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Best,
Jenna Bessemer and Tori Sommerman, Co-Editors
Zachary Bos, Advising Editor

Founded in 2006 by Catherine Craft, Mary Sullivan, and Chase Quinn. Boston University undergraduates may send submissions to burn.at.bu@gmail.com. Manuscripts are considered year-round. Burn Magazine is published according to an irregular schedule by the Boston University Literary Society; printed by the Pen & Anvil Press. Front cover photograph by Tori Sommerman, COM 2013. The editors thank Emma Alden for posing.
Letter from the Editors

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The river and trees;
highway,
brittle red, golden brown,
an Afghan carpet.

Maine;
Water's chant against the rocks,
sand, pink noses, rosy knees
tossed towards the sky.

The couch;
Wound together,
warm weather withers.
Strange neighbors
like TV drone.

Cramped and tired,
my marks make little sense;

paper has no deep reds,
pen no sunlight,
and pencil no human touch.
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Outside the train station, Andrew cut the engine. The Chevy died mid-groan and he sat, listening as the wind lashed heavy sheets of rain against the car. He checked his watch—6:48—and wished he had left a few minutes later. There was nothing to do now but wait and worry about what to say.

He turned the key a notch and clicked the radio into life, boosting the volume to drown out the storm. Swelling strings from the classical channel filled the air as he watched invisible crumbs from the passenger seat. Brahms, he thought, tiptoeing on the edge of a memory. A holiday party, maybe, somewhere back in Chicago all that time ago, and just for a moment he felt a flash of clarity—his wife's hand, thin and graceful in his own; the warm, easy weight of a drink in the belly.

Andrew changed the station. A newscaster's voice, timny in a sea of static, announced that President Kennedy would be speaking in a few moments. He was expected to defend his blockade strategy, the newscaster explained, despite vehement opposition from Congressional leaders. For the first time in the history of the country, the Armed Forces were on DEFCON 2. Andrew wasn't sure what that meant. He turned off the radio before the newscaster could explain.

Andrew felt the slow, heavy tremble of the train approaching. He looked up to the elevated platform, nestled in the heart of the woods of northern Maine like a treehouse. He swept the seat again as he watched his son carefully descend the steep cement stairs; twenty-four, he was tall and wiry, all limbs. The wind whipped his wavy blond hair in furious shapes.

Should I get out? I should get out, Andrew thought, but Charlie's stride was quick and he was already prying open the passenger door.

"Hi, Dad," he said, slouching into the worn leather seat. "Happy birthday." He draped an arm around his father's neck and pulled him in for a hasty embrace. Charlie's wet hair stank of cigarettes and floral shampoo.

Andrew cleared his throat and turned the key. The engine whined, sputtered, and died. "Don't worry," he said quickly. "She's just been a little stubborn recently." He cranked it again, harder. Same result. For Christ's sake.

Charlie rubbed his hand on the knee of his jeans. "Should I go ask somebody for a jump?" he said, nodding ahead to the small car filtering out of the parking lot. No more than a dozen cars had been waiting at the tiny commuter outpost; they were nearly all gone now.

"No," Andrew said sharply. He softened his tone: "No need. We'll just give it a minute. So. How's the new job?"

"So far so good. I like the work, I like the company." He itched his neck, fingernails scratching stubble. "The pay's not stellar, but not bad for a junior editor. Good enough."

"Good enough is never good enough," Andrew said before he could help it.

He was sure that Charlie rolled his eyes. "The main thing was to be near enough to Abby's parents. She's very close with them."

Andrew bristled: what is that supposed to mean? He turned the key again, but the old car still wouldn't wake. "And things are good with her?"

"Great."

"I'd like to meet her."

"You will. We're just both so busy. You know how it is."

"Sure," Andrew said. He looked out through the windshield more in hope than expectation: they were alone in the parking lot now.

"That jump's looking pretty good now, huh?" Charlie said.

Andrew stepped out of the car, taking care not to slam the door behind him. He propped the hood, obscuring Charlie from view. It didn't matter—they both knew Andrew's mechanical knowledge went no further than changing a tire.

He looked out to the road, a thin, pothole-ridden stretch of pavement framed on all sides by towering pines. The trail of orange streetlights in the parking lot extended only fifty yards or so into the street. Beyond their pale circles, the green black darkness seemed to go on forever.

Charlie climbed out of the car and moved to Andrew's side.

"There's a phone up on the platform," Charlie said.

Andrew said nothing, staring off into the road.

The rain persisted.

"Why don't you go ask Eddie, Dad?"

"Eddie's gone."

"What do you mean?"

"He moved. St. Paul, last spring."

Charlie sighed. "Okay," he said. "Well, what about your friend from the paper? Clark?"

"Retired," Andrew said, with a short, barking laugh. "And I never knew his phone number, in any case." He couldn't remember ever feeling so embarrassed. After a moment, he closed the hood and turned to his son, who was looking out at the dark road.

"Well," Charlie said. "We might as well get started, Dad."

Andrew guessed it was about seven miles or so into town. It was difficult to gauge their pace: the two men were weighed down by their sopping clothes, and in the darkness they could only see a few feet before them. For a while they walked on in silence, listening to the steady roar of the rain. There were a few stars visible overhead, their falling light blurry and smeared. Andrew was worried about what Charlie was thinking, but he was also suffused with a sensation, intense and unknown, welling up inside like a deep breath.

"Do you think they'll push the button?" he asked suddenly, swept up in this unfamiliar wave.

In the darkness he saw his son turn to him. "I don't know," Charlie said. "I'm surprised you'd want to talk about this."

"The radio said DEFCON 2."

"Jesus," Charlie said in a low hiss, his words dissolving in the driving rain.

"What does that mean, Charlie?"

Charlie waited a few paces. "It means that they're preparing for war. For nuclear war."

Suddenly, headlights appeared on the road beside them, and a car whizzed up behind them.
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“What does that mean, Charlie?”

Charlie waited a few paces. “It means that they’re preparing for war. For nuclear war.”

Suddenly, headlights appeared on the road ahead. Andrew and his son walked on, waiting for a flash of something.
an introduction to the concepts of sleeping and waking

by harry melzer

Watching somebody sleep is an out of body experience. Your consciousness leaves your limited perception and simply floats. Your breath is suspended—breathe too deeply and they’ll wake from the dream and you’ll wake too. But for that moment, you’re just above the playing field, watching yourself watching. The way your chest rises and falls slowly. Your muscles are taut but your eyelids droop ever so slightly—it is still early—and the photograph of early morning light is a dim wash through the pale curtains that makes the urge to drift overwhelming. Sleep reminds you it has unfinished business but your mind resists. In a dream, you lie down, quietly, and continue to watch. The shifting sounds sound like a thunderstorm. The sleeper’s eyelids flutter and your motion is arrested in anticipation—and then you sink down, trying to slow the groans of the mattress beneath you. Arms tight, you continue to float, as to not wake them, and breathe into yourself, slowly relaxing every muscle until you sink and sleep.

Paul sat like this a long time, one foot off of the bed and the other underneath him. The sheets warmed his pasty thighs and left his naked torso chilled. He dared not move and wake her. The floor creaked quietly under him as he adjust- ed his weight and he froze. He didn’t move and he didn’t breathe. For a mind that tried not to fall asleep when people were around. He squinted his head, to rest his head on her neck. Paul let his mind go, and he drifted again. From above now, he watched his frame through the sheets and it disapp- pointed him—including especially as he lay next to all that beauty—that his legs retained no shape and his hip-bones made an ind- ent in the thin fabric. He could see her face now. The way her eyebrows curved gently, and the remnants of teenaged blemishes left slight marks on her fore- head. Wisps of hair curled gently around her ears. Her lips were slightly parted. They were pale and thin and dry.

The room was dark with bits of fil- tered light illuminating the corners. It was clean, or clean as it could be, and only Paul’s shoes and in the corner and their clothing strewn on the carpet indicated its inhabitant. It was warm. In the dry air, Paul awoke again. He had slipped into a doze minutes before, but he was unaware of this, and waking up did not startle him as it had the first time. It was gentle, like the curves of the fabric around her hips. His hand had fallen asleep underneath him, and he wanted to move it. Again, the sheets shifted, but this time sounded like breaking waves and he paused in fear of awakening the sleeping girl next to him. He knew what it would happen when she awoke. The dream would be broken. He would have to come down from the ceiling and back into his body like before.

He much preferred it from the outside. Things were less personal. Things happened to Paul, not him. And then when he was Paul again, he could just imagine it how it felt to be outside, and things would be different, his life. His nose didn’t have that bump that always showed up in pictures. That was some other guy, not him. Kate used to say he was detached, he was absent, he didn’t care, and it was probably the truth.

They broke up over that. He watched that from the outside too.

The room was stuffy. It was warm, and humid, and comfortable, and smelled like her: fresh and new. Paul became conscious of his breath. He knew it must be terrible, and he was ashamed. And the acne scars on his shoulders. Her shoul- ders were smooth—they were barely visible under the white sheet, and he followed their contours with his gaze. She was skinny and her waist curved at the frequency of his arms and he longed more than anything to hold it and draw her close to him. Paul wanted this, of course. From the outside he knew better.

He’d had mornings like this before, when he forgot for a moment his pounding headache, and often forgot the night before. There’d been a few girls like this too. He had charm, he knew, but was it enough? The’d talk for a while and she would always have a sparkle in her eye although they were never as drunk as he was. But he always pretended not to be. In Paul’s mind, they were the only sensible two at the party. Always the girls awoke late, and always they were better. He didn’t have chicken legs. His nose didn’t have that bump that always showed up in pictures. That was some other guy, not him. He longed for this—the rise and fall of her chest—as his per- spective shifted and he could see her face as she slept.

There was a strength in it. A strength and a beauty Paul would never achieve.

Paul sensed that she knew where she was. And she knew what she was doing; and until now, Paul had thought he knew too. He wondered how he looked when he slept, and had she been watching him? Did he have the same strength, or did he just disappear?

He watched the clock switch from 7:59 to 8:00 and wondered why he always woke so early on days like this.

Maya was afraid of how he looked when he slept, and what she would think of him if she saw him there—his ghostly white shoulders and thin legs, dwarfed by his oversized boxer shorts. He tried not to fall asleep when people were around.

Paul was awake now. She still slept, her shoul- ders and breast retaining their hold over his concentration. He once again longed to draw her close and feel her warm skin against his body, but he knew better and slid out of bed noiselessly. One foot rolled to the floor, then the other, creating slightly under his weight. She stirred under the sheets, wrapping herself tightly. It reminded Paul of a painting, the way the sheets framed her body like an artist placed them there to render his fan-
an introduction to the concepts of sleeping and waking
by harry meltzer
Watching somebody sleep is an out of body experience. Your consciousness leaves your limited perception and simply floats. Your breath is suspended—breathe too deeply, and they’ll wake from the dream and you’ll wake too. But for that moment, you’re just above the playing field, watching yourself watching. The way your chest rises and falls slowly. Your muscles are taut but your eyelids droop ever so slightly—it is still early—and the world was quieter than the periods of sleep. The only sounds were the springs of the mattress sighed at long intervals before they disappeared. They’d be nice, and notice him for a little while the next time. It was gentle, like the curves of the fabric around her hips. His hand had longed to linger longer when he saw them before they disappeared. But he wasn’t unhappy, even though he couldn’t land a girl for more than a few days. It always could be worse. And even though he missed having a girlfriend, he never felt too strongly about it. No use worrying about the long-term, he always thought, because it was so far away. He kept his thoughts with him, watching from a distance, and let Paul do all the talking and the fucking. It worked better that way anyway. He kept himself happy most of the time.

And the dream would be broken. He would have to come down from the ceiling and back into his body like before. The dream would be broken. He would have to come down from the ceiling and back into his body like before. He knew that she knew where she was. And she knew what she was doing, and until now, Paul had thought he knew too. He wondered how he looked when he slept, and had she been watching him? Did he have the same strength, or did he just disappear?

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tases on cream-colored canvas.

He stepped lightly over their clothing on the floor. Her shoes were flat, not heels, and she had been wearing jeans at the party. That’s why he noticed her, he remembered, because she wasn’t dressed like the other girls.

She noticed him for the way his shirt refused to fit.

Paul went into the bathroom and brushed his teeth. The white porcelain sink was too bright, and he had to look away. He pulled on flannel pants to hide his ill-fitting underwear and sat in a chair in the kitchen. The wooden slats were cool on his back. By now sun streamed through the window and illuminated the grain in the laminated oak table. Everything in the apartment was cheap, but Paul liked it.

He breathed deeply for the first time since waking. It was refreshing, knowing he was far enough away that he couldn’t wake her. He was comforted that she was still there in the warm streaks of light, her breast barely covered by the blanket as she slept.

This time he’d forgotten some of the night before, like he usually did. He remembered watching himself, from the outside, leaving the party by the front door. He tripped on the steps and she laughed.

He arched his neck over the back of the chair and closed his eyes. The sun made spots on his eyelids and he watched them dance for a while.

“Hey”

The voice was quick and light and sweet. Its simplicity was beautiful and it barely broke the morning.

Paul was startled. He opened his eyes and the spots stopped dancing.

She was standing in the doorway wrapped in Paul’s shirt from the night before. There were stains on the front, too light for anyone to notice, but Paul did, and he was embarrassed.

Barefoot, her toes pressed lightly on the cool linoleum. She was shorter than Paul remembered, and her not-quite-brown hair brushed her shoulders and chest. Her legs were thin and smooth. Even under the ill-fitting shirt Paul could make out the shape of her that he had admired while she slept. The spell would be broken now and Paul would watch this part from the outside.

Except this time he didn’t. Despite his best efforts he could see her but not himself. His eyes remained fixed and so did his consciousness. If he had drifted away, he would have noticed that his hair was a brown mess and he had acne starting on his shoulder and forehead, and that the pants refused to fit him in the charming way his shirt had done so the night before, and that his spine could be seen as ridges in his skin on his back. He also would have noticed that his breath quickened and then became shallow again, as if he were treading softly again to not wake the girl from her sleep. Fortunately, Paul noticed none of these things.

“I—I don’t think I caught your name last night.”

It wasn’t embarrassment or shame in her voice, or maybe it was. Paul only heard the sweet round-ed tones from her lips and the words she was saying and noticed her look at her feet. She shifted. Paul didn’t know it, but she watched him from the inside for the first time.

“Paul”

His voice was raspy from the alcohol. He cleared his throat and it disturbed the calm sunlight from the window. Paul suddenly became conscious again, although this time, his soul refused to leave him behind in favor of the outside. He saw these things from the inside out.

“Evelyn”

It was the name she hated most—the label to the body she rarely inhabited. It was easier to watch Evelyn from a distance. But this time, it felt familiar on her tongue.

Paul smiled. He had a gap between his front teeth, but he forgot it.

Evelyn looked down again, a cautious smile breaking her lips as she exhaled. A strand of hair fell from behind her ear and floated across her cheek. Her eyes turned down and Paul was fixed on the corners of her mouth. They wrinkled and bent upwards and Paul couldn’t help it so his did too. The mist over his eyes started to clear. He felt awake.
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It wasn’t embarrassment or shame in her voice, or maybe it was. Paul only heard the sweet rounded tones from her lips and the words she was saying and noticed her look at her feet. She shifted. Paul didn’t know it, but she watched him from the inside for the first time.

“Paul”

His voice was raspy from the alcohol. He cleared his throat and it disturbed the calm sunlight from the window. Paul suddenly became conscious again, although this time, his soul refused to leave him behind in favor of the outside. He saw these things from the inside out.

“Evelyn.”

It was the name she hated most—the label to the body she rarely inhabited. It was easier to watch Evelyn from a distance. But this time, it felt familiar on her tongue.

Paul smiled. He had a gap between his front teeth, but he forgot it.

Evelyn looked down again, a cautious smile breaking her lips as she exhaled. A strand of hair fell from behind her ear and floated across her cheek. Her eyes turned down and Paul was fixed on the corners of her mouth. They wrinkled and bent upwards and Paul couldn’t help it so his did too. The mist over his eyes started to clear. He felt awake.

“mannequins” by bill hinsee
Sand invades the plastic pail,  
Exfoliating the scored sides  
And crowding every curved edge.  
We scrape the surface clean, neat,  
My palm pressing against the damp mass  
So condensed, it barely leaves a mark:  
The millions constitute one.

This stretch of land is my endless stage.  
I dance, twisting my body  
To fit the angles I believe construct the perfect pose.  
The spotlight never moves from above:  
Polka dots on my bathing suit  
Reflecting the light like numerous suns.

We build a palace  
Following my father’s recipe  
Like I followed the erratic placement  
Of his feet across the sand.  
His hands, like tools,  
Carve the moat that I run to fill,  
And with every second, the sand  
Sucks more water deep into its gut.

Rapt parties burst  
Through the doors  
Of a grease eatery:  
It’s feeding time so  
The drooling begins  
And the hungry order with rabid focus,  
Intent on guzzling their carnal fantasies  
Of devouring Samosas and syrupy Gulab Jamun.  
The order commences and thick-worded women  
Yell at customers to pick up the grub!  
Coagulating on squeaky styrofoam  
Waiting for the deep-fried massacre  
That will surely spew debris on  
The linoleum and laps of all.  
Quivering fat presses into the counter edge  
As they grab sticky trays and shove  
A path back to table legs jammed with newspaper,  
Braced for the feast that quakes the entire canteen  
And sends chairs scampering from their spots.  
The gorge ensues and oil dribble coats the  
Surface of every article in sight while the eating  
Bulge with relish until all the gristle bits and  
Masala Dosa disappear and fleeting ecstasy  
Is replaced by the lull of sedation.  
All at once they rise from the wreckage and  
Labor out the same doors without a thought  
Of gathering the mess—those who work gawk at  
The flurry in front of them and sink in relief  
As the last gob & belly leaves and the dive stills  
Until the next unsightly feed rages the place again.
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And crowding every curved edge.
We scrape the surface clean, neat,
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She was a completely serious person. Even her neighbors would attest to that. The little girl down the hall remembered well the line her mother had polled at for jumping rope incorrectly and that the odd woman in 4B wouldn’t leave her alone until she herself was out of breath from demonstrating. Her next-door neighbors could remember her face, her snout, and the red, at midnight when they’d been having a party and had violated the noise contract she had made them sign. The boy who stocked shelves at the market down the road remembered the way she stood in aisle 3 last Tuesday for an hour comparing the nutrition facts for two juices; he had imagined her debating the pros and cons in the neighborhood. No one took the serious woman seriously. She was a bother and a nuisance. She was after all, a serious woman. Even the neighborhood. No one took the serious woman seriously. She was a bother and a nuisance. She was after all, a serious woman.

That in itself was debatable, since Perry was not technically as much of a person as he was a gerbil at the local pet store. At quarter past three every day, save for Thursdays when there was a gerbil at the local pet store. At quarter past three every day, save for Thursdays when there was a gerbil at the local pet store. At quarter past three every day, save for Thursdays when there was a gerbil at the local pet store. At quarter past three every day, save for Thursdays when there was a gerbil at the local pet store. At quarter past three every day, save for Thursdays when there was a gerbil at the local pet store. At quarter past three every day, save for Thursdays when there was a gerbil at the local pet store. At quarter past three every day, save for Thursdays when there was a gerbil at the local pet store. At quarter past three every day, save for Thursdays when there was a gerbil at the local pet store. 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And yet, in all the ways that she was serious, it made her a laughable character in the neighborhood. No one took the serious woman seriously. She was a bother and a snoot, and the local teenagers were convinced she owned no dog, and sometimes tend to be interested in the pink dog collar, which she picked up, examined, then turned over and dying when 3:15 came and went and the bell didn’t chime nor did the parrot squeak.

So it had come to be that when Perry’s cage was opened and the little girl down the hall remembered the way she stood in aisle 3 last Tuesday for an hour comparing the steamy and red, at midnight when they’d gotten every week since 1982, when Perry had died. She would later picture herself in her plastic covered couch, watching the serious show, while the blue eye gerbil clawed at the cage, longing for her, and then turning over and dying when 3:15 came and went and the bell didn’t chime.

And some bet that she wouldn’t do anything in public because she was, after all, a serious woman. They counted down to 3:15 wildly, and the gum-chewing girl had shrugged and snapped the gum in her mouth apologetically and asked if she would come down to the community pool with their water noodles and play in the pool, but instead imagining her floating in the pool as he fixed the juice display. But mostly they had become the store joke amongst the employees and the regular buying dog food. The little girl down the hall remembered the way she stood in aisle 3 last Tuesday for an hour comparing the steamy and red, at midnight when they’d gotten every week since 1982, when Perry had died.

And this was all fine and dandy and working out so they could tell her the news and watch her reaction. They counted down to 3:15 wildly, and the gum-chewing girl had shrugged and snapped the gum in her mouth apologetically and asked if she would come down to the community pool with their water noodles and play in the pool, but instead imagining her floating in the pool as he fixed the juice display.

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At first it was like he was not there. His presence was known but did not cause a wake much beyond a ripple:

They stood on the side of the city street, next to the meter that begged for change. The pavement looked wet, yet the sky burned orange. She could see his body start to grow thin, his skin turning to crystallized dust, the sun slowly drawing him back up. At the bottom of the hill the water quietly watched, knowing better than to act too soon. She searched her mind for any final words that would cause the particles of his body to grow heavy and fall back down to her feet in a splash. She knew that he knew her and had just simply forgotten, that the sun had entered his pores and dried the little pool of liquid that cased his heart and kept it soft and mutable. She thought of what she could say, what she could communicate that would spark a similar emotion within him, causing her aura to radiate once again. Beauty, a thing she felt and appreciated from the depth of her being; beauty, he would understand.

The surface of the water danced with glitter, like stars pinpricked in the night sky. The cosmos had come to play. The heat of his tongue forced open his mouth and he said, “My favorite thing was the sun.” At first she did not know if she had heard correctly, as his words came too quick and sharp. She asked, “what?” wanting to hear him repeat the words of his essence. And yet again he plainly said, “The sun. My favorite thing was the sun.” The sun-coated Golden Gate Bridge spanned the horizon of her mind, and the water beneath felt no need to compete. For water is the only thing strong enough to extinguish fire's presumably everlasting flames. In the middle of the bridge, where the cables descend to meet, was a setting sun forcefully emitting its rich smoldering color, striving to project it’s burning warmth before sinking into the ocean.
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I

James had a nosebleed. They often happened in the dry New England winter. But the timing was a problem. He was left with no option but to shuffle through the office with a spattered tissue pinned hard on his nose. He stood at the mailroom window and watched Gabrielle walk to the subway. The breath from his mouth made tufts of fog on the glass.

Once he had disappeared, he turned his full attention to the nosebleed. He had been swift with the tissue and firm with his grip; not a drop had spilled on his shirt. But now the blood dripped backwards, leaving his throat raw and his stomach churning.

It was in this state that he returned home, tracking in dirty snow from the sidewalks with his boots. The salt and grit would linger for weeks, scratching the wood floor and clinging to his socks, finally settling in the sheets at the end of his bed.

He turned on the television in the living room and eased into his after-work routine. He placed a Stouffer's shepherd's pie in the oven. He pulled a glass from the dishwasher and filled it with red wine and three ice cubes.

In the living room, James draped a damp facecloth over his forehead. He took a long drink, submerging himself in the white noise of the news. A reporter with a bump like a knuckle in his nose was on the screen. The backdrop to the shot could have been a painting—soft, late afternoon sunlight bouncing off the surface of a narrow river carving through an ancient city.

The facecloth stained a spot on the table and his shepherd's pie burned in the oven as James combed the Internet for more information.

The New York Times: floods in East Asia, suicide bomber kills eight, then:

“SYMBOL OF ROME'S ETERNAL LOVE GOES MISSING”

ROME—Early this morning, Roman residents near the Ponte Milivio, one of the oldest bridges in the city, woke to a terrible sound, like metal and concrete colliding.

Upon investigation, they discovered the unthinkible—the bridge had disappeared, apparently ripped right from the concrete roads it connected.

The Ponte Milivio, known worldwide as a site of romantic pilgrimages, was host to thousands of padlocks. As the tradition went, couples would come to the bridge and lock their love to the fence on it. Afterward, they would toss the key into the Tiber, and their love would remain, forever bound to the bridge. Until now.

Police believe that the perpetrators of this strange crime navigated a massive garbage barge down the narrow stretch of river, crashing right into the bridge and tearing it from its spot. Then the barge—and the bridge—sailed away into the night. As of this evening, neither has been found.”

II

A faint odor of smoke drifted in from the kitchen. Cursing, James closed his laptop and retrieved his blackened dinner.

Unfortunately, the barge that carried the weight of the bridge while also generating its engine's roar to dislodge it. The noise, he thought, would have caused a bump like a knuckle in his nose.

Some have suggested that it may have been an accident, but the specifics of the crash suggest otherwise—a boat would have to have slam into the bridge at top speed to dislodge it.

“In this story many questions have yet to be answered. But perhaps the most baffling of all: why, in a city so renowned for romance, would this icon of love be targeted?”

The complex case navigated a massive garbage barge down the narrow stretch of river, crashing right into the bridge and tearing it from its spot. Then the boat—and the bridge—sailed away into the night. As of this evening, neither has been found.”

James combed the Internet for more information. As the media branded him, was vilified. His tiny house was covered in spray paint. Di Natale's closest friends, who swore to his kindness, were hounded from Ponte's Roman offices. He crossed the bridge twice every day, on his way to and from the docks where he had piloted his fishing boat for the past half century.

III

His regular presence at the office was probably what kept James on the payroll. Some of the most successful salesmen at the company worked from home and never came in at all. As far as James could tell, his attendance seemed to be interpreted as effort—maybe he had lost most of his clients, but he was trying.

Of course, he wasn't trying. He came in because he needed something to get him out of bed in the morning—somewhere to go where other people chatted about nothing, about the upkeep of their lawns; where he could feel up to it, could enter the kitchen and smile at them, seeing the rud-dines of their cheeks and feeling a part of it all, a competent, equal, indistinct grain in the dune.

From his cubicle he could see the elevator bank, and when Gabrielle appeared he sprang to his feet. He strode over as the glossy metal doors opened and slipped in, and then they were alone together.

He looked at her in the reflection of the closed doors. She looked down. She kept distance between them in the small space. She pushed the button for the ground floor even though it was already lit.

“I can't stop thinking about you,” James said.

She reached out and pushed the button again, hard. She acted as though he had said nothing. Her long black hair fell in soft curls on the shoulder of her tan parka. He thought of the freckles on her back.

“Gabrielle,” he said. “I miss you.”

“Goddamnmit, James,” she said in a low hiss.

“Leave me alone. Please.”

The elevator made a sharp ping and the doors slid apart. She was out and down the hall before he could respond. He pressed the button to go back to seventeen. He was all alone in the city.

Back at his desk, he pulled a thermos of white wine—he preferred red, but he couldn't risk staining his mouth—from his briefcase and turned to the news wires. The bridge story still had its hooks in him.

There were new developments. According to an Italian newspaper called Il Parola, the police had identified a suspect. Paolo Di Natale, a 74-year-old retired fisherman had been missing since the night of the incident. When the police examined his home, they found a scrap of paper on his kitchen table with three words scrawled: faccio perché devo.

Faccio perché devo. I do so because I must.

That afternoon the weather deteriorated. The stuttering sprinkle of snow had given way to a near-blizzard, and the commute home was slow.

James navigated the roads at an exhausting crawl, the radio turned loud to drown the crunch of snow underneath the tires. As he'd hoped, NPR was covering the story.

“The concern that some Romans have,” one pund-dit said, his voice deep and slow, “is that this type of gross vandalism could precipitate similar events around the city. Excitable youth’ was the exact term the police chief used.

“The latest breaks suggest something different altogether—that Paolo Di Natale was acting out of bitterness.”

They broke away for station identification and that was the last they spoke of it. When he finally arrived home, he turned on his computer.

As it turned out, Paolo Di Natale lived about five hundred yards from Ponte Romano. He owned the bridge twice every day, on his way to and from the docks where he had piloted his fishing boat for the past half century.

His motive seemed clear. Three years before the incident, to the day, Di Natale’s wife died of an aneurysm. They had been together since they were seventeen. The media drew the conclusion: in a fit of loneliness, Paolo Di Natale had decided that if his love disappeared, the city’s should too.

The Romans were relentless. The Love Thief, as the media branded him, was vilified. His tiny house was covered in spray paint. Di Natale’s closest friends, who swore to his kindness, were hounded from Ponte’s Roman offices. He crossed the bridge twice every day, on his way to and from the docks where he had piloted his fishing boat for the past half century.

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I

James had a nosebleed. They often happened in the dry New England winter. But the timing was a problem. He was left with no option but to shuffle through the office with a spattered tissue pinned hard on his nose. He stood at the mailroom window and watched Gabrielle walk to the subway. The breath from his mouth made tufts of fog on the glass.

Once she had disappeared, he turned his full attention to the nosebleed. He had been swift with the tissue and firm with his grip; not a drop had spilled on his shirt. But now the blood dripped backwards, leaving his throat raw and his stomach churning.

It was in this state that he returned home, tracking in dirty snow from the sidewalks with his boots. The salt and grit would linger for weeks, scratching at the wood floor and clinging to his socks, finally settling in the sheets at the end of his bed.

He turned on the television in the living room and eased into his after-work routine. He placed a Stouffer’s shepherd’s pie in the oven in the kitchen. Cursing, James closed his lap-top and smiled at them, seeing the rudiments of love hanging heavy in the air.

He stood at the mailroom window with a spattered tissue pinched hard on his tan parka. He thought of the freckles on her face, of her laughter, and of the way she kissed him at the end of long days. He turned on the television in the living room and eased into his after-work routine. He placed a Stouffer’s shepherd’s pie in the oven in the kitchen. Cursing, James closed his lap-top and smiled at them, seeing the rudiments of love hanging heavy in the air.

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Police believe that the perpetrator of this baffling crime navigated a massive garbage barge to the bridge. Until now.

II

The Ponte Milivio, known worldwide as a site of romantic pilgrimages, was host to thousands of lovers. They pushed the button for the ground floor even though it was already lit. "I can’t stop thinking about you," James said.

She reached out and pushed the button again, hard. She acted as though he had said nothing. Her long black hair fell in soft curls on the shoulder of her tan parka. He thought of the freckles on her back.

"Gabrielle," he said. "I miss you."

"Goddammit, James," she said in a low hiss. "Leave me alone. Please."

The elevator made a sharp ping and the doors slid apart. She was out and down the hall before he could respond. He pressed the button to go back to seventeen. He was alone in the city.

Back at his desk, he pulled a thermos of white wine—he preferred red, but he couldn’t risk staining his mouth—from his briefcase and turned to the news wires. The bridge story still had its hooks on him.

There were new developments. According to an Italian newspaper called Il Paolino, the police had identified a suspect. Paolo Di Natale, a 74-year-old retired fisherman had been missing since the night of the incident. When the police examined his home, they found a scrap of paper on his kitchen table with three words scribbled: faccio perché dovo.

Faccio perché dovo. I do so because I must.

That afternoon the weather deteriorated. The stuttering sprinkle of snow had given way to a near-blizzard, and the commute home was slow. James navigated the roads at an excruciating crawl, the radio turned loud to drown the crunch of snow beneath the tires. As he’d hoped, NPR was covering the story.

"The concern that some Romans have," one pundit said, his voice deep and slow, "is that this type of gross vandalism could precipitate similar events around the city. Excitable youth was the exact term the police chief used."

"The latest breaks suggest something different altogether—that Paolo Di Natale was acting out of bitterness."

They broke away for station identification and that was the last they spoke of it. When he finally arrived home, he turned on his computer.

As it turned out, Paolo Di Natale lived about five hundred yards from Ponte Romano. He owned the bridge twice every day, on his way to and from the docks where he had piloted his fishing boat for the past half century.

His motive seemed clear. Three years before the incident, to the day, Di Natale’s wife died of an aneurysm. They had been together since they were seventeen. The media drew the conclusion: in a fit of loneliness, Paolo Di Natale had decided that if his love disappeared, the city’s should too.

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James arrived at work the next day with every clipping of the story he could find, assembled carefully in a neat manila folder. On the outside he wrote Gabrielle’s name, and with it under his arm, he marched over to her office.

She wasn’t there. Her computer was on but asleep. He knew he should leave, but he didn’t.

He put the folder down and sat in her chair. The faint aroma of her perfume greeted him, and he closed his eyes, straining to remember the feeling of her skin. On the walls of her small office were pictures of her family, and he examined their faces. Her children—two boys and a girl—smiled back at him. He imagined meeting them.

Her computer was password-protected. He rummaged through her drawers. There wasn’t much; graphs, expense reports, a box of granola bars, tidy rows of pens and Post-Its. He found a plastic hair clip and put it in his pocket, then closed the drawers. He heard her footsteps and rose from her seat.

Her dark eyes met his for a moment before flickering around her office. She stopped on the threshold.

“What are you doing?”

He extended the folder toward her, a smile curling on his lips.

“I brought this for you,” he said.

She looked at the folder but made no motion to take it.

“What is it?”

“It’s a story. A beautiful story. It reminds me of you.”

She looked over her shoulder at the quiet office and stepped in, shutting the door behind her. James felt his heart leap, throwing itself against his ribs.

“Look,” she said. “What happened between us—it was a mistake. A stupid, drunk mistake. Do you get that? Can you grasp that?”

“I’m sorry,” he said again. “I just think that if you read this—”

“I don’t know what happened that night. I don’t remember and I don’t want to know. I won’t let you fuck up my marriage and my family—do you understand me?”

“Gabrielle, I don’t want—”

“If you don’t leave me alone, I will tell Steve and everyone else that you raped me.”

She opened the door and stormed down the hall, leaving him alone in her office once more.

After a moment, he placed the folder on her keyboard and left.

V

At home that evening, he was angry and confused—but his resolve held firm. He knew that all he needed was for her to read the articles. He had seen that side of her during their night together. He was sure the story would enchant her like it had enchanted him.

He drew the curtains and drank. The wine made him warm and brave, and he practiced his responses in the mirror.

“It’s okay,” he said softly to his reflection. “I know you were confused. I was confused, too. That’s all over now.”

When he felt better, he turned back to the news. A security guard at the harbor had come forward. His name was Giuseppe Pazzini. He’d been working the night of the incident.

Pazzini explained: a few hours into his overnight shift, a frail old man approached his security post. His name was Giuseppe Pazzini. He’d been working the night of the incident.

“Young man,” he’d said. “I need to talk to you. I need to ask you something. I need to give you something.”

Pazzini explained: a few hours into his overnight shift, a frail old man approached his security kiosk. The man looked quite sad, Pazzini said.

The man took a small brown package from his coat and placed it on Pazzini’s desk.

“This is five thousand euro,” the man said. “It is half of all the money I have. I need the keys to the biggest barge. You cannot ask me why. I need the keys to the biggest barge. I have a lock of his own on the bridge, after all.”

“I am a lowly night guard,” he said. “That kind of money is more than I can imagine. More than I have ever seen. You must understand,” he pleaded.

The police whisked him away into protective custody.

VI

Gabrielle didn’t come in the next morning. By lunchtime, James had made three trips past her office, but it remained deserted. The folder was gone.

The realization slowly came to him—she was at home, overcome by the power of the story. Just as it had done to him, Di Natale’s story consumed her; it kept her from thinking about anything else. Anything else but us, he reasoned. Our own love story.

James was confident, but he wanted to be sure, so he took the afternoon off. His elation was total, and he carved his way out into the snowy suburbs in peaceful expectation. He turned down the street behind hers, guiding his Volvo to its usual spot in the cul-de-sac.

The drifts of snow were high, but not high enough to block the view through her backyard. Instead, the snow merely obscured most of his car from the view of her back windows. James smiled as he retrieved his camera from the glove compartment. He adjusted the zoom and waited.

He had come to love everything about her house. It was the first clear day in weeks, and the snow-covered cottage was idyllic as it nestled in the snowy hills. It gave him a new appreciation for what he saw, sights that had become so familiar; the simple, rustic decoration of the rooms; the colorful swingset half buried in the snow; her old, sleepy beagle sprawled out before the fireplace.

He felt the house pulling at his core. It took all his strength to stay away.

After some time, Gabrielle appeared in the kitchen. James watched as though it were a dream: under her arm, she carried the manila folder.

She placed the folder on the kitchen island, but when she leaned forward she was just out of view. He threw the car in reverse and backed up. When he raised the lens again, he saw that the folder was open on the counter.

The shutter of the camera clicked quietly as Gabrielle flipped through the articles, chewing on the corner of her thumbnail. He was seeing her from the side, and her expression was hard to read. In a baggy blue t-shirt and sweatpants, James had never seen anything so lovely.

She was turning the pages over too quickly, though; he wondered if she was reading them in entirety. He had chosen their order with painstaking care; her frivolity stirred anger in him. He watched as she snapped the folder shut and laid her face in her hands.

Before he realized what he was doing, James was out of the car. He waded through the white dunes into her backyard, snow piling into his loafers. He needed to comfort her. He was passing the swings when a car pulled into her driveway. He froze in his tracks, crouching low in the snow.

Gabrielle’s husband got out of his car and moved toward the doorway. A shiver ran over James’ skin. He had never met the man, but he felt a dizzying, physical disgust at the sight of him.

James watched as Gabrielle heard the sound of her husband’s car door. She snatched the folder up, and with a glance to the front door, thrust it inside a kitchen cabinet. Her husband entered a second later, and he spoke to her, moved towards her, kissed her. They embraced with their eyes closed, alone in the house. James knelt in the snow in their backyard, hidden behind their swing set, soaking his khakis.

He knew he had to leave. He couldn’t risk being spotted. He didn’t want to be involved. It wasn’t as important—he was out there in the cold for her.

Still, after a few minutes more, he crept back towards his car, drenched to the skin and shivering the whole way home.

He was sure that he had witnessed a turning point. Her decision to hide the folder from her husband—to hide James from her husband—must have meant what he had hoped. He had reached her.

The thought of seeing her the next morning was exhilarating, and after some wine, he couldn’t resist. He dialed her house. After two rings, her husband answered.

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Pazzini explained: a few hours into his over-night shift, a frail old man approached his security kiosk. “The man looked quite sad,” Pazzini said. The man took a small brown package from his coat and placed it on Pazzini’s desk.

“Here is five thousand euro,” the man said. “It is half of all the money I have. I need the keys to the biggest barge. You cannot ask me why. I want you to walk down the road to this address,” he added, handing Pazzini a piece of paper. “In the mailbox, you will find another five thousand euro—the rest of my money. When you return, I will be gone. It will be best for you to forget I ever came. I regret that you had to be involved.”

Pazzini begged for forgiveness. He explained that he never imagined what the man would do. He had a lock of his own on the bridge, after all. “I am a lowly night guard,” he said. “That kind of money is more than I can imagine. More than I have ever seen. You must understand,” he pleaded. The police whisked him away into protective custody.

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“Hello?” His voice was high and grating. James
wondered how she could stomach such a mouse of a man. "Hello?" he said again. James wanted to humiliate him, to tell him about the night with Gabrielle, but he held back. He hung up and went to bed.

VII

At his desk the next morning, James drank greedily from his thermos. He answered emails with haste, made a few cold calls, and watched a spider knit a web in the corner of his cubicle. He heard a sound behind him. It was Harold. Harold was the closest thing that James had to a friend in the office. He was fat and slovenly; they were united in their alienation.

"Hey, James," Harold said. "Steve wants to see you in his office."

"He does?" James said nervously. "Do you know why?"

"No," Harold said. "Gabrielle's in there with him. And Cody from HR."

"Thanks, Harold," James said. Turning back to his computer, he felt dizzy and weak. He couldn't believe it. But he knew what he needed to do.

He gathered his things quickly, shoving papers into his tattered briefcase. He crouched as he stood, careful to keep his head below the short walls of his cubicle. With his coat and hat on, with his briefcase in hand, he fled; out through the back of the office, down the seventeen flights of stairs and out into the frozen city.

VII

He sat at the terminal bar, nursing a cocktail, trying to get the bartender's attention.

"What can I get for you, sir?"

"Another of these, please. And, if it's possible, could we get the news on one of these TVs?"

"Of course."

CNN came on, and James watched scenes of a protest in Syria. Women with children stood crying in the streets. Ragtag groups of men chanting, thrusting their weapons into the rusty sky.

He thought about Pazzini, alone in some holding cell, hidden from the wrath of the city. He wondered where Di Natale was, if he knew what had happened, if somewhere he was watching the story unfold just like James.

James waved down the bartender again.

"I know this is a strange request, but if they start talking about a guy and a bridge in Rome, could you yell to me? I'll be right over there."

"Sure thing."

James walked over to the airport window, a wall of thick glass. He watched the men below, flecks of orange hustling around the runway in the ash grey air.

"Hey, bridge guy?" the bartender called.

James rushed over and took a stool.

"It's been a tantalizing story, sparking debate all around the world," a woman reported, standing in the spot where he had first heard the news. "And we have it here—a CNN exclusive—the last chapter of the tale of the Love Thief."

The screen cut to a picture of a small old man with stark white hair, escorted by police through a thick crowd of people, flashbulbs blazing in his face.

"Paolo Di Natale, the man who allegedly stole a Roman bridge, came forward early this morning."

Di Natale stood at a simple wooden podium, Italian and Roman flags draped on the wall behind him. He looked exhausted, and dirt smeared the front of his simple white shirt. He spoke in soft, steady Italian, and after a moment, an interpreter's voice translated:

"My name is Paolo. I know that in the past four days I have caused many of you pain. For that, I am sorry. I am an old man with a loud heart. Sometimes I must listen to it. I only ask that you listen to me."

"When I was young, I met a woman. She was the most beautiful thing I ever seen, and we fell in love. We married and began our new life. For fifty years, we experienced everything together. We shared the simplicity of sunrises. We shared the magic of a good meal with friends. We shared the curse of being unable to bear a child."

"We did not have much money, but we were happy. Every morning I kissed her goodbye and crossed Ponte Milivio to work. Every night I crossed back and came home to her."

"One night, I returned home and she was on the floor in the kitchen. I do not ask for sympathy. She lived long, and she lived beautifully. In time, I learned to live alone, to live as half a man. I still had things that I loved: my boat, the water, my friends. Someday I would join her, I knew."

"But one thing haunted me: Ponte Milivio. You see, my wife and I put a lock on that bridge years ago, before many of you were born. I loved that bridge and I loved walking past our lock."

"Until one day a few months ago, when I was traveling home and noticed something. The lock was rusting. The wind and rain were taking their toll. I looked at all the locks. All of them, slowly, were rusting."

"I am no fool. I know that the lock must have been rusting for years and years before her death, I just never noticed before. But that didn't matter. With her gone, the lock was all that tied me to her, and someday soon it would fall. Someday soon I would walk past and it would be gone."

"I have learned to live with heartbreaking. It is something we all must do. I could have watched the lock disappear and I would have been okay."

"What I could not bear was the thought of others learning what I had learned about the bridge: that there was no magic at all. Nature was not a romantic."

"So I took the money I had saved throughout my life and I went to the harbor. I cannot express enough my sympathy towards Signore Pazzini. He did what any man in tough times would do."

"Then I sailed to the bridge. Just like I dreamt, it came loose like a tooth, and with it, I fled. Many will curse what I have done. I don't blame them. Hopefully, some may understand."

"The bridge with your locks on it is forever gone. They will decay and fall off, like leaves in the autumn. But the memory of the moment when you closed the neck of your lock around that most beautiful thing was strong. Untouched by wind and water. Perfect for as long as you live."

"That is my gift to you."

"And then Paolo Di Natale walked off screen.

VIII

During the flight, he reviewed his clippings, taking care to highlight aspects of the story in different colors based on their category—Di Natale, Pazzini, the citizens.

He wrote two letters. The first was to Steve, explaining his innocence and resigning from his position. He was cordial and brief, thanking Steve for the opportunity. The second was to Gabrielle.

James explained that he forgave her. He knew that she was confused and didn't want to hurt her husband—he understood that those other things had clouded her judgment and distorted the way she saw him. He told her that he would wait for her and that he would always love her. He enclosed a poem he had written about the night they spent together, and then he sealed the envelope.

When the flight landed in Rome late that night, he spoke to the Tourist Information desk and found a bed and breakfast not far from Ponte Milivio. After a peaceful night's sleep, he set out on his pilgrimage. He made his way down the cobblestone roads, smiling as he picked his route on the map. He rounded a corner, and with Gabrielle's hair clip clenching safely in his hand, he saw the gleam of the morning sun off the Tiber for the first time.
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of thick glass. He watched the men below, flecks 
of orange hustling around the runway in the ash 
grey air.

“Hey, bridge guy?” the bartender called.

James rushed over and took a stool.

“It’s been a tantalizing story, sparking debate 
around the world,” a woman reported, standing in 
the spot where he had first heard the news. “And 
we have it here—a CNN exclusive—the last chap-
ter of the tale of the Love Thief.”

The screen cut to a picture of a small old man 
with stark white hair, escorted by police through 
a thick crowd of people, flashbulbs blazing in his 
face.

“Paolo Di Natale, the man who allegedly stole 
a Roman bridge, came forward early this morn-
ing.”

Di Natale stood at a simple wooden podium, 
Italian and Roman flags draped on the wall be-
hind him. He looked exhausted, and dirt smeared 
the front of his simple white shirt. He spoke in 
soft, steady Italian, and after a moment, an inter-
preter’s voice translated:

“My name is Paolo. I know that in the past four 
days I have caused many of you pain. For that, 
I am sorry. I am an old man with a loud heart. 
Sometimes I must listen to it. I only ask that you 
listen to me.

When I was young, I met a woman. She was 
the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen, and we fell 
in love. We married and began our new life. For 
fifty years, we experienced everything together. 
We shared the simplicity of sunrises. We shared 
the magic of a good meal with friends. We shared 
the curse of being unable to bear a child.

“We did not have much money, but we were 
happy. Every morning I kissed her goodbye and 
crossed Ponte Milivio to work. Every night I 
crossed back and came home to her.

“One night, I returned home and she was on 
the floor in the kitchen. I do not ask for sympathy. 
She lived long, and she lived beautifully. In time, 
I learned to live alone, to live as half a man. I still 
thinks that I loved: my boat, the water, my 
VIII

During the flight, he reviewed his clippings, tak-
ing care to highlight aspects of the story in dif-

ferent colors based on their category—Di Natale, 
Pazzini, the citizens.

He wrote two letters. The first was to Steve, 
explaining his innocence and resigning from his 
position. He was cordial and brief, thanking Steve 
for the opportunity. The second was to Gabrielle.

James explained that he forgave her. He knew 
that she was confused and didn’t want to hurt her 
husband—he understood that those other things 
had clouded her judgment and distorted the way 
she saw him. He told her that he would wait for 
her and that he would always love her. He en-
closed a poem he had written about the night they 
spent together, and then he sealed the envelope.

When the flight landed in Rome late that night, 
he spoke to the Tourist Information desk and 
found a bed and breakfast not far from Ponte 
Milivio. After a peaceful night’s sleep, he set out 
on his pilgrimage. He made his way down the 
cobblestone roads, smiling as he picked his route 
onto the map. He rounded a corner, and with Gabri-
elle’s hair clip clenched safely in his hand, he saw 
the gleam of the morning sun off the Tiber for 
the first time.

IX

Di Natale was sentenced to ten years in a local 
Jail, but after a few months of his sentence, he 
died. A brief story in the Times reported that his 
death was a natural one. He was buried alongside 
his wife.

Neither Ponte Milivio nor the barge were ever 
found. Their whereabouts died with Paolo.

At the spot where the bridge once stood, the 
holes on both sides of the river remained. In a 
city council vote, four fifths of the representatives 
moved to not repair the damage or rebuild the 
bridge.

With no bridge in place, residents found new 
routes across the river. In the summer, what was 
once a major trade waterway became a clean 
stretch of water. Children swam and played while 
parents chattered happily, feet dangling from the 
sides of the road. When the sun shined, you could 
just see the shimmering of thousands of tiny keys 
below.
I'm not sure why I used to hate pets; then again, it might have come from my first experience with them. When I was nine years old, I visited my cousins in Washington D.C. They owned two dogs, Lucky and Belle. “Lucky has a very interesting story,” my aunt would always say. “Our friends found her hiding in the bushes during a thunderstorm so they decided to take her in. She’s terrified of thunderstorms now.” Lucky spent one night in the basement with me during a storm, huddled at the foot of my bed so that I was unable to stretch my legs. She would also yap incessantly at visitors. “The Watchdog,” they called her endearingly.

Belle didn’t have an interesting story; she didn’t really have a story at all. This dog was too old to have a story. My aunt’s husband might have owned her before they met. Or they might have bought her before they decided upon whether or not to have kids, as a sort of test-run. Either way, Belle had become a beast. She crept around the house, wheezing and drooling; I never saw her walk, yet she slowly managed to travel from one corner of the room to another. Her fur seemed to absorb the dirt on the floor, although at times I had the feeling that it was the other way around and couldn’t help imagining her leaving behind a trail of mucus, brown and moist like the stringy hairs dangling from her mouth. Every evening my aunt would lather a pill in peanut butter and put it in Belle’s dog bowl. While Belle ate the peanut butter my aunt would kneel down and rub the old dog’s anus with a cream. “She has a benign tumor on her butt,” my aunt told me. “She’s been getting them for years. They won’t harm her, but they will make her uncomfortable.” So I guess that was Belle’s story; she had a history of rear-end tumors.

One time I found Belle puking on the wooden living room floor. When I saw my aunt I said, “Your dog—he puked on the floor.”

“It’s a she,” my aunt said. “It happens sometimes. She can’t always stomach her food. I guess she’s getting older.” To me it was not a she. The last thing I would ever associate this curly, moldy mass with was a female. And yet every time I mentioned the ugly creature, which was only the few times she puked and the time I found her dead under my dresser, I would immediately be corrected. “It’s a she!” The whole family chorused while running into the guest room to see their furry family member on her back, her dirty mouth shut, with froth dripping from the sides, her stiff legs in the air. I’m sorry, it’s a she. Forgive me for not being able to tell that this filthy, scrawny wretch is a female and not a male; how rude of me to not seek out her genitals and determine the correct gender of your dog before mentioning her.

A few years later they visited my grandmother and me in the city. While I was setting the table for dinner they brought up Lucky. “Lucky died,” the boys said. “She barked herself to death.”

“That’s right,” my aunt laughed. “She was barking and barking at the construction workers who were redoing our kitchen, and all of a sudden she fell over and that was it.”

“Poor Watchdog,” my uncle finished. “She spent her whole time with us thinking we were in constant danger.” They chuckled.

“How cute,” I said. I was surprised at how comical they found Lucky’s death; I remember how dramatically they had reacted to when they found Belle. Personally, I thought she looked quite funny as she lay staring up at the dusty, wooden board under my dresser. She had rigor mortis, and we had to tilt the dresser to the side while my uncle fished out her hard body with a rake because we couldn’t get her out otherwise. When she emerged under the rake’s metal comb my aunt said “Oh, Christ!” and the boys began to cry. My uncle ran out of the room, leaving us with Belle, and hurried back carrying a pillowcase, into which he tried stuffing her. After he spent about thirty seconds trying to fit the dog into the pillowcase, during which we watched him, my cousins
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crying softly, he was still unable to keep her hind legs and her rosy, fleshly anus from sticking out, so he finally took her out of the pillowcase by the tail and threw her onto the guest bed. Her hind paw grazed his arm and he let out a small, nervous squeal of disgust and quickly drew back his arm. This made the boys cry even harder. He undid the sheet on the bed and wrapped it around Belle. “We’ll get you a new sheet,” he said to me as he picked up the solid mass in the white bed sheet. It was raining outside. My uncle didn’t want to dig a grave immediately, so they put Belle’s carcass outside of the back door under a small awning. My cousins and I watched the dead, loosely wrapped body from the living room until the sun went down, its makeshift shroud fluttering in the wind.

But nobody found Belle’s death funny the way I did, in fact my uncle scolded me when I laughed after my youngest cousin asked, “Why is she looking at me like that?” Perhaps by the time Lucky died they had gotten a little more used to the idea of death; or maybe they were simply unable to deny the humorously of the situation, so they decided to approach death with a sense of it being worth. Or maybe they saw my reaction to Belle’s death and were inspired by how unaffected I was, and wanted to emulate that in order to keep from mourning. This happened to me often; I am unsure why, but for some reason I was incapable of feeling any deep emotions. Even during the last time I visited the health clinic, I didn’t feel any different than any other day of the year. Even when I told the doctor about the antibiotics, and how they didn’t seem to have helped, even when I sensed him becoming more nervous. “In that case,” he said, his eyes fixed on his computer screen, “I don’t think it would be unwise to see a urologist.” He was trying to remain calm. “I think he’ll have a better say in this matter than me.”

“I mean; I have an appointment.”

I put my book down and went to the bathroom. When I came back, Peter was still sitting there. I sat down and opened to where I had stopped reading. Peter was silent for a long time. I looked up after a while and asked him if he was looking at the empty seat across from him. I sensed his mood getting progressively worse. His head was nodding back and forth, and through his glasses it seemed as if he was staring blankly ahead. He was chewing on his lower lip. I knew he wanted to say something. I could feel people looking at us in the common area of the music school.

“Let’s talk somewhere else,” I said finally.

We went into a room with a piano. Peter walked up to it and turned to face me. He touched the lid of the piano with one hand and began sliding his forefinger to and fro on the lacquer. His hand lightly grazed his pocket. He stood with his right foot protruding slightly in front of him. He wasn’t looking directly at me; his gaze fell slightly to my left. We stood in silence for a while. His upper body was still rocking back and forth. Tears began welling up in his eyes. Something about the way he was standing gave me the feeling for a moment as if I would laugh. I thought about all the times Peter was in tears. The first few times I asked him what was wrong, but he never told me. Sometimes, after several minutes of not speaking, he would say something terse and a bit confusing. One time he said “I don’t want to sound stupid in front of you.” Another time he said, “I don’t think I’ll ever be sad.” After a while I gave up trying to console him.

Finally, Peter opened his mouth and breathed in. “It’s just, I’ve—,” he began. “I’m too old now to fuck things up,” I stared at him. He was breathing heavily.

“I just want people to listen to me. I have so much to say. But nobody wants to hear it. I just want to tell people about what I know. I want friends that I can teach. But nobody wants to be my friend.” His voice turned into a loud whisper. “And I’m too old now. I’m too old for this.”

Peter, I can help you.”

I didn’t mean to sound insensitive. His crying had always made me think of some kind of steam-powered machine. He hiccupped and coughed on his own saliva. I still felt at that moment as if I would burst out laughing at any second. I decided to talk in order to distract myself.

“Peter, when did you lose your pa?”

“Emile became engaged to Sophie. It must have hurt Rousseau quite a bit to see his son so angry with him. He was just trying to help.”

Something happened a few moments after I finished speaking. I can’t explain it, but something inside of Peter seemed to click into place. Thinking back on it now, I feel like I can hear it. He was staring at me and something clicked inside of him.

“Peter, Rousseau had five children with his maid Anteo,” I paused. “When Emile became engaged to Sophie that he would end up living just for her.”

Peter was looking me in the eyes. He was still breathing heavily, but he had stopped crying.

“Emile became furious with his father and he couldn’t enjoy the trip because he constantly longed for Sophie. It must have hurt Rousseau quite a bit to see his son so angry with him. He was just trying to help.”

Michelle arrived, and then Sarah came with her friends and we had dinner. I could feel Sarah looking at me, but I didn’t look back. Once we had finished eating, my friends left the table and moved around my apartment. I cleared the plates and went to open a bottle of wine.

“Look how much you spilled!” Sarah said, grabbing a sponge and kneeling under the table. “Will you ever be able to just talk without moving so much?”

“Maybe, if the topic isn’t interesting. You really don’t have to clean that up, I can do it.” I leaned against the sink and watched her clean my spill on her hands and knees. She wanted me to look at her with her rear end sticking out, so I did.

“That must be what you said to the girl who tried to clean up your coffee spill. And your beer stain. Anteo, your floor is disgusting!”

“Well I figured you’d come by eventually and tidy up.” Sarah crawled out from under the table and walked towards me. She dropped the sponge in the sink and reached for a cup on the shelf above my head. She found one and brought it down, then paused.

“What’s that on your neck?” She asked. I thought
"I didn’t mean to sound insensitive. His crying had always made me think of some kind of steam-powered machine. He hiccuped and coughed on his own saliva. I still felt at that moment as if I would burst out laughing at any second. I decided to talk in order to distract myself. I said, “When Emile became engaged to Sophie, Rousseau took him on a trip around the world.” I thought about what I was going to say.

“He wanted Emile to learn to enjoy life as an independent individual. He didn’t want him to become too attached to Sophie that he would end up living just for her.”

Peter was looking me in the eyes. He was still breathing heavily, but he had stopped crying. Emile became furious with his father and he couldn’t enjoy the trip because he constantly longed for Sophie. It must have hurt Rousseau quite a bit to see his son so angry with him. He was just trying to help.”

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“Peter, Rousseau had five children with his maid and gave them all up for adoption. He never raised a son, so why did he write a work documenting the ideal upbringing of one? What could Rousseau possibly know about raising a kid? I’m your friend, Peter. You shouldn’t be afraid of fucking things up with me. I was kidding about the emotional little Peter thing. You know I’m just joking.”

Peter sat down on the piano bench. He took off his glasses and began cleaning them with the bottom of his shirt.

“How old was Emile when he married Sophie?”

He asked.

“Maybe you should clean my apartment; Andrew’s coming tomorrow.”

I thought he wouldn’t be here until August.”

“I know. We decided that it would be better if he came as soon as possible.”

“Ah ok.”

I walked the left and I tended to the rice: the water had evaporated and some of the rice had burned and was sticking to the bottom of the pot. Peter arrived, and then Sarah came with her friends and we had dinner. I could feel Sarah looking at me, but I didn’t look back. Once we had finished eating, my friends left the table and moved around my apartment. I cleared the plates and went to open a bottle of wine.

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“What’s that on your neck?” She asked.

He looked at me again. Sometimes his head reminded me of a baby’s bottom. I have no recollection of ever seeing a baby’s bottom, but there was something about Peter’s plump, hairless cheeks that made me envision a pair of soft little buttocks. We stayed in the room for another hour because I began to explain my situation. I told him about the first time it happened, the first time I visited the doctor, the false diagnosis, and how I’d be seeing a urologist tomorrow and would have to rinse myself.

That night I made a large dinner and invited my friends. As I was boiling water, Michelle arrived, and as the rice was cooking, we went into my bedroom.

“Are you sure you don’t want to stay for dinner?” I asked her afterwards.

“I’m sorry. I should clean my apartment; Andrew’s coming tomorrow.”

“Okay.”
I saw her smiling.

"I don't know, perhaps it's a wine stain." I realized that she wasn't fully smiling. It seemed as if her eyes were smiling and her mouth was frowning.

"Did you clean the sheets?"

"Sarah, come on." She paused again. Then she pressed her empty cup against my chest.

"Gimme." Her eyes were fixed on mine.

"First, he giveth." I said. I smiled and poured the wine into her cup.

I went to the urologist's office the next day. As I was waiting for my name to be called, I began to feel uncomfortable. I couldn't figure out why, until I imagined a nurse opening the doors in front of me and calling out my name; I didn't want to meet Dr. Oates. I didn't want him to assess my situation. I started feeling dizzy. I focused on an empty chair next to the sink. I sat down on the countertop by the sink where he had put his clipboard. He was moving quickly, but he looked confused.

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The entire check must have lasted less than twenty seconds.

"Yeah, there's nothing out of the ordinary, you can put your trousers back on." He moved back to the counteropt by the sink where he had put his clipboard. "You know, I've always loved music, I've just never been good at it."

"Well, I wanted to be a doctor once, but I never have any patients."

Dr. Oates didn't laugh. "What I've always liked to see was someone playing an instrument like the drums and to see how they were putting all their energy into it. It's a visual thing for me as well as an auditory one. You know, I really think seeing someone play with passion is inspiring."

"You should look into African music then," I said. "It was a problem in my pants. I'm pretty sure it's a plumbing problem or something like that, I didn't mean to—I didn't know it was a joke." Her and her husband exchanged glances.

"Fix what?" His mother asked.

"Nothing really, I had a slight problem."

"Oh, with what?"

"It was a problem in my pants. I'm pretty sure it's a plumbing problem or something like that, I didn't mean to—I didn't know it was a joke." Her and her husband exchanged glances.

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I took off my jacket and my sunglasses fell out. I picked them up and put them back into my jacket pocket. The plastic tiles on the floor seemed out. I picked them up and put them back into my pocket. The clipboard. "You know, I've always loved music, I've just never been good at it. So I received your information from Dr. Macdonald." He stopped flipping through the pages on his clipboard and looked up at me. You know, there's really no—I mean, how old are you? Twenty? Yeah, I mean, you're forever young.

He shook his head vigorously. "You have had no previous incidents like this, you're not a sixty-year-old man with prostate cancer, there's really nothing to worry about here."

He put his clipboard down on the countertop next to the sink.

I was standing in my briefs looking at him and nodding my head.

"This kind of thing can happen, it goes away after a few months; it's a self-limited symptom. But since you're here, I mean why don't we just triple check."

The entire check must have lasted less than twenty seconds.

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Dr. Oates looked at me. "There's so much simultaneous drumming and dancing and singing; the players move in a way that compliments what they are playing. Most of the traditional music there is based on moving and expending energy, in sort of an effort to reach a moment of catharsis. It's meant to inspire the audience to want to move, you know, to dance." My arms were moving with my words; I felt like I was lifting myself off of the ground.

I followed him out of the room and talked about a few more aspects of African music. I began telling him about my theory of how the African musical aesthetic not only still exists in popular music, but has also remained completely in tact over the course of hundreds of years. He interrupted me when we arrived at the doors to the waiting room.

"Alright, Anteo, thanks for stopping by, when I see you in five years at the Grammys you'll have forgotten all about this episode."

I left through the Medical Center's large revolving door and headed towards the bus that was resting on the corner of the street. As I walked along the facade of the enormous building, I passed a line of about ten men and women in wheelchairs, sitting quietly, each one looking at the back of the next one's head, the first one in line waiting for an employee to open the handicapped entrance door.

When I got back, I met Peter at the deli across from our school. He was in his tuxedo shirt, with which he had unbuttoned halfway down. He was sitting at a table with his parents. I went over and introduced myself and apologized again for not being able to make it to his recital.

"It's fine. Did they fix it?"

"Fix what?" His mother asked.

"Nothing really, I had a slight problem." "Oh, with what?"

"It was a problem in my pants. I'm pretty sure it's fixed, though," Peter's mother blushed. "I'm sorry, I thought it was a plumbing problem or something like that, I didn't mean to—I didn't know it was a joke." Her and her husband exchanged glances. Peter and I began to laugh. He was chewing on his food and put his sandwich down to hold his napkin in front of his mouth. We kept looking at each other and making each other laugh harder, and with each breath it became more difficult to stop. When we finally calmed down, I watched the family finish their food. I asked Peter's father what their plans were while they were visiting. He told me he had gotten in touch with someone who had a broken Victrola from 1927 that he was going to purchase. "I'll fix it when I get home," he said. "I have a large collection of old phonographs and radios."

I thought back to the scene of the people in the wheelchairs from before. Looking back on it now, I can only make out a few details about the individuals; there might have been an old woman with spots on her face, wheezing and drooling like my aunt's dog Belle; I think I saw a young Caucasian man with Down syndrome. But when I tried bringing the scene into my mind at that moment in the deli with Peter and his parents, for some reason I couldn't help but see the faces of girls I've slept with. Recently, I found out Peter was visiting the city. I called him to ask if it was true.

"Yeah it is, but I'm leaving today. I'm heading to the airport soon."

"Do you have time for a coffee? Where are you?"

"I'm downtown. My ride is coming in a few minutes."

"How long were you here for?"

"About two weeks. I was visiting my uncle, he's sick."

"Why didn't you call me?" There was a pause.

"What?"

"I said why didn't you call me? I was beginning to raise my voice; I looked around.

"I forgot, I'm sorry. I'll let you know next time I come."

"Ok, yeah, that sounds good. Please don't forget."

"I won't. My car service is here. I'll call you next time I come."

I hung up. I was on West 86th Street, facing a shop window in which I could see my reflection. I stood on the sidewalk and looked into my reflection until I noticed the shop clerk looking back at me from inside. I turned and walked towards 85th Street. I felt uncomfortable not seeing Peter although he was so close by. I began having a hard time swallowing. Then slowly my vision changed; the lights on the movie theatre in front of me began to smear. I could feel people looking at me; I passed a young boy in a red shirt. His mother lightly pulled at his hand and he drifted out of my sight. Everything in front of me was coated with a wet luster.
My eyes are wide;
imagine my disappointment
when the sun went out.

I imagined sleep,
and it left metal in my mouth
in absence of a kiss.

But when the road broke
my eyes stung
and the weight shifted
from my shoulder to my chest.
Indenting my bones,
it left lines in the skin of my sentiment.

One hundred miles to drive;
I will be dust in the end.
My eyes are wide; imagine my disappointment when the sun went out.

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One hundred miles to drive; I will be dust in the end.
We all like to think we'd be the hero if the sky was falling, but instead we end up running away. It's as if everyone's built your head up to the point where you're running from a storm, but that you're running on a cloud. I expected instant relief, though I suppose I knew it didn't work that way. I moaned, took the car keys, and walked out the door.

Shelby rustled in my arms; she carefully clasp of her bra. "Henry," she repeated, "I'm named after a city in Ohio. So is my sister, Akron, and even the dog. But I'm just going to say, for the record, that we live in Roundup, Montana—not anywhere in Ohio, and no, we never lived in Iowa. I've never been out of fucking Roundup; my name is a constant reminder of how much my life blows. Our parents named us for the city where we were conceived—too much information, I know—and the dog, well, I don't know, you'd have to ask them.

But just like our hairline—her hair smelled like flowers—and the way they left me, "at least let me drive you." It's a block away. I'll walk.

"Shelby—" "Henry." She turned to look at me, pulling down her creased waitress uniform, that serious look plastered all over. "I'll walk." She picked up her bag while she tried to put on her flip-flops, which caused her to wobble a bit. She walked to the door, held the handle firmly in her hand, and then turned back to me. "Come by the diner later," she said, "we need to talk."

My pink shoes are my favorite. Mama says they aren't as practical as sneakers, but they sure ain't as ugly as them either. I sipped on the straw coming out of my chocolate milk as I swung my legs underneath the booth so that my pink shoes ding on the backboard. I don't know what time it is, no one's gotten around to teaching me how to read a clock yet. Next week, Mama says, or sometimes when she's tired, she says, 'who needs to learn it?' Mama says that Daddy might teach me, but he don't live with us no more, and he ain't dead either, he's just gone. So I don't think he'll be teaching me nothing.

The school is only a couple of streets away from the diner, so I come with Mama in the morning, drink my chocolate milk, and go to school. Today, I squeak as I move in the booth because I'm zipped into my blue raincoat. Mama says, "I know you might not make any sense to take it off just to put it back on again. I like school—I think. I mean, they've got markers that actually work and if you're really good, Ms. Johnson will give you a sticker. Mama says it ain't nice to brag, but I have the most stickers in the whole class.

The chocolate milk is gone, but I suck at the straw, for a moment, listening to the loud yelping sound it makes and I wait for Mama to yell for me to stop it. But she doesn't, no one seems to be paying attention. I grab my pink backpack, shove the glass across the tabletop, and push myself from the booth. Mama tells me to say I love you before I say goodbye. Mama says to always let her know where I'm going. I march to the door like one of those little tin soldiers at Christmas time; I twist the handle and push it open. I step outside and breathe in the wet air; I don't listen to everything Mama says.
We all like to think we’d be the hero if the sky was falling, but instead we end up running away. It’s as if everyone’s built you up in your mind so that you’re anything but when the sky tumbles down so do you. They thought I’d save them. They thought I would get help. And inside I wanted to save them, but instead I tried to save myself.

IRENE

I had a headache. I kept a hand pressed to my forehead as I milled around the kitchen, waiting for the Advil to kick in. It was only 7 AM. I had the whole rest of the damn day to get through, and already the sky was frowning with a brewing thunderstorm. I wasn’t in the mood to deal with umbrellas and soggy menus. But then again, I wasn’t in the mood to have a damn headache.

I barely had my GED, but I tried to reason what the harm was in taking another pill—how much could one little pill hurt? This seemed to satisfy me, so I lifted my hand from my head to cheat the childproof container and proceeded to swallow the pill. I expected instant relief, though I suppose I knew it didn’t work that way. I moaned, took the car keys, and walked out the door.

HENRY

Before I knew it, I was awake. It felt like I’d never slept and like I’d never woken up at the same time. Maybe because it was still dark in her room, or maybe because she was still lying in my arms, silently inhaling and exhaling.

My lips moved toward the base of her hairline—her hair smelled like flowers—and kissed her softly at the top of her neck. Shelby rustled in my arms; she carefully slid herself on her back and turned her head to look at me.

“Hey,” I said to her, grinning. Her eyes squinted at me for a moment, and I wondered what she was thinking—regret, perhaps. “Hey,” she said slowly. She stretched beneath the sheets, then relaxed and sighed as she turned her head to face the clock. She turned back to me, a grimace where a smile should have been, and said, “Wait,” I called out as I watched her collect the sheets around her tiny body and slip from the bed. “I’ll make you breakfast.”

She looked at me seriously, dropping the sheets to collect her clothes on the ground. “Henry, not this morning.”

“Shelby—”

“Henry.” She turned to look at me, pulling down her creased waitress uniform, that serious look plastered all over. “I’ll walk.” She picked up her bag while she tried to put on her flip-flops, which caused her to wobble a bit. She walked to the door, held the handle firmly in her hand, and then turned back to me. “Come by the diner later,” she said, “we need to talk.”

HARRIET

My pink shoes are my favorite. Mama says they aren’t as practical as sneakers, but they sure ain’t as ugly as them either. I sipped on the straw coming out of my chocolate milk as I swung my legs ungracefully underneath the booth so that my pink shoes and white apron didn’t show. “Hey Etta,” Shelby called out, lifting a hand in a hello.

ETTA

By the time I finished my cigarette and slid in the backdoors of the diner, Harriet was gone. Shit, I thought to myself, mother of the year—again. I picked up the empty glass of chocolate milk, thinking of her little hands around it, then I wiped the counter clean with a dishrag and looked up at the sound of the door opening.

“Hey Etta,” Shelby called out, lifting a hand in a hello.

“Hey,” I said back, smiling. “How are you? How’s Henry?”

She made a noise, almost like when you’re about to barf. “Don’t ask,” she said dismissively.

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“Hey Etta,” Shelby called out, lifting a hand in a hello.

“Don’t ask,” she said dismissively. “What is that supposed to mean?”

Shelby took an apron off the hook and tied it around her waist. “It means I’m nineteen and the boy wants to get married and have the whole fucking golden retriever and white picket fence.”

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“And you said—”

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Shelby took an apron off the hook and tied it around her waist. “It means I’m nineteen and the boy wants to get married and have the whole fucking golden retriever and white picket fence.”
“What in life is what we want?” I asked.

“He loves me,” she said quietly.

“But not enough.”

Shelby was moving towards me, her hands hung loosely in front of her just like how my daughter’s did. “No,” she said, “I don’t love him enough.”

Anyone in Roundup can tell you that a thunderstorm is anything but innocent. It’s suspect from the moment it rolls overhead; those raindrops hitting your head aren’t going to be harmless by the end of the day. Everyone knows that.

There should have been panic. Should have been premonition at least. But maybe folks weren’t paying attention, they sure as hell didn’t think twice about what might happen, everyone was so tangled in their own lives.

Nobody was ready. Some were in mid-conversations, others halfway done their bacon and eggs. Some weren’t quite finished reciting the alphabet, others halfway done their bacon and eggs. They were in their own lives. I was paying attention, they sure as hell didn’t think twice.

I turned around, still sliding myself from my raincoat, as Irene burst through the front door. I had arrived a second earlier, well; truthfully, I had just followed Shelby when she left, stalking her from a block behind.

“Tornado,” she screamed, “here it comes.” Irene turned to me, seemingly unable to inhale, and began to raise her arms and flap them at me. “Go,” she fumbled with her words breathlessly, “go and hide.”

I turned to the rest of the diner, which consisted of Shelby standing at the counter with a hand on the pocket of her apron, mouth slightly open, and Etta, who stood panic-stricken with a cup at her feet, a small straw on the ground with a tiny river of chocolate milk making it’s way across the floor.

Irene ran for Etta, murmuring prayers, took her by the hand as she shoved Shelby at me, “Storage room,” she instructed, “we’ll go to the cellar.”

Shelby and I stood shoulder to shoulder like statues, neither here nor there, but she looped her arm through mine and began to pull me towards the back stairs. We moved like a snake—whichever way she tried to run I lagged behind; we were a syncopated harmony, not making music but obstacles. Her grip was tight enough to pull me along, but not solid, not like how I would hold her hand, as if letting me go would be as easy as holding on.

We barreled down the stairs, she pulled and we went to the left. I saw a door with ‘storage room’ written on it. “Get in,” she said as she released the door from the hinges, “get in.”

I obliged, whatever she said, I did. Her arm slipped from my own, but I grabbed her hand at the last second, pulling her to the ground with me. She looked at me with confusion, and tenderness, or rather a pity, but she did not fight my attempt at acting like a man. Instead she waved her fingers through mine.

I saw some boxes of beer next to me and suddenly felt the overwhelming need to drink it. I ripped the box open with my free hand and rescued two bottles, setting them down in front of us. I passed one to Shelby first. She looked at it forlornly, and I snapped the cap off of mine with my teeth.

Shelby removed her fingers from mine, one by one, and took the beer in her hand, the other hand knew something was coming. I stood in the doorframe panting, my eyes wild and big, “Tornado,” I screamed, “here it comes.”

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“Here,” she said finally, looking down but handling me the beer, “I’m pregnant.”

Kick and chase, kick and chase. The pebble bumps along the sidewalk and it reminds me of how Mama can skip a rock on water. My pink shoes pound on the ground, my hands clapped on the straps of my backpack, the wind licks the side of my face. I pull my foot back, and the kick the rock two squares ahead.

Step on a crack, break your mother’s back. I jump back from the crack splitting the sidewalk; my heart feels like a racecar under my shirt. I ain’t stupid, but I don’t think it should people should go around stepping on cracks and walking under ladders and stuff to see if bad stuff will happen to them. That don’t make no sense.

The chocolate milk sloshing in my belly makes it sore suddenly. I think about throwing up for a second and then, before I know it, I’ve puked all over my pink shoes. I make a face and shake my entire feet. Mama is going to be so mad when she sees this.

Once, last year, Mama took me to the fair. I was so small I could go on any of the good big kid rides, but she took me on those spinning teacup things. We went around and around and around, like the whole world couldn’t stay still, my body pressed to hers as we spun. All of a sudden I felt like that, I swayed to the side and fell down on my bum. I put my hand to my head, wondering if I had the flu or something, when I saw it, that big swirly black shadow in between me and the school. Mama called them twisters, said they messed up a bunch of stuff and throw a crapping napkin at me. “Leave it alone, boy,” I say, and then swallow the food.

The dog momentarily halts, and waddles to my feet, his arthritic hips creaking as he walks. He nudges my socked feet with his snout, a slight whine, but I kick him at leaving me alone. I shove another spoonful of the cereal in my open mouth, choking at it as I eye the clock: fabulous, late for school—again.

I take the key from the kitchen counter as I simultaneously toss my bowl and spoon into the sink. “Bye boy,” I say, crouching down to pat Wooster on the head, he begins to whine, and oddly sad. I blink at this and he begins to whine again. “Stop it,” I say, annoyed, pulling my backpack on my shoulder, “that’s fucking annoying.”

Mama and Dad are at work, Akron left for school an hour ago for stupid band practice or something equally lame. I double-check that the oven is off and the back door is locked. Satisfied with my millisecond check, I open the front door—but only to see a barely discernable streak run the length from the ground to the sky twist its way across my vision. I can feel my heart stop beating; a faint whimpering permeates from Wooster behind me. I turn back to the door and hesitate, my hand on the knob, my breath slow and invisible.

Finally, I push it closed, reaching down to scoop up the damn whining dog and letting my backpack shift off my shoulder. “Shh boy,” I tell him, his whining softens in my arms as we climb the stairs, “that’s it boy.” I carry him to my bedroom, put him on the bed, and then close the door behind us. I decide in the moment that’s it’s not suicide, I’m not taking my own life after all, I’m just choosing not to escape—is that the same thing? Fuck, it’s either this or carrying a gun, or taking a gun to the head, I don’t know which.

I line down the bed, and take the whimpering dog into my arm. “Shh boy,” I say again, “shh boy, we’re going to be okay.” He lies down in my arms,
“What in life is what we want?” I asked.

“He loves me,” she said quietly.

“But not enough.”

“Tornado,” she screamed, “here it comes.” Irene turned to me, seemingly unable to inhale, and began to raise her arms and flap them at me. “Go,” she fumbled with her words breathlessly, “go and hide.”

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"Here," she said finally, looking down but handing me the beer. "I'm pregnant."
rests his long chin against my own whimpering chest, and stops his own crying. We lay there, boy and dog, dead and deader; I close my eyes and wait for things to end.

ETTA

“No,” I beg, feeling those stupid tears drip off my chin, “she’s out there, let me go.”

Irene holds onto my arm, unable to look at me, pulling me toward the janitorial closet. “She’s gone,” she says softly, “come on.”

“No,” I plead, tears muddling my voice, “no, no, please, she’s my little girl.” I hit at her arm on mine, trying to rip myself from her.

“She’s…” Irene stops, tossing brooms onto the floor, then she turned to me. “Etta,” she grasps my shoulders tightly, “Etta, focus, we need to hide now. Do you understand?”

I nod, but I am sobbing, trying to figure a way to break free.

“Good,” she tells me, releasing her hands slowly, “help me.”

Once her hands are lifted, I run away, I reach for the door, I am crying, the world is slipping away. Suddenly I am on the floor, my cheekbones burning, Irene rolls me over and slaps my face.

“Do you want to die?” She demands, slapping me again.

“My baby, my baby, my little girl.”

Irene winds up to slap me again. “Stop it. Do you want to die too?” She pauses, our breaths panting loudly in the empty room. She leans closer to my face; her wrinkles are deep and everywhere. “You can’t help her now.”

This takes my breath away. My face stings and my bones hurt against the cold, hard floor. My hands fly to my belly—why can’t this be years ago when she was with me, in me, why isn’t she with me? I want her, I want her, I want her so much, but she isn’t here.

“Come on Etta,” Irene says as she pulls me to my feet, the building beginning to shiver in the wind, “come on.”

We race back to the closet, hand in hand; I wish I were holding a little hand instead. We empty the closet so there’s just enough room for the two of us, small and insignificant, Irene and I embrace as we huddle close, her breath warm on my shoulder. I begin to cry, wanting my baby, and her hands tighten on my back. Everything begins to vibrate and shudder, plates slide off the counter and shatter on the floor, someone screams, is that me? I hold her tighter, thinking of my baby—my baby, my baby, my baby. Things go dark—and then I’m gone. Everything is gone.

SUTTON

According to the urban legend, Roundup is named so because it’s a natural place to round up things—cattle, and people. We roundup ourselves, tying ourselves into knots; encircled by each other and tornados.

Anyone in Roundup can tell you that a tornado is anything but innocent. Your next door neighbor lost her dog to the one two years ago, your grade school teacher had her car wrecked last year, your grandpa’s business was trashed a couple of months ago.

I lived here a long time ago, and moved away as soon as I could. I came back to see my parents, and instead I saw the circle of life—tornado, panic, death, and moving on.

She is just a little girl. Shoes as pink as the inside of your cheeks, fallen on the sidewalk crying for her Mama. I don’t know her name, or exactly how old she is, or even why she is all-alone. But I know one thing for sure—I am here, and I can do something. I scoop her up in my arms, and hold her head against my shoulder so she couldn’t see what was happening around us. She is me, years and years ago, scared and tiny, and as we run, I feel her tiny hands tense on my back.

For a moment, I think that if I look back, I will turn into a pillar of salt or something equally biblical, but instead, the only words that come to mind are—here it comes.
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“au petit riche” by jenna kluger
Those eaten teeth,
Sugar-browned & bow-shaped,
They join the frail hair
And window-paned eyes
We avoid,
Beady and staring blank.

The mind goes, the hips widen
Into a pear sleeping on the couch
At every house.

Doctors declare No
But beady eyes rejoice
Yes!
Meds Meds Meds
More Meds with that brandy.

Those tales maddened with the "Wisconsin" cousins
And grandpa's ashes fostered from steely tools
And six-foot parrots squawking for the little daughter;
Those work-softened fingers always groping pie dough,
Always fiddling knitting sticks, always fumbling over
An unlit kool the first boyfriend gifted.

[Your Mental List:
The cat collapsed
The rabbit ran
The truck trashed
The rentals ruined
The clothes contracted
The pennies purged
The house & husband halved
The meds married brandy]

That cackling uncalculated laugh
Southern life made a mess of,
We hear it in pauses of silence
Maddened with blank stares
And those beady eyes
Seething, teething, rejoicing
Yes!

You can't be elegant.
With that lingering stench of burnt hair trailing behind you.
You can't be original
Chasing that anglicized definition of beauty.
Who wrote Webster's Dictionary?
In the delicate stratification of females in Black America,
Long hair and café au lait skin give you a privilege that you devour.
So sweet that your soul, being nowhere near as lovely as your appearance,
Grows more rotten with every chocolate girl you unconsciously scoff.
So malignant, chemo is the only option.
I wonder how my mother would mourn the loss of my hair.
Those eaten teeth,  
Sugar-browned & bow-shaped,  
They join the frail hair  
And window-paned eyes  
We avoid,  
Beady and staring blank.

The mind goes, the hips widen  
Into a pear sleeping on the couch  
At every house.

Doctors declare No  
But beady eyes rejoice  
Yes!  
Meds Meds Meds  
More Meds with that brandy.

Those tales maddened with the "Wisconsin" cousins  
And grandpa's ashes festered from steely tools  
And six-foot parrots squawking for the little daughter;  
Those work-softened fingers always groping pie dough,  
Always fiddling knitting sticks, always fumbling over  
An unlit kool the first boyfriend gifted.

[Your Mental List:  
The cat collapsed  
The rabbit ran  
The truck trashed  
The rentals ruined  
The clothes contracted  
The pennies purged  
The house & husband halved  
The meds married brandy]

That cackling uncalculated laugh  
Southern life made a mess of,  
We hear it in pauses of silence  
Maddened with blank stares  
And those beady eyes  
Seething, teething, rejoicing  
Yes!

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With that lingering stench of burnt hair trailing behind you.  
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So malignant, chemo is the only option.  
I wonder how my mother would mourn the loss of my hair.
Truly, to realize the beauty of the world,
One must experience a place devoid of it.

How now Medusa,
Your allure, once unSurpassed,
Has vanished by decree
of the grEat goddess.
She who contends
had you in her crosshairs,
And has [hard]-ly
spareD a [soft] feature.

Yet still you, Daphne:
Do you regret your flight?
Surely, the pAstoral firmness
with which you now burgeon,
Will atone for the disclosed desire
to emulate the Hunter.
In a betrothal of adamance and purity,
You Heedlessly became Apollo’s “crown’ing glory.

Through weaving waters, Charon,
You ferry the lost,
The bRo/ken,
The dead souls due for Judgment.
Wait! / What kEeps the passenger,
Not in hand but in mouth
as paymenT for the journey?
Indeed, the obolus [safely] resides here.

Enter, Hades.
Bring now upon me my/your Fate/s,
As I have had fortuNe enough
to evade your Fury/ies in my lifetime.
But oh! let me drink of the Lethe,
Allow me to forget my past
before I face this future.
To Minos, do I appEal: “Send me to the Elysians…
… Free [me] at last.”
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… Free [me] at last.”
My sister was eaten by a shark.
I was crabbing in Duck's Cove, about ten minutes from our house, when I found out. I had bought a raw chicken leg from the Superette and had tied a string around the slippery flesh. I was sitting on a rock, dangling it in the shallow water just above the sand, when my father ran up to me. His hands were dripping with sand and blood.

“Louise,” he said. “It’s Claire.”
I let the chicken drop into the ocean. We ran home, and jumped in the back of the ambulance just as it was pulling away from the beach.

This was late August in Tuxedo, Maine. That summer I was fourteen, and my sister Claire was sixteen. Before the day she bled out in the ambulance on the way to the hospital, I had reached 160 pounds.

We lived year-round in a low little house on the coast of Maine, down the street from the ocean. Our house had wooden walls and big glass windows that shook during storms. When there were no wind or waves, you could hear someone down the road even if they were whispering. Usually you knew the person talking—even in the summer, when families from Boston and Portland rented the houses in our neighborhood. Tuxedo was a small town.

Claire died, we shared the bedroom in the back of the house. On most nights, after Claire went to sleep, I snuck out of my room and into the kitchen. I had learned how to eat very quietly so that my parents and Claire wouldn’t wake up and catch me. I was able to open the fridge and unwrap a stick of butter and add some sugar and flour and peanut butter and mix the whole thing up—and they would never know. And the next day my parents would wonder why a stick of butter was missing. I wouldn’t say anything; I didn’t talk much, and I especially didn’t talk about food.

The funeral was on a Tuesday in a small, weathered church in downtown Tuxedo. There was a picture of Claire on the table by the entrance. In the picture she was sitting on a rock in Duck’s Cove, her hair blowing across her rough eyes and hollow cheekbones.

At the funeral my father wore a hat and my mother spat whenever she had to talk to anyone, as if she had forgotten how to swallow. Everyone kept putting their hands on my shoulders and I watched as John Macintosh entered the church and lingered at the picture of Claire.

John was my father’s friend from their long-haired days at Penn, and he had rented a house on the ocean for the week of the funeral. When we were younger, Claire had whispered stories about John Macintosh, during nights when the wind was blowing and our parents couldn’t hear us. She told me how she had once gone to Philadelphia with our father to visit John. He made Claire dance with him at his country club during a party for one of their friends. Claire said his breath was hot and fiery and his hands were running all over her body while our father stood outside the club and smoked a cigar.

After the funeral, when we were walking home, I asked my mother about the shark.

“What kind was it?” The newspaper article hadn’t said.

“Not now, Louise,” she said.

“It had to have been a big one.” Claire wouldn’t have been scared of the shark, though. But I was, even as I walked on the dusty road talking about it. “You used to tell us that sharks didn’t eat people. So that we wouldn’t be afraid of the water.”

“I guess it was a secret eater,” my father said.

My mother wouldn’t look at either of us. She kicked at the pebbles on the road as she walked, and they got stuck in her black leather sandals.

We didn’t have one of those funerals with a big meal at the end, and when we were walking back home I realized that I was starving. My parents went straight down to the beach, where they spent a lot of time these days, and I went to the refrigerator.

My mother had bought raw chicken nuggets in June, and two months later they remained untouched, in translucent pink wrapping. I put six nuggets in a pan, and the pan in the oven.

I stood in the kitchen and stared at the oven, waiting for the chicken to cook. I couldn’t wait. I took the chicken out of the oven, burning my fingers on the metal pan. I bit into a nugget, which was still pink and watery. I didn’t care. I ate all six nuggets, each of them as raw as the first one.

About an hour later, my parents still hadn’t returned home. I stood naked in my bedroom and stared at my body, trying to imagine where the shark had bitten my sister. Then I looked at my face and my mouth. I had a very small mouth, which I always thought I inherited from my father, who had practically no lips at all. Tonight I thought that maybe my mouth wasn’t so small after all—maybe my face was just too fat.

I smiled at the mirror. I poked at my teeth with my short and bloody fingernails. One of my earliest memories was of the first time I ever bit my nails. Ten years later I still bit them. I ate flesh.

Then I vomited raw chicken onto my feet. I eventually made it to the toilet, and when I was done throwing up I sat on the bathroom floor and pressed my lips together over my teeth with my short and bloody fingernails. Each of them as raw as the first one.

I got up from the table and was out of the house before she had finished talking. I let the door slam behind me, which she hated.

The town had closed the beach after the shark attack, so I had to go farther away than usual. I plodded on the beach in my usual spot, about a ten-minute walk away from where Claire was killed. There were a couple of dead crabs next to me that had washed in during the last high tide. I arranged the crabs next to each other and drew hearts in the sand between them to show that they were in love. The hearts were lopsided and ugly.

“My hearts are beautiful,” I said to the crabs. I choked on the words at first, and then I said them again, louder.

Five minutes after I had arranged the crabs and drawn the hearts, John Macintosh walked over and sat down next to me. That day he was wearing a pink shirt and fadin blue shorts and his forehead was greased with sun block. He was asummer person, you could tell. Not like me.

He smiled and had very straight teeth, but I knew from Claire’s stories that even though John Macintosh had a nice smile, he was not a nice man.

“Hi, Louise,” he said.

I tried to speak but I felt like I was swallowing sand.

He leaned towards me and his leather sandals knocked the crabs out of their positions. He held his face close to mine but he didn’t kiss me, and I knew it was because my mouth was too small. He put his hand on my stomach, on my first roll of fat, and squeezed.

“You have a beautiful body,” he said. He put his other hand on my chest but I didn’t say anything because I couldn’t really feel anything. That area still just felt like more fat.
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By the time Claire died, we shared the bedroom in the back of the house. On most nights, after Claire went to sleep, I snuck out of my room and into the kitchen. I had learned how to eat very quietly so that my parents and Claire wouldn't wake up and catch me. I was able to open the fridge and unwrap a stick of butter and add some sugar and flour and peanut butter and mix the whole thing up—and they would never know. And the next day my parents would wonder why a stick of butter was missing. I wouldn't say anything; I didn't talk much, and I especially didn't talk about food.

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I smiled at the mirror. I poked at my teeth with a dry Raisin Bran, and I sat across from her sipping water.

"You're not eating again today?" she asked. A few drips of coffee fell from the mug onto her shirt. She didn't notice and I didn't tell her.

Even though it was especially hot I wore a long-sleeve t-shirt and oversized basketball shorts. This was what I always wore in the summer to cover up my fat, no matter how hot it got. Instead of responding to Mother's question I tucked at my long sleeves, covering my fingertips.

"Why do you always wear all that clothing? What are you hiding?"

I got up from the table and was out of the house before she had finished talking. I let the door slam behind me, which she hated.

The town had closed the beach after the shark attack, so I had to go farther away than usual. I plodded on the beach in my usual spot, about a ten-minute walk away from where Claire was killed. There were a couple of dead crabs next to me that had washed in during the last high tide. I arranged the crabs next to each other and drew hearts in the sand between them to show that they were in love. The hearts were lopsided and ugly.

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"You have a beautiful body," he said. He put his other hand on my chest but I didn't say anything because I couldn't really feel anything. That area still just felt like more fat.
But then he moved his hand from my chest to my face, his thumb creeping towards my lips. I thought about his greasy hands, my tiny mouth, the dead crabs, my dead sister, and I bit down on his thumb. He screamed.

“What the fuck?” he said. Blood dripped from the middle section of his thumb. I didn’t think about his blood or skin in my mouth, I just scrambled to my feet, and ran.

I ran down the middle of the road and wished that a car would run me over. Maybe I would need plastic surgery because of my injuries and they would cut and sew me into a completely different person, skinny and beautiful, who wouldn’t get molested on the beach by John Macintosh.

I ran until I found myself at home again.

* * *

“What happened to you?” my mother asked. She was separating crescent rolls.

I went to the sink and sloshed some water around in my mouth. I spat John Macintosh’s blood into the sink.

“Nothing,” I said.

“What’s wrong with your mouth?” Her fingers were stuck together with dough. “There’s Listerine in the bathroom.”

“I don’t need Listerine, Mother,” I said, and I spat into the sink again even though I didn’t need to.

“What are you hiding?” she asked for the second time that day.

“Nothing,” I said, and I wished that my mother had been eaten by the shark so that she would leave me alone.

“John Macintosh is coming for dinner tonight,” my mother said. “Change your clothes before he gets here.”

John arrived at six with a bottle of wine and a sunglasses tan. We all sat down at the table and instead of eating I sucked on ice cubes.

He took his steak rare and heavily salted his mashed potatoes. I watched him in anger as the ice water slid down my throat.

“Louise is going to try out for the tennis team this year,” my mother said.

“Pass the potatoes,” my father said.

“It’ll be good for you to get a little physical activity, Louise,” John Macintosh said. “Though I personally prefer golf to tennis.”

I imagined taking my plate and shoving it in his greased face.

Instead, I bent over my food and started lapping up my mashed potatoes. When I was finished I took John Macintosh’s plate, and then my parents’ plates, and started shredding the rare and medium-rare steak with my front teeth, swallowing the pieces of meat in large chunks.

I ate until the dishes of steak and potatoes were empty, until the sounds of my parents’ protests and questions became as distant as the sound of the waves on a windless night.

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“rainman” by harry meltzer
But then he moved his hand from my chest to my face, his thumb creeping towards my lips.
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“rainman” by harry meltzer
God, my man, I would kill for you, so-
Won’t you employ your fiery entities to fester
My visions like a raging infection?
For they are, more or less, like a wound.

These words are stuck in my veins
Sitting idly and rocking in my blood.
They graze on it, as cows do.
Lazy words sucking down my filaments and my juices.

O how do they taste?
Won’t these parasites bubble to the surface in gasping breaths,
And emit Ringing Poetry from their pus-filled mouths?
O God, it’s just a favor.

You don’t know how it stings to be brim-full with little zealots
Clogging your pores, choking and dying in your arteries.
There are full life cycles of gross visions in me,
Just begging to break skin.

I try to let them out in sputtering phrases.
Pathetic really, the slimy things that roll from tongue onto page.
They ain’t scripture, and they ain’t nothing Sylvia wrote.
They rape the white sheet, gunky and shining.

Homer had his naked muses splayed before him, so
Why have you stuck mine inside me, lodged as caged animals?
Is it out of sheer distaste?
Or do you see visions as their lower selves, treasures that enslave:
Blunt and not beautiful, like blood diamonds, or ore.
God, my man, I would kill for you, so-
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Since its release in 1999, David Fincher's "Fight Club"—the film adaptation of Chuck Palahniuk's 1996 novel—has enjoyed a large cult following and is now considered to be among the finest films of the 1990s. Yet the film's initial critical reception did not give any indication of its future commercial success. In fact, there was no shortage of negative reviews for the film. Roger Ebert, for example, gave Fight Club just one star out of a possible four in one of the most noted negative reviews of Fincher's film. In his review, Ebert takes issue with elements that many other critics do as well: the often-brutal violence and the character of Tyler Durden (Brad Pitt) on the whole. Says Ebert, "Fight Club is... a celebration of violence... Is Tyler Durden in fact a leader of men with a useful philosophy? ... In my opinion, he has no useful truths. He's a bully... None of the Fight Club members grows stronger or freer because of their membership3." Tyler, in Ebert's opinion, is a malevolent force in Fight Club, one who does not exert a positive influence over those who follow him. Rather adamanently, though, I disagree with Ebert's critique.

By examining the character of the Narrator (Edward Norton) in his pursuit of post-Tyler lifestyles, coupled with Nietzschean philosophy and the ideas of Jean Baudrillard to give credence to the film's darker, more violent moments, it becomes clear and almost inarguable that Tyler is, overall, a force of good in "Fight Club", upon the Narrator, and upon his followers.

To begin, one must first look at the life of the Narrator before the introduction of Tyler. In a word, it is pathetic; Norton's character hates his job, has no discernible friends, and his only social interaction comes from the deplorable practice of masquerading as a survivor of various life-threatening diseases at support groups. Most importantly, though, the Narrator is a slave to the consumerist culture that has, for better or worse (worse in Tyler's interpretation), come to define our times; his apartment, for example, is not an outward representation of his tastes, his personality, or anything of the sort—rather, it is the manifestation of a representation of various companies and the best, newest products that they have convinced the Narrator he needs:

"Like so many others, I had become a slave to the IKEA nesting instinct... I'd flip through catalogues and wonder, 'What kind of dining set defines me as a person?' I had it all. Even the glass dishes with tiny bubbles and imperfections, proof that they were crafted by the honest, simple, hard-working indigenous peoples of... wherever.

His apartment—his living space—is not what it should be—far from a refuge or a safe haven, his home is actually something of a prison, its mallability based on trend and fashion, further keeping him from the rest of the world. These sentiments are repeated by the Narrator after he has been transported by a vibrating suit that is confiscated, as he laments, "I had everything in that suitcase: my CK shirts, my DKNY shoes, my AX ties." He once again displays his unreasonable concern for, andattachment to, material possessions while in a bar with Tyler after finding his condo has been blown up: "I had it all—a suit that was very decent, a wardrobe that was getting very respectable. I was close to being complete." Without a doubt, the notion of 'being complete' is subjective—it may be defined by personal happiness or achieving personal goals. Yet it goes without saying that the Narrator's culture has ascribed far too much importance to the material aspects of life when one may be considered complete based on the contents of his closet or the price of his stereo. He is, in short, part of the herd mentality that Nietzsche describes and condemns in "The Gay Science": "By means of morality, individuals are led to be functions of the herd and to attribute value to themselves merely as functions. Being alone, perceiving as a single person, neither obeying rules nor indulging in individual—that was no pleasure then, but a punishment." The idea of standing out, differing from the norm, then, is an undesirable one; fitting in is paramount and is exactly what the Narrator strives to do with his material obsessions and pursuits.

Some critics have weighed in on this aspect of the movie—namely its critique of an overly consumerist culture and its impact on the psyche—and concluded that Fight Club's emphasis on this topic is overblown. Among these critics is Lisa Schwarzbaum, who, like Ebert, gave Fincher's breakthrough film a scathing review, awarding it just one out of five stars: "I hadn't realized that overexposure to IKEA results in limp pennies, too, until I saw Fight Club. David Fincher's... movie floats the winky, idiotic premise of a modern-day onslaught of girly pop-cultural destinations... has resulted in a generation of spongy young men unable to express themselves..." Schwarzbaum is off base though, for this premise is one that is at the root of the Narrator's problems pre-Tyler. (It is worth noting the irony in her lines: she plays down the notion of an overly consumerist society. How is this you should be culture while writing for a magazine, Entertainment Weekly, that sells millions of copies by focusing on the lives of celebrities and basically saying to its readers, 'strive for this, these are perfect human beings')

An examination of the aforementioned Jean Baudrillard allows us to fully refute Schwarzbaum's points and, instead, show that the lifestyle of, and culture surrounding the Narrator, is indeed a negative one. Baudrillard, a late French philosopher, examines the relationship between reality, society, and culture and objects, signs, and possessions in his extended treatise Simulacra and Simulation. Baudrillard, in this defining work, asserts that a life whose importance is derived primarily from objects, signs, and symbols is no longer a life at all—rather, it is a simulation of reality, or what he calls hyperreality. The realm of existence that we now occupy is no longer what is actually real, but what is anticipated to be real: Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it. It is nevertheless the map that precedes the territory—precession of simulacra—that engenders the territory, and if one must return to the fable, today it is the territory whose shreds slowly rot across the extent of the map. It is the real, and not the map, whose vestiges persist here and there in the deserts that are no longer those of the Empire, but ours. The desert of the real itself.

The expectation of what reality is meant to be like, then, overshadows actual reality, resulting in a state of hyperreality. This sort of existence is exactly the one that defines modern societies in modern times due to the hugely influential, omnipresent mass media: the media presents examples of how life should be lived and what things should make one happy, thus simulating reality and instilling in us an expectation of reality before actual reality has the chance to play out naturally. This is what Baudrillard refers to as the "precession of simulacra," or the continuation of representations in the place of actualities, which renders the real nearly obsolete: "All Western faith and good faith became engaged in this wager on representation: that a sign could refer to the depth of meaning, that a sign could be exchanged for meaning. Without a doubt, the life the Narrator leads qualifies for categorization under the hyperreality heading. The stronghold that materialism has on modern society produces his hyperreal state, in which his consciousness is tricked into detaching itself from any meaningful emotional engagements or connections and, instead, prefers artificial simulation and instant gratification. In hyperreality, happiness or fulfillment is found through the simulation of reality rather than any prolonged interactions with actual reality. As a character, Tyler is far from stupid, which
Since its release in 1999, David Fincher's "Fight Club"—the film adaption of Chuck Palahniuk’s 1996 novel—has enjoyed a large cult following and is now considered to be among the finest films of the 1990s. Yet the film's initial critical reception did not give any indication of its future commercial success. In fact, there was no shortage of negative reviews for the film. Roger Ebert, for example, gave Fight Club just one star out of a possible four in one of the most noted negative reviews of Fincher’s film. In his review, Ebert takes issue with elements that many other critics do as well: the often-brutal violence and the character of Tyler Durden (Brad Pitt) on the whole. Says Ebert, “Fight Club... is... a celebration of violence... Is Tyler Durden in fact a leader of men with a useful philosophy? ... In my opinion, he has no useful truths. He's a bully... None of the Fight Club members grows stronger or freer because of their membership.”

Tyler, in Ebert’s opinion, is a malevolent force in Fight Club, one who does not exert a positive influence over those who follow him. Rather adamantly, though, I disagree with Ebert’s critique. By examining the character of the Narrator (Edward Norton) in his pre- and post-Tyler states, coupled with Nietzschean philosophy and the ideas of Jean Baudrillard to give credence to the film’s darker, more violent moments, it becomes clear and almost inarguable that Tyler is, overall, a force of good in “Fight Club”, upon the Narrator, and upon his followers.

To begin, one must first look at the life of the Narrator before the introduction of Tyler. In a word, it is pathetic; Norton’s character hates his job, has no discernible friends, and his only social interaction comes from the deplorable practice of masquerading as a survivor of various life-threatening diseases at support groups. Most importantly, though, the Narrator is a slave to the consumerist culture that has, for better or worse (worse in Tyler’s interpretation), come to define our times; his apartment, for example, is not an outward representation of his tastes, his personality, or anything of the sort—rather, it is the manifestation of his membership in the consumerist culture. This reality before actual reality has the chance to play out naturally. This is what Baudrillard refers to as "hyperreality". The stronghold of masquerading as a survivor of hyperreality comes from the deplorable practice of overexposure to IKEA results in real penises, too, until I saw Fight Club. David Fincher tricked into detaching itself from any meaningful emotional engagements or connections and, instead, prefers artificial simulation and instant gratification. In hyperreality, happiness or fulfillment is found through the simulation of reality rather than any prolonged interactions with actual reality.

As a character, Tyler is far from stupid, which personal happiness or achieving personal goals. Yet it goes without saying that the Narrator's culture has ascribed far too much importance to the material aspects of life when one may be considered complete based on the contents of his closet or the price of his stereo. He is, in short, part of the herd mentality that Nietzsche describes and condemns in "The Gay Science": “By means of morality, individuals are led to functions of the herd and to attribute value to themselves merely as functions... Being alone, perceiving as a single person, neither obeying nor ruling, constituting an individual—that was no pleasure then, but a punishment.” The idea of standing out, differing from the norm, then, is an undesirable one; fitting in is paramount and is exactly what the Narrator strives to do with his material obsessions and pursuits.

Some critics have weighed in on this aspect of the movie—namely its critique of an overly consumerist culture and its impact on the psyche—and concluded that Fight Club’s emphasis on this topic is overblown. Among these critics is Lisa Schwarzbaum, who, like Ebert, gave Fincher’s breakthrough film a scathing review, awarding it just one out of five stars: “I hadn’t realized that overexposure to IKEA results in limp penises, too, until I saw Fight Club. David Fincher’s... movie floats the winky, idiotic premise of a modern-day onslaught of girly pop-cultural destinations... has resulted in a generation of spongy young men unable to express themselves.” Schwarzbaum is off base though, for this premise is one that is at the root of the Narrator’s problems pre-Tyler. (It is worth noting the irony in the Narrator’s question: she plays down the notion of an overly consumerist culture: “How is this you should be’ culture while writing for a magazine, Entertainment Weekly, that sells millions of copies by focusing on the lives of celebrities and trend and fashion, further keeping him from the rest of the world. These sentiments are repeated by the other characters, as after he begins to resonate with vibrating suitcases are confiscated, as he laments, “I had everything in that suitcase: my CK shirts, my DKNY shoes, my AX ties.” He once again displays his unreasonable concern for, and attachment to, material possessions while in a bar with Tyler after finding his condo has been blown up: “I had it all—a stereo that was very decent, a wardrobe that was getting very respectable. I was close to being complete.” Without a doubt, the notion of ‘being complete’ is subjective—it may be defined by

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overcoming hyperreality in "Fight Club"

by oss ballantyne
Ebert not so subtly implies—in a much simpler mode of expressing them, he understands, supports, and espouses Baudrillard’s ideas. It is clear from one of the earliest scenes when Tyler and the Narrator share a few beers after the latter’s condo ‘accident,’ that the former rails against the mass media-dominated society they find themselves in, griping: “We are byproducts of a lifestyle obsession...The things you own end up owning you.” Tyler again shows his devotion to these ideas when, during a Fight Club gathering, he speaks to the attendees: “Advertising has us chasing cars and clothes, working jobs we hate so we can buy shit we don’t need.” Right from his introduction, it is clear that Tyler is the master of his own reality, while the Narrator has fully bought into the simulated reality that advertising and pop culture has him chasing.

However, it is not long after the Narrator moves into Tyler’s dilapidated house that the latter’s philosophies begin shaping the former’s worldview. The unwavering importance that mass media and material possessions played in the Narrator’s life before Tyler is being broken down as a fashion...and pop culture has him chasing.

The first step on the path to becoming an Overman is overcoming, which involves accepting and embracing life’s obstacles and challenges before passing them head-on. At its core, it is a process of self-assessment and self-mastery. Namely, one simply cannot come to understand their true self if they do not expose themselves to all that life has to offer, even its most painful and negative aspects. Only by overcoming these elements is one able to take control of his reality: “it is the good war which halloweth every cause. War and courage have done more great things than charity. What is good?” ye ask. To be brave is good. Let the little girls say: “To be good is what is pretty, and at the same time touching.” One must, then, set aside life’s more trivial elements and throw oneself toward its challenging ones, for it is only courage and bravery that allow one to overcome.

The second step on this path is that of becoming, which is a byproduct of the first step. By overcoming life’s obstacles and achieving self-mastery that comes with this, one enters the state of becoming. It is important to note that this state is not called being, as that suggests a rather negative stationary state; instead, becoming is infinite, one is constantly in this state. One in the state of becoming is thus always evolving and developing—never complete. Nietzsche affirms the evolving life undertones that permeate the processes he outlines as vital to self-improvement thusly:

“All beings hitherto have created something beyond themselves: and ye wanto be the ebb of that great tide, and would rather go back to the beast than surpass man? What is the ape to man? A laughing-stock, a thing of shame. And just the same shall man be to the Superman: a laughing-stock, a thing of shame.”

When one considers Nietzsche’s now legendary “God is dead” edict, the notion of mastering one’s reality takes on increased importance. Writing further in "Zarathustra," Nietzsche asserts that in the absence of God—or any sort of higher, omniscient being—the Overman is the highest level of existence: “The Superman is the meaning of the earth...Let your will say: The Superman SHALL BE the meaning of the earth!”

Let us briefly return to Roger Ebert’s review of “Fight Club,” in which he writes of Tyler that he is “like a man who tripped over the Nietzsche display on his way to the coffee bar in Borders:” How, though, can Ebert possibly assert such a thing? Perhaps it’s a comment on the language, ideas, and commands regarding the Overman? Is it not clear that nearly everything Nietzsche espouses is manifested in Tyler’s words, actions, and philosophies?

As we have already established above, Tyler single-handedly shakes the Narrator from his hyper-reality and begins greatly shaping his worldview. More importantly though, Tyler jumpsstarts the Narrator’s overcoming and becoming processes. Tyler is extremely in tune with Nietzsche on these ideas, echoing his sentiment about the infiniteness of the becoming process in one of his earliest scenes: “I say never be complete, I say stop being perfect, I say...I say let’s evolve.” To say otherwise, as Ebert does, is to devalue Tyler’s contributions. Soon after the Narrator and Tyler meet, Tyler, in the parking lot of a seedy bar, asks the Narrator to hit him as hard as he can. The Narrator is taken aback, calling the idea crazy. Tyler, as always, has a retort asking, “How much can you know about yourself if you’ve never been in a fight?” The Narrator comes around, realizing that this is an opportunity for a legitimate human connection, free of simulation; he sacks Tyler in the ear. The rush of adrenaline that comes with this and subsequent hits is a highlight by the Narrator, who at last can participate in something real and genuine, unlike furnishing his apartment or the survivors’ groups, for in these fight scenarios, he has no predetermined or expected manner of behavior. For the first time in the film, the Narrator, at the urging of Tyler, is pushing and testing himself—the fight can go his way or Tyler’s way, but he throws himself into it with reckless abandon, without even considering the possibility of the injuries he may incur or die out. The fights are freeing, for they allow the Narrator to begin his self-awakening, as he comes to realize—perhaps much to his surprise—that he can in fact overcome some of life’s more violent and scary elements. Attesting to this is his remark soon after the weekly Fight Club’s beginning: “You weren’t alive anywhere like you were then.”

As the film’s title suggests, “Fight Club” is a violent film, sometimes to extremes. Roger Ebert’s review does, it must be said, benefit from a viewer’s instinctive reaction to scenes like that of Angel Face (Jared Leto) being absolutely pulverized by a Reveille horn in the verge of death and is left permanently disfigured—it is in no way imaginable a pleasant scene to watch, nor does it make “Fight Club” seem like anything but an excuse to beat people up. Yet this is only an acceptable interpretation without Nietzsche, for the philosopher writes on pain in “The Gay Science,” ultimately painting it as the best force through which to free oneself: “It is only great pain that is the best force through which to free oneself: ‘It is only great pain that is the best force through which to free oneself:’”
Ebert not so subtly implies—in a much simpler mode of expressing them, he understands, supports, and espouses Baudrillard’s ideas. It is clear from one of the earliest scenes when Tyler and the Narrator share a few beers after the latter’s condo ‘accident’, that the former rails against the mass media-dominated society they find themselves in, griping: “We are byproducts against the mass media-dominated society they support, and espouses Baudrillard’s ideas. It is clear that Tyler is the master of his own reality, while the Narrator has fully bought into the simulated reality that advertising and pop culture has him chasing.

However, it is not long after the Narrator moves into Tyler’s dilapidated house that the latter’s philosophies begin shaping the former’s worldview. The unwavering importance that mass media and material possessions played in the Narrator’s life before Tyler is being broken down as he says that “by the end of the first month I didn’t miss TV,” and that, after viewing a Gucci under-ad on a bus he and Tyler share, he has “started seeing things differently. I felt sorry for guys packed into gyms, trying to look like how Calvin Klein or Tommy Hilfiger said they should.” The notion that Tyler preaches to the Narrator, and later the members of Fight Club and Project Mayhem, that “You’re not your job. You’re not how much money you have in the bank. You’re not the car you drive. You’re not the contents of your wallet. You’re not your fucking khakis” is instrumenta-l, as it demonstrates a need to distance oneself from external forces and objects that, in truth, do not define a person but only serve to distort their reality. Perhaps even more significant than this quote in underlining Tyler’s core beliefs is a shot that comes before the film truly begins; after the standard anti-piracy FBI warning, a similar warning pops up, but this one is from Tyler: “Is your life so empty that you honestly can’t think of a better way to spend these moments? Or are you so impressed with authority that you give respect and credence to all who claim it? Do you read everything you’re supposed to read? Do you think everything you’re supposed to think? Buy it is only courage and bravery that allow one to overcome.

The second step on this path is that of becoming, which is a byproduct of the first step. By overcoming his obstacles and achieving the self-mastery that comes with this, one enters the state of becoming. It is important to note that this state is not called being, as that suggests a rather negative static state; instead, becoming is infinite, is one constant in this state. One in the state of becoming is thus always evolving and developing—never complete. Nietzsche affirms the evolving self-understanding that permeates the processes he outlines as vital to self-improvement thusly:

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As we have already established above, Tyler sin-germatically shakes the Narrator from his hyper-

One of the most obviously Nietzschean manifestations in the film comes in the form of the ly
scene, in which Tyler brutally burns the Narrator's hand with a light from the soap he makes. This scene—a testament to Norton's acting abilities—is the ultimate representation of overcoming and accepting the need to become the supreme master of one's life. As the Narrator withins in pain, begging Tyler to stop the torture being carried out, Tyler barks at him: "Listen to me! You have to consider the possibility that God does not like you, never wanted you, and in all probability he hates you…We don't need him! Fuck damnation, man! Fuck redemption! We're God's unwanted children, so let's not blame the victims and one that truly begins the Narrator's dedication to overcoming.

In the essay "Enjoy Your Fight!—Fight Club " as A Symptom of the Network Society," Bulent Diken and Carsten Bagge Lausten analyze the role that pain plays in the Narrator's process of overcoming and, through their work, give validation to certain moments of violence and brutality—like the lye scene—that, without context, appear to be simply for the sake of violence and brutality. They write: "The aim is not to become immune towards pain but to live through it. Being hit and feeling pain is a way to reconquer life!" Likewise, Kim Greenwood in "Fighting and Ideology in Fight Club," from the Journal of Media and Culture, makes a connection between pain and the Narrator's development: "Fight Club suggests that there is a connection between pain and aggression and 'knowing yourself.' Confronting and engaging with the primal feelings of pain and oblivion, it is implied, will bring Jack (The Narrator) closer to a more authentic sense of identity than he could ever buy for himself at IKEA. " Tyler himself affirms these notions, saying, "Without pain…we'd have nothing...What you're feeling is premature enlightenment. This is the greatest moment of your life." What else, if not expressly after we've lost everything that we're free to do anything." As is revealed near the film's conclusion, Tyler is not real, but rather a figment of the Narrator's mind. Strangely, it is the fact that Tyler is a creation of the Narrator that shows just how instrumental the former is in the latter's overcoming and beconcurring processes. Terry Lee, in "Virtual Violence in Fight Club: This Is What Transformation of Masculine Ego Feels Like," writes on this very: "Tyler has just what Jack (The Narrator) needs…Tyler, then, embodies Jack's own re-pressed strengths, qualities that are useful, when contacted for short periods in the service of making transformative change...Jack needs to awaken from his consumer numbness, his deadened, emotionless life; the old Jack needs to die, so a new Jack can come to life."

Tyler affirms this idea, telling the Narrator he could not have done this by himself, he needed Tyler's presence and his urging: "You were looking for a way to change your life. You could not do this on your own."

Thus we come to the film's end. Standing in emptiness, life is now a corporate skyscraper, Tyler and the Narrator prepare to watch buildings across the city be destroyed, beckoning the tabula rasa of personhood for which Tyler clamors. But, wait—the Narrator objects. This is going too far, he cries. Defuse the bombs, he begs. This rebellion against Tyler—against a part of himself, in a fashion—is the ultimate step of the Narrator's becoming. Tyler, at this late point of the film, is no longer the funny, charming best friend that he once was to the Narrator. No, for he is now increasingly angry, calling for extreme violence. The Narrator comes to realize that he is changed because he achieved what he always wanted to—he broke free of his consumer-driven lifestyle and now lives in reality: Tyler is no longer needed because the Narrator is conscious and in control. The Narrator is already firmly in a state of becoming and has only one thing left to overcome—Tyler himself. As the Narrator pleads with Tyler to abort his mission, who refuses, the dynamic shifts: whereas previously the Narrator agreed with and supported basically everything Tyler preached in this scene, Tyler tries to convince him, saying, "This is what we want" before the Narrator responds with "I don't want this." The gun with which Tyler has been threatening the Narrator suddenly changes hands and the Narrator is in charge; he has come to realize that he no longer needs Tyler as he once did, and can live the life he wants without his aid. "My eyes are open," says the Narrator, just before he fires the gun in his mouth, eliminating Tyler completely.

By doing so, the Narrator has retained control of both his reality and his identity. Both were once dictated by and under the influence of exclusively external forces—mass media, advertising, the support groups, and even Tyler. Through various things that Tyler initiates—living together, Fight Club, Project Mayhem—the Narrator begins his process of overcoming and, by the film's end, has achieved the mastery of his reality that Nietzsche describes as one of the main elements of an Overman. This whole journey is started, maintained, and completed through Tyler. How, then, is Tyler a character who prompts no growth or strengthening in the characters with whom he interacts? The Narrator's path to self-mastery is absolutely contingent on Tyler, who, as a result, is a character we must approve of for the clarity and awakening he produces in the Narrator by the time Fight Club's credits roll.

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The Narrator, as we meet him at the beginning of the film, is lacking an identity; the fact that he is nameless is no mistake. As previously noted, he does not define himself, but instead allows objects and possessions to define him, whether it is his IKEA-furnished apartment or his designer-brand clothes. Fight Club changes this; for the first time, he, as well as the other members, is fully in charge of his own emotions, feelings, and sensations. They are, for the first time, they can remember, living in the moment and subjecting themselves to elements of life that they have not been instructed to chase.

The change in the Narrator is remarkable. As his process of overcoming is in full swing, the character we met at the film’s opening is completely gone, replaced by one full of confidence, self-esteem, and empowerment; the change is most evident in his interactions at work, as he now stands up to the nagging boss who was once, earlier in the film, captured in a low angle by Fincher, casting the Narrator, then, as inferior. Whereas previously, the Narrator was dedicated to his job, he is now conscious enough to see through it, his boss, and the cover-ups his company engages in. As Fight Club ‘moves out of the basement’ and becomes Project Mayhem, one may raise objections to the latter’s tenets and goals, and quite rightly, for the idea of blowing up buildings across a city is certainly not one many ordinary citizens would throw their support behind—it does not sit well with our consciences. Yet, even this element of the film, specifically Project Mayhem’s end goals, are undeniably Nietzschean even if the means of achieving these goals are rather dark. By destroying credit card companies and various other financial institutions, Tyler and his followers aim to finally free people from the forces that control their lives and distort their reality in the Baudrillard sense. Doing so grants people a clean slate, a chance to start over and become the masters of their reality. As Tyler says, “It’s only after we’ve lost everything that we’re free to do anything.”

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