotion onto animals. Maybe, Eden felt joy at the prospect of an enjoyable meal.”

“I am the one who feeds him,” I said. From the pause and the ‘facial tick’ it’s no stretch to assume he associates me with food. Dogs know that.”

“I don’t want to rely on assumption,” Dr. Fiestsite said to the monitor. “But, if Sidney’s right, it may begin to associate her as a caretaker or mother role. Which could be useful. If he’s capable of that association though, he might also view us as captors.”

I let the subject drop. Both men were built for data research and lab work. Their careful, clinical stance made sense, but contributed to my idea they searched for limits to Eden’s cognitive ability.

The facilitator shifts in her seat and probably wonders if I should speak more often. Truthlaw leans against the wall while explaining our research method. One of the woman eyes Truthlaw. She taps her tablet repeatedly, clicking through something likely unrelated. Two men hold their

chins in hand. The third silently chews a second finger sandwich. They all received an email containing the Power Point along with multiple spreadsheets. The presentation merely serves as a venue for us to prove to the company we exist and do actual work. The company wants this show.

“In case # 54, Female A, Caucasian 23—target demographic—updated her status to monogamous relationship with Male B, two years older of the same race. The two represent a fringe connection, meaning they share five or less friends. Female A commented on this change saying, ‘What a beauty. So happy!’ Over the next three days, 15% of their friends voted and/or commented on the status update. Female A’s friends 6% of which share friends with Male B’s friends, gave a negative vote. One comment said, ‘There she goes again.’ ‘Watch out, he’s been in and out a few times this year,’ said another referring to Male B’s relationship status fluctuations. Male B’s friends responded at a lower percentage but, seven of the nine votes were positive and many “liked” his new status. Two friends posted a ‘wink’ emoticon.

“Traffic shows both subjects viewed the other’s relationship history page. As did 20% of Female A’s friends. Only 7% of Male B’s friends did the same. Both relationship history pages showed multiple medium length relationship ventures. Most positive but dotted with negatives. One of Female A’s friends went so far as to link a negative review on the subject’s personal page. The review stated Male B stopped responding after a fight. A mutual male friend commented saying, ‘She was crazy. Wanted [Male B] to give her a key to his house after like 3 dates.’ Female A commented ‘No1 can make everybody happy.’

“The relationship ended in one month. Female A left three personal page posts on Male B’s page requesting communication. All deleted by Male B. This may seem a typical mid-twenties relationship pattern, but we’ve found the new 3.0 technology has sped up the process.

Going on similar patterns in people who do not have relationship history pages and patterns posted in nascent relationship history pages, the data suggest a relationship that would have lasted 3 to 5 months before 3.0 will now last 2 to 3 fewer months.”

I give over the floor. Eyes in the room linger on me as Truthlaw brings up the control group’s patterns. A draft grazes the back of my neck. It’s been a few months but my neck still feels naked and exposed like raw skin. I can feel my nervous look bounce off the wall and hit me. The facilitator nods as if to say I’m doing a great job, which I’m sure is what she means and what she’d say if she could. That’s her role in this and all things. The men rest in half attention. Two of them look middle aged, out of shape, and at the point in life when they wear T-shirts to the beach and avoid full-length mirrors. One is lean. Of the same age, I imagine he must take some kind of aerobic exercise. His suit falls flat on his chest. The image of them shirtless, crawling under the table with shifty vigilant eyes is ridiculous.

After Eden’s curious response to grain, I continued to tinker with his food. I found he ate a 70/30 mixture of cooked beef and grain most eagerly. Dewey pushed to try dog food. Dr. Fietsite called it an interesting idea. Most dog food is low-grade meat and grains. After multiple debates, I gave in and served him an expensive brand. He approached the food quickly. He sniffed, face

over the tray, his mouth and cheeks twitched. He read my face and saw discomfort. He dipped his fingertips into the meat/gravy slop. He took a small bite and chewed like troubled gears. He swallowed. In a swift motion, he swatted the bowl off the tray. I met his eyes and watched his top lip twitch in a flashed snarl. Our eyes met, I saw contempt and insult in his. Mine apologized, I tried to convey a plea to him. I shouldn't have let them convince me to feed him that garbage. His head flicked away before his body followed. In his slow stalk back to the table, he didn't turn back once.

After that, when I carried Eden's meals to the door, he watched me without moving more than his eyes. We inspected his eyes. As expected, they were photophobic. We tested them in practice. We tranqed Eden, entered the room, and hid small objects. He'd fallen into a nightly route. He zigged diagonally across the room, moved up the north wall then circled, missing the other corners. We placed the objects in those corners, where he might only look if something was out of the norm. We used funny little things on hand, partly out of curiosity about what he'd make of them. Keys. A wristwatch. An egg timer. Eden found the objects on his first sentry 80% of the time. We dimmed the lights from dusk to simulated midnight. Eden kept his average above 50%. We understood, biologically, Eden was human. The Dr. and Dewey questioned how fast evolution or mutation could take place. They searched for a conclusion that buffered them from Eden. He kept the objects under the bed he otherwise ignored. He twisted the knob on the egg timer. When it buzzed, he turned and stared. I expected the noise, but still flinched. Eden solved problems for basic survival. He could open a box to retrieve food. His interaction with objects showed curiosity. Once he set the timer, watched it click down, and nudged it with his nose as it buzzed. He lounged complacently through the day, although it's impossible for one to be complacent when trapped in a place where he or she feels isolated and alien. Unless the person is

unaware of the trap and ignores the isolation. The Dr. and Dewey watched Eden together. I'd walk in to find them replaying video. One pointing a finger at the screen, "Note how the pectorals don't fully flex in motion." His physique called into question theirs. They fought the question with intellect and pronouns. "It shows signs of problem solving skills and the ability to learn on par with an elementary school aged student," one of Dewey's reports read.

Dr. Fiestsite came to the lab less after the first month. He handled business meetings, and left us to perform tests per his guidelines. Dr. Fiestsite concerned himself with analyzing Eden's muscle and skeletal development. Eden wasn't deformed. "The body has adapted itself to quadrupedal motion and stance," he said. "Sidney, I think you'd be best served to keep that in mind in your work." I said I would, but I didn't think his adaptations interfered much with my ideas.

He smiled, which he didn't often do, and said, "Dr. Kanser, I believe our research will mesh very well. Dewey's also." He walked off. I felt less like a third wheel.

Left to our own devices, Dewey and I let our theories compete. At the base of all scientific experiment is child-like wonder, a let's-see-what-happens mentality. And this mentality guided us. Dewey and I spent three nights a week observing Eden together and divided the rest. The majority of the time, "observing," meant watching Eden sleep. Watching him pace. Watching the clock waiting to feed him. Watching him eat. Watching a computer screen. Scrawling a note on the exact placement of his hand on the fifth step from sitting. After a month, Eden, Dewey, the Dr., and I settled into our routines.

In week nine, Dewey called Eden a dog boy. I took issue with the nomenclature. Eden's movements were more feline. We decided to experiment guided by the previously mentioned

mentality. Through one of the slot box doors on Eden's room, we threw in a ball of yarn. Dewey and I rushed with excitement.

Eden shrank away from the ball at first. As he sniffed around it, Dewey nudged me. "See, totally dog-like. A cat would bat at it."

"Just wait. It still takes him awhile to trust his food. We did feed him Gravy Train, at your insistence, by the way."

Eden grabbed the ball. He placed his palm on it and gripped with his fingers, pulled it up to his armpit, and moved away from the spot in an ape-like gait. With his index finger and thumb, he found the end, and slowly unwound the ball into a mess. We agreed ape rather than cat or dog. He patted the mess softly. Then with care, took one end of the yarn and wrapped it around his finger. Tilting his head, he wrapped until the yarn balled in a mass around his finger. He pulled his finger out, held the ball then unwound it again.

A week later, Eden followed me on the other side of the Plexiglas. Now the yarn dressed his forearms. On video, he cut the yarn with his teeth and clothed each arm as if performing a ritual. His movements appeared more confident afterward. He followed, a few feet from the barrier, a few steps behind, but he followed pacing to lag. He clung to my peripheral vision. He tracked me, and I wondered if he was hunting. My steps quickened from involuntary instinct, which communicated fear. I slowed and he mirrored, staying just in eyesight. Dewey and the Dr. visibly outweighed me. If I ran, I'd mark myself as the weakling. At the corner, approximately ten feet from the observation room, I stopped and turned. He sat on his knees, hands on the floor, and stared back at me. His eyes glowed in the artificial light, reflecting the yarn. "What do you want?" I asked. He came a step forward and sat. "Did you understand that?" He lowered his head, but maintained eye contact. I walked to the Plexiglas and put my hand against the wall. As

he sat in supplication, the light deepening the ridges in his body, his mouth cracked to breathe, I thought he must be lonely. That was the first time I thought about entering the room by myself.

Fingers glide across tablet screens as Truthlaw lets me speak. The group's eyes focus and unfocus, flicking from HD digital screens to my low-resolution face. Their vision dulls to accept the comparatively flawed 3D reality. "Market data show while the project may take one to three years to begin exponential growth, the relationship market is mostly untapped and if launched in the next six months may be cornered. A relationship/partner rating system is broad but ripe. We propose a familiar system: credit rating. Three separate scores and an overall average score. Three categories being: Mutual Break Up percentage, Reconciliation Rating, and Number of Forgivenesses requested vs. number Granted. Each should be weighted differently according to data. We suggest Mutual Break Up at 40%, Reconciliation at 35%, and Forgiveness Requests vs. Granted at 25%. This model works from the result of relationships instead of the content. It's impossible to quantify happiness, but research shows heartbreak, be it suicide inducing or simply routine interfering, is generally understood and easily empathized with. It can be rated, graphed, and quantified."

While flawed reality lacks HD's perfection, interpersonal, face-to-face encounters offer more chance. This meeting contains far less recorded history than if done over the Net. A dwindling gift from our ancestors allows us to sense a person nearby. The instinct gets slandered as "lizard brain" or "animal brain" and is often associated with lust. We perceive the change in air-pressure, temperature, and scent. Subtle hints give us a "feeling" not a "thought." I try to distinguish the minute changes. A hair of tepid heat drifts from one of the men, I can't tell which, the sensation so weak it barely warrants mention. From the presentation, I reasonably assume each person is contemplating lost loves and their own pathetic moments. Of the three men, at least one enjoys that he crippled a lover with his absence. There are three women, if there were six, one of them would share his revelry. Despite the cliché that opposites attract, 40% of the time the two have already or will sleep together.

"The required algorithms are listed on the next page. Of course, the success of any social based Web project lies in participation. It should be paramount to encourage employees, friends, and, unlikely, but if possible, minor celebrities to create accounts." The facial expressions change from contemplative to worried and vulnerable. The facilitator tucks her hair behind her ear, using her physicality to distract. One of the men pinches his neck skin. Others reposition arms across their bodies. Truthlaw only watches. He makes no move. I have no notion of his personal life but imagine the idea of this self-exploitation gives him no discomfort.

In the white on white on white room, the mayo rots in the stale air mixing with turkey stench-breath gusts rhythmically filling our closed Wi-Fi network. I end by letting them off the hook they asked us to put between their teeth and cheeks: "As you know, a disclaimer should be noted in the site. This, in no way, is a model to predict the chance of success in a given scenario or relationship." This, statistically, is a lie. They thank Truthlaw and me. The facilitator says they

will remain in the room to discuss our findings. She smiles at me. “Please, take a finger sandwich on your way.” Truthlaw takes two and thanks the room as we leave.

“Well, I think that went pretty well. As well as it could have gone.” When he talks, I see nothing but masticated white mush.

“Up to them now.”

“Are you headed back to the office?”

“No, I think I’m done for today. Stuff to catch up on.”

Truthlaw takes long strides with no attention to the pace of anyone around him. He isn’t a shuffling lab geek. He has the gait of a confident, attractive man. Someone who assumes anyone of importance will keep up. “You’re working on a side project? Trying to get back into the real labs? Something promising, I assume.”

I know his meaning. “Career” is a word—an idea—I lost interest in some time ago.

“Sid?”

“Yeah. Not a full on project. Just some research. A node of an idea for a thesis.”

“Good. I think that’s really good. Not that you’re slumming it now, or you need to prove anything. What I mean is-”

“Thanks, Doctor.” I smile and hope it appears genuine. “I’ll see you tomorrow. I’m sure we’re going to have to do a few more test runs with this.”

Truthlaw waves and bites a tiny sandwich in half. His walk speeds up as I stop to turn the other way. He’s the kind of person who can walk into a building with you then not notice when you take a different path to leave.

Because I didn't tell the Dr. or Dewey about Eden's response, it went unnoticed until my "performance review." Eden lay near his table, no longer under it. He pretended to sleep. When Dewey or the Dr. walked through the lab, his eyes tracked them. More than once, he lifted his head to show the men he watched. They noted the behavior. The Dr. speculated Eden was bored. Neither listened to my idea about the dynamic.

I repeated the experiment on my next solo night shift. With guards present, I went through the double doors, locking one before opening the other to enter Eden's room. The first time, I stayed near the door, ready to jettison myself at the first sign of aggression. Eden was, after all, extremely unpredictable. He scanned from under the table. "I brought you some food. I know you've eaten already, but I thought you might like a snack tonight to break up your routine."

Eden lifted his head. His eyes looked at the food tray and then to me. I pushed it toward him with my foot. As I moved for the door, Eden lifted himself to all fours. Because Eden had violently attacked the police officer who found him, we had strict rules about entering Eden's room. Basic procedure mandated sedation via meals before any entry or contact. Eden's hands on the floor, weight shifted to the balls of his feet, he held himself still. My palms were damp. I fought the natural urge to clench them. I was in his domain without another scientist. I can't remember if a guard was anywhere near. Eden moved in a diagonal toward the wall then in a

tentative, rangy gait he came to the tray of food. While I watched a foot or so from him, he ate, using his hands, yielding his eyes to me.

I planned to ease into my interchange with Eden. My actions were rash, and I worried the Dr. and Dewey would assume I acted illogically. Around this time, I'd stopped leaving the building. I slept in a small room with a cot. After a nap, they told me an animal behaviorist agreed to give a consult and would arrive soon. They hadn't included me in this decision. The Dr. said it was critical we make a breakthrough with Eden sooner rather than later, as an excuse

“If he can communicate with Eden,” Dewey said this without looking at me, “It'll go a long way to prove the subject experiences the world as an animal.” Clearly this consultation had been scheduled.

The animal behaviorist walked with authority and clearly did not think much of the Dr. or Dewey. With a firm handshake and direct eye contact, he said “Adam Siler” and repeated the ritual for each of us. His dress shirt's top button left open, he kept one hand in his khaki's pocket. Dr. Fietsite explained our (my) attempts to communicate with Eden. Dewey said he theorized Eden's cognition and capacity corroborated his idea to request the consult. Adam listened with his tongue in the front corner of his mouth. “You have to be joking. Aren't you missing something here? You've got a teen-aged boy locked up in a room, and he won't respond to you. Don't you think that might be related to his treatment? You found him locked up like a dog. You treat him like one. Don't you operate under some kind of ethics?”

“Mr. Siler-

“Adam.”

“Adam, we’ve locked him in a room because all attempts to treat him like a human being have failed.” The Dr. said. “Before we received Eden, social workers tried to handle the case. He attacked two of them. One nearly lost a finger.”

“He’s been treated like a prisoner for all his life as far as you know. Put me in a cell for no reason, I’ll do the same.”

“Please, if you’re interested in this case, this is the way we’re handling it. We know our subject. You’ve just stepped in.” Dewey said. I should have stepped in to say *if anyone knows Eden*, but Dewey appeared busy searching for his spine. His hand trembled before he shoved it in this lab coat.

“Sure. He’s attacked before. He’s dangerous, or he can be. He’s comfortable in his surroundings?”

“We’ve done everything to make him so. Yes.” Dewey kept his hands in his pocket.

“That’s something. If he’s comfortable he’s less likely to attack, wild or no. How often do you spend time with him without sedation? How much human-to-human contact?”

Dewey shifted his hand. Dr. Fietsite stepped forward. “Because of his violent history, we decided not to risk that level of interaction until we’re certain he won’t hurt anyone.”

“So none?”

“None,” Dr. Fietsite admitted. I glanced to the floor, annoyed by how life presents so many opportunities to reveal something you won’t communicate. As a scientist, ethics begged me to speak up. As a driven career-oriented person, I recognized pockets filled with new silver.

“Jesus. It’s good I’m here. Afterward, we should talk about my role,” Adam said. Someone needs to watch out for Eden.”

I couldn't catch his eye to signal my agreement. Eden watched the man walk past the Plexiglas wall. A guard secured the first door to Eden's room. We watched on the monitors in the observation room. Once inside, Adam's steps gained even weight. On all fours, Eden approached from under the table. Adam maintained eye contact to signal control. Eden halted a few feet from him and shifted his weight to the balls of his feet. His knees unnaturally high, just below parallel to his body then bent his elbows to lower his shoulders. Dewey asked if Eden was submitting. No one answered. Adam pushed his shoulders back in smooth morph. Eden's neck curved up to keep his eyes on the man. In an unquestionable tone Adam said, "Eden, it's okay. I'm Adam."

Eden shifted at the noise. Adam began to raise his arm, wrist turning up to sign, "halt." On replay, we slowed the video to comprehend the scene. Eden's arms straightened. His shoulders rose. Knees pulled together under his chest, toes bent at a right angle, his feet planted between his hands. Adam's hand continued its rise. Eden leapt in a feline move, legs exploding from under him. Adam's hand rose for protection, Eden grabbed the man's opposite shoulder with one hand and crossed his forearm over the man's collarbone. The technique showed practice. Fractions of a second after his arms were in place Eden wrapped one leg behind Adam's knee. Eden's momentum and weight carried him through his target. The two hovered flat in the air. When paused, the screen shows a calm teen-aged boy riding a terrified, flying man. Unpaused, the two crash. Adam landed on the rectangle of back below his shoulders. Above him, Eden's weight drove his forearm into Adam's neckline. His collarbone audibly snapped where Eden's elbow connected. Eden rose, his fist balled to strike with the proximo-distal axis, primate-like. After multiple views, it was clear Eden aimed his second blow at the

other (right) side of Adam's collarbone. Two tranquilizer darts appeared in Eden's chest, and he collapsed. I should also note Eden was fed sedatives with his breakfast.

I change into a shirt and jeans at my apartment. On Main St. a 2D billboard towers above the flow of individual persons. No words or obvious advertisement. A massive QR code dot matrixed the white background. A few people salute, aiming their phones up to receive the ad directly. My company researched and endorsed this type of ad before I was hired. In the next three months, QR-codes will go up for our current project. The image is an instant mystery. It harks to its iconic little brother, the bar code. It asks, "What am I?" On average, it's 60% more effective on those who see the ad. Not only do they take the extra moment to process the message, but it remains in their Web history. We become that history more and more. That history is sold and marketed for people like me to track and watch for trends then hand over the research to various companies along with theories on how best to exploit that history and those trends.

The relationship mapping QR-codes will link directly to the site. The user will be prompted to check in, state if they are on a date and with whom, or comment on another's date. This creates an active site. The network could decide the date before dessert. I'm just as involved

as anyone one. Everyone is plugged in. The sole escape from the Web history cycle, isn't escape. One would have to be born and raised off the grid. The only instance I know is Eden. But we recorded every move he made in our lab and gave him a social history. I'm not sure we didn't betray some natural order, but even if so, that's between the lines in my job description. Without the correct tool or knowledge, the QR-code stands incomprehensible. It gives the impression of a pattern, but offers no clues to its existence. When I say 'we become that history,' it's not some trite rhetoric from a burned out researcher with Luddite leanings.

The address takes me to a mall. I know Eden won't be here. He's under lockdown, probably drugged to the point of drooling; fed pureed meat. Proverb cites curiosity as life threatening to felines and females, but it provides a logical basis to move forward, which I'm grasping for. The Web is stagnant. A moving data pool, it swirls, it doesn't flow. I don't expect to crack a mystery or find an answer; I just want to see where he came from. A place where the panopticonic social network isn't allowed. I don't know if I'd prefer a place with simpler rules of engagement, but mine has turned against me, so down the stairs I go.

The mall's lower level houses a cell phone accessory store among many closed shops. At the end of the hall, two men in suits talk in front of a door. Neither large nor imposing, they watch in silence as I walk toward them. I keep my head up and shoulders back. Eden carried himself with certainty. He lived in his world as fluid poured into a body of water. He didn't give it a moment's thought. I tell them I'm here to meet Rx. With no words, one opens the door.

After the attack, Dr. Fietsite spent most of his time in meetings with our board convincing them we took no unnecessary risks. He stressed the grave importance of our work. We tripled Eden's sedative dosage and administered it with his breakfast each day. Dewey holed up in the observation room to document our previous experiments and construct a defense for Adam's accident. If I entered the room, he never noticed. Eden barely moved. He drooled on himself and his food as he tried to eat. He couldn't make it across the room without falling over. I left Dewey alone in the observation room. I would have consoled him, if he made the slightest note of my existence. I spent my time outside Eden's room watching him stumble and fall asleep in his food. The attack fit Eden's body language. I'd interpreted to mean he sought to challenge the perceived power structure. Dewey and Dr. Fietsite both shuffled, stoop-shouldered around the lab. Eden acknowledged his trap, but in terms of pecking order, I'm not sure if he factored that power. It's possible Eden aligned with me and meant to prove himself. Adam Siler walked with sure confidence. He entered Eden's room, straightened his body, and dropped his tone. Eden's first chance to assert dominance. Perhaps the presence of another virile male triggered an instinct to protect his ability to copulate with the present female, or to prove his virility. I knew Eden didn't mindlessly lash out. He recognized compassion. Placed in a glass box, he worked out those who were aligned against him. I should have told them about my night entering Eden's room as evidence he was not inherently violent. I know this, but I wasn't sure what, if anything, they'd use it for. Also, I hadn't left the building in over a week and was not completely myself.

I didn't sleep much. I envied Eden as he stumbled and fell to sleep. The pen and pad in my lap acted as a formality. I took an office chair from Dewey's observation room. My notes complain Eden couldn't attempt communication in his state. Often, I dozed into a daydream

place where I walked into Eden's room, both doors left open. Eden not drugged, not in graceless stumble, but moving with untaught balance toward me. Nipping at my ankles and rubbing his face on my legs, then rising to stand.

Dewey called me over the intercom. He sat in front of a table of notes, a tablet, and the computer screen divided into four spreadsheets.

"The Dr. said he's not sure what's going to happen. The board said they understand risks but worry about how fruitful our work will be if we can't communicate or enter the room. I've offered to resign, but Dr. Fietsite said that wasn't the issue." Dewey's sallow face looked like it hadn't touched a pillow for days.

"It wasn't your fault. Eden was sedated according to his body weight. I've thought a lot about what the animal behaviorist said. Maybe we should rethink the entire observation."

"It was my idea. On my thesis, which might actually end up being correct. It may be too much to try to socialize Eden."

"We haven't even tried. We've based everything your on absurd notions. He's acting in exactly the way we're handling him. Shouldn't we change our method if the aim is to socialize him?"

"Sidney, it tried to kill a man. I've been reading the reports from the two other attacks, and I'm pretty sure it tried to kill them, too. It--"

"He's human. He has a sex." I tilted my head at him.

"Fine. He he he. He bit a woman's finger off. He bit through the joint. He broke a collarbone."

"But in the time he's come into contact with people, do we know of one time when Eden wasn't treated like a threat or a prisoner?"

“I hear you, but social theorizing aside, look at the evidence. We are treating *him* as *he* has acted.”

“He’s acted when threatened. Adam said if you treated him like a prisoner, he’d be just as violent.

“People say things like that for gravitas,” Dewey said.

“No, some people are aggressive, proactive I mean. Not passive.”

“So what do you suggest? We let him out? I cannot see any safe or ethical way to do so. Even if I were to agree with you, which if I haven’t been clear, I do not, we have more people to think about than us. Over a hundred people work in this building. Other scientists. Guards. Cleaning staff. Researchers. Sidney, I already feel completely responsible for that man’s collarbone. What if you’re wrong and Eden kills someone?”

“I understand caution. We have guards. They have tranq guns. We have a correct dosage now. You can’t think he’s a threat in this state.”

“As far as I’m concerned, until I see evidence to the contrary, Eden is always a threat. You’re basing your opinion on his appearance. If it were a wolf or a chimp in that room, you’d feel exactly as I do. If a chimp had pounded on that man’s chest you wouldn’t lobby for a more hands on approach. Please, save your sympathy.”

“You’ve been holed up here for too long. Take a walk or a nap. Besides, I have my own reports to write. Want me to go over yours?”

“Sleep. I can’t close my eyes without seeing them crash down. The way his arm hung there.”

“Just take one of Eden’s sedatives.”

“What?”

“It was a joke. You know, we used to tell those.” I put my hand on his shoulder. “How much progress are you making in this state anyway?”

Dewey laughed and lowered his head. He said okay and stood up. “Look, I’m sorry. I know Eden is human, but if that were the case, wouldn’t we lock him away at this point? Okay, I’m going. Those spreadsheets are pretty self explanatory.”

“We can go over them when you get back.”

I re-watch the recording from that night. If I told the Dr., he might argue Eden was distracted by unscheduled food. Then add, how lucky I was nothing happened. Dewey would nod and suggest the Dr. assign a leave-of-absence. Both men threw themselves into dowsing the flames, and it allowed them to avoid the lab, Eden, and, because someone had to keep up the actual research, me.

After he attacked the animal behaviorist, I felt an affinity toward Eden. He could communicate, be socialized, and keep his animal spirit that pulled me in. My co-workers epitomized the same men who filled my college labs. Men who attacked with their beast-mighty intellect rather than with weapons or brawn, but still conquered anything in their way.

The stadium seating stretches back four rows. Every seat filled. Attendees represent a cross section of middle class. More than a few men wear suits. The demographic roughly 80% male. 60% white. A woman in a skirt-suit stands watching the arena. She beckons a man in his twenties and puts her mouth to his ear. He listens then maneuvers to a betting station. A few men sport T-shirts with garish logos or QR-codes printed on the shoulder or where a pocket might be. One middle-aged man with blond hair bars his forearm across the collarbone of the man he speaks with. I feel a rush as he demonstrates the move I watched Eden execute.

People queue up to speak with a man in a suit holding a tablet connected to a closed circuit. Closed, but each transaction is recorded. Everyone ignores the dirty linoleum floor and the slight mildewy locker room scent in the air, while I fight the urge to cover my mouth and nose. Even the woman in the skirt-suit postures the same pride she might on a walk down a clean street in front of city hall.

Rx doesn't smile with any part of his face. His eyes only admit recognition. He nods to motion me over. Two other men stand in front of a cage. It holds a dirty, hairless teenager in leather shorts. Rx barks orders at them and winks at the boy in the cage, its luster reflects the stage lights aimed at the arena. The cage is my height, but the boy rests on his haunches, before he treads to the back. His gait matches Eden's. The cage grants a six step pace. Rx says the cage is for show. The boys would do just as well on a leash or sitting. They're only in cages before fights. "They know who takes care of them. Smart enough to know what's best for them," he says. "This one slept on the backseat on the ride over." The crowd wants a wild, animal of a boy, not a fighter trained from birth.

Rx introduces me as a friend, but the other men don't trust this. They raise their chins in greeting. Rx's boy, Terah, fights in the next match. A seven-foot fence circles the ring. After watching Eden move, I have no doubt these boys could top the fence in a few moves.

"They don't jump the fence?" I interrupt them from rubbing oil on Terah.

Rx looks back at me over his shoulder and glowers. "Nah, I told you. They don't want to."

The two other men continue preparing for the fight. At the back of the cage, hidden from the audience, a man squirts water into Terah's mouth. He swishes the water and swallows. Rx looks around. "What the fuck is taking so long?"

"Are people still betting?" I ask.

"Probably, but we're waiting for the other guy to get here. He does this shit all the time. Thinks making us wait puts us off."

At my review hearing, we watched recordings of both my entries to Eden's room on a large flat screen computer monitor. After the first recording ended, Dr. Fiestsite said it was a promising experience, and I should have reported it at once. He looked down into his lap and said he

understood the drive to replicate results and the ambition to discover. The Dr. adjusted his pen on the desk. I'd seen him do this while candying bad news.

Dewey stayed silent in his chair. He occasionally looked at the Dr. or the two members of the board. Never at me. I hadn't spoken to either of them since the day of my second experiment despite my messages and emails. The Dr. responded once to let me know when my review would be held and that he understood I must be in a "tough spot" but it would be best to wait until the review.

In the second video, I enter the room, opening the second door before securing the first. I hold a tray of food. Eden lifts his head. The Dr. and one of my former employers noted that the video shows Eden's head moved slightly as he looked from me to the food and focused on the opened door. They paused, rewound, and replayed this in slow motion. I kept my eyes on the screen and watched the rest of the room in my periphery as if I stood outside of myself.

When they spoke of "Dr. Kanser," I thought, yes, Dr. Kanser, what has happened? On screen, Eden rose and took a few staggering steps. They didn't note the moment a small smile formed on my face, but I'm sure they noticed. Eden bolted, knocked me to the floor, and tore off screen. They let the video play. The Dr. Kanser they referred to rolled to look through the clear wall. Lying there, I watched Eden move certainly toward the double doors we used every day. He'd watched us and understood how to leave.

My employers recounted Eden's actions after he left me. He'd reversed a guard's knee and broken another's collarbone in the same move he used on the Adam Siler. A guard shot him in the leg as he headed for the main exit. I heard Dr. Fietsite say, "Dr. Kanser," but I thought, could Eden read? Did he recognize the word "exit" over the door?

Rx says the move I watched Eden demonstrate is a common take down. So common most of the time it is reversed into a move that renders the attacker's arm limp and useless.

“But common here, not in other self-defense or martial arts?”

Rx ignores the question to answer one of his cronies. The boy in this cage, Terah, is the underdog. One of the men, one wearing a sleeveless dress shirt, crouches down next to the cage and speaks in a low, harsh tone. Terah presses his face against the bars and grinds his knuckles into the floor. The man says to Terah: “If you're down, lock the elbow, bite the bicep, break whatever you can.”

It's amazing what can be found if one is willing to look. I found Rx while looking for the original owner of the house where Eden was found. I don't mind saying after being released from my lab position, I had a little too much spare time. This is to say, I wasn't entirely surprised or disappointed when I found myself searching through property records, forwarding addresses, and phone bills. I stumbled over Rx's phone number in the abandoned house where Eden was found. Sometimes research is dumb luck. I called and sputtered that I was looking for the owner of the house. That I'd helped take care of what was found there. The line went quiet. I asked him if he knew what was found at the house. Rx's smooth voice softened his curt words. He said to meet him at his place. He gave me the address and hung up. Admittedly, I was fixated and rushed in without thinking.

Where I met Rx turned out not to be “his place” but the place where he housed and trained boys like Eden. We spoke outside the large brick building. Rx wouldn’t let me in. “I figured it’d be better just to meet with you to find out exactly what you’re after,” he said.

Rx was not imposing. For someone who trains boys to break and tear at each other, he closely resembles some mix between Adam Siler and the men at the meeting. When we met he wore a blue dress shirt and jeans. He had a pushy sneer of a smile and shook my hand with dismissive absence.

“Where did Eden come from?” The words rushed out.

Life offers a litany of disappointments. Colleagues cripple each other for ambition. The same zeal rests under your ribcage, cellophaned around your heart, no better than them. On a long drive to find an answer, the asphalt hypnotizes and a thought sprouts: you’ve dedicated yourself to a distinguished future, peers’ respect, and breathless logic. Without a moment for the present, you’ve expounded complex theories on meaning rather than affix meaning to a thing in your hands. The idea expands, fills the car, quickens your protected heart, and you realize you’re talking to yourself as if you’re someone else. Rx looked at me and said, “No.”

“No?”

He said no. He told me the boys “just are.” They don’t come from here. They come from there. If I wanted more than that, I could go off and screw. He gave me the address for the mall and said to ask for him. He said he’d be there and I’d find him.

My colleagues cited stress and PTSD. “Fired” was the word they avoided. Those excuses weren’t correct, and I couldn’t find any of my own. While my colleagues turned their analysis on me, I couldn’t explain my actions or position, but I felt no remorse. Dr. Fietsite asked if I intended to leave the door open. One member of the board asked what I could have hoped to gain by acting so carelessly. He asked if I didn’t understand I could be held liable for damages and injuries. I stared numbly at a corner of the room. I shifted my eyes from person to person to convey engagement. I paced the room with my eyes, detailed the furniture, memorized the dimensions, and sized up each person while they waited for my response.

Because the Grass Is Wet and The Air Is Clean

Cotton pours black powder into a single chamber on each of the revolvers. It's black like sand, but sand isn't black, I think. Each grain falls blue-black in the daylight. I can feel it in my mouth, but it had no way into my mouth. I run my tongue over my teeth. They are jagged and sharp as razors. It's not powder I feel, it's each blood cell bouncing out of my tongue, but I don't taste any blood. Cotton drove us to this field in exactly seventeen and a half minutes. I sat in the back with Jesus and kept time. "Behind Blue Eyes" came on the radio. My father's favorite song, I told Cotton and Jesus. I sang along, and it was quiet in the car. The song is exactly three minutes and forty-seven seconds long. Jesus called me Blue Eyes even though my eyes are brown. He said it was my new name, and he had the right to

name me. When he said it, I realized my jaw ached. In our little clan, none of us remembers how to sleep. A few feet away, Jesus paces in a circle. He mutters to himself. We can't forget how to talk. He says this is a good idea and the sole solution. I don't care because I don't know the words. Cotton presses back a lever connected to the barrel. It packs the ball and powder. His face has excitement, and he tells us these are Walker Colts. They were made to kill Mexicans. Jesus stops his pacing to glare at Cotton. Cotton holds up his hand and says, "A long time ago." Someone traded them to him for meth. Cotton only owns meth and things meth turned into. Once he turned meth into a girl. She cried, naked on his couch. He called her collateral. He laughed then. He said that I could fuck her but it had to be on the couch. He wanted to watch, and I told him one day someone would kill him, and he'd cry just like her in the final moments of his terrible life. All members of our clan wish these things for each other. Right now, he says a Walker Colt is the most powerful handgun I will ever fire. He tells me that a good shot to the shoulder removes the arm. The guns are loaded. Jesus walks over without being called. My jaw ached because he punched me before we came. To fire a gun, really, honestly fire a gun he said you could only aim at one particular thing. He socked me and said it was a challenge. I ask him if he's ready to die. He laughs and slaps my arm. He says he's been ready for a while. He's three inches shorter than me. I will aim about six inches lower than my eye. I've never fired a gun, but I know I will be a crack-shot. I have a deadeye. Cotton asks us what this is all about, again. Jesus laughs so hard he nearly falls over. Cotton looks to me. He has a serious eye. I'm reflected in his pupil, but the eye is his. I remind him that "all about" is not the custom of our clan. His head shakes in a slow side-to-side motion. I could kill him along with Jesus then start a new clan. Jesus vomits thick mucus. Cotton asks us if we want another hit. We all nod. He shakes

out a double portion of crystal on a piece of tinfoil. The sun is violent on the foil, and the meth is broken glass. But it is not glass because men like Cotton do not make glass. Jesus and I exchange a look, and I love him. He knows, just like me, that this has always had to happen. I hear the lighter strike like it's a memory of sound from a time before this one. I inhale with pinpricks in my fiberglass lungs. My breath escapes into the sky. It's big and blue and empty, with a yellow disk, like a kid's drawing. My breath chases the sun but falls short into a wispy ghost cloud that dirties the air around us. I want to cry, but we've forgotten that, too. It disintegrates, and I can't do anything for it. I want to float up where I might hold it together. I recognize the sky from my eighth birthday. My father gave me a bunch of silvery balloons from the grocery store. I had them all day. At my party the sun reflected hard off them. I jumped off a chair and punched them, until one split. I held it together, clutching the side with my hands, but it didn't matter. The helium escaped and mixed with the air like it was air. My father said to stop my goddamn crying. I'd done it, and men don't cry over things they've done. He said that I had four more balloons just like it. I didn't care about those. I needed to take it back. But Cotton presses the gun in my hand and pushes me into place. His teeth are the brown of dead things in fall. The gun is warm and fits in my hand like it should always be there, but it's heavy enough that I want to drop it. My thumb finds the groove. I raise it with the barrel still pointed down to judge the heft. Cotton has me by the shoulders, and my back hits something. Jesus. He says Blue Eyes. He tells me it's going to be all right, and I believe him. I take a deep breath, and the world shines bright and silvery, like a balloon at a birthday party I remember. My back against his, we understand each other. I want to see his blood fresh and gushing. Cotton talks. We will take ten steps, turn, and fire. We each have one bullet. In the event that both of us are

hit and live, the person less wounded is the victor. The word victor sounds stupid, as if this is kid's play, and Cotton is a father. We've learned enough from fathers. I'd like to ask if we're men or if we should wear cowboy boots. Cotton says one, and I know I'm supposed to step forward.

Two.

The grass ahead rolls in the wind. Behind me the wind is tinged with my scent.

Three.

Each blade screams from a tiny face. They are afraid.

Four.

The gun is heavy, and my shoulder drags behind, unwilling.

Five.

I've forgotten speech. A trigger of hope separates me from the clan, but I can't ask Jesus to stop this thing we do.

Six.

In front of me, a line of trees is as far away as I remember anything being far. I see rays of sun turn the leaves translucent green. Someone shouts ten over and over. I turn and something hits me. Then my back finds a hard place, and, now, I watch the sky. My breath is gone, and the sky is clear. I hear someone laughing. Jesus stands over me. He laughs and laughs. He says something that's so overjoyed it doesn't make sense. I try to smile, but I can't close my mouth. Now the grass is wet, and the air is clean. I think he killed me, and if I were him, I would laugh just like that.

This Small Thing Between Us

“I still love you,” you say. You don’t want to move, but you figure you don’t have a lot going in this city. You’re well trained in AutoCAD and MicroStation. A new job won’t be hard to come by. Sure, you have some friends here, but when you really think about it, in a way you wouldn’t admit to those friends, you wouldn’t say you have a life here. You’ve been with her for a couple of years. Marriage has come up, and despite how bad things have been, you still consider it.

Things are different from the first year. Now, she thinks you are too slovenly and tells you so. The cuteness of her art tarnishes, and you think of her as someone who paints rather than an artist. Sometimes you tell her so but apologize later because you are tired of arguing. You press her to apply to art school because you think she’s too complacent waiting tables. She should do something with her talent. But, because you have something of a career, you think it’s altogether unrealistic. This is the word you connect with her name more and more.

Finally, she agrees. Art school scares her, and she says that's reason enough. With each application she finishes, you tell her you are proud of her. You mean it. To be a positive influence in someone's life feels like a good thing. You love her, but you worry about her ability to handle stress when you come home to find she has thrown away all of the plates because you didn't clean them. You are not prepared for this and tell her it is not fucking okay. She smolders on the couch and tells you calmly that maybe it's not okay to live like you're still in a frat house.

You were never in a frat.

She goes on saying she's not going to be a little housewife waiting for you to come home. She's not going to have fucking supper waiting for you and then wipe your chin because you are too lazy to chew with your mouth closed.

You wonder if you do chew open-mouthed. You wonder, if she's right, what else she might be right about. You are about to ask, but you've taken too long to respond. You say she's so complacent to wander through life as if the future will take care of itself. She says you would rather live in a cocoon than be in the world. That you are scared of living. The fight spirals downward until you try to stop it by admitting fault. In the same tone as her insults, she tells you not to be stupid. To hug her. And the sex, as it's always been, is amazing. In bed, she screams foul things and insults you with her eyes closed. This excites you. You climax, but keep going because, if she doesn't, it will be much worse than before. She won't say anything but will sulk in a way that makes you feel like less of a man.

Acceptance letters come from art schools. Despite what you've said about re-evaluating your relationship when she chooses a destination, you say you will move with her. You replace all the me's with us's in the thoughts you've had about clean breaks and fresh starts. The purple bags under your eyes return as the two of you stay up late, talking about what will happen in a

new city. The conversations are fun. And, honestly, there are moments she sweeps you up in her excitement, and you think maybe this will work.

So you find a place in the new city that's bigger and cheaper. You both have fun on the drive. You make stupid jokes that make her give you a look that says she is not amused. But she laughs.

You get to the place late and assume all new places look intimidating at night. The realtor may have led you to believe the neighborhood was better than it is, but it's near a subway station and a corner store. You park the truck, and, because you've planned well, you grab the box full of bedding from the back. You make a bed out of blankets in the living room. You make love to her and fall asleep feeling pretty good about your decision.

There are no curtains, so you wake up with the sun and begin moving things. She helps for a bit but becomes concerned with placement. Boxes are stacked everywhere in various states of unpack. She's been looking for something. You order a pizza and eat together amongst the boxes. The setting is new, which erases the old troubles momentarily. You both giggle and poke at the possibilities. She isn't too keen on unpacking, so in an attempt to start this out on the best foot, you suggest spending the next few days exploring the city. It's pretty fun. Like a vacation.

You finally get to the organizing. She wants to put this here. You want to put that there. The basement is a collection of things left behind by previous tenants. There are a few boxes of clutter and a couple dusty lamps. She thinks it's great. These hand-me-downs with unknown history. You would rather just buy the things you need and do without the things you don't. Like lamps in a house with ample ceiling fixtures. She drags up a chest with a dented side that looks like it's survived a busted water main or two. Its structural integrity is questionable at best. She says she can keep her art supplies in it. Every time she goes to the basement, she yells at you to

come see something. She will only keep yelling. You cannot ignore your way out of a show-and-tell. She stands in the corner holding something, cradling it in her arms, and whatever it is gives off a soft light. She brings it over to you, and you can't tell what it is. It casts a warm, green light while squirming just a little. It almost nuzzles her. You ask her what it is. She says she doesn't know. She found it when she moved one of the old boxes. Its face is a mix of human and insect features. It has no arms or legs, just a segmented larva-like body, about a foot long. Its cherubic cheeks surround a soft beak-like mouth. You look at its black eyes and think this is a very scary thing she cuddles with, but the soft glow seems familiar and gives the impression the thing is happy.

You step back and ask if it's real. Is it living? Is it warm? She says it's alive. She can feel it. You ignore her scrunched face to stare at the thing. It nestles into the crook of her arm. You have already filed this in the category: things: unneeded. And what do we do with it, you ask. I suppose you want to just get rid of it, she says. Quickly, you re-file this thing in the category: found pets: unwanted by you and wanted by her. This is an empty file you prepared after watching her feed strays. You try to fix the misstep by saying what you mean is should we get something to keep it in. Does she think it should have its own home? Neither of you, perhaps nobody, knows anything about whatever it is. She asks you in her this-is-going-to-be-a-fight tone if you mean a cage. There is no correct answer. Even if you recant or ask how she could think you might want to put this beautiful black-eyed writhing, unnaturally glowing, worm into a cage until we know it won't crawl inside one of us and burst through our chest at the dinner table, it will still be a fight. So you just keep staring at the thing. No answer is the best option here. So she continues, this is what is wrong with you. You just want to lock things in cages and make everything safe. God forbid you take a chance. Variations on a theme. All the while she looks

from you down to the invertebrate (?) in her arms. But when she looks down at the thing, she smiles a little.

You nod, and shuffle upstairs to find a box, a pillow, and a blanket to keep it in. When you get back, she still cradles the worm-thing. You show her the box, and before she can say anything, you tell her the enclosed space will help it retain heat. She spends the rest of the night cooing over the opening, taking the little thing out and holding it against her face. You watch the five o'clock news, some sitcoms, and the nine o'clock news when it comes on. She goes to bed because she wants to be fresh for her first day of class. She takes it upstairs with her. When you wake up on the couch and drag yourself to bed, she wakes up and tells you to be careful of the thing. She calls it the little guy. It glows soft like a nightlight. This starts the custom of the thing sleeping between the two of you.

You go to work. She goes to school. The two of you, mostly her, make discoveries about the thing. It doesn't like to be in the box. (I told you so, she says.) The only thing you can get it to eat is Doritos. You're happy you've discovered this. You even feel something like affection for the green-glowing cherubic thing when you open a bag and watch it crawl in and eat its way out. Literally, through the bottom of the bag, creating empty husks of packaging. She tries to get it to eat fruit and vegetables. It doesn't recognize these things as food. You laugh about it. She glares, but says that's why it gets along with you. Neither of you eat real food. You both laugh and smile at it. She's taken to calling it Kewpie because of its chubby cheeks. After a few weeks, you call it by this name as well. You don't want to admit it, but when you wake up, and Kewpie is burrowed into your armpit, it feels comforting. It makes you feel loved, even if you're pretty sure this thing isn't on the emotional level of a standard housecat.

She has a break in the afternoon and then class until seven. This means you get at least

two hours alone with it after work. You cherish this time watching Kewpie's constant grin disappear into blue bags of chips. You try to figure out how smart the thing is. You throw blankets on it. (It goes to sleep after wiggling around for a few minutes.) You put it in cabinets. (It took thirty minutes to push the door open the first time but now can figure its way out in about five.) It responds mostly to touch and smell. If you place a bag of Doritos unopened next to it, the bag is ignored. Once opened, Kewpie will finish it off in under a minute. Its appetite is endless. You stopped testing its limits after feeding it three bags in ten minutes.

When she gets home, she immediately asks where Kewpie is and what Kewpie's been doing. You tell her in detail where it's crawled, how much it's eaten. The two of you eat dinner together, and she tells you what Kewpie did this afternoon, which is not much different from what you've told her. There's this uncomfortable silence when she finishes her stories. She looks up at you in this sad way, and you try to place the last time you saw her smile at you. You ask her how school is. She tells you about a drawing of Kewpie she's working on. The silence comes back, and you begin to wonder if you are happy. Her eyes have the look of someone who's surrendered to something. Of someone who's accepted a displeasing option because it seems like the only one. She pushes her hair behind her ear. The light falls just so on her skin, and you realize how long it's been since you really looked at her. You suggest the two of you go on a date. She says she has a lot of work to do. She says you're sweet for asking and smiles at you. She stands up and kisses you on the mouth. The kiss gets harder. You move your hand up her thigh. She pulls away and smiles. Her eyes shine. Later, she says and walks upstairs. In a few hours, you go up to her art room. She opens the door, and you ask to see what she's working on. Sure, she says. Looking over the sketches, you see she softens the beak and gives the eyes warmth that probably isn't there, but you both see it when you look at Kewpie. You tell her you

like them. That she captures a feeling you can't put into words.

You've started holding Kewpie when you get home from work. You only put it down to feed it. Sometimes you feed chips to it one by one in your arms. You turn on the TV and sit holding this little, warm, segmented body against you. When she comes home, she barely says hi and you hand off Kewpie. She eats dinner with Kewpie. You are stuffed with Doritos. You let her have Kewpie for the rest of the night because she uses it in her drawings and it calms her when school overwhelms her. You don't resent her for it. You just look forward to when you can get in bed and feel it snuggle into your armpit.

You get off work on a night that feels no different from any other and head to the store to buy chips for you and Kewpie. You open your checkbook and realize next month will be the year anniversary of moving here. You have no idea how so much time has passed. You don't drink often anymore, but you decide to buy a bottle of vodka. It's what you drank when you used to celebrate. You get home, make a drink, and open a bag for Kewpie. The first drink goes down hard but makes you feel better, so you have another. You have another after that. You walk around drinking and holding Kewpie. You ask it how it could have been a year. You ask it if it can remember if yesterday was yesterday or the day before. Soon, from the walking and the quick drinking, you begin to feel sick. You need some fresh air. You take Kewpie out and sit on the front steps. It's just getting dark. The sky is a burst of orange above the brownstones. You rest your head on the doorframe and wonder when the last time you looked at the sky was.

When she shakes you awake, your head hits the doorframe and hurts less than you think it should. The pain comes when she asks where Kewpie is. The two of you scour the neighborhood. You keep saying it shouldn't be so hard to find something that glows. The nine o'clock news is long over by the time you give up looking. You suggested splitting up to cover

more ground, but she said no. All night she has muttered things at you and then clung to you.

The thing is gone, and you're pretty sure you'll never get it back. When she closes the door, you say you're so sorry. She begins to say something, but you stop her. You say no, you're sorry. It's your fault. You lift your head and speak concession and contrition, and that's the end because one of you named it.

Vita

Justin Burnell was born in Knoxville, TN. At age seven, he convinced his grandmother he could remember his last two months in the womb and his birth. He graduated from the University of New Orleans with a BA in English in 2007. The next year, he returned to UNO to work toward a Master of Fine Art in Creative Writing.