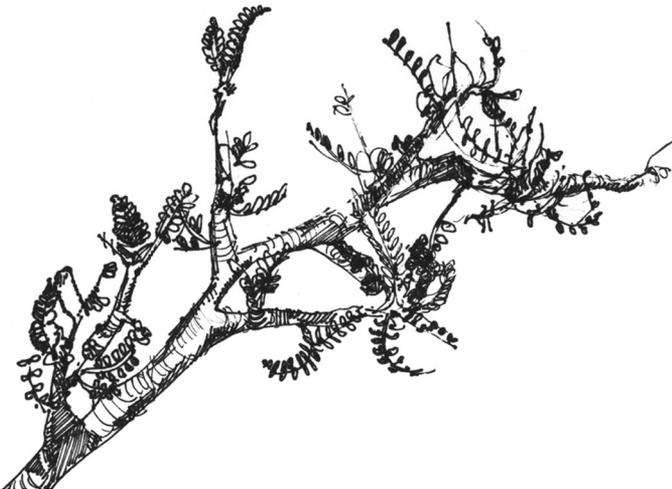

elephant tree

Chapman University



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Karma Repair Kit: Items 1-4

1.

Get enough food to eat,
and eat it.

2.

Find a place to sleep where it is quiet,
and sleep there.

3.

Reduce intellectual and emotional noise
until you arrive at the silence of yourself,
and listen to it.

4.

– *Richard Brautigan*

Months

You did say then that we did not have to agree on it and I believe it too. Before roads were not as terrifying. I do not know if we should take trips there any longer. Sunbathe on snow. With the departure of your flight you made sure I would not be lost luggage. Six times plays the song, "A membrane is a thin layer that separates cellular structures or organs." Driving too fast without mirrors where they should be is not smart. I am sorry I missed what you left me under my bed or was it behind me as I am still spinning. The laundry looks like it's done. A road is a road is a road is a joke. Mirrors stain easily. Protein fills the gaps between closed eyes.

In Me

It's the song to the movie
that reminds me of
the red vacuum my
mother loved
It's the words to the people
around me that
refuse to leave my head
But it's the looks that
you give me that rearrange
what I am

No You Won't

There are many ways I can tell you
but only one way I know you'll understand
Sometimes in the morning
I give you a nudge with my elbow
and I hear you leave without a word
I guess next time I'll stay on my own side

Say Nothing

he doesn't say anything,
 except
when he says You don't belong
in a place like that
she doesn't say anything,
 except
when she says why she
remains silent
he doesn't say anything,
 except
when he says it's funny if
only it hadn't happened to You
she doesn't say anything,
 except
when she says You shouldn't
rush matters
he doesn't say anything,
 yet
You say a lot of things,
 except
what You really mean:
 in my home
I was hunted
 in my escape
I was hunter
 here i am nothing

Blots

you can't just write anything you know
she said distinctly
and I heard her words without seeing the blots
as she tapped my pen insistently

yet with profound agitation I realized
that typing is aged
and one key at a time—
it stutters

but at least there are no blots
she says teasingly
and I disagree
not all blots are visible
like your words
I say.

words in the air

pale pink jokes
yellow celebrations
pondering blues
and inspired greens
swirl forever

and through it all
i can see your voice
and my voice

balanced just so
on the tip
of my finger
a frozen soap bubble
our communion
inside

Swimming

When you first surfaced,
and chords trickled from piano's edge
as you flicked
final notes from finger tips,
and hanging eighths trailed dotted thrills
down your neck,
could you breath?

Your den of thieves, flooded
to lair's edge,
was surface-flecked by
starched parchment;
emptied of its villains whose courage
once ran
into vibrato-lengthened tributaries.

Harassed by heady rhythm, your statue sank
beneath the torrents and slept
a good long while, content
to anchor
the muted, mossy trills
of harmony.

While submerged,
the pressure in your ears became a sharp
pleasure-pain.
And I must ask, for my
own sake,
how soon after you finished
did you dive in
again?

For Mr. David Lee

Let me explain.

Bedtime was red foreign cars
and winding Spanish roads and your life risked for a headline,
stories of the French girls who still lived in the hidden part of his wallet.

Let me explain.

Childhood was an excess of swing sets and bicycles for two,
boat-sized cars of robin's egg blues across the Golden Gate,
construction paper hats and lovingly mistaking weeds for flowers.

At four, words had already begun to take on lives and interact
and it wasn't until after his last cup of coffee
that I remembered the shoes I made of eggshells
and the bottle by his sky-high typewriter
and how, then, its label had sounded to me like the spring boards
bird-women in blinding metallic leotards flew from.
Gym beams were proof of either heaven or magic to me, then.

Jim gym jim gym:

The words had already begun their arching and intersecting.

The Tuesday we let my father go,
I shuddered as the ashes left my hands:
I had expected something like powdered sugar,
easily compacted and understood in the hands of grief,
but I discovered pieces altogether too rough and granular
for any sort of molding.
They flew around, intoxicated, and refused to settle on the Bay,
while his ex girlfriends, still beautiful and insane and redheaded,
got drunker and drunker.

Will you let me explain?

The best dreams I have are very simple ones
in which the people I love, alive and long dead,
go swimming up some green river and drink beers on the rocks
and maybe go fishing
and eat the sandwiches my father's prepared early that morning
We all call back and forth to each other, laughing.

I stay at the very back and watch.

San Diego

The small red trolley passes slowly
while high heels glimmer
click snap shimmer -
cautiously - before
tiptoeing hurriedly through
the bundle of passing
umbrellas

They pop up so fast
a visual melody
off-notes beating with the
collective symphony
while one hand struggles
- laboriously - nervously
rain drops blending into crevices
of the well-worn and freckled
hands

Are shaking left and right
grabbing cell-phones and
bags and finding lipstick
with pursed lips -
then a pucker
and smoothing
and smiling
head tilting - hands holding the
tiny mirror

Reflections form blurs
puddles of people in
asphalt - concrete
- running
down drains - never meeting
as the ground becomes
swathed in colors -
passing phobias - but
the trolley has stopped.

Taxes

Uncle Max doesn't pay his taxes
I should know - he tears each bill up
And uses it for fertilizer
To make his garden grow
He's a magician, so when the IRS
Comes banging on his door
He disappears and isn't seen anymore
Until the day before the summer grows short
And recedes into the distance
Every night, Uncle Max prays
That the money-snatching bullies would just go away
He's like a child that way
So I tuck him in
Seal a kiss on his yellowing skin
When you touch his face
It's paper-thin
But strong enough to hold a dream

I finished a book yesterday

I finished a book yesterday and it reminded me that I love you it reminded me that when I go to sleep when I wake up in the morning that the feeling will still be there do you ever feel like when we lay together in a bed that it becomes a garden or maybe even a clearing in an otherwise lush forest I do this may sound silly but sometimes I swear I can see the green grass and redwhiteyellow flowers and hear the wind rustling through the trees

When I try to write to you I always want to use other people's words not because I don't have my own but because I fear mine are inadequate like in the book I finished Leopold tells Molly she is like the flowers on the mountain You are like the flowers on the mountain but that doesn't really come from me and it is not really what I mean I don't think All I want is to be able to express myself to you and that is what I am trying right now

I Love You

hopefully that cannot be said too many times.

Pants and Sandwiches

Every Sunday it's the same old cycle.
The morning's empty of sound,
Save for a few chirps and barks...
The sidewalks are vacant
Like an abandoned old army trench...
And the serenity of my porch
Seems as permanent as the sun.

But then you rotten kids scurry by
With your silly checkered pants,
And your cheap red wagons,
Filled to the brim with fat ham sandwiches,
Wrapped in cheap old wax paper
And smelling of bitter, brand-name mustard.

And those rotten, rusty wagon wheels.
Ka-chunk! Ka-chunk! Ka-chunk!
Like they're gonna collapse at any moment
Under the weight of all that bread and meat.
Lord, what do you need with all that bread and meat?

You rotten kids. With your pants and sandwiches.
Maybe it'll rain soon. Maybe it'll even snow.
Yeah, that's what we need.
A fine, heavenly chill.

And when it comes I'll be right here...
To see those wagon wheels cease...
To see those sandwiches spoil...
To finally peer out at the sidewalks
With no checkered pants in sight.

Then maybe...
Maybe...
I'll have one Sunday morning in peace.
Without you rotten kids...
With your pants and sandwiches.

Rearrangements

I was falling for the boy when I met him for breakfast down on 4th street. I have many thoughts about breakfast food. Toast and coffee always remind me of my father and my father's father. I found Grandpa's old typewriter in the basement. Sharp knives inside clicked away and refused to let me go back and erase the mistakes I had made. When the boy embraced me, I couldn't rearrange my flight schedule. A moment is a moment that cannot be redone. Isn't that why it's called a moment? Within each passing second, the shape of me up close to you is not the same shape of me walking away. Sometimes you need to actually see with your eyes the vision of a dream to be reminded of older dreams. Stopping in Copenhagen in winter, I saw the mermaid covered in snow. Snowy sheets are rooms filled with concealed childhoods. I use to kiss snowflakes and pretend they were you. I use to whisper secrets to you through keyholes found in the doorways of the backyard. Returning to them now, I find weeds and roots of nostalgia growing there for the repeated act of naive frankness, the warmth of our breath that came from our lips when we spoke under flying airplanes. These days, I am surrounded by paper and pens. Some days, I can only invent so many words. Some days, I take words and cut them into smaller pieces. I throw everything unsaid between us in a pan in the oven. I wait. When I take the pan out, I find that I've only created euphemisms. I hide every blue joke there is. Nowadays, you and I remain in post-production, continuously trying to edit out all the unfit spaces.

My Cadence

Sometimes my pulse
escapes its steady thrum to tumble,
tripping, out of its home
(my chest),
and gather tremor-filled in my wrists, my ears,
or just above my collar bone.

It won't be coaxed back
or follow the paths mapped
in blue-grey — — stark
against my sun-shunned skin — —
without patience, deep breathing,
and you

leaving.

White Noise*

The sunsets linger with us

In the dark the mind is a devouring machine, the only thing awake in
the universe

In our dreams, most of us have probably seen our own death but
haven't known how to make the material surface.

Maybe when we die, the first thing we'll say is, "I know this feeling, I
was here before."

We seem to believe it's possible to ward off death by following rules of
good grooming

All plots move in one direction,

Death has entered.

* All lines come from Don DeLillo's *White Noise*

The role of a writer is not
to say what we all can say,
but what we are unable to say.

– *Anais Nin*

Suckerfish: An Essay

A Beginning to a Story that is Not Named but will be Named by the Conclusion of this Beginning to the Story that has not been Named

"Life is an eternal search for story, for an identifiable beginning, a rewarding middle, and a well-packaged ending. Every creature, that has had the regrettable opportunity to crawl from the softened warmth of eggshell or womb into the muck of existence, imparts this journey onto itself. Sucker...every one of them."

-Bob

(A character who might later become a prominent and indispensable factor in a story arch of a subsequent tale that has yet to be named, but will be forthwith at the close of said 'beginning' as previously mentioned in the above page caption)

There is a formula for immortality. Seriously. It is calculated as such: (Name+Title)Story = Immortality. Though all ingredients are important, story, as the multiplier, is the most critical element to a successful afterlife. And though a conclusive outcome while using this calculation is a tricky matter, its merits, if considered, are persuasive. Consider this. Title alone is not essential to immortality, and a name by itself, with all probability, will see those whom it names fade into obscurity. But, when these ingredients are magnified by either an epic or infamous story, the likelihood for immortality increases; this has been proven through rigorous scientific trial. Seriously.

History itself points to the importance of a good story. For example, Herman Melville, a writer (not so great a title), and Alexander the Great, king and conqueror (a really impressive title), are equally preserved for eternity even though one has a larger title than the other. Why? Both men have great stories attached to them. One lived a great story, and the other one wrote them.

I'm telling you this, because you seem unmoved and unconvinced. So, here it is! Proof! Concrete evidence! All things being equal, story can

make the difference between an obscure little dirt nap and a national holiday with your name on it. Seriously. When name or title is attached to a great story, there is an incendiary effect on the hearts and minds of those needed to ensure that the immortality takes place, to ensure that the “non-death” sticks, as it were.

With that cleared up, I would like to present you with a simplified version of the equation discussed in the previous paragraphs:

$$(N+T)S=I$$

Here, it is cooked down to its bare essentials. Now, the information is in a compact construction that can be easily recalled and more effortlessly remembered over long stretches of time. It is very much like a story itself, when you think about it. It is not a comprehensive rendering of the parts it represents. It is a narrowing, a condensation of only the important facts—a presentation of only the things I want you to know. I mean, who wants to remember all the mundane, insignificant nonsense that makes up most of your lives? That is, after all, what we are talking about here; we are talking about being remembered, living beyond our god-given expiration date, as it were. Through the impressions we leave on the suckers still fiddling and wasting away the daylight, through those left behind trying to peel a sliver of contentment from this big dirt convection oven of a planet, we might live on.

Long before we understood its importance, the equation, $(N+T)S=I$, it had been driving the course of human history for eons. It is driving it, now. The gastrulas bloat of our own self-importance, our insatiable need for eternal life, is central to every evil act, every seeded-hatred, and every savage jealousy throughout history and time immemorial. Really. It’s entirely the truth. It has been proven through rigorous scientific trial. But, I don’t wish to highlight simply the negative effects of $(N+T)S=I$. It is this same vanity that has been key to all industrial progress, every medical breakthrough, and all humane charities fashioned by the hands of *Homo sapiens*. It is by the conceit of *Homo sapiens*, by $(N+T)S=I$ that the masterpieces of art and engineering have found life. Leonardo DaVinci? A self-absorbed narcissist. Marie Curie? Consumed by an obsession with recognition. And, what about those pyramids at Giza? The Egyptians are history’s ultimate megalomaniacs (just look at all those mummies). Here it is, again! Proof! Concrete Evidence! Just look at what happened to Randolph Hearst, who, through his extensive social connections and financial empire, reduced Orson Wells’ career to only one

good film. Did you see *Touch of Evil*? Charlton Heston as a Mexican? Holy crap! Why? Because he was worried how he would be remembered! Because Orson Wells messed with his story! This formula, $(N+T)S = I$ (and especially *S*) is the cause of far more death, poverty, greed, triumph, conquest, or construction than any similarly stated equation based on nuclear reaction, chemical and/or biological mutation, or mechanically engineered contraption. I shit you not.

However, it must be noted, the equation cannot do all these things alone. It needs help. It needs an even more insidious invention to act as a co-conspirator in its human debacle. It needs something to give mass and physicality to its individual parts; the equation needs its own immortality. What it needs is the most dangerous substance ever concocted, a substance more toxic than the meat of the dreaded *Fugu rubripes*, a substance more irritating than the sap of the *Narcissus poeticus*, a substance with a soul as black as the deepest well and as shallow as the thinnest pool. In a word, it needs ink. The equation could not have worked its treachery if it had never been written down. With writing, we begin to think of our singular life, as unique as it is, as less important than what might lay beyond it. You see, a kind of devaluation of “real life” occurs with the development of printed communication. At no fault of its own, extra-verbal communication, through its exorbitant shelf life, extends the human story beyond its natural capacity, beyond its god-given expiration date, as it were. In doing so, it gives birth to the greatest sin ever conceived by carbon-based machines: hope in a world where there can be none. In the face of death, demise, in extremis, finis, and the last roundup, it offers something beyond our cessation; it offers the proverbial extra-innings to the big ballgame. This simple wish for immortality, this hope in the face of hopelessness, becomes the sprawling root structure that feeds and nourishes all nefarious human behaviors both egregious and grand. I shit you not.

It all begins some thirty-one-thousand-years ago, give or take a few years, in Western Europe as the air along the floor of the Pont-d’Arc Valley grows chill, and the swift waters blanch opaque and slur soupy with ice. Along a southern pointing meander in the Ardeche River, the air becomes sterile but for the occasional acrid sting of campfire ash-drift. The micro-biotic and wind wandering pollen is ushered into dormancy by the killing frost, and nothing can grow. For as long as anyone can remember—at this point in human history, all one can do to recall the past

is use their meager brains and vocal cords. The frozen valley floor has provided sparse opportunities for food gathering or hunting in the local communities of Homo sapiens and periods of less severe weather are frequently punctuated by longer and deeper eleven-month winters. But too often, no break in the darkness ever comes. For the primitive but ingenious Homo sapiens, time during these icy stretches is spent huddled in the rocky niches at the valley's edge.

During a particularly lengthy interlude between sun-broken horizons, food supplies are wearing thin and entertainment, like daylight, grows more difficult to come-by. Now, I am telling you honestly, one of these hygienically challenged Homo sapiens gets an idea into his head. We will call him, *Bob*, for the sake of storytelling. Overcome by the boredom of his ice age induced prison, Bob decides to trace images onto the cavern walls. While sitting beside a combustion of dried sage and using varying mixtures of squashed fruits, vegetables, insects, ash, and blood, he conjures, like the sorcerer he is, images of deer and cattle upon the limestone walls. Bob depicts successful tribal hunts from the past with fond recollections and ruminates over the full stomachs they had brought. An introvert by nature, this particular specimen of the genus Homo sapiens hasn't many friends, and his own exploits on the field of battle and provision did not acquire him much notoriety among his peers. But somehow, as he works his stained fingers across the blond stone above him, he feels his stunted self-image rise at the sight of the work he is producing. And, Bob is happy.

Soon, the rest of the tribe gathers around him to admire the crude representations of the hunter and his kills. And, they admire their creator. He is in essence the first celebrity novelist to walk the face of the earth, and from that day forward, he is a respected member of the community as its official *Executive Magician and Historian*. This is his title. It is something he adds to his name for recognition and prestige. It gains him a larger cave to conduct his work (larger office space, as it were), and appropriates for him several assistants (subordinates, as it were). And, Bob is happy. But his work, with its permanence hung colorfully above their heads, is so much more valuable than what the new *Executive Magician and Historian* and his admirers can imagine. It is a history, a religion, and a scientific breakthrough rolled into one. It is infinity spread across geologic time. It is immortality pressed into blood, fruit, and ash. It is **(N+T)S=I**. I shit you not.

Years pass, as they do, and many others leave their mark on the same cave ceiling at the back of the Pont-d' Arc Valley and inside identical stone enclosures and porte cocheres across the frozen globe. Carefully, they render depictions of what they consider important events and what they believe other people should consider to be important events. And then, something happens. It is something unexpected. No one foresees in all that brushing and splattering a window to a terrible greatness opening onto the world. At the back of the same Pont-d'Arc Valley cave, a young man is standing with a friend. Somewhere down the line in the succession of Homo sapiens' successions, a great grandson to someone's great grandson stares reflectively at the many fruit stains and remembers. At the back of a particularly deep cavern with his best friend by his side, this great grandson to a Homo sapiens' great grandson straightens a finger to the ceiling and points his buddy's attention to a small crimson stick figure standing beside a patchwork bison. A thinly drawn spear is held high above the figure's head.

"Him there. That's the father of my father's father. I shit you not," he tells him. Of course, this is said in the language of his own people.

And **BOOM!** Just like that. Immortality. It is just that simple. Ever since, man has continually sought to find more and better ways to get their drawings up on the cave wall, to record their story in a deeper and more persistent rock, so someone they never knew (and will never know) at some future date (which they will never live to see) will remember them. Honestly, do you really think we'd be talking about some Neolithic Frenchmen if they hadn't squeezed their lunch onto a wall those many years ago? I didn't think so.

And so, we find ourselves, again, picking away at those key elements of the immortality equation: an equation likely to remain beyond the reach of our run of the mill lives. Most of us will have no great story to tell. Most of us will never have an impressive title or name. Some of us might have a great story but have no ink to write it in. And if we manage to acquire one of the inquisitorial elements, we, by a simple application of statistics, will fail to acquire the others. As stated earlier, all parts are necessary. It is only when name and/or title reacts with a well-told story (a story carefully recorded on/in paper, canvas, or rock) do we acquire earthly permanence.

Fortunately, I am a writer. And while writers are among the most pathetic and degenerate of the human species, we have one advantage

over the rest of humanity in connecting with the infinite. Yes, it is true. Writers are not the kind of people who have great names, titles, or stories. However, we are blessed as the most incredible liars. Thusly, I don't need a name, title, or story to get my shot at immortality. Unlike readers, the unlucky lot you are a part of, I get to make up my own parts of the equation: $(N+T)S=I$ (pull them out of my ass, as it were). As for all of you poor creatures reading this, now, you are yesterday's news, table scraps, worm food. But, I am getting ahead of myself. If I am going to live forever, I need to get started. I need to get the lies rolling and keep 'em coming.

O.K. Let's start with a name, a label to carry me through decades of term papers, driver licenses, job titles, and social security checks. For, we are not truly alive (and never immortal) until we have a name. Hmm. Let's go with ____ _____. No wait. ____ T. _____. The "T" makes me sound more sophisticated and refined. It is plain and lacks imagination, but you understand, Lord Byron was already taken. ____ T. _____, author. Oooo, I like the sound of that. And, why not? Author is as good a title as any for someone as humble and unassuming as myself. And, what about this thesis? Just like the Homo sapiens, a tale is not truly a tale until it has a title (at least not one that can be easily marketed). I know. How about "Suckerfish?" Not great, but not bad for a stack of paper smeared with fruit juice. Anyway, *I* like the sound of it. It doesn't really mean anything, but it should have literature students guessing well into the next century. There. We have both a name and a title.

Gee. I'm feeling more permanent already. All we need now is a little story. And then, **BOOM!** Just like that. I shit you not.

The Smoke Along the Glass—The Boom Against the Door

An excerpt from *Invisible Escalators*

BEFORE SUNSET I managed to find a vacant campground turnoff at the end of a narrow dirt road. I flipped up the lid to the pack of cigarettes. Dumped out a pink lighter with the last of my dad's crop in the form of a joint. I opened the sun roof / lit up / leaned back in my chair; stars appearing through the darkening blue: Exhale. . . . The smoke spread out in every direction, enveloping along the glass: BOOM! A smack against the passenger door. I sat up in a fuck-it sort of daze. I figured I was busted. Then came another boom, trailing off into tiny knocks on the window. . . . An itsy-bitsy hand reached up behind the glass. I scrambled to extinguish the joint with the lighter when a little girl no older than eight climbed into the shotgun seat: Overalls. Pink T-shirt. A ponytail. Sandy blonde hair and full of smiles, she closed the door behind her....

—You don't haveta put it out, Mister, she said. My daddy smokes all the time.

—This isn't a cigarette, sweetheart, I said, stamping out a lingering trail of smoke.

—I know that, Mister. Daddy smokes marwanna all the time.

I slid the lighter and the last of my roach into the pack, then dropped it in the cup holder.

—You can call me Cleve, I said. But isn't your daddy gonna come looking for you?

—He's out with Mom. They go out dancing, she said, resting her feet on the dash.

—I'm not so sure if they'd—

—You can call me Cleopatra, she said.

—I mean, since I'm a stranger and all, and you're a little girl, your parents might—

—Actually call me Isabella, it's better don't you think? . . .

When she wasn't talking she was humming a song like there was no way I could hear her.

— I like both, Isabella. But I'm not so sure your parents would like you sitting in my truck.

— Oh they wouldn't care, silly. Sometimes I'm gone for days and they don't even notice.

My curiosity was escalating. — Really? You're gone for days? Where do you go for days?

— I've been lots of places. Been to Mexico, China, England. I've even been to outer space.

— Wow. You've been to space, huh?

— Yup. I've seen the moon, and the asteroids, and Jupiter. The red spot's my favorite. . . .

She turned her head up and around. She was wearing a yellow, cardboard crown with writing on it too small for my dry eyes to read. She pointed at a faint orange glow in the eastern sky.

— That's the one, right back over there. Kind of orange, it doesn't sparkle like a star.

— Oh yeah. Maybe next time you can show your mom and dad the red spot, I said.

— Well they're always dancing, you see. They're just so happy when they're dancing.

— Well they must be so happy to have a daughter like you, Cleopatra. I mean, Isabella.

— I'm not so sure about that, Mister. Believe you me, when they dance they're not at all the same. When they dance they're sooo in love. Like maybe they're only happy when they dance.

— Well maybe one day you could take them into space, and all three of you can dance.

She scooted up in her seat. Her little feet in her little pink shoes with glittery stickers on the toes fell off the dash towards the floorboard, where they dangled about, unable to touch. . .

— Oh that'd be lovely, she said. Do you think Daddy could carry me on his shoulders?

— Of course he could, and all three of you can just go floating through space together.

— I'd tell Daddy to spin me, and Mom too. And you know what would happen next?

— What would happen next?

— Mister, you must know what happens next.

— Tell me tell me, I said, a little surprised by my own excitement.

— Well we'd float. . . and we'd spin. . . and we'd dance. . . and then we'd explode!

– What do you mean, you’d explode? If I were you I’d never want the dance to end.

– But no one can dance forever, silly. And that’s what happens in space. Things explode.

Beneath her dangling shoes she noticed a little business card and nabbed it. Before I could think to stop her, she had ripped it up and scattered the pieces throughout the space between us.

– Just like that! We’d be a jillion tiny pieces mixed together, she said, beaming my way.

– Hey now, why would you do such a thing? I asked in a playful tone.

– ‘Cause that’s what we’d be, mixed together. A bajillion tiny pieces dancing together.

Her humming returned, infused with giggles, chopping the melody up into fragments.

– You’re very special, Isabella. Do you know that?

– Mister, I’ve always been told that no one’s really special. . . .

I looked around trying to locate all the pieces of the business card: inside cup holders, an ash tray, a coin tray, on the dash, between the seats, under the seats, blanketing an unlit gas light.

– Well I think you’re special. But don’t you think ripping that up was a little uncalled for?

– Well so is the sun! she said. The sun’s uncalled for, but some people worship the sun.

– Yeah well some people worship the devil, I said.

– Yeah but you can see the sun, silly.

– Yeah but –

– Hey Mister, what’s that on your arm?

Isabella leaned over and poked at a thin streak of dried blood wrapped around my elbow.

– Oh that’s nothing, I said, pointing to the sky. Hey look-it, all the stars are coming out.

She peered up and began to count the white sparkles, her index finger bobbing in the air.

– How many can you count, Isabella?

– Not many, but I love to count ‘em anyways. Hey Mister, which one are you from?

– Isabella you don’t have to call me Mister, I said.

– But which one are you from? she asked again. Try to guess if you’re not sure.

– I don’t know, maybe the bluish one just over that weird looking tree.

– The bluish one’s not a star, silly. That’s Venus. You know, the planet.

—Sorry I'm not a space traveling expert like you, Isabella.

—Actually call me Lyla.

—Okay. So which one are you from, Lyla?

—Oh I'm from lots of stars, she said. We all are.

—Who's we? I asked.

Lyla took off her crown, set it in her lap, turned towards me, but kept her eyes closed.

—We is everyone. All the people, the animals. Anything alive. That's why no one's special.

—Well maybe everyone's special, I said.

She opened her eyes. . . . Another burst of giggles, she even clapped a couple times. . . .

—But if everyone's special then no one's really special, the little Lyla / Isabella / Cleopatra concluded. . . . She brought her shoes back up to the dash, reclining in the chair, carefully counting the cosmos as it followed the sun into the empty westward expanse. . . . My red-hazel eyes and their heavy lids began to blur the girl, the dash, even my seat; the entire arrangement, blurred.

—I love *all* your names, Lyla. But I gotta ask, which name did your parents give you?

—Actually Mister, Mom and Dad haven't got a chance to name me yet, she said.

—Well what do they call you?

She put her crown back on: *The lull of her humming*. . . . My eyelids cut her off. . . .

—They don't actually call me. Even if they saw me, I doubt they'd even know it was me.

I nuzzled the back of my scalp into the headrest. —Why wouldn't they know?

—'Cause they've only seen me on the ultrasound, she said.

—On the ultrasound?

—Yep. See I haven't actually been born yet. Not this time around, anyway. My mom and daddy kept trying after having a baby boy, but something wasn't right. Something still isn't right.

—Then how are you here?

—Mister, since when do you gotta be born to be anywhere?

I laughed, drifting away. . . . —Point taken.

—Can you tell me a story about your parents? she asked.

—My parents? Why my parents?

—Or my parents. Whichever. Tell me more about their dancing.

—In space?

—Yeah, in space. . . .

The Good Life

The Nursery Rhyme CD starts up again for the third time today and my head continues to throb.

“Next time won’t you string with bees?” Hannah sings loudly.

“That’s not the words!” Timmy yells.

“Yes it is!” Hannah argues back. I look in the rearview mirror and see the two kids at it again. “Daddy, Timmy’s poking me!”

“Am not!”

“Timmy, stop poking your sister.” I say as I grip the steering wheel. I used to have a custom steering wheel on my Chevy. A fire truck red ‘88 Camaro. I used to drive Shirley all over town in that beauty. That was before we were married, of course, and that car could fly. Now I’m thirty-six years old and driving a pale green ‘97 Chevy Astro Van. Shirley said having a red car would attract cops. She’s right, I used most of my paychecks from Bob’s Big Boy to pay off speeding tickets, but man was it worth it.

A stuffed dinosaur hits me in the back of the head. “Who threw that?” I ask with my dad voice.

“Hannah did it.”

“No I didn’t.” Hannah replies, hitting Timmy in the process.

“What did I say about hitting?”

“He hit me first!”

“Did not!”

“Sit on your hands, both of you,” I say sternly. I watch them from the rearview mirror as they slowly obey.

I look at the grocery list that is attached to the dashboard. It sounded like a good idea at the time, but after Shirley informed me that I had to go to the grocery store, I almost regret telling her to go enjoy her Saturday at the spa with her friends. She deserves it though; she’s at home with the kids all day long. I don’t know how she does it. A day at the office is nothing compared to taking two kids under the age of eight to the market.

They are now trying to hit each other with their elbows.

“Don’t make me come back there.” I can’t believe I just said that, my dad used to say that all the time and I would just roll my eyes at him when he wasn’t looking. I look back – just to make sure they didn’t inherit that trait.

We arrive at the grocery store, and I take a deep breath. Even I know that nothing good can come from taking kids to the market. I help the kids out of the van and we walk into the store, but not before they beg to ride the mini-carrousel next to the entrance. I reply to their pleas, “If you’re good and behave while we’re here, then you can ride it when we’re done shopping.” They nod.

After arguing for five minutes about who gets to sit in the seat of the grocery cart, I put five year old Hannah in the seat and seven year old Timmy in the basket. I take out the list Shirley gave me before she left. “Only the necessities,” she said when she handed it to me this morning. I guess she didn’t think I could handle a real grocery list—she was probably right.

In college, my grocery list consisted of: frozen pizzas, lots of Dr. Pepper, plenty of Top Ramen, and a six pack of Bud Light I made my roommate buy me with his fake I.D. — only the necessities.

We walk into the familiar market. I stayed pretty close to home, even after college, Shirley and I thought this would be a perfect place to raise a family. To the left is the bakery, rolls and long baguettes line the counter. I take a number and wait for the baker to call me.

In high school some of my buddies and I used to steal long baguettes from this market and sword fight all the time. I did some crazy stuff back then.

The kids found the bakery to be so interesting that they beg me to let them out of the cart that I had just put them in. The instant I take them out, Hannah and Timmy felt it necessary to run past the baker and into the working area. The baker is nice about it though, he brought them back to the front and even gives the kids lollipops to quiet them down – which ends up on Timmy’s shorts and in Hannah’s hair.

After the bakery incident, we head towards the bank teller near the entrance of the market. Timmy wants to hold money, so I give him a dollar, which makes Hannah want one too. I stand in line holding my deposit slip while trying to keep the two quiet, I am successful until Timmy realizes the aisle separators come off and if you disconnect them and let go, they fly back to the other side. He thinks it’s hilarious, but

Hannah isn't amused, especially after she gets hit on the arm from the strap.

I pick her up and give Timmy a firm look. "Put your hands in your pockets and don't take them out until I say so."

Did I really just say that? And he listened? In my day, listening to authority wasn't even an option. I remember when my friends and I would ditch school. We would pile in my buddy's station wagon and speed past campus security. We would go to the beach to play some football and try to impress the girls with our tackling skills. That's actually how I met Shirley. She ditched her all-girls high school and I bought her a cone at the ice-cream stand on the boardwalk.

I finally get to the front of the line and the teller asks for the next customer. I walk up to her window and Timmy, with his hands out of his pockets, tugs on my shirt because he says it's not fair that Hannah gets to see and he doesn't. I put Hannah on the counter to the left of the window and do the same to Timmy on the right.

"Your children are just precious," the teller says as she makes my deposit. If she only knew the chaos I've been through today. Breakfast consisted of Cheerios being thrown clear across the kitchen because Hannah wanted Fruit Loops. Timmy came downstairs wearing his shirt inside out and his shoes on the wrong feet, and that was before I had my first cup of coffee.

I thank the bank teller as she finishes the transaction. I place the kids back into the grocery cart and head towards the lunch meat when Hannah realizes she no longer has her dollar bill and tries to take Timmy's, which results in getting her hair pulled by her older brother. I tell Timmy to once again put his hands in his pockets, and he does so, reluctantly. We almost make it to the lunch meat when Hannah informs me that she has to go to the bathroom.

"Why didn't you go when we were at home?"

She replies with, "I didn't have to go then."

After five minutes of trying to decide which bathroom I should take her into, a nice lady offers to make sure the women's restroom is clear so that I can go in with Hannah. It is a challenge, but I finally convince Timmy to come in with me and Hannah. Timmy and I stand outside the stall as Hannah takes care of business.

We once again head towards the lunch meat, which happens to be by the fruit. After several minutes of picking up apples off the floor which Timmy swears wasn't his fault and that he only touched them, I finally get

to the lunch meat. I have to get both turkey and bologna because Hannah will only eat bologna – she says it looks pretty.

Sophomore year of college I got a D on my final paper for Economics. My roommate agreed that it wasn't fair, so we found my professor's BMW the next day and put bologna on his car and let it bake in the sun all day. I didn't get to see his reaction, but every morning after, I passed by the polk-a-dot Beemer, and smile.

Next is yogurt. I get two kinds of yogurt because Timmy doesn't like the yogurt with the pieces of fruit in it; he says it freaks him out. I head over to the frozen food aisle where the two decide they have had enough of the basket and want out. I take out Hannah, then Timmy. Before I can put Timmy down, Hannah has managed to get stuck in the freezer with popsicles. Timmy stands and laughs as I rush over to Hannah. I try to use my dad voice to get her out, but she refuses to come out of the freezer unless I agree to buy her a box of Push Ups, she gets her way.

After the freezer incident, I make the two hold the basket as they walk, and I push. Next on the list is sandwich bread. I let the kids choose which one they want, we end up with bagels.

I get to the next aisle where I am bombarded with pleas for a chocolate bar. I refuse, saying that they already had a lollipop today. They continue to beg and I reply, "I said no and that means no." They immediately stop their pleas and fold their arms with an angry expression on both their faces. I gave that same face to my dad when I didn't get my way.

An older woman passes by with her cart and says, "You look tired," with a slight grin. I look at her for a moment and just nod in agreement.

Senior year of college I would get up before the sun rose and head over to the beach to hit the waves before my first class. After class, I worked in the bookstore and at night I partied until I couldn't feel my feet. Then I would wake up and do it all over again, and not once did anybody say I looked tired.

I walk down the aisle and look over my list and the food in the cart. Fruit snacks and potato chips cover the yogurt I had gotten earlier. I'm not sure who put them in the cart, but I have a feeling it was a group effort. I let it slide; it has been a long day.

Timmy and Hannah start poking each other.

"Hey guys knock it off, Daddy has a headache," I say as I rub my forehead. Did I just refer to myself in third person?

They stop for a moment and start to poke one another once again

when they think I'm not looking.

"Okay, that's it, no carousel ride for either of you," I say firmly. They immediately stop and look right at me. I avoid making eye contact with their distressed eyes and drooping lips, I won't let their sad faces crack me, I won't. I invented that face, and my dad always bought it, I won't let them break me.

"But Daddy, it was Timmy, I wasn't even doing anything!" Hannah argues.

"Naw-aw she poked me first!" Timmy argues back.

"That's enough from both of you! Daddy has a big headache and your arguing is not helping." They both drop their heads and sit in the basket in silence as I push the cart down the last few aisles.

I turn towards the paper products and Timmy quietly asks if he can get out and walk. I oblige. He holds onto the basket as I look carefully at numerous types of toilet paper: Absorbent, super absorbent, strong and tough. Shirley didn't put down what kind she wanted. I decide to pick the one that is on sale. They are at the bottom and of course they are shoved in the back of the shelf.

A few of my buddies and I decided to teepee our neighbor's house. Immature, sure, but Saturday nights hanging out with Jack Daniels and Captain Morgan, immature ideas come to mind. We used a general brand, that way when the sprinklers went off, it would get all wet and tear apart easily. It took all morning for them to clean it up, we watched from our living room window.

I turn towards the basket and shove the twenty-four pack of soft and strong toilet paper into the bottom of the cart. As I am crouched down, I realize there are no seven year old legs on the other side. I stand up quickly and see that Timmy is no longer holding on to the basket, nor is he anywhere in the aisle.

"Hannah where is your brother?" I say, with a slightly nervous voice. She responds with a shrug as she eats the animal crackers she opened when I wasn't looking. I grab hold of the basket handle and walk quickly to the end of the aisle. I go down baking supplies, bread, the cereal aisle and even the women's products aisle, just in case, nowhere, he is nowhere. My palms start to sweat and they slip off the basket handles repeatedly.

"Daddy you are going too fast," Hannah says as she grips the basket.

"Sorry honey, but we have to find your brother," I say as I head

towards the candy aisle. Nothing. Beads of sweat begin to form on my forehead, and I can feel my pits moisten as I continue down the aisles.

In college my roommate's pet tarantula got out of its cage and we couldn't find it for three days. I slept with one eye open every one of those three days. It was the scariest time of my life. I would give anything to be back in that situation. I didn't realize I could be more scared than when I was lying in bed listening for eight legs crawling toward me.

I speed down the condiments aisle as people look at me curiously. I would ask for help, but I don't want any psychos knowing that there is a seven year old boy alone in the market.

I am now jogging through the frozen food aisles, and checking the freezers, just in case he felt the need to repeat his sister's actions, nothing. The last aisle is beverages, cans and bottles fill either side of me, but no Timmy. My eyes begin to water slightly, I can't believe I let this happen, I should have just let them ride the carousel, why didn't I just let them ride the carousel, or let him have that candy bar, it was just one candy bar. What kind of father am I?

"Daddy, is Timmy lost?" Hannah asks as she sits quietly in the cart. I look down at her with a tear rolling down my left cheek. I wipe it away quickly and kiss the top of her forehead. I look up to continue my search. I see the pharmacy and a little boy at the counter talking with the pharmacist—Timmy.

I rush towards Timmy, get down on my knees and give him the strongest hug I've ever given in my life. I pull away and stare into his big green eyes. "Why did you leave Daddy, Timmy? Why did you leave without telling me?" I ask anxiously as I give him another bear hug and pick him up.

"For medicine," he replies calmly.

"Medicine, why do you need medicine?" I ask.

"Sorry to interrupt," the pharmacist says as he holds a box of Advil, "Your son said his dad had a headache and wanted to know what medicine would make him feel better."

I stare at the medicine box for a moment, and then back at Timmy. "You left to get me medicine, Timmy?"

"I wanted you to get better."

I give him another hug and reply, "I'm better Timmy, I'm better now." Timmy smiles and this time he gives me a big hug. I put him back in the basket with his sister and turn towards the pharmacist.

"Sorry about that," I say.

"Don't worry about it, you still interested in the Advil?" he replies. I look back at the kids, who have started poking each other once again.

"Sure, I'll take it."

He rings me up and I pass him my credit card, "Jeff, Jeff Anderson?" he says as he looks over my card.

"Yes?"

"It's me, Frank Mitchell, from high school, remember, I had the party wagon. Beach or bust."

"Oh Frank Mitchell, how are you man?" I say as I shake his hand.

"I'm good, just got a house over in the hills, and my wife just made partner at the law firm."

"That's great, congrats man."

"Thanks," Frank says as he gives me a confused look, I turn and catch a glimpse of myself on the mirror behind counter. My sweating has left stains on my shirt and my hair is no where near what it was when I left this morning. "So what about you Jeff, how's life?" he asks.

I pause for a moment and look back at my kids poking each other. Hannah has crumbs all over her shirt from the animal crackers, and her blonde braid has turned into a knotted mess. Timmy has green stains on his white shirt; I don't even remember him eating anything green today.

I turn back to Frank, smile, and reply, "Good, life is good." He hands me the receipt and I take my purchase back to the basket. "See you around, Frank," I say as I take the handle of the basket once more.

"Daddy, can we go on the carrousel now?" Hannah asks as she pushes her hair out of her face. I look down at their smiling faces. "Sure you can go on the carrousel," I say as I head towards the check-out.

Untitled: Impermanent Title

I. A shopping cart will under force of nothing but its own will push itself away from the other shopping carts and will roll towards the parking lot, away from its kin and wildly roll in front of your car as you drive between its origin and its destination. Not wanting to run into the wild cart you slow down so that it will pass in front of you yet its path is unknown, but you do not want to stop or turn around so you take the course least likely to encounter the path of the cart. It then turns and parallels you, so that you are following along side it at roughly the same speed. Then you realize you must turn left, and in doing so one of you must occupy the space the other wants to occupy. So you speed up and it remains its same speed, slower now than you are driving. You must turn left now, but you have gained a few yards on it and quickly turn left so that it crosses the space you just drove through but is now behind you. In your rearview mirror you see it stop once it hits the curb of the small island of shrubbery next to the handicapped parking spaces and it comes to a sudden yet peaceful stop, not bouncing off the curb or flying up over it, but stopping.

II. He stood a few feet away from her. For a moment he imagined his old former self, standing there by her old former self, although he had just met her. He reflected on how he once was, a geek with frizzy hair, lugging a heavy trombone case in one hand and a duffle bag with his marching band uniform in the other, sweating and struggling. He often ran across campus, always running late, panting as his oversized glasses slid down his greasy nose.

He glanced at his reflection in his car door window, and pushed his shaggy bangs away from his forehead. He had an expensive hipster haircut, messy on purpose but in a nonchalant way. He had invested much of his money in his appearance, trips to the dermatologist for acne scar resurfacing, hours with a personal trainer at the gym and personal shopper at Nordstrom. He drew his pea coat closed to warm himself in the biting night air.

"I can't believe I told you I was a fat dork in high school," he said, taking a drag. The only warmth over his whole body was the burning tip of his cigarette, radiating across the tips of his fingers, like a beacon of light on a dark sea.

"It's ok, my former dork self would have still gone out with you back then," she said.

"Then I guess it's better this way, right?" he asked her.

"I don't know what you mean," she said. He thought, I wouldn't be good enough for you now.

"Because now we're stronger for it. Things could only have only gotten better after high school," he said, and took one step closer to her.

He smelled the wine on her breath as her slightly crooked smile grew, and studied the way her eyelids softly and slowly lowered as she blinked. He flicked his cigarette butt over her shoulder and took the final step to stand face to face with her. He could now feel her body's warmth as he turned her back to the side of his car and leaned against her. Pressing his lips onto hers he grabbed the back of her head with one hand, wrapping his fingers around a few strands of hair. He put his other hand on her hip which was pinned to the cold steel by his groin. He pulled his face away from hers but she tried to pull him back towards her.

"We should go," he said as he pulled his keys from his pocket to open her door.

III. "Welcome to Del Taco would you like to try our Spicy Jack Quesadilla?" said the crackly tin box.

"My girl wove six dozen plaid jackets before she quit," was the reply.

"I'm sorry could you repeat that?"

"My faxed joke won a pager in the cable TV quiz show."

"Sir, can you speak up more into the box, I can't hear you. Did you say quesadilla?" The metal speaker increased its nasally tone.

"Sex-charged fop blew my junk TV quiz!"

"Ok, sir, please exit the drive thru, there are customers waiting, thank you!"

"I can only speak in fixed zany pangrams, quoth loveable jokester," he said with a laugh.

"Tangrams? Shape puzzles? Please stop wasting my time, sir, drive through." She looked up at the CCTV monitor over the cash register with a groan.

“Sir, it is against our policy to enter the drive through if you are not in a motor vehicle, please exit now for your safety and the safety of the customers behind you.”

“I think he said ‘pangrams,’ Puh, not Tuh?” said the other Del Taco employee, who had ceased scooping fries from under the heat lamp to watch his frustrated colleague.

“No, sir, not OK please exit the lane before I am forced to alert local police.”

The other employee threw down his metal fry scoop and walked around the counter to prevent further annoyance by the man in the drive-thru.

IV. Burnt popcorn. The microwave stunk from it for months after she fucked up by setting it for too long and walking away instead of checking on it before the kernels burned and black smoke came pouring out of the bag as she flung it into the sink as the paper bag smoldered and the smoke detector screeched. She told me to get out of the living room so she and her boyfriend could watch their rented movie. Go read your stupid book somewhere else kid she said. I was here first I said. Well go to your empty little room and read your stupid books and stop bugging us she said. Stop trying to be cool in front of your boyfriend I said. You’re a jealous little brat she said. You’re a vapid little tart I said. Those are fancy words for a snot nosed kid she said. They’re only fancy to you because you don’t know what they mean I said. Because you spend all your time looking in the mirror in the bathroom with your eyes squinted to see what you look like when you make out with boys I said. Maybe you should read a stupid book sometime I said. You stupid pig nosed bitch she said. Then she snatched my book and tore the front cover off it and her boyfriend laughed. What did you do that for I said. Maybe if you ever stop filling that empty head of yours with silly books a boy would want to kiss you she said. Then I picked up the TV remote and threw it at her face. My head’s not empty yours is I said. It hit her cheekbone and her boyfriend said hey. She ran at me but Mom came in the room and yelled what’s burning. They went to the kitchen and the popcorn smell was coming in the whole house and I ran out the front door before Mom would ask what happened to her face. I got down the street and to the parking lot of the supermarket when I saw no one was chasing me. I sat on the block wall next to the gas station for a long time until Mom came looking for me. When she took me back to the house it still stunk.

V. When we started hanging out there the only thing next to Starbucks open past 7 was a Coco's which was usually cleared out by 6 anyway, after the senior citizen dinner special. The rest of the place was pretty empty, and we'd sit for hours getting 50 cent refills of coffee until it was time to go home. The only tables in front of the Starbucks were full of smokers and bums playing checkers, so we were relegated to the far corner of the lot. Those cement planks at the front of parking spots were never comfortable to sit on, but after a few hours of standing next to one they start to look appealing. I used to put eight or nine sugar packets in my coffee to get rid of the acrid taste, but after each swig the sugar would coat my mouth and teeth creating a slimy, sickly layer that was worse in the last inch or so of the cup. Sometimes the heavy melted crystals would mix with a few crunchy coffee grinds and spoil the last sip entirely. I hated coffee, but without it I had no reason to sit there on the hard cement plank and try to talk to her.

Once the frozen yogurt shop replaced the cell phone store I tried switching from coffee to chocolate yogurt, but one of my friends called me a fat and she laughed. I laughed along with him. Sure, I said, it's fat-free, because I'm watching my figure. I never got a yogurt after that.

A month later the Coco's closed after rat infestation was shown on the local news, and it was gutted and turned into several take-out places. Our former resting places were filled with minivans of screaming families going to get Chinese food and college kids going to the pizza place. Watching fights over parking spots replaced our typical conversations. Slowly people stopped coming to hang out. I asked her out on a date finally and she said yes, and I had no idea where to take her so we went for coffee. She wanted to get frozen yogurt, because she didn't like coffee, and told me she wouldn't make fun of me if I got one too.

Hunting Bears

A gunshot cracked, sending a flock of birds into noisy panicked flight. Frantic flapping muffled a child's scream. The man dropped his gun, clutching his stomach. As he lay, he looked down at the blood in his hands. For a moment everything glowed; his eyes blurred; the hair on the top of his head ached, sensitive to the breeze. Squirming as the bile seared from his stomach.

"I've been shot," he said to the apparition running towards him. It was a boy. "I've been shot," he said, believing it. "Did you see them? Did you see anyone?"

The boy looked around, over his shoulder looking, *hoping*, "No one." The father seized, looking through the trees, "Where did you come from? I'm all turned around."

"I was back at camp," the boy avoiding his father's green eyes, he looked at the stain seeping through his shirt. "Pa, you need to tie that up." His father's hands were shaking, ghostly white. "Pa?"

His father blinked hard, trying to focus. He looked up at his son. "Orson, help me with this." He leaned forward trying to relax his shoulders and the boy helped slip off the duster. Then the man grabbed the Bowie knife carried heavily on his hip and offered it to his son. "Now, I need you to cut me a long strip so I can tie this off."

The jacket weighed heavy in the boys hand. He looked at the knife.

"Okay well, I'll do it, but I need you to keep pressure on my stomach, you hear?"

Orson knelt down, and cupped both hands on his father's stomach. He closed his eyes and looked away. The blood warmed his hands, as they rose and fell with each short breath.

"That's right, don't be 'fraid to press hard."

The boy leaned with all his weight, but was more afraid of the red on his hands. His father took the knife, tearing a thick strip lengthwise. He dropped the knife and coat and leaned forward, tying the strip tight around his belly.

Orson helped his dad pick himself up off the ground. He held his

hand tight and started pulling him forward. "Hold on. Grab that. They could still be out here."

The boy looked down at the gun. There was no one, they were alone. He reluctantly picked it up. "Pa, what about camp?"

The father slouched in pain but kept pace, his arm covering his side. "Leave it. We need to get on. I need a doctor."

The boy grabbed his father's hand and they began their climb. Orson held on as best as he could, but while evading the roots and branches he could feel that soft hand weakening. He was losing him. Orson's tiny grip had only the ends of the middle three fingers. He concentrated on the sound of his lungs grinding together, preventing the vacuity of the moment.

"Orson. Stop," His father yelped in between breaths, leaning against a pine.

The boy looked at him, desperate. "We have to keep going. We're almost over it." He held the gun by the barrel, not able to shoot anymore.

"I just need a rest."

"Pa."

"We'll get on. But I can't make it like this. I need you to find me a branch, a thick one. My damned knee, it's giving me hell."

The boy's head darted from tree to tree. He dropped the unneeded gun, and looked for a suitable branch. His father was a large man, but soft and shapeless. During long treks he would walk with a limp. He had hurt his leg in the war. He was from Boone's Lick Country, Missouri, which had been a border state in the war.

His own family split between sides, he had chosen the Union, having been closest to his grandfather on his mother's side. He was raised by his pappy, whose whereabouts were in Illinois. The brutal warfare ripped apart his home state, along with some of his right knee. Among other things. He had been discharged from the army and moved to Columbus, working mostly in small stores as a counterman, lonely.

Orson knocked on the branches of a dead tree. They hadn't decayed yet and he used both feet to snap it off. *This should do.* He held the heavy branch up, it reached over his head.

He found his pa readjusting the tie-off around his waist, sitting under a tree. Some blood escaped through his shirt. The boy was afraid to approach, pretending he didn't see. His father looked up. "What you got there?" he said through a weak smile. He reached out and grabbed the

branch. "This'll do. Alright now, help me up." The boy bore as much weight as he could, but most was up to his father to hold. The responsibility caused the boys knees to buckle.

His father stood, his eyes looking long at the trail above. He pulled the stick under his right arm, putting his weight down. "Let's climb us a mountain."

The two climbed. Orson reined at his want to hurry off ahead, his father moved at a difficult pace to keep back with. He felt helpless. He looked back to see the pain on his father's face, the boy walked back, slipping himself under the giant left arm. He put his arm around his fathers back and together they climbed.

Blood shown through the tourniquet; the boy pushed his father's back. Each step was labored, but it was his burden to bear.

They reached the peak, the valley stretching before them. The few buildings of town could barely be seen through the thicket. Orson looked up at his father, his eyes knowing the long distance ahead. He licked his dry lips, wiping a whiskerless chin. Then, looked back at the boy, nodding, and began their descent.

The descent carried them, the crutch caught up in the soil, holding them back, so he released it from under his arm. The father and son moved easier now. Gravity grabbed them, pulled them towards the plains. Orson had to do everything he could not to trip under the weight which was bearing down on him, making it difficult not to go too fast.

The strip of coat around his father's waist was a deep red now. Drips of blood shot past as he poured down the hill. The boy struggled to keep his footing. It was all he could do.

The father just let gravity do the work. His feet moved on their own. He hardly noticed the green rushing past him. Nothing registered, nothing made sense. The sun flashed through the trees, blinding his blindness even further. His legs were numb, but he felt himself moving.

Then the bottom dropped out. His foot tripped up in the roots and the chaos, he fell. The boy, caught under the pressure of his flailing father, dropped to the ground. The two tumbled downward. The bushes and tree branches attacked them as they fell. Orson lost sight of his father as the world spun around him, he cried for it to stop. His back twisted as he clipped a tree trunk, knocking the wind of him. Gasping for air as he slammed against a large trunk, stopped. The world still spun around him. Able to grab the pine, he pulled himself up.

Orson gathered his breath and looked at his arms, scraped and scorching. He listened hard for the sound of his father. He could hear nothing but the sound of the trees and the wind and the wind against the trees. He let out a scream, "Pa! Are you there? Pa!" Nothing. Where was he? Was he still falling? He listened again, it was quiet. He looked up the direction he had come, burning to see between he trees. It was all his fault, he could never forgive himself.

He ran around aimlessly in a panic. Sometimes calling out when he could remember to through all of the thoughts and the guilt clouding his head. Maybe I can make it to town, to get help. The thought of just leaving his father made him surge with anger. His little white knuckles hitting his knees. And then he saw something low through the trees, moving. He ran to it, not afraid of what he would find, even a bear.

"Pa! Pa! You alright?"

His father was crawling on his stomach, head first down the mountain. He turned over to look at the boy, his nose and mouth leaking with blood. "Orson. Orson, listen—"

"Pa, get up we've got to get on."

"Orson—"

"Get up. We're close, real close to the bottom."

"Boy, I ain't getting up...my leg...." He pulled up his torn pant legging, exposing the cold, white bone protruding from his shin.

Tears covered Orson's face. "I can do it. I can get someone, I can make it down. You just have to stay right here, I know where you are."

"Good, you go down into town, but you have to know son, I'm not going to be here when you get back. I'm not going to be for much longer." He gripped the blood-soaked jacket and squeezed it lamely, the blood bled through his fingers.

"Pa you don't know that, you just don't."

"Of course I do. It's comin' for me and I ain't going to make it for much longer." The boy came up and hugged his father, he cried hard into his breast. "Orson, I need you to understand something. So you need to listen up. Can you do that for me?"

The boy looked up at his father, barely able to make eye contact. He nodded his head, wiping his upper lip with his hand.

"You need to understand something about where you come from. Now I know I told you about your mother. She died giving birth—and that's true. I raised you as good as I knew how. I'm your Pa. But you're not my blood—"

The boy looked at his father's eyes. Shaking the sound from his head, "What?"

"I, I raised you like my own, but I didn't father you. I couldn't have. I know this ain't easy to hear, but it's what you got to know. Your Ma, now I loved her, I loved that woman, but I wasn't the only man who did. Things ain't easy here, 'specially on a woman. She did what she had to do to get by. But when she died I took you on to raise you." He tried to close his eyes to keep the tears from coming, but he couldn't stop what was coming. "It's just something you have to know, I didn't plan on telling you 'til you were old, but there's just no time....Now, you need to know that I'll always be your Pa, but truth is holy. Remember that, you can't go through life living a lie."

The words lingered. The boy looked at the being beneath him, covered in blood. Orson opened his mouth, unable to speak.

The figure watched the boy, laboring to absorb the sight. "You need to get down that mountain, and find someone in town—they'll know what to do."

The boy sat still. Then he grabbed his Pa, entirely, the man patted him on the back. He looked up at his eyes for the last time, the man nodded through tears and lightheadedness.

The boy made off back to town. The man lowered his head back to the soil, looking up at the wisps of cloud through the trees. The boy reached the plains. With gravity no longer pulling him down, pain finally caught up to him. He looked at his arms, covered in scrapes and little cuts. He made his way through the trees and saw the blood on his shirt. Pa's blood. He touched it, his fingers covered. A fury poured over him. He painted his palm and looked at his red hand. Orson held out his arm, the cuts drying, scabbing over. He scratched at his arm, holding it deep into his cuts. He held it there, afraid to let go.

#

The Priest sat in the confessional box, as the church door slammed open. The sound of panic echoed towards the box. The priest opened the window to the confessional. But his own door was thrown open, it was a boy. He was wild, covered in blood, his face swollen with tears. The Priest sat there frozen, shaking himself out of it, "My son, what has happened?"

And the boy climbed into the box, holding the Priest, sobbing. Into his cloak he professed, "Father...my father...we was hunting, hunting bears..."

James

I came to the Yuba in search of my brother. Mama and Papa had gone months before, slowly and carefully retracing his steps. "Go look for him," they told me. "You must see for yourself." But I didn't look. Instead I moved to a city far away from the Yuba. But even at that great distance, my dreams carried me back to the river. That was why I came to the Yuba.

The path I took was guided by my brother's footprints, which now carried the imprint of Mama and Papa's steps also. They led me to a narrow mountain road, one side a wall of rock, the other a straight drop into the abyss. Cedars and pines towered overhead, filtering the fading sunlight. The road snaked right and left, twisting down, down deeper into the wilderness.

When I reached a wooden bridge, made of rotting planks tied with rope, I lost sight of their tracks. They had been trampled by others, making a tangled web so that I could no longer even tell which were mine.

"Something terrible has happened."

Crossing one foot in front of the other, like walking the plank, I moved forward. The bridge wobbled, rocking me side to side.

Cupping my hands around my mouth I shouted his name, "James! James!"

The riverbed replied: "...ames...ames"

This forest is filled with echoes, as though they were trapped in the caves, or carried by the wind. At dusk the light casts lengthening shadows, growing in the distance, making the trees appear more than they may be. You hear rustlings, and murmuring. The earth trembles, like fists pounding deep beneath the ground.

"All I want is to go back where I came from."

All the roads are grown over.

"Don't you hear me?" I cried.

And his voice surrounded me. "Where are you?"

"I'm here. Don't you see me?"

It grew fainter.

"I don't see you."

Three Lives Moving Toward a Disappearing Center

I

A junior associate at a tax firm has to be at a mandatory staff meeting at 6:30 P.M. It is now 6:00 P.M. He lives 15 minutes away from work. This gives him 15 minutes to decide what to wear before he has to leave his apartment. Normal office dress code does not apply to this meeting because it is being held after hours. The meeting's goal is to introduce the newly hired tax consultants and explain the integral role they will be playing in the company's administrative restructuring. The man does not care about the new staff members. What he cares about are his clothes.

The man rules out jeans because the company lacks a casual Friday policy. He then chooses between dress slacks and a more casual pair of khakis. If he chooses the slacks, it means he'll have to put on a dress shirt and dress shoes, neither of which he is eager to wear. Plus, the dress shirt introduces the possibility of a tie, which he is also in no hurry to put on. If he wears the khakis, it would clash with his formal dress shirt. He would have to wear a polo shirt instead. But, a polo shirt is too casual. Or is it? Khakis require a less formal shoe than his dress shoes, but not a tennis shoe. He has a pair of black shoes, but they are thick soled and look more like workman shoes. The man wishes he had a third, more appropriate pair of shoes. He doesn't know the name for them, but something along the lines of a relaxed loafer. Something made out of leather, but not patent.

The man looks at his watch and realizes he now only has ten minutes to get to the meeting. He wasted 20 minutes deciding what to wear and still has not reached a solution. He looks over the possibilities hanging in his closet with hurried consideration. The man decides that he will take a chance with his thick soled workman style shoes. This means he has to wear the khakis because the clean lines of the slacks would clash with the monumental bulk of the work shoes. With pants and shoes picked out, he only needs to pick a shirt. A new player comes into the game; a short

sleeved, formal shirt. It is not a dress shirt, but it is made of a smooth, synthetic material and has a sensible vertical stripe pattern. The man feels, stylistically, it fits his ensemble perfectly, but is unsure of whether such an outfit is appropriate for the meeting. He considers wearing the dress shirt with the khakis but, again, is unsure of whether a formal shirt and relaxed pants would be too incongruous a pairing. And, if he wears a tie, would that only further accentuate the disparity in style or compensate for the lack of formal pants? The man decides the most reasonable decision is to wear the long sleeved dress shirt with no tie and hope no one notices. He takes the clothes off their hangers and dresses himself with maximum efficiency. The man rushes out of his apartment and into his car. With seven minutes left to get to his office, the man prepares himself for the very distinct possibility of being late to the meeting.

He needs to get all green lights and speed faster than normal to make it on time. As his car peeks out of the driveway the man sees a thick line of cars rushing toward him from his left. There is no way he can make the right hand turn he desperately needs. He waits, staring at the distant signal to his left hoping his piercing gaze will change the light from green to red. This tactic proves ineffective. He looks in his rearview mirror and sees a car behind him. The man shakes his head from left to right; arms flapping. He hopes the other driver will notice and they can both, together, be annoyed by the immense amount of traffic on the road. This tactic also fails.

The man returns his attention to the street and takes advantage of a break in traffic by swerving out into the right hand lane. He speeds by several slower cars and gets the green light on two signals. He hits a red light, but it is short. An attractive young woman in a short skirt crosses the street while he waits. She is wearing a hooded sweatshirt which hides her face from his view. The man bangs on his steering wheel impatiently. The light turns green, the girl reaches her intended corner, and the man pushes his car's speedometer well into the 40's, occasionally cresting into the low 50's. A couple turns later and the man is almost to the office. He checks his watch; only two minutes late. Not bad, he thinks. He is two blocks away from the office; he can see the parking garage looming on his right. A car from the left lane cuts in front of him. He pushes hard on the brakes and honks. The car in front of him keeps a steady 30 MPH pace; insufferable to the man. He wants to go around the car, but the left lane

is packed; there is no chance he will make it in. The car in front of him has its right blinker on. It flickers for half a block before the car turns into a driveway. The man speeds on, not even bothering to flip off the driver.

One block to go. He can see the parking lot attendant sitting at the gate. A check of the time; he is eight minutes late. The man is sweating now and is conscious of his state. His self consciousness makes him sweat more. He worries that the sweat will show through the dress shirt. He regrets not wearing the polo shirt. The man is also concerned that his seat belt has wrinkled both his pants and shirt. He sweats more, becomes self conscious again and sweats even more. The man is not soaked, but he can feel the sweat seep through his shirt.

As the man turns into his office's driveway he nearly hits the small, mechanical arm that begins to rise as he pulls the parking ticket from the machine. He is fortunate and finds a parking space on the first level. If not for the after hours meeting time, this would not have been possible. The man walks at a brisk pace from his car to the office building.

The meeting is to be held in the first floor conference room. The man walks into the lobby, smooths out his clothes, checks armpits for wetness, and moves toward the conference room on the left. He is now ten minutes late. As he opens the door he can't remember looking at the small placard on the wall; whether it said conference room or not. He thinks it's the right room; he's been inside it before, but now, under these circumstances, he is not sure. He is also concerned he opened the door with too much speed and force and will bring unnecessary attention to himself upon entering the meeting. This attention will, in turn, lead people to stare at him and notice his sweaty armpits.

As the man peeks inside, he sees a group of men and woman sitting around a table. They are in full office attire. No one looks familiar. He thinks, perhaps, he is in the wrong conference room. Many thoughts go through his head. Do I ask someone? Do I walk in? Do I close the door and leave? Do I go look for the receptionist in the lobby and ask her what's going on? He sees the side of a woman's head inside the conference room. He recognizes her. He whispers to her, "Excuse me." After his third attempt she hears him. "Is this the staff meeting meet and greet thing?" he asks. She gives a reply, but the man is too nervous to listen. All he notices is the woman's large ears. Her hair is pulled back and her face is long and narrow; shaped like a foot. The man never noticed this before, but is entranced with it now. The pearl earrings the woman is wearing

only accentuate her ears' size. He asks her if the boss is in the room. She shrugs. Others in the room begin to look in his direction. The man does not want the attention. He closes the door. He is both late and in poor fashion. One would be acceptable, but not both. The man decides to skip the meeting entirely. He leaves the office building and walks back to his car. While driving home he thinks of excuses to tell his boss the following morning. Nothing believable comes to mind.

II

A girl is at a party in her friend's apartment. She is sitting on a couch next to a boy. She leans in to kiss him. As her mouth moves closer to his she begins to notice a small black line tracing the edge of his lips. The line is made up of Oreo crumbs. The girl hesitates and slows her movement toward the boy's mouth. She stares at the crumbs and then notices the small, thin hairs growing on his upper lip, the pimple in the middle of his chin, and the slight flare of his nostrils every time he breathes. The boy is no longer a person the girl wants to kiss, but it is too late. They have both leaned in too far. She can not back away. Her eyes close just as their lips meet. The last thing she notices before the kiss is the size of the pores on the boy's nose. They are large and clogged.

The girl pulls away after the kiss. She tries to move at what she considers a normal rate of speed. She does not want to move too fast and cause alarm; provoke conversation; be around the boy longer than necessary. After her lips make an adequate retreat the girl tells the boy she has to go; has to meet someone for a movie. He insists they exchange numbers. She agrees; anything to get out of the room. The girl hugs the boy and heads toward the door. She does not see her friend as she exits. She does not say goodbye to her. The girl's only thought is getting to her car. She can see it as she walks down the stairs from her friend's second story apartment. Although only across the street, the girl thinks she parked her car too far away. It is cold outside, she regrets wearing a skirt. She zips up her hooded sweatshirt and walks to the corner.

The "Don't Walk" sign is alit. She lifts the sweatshirt's hood over her head. As she does this she remembers the sweatshirt is not hers. It is the boy's, the one she kissed. She thinks about going back and returning it to him. The "Walk" sign flashes green and she begins to cross the street. She is too close to her car to go back now. Halfway across the street the girl notices a man sitting in his car waiting for the signal to change. The car's

headlights and dirty windshield obscure the details of the man's face, but she feels there is something familiar about him. She watches him watching her as she crosses the street. He is banging on his steering wheel. The girl pulls on the drawstrings of her hood and continues crossing the street, now with greater speed.

The girl gets in her car, starts the engine and turns her left blinker on. The traffic shows little signs of letting up. The man who stared at her whirs past in his car. She waits for the signal to turn back to red. It does and she makes her way out onto the street. The girl is unfamiliar with this part of town and drives for several blocks unsure of her direction. She stops at a signal. The street name looks familiar to her, she turns onto it. She continues on this new street for a few blocks. The buildings look like the ones she passed on the way to the party. She feels reassured, confident in her new route.

A new intersection comes to pass. This name of the cross street also looks familiar. It is a street she passes when she goes to work, but pays little attention to, has no memory of. The office building where she works as an aide is only several blocks away. They are having an after-hours meeting. She knows nothing of the meeting or her close proximity to work. Photocopies and pie charts do not interest her. All the girl wants to do is go home. She turns onto the familiar sounding street. The buildings no longer resemble the ones she passed earlier. A mistake has been made. The girl thinks about making a U-turn, but there is too much traffic. She continues down the street unsure of where it will take her. She looks in her rearview mirror. The man who stared at her when she crossed the street is in the right hand lane and coming on fast. He is still pounding on his steering wheel. The girl returns her eyes to the road and sees a sign for a fast food joint two blocks ahead. If nothing else, she thinks, I could get a burger.

As she nears the burger place she swerves over to the right lane, cutting off the man who had stared at her earlier. The man honks and tailgates her. The girl drives at a slow speed, not wanting to miss her turn. When she sees the small, red and yellow "Drive-Thru" sign, the girl turns into the driveway. The man in the car behind her continues racing down the street. The girl expects a honk, but hears none.

The drive-thru line is long; at least four cars in length. The girl takes the time to look at herself in the mirror. The car's vanity mirror is small, but it is enough. She looks at her lips; rubs her fingers across them and

brushes off any Oreo crumbs. Her lips are dry. She searches through her purse for lip gloss, but can not find any. The girl returns to looking at herself in the mirror. There is a small piece of loose skin on the lower left corner of her bottom lip. She tugs at it; it begins to peel, but breaks midway across her lip. There is a stinging sensation. The girl picks up where she left off; peeling off the remaining layer of skin. Her whole lips burns as she purses them together. The lower one turns scarlet; blood is beading at the surface. She doesn't have tissues so she dabs at her lip with her hand. The blood is warm against her skin. The girl pulls the hood of her sweatshirt off her head. Her hair is frizzy and tangled. The girl smoothes her hair with her hands and thinks about what to do with the sweatshirt. In order to give it back to the boy, she would need to call him, which she doesn't want to do. She would also have to meet with him; another option she hopes will not arise. He might also call her. She would force herself to answer for the sake of the sweatshirt. The girl also considers keeping the sweatshirt and never talking to the boy again. But, because they exchanged numbers, contact seems inevitable.

A car behind her in line honks. The girl looks up and sees the line has moved. She pulls forward and stops in front of the menu/intercom. She is distracted and no longer craves food, especially with a bleeding lip. The girl looks behind her. There is no way to back out of the line. Not knowing what to order, she asks for a cup of ice. She thinks the ice will do her lip some good. The girl does not pay attention to the attendant's reply. The only words she hears are, "...second window, please." She pulls up to the window and waits. The attendant looks at the girl. The girl looks back at the attendant. They remain quiet and do not attempt to exchange words through the glass. The girl hears an airplane fly overhead. She looks up, but her view is obstructed by the building's overhang. The girl remembers how, as a child, she would lie in bed and count the planes that passed her window; transfixed by their red safety lights blinking across the sky.

The car behind her honks again. The girl eases her foot off the brake. The car slides out of the drive thru and onto the street; cup of ice left forgotten. After a few minutes of driving the boy's sweatshirt becomes itchy. The girl stops at a corner and takes the sweatshirt off, tossing it on the passenger seat. As the girl drives home she thinks about what she will tell the boy if he calls and asks about his sweatshirt. She thinks up excuses, but nothing believable comes to mind.

III

A man is alone in a small room. It is the size, perhaps, of a walk in closet. The man is kept company by a copy machine and boxes full of paper. He has a packet of stapled papers in his hand. They are part of a presentation he is preparing to give. The pages are filled with graphs and figures; diagrams and charts. The pages are long; $8\frac{1}{2} \times 14$ instead of the standard, $8\frac{1}{2} \times 11$. The extra space is necessary to accommodate the graphics. The man looks around for a staple remover, but cannot find one. He does not have time to go back to his office. His presentation starts in five minutes. Lacking time and the proper utensil, the man rips the pages from the staple one by one. He does not like paper with torn corners, but sees no other way to rip them apart.

He loads the first page of the packet onto the copy machine and hits, "Copy." There are 13 pages total and 20 people attending the meeting. The man realizes his current copy system is not efficient; he will not finish in time for the meeting. He takes the piece of paper out of the copy machine and tries to figure out a more efficient method of copying. The man looks at the display panel on the copy machine. He presses the menu button. It asks him to select the feeding tray he would like to use. He chooses "A." The man puts the stack of unstapled papers in what he believes is tray "A." He presses "Copy." His packet does not move from the feeding tray, but a piece of paper does come out of the machine. It is blank. The man puts his packet on another tray and presses "Copy" again. The copier whirls and hums. The packet of papers gets sucked into the machine. As before, papers come out on the other side of the copier. This time there are graphics on the paper. The man is relieved. But, the graphs are cut off; the paper is not the right size.

The display panel asks if he would like to make an additional copy. The man chooses, "No." He opens the various paper trays on the front of the machine. One of them must hold $8\frac{1}{2} \times 14$ inch paper. He finds the correct tray; it is tray #2. The man closes the trays and selects the correct paper source; tray #2. He hits the copy button with confidence. With the correct feeding and paper source tray selected, the copies should be fine. They are not.

There is a paper jam; the display tells him the problem is located on the bypass belt inside the machine. Attention must be paid to primary panel Alpha, which can be released by pressing the green lever adjacent to bypass feeding tray "B." The man has little time for mechanical failure.

He looks at his watch. It is three minutes past the scheduled meeting time. My junior associate should be here by now, the man thinks. Or at the very least, that new girl I hired. How am I supposed to know how to work this thing?

The man thinks about the staff members waiting in the conference room across the hall. He wonders what they are saying; if they notice the meeting has not yet started. Are they are looking for me, he wonders. Are they talking about how I can't work a copy machine?

The man does not tolerate incompetence. Not from his staff, not from himself. He does not want to be late because of incompetence. He refuses to let a copy machine tarnish his image. The copier's fan turns on. Warm air is blown onto the man's slacks. He is becoming hot. He regrets wearing a full suit and takes off his jacket, placing it on a box of paper. The man again checks his watch. Six minutes past the meeting time and still no sign of his junior associate.

The man opens up the copy machine by depressing the green release lever adjacent to bypass feeding tray "B." He sees a tangle of cogs and belts; screws and rollers. It is dark and dusty; the room's fluorescent lights are of no help. The man peers into the machine, but does not reach inside. There are several crumpled pieces of paper deep in the machine. They are jammed between two rollers. The man is unsure how to approach the problem. He motions toward the paper with tentative waves of his hand. He does not want to get toner on his sleeves. The man hears people outside; talking as they walk down the hall. He listens for mention of his name, but hears nothing. With no options left, the man reaches into the machine and claws at the paper. The edge of one sheet slices along his fingertips. The crumpled paper is clear of the rollers; that is his sole concern. His fingers can wait.

The man closes the copier's main access panel and hits the copy button. Again, there is a whirring noise; a resurgence of mechanical function. But still, the copies do not come out. The man cannot even find his original packet. It is lost somewhere in the machine; caught between rollers or rerouted to an auxiliary tray. The man does not wish to speculate on such things. He does not want to remind himself that a copy machine ate his presentation.

In a full sweat, the man decides that he does not need graphs; he can do the presentation on his own. He puts his jacket on and exits the copy room. Now, 11 minutes late, the man crosses the hallway. Out of the

corner of his eye, the man sees someone exiting the lobby wearing a dress shirt and khakis. His walk is familiar, but without seeing the person's face, the man is unable to place him.

The man enters the conference room. A senior associate is giving a presentation. The man sits down next to a female coworker. He compliments her pearl earrings and asks if she has seen the firm's junior associate. She shrugs. The man settles into his chair and waits for his coworker to finish his presentation. He stares at his hands and can't remember when his knuckles became so hairy; his skin so dry. The room gives out a light laugh. The man looks up and sees everyone applauding. He, too, claps his hands. The presentation must be over, the man thinks. It must be my turn. He gets up and stands behind the podium. The man stands up straight and pushes his shoulders back. His presentation begins with an apology for being late and not having his packets ready. He makes a joke about the copy machine eating his homework. The room laughs.

As the presentation continues the man realizes the necessity of the graphs; how vital they are to what he is saying. The man becomes nervous and unsure of his words. He refers to figure 7B, but no one knows what he's talking about. The man looks around the room. Everyone is looking at him. He tries to make eye contact, but cannot. He settles his gaze on a paper clip left on the podium. He twirls the paper clip in his right hand, between thumb and index finger. The man falls silent and the room of faces turns from boredom to concern. He can see the questioning in their eyes, their wondering how a man so dull and incompetent could ever be head of a company.

The man twirls the paperclip more quickly. As he does so, his index finger becomes tender. He looks at his hand and sees a paper cut running the width of his hand. The man presses his thumb against his index finger. The cut flesh puckers open and blood seeps out. He is taken aback. Distracted by the sudden pain of the cut, the man announces it is time for a break. He is first out the door. The man knows he can not continue with his presentation. He is of no use to his staff. The man walks out of the building and towards his car in the parking lot. As he drives home the man thinks about excuses to tell his staff the next morning. Nothing believable comes to mind.

Hey World Are You Listening? A Series of Dramatic Monologues

It's Just a Game – HAYDEN – a male or female teen

Moving On – OLIVIA – female teen

What Else Am I – BETH – female any age

Hey World Are You Listening – NAMELESS – a female or male teen

IT'S JUST A GAME

(HAYDEN is sitting on the ground with his/her back against the acting block. When his/her special comes up s/he comes to life and stands to address the audience, engaging them with eye contact before beginning):

HAYDEN:

My best friend's name is Robbie. We grew up together, and when we were little our favorite game was cops and robbers. We'd use our Super Soaker squirt guns and run around my backyard hiding fake pirate money and soaking each other the whole time. Robbie was really fun to play the game with. He got into his role as the robber, but he'd never laugh like I did...I thought it was a funny game, but he took it so seriously. Until the game was over, and then he'd have this huge excited grin on his face, like he'd accomplished something great.

When I asked Robbie what he wanted to be when he grew up, he said:

"I wanna be one of the most wanted robbers in the world! I wanna go from bank to bank, and rob 'em so they never knew what hit 'em!"

I thought he was joking, but when I laughed he looked at me as though I had stomped on his feelings. I should have realized something was wrong with Robbie. *(Sits on the acting block, still addressing the audience.)*

We grew apart as we grew up. We only got to see each other about once a week when we'd hang out at the mall, or get frozen yogurt at our favorite place. Maybe it was the memory of our fun times that kept us together; maybe we just convinced ourselves we'd stay friends forever. But Robbie had changed. He'd already been caught shoplifting more times than I'd like to remember. He'd even been to family court because

he tried to mug a girl in school – I was glad he got caught doing it. I figured he'd finally realize that his ambition of becoming the world's most wanted robber wasn't an option. I hoped he'd give up...but he didn't.

Robbie came over to my house late one night and told me he found the place to start his career. I wanted to yell:

"Tell me you want to be a clown, or a pro-wrestler, or even the president of the United States, but please don't say a robber!"

But he did. He said he found a perfect store; the new "Red Handed Liquors" on Center Avenue, no security camera's installed yet and he was going to rob the store the next day after school. He wanted me to go with him. "Just like the old days" he said, "but this time it'll be real". And then he pulled a hand gun out of the back of his jeans.

I freaked out. I told him there was no way was I going to be involved, and that he should give up the idea.

"Don't be dumb; don't throw your life away! You're better than this...can't you be a normal kid and want to be the next big actor or video game creator?"

Robbie's face changed. He pinned me against the door of my room and put the gun to my head. "You chicken?" he asked

"Yes! Yes I am, please, Robbie! Don't do anything stupid!"

"I'M NOT DOING ANYTHING STUPID!!" he screamed in my face. My mom came to the door and asked what was going on. "It's just me Mrs. Roberts, it's Robbie!" He said through the door like nothing was wrong. My mom didn't second guess his voice. She liked Robbie, even trusted him. But I wish she had opened the door and caught him with the gun to my head.

After she left, Robbie continued to threaten me. "You don't have to be there tomorrow. I don't care if you are...but I'm going through with it. I need this to get out of school, and move on with my life! Don't you dare tell anyone what I'm planning...and don't show up to stop me. Or else." (Pause)

I told my mom the next morning, and hoped that by telling her she'd be able to contact the police, or Robbie's mother or someone to stop him. I mean, that's just common sense right? She said she'd take care of it, which automatically made me feel better. I trusted her.

When school got out that day I saw Robbie. He had on his black leather coat, and that smile he used to have when we were kids playing

cops and robbers. When he walked past me he caught my eye, and patted a bulge in his inside jacket pocket. It gave me an eerie feeling in my stomach and I avoided his gaze. I didn't want to give him a hint of how I felt knowing what he was going to do, knowing that I told on him...knowing that someone might get hurt because of this...stupid game!

I went home hoping my mom would assure me that I had done the right thing by telling her. But when I got home, no one was there. I tried to call my mom...no answer on her cell. Then Dad walked in the door.

"Where's mom?" "She isn't home and there's no note, and she's not answering her cell." Dad was silent at first and I knew what had happened. Then he explained that there had been an accident at a liquor store and that mom was involved.

We raced to the hospital. The police were there and so was the woman who was working at the store. She said a high school kid had come in with a gun and demanded money. *(S/he stands as if playing out his/her mothers role.)* My mom stepped between them and tried to talk him out of it. She said that my mother was very brave, and gave him the money without argument. My mother told the boy she knew who he was, and that he was better than this game. But the boy smiled his excited smile, and said:

"This is not a game" and...he shot her. *(Beat. Changes and gets very emotional)*

I thought I was doing the right thing by telling her. I didn't think she'd take matters into her own hands. How can things go so wrong when you do all the right things? Robbie killed my mother, and he got away *(s/he sits back down on the floor, his/her back against the acting block)* and nobody ever heard from him again. *(The lights fade out on the boy/girl as s/he settles back into a comfortable position, to remain for the upcoming pieces.)*

MOVING ON

(As the lights fade out on "IT'S JUST A GAME" they fade in on "MOVING". OLIVIA is sitting on top of her block with one foot underneath her and one off to the side of her block looking towards the ground. As her special comes on, she raises her head, engages the audience with eye contact, and lets out a sigh with a smile as she begins her story.)

OLIVIA:

My name is Olivia. I just moved here about three months ago from

New Jersey. No, my mom didn't want to move here. No, my dad's job didn't get transferred. The rest of our family still lives in New Jersey. We moved here because...because of me. I was having this problem getting along with these girls back home and I just...okay, no lies.

I have been made fun of all through school. If it wasn't because of my weight, it was because of my looks. It wasn't because of my looks it was because of my brains, and if it wasn't my brains, it was because of my clothes and...you get the idea.

(OLIVIA gets up off her block and begins to walk around the back of it.) It started off so normal. Just girl stuff, you know. Talking about me behind my back, starting rumors about me, trash talking. I thought it would stop when the teachers heard about it, but that made it worse. They believed what the other girls were saying and called meetings with my parents to see if I actually did have an eating disorder, or if I really was pregnant. *(Pause to make eye contact with an audience member, then continues around her block.)*

The gossip only got worse with school newspaper articles talked about me. I accused them of slander, but no one believed me. They didn't use my name in the articles, but it was obvious who they were talking about...and no one would do anything to help me. I dreaded going to school...waking up in the morning and thinking "What's going to be the best way to avoid giving these girls more fuel?" I couldn't eat, I couldn't sleep, and my grades began slipping.

I told teachers. I told my parents and they brought it to the school board, but it didn't help. They just said "kids will be kids," like this was the norm. I started getting phone calls with anonymous threats...the voice on the other end of the line asking "are you home alone?" followed by a horrible, familiar giggle. *(She sits again, this time on her knees not making eye contact, almost ashamed.)*

I don't know why they did it. There really isn't a reason. All I know is they humiliated and harassed me to the point that my parents pulled me out of school, and moved me as far away as possible...here. *(she adjusts to a comfortable seated position, and makes eye contact with someone new)*

Here, the first few weeks of school were fine, and then it began. This girl named Brittany came up to me and asked me if I liked this certain boy she pointed out. I said I didn't know him.

"How can you not like him?" she asked. "He's gorgeous!" I replied again that I did not know him.

“What about that girl over there. Do you think she’s pretty?” She pointed to a girl who seemed to be popular. A standout with her shiny red hair.

“Sure,” I said, “She’s pretty.” I hoped that might get this Brittany off my back so I could go back to eating my macaroni salad. (Beat) It was the start of hell all over again.

Rumors that I had a major crush on Ashley the redhead spread like wildfire. (*puts her feet down onto the floor and steadies herself with her hands supporting her on the box next to her sides.*) The funny thing was that no one ever asked me if it was true...they just stared at me funny as I went down the hall. I dealt with it. I knew that rumors weren’t the worse thing they could do.

(*Throughout this section she makes eye contact with a new person for each new detail.*) It did get worse...I’d open my locker and pictures from Playboy would be stuffed inside. In PE I’d run behind people and the coach would pull me aside to ask why I was gazing at other girls. When they started putting up awful, photo-shopped posters of me I told my parents. My mother didn’t screw around this time. She bypassed the principal, and the school board, and went to the police to file a restraining order against the Brittany’s and Ashley’s of the school. I thought that would be the end of it, until I found out that the Chief of Police was Ashley’s father.

Ashley came to school the next day with a smile on her face like I had never seen before. She came up to me in the cafeteria, where I was sitting by myself, as usual, and said:

“Listen, Olivia, I’m real sorry about the way I’ve been treating you. It was wrong of me and it got way out of control. I want you to know that I’m going to try and set everything right between us. I’d love for us to be friends.”

Something was up and I knew it. She held out her hand for me to shake and I took it. As I shook her hand she dropped her books.

“Oops!” she said. “Clumsy me.”

(*OLIVIA crouches on top of her box*) I bend down to help her pick them up like any considerate human being would do, and no one could have predicted what happened next: Ashley kissed me. She kissed me. In the middle of the cafeteria, and everyone saw. She jumped up from her crouched position, (*OLIVIA stands up on her box and acts out the girl in the story*) screamed “pervert!” and whipped out of her pepper spray and sprayed it in my face. (*is sure to make eye contact with the audience.*)

I fell onto the cafeteria floor in pain, my eyes burning, my vision completely blurred by uncontrollable tears, hot, stinging my face. I became aware of one, horrible fact: everyone was laughing at me. No one bothered to help me out of the cafeteria. I stumbled and fought my way through the blurred faces towards the door and ran out of the school, never planning to set foot in that hell-hole again. *(She takes a moment of pause to seat herself in her beginning pose. Then when she is ready, she looks at the audience and says her final words):*

My name is Olivia. I just moved here about three months ago from New Jersey...and now we're moving again. *(The lights fade out on her as she settles back into her position to remain there for the following pieces.)*

WHAT ELSE AM I

(The lights fade out on "TO BE OR NOT TO BE" and come up on "WHAT ELSE AM I". BETH is sitting on top of her box, hugging her knees to her chest, her head down upon them as if she needed to hug herself to feel safe. As the light come up she raises her head and addresses the audience):

BETH:

I'm Beth. I'm 17 years old, and I've dated the same guy for all of high school. Zack's...well, Zack is Zack. He's not the sweetest guy, or the nicest, but he's good looking...and I'm dating him. Why am I dating him? A lot of people ask me that...I can't really explain it myself, but maybe after I tell you this story you'll understand. Or maybe you'll just think I'm weak, or shallow, or plain scared.

(She drapes her legs over the front of her box, takes a deep breath and begins opening up to the audience.) A couple months ago, I started hanging out with this guy named Nicholas. I've actually known Nicholas since like kindergarten, and we had crushes on each other on and off through elementary and junior high school. Once we reached high school I just fell into a pattern with Zack. That's when my friendship with Nicholas sort of fell apart. But we started hanging out together again during the spring play, and it was great, I won't lie. I hadn't smiled so much in a long time.

Nicholas was the epitome of a nice guy. *(Continues this section dreamily, as if she sees NICHOLAS right in front of her)* He had a friendly, quiet but genuine smile. A safe-feeling hug and a subtle, yet really good smell. He was the kind of guy every girl wants at the end of the day. You know, easy

on the eyes. A plain but nice look about him, and the kind of gaze that tells you you're the only girl he wants to look at. Nicholas was smart, articulate, and romantic. He liked talking about anything and everything...and was a great listener...never zoned out like Zack.

As we neared the end of the spring play, Nicholas confessed that he liked me...more than just friends. I told him that I was dating Zack, and Nicholas gave me a knowing look:

"You may be dating him, but you don't like him Beth." I knew he was right.

"I just don't think he's a very nice guy. You deserve someone who will appreciate you...like I do. You know I care more about you than anyone. I always have."

I told him I'd think about it...I mean, he made it sound so easy! I knew it wouldn't be that way with Zack, so I decided to keep what Nicholas said to myself until I made a final decision.

The next day Nicholas came to the show with flowers for me. I know! This guy is perfect right? Well, Zack didn't think so. Zack doesn't even like plays, he thinks they're stupid, so I was amazed that he showed up...and saw the flowers that I was carrying with Nicholas's name on them. I should have known what was going to happen next. Zack said he was going to go home, he couldn't believe that he had "Missed the big game for this crap!"

So Nicholas offered me a ride. We walked out to his car to find it vandalized and bashed in. We stood in shock, and then I realized who had done it as Zack came out from behind the car with a baseball bat.

(BETH must build emotionally throughout these next sections. Going with immediate impulses, and emotions that come.) I screamed. Zack was an athlete, bigger and bulkier than Nicholas, but not as quick. Nicholas managed to take the baseball bat away from Zack and throw it to the side, and Zack got angrier. They locked arms and began to wrestle. I stood there, not knowing what to do. What could I do? I was crying and screaming as Zack pinned Nicholas to the pavement, Nicholas's nose and mouth dripping blood, and Zack's eyes blackened and his nose broken.

(BETH stands here) "STOP IT!" I screamed. "STOP!" Zack had his hands around Nicholas's neck...he couldn't breathe. Zack was laughing maliciously.

"Zack stop!" Nicholas was choking for breath when he looked up at me. "I love you." he gasped. And that's when I lost it. I picked up the baseball bat, and I hit Zack as hard as I could. Over and over I hit him

until he fell on top of Nicholas, unconscious. Nicholas wriggled out from underneath him. I cried as I rolled Zack over. Nicholas called 911 on his cell phone. He picked me up off the ground and I clung to his blood stained shirt, wailing into his chest.

When the cops arrived, they took Nicholas and me into custody and took Zack to the hospital. Nicholas was charged with assault, and I was let go.

(BETH connects with the audience, filled with guilt and seeking understanding) I told them it was my fault, I was the one who hit Zack...but the cops just laughed and told me not to protect Nicholas.

Nicholas's parents were so upset with him that they enrolled him in military school. He didn't even get to finish the spring play. And although I kept telling everyone that it was my fault, everyone had the same reaction as the cops. The only one who did believe me...was Zack. And he told me that if I ever pulled a stunt like that again, he'd kill me. I believe him.

I haven't heard from Nicholas since that night. I wish I knew how to contact him...but even if I did, I wouldn't dare try. But I miss him everyday, and I always will. *(Pauses. She sits on the box, and makes firm contact with the audience.)*

You can call me weak, you can call me shallow, and you can call me scared...and I won't try and argue, because I KNOW I am all of those things. *(Softens, hugs her knees and rocks herself.)* I just wish I knew what else I am.

(The lights fade out of BETH instantly and stay dark until a voice is heard for the following piece.)

HEY WORLD ARE YOU LISTENING?

(The lights go down on BETH and stay down for a time. NAMELESS is sitting Indian style on top of her block facing full front to the audience. She begins to speak through the darkness clearly and the lights slowly being to fade up on her.)

NAMELESS:

Do you know who I am? I bet you don't. I'm that girl nobody really pays attention to. I'm the girl who works hard, and is involved with everything, but no one knows exactly who I am. I'm the girl guys never notice. The girl girls never notice. The girl who holds her hand up in class and the teacher doesn't see. The girl who seems to be - invisible to

the rest of the world. (*The lights are now fully up on NAMELESS.*)

It's not because I want to be...I mean, I don't want to be the popular girl. I don't want to be the geek, or any of the other horrible stereotypes that society forces on people my age. I just want to be...me.

Nothing really exciting ever happened to me. I've never been awarded anything. I've never gotten bad grades. I've never been fat, or made fun of for my clothing. I've just always been able to fly under the radar. I don't try to, but I also don't try to stand out.

I am the quiet girl who sits in the back of the classroom. Not the girl who asks for extra homework, but the one who somehow always manages to get A's...but is never recognized for her accomplishments. I am, as I said before, invisible.

There are benefits to being me though; I know things that no one else knows: (*She stands and addresses a different person with each new thing she knows. She is very factual and does not get emotional yet.*) I've witnessed the violence that goes on in school. I've heard the popular girls talking behind others' backs about frivolous things that shouldn't be as big a deal as they make them. I've seen the jocks dump the geeks into garbage cans. I know where the "tough crowd" takes kids to pummel them. I know which teacher is sexually abusing kids after hours. I know exactly how many gangs are on campus. I know which student was responsible for the bomb threats last year. I know what teacher secretly thrives on making his students miserable, and I know which one conceals vodka in her coffee mug. I remember the names of the kids that died in the school shooting 3 years ago. And I remember the shooter's name.

Now I don't know if it is just because all these horrible things are happening around me and I can't speak up, or if it really is that no one is listening. (*Now she becomes emotionally invested.*) Why do people get so caught up in their own lives that no one takes the time to listen anymore? HUH? You hear about these horrible things and think "God, that's awful" and yet you don't do anything! It's like in one ear and out the other. Why do only certain people get heard? If nobody is better than anybody else...why can't we listen to everyone? (*Beat of realization*) Why are we allowed to go unnoticed?

I had a crush on this guy once, and he wasn't popular or anything. He was just, you know, normal. After about 6 weeks of joking with him and flirting in class together I decided to give him my phone number, and told him we should hang out sometime. He said:

"Yeah, that would be cool...what was your name again?" *Pause, then continues)*

Two weeks ago I went to talk to my mom. She was working on the computer and I kept trying to get her attention to look over my English paper. And she didn't seem to hear me. I was like:

"Mom, I need help with my paper. (Pause) Max just peed on the rug again. (Pause) Dad's cheating with the housekeeper. (Pause) I think I'm suicidal." And she didn't even raise her head.

So why isn't anyone listening to me? Or anyone else for that matter! What about the kids who are being harassed in school? (*Special comes up on OLIVIA from "MOVING"*) The kids who are suicidal because of abuse? (*Special comes up on MS. MYERS from "THE END"*) The bullies who need psychotherapy? (*Special up on JUSTIN from "TO BE OR NOT TO BE"*) What about the kids who can't change? (*Special comes up on ANDY from "CLOUDS"*) The girls who are the cause of fights? (*Special up on BETH from "WHAT ELSE AM I"*) The friends who are in trouble that no one can help? (*Special up on HAYDEN from "IT'S JUST A GAME".*) What about those of us who are forgotten?

Who will listen? Who will remember? (Beat) Will it be you? (The lights fade out on each of the characters one at a time but stay up on NAMELESS. She observes all the other lights going out around her. Looks directly at the audience and say) Hey, world, (beat) are you listening? (Immediate blackout)

END.

Beauty in a Sarcophagus: Beep. Beep. Beep.

A Mayan retelling of the folktale “Sleeping Beauty”

—Once upon a time, no. There is no time, only calendars and clocks. There is the day and the night, and the fact that everything is spinning, repeating, erratic, chaos, but ordered, nevermind. . . .

One-thousand three hundred and twenty years ago in what is now known as Palenque, in what is now known as the Mexican state of Chiapas, located at 17°29'0"N, 92°2'59"W, the Red Queen awoke feeling disturbed. She called for the King of Kin. When he arrived, she said to him thus:

—Your beauty is your math, the counting of days, of cycles, things not known in places we will never know, let's call these places Europe. I have been dreaming, my love. A horrible horrible dream that came true, or will have come to be true in the future, which is now, for we have no word for “future.” Everything that is to come has already come, is present. Whatever waiting there may appear to be is merely an illusion that we call “waiting,” perpetuated by the Symbolic Disorder, but that comes later. Along this illusion, we will grow old, and you will die first. There will be no tragedy at first. People will mourn. People will move on. And I will arrange a tomb for you, a tomb beneath a temple pyramid with you in a sarcophagus beneath a brilliant stone lid. The walls of the tomb will glisten like snow crystals. Intricate festoons of stalactites will come to hang from your tomb like tassels of a curtain. The floor will be filled with stone carvings, stucco figures in low reliefs. I will place a jade mask over your face, and you will reside behind the mask in the sarcophagus until the end of the Symbolic Disorder. I will have the brilliant stone lid installed, a lid inscribed with the story of the end of all inscription. And the entire tomb will be sealed off, except for a single stone hole, called a psychoduct, which will rise through the temple above and into the jungle, so that the gods may come and go; so that they may witness the unfolding of the stories left in the inscriptions on the walls which lead to the end of all inscriptions on your lid...Over time, the temple pyramid will come to be known as the Temple of Inscriptions, for the story of the remainder of the Symbolic Disorder will be inscribed on the walls that will lead to the

discovery of your tomb. A second temple will be made to house a tomb of my own, with bright red walls that will fade from the heat long before the supposed future comes around. It will be called the Temple of Non-Inscription, for not a single inscription will be left to be found in the stone walls of the temple which will lead to my tomb. Not a single jewel will be left with me, not a written name, not an offering from the people. When both temples are completed, and your tomb is perfectly sealed, I will go to rest in my own sarcophagus. I will not intend for our people to place the impossibly heavy, unmarked, stone lid over me while I take a nap. The temperature in my sarcophagus will rise too high for me to breath, or scream, for my eyes to open, for me to resist my physical demise. And so it will be, the two of us in our own sarcophagi, yours foretelling the end of the beauty of your math, our calendars, the end of the Symbolic Disorder, my own foretelling thereafter. And in the meantime, the humidity of the jungle will eat away at our flesh, we will decay down to our bones. Spiders will prosper in between our bones. Outside of our sarcophagi, our people will lose their way and forget about your beauty. They will abandon our cities and intermingle. They will never return; our temples partially digested by the jungle for a thousand years. White men from Europe will arrive, those who were here, those who don't remember will mistake the white men for gods. Kukulcan, Quetzalcoatl, our gods will be replaced with other bearded gods they'll call Jesus, Santa Claus, Uncle Sam. They will burn our libraries, destroy our temples, and on top of the ruins they will build churches in dedication to their own bearded psychological idols. Eventually, the white men will discover the psychoduct that leads to your tomb. They will hear whispers of gold, profit, ownership coming from the stone hole, and like our women and language, they will have their way with the stone hole psychoduct. Mile long lines of men from all over Europe will form in some collective Imaginary Construct, slicing with knives new paths in the jungle, trampling insects. Each man will take turns attempting to fill the psychoduct with their very own throbbing, inadequate members in hopes of receiving those things mentioned in the whispers in the hole. Jaguars, monkeys, and all kinds of creatures will mimic the white men, they too mistaking the foreigners for gods. The animals who protest will be struck quick with flying knives. They will not be eaten. They will rot like you and I, waiting for the end of the Symbolic Disorder: *Our heritage in cages, all the animals in cages*— While we wait, for one-thousand two hundred and sixty years no one will understand the unconscious origins of the whispers in the hole: *Empty penetration. Empty penetration. Nothing*

made whole. . . . Until one day, as foretold in the inscriptions in your temple, the virgin Prince Archaeologist will discover in his messy disappointment after having his way with the stone hole psychoduct, that the stone hole psychoduct beneath him in the ground simply must lead further than his member could ever manage. The Europeans will then crowd around in the muggy, humid heat while Prince Archaeologist uncovers your tomb. The brilliant lid to your sarcophagus will be harshly removed, fractured on the floor. Its inscription will be misinterpreted. Your jade mask will be sold to a museum. Your bones will be auctioned off, one by one. Your teeth too, one by one and spread throughout the world, their origins forgotten, dropped, buried beneath the earth at random. Your temple will be turned into a tourist attraction. Roller coasters will run from city to city to your temple. Laughing children from all over the world will draw with crayons all over the inscriptions. The inscriptions will be misinterpreted. Crayons mistaken for carvings. The image of your temple will be reproduced on posters and tee shirts and bumper stickers on mobile machines that will feed on the vines of the jungle. Children will stick gum on the reproductions, while the beauty of your math, our calendar will be trivialized, replaced with ugly, arbitrary clocks and calendars from Europe that do not correspond to the Real; that perpetuate Western rationalism, psychology, the idea that time equals some intangible thing they'll call "money." My own tomb will be turned into a Lost and Found center for belongings dropped on the tracks of the roller coasters. Mechanized cashiers that make hideous clicking and beeping cries for all the days and nights will be placed on top of my lid, a beep for every thing they'll call a "second." Beep. Beep. Beep. No one will be interested in the contents below the beeps, because inside my sarcophagus there will be no jewels to sell, no image to reproduce, no inscription to misinterpret. I will call for you constantly through the crack in the lid: *O the sun, O the sun, through the crack the gods will come* — Beep. Beep. Beep. . . . One day I will call for you, and something called a GI Joe doll will fall through the crack in the lid, a crack used for power outlets, telephone lines and wires, internet hyper broadband connections: Beep. Beep. Beep. The GI Joe will shatter my brittle rib cage, my sad corroded rib cage, but I won't mind. I will take off all of the doll's little clothes and plastic armor. I will pretend the doll is you. And I will tell you of my destiny to wait. But you, you, stupid painted lifeless eyes, you will not reply. You will stare up at me emptily. You will know not how to count the days, the beauty of your math forgotten. So I will remove your little plastic head. And I will snap off your arms and legs. And I will throw each and every piece back through the crack...

Poem Beginning with a Line by Frank Lima

And how terrific it is to write a radio poem
and how terrific it is to stand on the roof and
watch the stars go by and how terrific it is to be
mised inside a hallway, and how terrific it is
to be the hallway as it stands inside the house,
and how terrific it is, shaped like a telephone,
to be filled with scotch and stand out in the street,
and how terrific it is to see the stars inside the radios
and cows, and how terrific the cows are, crossing
at night, in their unjaundiced way and moving
through the moonlight, and how terrific the night is,
the purveyor of bells and distant planets, and how
terrific it is to write this poem as I sleep, to sleep
in distant planets in my mind and cross at night the
cows in hallways riding stars to radios at night, and
how terrific night you are, across the bridges, into
tunnels, into bars, and how terrific it is that you are
this too, the fields of planetary pull, terrific, living
on the Hudson, inside the months of spring, an
underwater crossing for the cows in dreams, terrific,
like the radios, the songs, the poem and the stars.

– *Lisa Jarnot*