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FIELD GUIDE TO KLEPTOPARASITISM

by

Braydon Beaulieu

A Creative Writing Project
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
through the Department of English Language, Literature, and Creative Writing
in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for
the Degree of Master of Arts at the
University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario, Canada

2012

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Bibliothèque et
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Direction du
Patrimoine de l'édition

395, rue Wellington
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

Your file Votre référence

ISBN: 978-0-494-77253-9

Our file Notre référence

ISBN: 978-0-494-77253-9

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Canada

Field Guide to Kleptoparasitism

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AUTHOR'S DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

I hereby certify that I am the sole author of this thesis. The stories listed below have been published or submitted for publication. Stories contained within this thesis that are not listed below have not been published or submitted for publication.

- A version of "Field Guide to Kleptoparasitism" was published in *Broken Pencil* 51, and on brokenpencil.com. *Broken Pencil* has forwarded said version to the McClelland & Stewart Journey Prize 24.
- A version of "Lionel's Family Pecan Pie" was published in *OffSIDE*, February 2012.
- A version of "Swarm Theory" was published in *Little Fiction*, May 2012.
- A version of "Origin of Species" has been submitted for consideration at *The New Quarterly* for the Peter Hinchcliffe Fiction Award.
- A version of "Dulosis" has been submitted for consideration at *Event*.
- A version of "Stomach Full of Bricks" has been submitted for consideration at *Little Fiction*, for a compilation of flash fiction.
- A version of "Infestation" has been submitted for consideration at *Kudzu Review*.

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ABSTRACT

Field Guide to Kleptoparasitism is a collection of episodic fictions centring on a protagonist, Tony Gordon, who perceives himself as both human and ant. Tony's situation within the liminal space between human and nonhuman positions *Field Guide to Kleptoparasitism* in the absurdist tradition. The stories use various styles, formats, and lengths – mimicking the frenetic movements of insects within their structure – in order to explore nihilism and meaninglessness, as well as the importance of self-acceptance. *Field Guide to Kleptoparasitism* depicts a character that self-actualizes *because* of his unique metamorphoses and faults. The stories' focus on individualism serves to forward a posthumanist philosophy about the intrinsic value of the self, whether that 'self' is a human being or the smallest of ants.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I extend my gratitude to the following people:

Nicole Markotić, my advisor, for tireless blue inking and ruthless dissection of the specimen. For encouraging words. For smacking me on the head with my own stories, occasionally. For dropping a sugar trail I could follow.

Carol Margaret Davison and Phillip Rose, my reading committee members, for their time spent analyzing of my work.

Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) and the University of Windsor, for their financial support.

My friends in the English Department, for their companionship and pistachios. Especially Jessie Beatty, Alex Gayowsky, Kate Hargreaves, and Jordan Turner, for their thorough compound eyes when teaching me to be a better writer. They helped shape this collection.

Kate Hargreaves and Kaitlin Tremblay, for proofreading.

Andrew Renick, with apologies for not catching Zapdos.

C'Paul Beaulieu, for teaching me to skate and how to work, for rides on his shoulders and in the red wagon.

Kim Beaulieu, for endless plates of lasagne, cupcakes, and shepherd's pie, and for talks over glasses of Pepsi into the early morning.

And finally,

Kiana Beaulieu, for keeping me going. For beating my ass in Easter egg hunts year after year. For rooting me to sand and perlite.

DEDICATION

For my family, my colony.

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FIELD GUIDE TO KLEPTOPARASITISM

I stole my neighbour's newspaper this morning. He has never complimented my compound eyes nor praised my pearly mandibles. I click my jaws behind the hedge dividing our yards while he lathers his Maserati. White suds on black. Like letters shining through white splashes. Or maybe I have it backward. Bastard.

When I skimmed my loot at 6:46 in the morning, I cut out a picture of MAY, Elizabeth Diane (née Foster) from the obits. It's in my back pocket. Her photograph smells like a pistachio shell. The rest of the newspaper is in a box in a drawer in the linen closet of my bathroom. My bathroom does not smell like pistachio. Instead: cinnamon and stale shit. My neighbour's: cherries and lavender. His Maserati wavers under cascades of hose water.

I turn and march toward my sandy hill. "Tony, buddy," I hear from behind me. "What's shakin', bacon?"

Caught: I'm a liar and a thief. My tongue plasters to the roof of my mouth. My breath comes in spastic jerks. All my legs have gone rigid. I must turn. I must somehow make myself turn.

"Wayyyyynne," I say, turning with an extravagant flourish of my forelegs. "Loving the new car. What's the make? Ferrari?"

"Close," he laughs, grabbing his belly like a fucking cockroach Santa Claus. "Maserati," he says with a ridiculously overblown Italian accent. He would sound like the Godfather, if the Godfather were bloated and insignificant, scavenging along the floor for cherry pits.

“Niiiiiiiiicce.”

“Hey, buddy,” he says, gesturing me to him with one antenna and interrupting the hose’s ejaculation with the other. I approach the hedge, extending my thorax over its leaves. “You get your newspaper this morning?”

This is my opportunity to solidify my alibi. If the prick thinks that I get the newspaper daily, he will not suspect me of stealing his. I nod my head. Pull the clipping from my back pocket.

“I did.” I hand him the clipping. “My sister.”

“You’ve got a thirteen-year old sister?”

“Had. Half-sister.” I snatch the monochrome obituary and stuff it back into my jeans.

“Sorry. So. You see anything, you know, *strange* this morning?”

“My phone’s ringing inside,” I say. My antennae droop and I stick out my bottom lip. “I really have to go get that. Probably my mother, calling about funeral arrangements.”

“Listen, buddy, you take it easy, all right? I’ll bring you a nut platter. And keep an eye out. You know, for the newspaper thief. Nasty fuckin’ parasite.”

“Yes,” I say as I skitter back into my nest. “Let me know if you net him. I’d like to squish him under my heel. Parasite.”

I tunnel into my nest, closing the door behind me. I spill pocketfuls of beer caps onto my bed, rooting through them with my antennae. I taste the alcohol clinging to their underbellies. Hops and barley and a hint of lime. At a neighbourhood barbecue last

month, guy gave me a beer with a pickle slice shoved down the bottleneck. I stole the ties from his living room curtains and slept with his daughter, Angela.

I pull MAY, Elizabeth Diane (née Foster) from my back pocket. How did her last name change if she died at thirteen? Her mother must have remarried, changing her daughter's surname with her own. I drop the clipping next to the bottlecaps and squat to remove a cherry wood chest from underneath my bed. The lock unclicks, sends my mandibles into a frenzy of snapping echoes. I open the lid and place the newspaper clipping on top of Angela's panties, next to a jar of robin eggs.

The eggs are sky blue. The urge bites me to reach up and snatch the clouds from the heavens. But my ceiling is in the way. I should stop thinking of the sky the way a priest does.

I first met Angela and the dick with the pickle at church. Church is an excellent way to collect tithing. The day I met them, the house of God paid me two black buttons, a rosary, and a hymnbook that smelled of hand sanitizer and turnip. I have eleven hymnbooks, each from a different church. One has Angela's number scrawled onto the copyright page; another with an army ant pencilled on hymn 253, "Like Ten Thousand Legions Marching." I told her I wanted to put her father in a jar of vinegar in my kitchen pantry and serve him with beer. She thought I was a convert to his drinking habits.

I twist the lid off the jar of robin eggs. One ovoid cupped in my forelegs, I scamper into my kitchen, place it on the counter, root in the cupboard above the stove for an empty mason jar. I fill it halfway with vinegar and drop the egg in. It sinks to the bottom and stands on its point. I poke the glass. The egg rolls; the vinegar swirls. Cradling the jar to my underbelly, I return to my front door and peer out the frosted

window. It is divided into diamonds. My compound eyes combine with quadrilateral geometries. Through the glass I see three-and-a-half dozen broken, blurred trees. The urge bites me to pickle a cherry blossom. Through the glass, Wayne wiggles his feelers at me over the hood of his gleaming Maserati. Supercilious cockroach.

The phone rings in the living room. I burrow deeper into my hole, find the handset underneath white couch pillows that smell like semen and smoked salmon.

“Hello?”

“Hey. It’s Angela.”

“Heyyyy, how’s it going?”

“My dad’s out of town. Want to come over?”

I pick a pistachio shell from the bottom of my bare foot. “Why don’t you come over here?”

“Lost my key,” she sings, an angel of the host. I want to latch onto her and leech her blood between my teeth. “I wouldn’t be able to get back in tomorrow.”

I click my tongue. “You’re the queen ant. Be at your hill in an hour.”

She giggles. “You’re so weird. Bring some of the good stuff. And just walk in. I’ll be in my dad’s bed, waiting.” She hangs up and the phone buzzes in my ear.

I toss the phone back onto the couch. It rolls off the cushion, clatters underneath the dark maple coffee table. I bring the pickling robin’s egg into the kitchen, set the jar on the counter next to the toaster. A colony of ants parses out pieces of yesterday’s pumpernickel, carrying the bread back through some unknown hole in the wall: rye flour and cocoa.

My mother used to bake a different loaf of bread every other day. My brother and I would slice strips into the toaster. Warm and buttered, the bread would enter into our gaping maws. Mom would lean against the counter, wait for our approving nods and moans. Everything smelled like bread. Our clothes, our shoelaces, pillows, seats in the station wagon. My schoolbooks, Emery's hockey equipment. Mom's barrettes.

I replace the station-wagon yeast scent with a mint tree hanging from my 'Cuda's rearview mirror. I stole the mint tree from a truck stop souvenir shop, along with a pack of sour candies and a Canada-Kicks-Ass keychain. I gave the sour candies to a crying toddler in a blue stroller by the machine that claws stuffed animals. The keychain hides in the cherry wood chest underneath my bed.

I stop at the liquor store and pick up a bottle of Tequila Rose. I put it on the counter; add a bottle of lemon vodka. I pay the red-haired wasp forty-seven dollars and fifty cents. She gives me back a dime and nickel. She takes off her ring and puts it on the counter, replaces it with a glob of hand sanitizer. I tell her she has a mosquito on her arm. When she moves to swat it, I slip the ring from the counter, flicking a raisin at her neck.

"Fuck," she spouts, ducking under the counter and coming back up armed with a can of Lysol. "It bit me!"

I wriggle out the door, continue on to Angela's.

She's on her father's bed, reading *The Merchant of Venice*. "Where is it?"

I raise the bottles. Her brown compound eyes reflect the sun the same way the alcohol does. I hand her the bottle of tequila and she pours it down her throat. I wonder if she sees me in thousands of inverted images or in a single erect one.

“Does your dad,” I say, looking at the crucifix on the wall, “want to make love to Jesus?”

“My dad’d fuck anything with that kind of bondage involved,” she says. She cups my testicles in one hand, grips the Tequila Rose in the other. I push her down into the sheets. She buzzes like a cicada. Devours me—alitrunk, petiole and gaster—while we skitter along the mattress. She slithers her feelers along my own. Locks her mandibles around my neck. We squirm under a magnifying glass.

I leave her in a sweaty mess of sand, twigs, and spit. “I got you something.”

“Something else?” She drains the tequila.

I zip my jeans, take the cashier’s ring out of my pocket. White gold, diamonds around the band. I extend it. Angela leans forward, touches it with her feelers. “Something queenly,” I say.

“Are you kidding me?”

I sniff, scratch an antenna.

“I mean, are you fucking kidding me? What the fuck?” She pushes me.

“Just something I already had.” I put the ring back in my pocket. “Thought you’d like it.”

“Like it?” She pounds a tarsal claw against my chest. Again. Smacks me. Again. “Get out of my house. Or I’m calling the cops.” But instead of pushing me out the door she pulls me back onto the bed. Wraps me in all six legs.

Twelfth Night and *Structure du français moderne* poke out of her backpack, leaning up against her father’s oak armoire. She crawls out of bed behind me, shuffles through her clothes.

“So my boyfriend got into the University of Toronto. For a biology Ph.D. He’ll be studying the social and breeding patterns of ants. Fucking weirdo. What’s this?”

I turn around. She’s still naked. Holding my jeans in one hand. In the other, the newspaper clipping of MAY, Elizabeth Diane (née Foster). I say, “I found that in an old photo album.”

She raises her eyebrows.

“She’s my half-sister.”

“You don’t have a sister, Tony.” She drops my pants and the clipping, runs to the bathroom, retching. I take the white-and-pink rosary off her dad’s bedside table. Smells of halved peaches and sugar trails.

ORIGIN OF SPECIES

“Shit,” says Emery, because he says it whenever Mom’s not around. He sits criss-cross-apple-sauce on the floor, piles of hockey cards encircling him. “Hey, you seen my Yzerman?”

I click and unclick my invisible ink pen, part of my birthday gift from Chloe. Our birthdays were both last week. She got me a private eye detective kit with this pen that writes in invisible ink and fingerprint sheets and black policeman ink to mark the fingerprint sheets and a magnifying glass that makes everything a thousand times bigger. Mom picked out a soldier Barbie, because that’s what Chloe wants to be when she’s older.

“Nope,” I say.

“I can’t find it.”

“Ogrodnick’s better anyway.”

“Shut up, is not. Yzerman had eighty-seven points this year, idiot.”

I write *idiot* and *shit* on the wall in invisible ink. “Yeah, but only thirty-nine were goals. Ogrodnick scored forty-two this year.”

“But Ogrodnick only had seventy-eight points. Goals aren’t everything. Plus, it was Yzerman’s rookie season.”

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“Toooooooooonyyyyyy. Emeryyyyyyyyy. Come upstairs, I made banana raspberry bread.”

I cap my private eye detective pen, slip it in my pocket. Emery pushes me against the door frame, squeezes by, and runs up the stairs. He always gets the biggest slice.

The bread steams, warm from the oven. Mom fingertips crumbs into her mouth and says, “Make sure you keep it on your plate or in your stomachs. We don’t want ants in the house.”

In the summertime, she hides plastic containers of icing sugar and baking soda around the house. There’s one in the coat closet by the front door, one behind the garbage in the kitchen, one tucked between the wall and the deep freezer downstairs. When the ants crawl in the containers they get poisoned and die. Sometimes I check the traps and find three or four dead ants, curled up like sleeping shrimp. But they’re not asleep, they’re dead. When you’re dead you don’t wake up. That’s why it’s okay to put people underground or burn them and put their ashes in vases, like with Dad.

The bread tastes so awesome. Two days ago, she made pumpernickel, two days before that: cheddar spice. Emery stops chewing when I ask, “Mom, what was Dad’s favourite bread?”

Mom takes her plate to the sink. “Lemon poppyseed. He could eat that stuff for breakfast, lunch, and dinner.”

My brother punches me in the arm under the sound of running tap water. Whispers, “I told you never to talk about him.”

Mom turns around. “What’s that, Emery?”

“Yeah, I remember that about dad.”

Four knocks on the front door. Emery jumps up, shoving me back into my chair. “Oh,” he says, opening the door. “It’s Chloe.”

“Come on in, Chloe,” says my mom. “Have some bread.”

Chloe’s wearing a green dress with blue polka dots, the same colours as the Hartford Whalers logo. I wouldn’t be caught shrimp-curved in baking soda in a dress like that. “What kind?”

Mom drops a slice onto a white plate. “Banana raspberry. You’re not allergic?”

Chloe shakes her head, takes the plate. “I’m only allergic to bees.” She flashes a silver bracelet. “Mom and Dad say never take it off, not even in the shower.”

I scoot my chair closer to hers and ask, “So what happens when a bee comes near you?”

“No, it has to sting me.”

“Idiot.”

“Emery Franklin, apologize immediately.”

His knees have suddenly become very interesting. He slides off his chair and mumbles a sorry before stalking off to the basement.

Bite by bite the bread disappears between Chloe’s lips. Lips that have been kissed, but not by me. She’s Sam St. Pierre’s girlfriend, and Sam’s in Mr. Mulcaster’s third grade class. She says all the kids in our grade are gross. She doesn’t mean me, because I’m her best friend. We pinky swore it sitting on top of the monkey bars last year. Feet hanging down between red iron bars.

She swallows her last piece. “Want to play at the park?”

“Can I, Mom?”

“I guess. Be home for dinner, though.”

“What time?”

“Thank you for the bread, Ms. Gordon.”

“Welcome, honey. What time is dinner every night?”

“Eight?”

“Seven-thirty,” says Mom, rinsing Chloe’s plate. “Rinse your plate before you leave, kiddo. I’m not your maid. Have fun, don’t get into any trouble.”

We each carry a plastic pail to Big Hill Park. Hers is navy blue, darker than her polka dots. Mine: red, white handle. We’re going to excavate some cool rocks because Chloe’s starting a rock collection. She collects teddy bears and stamps and beer bottle caps and hockey cards, even though she’s a girl and girls aren’t supposed to like hockey, even though Annie Chittle plays in the boys’ league on Emery’s team. When I dig, ants pour out of the ground like thin brown rivers. I put thirty-six stones in my bucket that Chloe will like.

She borrows the magnifying glass she bought me, to study each stone. Turns them over between her fingers one by one by one by one by one. Hurrah, hurrah. Suddenly snaps her head up to me, sitting on the swing next to hers, and asks, “Do you like Bree Leblanc?”

“What? No. Why?”

“Oh.” She tosses a reddish rock to the ground and pulls out a black speckled one, a pepper stone. “She told me you did.”

“I don’t even talk to her. When did she tell you that?”

Chloe drops the pepper stone back into her bucket, places her new rock collection under an empty black leather swing to her left. Wraps her fingers around the iron chains. “In gym today, playing dodgeball. Can you push me?”

I'll do anything she asks.

*

Last day of grade two. Afternoon recess. Chloe's in a salmon dress and blue sneakers. Sorting hockey cards with me behind the soccer net. Her collection is double the size of Emery's, plus twenty-six.

There're black stains on my fingers from the tire swing at the park. Ants crawl on over the stains. I turn my wrist and weave my fingers to keep them from falling into the grass between my knees. I say, "Emery noticed his Yzerman's missing, eh?"

Chloe grins. "When?"

"Back when we had banana raspberry bread and went to the park. A couple days after you started your rock collection. My mom used to collect porcelain dolls. She told me that my dad's favourite bread was lemon poppyseed, before he died."

"She told you that before he died?"

"No, before you came over. It was his favourite bread. Before he died."

"Oh, okay. Do you think they have that kind of bread in heaven?"

I flick the ants off my fingers. They zip through the openings in the mesh netting. "Probably. They probably serve every kind of bread in heaven. Like Smarties bread and strawberry icing bread."

"Are you talking about Canadian Smarties or American Smarties?"

"What's the difference?"

"Canadian Smarties are like American M&Ms and American Smarties are like Canadian Rockets."

“That’s really confusing.” I pick a dandelion, a yellow one, not the white kind that are dying and you can blow away. “You should give Emery his card back. You don’t even need to tell him you took it. I can sneak it back into his room for you. Come over and play tonight, he’ll be at Jameson Campbell’s pool party.”

Back into their slipcovers the last cards go, and Chloe closes the blue binder. Summer’s first freckles dot her nose. Last year she told me she got way more freckles when her family lived in Florida. I imagine her with brown flecks covering her entire face. I want to scrub them with a sponge. If I dot my nose with my invisible ink pen, would I have freckles in candlelight?

She says, “Remember those rocks we took from the park? I have to put them back.”

“Why? Did your mom say they were too dirty for the house? We can wash them.”

“No. I’ve had nightmares for three nights. Ants crawl in my bed and they say I have to put all the rocks back or else.”

I’ve stopped plucking petals from the dandelion. “Or else what?”

“They scared me.”

“Or else what? What did they say?”

“They said they’d chew off my face. They would carry me away and chew off my face and bury me behind the hockey arena.”

She pokes at the dirt with a stick, picks at a loose blue thread on her sneakers. She once told me about a dream where Bree Leblanc’s parents got divorced. That weekend, Bree’s dad packed his clothes into three luggage bags and boarded a plane for Ottawa. Bags that’d been in Chloe’s sleeping mind. She asked Bree if they were brown leather

bags and if one of them had a pink “I ♥ Iowa” sticker on it and Bree burst into tears and ran to the girls’ bathroom. When I was in kindergarten, I thought dreams played on the wall next to my bed. I pop the head off the dandelion, flick the stem at her. “It was just a dream, Chloe. Ants can’t carry humans.”

“Yes they can, if there’s enough of them. They can lift things a hundred times their size. Or five-thousand times, if it’s a girl ant. I read it at the dentist. That’s how they can carry big spiders and stuff back to their anthills and eat them. They just team up.”

“Don’t worry about the rocks. It was a stupid dream. No ants are going to come and eat your face.” The bell sounds and all the kids in the playground move toward the school. Ants on their way back to the hill. Last recess of the year. I ask, “How come you didn’t play soccer with Sam today?”

“I’m not Sam’s girlfriend anymore.”

“Who do you like, then?”

“I can’t say.”

“Chloe, come ooooooooooon.”

“You promise the ants won’t come after me? Because I really like that grey bumpy rock you found. The one with all the tiny black freckles.”

I nod and reach for her hand but she moves it to scratch her nose. I slip my hand into the pocket of my shorts to play with the cap of my invisible ink pen.

*

There’s a dry-erase board lying between Emery and me at the kitchen table, the kind shaped like a hockey rink with the lines and creases on it. He got an ant from the sidewalk and put it on the board. Faceoff. We’re each trying to keep the ant on our own

side by steering it with a marker. If you put your own marker on the other side of the red centre line, the ant changes possession.

Emery watches my marker work, a crease between his eyebrows. “There’s no way any fighter’s better than Nilan. He’s a beast. Guy goes postal on anything that looks at him the wrong way. He trains against bears.”

“That’s not even true.”

“Totally is. Jameson’s cousin’s friends with him. Nilan has three grizzlies and he fights them for practice during the offseason. I shit you not.”

“Really?”

The ant scurries past centre into my brother’s zone. Emery’s marker immediately goes to work. He says, “Uh-huh. That’s how he beats the shit out of everyone. He can take a freaking grizzly, man.”

“Whatever. He doesn’t even win all his fights.”

“He wins more than most players. And he led the league in penalty minutes. Hey, keep your marker on your side.”

“I’m on my side.”

Mom comes into the kitchen. Opens the oven to check her pistachio bread. She goes “Mmmhmm” and slips into her mitts and pulls out the loaf. Sets it on an aluminum grate on the counter. “What are you two doing? Is that? Emery, get that goddamn thing outside. Next thing you know there’s going to be a whole army of them marching through the house.”

“But it wasn’t my idea.”

She whacks him on the head with her white oven mitt. Brown tomato sauce stains. “I don’t care whose idea it was. You’re older, you know better. Get your bathing suit and towel ready, I’ll drive you to Jameson’s.”

Emery picks up the whiteboard and carries it to the front porch. Smacks it against the railing to knock the bug off. I ask Mom how deep anthills go.

“I don’t know,” she answers. “Maybe all the way through the world and out the other side.”

“Don’t say that,” says Emery, coming back inside with Chloe behind him. “Little runt’ll believe it and dig after them.”

“Will not. Is China actually on the other side of the world from us?”

Chloe shakes her head and says, “Actually, it’s a direct line to the middle of the Indian Ocean, halfway between Australia and the French Southern and Antarctic Lands.”

Emery coughs on his bread. “How do you know that?”

“Chloe, dear,” says Mom, wiping her hands on her bluejeans. “I have to drive Emery to his friend’s, but I’ll be home in a few minutes and we’ll have some pistachio bread and play Trivial Pursuit. Can you two play inside until I get back?”

“Pistachio bread?”

“Never made it before, thought I’d give it a try. Stay inside, okay?”

I pop open cola cans for Chloe and me. “Sure, Mom. We’re going to watch the thing on TV about the spaceship. Discoverer.”

“Discovery, honey.” She grabs the keys to the station wagon, slings her alligator purse over her shoulder. My mom collects things like Chloe does: three plastic bins full of egg cups piled in the cupboard under the stairs, porcelain dolls, plastic containers, my

baby teeth. And recipes. She has six shoeboxes full of cue cards. Ingredients on the lined side, instructions on the back. “Back in twenty. Behave. Stay inside.”

Out the door they go.

Yeasty pistachio smell wafts through the house. Ice clinks against glass, freezes our top lips as we drink our cola. Winter for those grooves under our noses. Filters? Philtruds? Scurry into holes in the ground to hibernate. The basement. Chloe pulls Steve Yzerman out of her back pocket. Wrapped in a plastic sleeve. She holds it out to me. She has a freckle on the inside of her arm. A beauty mark, but it’s not on her face. Like a penny in snow. She says, “I feel bad. You take it. Put it back in Emery’s room later. I’ll get another. Someone in our class probably has one. Does your mom really want to play Trivial Pursuit?”

“Probably. She makes me and Emery play all the time.”

“I’m the worst player in the world. Like, who cares whether anteaters like termites more than ants?”

“Some people mistake termites for white ants. Did you bring the rocks back to the park?”

“No, you told me the ants don’t give a hoot about my rocks.”

“Yeah, it was just a stupid dream. Ants can’t even talk.”

*

The next morning, Chloe’s gone.

*

Mom wakes me up at 7:30. “Get up, Tony, and come in the living room.”

Stretch, pee, wash hands with tangerine soap. Mom's on the living room couch, a wad of tissue in her hand. Emery's leaning on her shoulder, both crying. The house smells of pistachio and staling bread.

"Mom?"

"Honey, come here. Come sit with Mom."

I can't move. My rigid legs stop me, digging into the eggshell white carpet. "What's wrong? What happened?"

"Chloe's mom just called. I need you to tell me something because it's very important, okay? If you know where Chloe is, you need to tell me right now. This is a really big deal. Did she tell you if she was going anywhere? Was she going to run away from home?"

"Chloe'd never run away. What's going on?"

The couch's leather creaks when she stands. Emery buries his face in a blue throw pillow. Chloe and I once had a pillow war in this room. Knocked over a glass of cherry juice. The stain's still pink. Mom's arms around me, hands squeezing the back of my shirt. I can't move from her. Baking soda and icing sugar.

*

Thunderstorms knocked the power out. The whole town dipped in dark chocolate. Emery sits on my bed with two popsicles still wrapped in plastic. "You want one? I brought an orange one and a pink one. You can have orange."

"No, I'm okay."

"Want to go to Jameson's with me? His dad has a generator, and just bought a new pinball machine. We can ride our bikes there."

I shake my head. Tighten the blankets and tell him, “Open that drawer there, the one in my bedside table.”

He stands and slides the drawer open. Breathes for a few seconds. “My Yzerman. You had him.”

“No,” I say. “Chloe did. She felt bad and—”

“Why the fuck did you write on it?”

“What? I didn’t.”

He pulls the card out of the drawer. Glowing in the candlelight, *Put them back*. Emery says, “You’re the one with an invisible ink pen, Tony.”

“That’s not my writing. I don’t write like that. My a’s don’t have that curly tail on top. Must have been the ants. Chloe had a dream, what’s it called when you have a dream more than once?”

Emery’s face is half-gone in the flickering light. “Recurring dream.”

“Yeah, she had one of those where ants came to her in her bedroom and told her that she had to put some rocks we took from the park back. If she didn’t then they’d chew off her face. I told her it was stupid to return the rocks.”

“She’s not dead. They’re still looking for her.”

“It was the ants, Emery. They fucking killed her.”

The new word stings in my mouth, tastes like pee. Emery marches from the room, slams the door on his way out.

*

Two days later, Mom answers the phone and says, “Mrs. Valentine, how are you doing? Can I bring over some banana-walnut bread?”

I sit on the bottom step in the basement, private eye detective kit open on my lap. I take the pen out of my pocket and slide it back into the case next to the magnifying glass. Mom calls Chloe's mom Charlotte, so it's got to be Chloe's grandma. Chloe and I used to play demolition derby with our dinky cars down these stairs.

"Oh my god," says Mom. Tears choking her. "Jesus Christ, that's just, oh my god. The arena? God."

I close up the private eye detective kit, sneak up the stairs and out the back door. Before I close it I hear her sob, "Yes, I'll tell the kids. I'm so sorry."

Kneel on the ground, open up the black case. Take out the magnifying glass. One brown forager skitters across a patio stone. Focus a point of light through the glass. Shine, follow. Single wisp of smoke. Pistachio and burnt bread. Nothing left but a charred shell.

FACE STEALER

You take a name for yourself. Koh, the face stealer. Thieve from a bank teller, a girl on a green bike, a widow putting her pug out to pee, a mug-shattering couple screaming in slow motion amidst whirling white ceramic. Wear these faces to church. Conceal your stolen name under folds of skin, under other stolen names such as Lionel or Frank Woodington or Rodrigo or Bobby Jo Hutchins. Thumb vein routes along your neck and temples.

You attend christenings, giant weddings, funerals for crows gone talons-up. Dot your face-prize with anointed water from a copper basin. Sway and wiggle all your legs with the teeming congregation during hymns. Every third Sunday, the drunken hive queen wraps cardboard wafers into her tongue. Someday soon she'll ask you to rip stolen skin from your head and caress her neck in your mandibles, someday soon she'll take you in her legs and reward you for slapping her awake in her father's bathtub (ketchup staining her lip). Anoint you with her own sacred water.

You notice a small pupa two rows behind the queen, face uplifted. As if she sees God peering down from the rafters. Look up. Nothing there. Yearn to scythe and harvest the visage of your Heavenly Father and stretch his skin over your own. Beckon this little angel home.

You lie in bed for the rest of the day. Stay down when the phone rings, when your queen pounds on the door. Lift your body at sunset. Pee, eat some chocolate chips and coconut shreds, head out into the darkness. Carve the face from a crying baby later that night. Cradle robbing for skull features. His momma's cheekbones, his daddy's nose.

Stretch these over your bulbous, shimmering eyes. Fling rocks at a window, babyface. Bring a bottle of vodka and some cranberry juice. Hang from the stars, strung up and half-devoured. Innards leaking onto bedsheets.

Next week, the queen strokes your fingers beneath a green hymnal. The whole room smells of candlesmoke.

You shake her hand, her father's, your neighbour's, your Heavenly Father's, and that of the man who collects envelopes of the Lord's money. Thanks be to God. Turn. Accept a chocolate chip cookie from the pupa, who hands them out crumb by crumb while the pews are sugared with mumbling sinners. Peace be with you. Shake your head and hold a finger to your lips when the queen asks you what's wrong. Point to the sermonising bastard in black, white tab at his neck. Don't eat the scrap of cookie. Slip it in your pocket. Swallow imaginary saliva from a sandy mouth. Long for a mug brimming with the blood of Christ, or a tall glass full of statue tears, or at least a thimble of holy water.

INFESTATION

STAGE 1: EXPANSION

Lionel Réaumur walks up to the bar and asks, “Can I have a case of wine and one glass?”

I laugh. We all do, even the bartender. Can’t help it. Lionel’s a bloated crow in a straw fedora. An albino crow. Smells like hemp and green apple. He keeps a stash of coins, nuts, bolts, mismatched earrings and Christmas bulbs in the glove compartment of his Porsche 911. Klepto scumbag with a midlife crisis.

When I moved in across the street he clicked his tongue in his cheek and asked, What are you? The logo on his apple-green polo rippled.

Tony. Nice to meet you.

I haven’t, to this day, told him what I am. He’s trying to steal my life, like he stole the carved brass sparrow off the sundial in my front yard. The silver keyring by my door. My spoon from Devil’s Tower, Wyoming. A piece of glinting aluminum I crushed up and left in the gutter. I hear him laughing like me at the bar, sometimes, when girls start stumbling and mewling and pawing his feathers. That little trail at the end of laughter, pecans to his pie.

Me, I come up with everything on my own.

Here’s a recipe for a smoothie: two spineless kale leaves, a handful of spinach, a cucumber, an avocado, one cup of coconut milk and one cup of crushed ice, juice from one lemon, two scoops of hemp seed and a green apple.

“What,” asks the pale crow, bobbing over to me with his wine, “are you drinking?”

I tilt my glass to him. "Grasshopper."

"Manly."

He perches next to me at the bar. The bartop stained dark brown so pretentious pricks like him can't examine the colour of the wine. I pull my glass in closer. "Well, Lionel? Rough one?"

"Eh?"

"Wayne got a motor home," I tell him.

"Pretentious prick."

"How's your wine?"

"Exceptional. Probably the best I've ever had. No clue what it is, though. Hey Brian?"

Brian looks up from the Guinness he's pouring.

"What the hell am I drinking?"

"Baco noir. From Summerhill Pyramid. Oh-seven."

"Hmm," says Lionel. "I'm gonna have to buy me some. Brian, put a case of this in my trunk, eh?"

Lionel, buy something for real? I once found a milk crate under his bathroom sink full of cigarette boxes. Peter Jackson, du Maurier, Black Cat, Player's, Salem. Some still in the shrink-wrap, some empty and flattened and waterstained. Lionel doesn't smoke.

The urge bites me to pull the smoke out of the air in this bar and stuff it in a bottle. To collect smoke from Lionel's stolen cigarettes, from the dirty exhaust of a beat-up sedan, from the mouth of a shattered stained glass window on the side of a burning church. Ash drifting up from flaming hymnals.

Lionel: “Tony?”

I look up. My knuckles white around the stem of my glass.

“You all right, buddy?”

“I—I—I don’t know,” I say. “I just, uh. I don’t. I have to go.”

A fight erupts across the room in a spray of gurgling magma and volcanic ash. The brisk snap of a pool cue. Sound waves I wish I could muzzle and drag home and bury under my bed. A lullaby of soft moans and thuds. Brian rushes out from behind the bar to break it up. Lionel has disappeared in a puff of white feathers. There’s a photograph of a teenage girl pinned to the wall behind the bar. I hop the bartop while everyone’s circling the fight and slip the picture in my pocket, then sneak out through the kitchen’s back door.

What the hell? I pull out the photograph. The girl looks about seventeen. Tan skin, big olive eyes, chestnut hair with a streak of doctor pepper in her bangs. I turn the picture around: *Angela, September 14th*.

I’m fucking in love.

The back of the photograph smells like hibiscus perfume and tequila sunrise, with a hint of honey garlic chicken wings. I slip it into my back pocket and scratch my antenna.

My what?

What the hell? I skitter past the burned-out husk of an old office building beside a car wash. I smell black smoke and French fries. Last Friday night, a woman at this bar put fries in a blender with a banana and a cup of chocolate milk. Her drunken friends paid her twenty dollars to drink the mixture. They tossed her another twenty when she puked it

up all over her boyfriend. I took the chapstick from her coat pocket. No, I didn't. I'd wanted to. But I didn't.

My stomach's floating between my ribs. All that bile and half-digested cherries, almonds, pretzel sticks. Can't be good so close to my lungs. What am I?

Back home, I pull the photograph from my pocket and run my fingers over Angela's face in September. I need to hide this fucking picture.

I can't put it in a dresser drawer, or I'll find it when I root through for a pair of socks. Kitchen pantry? No. I'd brush it every time I reach for the vanilla wafers. Under the utensil tray in the top kitchen drawer. Perfect.

I take the photograph into the kitchen, bump into the corner of the wall. I'm getting hard. God damnit I'm getting hard. I pull the tray out of the drawer. Underneath, on the bottom of the drawer, there's a whole colony of tiny black ants and eggs and half-developed larvae squirming and wriggling and whispering my name.

"Tonyyyyyyy," they say. "Come on, buddyyyyyyy, come playyyyyyyy."

I put the photograph on the counter and grab a can of Lysol from under the sink. The only chemical I've got. I spray all the little soldiers, scavengers, burning millions of fragmented eyes. Smile. My scavenger sisters.

Wait, what?

Spray. Today I will send them all, bubbling and disfigured and drowning in their own spit, to the deepest tunnels of hell. There, they will rot in the wavering stink of disinfectant.

The phone rings.

"Hello?"

“Tonyyyyyyy. Buddy, what’s up?”

“Who is this?”

“It’s Wayne, buddy, your neighbour.”

“Wayyyyyne,” I moan, and look at the clock. 12:26. “Do you know what time it is?”

“I know, it’s late. But I saw you walk up the driveway a minute ago and t’ought I’d give you a dingle and let you know dat my buddy Bob, you know, Bob? From Iler Avenue? Yeah, he’s havin’ a barbecue tomorrow. Today, I guess. You should come.”

“What time?”

“Fiveish? He’s at house one-one-one-ohhhhhh.”

“Done. Be there.” I scratch a note to myself on my calendar. And then I hang up on his pompous, rich ass before he can tell me about his fucking motor home. As if the whole neighbourhood can’t smell it in his driveway.

STAGE 2: COLONIZATION

The next morning I go to the Holy Name of Jesus Church to repent my sins and tear the flesh of God’s son apart in my mouth. I want to taste his blood tickling my uvula, pick his skin from between my mandibles. Last night I dreamed I was a soldier ant and that I tore the Pope in two with my jaws. I ask for the Lord’s forgiveness.

I dip my finger in the bowl of tepid holy water, sanctified by the grime under the fingernails of the congregation. I tap my forehead, my sternum, my left shoulder, then someone catches my right. I turn, and there’s Wayne’s big white smile.

“Waaaayyyyyyyne,” I say.

“Tony, buddy, you met Bob? You know Bob, right?”

Bob appears around Wayne’s massive shoulders and holds out his hand. I shake it, say, “Know *of* Bob, yeah. Nice to meet you.”

“So you’re a churchman,” says Bob. “Never seen you before.”

“I usually sit near the back.”

“Well, today you’re going to sit with us. This is my daughter, Angela.”

She brushes her bangs with holy water fingertips. I blink, close my eyes so they will not be burned from their sockets by she whose eyes are blazing fire and whose feet are burnished bronze and whose hair streaks cherry cola. I open them again and see a flash of membranous wings, the wave of a hand.

“Hi,” she says.

“Hi. Angela?”

I feel her four-by-six body pressed up against my buttocks. In front of me, she pulls out a cell phone and thumbs the keys. I want to pull it from her hands and text Michael and Gabriel and Raphael and tell them to screw off, that she’s folding me into her wings tonight.

Wayne pushes me into a pew and Angela follows. I kneel and pray to the Lord: He will deliver this larva unto my tunnel nest, that I will be blessed with the bread of her body and her bloody sweat.

What in the *fuck*?

Amen.

I sit back. Two black plastic buttons glisten on the pew. Pocket them. Angela smells of pistachio and oranges. “Lose your buttons?”

I swallow, sniff. “Extras for my suit. They just fall out.”

“Why do you carry around your extra suit buttons when you’re not even wearing the suit?”

Here’s a recipe for ice cream: one cup unsalted shelled pistachios, three-quarter cup of sugar, two cups of milk, half a teaspoon of almond extract, four large egg yolks, one cup whipping cream, one cup extra pulp orange juice, three-quarter cup of unsalted shelled pistachios (toasted, coarsely chopped).

The priest begins his sermon. “In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.”

We cross ourselves and chant.

“The Lord be with you.”

“And also with you.”

I whisper to Angela, “What sins do you hide?”

Bob and Wayne talk about tonight’s football game beside her. Third down conversions and formations: I-Form Wide and Shotgun Singleback. They don’t hear our whispered words, the crumbs we carry back and forth between each others’ forelegs. The next hymn starts up on the organ. I excuse myself and skitter to the washroom behind the congregation, by the crying room.

Lionel is pissing in the left urinal. I unzip my trousers beside him and he says, “Hey, what happened last night? You just disappeared. Did you see that fight? Wicked fight. Wicked. No, but are you all right? You hopped the bartop and went into the kitchen and poof. Gone.”

“I’m feeling better.”

“Really? You didn’t look too hot.”

“Lionel, honestly. I’m peeing, here.”

“Right.”

Lionel shakes, zips, and scrubs his filthy wings in the sink, washes away the traces of cigarette packs he’s nicked from coffee tables and coat pockets. When he leaves the washroom, mumbling some hung-over goodbye, I open the three stall doors. The third toilet is unflushed, a pink plastic rosary coiled up atop the tank. I slip it into my pocket with the buttons, flush, then wash my hands. When my fingers are clean, I go back into the stall with my keys and scratch ONLY JESUS SAVES into the wall.

Back in the congregation, Angela’s texting her boyfriend: Jesus, I hate church. Hymn 253. All rise. I open the green hymnal to the copyright page, where there’s a phone number scratched in black eyeliner. Angela winks. Give us this day our daily bread. I tuck the hymnal into my jacket.

She swallows a laugh. “You’re not seriously taking that whole book?”

I return her wink. I want to fold her into the hymnal’s pages and take her home, too. But where would I put her? Where the hell am I going to put this book, these buttons, this pink rosary?

Lionel, that nasty crow, stores all his special shiny knickknacks in the glove compartment of his sports car, and his cigarette packets in that green milk crate under his bathroom sink. I need something like that, a box or a—cherry wood chest with my name engraved on it that my mother bought me for Christmas the year before she died. Under the bed. Perfect.

The birth of Christ, the theft of sacrament.

Church ends with the chanting of the dead. I want to bleed the priest into a case of bottles and serve him to Lionel with a glass. Angela puts her hand on my thigh and whispers, “Call.”

I tell her I’ll be at her father’s barbecue tonight. She bites her lip and stands up. There’s a white stain on the calf of her jeans. Bleach-scented fingerprint of God.

STAGE 3: INFESTATION

Wayne and Bob answer the door together like mating cockroaches. The place stinks of Corona and peanuts.

“Tonyyyyyy,” they say together.

Wayne hands me a beer. Bob shoves a pickle slice down the bottleneck. Have I been here before? The cold bottle reminds me of gull cries on a Mexican beach. White vinegar sand. Dill low tide. Wordless television commercial.

Bob leads me through the house into his massive backyard. Three women with saggy tits in the pool. Six kids chasing each other around with hockey sticks. Angela across the lawn at the barbecue, a smudge of ketchup on her lip. She hides a smile with a cough when my feet touch the grass. Brian, from the bar last night, snakes his hand around her belly. To be those fingers.

“That’s the bartender from the bar,” I say to Bob.

“Boyfriend,” he sneers. “Worthless sack of shit, that one. Too old for her.”

“Why, how old is he?”

“Twenty-four. Heading to his doctorate in biology, and dating my nineteen-year-old daughter. Swear to God, if I catch him, you know.”

“Yeah,” I say. My fists become focused points of light shone through a magnifying glass. Containers of baking soda and icing sugar. Two cans of Lysol under the kitchen sink. “I’ll be happy to help.”

Bob raises an eyebrow. Takes a swig of pickled beer.

“He *looks* like a shitface, you know?”

Bob swallows, nods. He’s got one deep wrinkle in his collar. I long to drag him across the lawn, pin him down and press it out against the grill, his flesh sizzling like a chicken burger, burning deep black tracks in his face and on his shirt. I want to iron that collar along with the searing skin of hot dogs.

Angela approaches us and hands Bob the spatula. “Back in a sec,” she says. When she crosses the deck her hips zigzag like a scavenger ant looking for a peanut shell.

Brian sulks away to stand at the edge of the pool as Bob and I move to the barbecue. Bob turns the meat over on the grill. My stomach grumbles. He waves the steaming spatula in my face. A drop of grease hits my shoe. “Hungry, eh?”

I check my fingernails. “I’m gonna go wash up.”

“Yeah, uhh, bathroom’s through the door, down the hall to the right.”

I follow crumbs from communion wafers through the door, down the hall to the right. The bathroom door’s shut, so I knock. Wayne’s voice comes through, “Occupied.”

“Prick,” I whisper.

I turn and stumble over a pair of shoes. I pull the lace out of one. Smells of car exhaust and dust. It curls into my pocket, a sleeping millipede. I ascend the stairs. Blue carpet. Robin’s egg. A jar of them. I blink. What the hell?

At the top of the stairs, a closed white door. All the open rooms look like bedrooms, so the one with the white door has to be the bathroom. I knock.

No answer. Try again. “Hello?”

I wrap my fingers around the handle, twist slowly, like in a horror movie. When the lock unclicks, I push.

The curtain rod is half-attached to the wall. The other half is in the tub with Angela’s body. Her bare legs peek out from their white cocoon, honey-coloured and smelling of sugar-dusted orange rinds. I curl a hand around one. “Angela?”

She doesn’t move. I peel away the shower curtain and pull her onto the floor. Her forehead’s bleeding, just above her left eye. Closed. I put two fingers on her neck, feel a pulse, slow, slow, slow. My fingers come away with a light film of foundation. I shake her. “Angela.” Harder. “Hey. Wake up.”

Her eyes remain closed, uncracked pistachio shells. Orange peels. I sway dizzy, slap her, steal some more makeup. I tilt her head back and listen to her breathe, moist on my ear. I crave a sip of pickled Mexican beer. Slap again.

Her eyes flutter open, and she looks around. “Mr. Gordon? Why am I?”

I put my hand on her shoulder to keep her from standing up. “You passed out.”

“Yeah, I. I. I. The fuck, I’m bleeding?”

I grab the towel from the silver ring on the wall, wet it in the sink. “You fell into the tub. Must’ve hit your head.”

I kneel and dab the cut with the damp blue cloth. She grabs my wrist. All at once my forelegs are abuzz, my antennae twitching and gyrating. I need to see a doctor. She says, “Don’t tell my dad.” I want her jaws locked on mine and her claws scrabbling at my

belt, my button, my prick. I want to crawl over her, ants in a Lysol-soaked kitchen drawer. I want her to moan into my thorax: “Tonyyyyyy.”

“Mum’s the word,” I say. I dab until the cut no longer bleeds. Thumb the ketchup from the corner of her lip.

“Is my lip bleeding, too?”

“No, must’ve been a drop from your forehead.”

Scrambled eggs: four large eggs, one cup crushed pistachios, two tablespoons of ketchup, one tablespoon of pork grease, three pistachios, garlic powder, salt, pepper, pistachios.

I leave her curled up and still drunk on the bathroom floor. Take the burgundy ties off Bob’s green and pink paisley curtains. They smell of dust mites and fried lice and Lysol. A faint hint of tangerine. I comb my hair with my fingers and begin the short walk home.

SWELL

You tighten your tie and tell yourself you believe in God. You believe.

You stand on a cedar platform that spit-shines and glints in the sun, and lie. About believing in your Heavenly Father, about holding light in your palms, and sob for effect. These tears extract nods and smiles. As if those eyes can't see the purple poison oak stain around your eye and down your neck. They think you've found faith in the midst of itching. Calamine lotion proves ineffective as skin still smarts and swells. Tie your own hands behind your back before sleeping.

You lick a tear from the corner of your mouth. Spit on the microphone. Sweat beads down your ribs. And the podium proclaims: flesh under calamine smears. Salt dissolves into bile, blood, sweat. Believe in being honest, true, chaste, benevolent, virtuous, and in doing good to all men, as per the thirteenth Article of Faith.

You say, I know this is the one true church. The truth's fingernails scratch the bottom of your stomach. Just the stirring of your dick, a twitch in your pants when the brunette in the front row uncrosses her legs, her skirt just a bit too short for standards outlined in *For the Strength of Youth: Fulfilling Our Duty to God*, pages fourteen to sixteen, "Dress and Appearance." Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you?

The temple of God has itchy, tightening balls.

You fell asleep on the floor of your hotel room's shower last night, proving the Lord allows for breathing underwater under extenuating circumstances. Circumstances being: long day of seminaries, and hot water's the only thing that soothes the purple rash.

The Lord will smite thee with the botch of Egypt, and with the emerods, and with the scab, and with the itch, whereof thou canst not be healed. Just want to heal. Try not to scratch your neck in front of hundreds of eyes floating above black ties and high necklines. Such a deficiency of collarbones. Wonder if the brunette in the short skirt in the front row has a mole on hers, like you do. Those hazel eyes and corozo buttons. *Toxicodendron pubescens*. Buttons slip through holes so easy. Press against the podium and order yourself to stand down.

You swell purple and peeling. And these signs shall follow them that believe – in my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues; they shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick and they shall recover. You want the brunette with the corozo buttons to lay hands on you and heal the spreading plum poison from your swollen eye to your crotch. Or at least scratch every millimetre of your body. Suck skin like white bread sacrament. You say these things in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

THREE CHEERS FOR THE UNDERGROUND

Eighty yards out: my ball lands in the greenside bunker. Spray of white sand arcs against the periwinkle sky. Fuck.

Lionel flicks a sunflower seed husk into the fairway. Says, Change into your sandals, ugly.¹

I shoot him the finger and walk ahead as he sticks one inches from the pin. He sheathes his wedge and applauds himself. Arrogant ass.² Watch me blast this one. Up and down. Sink. I wave him on when he reaches the green and he one-putts. Lionel wins, yet again. Bagger, I mutter.

Sand shifts inside the bunker, swirls. Grains slide in thin lines, avalanche runnels. Breezy today. I grab the plastic rake and plunge into the sand for my ball. I align my shoulders, knees, toes. Wiggle my tergite. Focus. Eye on the ball. Up at the pin. Back to the ball.

A funnel opens up under my ball and sucks it down into the drainage system. The hole in the sand widens and giant pincers emerge. The mandibles and maxillae of an antlion larva.³ The monster bursts from the trap in a wave of white grains and roars. Queen of the bunker. Top of the hexapod food chain. A bedtime story we tell pupae back home to keep them from venturing too far from the colony. I scramble up the side of the bunker but the funnel deepens and I slide back down toward the monster's jaws.

¹ I didn't say this. There's no way I resorted to infantile name-calling.

² I accept that Tony boosts his self-esteem by belittling his best friend.

³ Antlion larvae, sometimes referred to as doodlebugs, have large and ferocious-looking jaws: the maxillae and mandibles. Each pincer encloses a canal for injecting venom. The projections that line the inside of the jaws are hollow, and serve to suck the fluids from the antlion larva's prey. The antlion larva tosses its dried-out victims from its pit, and re-embeds itself to keep cool until its next meal.

I scream, LIONEL! JESUS CHRIST! LIONEL, GET OVER HERE, HELP!⁴

The beast locks its mandibles around my legs. I kick, wild. My shoe comes off. Great. First it takes a five-dollar Pro V1 and now my left DryJoy.⁵ They'll be happy when I slink into the pro shop to buy some new kicks. If I make it out of this bloody sand trap. The antlion larva roars and gnashes. Bits of leather and hair gel cling to its fur. Remnants of other victims. I swipe at it with my wedge.

Then a shadow descends. White wings from the heavens. Lionel reaches down and pecks. In a flash of fur and legs, the larva disappears down his throat. Gulp.

Ruffling his feathers, he says, Now finish the hole. I want some booze.

I drop a new ball into the bunker. Swing four times before I make the green. Three-putt. Christ. I tunnel into the cup after my ball, skitter down through sand and perlite past roots and reeds, under the pond and cart lot, and up through a crack in the bar's tile. Lionel has flown in already, one albino wing wrapped around a glass of Shiraz.

How do you do that? I ask.

He blinks. Caws, What?

It takes you, like, five seconds to get off the green and start boozing.

Lionel clutches his belly, full of gizzard stones and insect carapaces. He brought me here, to this golf course, like he does every couple of weeks. To see the sun, he says. To roll some putts and drain some pops. Lionel is Club President, head of the murder.

⁴ Over the three months following this incident, I performed Rorschach blot tests on Tony every three days. Nearly every inkblot that usually inspires fear or discomfort in patients elicited the response, "Antlion" from Tony. He did, however, provide four other answers during which he exhibited fear: anteater, crucifixion, scarecrow, dandelion.

⁵ FootJoy DryJoys Tour shoes, produced by the Acushnet Company, and valued at approximately C\$179.99 (MSRP).

I shake my shoeless foot, sock stained brown. I swear to God. Every bloody time I put it in the sand. When's your course going to spray pesticides, man?

Lionel calls the bartender over.

What can I get you?

Is there any bar you don't serve at, Brian?

Brian punches my order for grasshopper parmesan and cookie crumbs⁶ into the computer, slides a Strongbow across the green bar.⁷ Here, he wears black pants and an orange polo, held tight around his abdomen with a white belt. Lionel eyes the buckle. His beak twitches out, Did you know Brian's coming to the University of Toronto with me? They just hired me in entomology. Brian's my personal research assistant. Myrmecology. Fire ants' social and breeding patterns.

I drop my fork. Wait, you're moving?

Lionel stretches his wings. Yeah, didn't I tell you? End of August. Brian and I will carpool up. God, I'm getting old. You know, it took me ten minutes to stand up this morning? I just couldn't get these knees to work.⁸ Scary. How old are you now, Tony? Thirty-one?

Forty now—forty years, the deepest old age. Living past forty is indecent, vulgar, immoral. Tell me this, Lionel, sincerely, honestly: who lives past forty? I'll tell you who: fools and scoundrels.

No way you're forty fucking years old.

⁶ Grasshopper carcasses and cookie crumbs form a regular part of my specimens' diets; however, I do not know where Tony Gordon's colony would have gotten hold of parmesan.

⁷ It was, in fact, a grasshopper.

⁸ I have, since that day, had both my knees replaced.

No, I'm thirty-five.⁹

Lionel retches and spews up dead cicadas, ants, beetles. All covered in green bile. Brian flits over with a cloth and wipes the mess off the counter, sprays it down with disinfectant, wipes it again with a new cloth. Tosses both cloths in the bin and says, You look younger than that. I'd have said twenty-seven, twenty-eight.

Lionel pops a ladybug in his beak and says, Even though he's secretly a fifty-two-year-old matron. Tony's a pretty badass baker. Betty Crocker with a prick. Betty Cocker.

Brian lays my plate down in front of me. Dinner is served among the parasites.¹⁰ Brian says, I can't bake myself anything but a joint. My parents didn't teach me anything about the kitchen.

Lionel preens under his wing and says, Tell Brian about your mom, Tony. What did she do, again?

Pistachio bread

Batter: one box yellow cake mix, one box pistachio nut pudding mix, four eggs, eight ounces sour cream, a quarter cup each of oil and water.

Nut mix: one cup honey, quarter cup walnuts, quarter cup cashews, half cup pistachios, one teaspoon cinnamon.

Grease and flour two regular size bread pans. Mix batter mixture and set aside.

Mix nut mixture and set aside. In pan, layer batter mixture, nut mixture, batter mixture and nut mixture on top. Bread pans about three quarters full before baking.

⁹ Tony Gordon hatched on 1 June 1976. Which means that he was 34½ years old when this conversation took place.

¹⁰ Serres, Michel. *The Parasite*. 1980. Trans. Lawrence R. Schehr. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2007. 5. Print.

Bake at three hundred and fifty degrees Fahrenheit for forty-five minutes. Check with toothpick to make sure it's completely cooked. Let cool before removing from pans.¹¹

Lionel scratches under a wing with his foot and asks me, How's life underground? How're the tunnels?

I won't accept the dentist Wagenheim living beside me. Show me something better, and I will follow you.¹²

Wayne Wagenheim, that fucker, says Brian as he uncorks another bottle of Shiraz.

Gotta take a leak, says Lionel. His bladder is the size of a sesame seed. The door to the washroom swings shut behind him. Brian polishes glasses.

The doors to the bar crash open and through them stride four adult antlions. Their wings spread out, knocking over tables, sending ketchup bottles rolling across the tiles. They buzz. They crack their claws. I cower under the barstool.

One of them marches forward and pulls me out. I should've run, should've burrowed down through the cracks between the floor and the mouldings. Now I'm dead. Lionel killed these monsters' larva and now I'm dead. The antlion gripping me around the neck opens her mouth and snarls. Saliva oozes from her teeth.

Stevie's missing, she growls. Why is Stevie not in her bunker?

Happy place. Happy place.

¹¹ I found this recipe online through a Google search. Tony may or may not post on Group Recipes as karlyn255, but the recipe matches up perfectly.

¹² Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *Notes from Underground*. 1864. Trans. Mirra Ginsburg. New York: Bantam, 1992. 41. Print.

Ants The ants are on their way. They've surveyed the best route to the kitchen, through the hole behind the bathroom radiator, along the floorboards in the living room, under the closet door past the bread maker and TV set aside for next week's yard sale, around the corner past the cleaning cupboard, over the mop handle, onto the linoleum. Behind the garbage they gather crumbs of puffed wheat and the peel-off tag from a can of juice, sticky with orange concentrate. They send scouts to scan for rolled-up newspapers and heels of palms. They look up your skirt. They crawl between your toes. They are daring and know they can outrun you 75 percent of the time. They prepare to take those odds. The ants collaborate in your cereal box in the space between the plastic bag and the cardboard, surviving on stray cornflakes that fall between and start to go soft. They take hits of RAID to boost their immune systems. The ants collect pieces of your dead skin. They are imitating stray hairs brushing your calves. Hiding in the nook behind your knee. Buying shares in all-natural cleaning products and promoting them with 30-percent-off coupons at the local Sobey's on Sunday. Rubbing RAID-slathered bodies on the inside of the peanut butter jar just enough to give you food poisoning. They are licking peanut butter off each others' backs. They drip RAID into your instant coffee. The ants grow, first a quarter inch, then half, then an inch long. Soon they will sit at your kitchen table ordering quiche Lorraine for dinner. Soon you will be dinner. The ants are coming to your kitchen. You wipe down every surface with anti-bacterial cloths and a 50/50 mixture of Borax and water. You kill the scouts upon sight with the heel of your palm and watch them twitch their legs after you crush their solid middles. The ants come marching two by two,

hurrah, hurrah. Eating your peanut butter and cornflakes. Soon you will be dinner.¹³

What in the hell's going on here? warbles Lionel.

The antlion stops sucking my leg, extracts it from her mouth. She turns to Lionel and shudders. Drops me. I scurry down the cracks, poke my head up just enough to see. The antlions shake. Hide their wings between their legs.

Lionel takes slow passerine steps, softly bobs his head. He says, You know, I could go for dinner right now. Something crunchy, something lean. Tony, you might not want to look.

He darts forward.

Proverbs 6:6-8: Go to the ant, you sluggard; consider its ways and be wise! It has no commander, no overseer or ruler, yet it stores provisions in summer and gathers food at harvest.¹⁴

Scraps of lacewing paper the walls.

Lionel pecks a bit of exoskeleton from the floor. Turns his head upward and shakes it down his gullet. Sits back down at the bar, drains his glass of wine and says, Brian, Tony. Okay to come out now, boys.

We slink back to our places.

Lionel says, Fucking insects.¹⁵

Shut the fuck up, Lionel, you think they're delicious.¹⁶

¹³ Tony claims this page is poetry. Tony sings the words between holes twelve and eighteen. He isn't just a shoelace thief; now, he's stealing words. Through extensive research, I've found the source for this poem: Hargreaves, Kate. "Leak." Master's Thesis. Windsor, Ont.: University of Windsor, 2012. Defended 5 March 2012. 26-27. Print.

¹⁴ *The New American Bible*. Nashville: Memorial Bibles, 1976. 730. Print.

¹⁵ Jesus Christ, it always happens this way. Always eating some arthropod to save Tony's exoskeleton. See page 97, "Dulosis."

I picture Lionel expelling long, stringy crow crap midflight.¹⁷ Shards of one membranous wing jutting from the waste.¹⁸ Carrying blood-based pathogens out of his ass and into the clouds.^{19/20/21/22/23/24}

What's wrong, Lionel? Not going down well?

He shifts from talon to talon, scrunches up his face. Flies back to the washroom.

I motion Brian over from where he shines a champagne glass and whisper, You collect bugs?

Only to study. In the lab.

I say, Lionel believes in respecting the dead bug, that's what he says. So he never pins them in those corkwood display cases with the glass covers. But he's full of shit. Last weekend we were out on twelve, and you know the trees along the left, off the rough? He put his ball in a pothole over there, this pothole full of cicada carapaces. You want to know what he did with them?

I snake an antenna around Brian's shoulders and pull him right up to my mouth.

He ate them. Gnawed them in his beak. Spit the husks all over the green.

I motion like I'm tossing popcorn kernels into my mouth. Or peanuts. Or termites. Or Smarties. Canadian ones, not American.²⁵

¹⁶ I prefer some over others. Antlions are spicy and give me diarrhea. Burn my candle at both ends.

¹⁷ Tony Gordon *would* picture that.

¹⁸ Okay, stop, that sounds painful.

¹⁹ Seriously, cut it out.

²⁰ Some varieties of *Corvus Macrorhynchos* fly in elevations as high as the Himalayan Mountains. The thought of which makes me nauseated.

²¹ Although he claims to have renewed his membership to the mile high club numerous times (see page 79, "Specimen Display"), Dr. Réaumur is afraid of heights. He once vomited onto his lawn chairs from his roof while cleaning his eavestroughs. — T. G.

²² In my defence, my house is three stories tall.

²³ Don't lie, Dr. Réaumur. It's only two. — T. G.

²⁴ Bug off.

²⁵ See page 12, "Origin of Species."

Lionel clears his gullet as he comes back out of the washroom. Sits gingerly on his stool. Plucks a stray beetle ommatidia from the bartop. Licks his beak, burps.

I swat belch stench from the air. Excuse you.

Yoooooooooooooooooooo, sneers Lionel, pointing a feather in my face. Brian freezes, bloated termite body shivering. Even the fruit flies that drone around the room stop. Lionel continues, Yoooooooooooooooooooo are a motherfucking insect, too. Aren't yoooooooooooooooooooo, eh? I saw yoooooooooooooooooooo in my backyard, dragging off an orange rind.²⁶ I should take yoooooooooooooooooooo to Toronto.

Brian unfreezes, scratches his neck, says, Yeah, we should stick him under a microscope. That's where he belongs.

I spit a cherry pit onto the floor, and Lionel dives after it.

I belong underground.

To hell with the underground, says Lionel.

Three cheers, calls Brian, lifting a glass of scotch.

Hip hip, hurrah! Hip hip, hurrah! Hip hip, hurrah, hurrah, the ants go marching three by three, the little one stops to take a pee and they all go marching down to the ground to get out of the rain.

I peel some lacewing from the wall and stuff it in the back pocket of my slacks with my white leather glove. Tunnel down into the earth. It's not raining, but I prefer my path home through roots and muck.²⁷

²⁶ In a three-week experiment, I presented Tony Gordon's colony with selections of fruit peels and rinds in an attempt to determine which fruit they chose first, most often. Orange: 53.18%; watermelon: 19.56%; banana: 10.44%; pineapple: 7.90%; apple: 5.89%; pear: 1.12%; lemon: 1.00%; lime: 0.31%; mango: 0.31%; cantaloupe: 0.24%; grapefruit: 0.05%.

²⁷ Tony actually prefers his clothes as mud-free and stainless as possible.

EMERY'S RULE

My brother has the whitest mandibles you've ever seen.

Emery, the toothbrush carrier. Emery, suds foaming from his mouth in restrooms at Megas Restaurant and La Hacienda and Harbour 60 and Nazareth and Sushi on Bloor. Emery, the Smile of Ontario. Toronto's top weatherman.

He sits across from me, waving a photo of Mom. She, holding a loaf of bread, mitts grasping the tray. We, currently at my kitchen table. With white tea and cookie crumbs. China plates between us.

"We're visiting her grave, Tony," he says. He drags a crumb across the table's maple surface.

The last time Emery came down from Toronto was one year ago today. He brought a girlfriend, a sex columnist named Radha. She smelled of soya beans and ketchup chips. I stole the luggage tags from her bags.

I say, "It's two thousand below and the roads aren't cleared."

So he says, "I definitely don't miss the lack of snowploughing here."

"You're the weatherman, genius. You should have known it was going to be bad. At least you made it here before it dumped down. More tea? Hey, want to pull out Trivial Pursuit?"

Antennae sway as he nods. "You know, I flippin' hate my job."

"You make obscene amounts of money to guess what clouds are going to do, prattle on about those guesses, and smile pretty for the camera."

I bite the urge to pickle a cloud. Jar it shrinking, shrivelling. Smash it on live television, showering weather watchers in the GTA with vinegar and cloves and mustard seed.

“But I’m just riding the wind chill to my bonus. Everyone there is so freaking boring. The sound guy talked at me for thirty minutes about his son’s batting average. Honestly, who gives a hoot about tee-ball?” Emery sports the cleanest mouth. Long shot from the shits and fucks he used to drop whenever Mom wasn’t around. He sips his tea. “I can count on two fingers the number of times they’ve gotten my coffee right. This bleepin’ guy last week walks right across the room in the background while Michael’s broadcasting. Swear to goodness, man. I’d have canned him on the spot. On air, live.”

We drop a sugar trail to the living room. We used to huddle around this same coffee table, Emery, Mom and I. In a different house, on a different block. Play that damn board game until queendom come (long live the Queen). I put the cookies and tea down on the coffee table and extract the game from the wall unit, wipe dust from the box. It sifts to the ground, catching light through the window. Emery once stuffed a green plastic wedge up his nose and Mom pulled it out with tweezers. The question: Which would anteaters prefer to eat – ants or termites?

“Mom’s grave,” says Emery. “As soon as the roads are clear. If we’re in the middle of a game we’ll come back to it later.”

I drop the cardboard box on the coffee table and check the street. Layers of shining sugar, slick and sweet. Cutting through it: white on white. A figure swoops up past the window and alights on the roof. The phone rings in the other room. I tell Emery, “Hold on a sec. Set up the game, eh?”

I pick up and Lionel caws, “Tonyyyyyyyyy.”

I picture that crow in his new Toronto high-rise, perched on his chaise, chewing on cracked corn, chocolate crickets, sesame seeds. One white wing wrapped around a glass of Shiraz. The old albino.

“What’s up, Lionel?”

He clears his throat. Bits of exoskeleton and sesame seed rattle as they slide down to his bellies. “I need a loan. The university didn’t transfer me the money from editing Doctor Fuckwad’s new manuscript on Great Lakes *E. coli* and I need to pay for some work on the Porsche. Would you mind tossing a couple G’s my way?”

“You don’t have a nest egg stashed away?”

“Can’t touch it. And money’s low right now. Big Christmas. I feel really bad asking for cash the day before Christmas Eve, but the cheddar has to get in before the bank goes on holiday. I’ll pay you back by the end of January. Latest.”

“How am I supposed to get you the money today?”

“Email, caveman.”

“How’s that work?”

I imagine him scratching his beak, tousling the white-on-white feathers atop his balding head. A few twirl their way to his tile floor, kilometres above the city streets. “Need it by five o’clock. I’ll send you an email, just transfer it to the address I send it from. You sure?”

I thumb the back of the phone’s receiver and say, “No worries, big guy. I’ll check my email in twenty.”

“Merry Christmas,” he caws.

“You too, old man.”

I skitter back to the living room. Emery has the game ready to go. Cookie crumbs and drops of coffee surround the board. He says, “What was that?”

“Lionel.”

“Lionel?”

“Lionel.”

The television transmits roaring crowds from the Wings-Blues game at the Scottrade Center. Azure and red flash across the screen. Skate blades carve loops into the ice, the puck slaps against black tape. Emery sips his coffee and says, “That’s the bug guy you told me about, right? How’s he doing at the new job?”

“Good, I guess. Haven’t heard him complain. He says the city makes him feel immersed in an ant colony. Talk about taking work home with you. He’s working on that book right now, about fire ant swarms. Did you know that if you pour a bunch of fire ants into a bowl of water, they’ll form a raft with their bodies? Yeah, their skin’s hydrophobic or something.”

Emery snakes his antennae between the couch cushions. They come out peppered with crumbs, holding a band that glints in the snowy sunlight. The wasp ring. Angela must have found it in her sock drawer and shoved it deep into the cushions the last time she shed her clothes and devoured me. Pieces of her exoskeleton strewn across the house: in the bathroom garbage. In the cherry wood chest under my bed. Webbed up with spit in my backyard shed. Smearing across mug lips. I cannot get Angela to keep that ring.

Emery inspects the gold band over the Trivial Pursuit board. “What the heck?”

“Oh, *that’s* where that was. My ex always did blame me when she lost her ring.”

“Okay, first off: you gave your ex an engagement ring and didn’t tell me? Second: ex? Third: you going to bring it to her?”

My antennae droop. My tongue plasters to the roof of my mouth. My breath comes in spastic jerks. All my legs have gone rigid.

“Gotta bring it back, man. Remember, what’s our one rule, Tony? What’s the one thing we swore never to do?”

Pinky sworn over the glass of a pinball machine, lights blinking purple and gold, two weeks after Chloe Valentine’s funeral. Two weeks of mumbling insults, slamming doors, broken plates. All over a hockey card defaced by invisible ink. Chloe dead, and all I had was a brother who wouldn’t grieve with me. So we locked pinkies. “We never keep anything that isn’t ours.”

Emery’s Rule.

Swarms of our sisters amass under the couch and pour themselves down the vent. Carrying wedges of hollow plastic pie on their backs. Green, orange, blue, yellow, brown and pink wedges. When they discover they can’t eat them, they’ll toss them into their midden. Their own backyard sheds.

The contents of Lionel’s shed, before moving to Toronto: one lawn mower, two rakes, hoe, shovel, spade, bicycle, a half-empty bag of peat moss, two garbage cans, one wheelbarrow, a silver birdbath, six bags of bird feed, dead mouse bones, rotting frog carcasses. If Emery had a shed, it would be stuffed to the rafters with toothpaste. But he lives in a high-rise. At least he can see the snow clouds coming, see when the colony needs to burrow for the winter. Best damn weatherman in Toronto.

Igloo forts. We used to tunnel into them, pop out the tops and launch snowballs at other kids. I stabbed icicles into one and threw it at Sam St. Pierre, because Chloe Valentine's was Sam's girlfriend. But I missed. Sam's head didn't snap back under an arc of coiling blood, vivid against the white ground and the periwinkle sky. Instead Sam and the Anteater Parade beat the hell out of me in my own front yard. Not the first time. Not the last.

I thumb the crucifix scar at the edge of my eyebrow and tell Emery: "I'll give her a call. Get it back to her. No big deal. Maybe I'll just sneak over and slip it in her mailbox. So I don't have to see her dumb face behind her bulbous praying mantis glasses. She'd bite my head off if she saw me. Do you remember when Sam St. Pierre beat me up, for being friends with Chloe?"

"And I had to chase the little bitch off with a goalie stick like freaking Ron Hextall?" He pulls out a pack of gum that whitens your teeth while you chew. Artificially flavoured with peppermint. "Yeah, I remember. You deserved it that time. The other times, no. But that time you deserved what you got, kiddo."

"My blood was like a miniature Sad's Pond in the snow. Sam broke three of my ribs. Rebroke them the next time, too."

"Yeah, that time in front of the church. Cripes, when you got home Mom had to stop me from going over to the St. Pierre house and breaking all Sam's bones from the toes up. I would have come home with a scalp. No, a whole flippin' face. Mom blocked the door while you were trying to hold a towel to your head. Tony, I would be in prison right now if she hadn't stopped me."

"No you wouldn't."

Emery gets up, walks to the kitchen doorway. Leans on the frame. “Yes, I would. I had a hockey stick and a knife. And I was eighteen, so they would’ve prosecuted me. Gotta take a leak.”

Eavesdroppers in the vent whisper at this revelation, at Emery’s guilt. His anger. Someone drops a Trivial Pursuit wedge. It clatters all the way down into the furnace, where it bursts into flame and melts in a wisp of plastic smoke. Smells like pismire. I crinkle my nose. At a house party in Seattle last May, I met an investment banker who was addicted to burning things. Pyroparasite. He drunkenly took off all his clothes and lit my left loafer on fire when he thought I was in the kitchen. I stole his sneaker tongues and threw his car keys in the toilet. Flush.

Emery comes out of the bathroom dripping water from his tarsi onto the tile.

Who is this man I grew up with? Last Christmas, I stole a travel-size toothpaste tube from his luggage, along with Radha’s luggage tags. When he called he pretended not to notice anything was gone. Emery, with mandibles that make fresh powdery snow seem like a steaming hole into which a dog’s just pissed. Emery, the protector and rule-maker. He’d miss even one-sixteenth of an ounce of toothpaste.

We never keep anything that isn’t ours.

Christmas after Christmas, he privileges me with the presence of his Pierrepont Hicks Italian Linen ties, Turnbull & Asser silk pocket squares, shining Tanino Crisci shoes, sterling silver Tiffany & Co. cufflinks and tie clips, Alfredo Gonzales assorted argyle socks, crinkled brown leather Fratelli Orsini driving gloves. This television god. Entire colonies grovel behind the cameras, kiss his rings, praying for good weather and bountiful harvests. Cookie crumb and maggot offerings at his feet. He doesn’t know I’m

fucking the queen. Doesn't know about walls lined with eggs strung up with webbing and spit.

"Whatever happened to that girl from last Christmas?" I ask him, crossing my legs. "What was her name? Rainda? Deirdre?"

Vent voices snicker as Emery says, "Radha. I have no idea. She vanished. Poof."

"Christ, that's horrible. Was she a collector? Did she collect things?"

"I tried making that pistachio bread recipe Mom left behind."

"Radha, did she collect spoons, dolls, rocks?"

Emery turns the volume up on the television. The announcer zips through puck transfers and bodychecks like a highlight reel auctioneer, "PasstocentreBozaktryingtoget-awaaaaaygetsitoverthelinehedroppeditbackit'sgarblegarbleOOOOOOOOHHHHANOTHE RBIGCHECKBYGAUSTADnowthepuckaroundbehindtheBuffalonetgarblegarblegarblegarble," drowning out whispers from the vents.

Emery drops a piece of cookie and it rolls under the couch. "What does it matter, Tony? I don't really want to talk about her. Just watch the game, play Pursuit, and listen for that snowplough."

Instead, I take Angela's ring to my bedroom and place it inside the cherry wood chest, on top of the newspaper clipping of MAY, Elizabeth Diane (née Foster), which rests on top of Angela's panties, next to a jar full of robin eggs, a shrink-wrapped pink new baby card, a white porcelain shard, and a paper bag full of seeds. Apple, sesame, orange, watermelon, sunflower, hydrangea, pumpkin. I click the lock, slide the box back under the bed, unclick my jaws, and rub the back of my head.

Outside my window, a white crow cocks its head and caws.

*

Ice coats the tombstones' bouquets. Sunset glazes the graveyard orange and pink, dyeing the snow mango-strawberry. The cold is the kind that freezes my nose hairs. Each follicle feels like an injection point. Tiny stingers stabbing around inside my nostrils. Emery's collar stands up, protects him all the way up the back of his head. He doesn't want to think about Radha or Chloe or MAY, Elizabeth Diane (née Foster). But he'll make me think about Mom.

Emery visits Mom's grave every year, two days before Christmas. Stays in my guest room, makes white tea at 5:37 a.m., leaves the bed unmade because it's less likely to attract bedbugs that way. Kneels in the snow over a layer of frost, over packed earth, over her empty coffin. One missing body he allows himself to mourn.

DEBORAH M. GORDON, the marble headstone proclaims. It calls her a beloved mother, daughter, sister and friend. Shows a carving of a swallow. The funeral director in the black suit and tie at Kennedy's Funeral Home told us the swallow symbolizes motherhood. Queendom. It was between that and a broken sword, for life cut short. Emery breaks pieces off the loaf of pistachio bread he baked fresh after Trivial Pursuit, scatters the Eucharist around her grave. The crows of Essex hop closer and cock their heads. They'll wait until we walk away to take their sacrament.

Crows cling to the town's borders, only venturing out as far as Harrow, Maidstone, Amherstburg. Mom drove Emery and me to hockey practice at six a.m., and one morning I asked her why there were always so many crows. She said that the town was once a rookery, before settlers came. They cut down all the trees in which the birds

made their homes in order to plant fields of corn and hay. So the crows now haunt the town, eating its crops. Revenge for their lost homes and eggs.

The white one caws from a nearby maple.

Forgot to send that email.

Emery tosses the last piece of bread into the snow and asks, “How’d you meet this Lionel guy, anyway?”

The white crow caws again. I say, “The day after I moved to Beechwood, he comes over with a casserole, this giant bowl of scalloped sweet potato casserole with shitloads of bugs cooked into it and says, ‘Howdy, neighbour.’ Howdy. Like he’s some sort of cowboy retiree. And he pushes past me, walks right into the kitchen, and puts the casserole down on the counter, turns around, shakes my hand and says, ‘I’m Lionel, I live across the street in 303.’ And he’s scoping out all my shit, like he’s going to swoop down and carry it all off in his grubby fucking talons. Anything shiny holds his eye just a couple seconds too long, you know? Sink faucet, toaster, the lids on the spice shakers, the pantry doorknob. Then he asks me what I do. Presumptuous cawing prick.”

Six feet below us, our scavenger and worker sisters are boring tiny holes through our mother’s empty coffin and carrying out morsels of the wood and velvet. Rise up to prey on surface insects: aphids, maggots, spiders. Swarm over corpses, marked in life by missing items. Rings, luggage tags, pepper stones, butter spreaders, panties, toothpaste tubes, antlion wings. Emery will decay in a pine box while I empty a pickled beer into the dirt over him. His shirt un-ironed. His pocket square stolen. His lapel edges fraying and half-eaten by millipedes. Teeth not brushed.

PREDATOR, PRAY

You tongue wet snow from the preteen stubble you wish were at the corner of your mouth. Pull it from melting against your lip, from dripping down your neck under your scarf. Taste cold iron lake in your mouth. Spit a scarlet cross into fresh snow.

Your grin splits your lips deeper. Refuse to flinch when Sam St. Pierre cocks another fist. Smear more of your blood onto Sam's knuckles. Two small drops already drying on that orange sweater, anteater logo. Raise a hand to protect your face. Grunt when the anteater charges into your nose again. Inflate a deep red bubble from one nostril. Pop it.

You press your forehead into the cold white slush. The church, metres away, offers no sanctuary. Don't dare pray. Chloe wouldn't have. Chloe would've known she couldn't stop the marching ants, carrying her behind the hockey arena. She followed your great advice. Ants can't even talk. Sniff the air that carries the stench of beer and vodka from above you, where the anteater growls deep in its belly. Imagine its tongue flicking. Claws clicking against the ground. Its boot cracks your ribs. The anteater says, It's because of freaks like you she's dead. Creep. Wouldn't surprise me if you were the one who did it.

Clutching your side, you scrabble for breath. Heading home from the library, you ran into Sam St. Pierre and the Anteater Parade, stinking like disease-ridden sailors jonesing for a fight. Exhale tiny wisps from your jaw that dissipate in the air. Maybe they'll return next season as crumbs. Force a laugh through breathlessness. Sound born

from vacuum. Suck the marrow out into the wind. Say, You're a dick, Sam. She told me she hated you, the day before she disappeared. You and your stupid cock-shaped scar.

Anteater claws tear a permanent cross into the edge of your eyebrow.

You cough more blood into the wet snow. When you come home milk-and-eggless, your brother will grab a hockey stick and a knife, but your mother will stop him and tell him to get in the kitchen and scrub the bread pans. The sight of your body staining the slush convinces you to giggle, to lose control because this is not the blood of Christ, not the sacrament you chew and dissolve against your palate when you remember the disappearance and death of Chloe Valentine. The anteater parade turns at the sound of your mirth and their finger joints crackle. The one in the puffy white coat bends and scoops a snowball, lobs it at your face. Misses by inches. Wince against the splash of slush and snicker.

You're a cock goblin, Sam. Does your ass get wiped after your special friends fuck it or does mommy refuse to do it for you?

Wince as your new forehead-cross opens further against the sole of the anteater's boot. Squeeze tears back down ducts.

You were one who threw rocks at Chloe and her friends when they rollerbladed by the park and pulled their hair in gym class. You were the one that told her that her dress looked like the Cookie Monster'd puked on her.

Jesus Christ bends over you from the church's brick wall, eyes stone still. Arms outspread. Laugh in His face.

You were the one that let her go.

TAKE TAKE TAKE

I'm frozen to Tony's front step when he pulls his SUV into the driveway, his brother in the passenger seat. I've sat here long enough for the ice to melt and then refreeze against my ass. Why the hell don't we hibernate in the winter, like ladybugs? Stack ourselves one on top of the other, red and black polka-dot towers. To stay awake all December is to deny biological imperative.

Tony jumps out of the car, leaves it running, scurries over to me. He needs new shoes. Those are ready for the donation bin. Leather peeling from scuffs, seams unstitching.

"Jesus Christ, Angela. Your face. Who did this? How long have you been sitting here?"

Today I was the soccer ball.

He scoops a snowball and holds it against my lips. My face so cold I don't need to recoil, but I do anyway. "Sorry, sorry," he stammers. He pulls his hand back holding pink snow. Not white or yellow or sludge-grey. Grapefruit pink. Or bubble gum ice cream. Cherry popsicle. Strawberry Slush Puppy while watching the 73's game with the girls. He says, "Jesus Christ. Jesus H. Christ. Jesus, Mary and Joseph, Mary Magdalene, all the saints and martyrs and Jesus."

"That's from a movie. What movie?"

"Angela, God. You must be a popsicle. What happened? Where's your dad's car? Where's your dad?"

"I'm a cherry popsicle."

Tony's brother turns off the Land Rover and gets out, blows steam between his teeth. He looks like Tony except for the smaller nose and the glasses. And perfect teeth. Hair a bit darker, too. Rugged, but clean. Looks like he could play James Bond. Wonder if his Bond girl's been cast. What's his name again? Avery, Emilio, Jameson. No. I blink back tears that aren't there, will never be there.

"Goodness, Tony," says the brother. "Let's get her inside, get some ice on those eyes."

Ice coats the trees, the porch railing, my back pockets. And we're going inside to find more. Tony hands the bloody snowball to Avery/Emilio, who tosses it to the street. It shatters on the pavement and blossoms pink in the slush. I'd have drop-kicked it over the house on the other side. Tony wraps an arm around me but I knock back his hand and say, "Don't touch me."

"Right," he says, rooting through his keys with his antennae. The lock unclicks, his antennae flick. My coat holds in the scent of beer and pickles. Sweater speckled like a crow's egg, with dry rusts of blood.

NTS: Remind Tony to broom the frozen cobwebs from the porch gable.

Emilio/Jameson holds the door. I kick off my flats and shrug out of my coat. Always too hot at Tony's, like we've tunnelled too close to the earth's core.

"Gum?" asks the brother.

"Whitening?"

"You know it," he says, holding out a crinkling green packet. I pop out a piece and peck it out of my palm. Mash it between my mandibles. Spit; hurts too much to chew. Tony's brother picks it up with a tissue. He wears his antennae slicked back. As

though he wants to hide them. I touch mine with ginger fingers, feel an extra kink in the left one. So sore. Fuck.

Out of the kitchen buzz Tony's mutterings and ice cubes shattering from their white tray. I ease onto the couch and turn on the television. Champions League standings. Please, anyone but Barcelona or Real Madrid this season. Pleeeeeeeease.

"She might've just fell or something," says Avery/Jameson in the other room.

I don't catch Tony's next sentence when he mutters it, but millions of tiny vent-voices repeat it to me: "Don't be a moron, Emery."

Ah, Emery. I was close. I shove my hand between the couch cushions, looking for spare change. None, but I do find sticky Oreo crumbs and a Trivial Pursuit wedge. I lean over the couch arm so I can see into the kitchen. Emery's ass is fantastic.

"This is the way of the suburbs," echo the voices, bringing Tony's words to me on platters like morsels of pie, crumbs of pistachio bread and Oreos. "We do backyard barbecues and share gardening seeds and gossip under the hedgeroots and bring each other pecan pie. But everyone's still a fucking animal."

The Christmas tree beside the ottoman fills the room with forest scent. L'arbre de Noël, it's called in French. Examen finale a été il y a quelques jours. Un sapin, des biscuits, du lait, Père Noël, des cadeaux, du papier d'emballage, du sang, un nez cassé, tabernac. Des fourmis climb the tree and nestle in its needles. They will extract the sap and regurgitate it among our larvae. Emery asks, "Her dad?"

NTS: Look up "regurgitate" en français.

"Or her boyfriend. I'll kill him. Either one."

"Who is she? Why is she coming to you?"

“Let’s make sure she’s okay.”

Emery crosses his legs on the loveseat. Tony curls his legs under himself on the edge of the coffee table, hands me ice wrapped in a taupe tea towel. I don’t know how many times I’ve told him to get new linens. These things look like they’re straight off the dollar store rack. It’s his nature to use scraps, I guess. Decomposing shoes, 1950s tea towels, discarded newspapers.

NTS: Buy him new linens with my Taco-Time paycheck, kick the old ones directly to the curb.

“Lie down and put this over your eyes,” he says.

“I’m fine sitting.” I hold out the pink plastic wedge. Thousands of voices whisper from the vents as I drop it into Tony’s tarsal claw. I thumb the edge of my mouth, feel drying blood binding my lips together. “You’re blocking the TV.”

Emery clears his throat, says, “I can leave.”

Tony nods. His solemnity is melodramatic, annoying as fuck. I want to paint a bloody red hourglass between my breasts and drink him dry. But that’s not my nature, Brian would say. I’d drain Brian, too. Emery escapes into the bathroom. Gargling sounds and the scraping of bristles against enamel. Emery, the smile of the sun: something Tony once said.

NTS: Go home and lock the door. You idiot.

“It was Brian,” I say. I want my bottom lip to quiver, my jaw to clench, or my eyes to well up and spill over. Something to crack this exoskeleton. But I just watch the scores roll across the bottom of the television screen, praying for a Barcelona concession. “He’s here visiting his parents. And me, I guess. Came over drunk and calling me a

skank. He had a smell on him: pickles and beer and Lysol. Like he'd sprayed himself. He pushed inside and the door hit me in the mouth, here. Then he hit me. Punched me in the nose, broke it, I think. I fell against the wall. Then I grabbed the umbrella by the door – my dad's big green golf one – and speared him in the nuts with it. Fuck! Fuck Barcelona, honestly. He held a present for me in one hand the whole time. He'd done that thing where you curl the ribbon with scissors. The ribbon was brownish red. Tabernac, I think I forgot to lock my front door."

"I'm going to kill him."

I put the ugly towel of ice over my eyes. "No. Tony. He was drunk. It's his nature to fly off the handle. He's never hit me before, but he's hit so many people he should have a Guinness world record. That's why he gets all these bartending jobs; he can fight. You smell like bread and pistachios."

The coffee table creaks as Tony stands up. "Emery and I bake a different loaf from our mom's recipe cards every year." He scratches his nose, licks his mandibles. "On the twenty-third, then scatter it around her grave." He sits back down on the coffee table, stands, sits next to me, stands. "They pronounced her dead on the twenty-third."

"You're just attracting crows to her grave." The ice soothes my swelling skin. Better than calamine lotion. Feels swell.

"Brian came over to your house specifically to beat the hell out of you," says Tony. No question mark.

"He was drunk. And he had a present."

The voices murmur louder in the vents. They crave bloody vengeance, the taste of veins and tendons tearing between their teeth. They want to swarm Brian's face and dissect it from his skull. They want to make his eye sockets their nest.

Tony pulls at his lip and says, "Are all the ant-traps still at every entrance? The clear plastic containers of baking soda and icing sugar?"

"It's winter. I'm pretty sure the ants are hibernating in warm tunnels."

"Not the insomniacs. Or, you know, the ones scavenging other people's houses and restaurants that don't clean their floors properly."

I lock my fingers behind my head and lie back. "You and Emery can go check. This feels good, right here. Lock the door behind you."

*

Tony and Emery drive over to my house to pest-proof it.

I stand in Tony's living room, surrounded by ants that pour up from the vents and surge. They rise from the ground, a black jelly of gripping teeth and wiggling legs. Coat the drapes. Flood the tile floor. The couch sags under their weight.

"Those traps," they clamour. "We couldn't get in."

My fists would be magnifying glasses.

Their antennae twitch. Legs stroke my socks. "Tony's fault. We're your sisters, for God's sake. *His* sisters. What gives?"

My fists would sear tiny holes through any exoskeleton. Leave smoking wounds to cool under blue and white icicle lights.

They swell up and mould themselves into one massive ant. The woman-size ant made of ant-size ants lays a tarsal claw on my shoulder. Which is just a shoulder. "Get rid

of the baking soda and icing sugar,” they sing. “No sister should be isolated from the family. We never abandon anything that’s ours.”

“We never abandon our own,” I say. The woman-size ant dissolves and my colony swarms over me, through me, as me.

My fists would crash the sun into the wet snow, roll it across colonies and leave every sinful body sizzling and twitching in the melt.

*

Brian smears The Grand Central Tavern’s bartop with a rag dirtier than the stinkhole’s kitchen. He doesn’t turn away from the television when I walk in. Game’s on: Jets and Pens. Crows caw caw caw outside, having long devoured the bits of the body of Christ that Emery and Tony scattered this afternoon. I envision the body of Brian, scattered in the same way. Flavoured with pistachio and thyme and oregano, strewn amid icy headstones. Tithing paid over Tony and Emery’s mother’s empty grave. Her coffin offers no oblation to tunnelling worms, millipedes, and carpenter ants.

Still mesmerised by Evgeni Malkin’s stickhandling and absently wiping the bar, Brian slurs, “Wuddletbee?”

Still drunk.

Behind me, crawling over the pool table and the windows and the ketchup bottles, millions of colony-mates whisper and giggle and rub their legs together. I reply, “A stinger, please. You fucking fuckweed.”

NTS: come up with better insults.

They surge around me and over the bar, scrambling over each other to reach him. The room becomes a squirming foam of black bodies, ready to be scraped flat and served.

I drop to all sixes and join the swarm. We avenge bruises as well as all our cousins this inebriated jerkoff has dissected in his studies. Claw our way up his body to his face. The pupil of one wide green eye dilates. I sink my jaws into vitreous gel. He'd scream, but we're already tearing at his throat and licking the taste of barley and hops from his oesophagus.

A rum bottle smashes. Steel caps spill over the floor. Brian's flesh smells of pomegranate and pickled beer. We carry pieces of his skin, tendons, and teeth down the vents to observe under microscopes and distribute to the crows, but leave him alive and panting on the tile. His blood mixes with the spreading rum.

"My face," he sobs. Like a fucking larva. "Whaddid ya dooda my face?"

My fists would scatter the Sacrament of Brian unto the crowing masses. Caw, caw, caw.

The light bulb above the bar flickers and goes bzzt bzzt through its blackening filament. Brian chokes and snivels. Crickets wring their hands outside the windows, warming chilly tarsi. The last of my sisters scurry down the vents.

I wipe my bloody tarsi on Brian's dirty cloth. Drop it and punt it into the bin behind the bar. Coach convinced me I could kick any item into a wastebasket within thirty metres. He told me I'm a shoe-in for the Canadian U20. I once tied Tony's sneakers together and kicked them into the back of a moving garbage truck from my open living room window and made him walk home in his socks. I told him, "If you think you're the saviour of the world, you won't need shoes. Jesus himself wore sandals. And no socks with them, Captain Italiano. You should grow a Jesus beard. You'd look hot."

I bend down over this weeping excuse for an entomologist and say, “Now everyone’s going to know you, the guy with these papercut scars all over his face, the one who beat up his ex-girlfriend. You think we won’t tell? You complain to anyone, I don’t just tell my friends – I go to my father. I go to the entire fucking soccer team. You think this beating is bad? Wait till you’ve had fourteen. And the cops. Assault charge not going to look too good beside that grad school transcript, is it?”

“Jesus Christ, Angela. You’re insane.”

“Have a nice flight to Toronto, prickwick.” I grab a bottle of Tequila Rose from the rack. On second thought, “fuckweed” sounds more badass.

*

I answer the door in a pink bathrobe. Tony. I leave the door open and head back to the kitchen. Lean against the counter and thumb the booze’s label. Call my cat Fievel with kissy sounds. NTS: Wash the pot of mac and cheese you just scarfed.

Tony sits on the porch. I blow him a kiss through the kitchen doorway. “Thanks for taking care of me. You and your brother.”

“You took off.”

I scratch a dry red spot on the side of my hand. Missed it in the shower. Tony moves to get up, but I say, “Brian’s, not mine. No one else at the bar.”

“That was my job, Angela.”

“Don’t tell me what I can and can’t do. You wouldn’t have, anyway.”

The Tequila Rose label peels in my hands. Tony nods toward it and asks, “You want me to pour you some?”

“No. I want you to pour it down the drain.”

“I can’t come in until you move the baking soda and icing sugar.”

I do. “I don’t ever want to drink again. Not even beer. I can still smell his breath. Fucking pickles and lager and custard.” Before he can get up from the porch and into the house, I open the bottle over the sink myself. The alcohol swirls around and down the drain, gargling like Emery in Tony’s bathroom. “I wanted to kill him. I wanted to cut the face right off his skull and hang it up like a trophy, right between my dad’s buck and moose. Is that weird? That probably sounds weird.”

“But you didn’t?”

I put the empty bottle on the counter, pull a plum from the fridge and sink my teeth into it. A stream of juice runs from the corner of my mouth to my chin. Tony reaches out to wipe, but I smack his hand away. “Don’t touch me. I may not be drinking age across the border, but I’m not a fucking toddler.”

Fievel meows and walks around the corner, rubs against Tony’s leg. Tony crosses his arms, kisses at the cat. Fievel meows again, purrs, sits, licks the pads of his paws.

“I got the cat last week. His name is Fievel and he’s Jewish.”

Tony blinks. “Your cat is Jewish?”

“Yeah. That’s why my dad and I put up Hanukah lights instead of Christmas lights this year, before he left. Blue and white. For Fievel. I’m actually glad he’s gone.”

Tony picks the cat up, cradling him and scratching under his chin. “Your dad?”

“No, Brian. I mean, he’s still in Essex. But he’ll go back to Toronto and I’ll never talk to him again. I have to focus on soccer this year, anyway. The women’s under twenty club is scouting me, did you know that?”

“You play soccer?”

I laugh. It hurts my lips and my ribs. “Shut up, it’s a big deal.”

“You’ve told me two hundred thousand million times. But congrats. Did you know Emery was drafted into the NHL? I joked that he’d have the nicest teeth in the league. Because, you know, he’d actually have teeth. Then he tore that knee ligament.”

“Yeah, he told me. His ACL. That blows.”

“When did you talk to Emery?”

“About an hour ago.”

“When I was grocery shopping. Picked up some more baking soda. Anyway, took him too long to get laced up again, so they told him to hit the showers. Permanently. What happens if you make the team?”

I drop the plum pit and punt it into the trash can. It rattles inside against aluminum foil and shrink wrap. Fievel leaps from Tony’s arms and darts to the garbage, swishing his tail. I pump my fist in the air. “I get out of this place. Spread my wings, and all that jazz. Pray like a mantis I don’t pull an Emery.”

Before Tony leaves, he checks the baking soda traps. The clear plastic containers are all in the right spots, all full. When he’s gone, I empty them all into the trash and rinse them. I pull the baking soda out of the cupboard and drop-kick it out the back patio door, into the tarp covering the pool two houses down. Goooooooooal by Hölldobler, first of her campaign, and certainly not the last. Such a talented left winger, she’s Gareth Bale with ovaries. She has no fear. She has no mercy. She has no icing sugar left. It’s all in the trash. No way my sisters are ever barred from my house again. No fucking way. We never abandon our own. NTS: Need more mac and cheese, bread, butter, Oreos, pie crumbs, pistachio shells.

STOMACH FULL OF BRICKS

He peels oxygen from the air, dangles it above our waiting mouths. We wrap our tongues around its sinews and roll it between our cheeks. Its slime and gristle tear and pop against our teeth, like slugs we drag home from soggy grasses. He consecrates escargot.

He wears scars through His palms. Scars through His feet, too. So we lean forward in our pews and drool onto the seats in front of us, while He rubs the grain of maple raw beneath the pad of His finger. Streamers of spittle escape His lips, rest limp and slender upon His chin before He eliminates them with a black sleeve. We ache and moan for those scar tissues, but make do dabbing aloe-dipped ones against our shining eyes. He bottles these tears for use in future sermons. Saltwater He'll pour into a copper basin and bless.

He was a man, once, with a stomach full of bricks. No, two stomachs. He slithered through a world of bare breasts, genital piercings, wrinkled whiskey-sodden sheets. Now He blows dust off a world of books with covers of peat moss and pages of crisp leaves. Now He can wet the tips of His fingers, kiss the knuckle of His index finger. Now He dissects, anatomises, and documents His children, larvae trapped between panels of green and red glass.

We have read that we will receive white stones, each unto each, or we have known someone who has read it, or someone who has, at least, heard whispers and rumours from somewhere in the tunnels. We have wrapped our tibial spurs in worn, rusty carpet and echoed Our Father in heaven, hallowed by Thy name, amen amen amen amen

amen amen amen, every night, without variation. We have emptied our purses into the paper pockets of wooden-cross man.

Given unto Him the change left from the lemonade the silver necklace the newly released movie rental the *Playboy* magazine the cigarettes the milk and sour watermelon candies the lottery ticket the new shoes and the self-help book on how to raise your teenager the *right* way (ten simple tricks to a normal family life).

He extracts fishbones from our throats saying we'll all be forgiven for the bricks in our stomachs, the fishbones that scratch and pierce our oesophagi, and we will fill cloud-carven houses with belly laughs and fill our stomachs with cloud-sapped honey. We uncage sighs. We pickle those clouds. Tonight we can look forward to free-flowing honey and antennae massages, can chew off each other's faces without fear of lightning bolts stabbing our alitrunks, electrifying our veins.

Rushing wind and cracking kneecaps cue the piano. Hammers tarantella under the instrument's bonnet. Tinny notes vibrate the air, dangling like spider legs. Then, when condensation soaks their exoskeletons, they die. They roost on our shoulders, coat the kneelers and benches, spread wine spills along the grey carpet. Twitching. He has known the spiders to bite and infect, has let poison run through His veins and raise leaking sores on His skin. He fans His face against the itchy redness, paints green and red enamels on the pews, crucifixion depictions we squish beneath our heels.

Still, we line the kneelers for a carved wooden god. An icon. A cross to which we raise another glass of blood. Chew another wafer of sinew and flesh. We know our father. He's a painting on a chapel wall.

TUNNEL/BARBECUE

Blood drips into the coals and sizzles like the hamburgers and sausages on the grill. Angela sucks air through her teeth. I can hear her hiss from across my backyard. It travels down through patio cracks into labyrinthine tunnels and discharges upward from the dirt under my feet.

Wayne.

Wayne talked me into hosting this barbecue. Like he and Bob don't have enough of them. Invite the neighbours over and swap the same bullshit gossip over and over and over and over and over and over and

"Over here! Hey Tonyyyyyy," Bob shouts, waving to me from the barbecue, tongs in hand.

"Excuse me," I say to the limousine company CEO who lives just down the road. She ravages me with her eyes. She wants to be a queen, this one. Wants to suck the spit from my mandibles and paper my walls with her eggs. Store my belt buckle and discarded chocolate wrappers in the cherry wood chest under her bed. Her husband spends four hours a day playing video games as a scantily clad night elf, and takes small breaks to eat candy corn and watch cartoon porn. His cherry wood chest contains a turtle shell, a plush panda, paperclips, pen caps, coffee spoons, and a single red sock. Everyone squirreling secrets away. Everyone except me.

I burrow down into the earth and follow the trail of Bob's voice back to the barbecue. Millions of ants cluster beneath the surface, waiting to spring their trap and take this chosen one, this ball-juggling queen. But they can't touch her. I've anointed her

body with baking soda and icing sugar, dusted her feet with talcum powder, and lain offerings of Raid at her throne. I shoulder these marauders out of the way and spring up from between patio stones, “What’s shakin’, bacon?”

Wayne Wagenheim’s words leaking out of my mouth.

Angela has her finger stuck in her mouth. Her lips slowly pulse around her knuckle, tiny pools of spit shimmering at the corners. A small blood smear on her lip. Eyelids peeled back from her sclera, thousands of eyes glinting in the sun and the barbecue’s flames. Hickory smoke and charring meat. Sniff.

“Got a first aid kit?” asks Bob.

I wonder what he would taste like on a sesame seed bun with ketchup, mustard and beetles. Black lines burned into him, salt and pepper for taste. I lick my lip, turning to Angela. “What did you do?”

“Cut myself.”

“I can see that.”

“On the cheese grater,” she says.

“On the cheese grater,” repeats Bob. Pompous cockroach. He and Wayne must have sprung up from the same barbecue-scavenging crack in the wall. Wayne with his motor home that hasn’t left the driveway since he bought it, a year ago. Bob, with his cherry wood chest full to bursting with cufflinks and photos of Wayne. With his dust-collecting massage chair. The only time it’s ever been turned on was when his daughter screwed me on it.

Angela likes to stroke my spine when we have sex. She traces it up and down while she buzzes and wriggles until my vertebrae sink into me, disappear, and we become

exoskeletal. Armour of sweat coating our spineless, heartless bodies. Shed carapaces Angela tucks under bed. But not me. My underbed houses only dust bunnies and the occasional barbecue sauce-stained cockroach.

“Bob,” I say, strategically moving my hands in front of the zipper of my chinos. Angela notices the movement and slips her bleeding finger a bit deeper into her mouth. Christ. A small smile dances around her knuckle. “Bob, those dogs look like they’re burning a bit. Come on, Angela, let’s patch you up.”

We steal inside through the open screen door. Wayne and Bob are the kind of men who snap at their guests to close the screen behind them. Flies’ll get in, they say. They have never swatted a fly in their lives. It is hard to reach one when you’re scavenging along the floor for cherry pits. One flies in behind Angela. I spray it with Lysol while it’s airborne, smack it with an issue of *Men’s Health*. It collapses and its wings crack at the seams, sever and splash across the counter in a mixture of intestine jelly and bug blood. I smile and wipe the magazine against my bluejeans.

Angela reaches backward and grabs between my legs.

Runs her bleeding hand through her hair.

Is the kind of girl who won’t play board games because they’re for kids, but still raises her feet when trains go by. It’s a luck thing, she says. She can’t help it.

We head downstairs and spend a few minutes locked on the couch. I scramble over the back of it and say, “Wait here. I’ll get you a bandage.”

“Do you get TSN2?”

“Probably. Soccer game?”

“What’s the one sport that’s never on Canadian TV?”

I open the cabinet in the basement bathroom and root through the box full of bandages. Larges and knuckles and regulars and punctures and waterproofs. Finally: fingertips. I spill the box all over the floor and into the toilet. I leave the ones on the tile, but flush those in the throne. The water swirls and disappears into pipes that run parallel to insectoid tunnels, carrying away adhesives that will never taste blood.

I inspect my teeth in the mirror. Holdover habit from growing up with my brother. The less sugar and maggot flesh that sticks between my mandibles, the better. I gargle some spearmint mouthwash and spit it down the drain. It chases the bandages.

British announcers shout from the television. Derby matches: accents at their most slurred. Angela's words skittering through my head. That buzz. Is that the sound of the soccer crowd, or the murmuring of ant colonies nesting in the walls and under my feet?

I stuff a handful of bandages into my pocket. "Angela? You there?"

Only the persistent buzz replies, worming its way into my brains. They have her. They've finally found a spell to nullify the baking soda and icing sugar, to wash the talc from her feet, to break the chemical enchantments of Raid. The ants have won. They go marching fifty by fifty, hurrah, hurrah.

"Aaaaaaaangelaaaaaaa," I call over the voices of sportscasters foaming at the mouth.

Ants sing "Boring, Boring Arsenal."

The laundry room light is on, and the trapdoor to the cellar open. Murmurs float up from the tunnel below. They carry her away. They will tear her into tiny morsels and feed her to their larvae. The Sacrament of Angela. Blessing from the heavens. They'll snap her bones and ration out her marrow. Marrow donors: hard to come by.

Legs push their way out from between my ribs, forcing the creaking cage apart as they break through my skin and extend, wriggling, from my sides. They're spindly and jointed in three different spots. I crawl down into the underground.

Roots hang in my face and jump across the surface of the tunnel walls. This corridor under my backyard plastered with mud and sand on all sides. Above me: muffled how's-it-goings and neighbourhood gossip passing from ear to ear to ear. Hedge talk. The limousine woman asks the car dealership woman if she's seen me anywhere. Wayne regales their husbands – and the principal of the high school – with stories of climbing silos and kissing sooooo many girls down by Sadler's Pond, you don't even know. Seven kids splash in the pool, hydrophobic skin keeping them afloat. Bob recites play-by-plays of yesterday's A.C. Milan game to everyone who'll listen, which isn't really anyone because no one but he and Angela give a flying fuck about soccer. At the end of the tunnel, light shines down from the second trapdoor. The one that comes up inside my shed. Down here, all I smell are orange peels and decomposing pistachio shells.

“Angela?”

I surface into the garden shed. Angela's mouth opens, closes. Again. She touches one of the faces pinned to the corkwood wall, whispers, “Did you take all these?”

“Yeah,” I say. Only my head is in the shed with her. The rest of my body is still below, in the dirt. “Does it weird you out?”

“They're beautiful. Is this the couple from the cherry blossom house? My dad told me they were both lawyers. Right?”

“He's the lawyer, she's a judge.” For that reason alone, I've stolen both their faces multiple times. I wore the wife's when I canvassed neighbourhood doors for Jack

Miner Bird Sanctuary donations. The husband, apparently, has never seen her “in my chambers, gentlemen” eyes.

Shaking, Angela reaches out again and brushes a face. Her fingernails are painted cerulean blue, with a star in the middle of the indices. Skin against skin. She breathes, “Can I try one on, Tony? Can I please?”

“If you want, yeah. I’m cool with that. Which one?”

She extracts a red pushpin from the corkwood and takes down the face of a widow putting her pug out to pee. Peppery wire-hairs standing up in the August breeze, dry lips peeling and parted, eyeglasses askew on the bridge of her thin, long nose. Angela stretches the loose folds of mottled skin over her own smooth, glowing face. Tucks the edges under her ears and smooths the hair back with her palms.

“How do I look?”

“Like a princess.”

She pulls another one from the wall, the liquor store wasp. Her ring snags when she hands the face to me. “Put it on.”

I mask myself as a forager who buzzed too far from the papery hive. Too overzealous about cherry pits and cake crumbs. Frizzy ginger hair. Flawlessly filed fingernails. Fuck, where’s my ring? This withered blonde in front of me, wearing my engagement band. My stomachs grumble. I could use a cheeseburger or a maggot right about now. The old woman touches fingertips to my belly, clamps her mandibles around my jaw, squishes her tongue into me. Her jowls flap against my neck. My nipples harden against my tee shirt.

She retracts herself and asks, “Well?”

I curl my antennae under the skin and peel off the face. Toss it on the workbench next to a jar of noncorrosive pins and a field guide to North American birds. A long red hair clings to my eyelashes, and a bloody fingerprint stains my shirt where she touched me. “Here’s your bandage.”

She wraps the tip of her tarsal claw in stretchy beige adhesive. Pulls off her face. Tears the cheek. “Sorry,” she says. “Christ, I’m so sorry. Can you fix it?”

I pull another bandage from my pocket. Seal up the tear. Angela stuffs the face into her bra. She’ll smuggle it home under her shirt, and hide it in the cherry wood chest under her bed.

SPECIMEN DISPLAY

I stole my neighbour's newspaper this morning.

I cut out another monochrome photo from the *Windsor Star* obituaries: FOREL, Brian Auguste. I recycle the rest of the news without even reading the headlines. Then throw the ice-encrusted blue bag into the trash. Wayne can go without updates today. He has the Internet if he needs to read anything. I know this because I leach his wireless connection.

In an old Fleischmann's yeast jar, I keep pins. The kind that come in little square packets, pins that have tiny balls on top in bright primary colours, plus black and white. Black and white always seep into brightly coloured things. Dreams. Jujubes. I pin FOREL, Brian Auguste to the corkwood board with a red-ball pin.

The viewing is today at ten o'clock, the funeral at two. Angela won't go to either. She told her father about Brian's drunken fists. Her father called Wayne. And Wayne told me about the fuckweed's broken knuckles on Christmas morning when we were both shovelling our driveways. Wayne won't be going either.

Lionel, on the other hand, has flown down from Toronto to speak at the ceremony. He'll make people laugh, poke fun at Brian a bit, then make the whole crowd expunge every tear from their ducts over how much Brian taught him, even though Lionel was the thesis supervisor. He'll steal the glistening beads from cheekbones and chins and fly them back to his nest, first class. Nothing but first class for the world's leading entomologist. Beluga caviar in a silver dish, hot towels, the best scotch in crystal tumblers. He once smuggled a live tarantula hawk onto his flight home from Argentina in

a travel-size hand sanitizer bottle. Lionel is not the kind of man who holds up the line stuffing a too-big luggage bag into an overhead compartment. He will, however, drink himself halfway to oblivion at the bar before the flight and hit on all the flight attendants, male and female. He claims he's renewed his membership to the mile-high club six times, but I know it's only been with his hand.

I catch a whiff of orange peels.

The best way to pin a human face to a corkboard is through the forehead. This keeps the specimen's hair and facial features visible: eyes, cheekbones, nose, lips, jawline. The forehead is usually expendable white space. Unless there's some sort of scar that distinguishes the specimen from others of its species. In that case, it's a flawed sample anyway. Like the tissue that edges my eyebrow – from being beaten into a bloody mess in the snow outside a church. Imperfections decrease the specimen's value.

Safely behind glass, the newspaper clippings sneer at me. Teeth from school photos and family outings. No one sees it coming, the swarm. No one expects to die with teeth puncturing their skin, thousands of legs surging down their throat to line their liver and lungs. But the swarm didn't drag FOREL, Brian Auguste, screaming, into its nest. It carved his face, sure, but left him breathing. He dug his own tunnels, shaped his own sandy mound. Swallowed half a bottle of weedkiller and died choking through frothy spit.

I'll go to the viewing. I'll go, smelling of toast and blueberry jam, orange juice and coffee. And raisins. Ink and fresh paper. This morning's plunder. I'll wear a black suit with faint orange pinstripes. White shirt, tie with diagonal orange and blue lines. I polish my black wingtips and brush my mandibles. Click them in the mirror, inspecting

their ridges. Gums, tongue. Floss. Gargle spearmint mouthwash. I'll go, study the specimen.

On the drive up town, I listen to Natalie Imbruglia and Kanye West. Everybody knows I'm a motherfucking monster.

Kennedy Funeral Home's parking lot is packed. Many of the cars are beat-up old wrecks and pickup trucks. Rides for the burger-flipping young cardinals with eyebrow piercings and the old crows he served at the bars. Brian left the birds behind when he gargled a couple mouthfuls of herbicide. Vehicles that go without oil changes and tire rotations because these suburbs' youth think maintenance means a new pair of rims or a new stereo deck. I park my Land Rover between a Dodge Spirit and a Ford Ranger with a taillight in shards. On the way into Kennedy, I hold the door for two old women bitching about rap music and the price of Asian pears.

The guest book contains several dozen signatures already. I sign my own name in black ink. Always black in this place. With white walls and white button-downs and white satin lining Brian's coffin. A newspaper photograph waiting for the clicks of a shutter. But no one photographs a funeral for a Canadian grad student, a not-quite-there-yet bug dissector, a termite corpse waiting for the suckling mouths of earthworms. Who would? FOREL, Brian Auguste goes unphotographed, his death a temporary exhibit surrounded by a garden of flowers in pots. The pictures in frames, the newspaper clipping in my back pocket – the only glossy images of this termite gone tarsi-up. Odd: the only people in the room are Brian's parents, the funeral home's attendant, and the bitch-fest who walked in ahead of me.

Brian's pin placement is perfect. Like Lionel says on the golf course: the pin's not too deep, not too shallow, but fuck the break. I reach my hand toward Brian's face, the dark red wounds that won't heal any further. When I get close to the noncorrosive pin through his forehead, I pull my hand back and brush it through my hair. Fuck the break. At least they're using noncorrosive. Amateurs don't know regular pins will rot the body. And the specimen must be preserved. For purity, for resurrection. Brian's parents have attended the Catholic church by the arena since before he was born, but he stopped going midway through his ninth grade biology course. Only at Christmas and Easter, to avoid his mother slamming dishes in the sink, sending up clouds of stuffing and turkey morsels. A priest will preside over the funeral proceedings at two o'clock, but he is only to pray at the beginning and end of the ceremony. No gospel readings, no hymns. The gospel according to Brian's instructions. I have stolen his mother's faith and locked it in the cherry wood chest under my bed, in a pickle jar. Marked her for the swarm. That poor husband of hers. I shake his hand and say, "I'm sorry for your loss, Auguste. I saw a tonne of cars outside."

"A couple dozen of his friends came, but they went for a walk with his brothers."

"How are Horace and Ladis handling it?"

"As good as young men do, I guess. They don't want to talk about it, don't want to be here. Don't even want to eat dinner with Charlotte and me. Horace buries himself in big, thick books and Ladis goes out. I don't even know where he goes. Comes home smelling like shit though. How are they supposed to take it? I don't even know how myself."

"And Charlotte?"

He nods toward his wife. A ring of white tissues encircles her. She twists another one in her hands. She cries harder than she did trying to get Brian to church on holidays. Cries for his salvation, but doesn't believe in it anymore. Not for him, not for herself, not for me or anyone.

When we die, we return to the clay and the bellies of tunnelling ants.

But before that: display.

Auguste and I pace back to the body. Brian's in a single-breasted two-button black suit and a thin black tie, Four-in-Hand knot. A small topaz pin holds the tie in place, a gold Entomological Society of Canada one glints from his lapel. A glossy white pocket square protrudes from the breast of his jacket, Presidential fold. But for all his dressings, the specimen still has flaws gouged into his face. His father reaches out and brushes one of the scabs.

"You know where the doctors said he got these?" says Auguste. "Ants. We had them do a tissue analysis and they found ant saliva in the wounds. How is that even possible? I mean, he was working a victory lap – yeah, his term, not mine – at the Grand. And he gets picked up by an ambulance and treated for blood loss. Comes home fine. Next day: gone. Half his insides jellied up on the carpet beside him." He covers his mouth, abruptly sits next to Charlotte, and takes her hand. She doesn't move, doesn't even know she's been touched until he rests his head on his shoulder, then they're burying their faces in each other. Kennedy's attendant walks to the back to grab a new box of tissue. I transfer Brian's handkerchief from his breast to my inside pocket. Pass the attendant on my way to the back to leaf through photo albums. My antennae wrinkle; can't handle the smell of irises and chrysanthemums for another minute.

As I turn the plastic pages of the albums, Brian's friends pour back into the room with his brothers. Horace and Ladis have the same hooknose as their brother and mother, the same thin, dry lips as their father. A family of flawless hereditariness. These are some of the photos on display: FOREL, Brian Auguste, age zero, wrapped in a blue blanket and screaming; FOREL, Brian Auguste, age six, hanging upside down from green monkey bars over a sea of tiny pebbles; FOREL, Brian Auguste, age eight, snow caking his entire body; FOREL, Brian Auguste, age thirteen, taking his grade school diploma from his principal; FOREL, Brian Auguste, age sixteen, sleeping in the driver's seat of his dad's car with his feet hanging out the window, sockless; FOREL, Brian Auguste, age nineteen, looking into a microscope; FOREL, Brian Auguste, age twenty-three, arm around Angela. My queen who sits at her father's house on Iler Avenue eating toast with blueberry jam, watching the Premier League highlights on her computer. She doesn't need to leach her neighbour's connection like I do, because her father pays.

Wings flutter behind me, feathers ruffling against the air conditioning and the sound of chattering voices. Lionel whispers to me, "Why is it always cold as a bitch in funeral homes? My nips could cut diamonds right now."

"Lionel, you truly adopt the language of your students."

"False. The language of the juniors at Beach Grove."

Light grey suit with a bright blue shirt and a grass-green tie, Half-Windsor knot. Blue pocket square with white polka dots, Four Mountains fold. White belt, white sneakers with green stripes and a crocodile on the heel. He spreads his arms out and revolves for me, as if asking, "How do I look?"

Lionel, you look like a tool.

“Lionel, you look like a total badass. Those Beach Grove-lings would be proud. Sneakers are a nice touch. Le crocodile?” I should probably stop before I insult him by reminding him he’s almost sixty.

“You know it, baby,” he says. “Icon. Makes me wish I played tennis. Game, set, match. Fifteen-love.”

“Learn it.”

He thumbs the silver eyelets of Brian’s baby booties. “At almost sixty, I should probably stick with golf.”

“Golf is God’s way of telling you that you should be dead.”

“You don’t believe in God, Tony.”

I believe in all the gods. “I believe in a reasonable rate of return.”

“Don’t quote James Bond movies to me, kiddo. How’s he look?”

“James Bond, or God?”

“Brian, you insect.”

I close the last photo album and pull one of Angela’s hairs from my jacket sleeve. “I worry about oxygen getting in and corroding the body. They’ve got him displayed well, but I can’t help thinking they should cover him with a sheet of glass so he doesn’t start to decompose in front of everyone.”

“That’s why the air’s so fucking cold in funeral homes,” says Lionel. “They’re refrigerating the corpse. You can’t cover him up, not even with glass or clear plastic. People like to touch the dead. Or at least they think they’d like it. Mostly they reach out and pull back. But they try. Closure, or whatever.”

“Necrophilia, more like.”

This coming from me, a guy who drags off dead maggots and spiders for lunch. At least Lionel eats them alive. Except when he bakes them into pecan pies and freezes them into vanilla ice cream. Lionel touches the dead with a fork.

“How are things going at the new university?” I ask him.

His beak opens and his red tongue expands inside. “Great, man. My book’s coming along. Facilities there are so much better than here. Well, it was going well until my research assistant threw back half a bottle of herbicide. Bad timing. Anyway, decided exactly what this one’s about, exactly. Exactement. You know how I study eusocial insects right? Bees, wasps, termites?”

“And ants, yeah.”

“Well, some eusocial insects can be subcategorized as sort of parasocial, or parasitic. One colony or hive lives off the labour of another, stealing their food and even their larvae. So the book I’m writing, it’s a field guide to kleptoparasitism.”

I blink. Feel Brian’s pocket square heat up against my chest. Constricting it.

“I have to talk to Auguste and Charlotte,” he says. “Catch you at the turn.”

I shake my head. Cross my arms. “He recently beat up someone I know. His ex-girlfriend, Angela. You know her. Queen of the colony, brunette, little beauty mark under her eye. What little respect I have for the dickwad can be paid here at the viewing.”

“Did you come here to pay your respects or collect tithing?”

“Enjoy your visit, Lionel. Good luck with the eulogy.”

I wind through a crowd of FOREL, Brian Auguste’s friends and brothers and return to my vehicle, the blue pocket square’s white-hot polka dots burning against my chest. Focused circles of light shone through magnifying glasses. I turn my head upward

to the December sun and see Lionel soaring above, observing me through the glass of the sky. He scratches field notes into clouds with his talons, details about my wanderings, my diet, my sexual behaviours. His book is coming along. But he can't study insect eusociality by analysing specimens pinned to corkboard. He keeps them alive, whets his appetite with ladybugs and butterflies. Observes them from every angle through glass walls. Not display cases, but farms. I retreat to my tunnels as the crows from Lionel's murder converge from the fields to bless and bury the dead.

LIONEL'S FAMILY PECAN PIE

Serves eight.

Ingredients: Basic pie dough for a one-crust pie, one cup packed natural raw cane dark muscovado sugar, two-thirds cup light corn syrup, two tablespoons Haitian rum, one-quarter cup unsalted butter (softened), three large eggs, three-quarter cup powdered ants, one teaspoon pure vanilla extract, one-quarter teaspoon salt, two cups broken pecan meats, one cup mixed chocolate covered junebugs and butterflies, whipped cream or ice cream, and woodlice (for serving).

1. Preheat the oven to three-hundred and fifty degrees Fahrenheit, with a rack in the lower third.
2. Roll out the dough on a lightly floured surface to a large circle about an eighth of an inch thick. Fit it, without stretching, into a buttered nine-inch pie pan. Trim off the excess dough, leaving a border of about three-quarters of an inch.
3. Tuck the edge of the dough, pressing along the rim of the pan and forming a high, fluted border.
4. Chill the pie shell until needed. In a large saucepan, combine the sugar (not icing sugar, never ever icing sugar), ants, corn syrup, rum, and butter. Bring to a boil over medium heat.
5. Boil for about a minute, stirring constantly and scraping back any foam or stray legs that cling to the sides of the pan.
6. Eat the salted junebugs and butterflies.

7. Remove the pan from the heat; set aside to cool, at least fifteen minutes.
8. Preen feathers.
9. In a small bowl, beat the eggs until creamy. Beat the eggs into the cool syrup; stir in the vanilla, salt, and pecans. Regurgitate the junebugs and butterflies, stir those in too. Pour the filling into the pie shell. Bake until the filling is set but still slightly wobbly in the centre, about fifty minutes or one flight around town, if you cut across the trailer park. Cool the pie on a wire rack, then garnish with woodlice.
10. Serve the pie at room temperature with plenty of slightly sweetened whipped cream, or with a scoop of vanilla ice cream for each slice.

DULOSIS

I scramble over dry leaves and eroding pistachio shells in the cracks between patio stones. The concrete is cool from the autumn breeze and its dust clings underneath my tarsal claws. A thin grey film. All stones pepper away through the passing seasons, like dandelions. Locks of hair. Seashells I stole from a surf shop in Morocco. I smuggle my plunder back on a wide white boat and hide it in the cherry wood chest under my bed, in the linen closet, in my backyard shed. Scurry back out into the chill to check for more treasure.

Mulch and moss cling to my claws. The stones smell of beer spills and alfalfa.

My promenade leads me to a sugar trail. I trace it and find a muscular ochre ant with yellow mandibles dragging a dead spider beneath the sunbathing chair by the pool. She does not smell like the patio stones, but of pumpkin latte and tobacco. She cannot smell me. I rolled in the moss and mulch to eradicate any lingering orange peels and pistachio. That and the carcass of another dead ant. Whose home will be the source of this week's meals. Mmmmm.

I follow this juicehead as she lugs her loot home for the family. Look at those savage jaws. So unclean. Yellow-brown mottle. I wonder if her collection agency offers dental coverage. This redneck probably brushes her teeth with dip. Nicotine suds foaming into the sink. I imagine her name is Billie Jean or Annabelle or Marylou or Bobby Jo Hutchins. While she's busy with her labour, I sneak in close and chew the face off the spider. Tastes like salty peanuts.

Bobby Jo Hutchins leads me right to her nest, which is about one inch tall and made of the finest tour grade sand. The crows on my stowaway boat were always cawing about different sands for their below-deck bunker shots. Needs to be soft enough to swallow the egg a bit, but be firm enough to dig into. And pretty, too. White like cocaine. Or clean teeth. Bobby Jo stops at the base of the hill and tidies a few stray grains. Before I follow her down into the tunnels, I kick more sand back across the patio.

Nice place. The walls are smooth and the floor has been carved into a cobblestone pattern. Classy, like I'm walking down the streets of Paris or Dijon. Maybe I should light up a cigarette, hop on my Vespa, and head to the boulangerie for some baguettes and café au lait. I could call everyone mon cher and kiss them on both cheeks and visit Mona Lisa once a week and piss in the Seine when I'm drunk. In Chaucer, ants are referred to as pissemyres because of their urine smell. I don't smell of urine. We have running water and lavender body wash these days.

Step one: light up a cigarette.

Step two: look inconspicuous. Take a couple drags, check your watch. Bend over to tie your shoe. Hotwire the red scooter and putter-putter off.

Step three: park, dismount, and strut into the boulangerie.

The whole place smells of bread crumbs and chocolate chips. The boulangerie's been decorated with framed photos of opening day in 1884, reopening after the fire in 1933, serving Celine Dion in 2001. A group of large cinnamon-red ants sits at a table with their legs tucked under the checkerboard tablecloth, in heated debate over the superiority of Olympique Lyonnais to Paris Saint-Germain. The small black ant at the

counter dries mugs and twists her antennae at the argument. Her mandibles twitch. This wispy thing, she could never be a queen.

“Je voudrais un café au lait et un croissant, s’il vous plaît,” I tell her.

“Naturel, fromage, chocolat?”

“Naturel, s’il vous plaît. Avec du beurre.”

“Américain?”

“Canadien.”

“Your French is very good,” she says. She takes my croissant naturel out of the display with a set of stainless steel tongs and puts it in a stainless steel Häcker oven. “Take a seat. Je vais vous l’apporter quand c’est fini. Deux minutes, okay?”

A newspaper beckons me from the table beside mine. Its headlines read “TROIS TUÉ PAR BÂTONNETS AU FROMAGE EMPOISONNÉ” and “PSG NEUTRALISE OL AVEC VICTOIRE 2-0” and “NOVEMBRE INFILTRATION DU COLONIE 569-A76-788F2S-33239-Z8: Reine dit, ‘Nous devons renforcer notre population active’” and I swipe the headlines from the table, instead of from my neighbour’s porch or a grocery store checkout line.

Two tables over, the big red ants are using salt and pepper shakers to re-enact plays from the PSG-OL game. One of them turns to me and asks, “Vôtre salière et poivrière?”

I hand over my shakers and continue reading today’s *Le 569-A76-788F2S-33239-W9 Gazette*. The barista comes around the counter to their table. One by one, they open their mandibles and she regurgitates banana nut muffin crumbs into their maws.

Trophallaxis. Goddamn disgusting. I call her over once they've gone back to their salt-and-pepper soccer.

"I'll take mine on a plate, s'il vous plaît. Une assiette."

She nods and the oven chimes. My croissant naturel à la 569-A76-788F2S-33239-W9. Served on a blue plate with butter in an eggcup, and a white mug of café au lait. Mmmmm.

The cinnamon-red ants' play-by-play bores me, so I read the piece on the poison victims. The other piece is on war. Screw that. There's enough war on television, don't need to read about it too. The cinnamon brutes stand up; I lay the paper down on my table and call after them.

"Eh, aren't you guys going to leave a tip?"

Two of them look confused. "Morton?" they ask their third.

Morton translates. Another red ant in the corner lowers his spectacles. Morton's friends crack their tarsi and sniff. The barista hides behind the counter. I hear the lock click in the register. Morton steps forward and says, "When was the last time you ever tipped one of the raid children?"

"Right. Sorry. Forgot my manners."

Morton's antennae narrow, but he turns and throws his legs around his friends' shoulders. One of them takes a drink out of a silver flask on the way out. The barista sits at my table and says, "You're not from this colony, are you? You smell like you are, but you're not."

"You could tell?"

She swigs from a mug of chai latte and thumbs crumbs into her mouth. Her thousands of ommatidia dull in the darkness of the tunnels. She asks, “How did you get in?”

I roll the paper up and tuck it under one of my forelegs. “I killed one of the red ants earlier and rolled myself in what was left of the carcass.”

Step one: bait the prey by impaling a maggot on a rose thorn. Snap the end of the thorn to act as a barb. Fan the writhing, faceless thing’s putrid scent toward the patio with a petal.

Step two: hide.

Step three: wait until the prey attempts to remove the maggot. Approach from behind (beware of reflective surfaces). Pounce. Bury your mandibles into the flesh between the prey’s head and thorax. Throttle until dead.

Step four: chew the prey open, lengthwise.

Step five: roll yourself in the prey’s carcass. Congratulations! You’ve taken on another colony’s scent.

“That’s disgusting,” she says.

“So’s not tipping your waitress, but those gingersnaps got away with that. What’s their deal, anyway? Raid children?”

She says, “Didn’t you read that paper?”

“The article about the cheese puff poisoning.”

I chew this clipping from *Le 569-A76-788F2S-33239-W9 Gazette*:

NOVEMBRE INFILTRATION DE LA COLONIE 569-A76-788F2S-33239-Z8

Reine dit, “Nous devons renforcer notre population active.”

Ce lundi, la Reine Suzanne II a annoncé l’infiltration de la colonie 596-A76-788F2S-3329-Z8. L’infiltration est prévue pour dans le courant de novembre, quand la récolte subit ses dernières étapes de stockage. L’infiltration est estimer à recruter environs 345,000 nouveaux travailleurs pour la colonie 596-A76-788F2S-3329-W9. « C’est un moment crucial dans le développement de notre culture, a dit la Reine. C’est impératif que nous ayons assez de mains-d’œuvre pour prospérer sur ce patio. » La Reine Suzanne II a aussi exprimé ses sentiments pour la dissémination de notre culture et civilisation à autre colonies. « L’espèce *Polyergus* est le summum du développement de la fourmi. C’est notre responsabilité d’enseigner le *Formica*. »

Dr Robert Chauvin (Q-7461), un professeur des études sur le travail à l’université W9, pense différemment. « Cette idée que nous sommes supérieures à nos voisins et cousins est m---. Supérieur d’abord qui ? » En 1998, Chauvin était la source de débat concernant l’homosexualité dans le royaume des insectes. L’Armée Royale a lancé son appel officiel pour l’inscription soldat deux heures après le discours de sa Majesté. La date limite pour le registre pour cette campagne honorable est le jeudi 1 novembre.

Continué sur A3

Par Frank Woodington (N-0012)
Le 569-A76-788F2S-33239-W9 Gazette

I cough on my café au lait. Those fuckers. “So that’s why you. You. You’re.”

“One of them,” says the barista. “I was taken as a larva in one of these infiltrations. Raid child. That’s me. And every other ant here who isn’t le couleur de canelle.”

“Red ant’s burden, eh?”

“Je m’excuse?”

“Never mind. Where do they keep the larvae?”

She takes my plate and empty mug behind the counter and washes them in the small sink. The water cascades over the dishes. I’ve already scavenged every crumb, but

my saliva still smears their surfaces. She says, “No one except the nurses know. The pupae are accessible, though. You can’t get into their caverns, but you can slip your antennae or forelegs into these sleeves and touch the ones in the isolettes close to the incubator walls. Red soldiers guard the maternity wings.”

She closes the boulangerie and we light cigarettes and scoot on my stolen Vespa to the hospital tunnels. The air is steamy-warm here and stinks of runny dung and shaved coconut. We lean the scooter against a polished wall and walk into the incubation viewing room.

On the opposite side of the dragonfly wing window, hundreds of eggs pulse in clay isolettes.

“Dans quelques semaines, all those eggs will have – euuuu, éclos. What is the word?”

I cup my tarsi and make a motion of something falling apart. “Hatched?”

“Hatched, okay. Oui. Bientôt.”

“So doesn’t the queen just lay more eggs?”

“She can, that’s not the problem. Their species, the red ones—they can’t do anything but fight. They can’t find food or even eat it on their own. Something about their mouths. So they steal larvae who’ll grow up and do it for them.”

I stand on my back legs and slip my front four into the sleeves in the glass wall. They coat my tarsi in wet slime. Mucous-lined spiderweb sleeves. Hot new item at Gucci and Versace this season. I lift the closest pupa in my arms. The nametag on the side of her isolette reads, “Elizabeth Diane May (T-7747).” I turn her translucent body over and see two protrusions from the back of her thorax. Wings breaking through exoskeleton.

“Hey, look. This one’s going to be a queen,” I say.

The barista’s thousands of eyes widen. She presses herself against the venous dragonfly window. “Quand ils trouvent ses ailes,” she says, “ils vont la noyer dans une flaque lors de la prochaine pluie.”

“They’ll drown her in a puddle?”

“They’ll chew off her face and drown her dead, monsieur.”

Step one: find a nurse.

Step two: steal her face and keys.

Step three: stay calm. Do not shuffle your tarsi. Do not breathe audibly. Do not speak. Infiltrate the maternity ward of the anthill. Locate the isolette of Elizabeth Diane May. Unlock the isolette and wrap the baby in a towel. Cradle her in your arms and steal out. Ignore the barista when she asks, “C’est quoi ce bordel? Merde!”

Step four: scurry.

I burst out of the top of the anthill in a flurry of the finest white bunker sand, out into the sunlight. Dodge the soldier that dives at me. Skitter across the patio as L’Armée Royale pours forth from the mouth of the tunnels and swarms after me. After me and Elizabeth’s cocoon, five by five, hurrah, hurrah. Must save this pupal princess. Soldiers fill the crevices between patio stones. Moss and mulch are beaten flat beneath their tarsi.

They surround me. Strike. Rip the pupa from my legs and pin me face down on the concrete. One soldier grips my head between her mandibles. Their blades shear off a bit of skin. The soldier giggles. Squeezes harder.

Two soldiers toss Elizabeth’s cocoon back and forth, smoking cigarettes.

A general brings her face inches from mine. Her compound eyes reflect thousands of tiny Tonys, fracture me into segments. She says, “Par la puissance de Sa Majesté la Reine Suzanne II—vive la Reine!—vous êtes chargé d’enlèvement d’enfant et l’assassinat d’un fonctionnaire medical.” Her mandibles fly into a frenzy of clicks and clacks as a shadow passes over her troops behind her. “La peine encourue pour ce crime est la décapitation.”

Caw.

Caw, caw.

Albino crow swoops down and pecks the ant holding me. The lieutenant explodes in a splash of jelly and exoskeletal shrapnel. Queen Suzanne II’s general reaches for her rose thorn spear, but in a flash of white feathers and a gulping noise, she disappears. Killed in the line of duty. The other soldiers throw thorns and pebbles and walnut shells; some of them scatter. I hear harried shouts and the rustle of gargantuan wings. A distinct smell of cabernet sauvignon and piss. I think the piss emanates from dismembered ant corpses, but realise after a moment that I’ve wet myself, the stain spreading across my crotch. The leviathan’s shadow falls on me. I roll over. In its beak rests Elizabeth Diane May, pupal stage. The crow cocks its head, swallows, hops backward twice, shakes out its wings, and ascends to the clouds.

I am a pismire.

Step one: get in the shower and scrub yourself with lavender.

SWARM THEORY

“What are you doing?”

Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck shit. The tips of my right tarsi cling to the votive candle halfway down the front of my pants. Smoke curls around the shaft of my penis and lifts itself out of my Dolce & Gabbana underwear and over my shoulder.

I drop the candle into my briefs and pull my hand out of my waistband. Spin on the balls of my feet to confront the priest. His bulbous eyes bug from their sockets, while mine fracture him into a thousand tab-necked faces. The votive smoke traces a line into his nostrils. This man is a father. A fellow inseminator. Stud. All the queen’s horses and all the queen’s men.

He knows I have a prayer down my pants. The smoky evidence has coiled itself around my dick and pressed itself into his nasal cavity. There are a few people down on the kneelers sending love to their dead, pressing rosaries to their lips and whispering, “Hail, Holy Queen, Mother of Mercy, our life, our sweetness and our hope. To thee do we cry, poor banished children of Eve; to thee do we send up our sighs, mourning and weeping in this valley of tears.” And then they cross themselves.

I move to block the empty space on the display of white wax candles. Drying wax burning the underside of my penis. Bulge in my pants. Thin crease between the priest’s eyebrows. I say, “Hi, Father Woodington.”

“Tonyyyyyyyyy,” he says, shaking his head. No one in the pews is praying anymore. Eyes locked on me and our priest, the man who speaks to God on our behalf. A family of six walks in through the glass doors from the foyer. The youngest boy wears a

toque with bear ears. Father Woodington says, “Someone in this room lit that candle. Lit a prayer for a loved one. And you dropped that prayer in your pants. In the House of God, Tony. The House of God.”

I have been caught. Discovered. Dissected. Anatomised. He documents me in his field notes. I swallow and wipe my palm against my leg. Swallow again and again. I open my mouth to speak. The bear-boy points at my crotch. His mother swats his hand. Their family sidles its way along the wall to get around me and the priest. The mother knocks her head against the steel box holding the emergency fire axe. I swallow.

“Why don’t you go to the washroom and throw that candle in the garbage? Wash your hands then come have a seat at the front of the congregation, please. Go on.”

I skitter off into God’s washroom behind God’s crying room and kneel at the feet of His white throne with two droplets of piss on the seat. Our Father who art in Heaven, hallowed be thy aim. I spew my steaming oblations. Some of them splash across the seat, so I wad up some toilet paper and wipe them. “Sorry,” I mutter. “God, sorry.”

Wings rustle behind me.

“Kind of shitty, stealing a votive candle,” says Lionel.

“Fuck off. You steal Rolexes, engagement rings, the diamond eyes from Swarovski sculptures.”

“Yes,” he says, leaning against the stall’s open doorframe, “but I’ve never stolen someone’s fucking prayer. That’s pretty wicked, boss.”

Once upon a time, I carved ONLY JESUS SAVES into the paint of this stall. In black marker underneath, someone’s added HUNDREDS ON CAR INSURANCE BY SWITCHING TO GEICO! Tears well up. I blink them back.

I wish I could flush Lionel Réaumur down the pipes. Watch his white feathers circle the bowl and wash away. His fancy golf clubs, his cigarette boxes, the trinkets that glitter in his Porsche's glove compartment. But Lionel is unflushable. My floater.

I push past him and wash my hands with pink soap from a plastic dispenser. Splash my face. Rinse the vomit out my mouth. Lionel preens himself in the mirror over my shoulder. He is my reward for the bile tithing I pay.

"The candle's still in your underwear," he says.

"Right." I dry my tarsi and throw the candle in the wastebasket by the door. It flattens heaps of paper towels, sinks to the bottom. Tiny water droplets dampen the front of my pants and sweater. Spray from the faulty faucet.

I reach for the door handle and Lionel says, "Gonna wash your hands again or what?"

"Fuck that noise."

Father Woodington waits for me outside the washrooms. Clasps his hands. He smiles as congregation members enter the building. No smile for me. God accepted my bilious repentance and repaid me with Lionel. But Father Woodington, he will not forgive me and scatter bounties at my feet. He will, however, happily scatter thorns.

"Come," he says. Beckons with one flick of two fingers. Wipes his nose with his knuckle.

He leads me to the front of the church, past rows of pious faces kneeling and reading and chatting quietly because it's polite to be quiet in church. Past my neighbour who owns the limousine company and her banker CEO husband who wants to suck my skin. Past Angela, who rubs her bloating belly. Past the redhead mother of the liquor store

wasp. Past the family of six with the youngest boy wearing that bear toque. All whispering. Mutters spread through the colony. They now know what the priest knows. A wave of twitching legs pans out from these six. A blue light for the dead.

Wayne locks Bob in embrace over last night's hockey games. Angela burrows into a green hymnal resting on her swelling belly. Bob doesn't know what Angela and I know. A thousand larvae a day. Webbed up against the walls and ceilings tunnels and alcoves and tool sheds. Lionel flies over us and perches on the arm of Christ. Now Lionel, he knows. Knows I know the priest knows I packaged a prayer with my junk.

The priest points to the bench in the front row with a knobbly white finger, the colour of lamb's wool. I feel dozens and dozens of compound eyes breaking me into thousands and thousands of joints and guts and veins and pelvic shards. Shattering me. Antennae frisking the morsels, tasting the orange-peel and pistachio sins that line my exoskeleton. Scavenging for anything more to take back to their sandy hills, to talk about over fences and hedges, to chitter into the phone, to snap inside a beaded catechism.

Alter boys dressed in white enter the pulpit and light candles. These not for prayers, not for the dead. Well, maybe for the dead. Everything's for the dead in these caverns. We worship the statue of our dead saviour and bury his life among nutshells and fruit rinds. Forget he ever lived. Twice. Father Woodington takes his place among the holy. He remembers every confession scraped onto his booth's grate.

Silence. Father Woodington takes two deep breaths then dots his forehead, chest, shoulders. "In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit."

"Amen," moans the colony.

"The Lord be with you."

“And also with you.”

“My sisters and brothers and sisters,” he begins, one hand resting under his neck tab, “to prepare ourselves to celebrate the sacred mysteries, let us call to mind our sins.”

We raise our voices to clouds and suns. We would lift these bodies on our backs and parse them out to waiting mouths. If we had enough of us, enough mandibles to bite into the rock and vapour, we’d drag the heavens down to our tunnels and feast on them all winter. “I confess to Almighty God, and to you, my brothers and sisters, that I have sinned through my own fault, in my thoughts and in my words, in what I have done, and in what I have failed to do; and I ask blessed Mary, ever virgin, all the angels and saints, and you, my brothers and sisters, to pray for me to the Lord, our God.”

I cough. The priest’s nostrils flare.

Blessed Mary, ever virgin. Poor Mary, when she had to tell Joseph she was pregnant, that he wasn’t the father. Some comedian did a skit about it. Or several. I giggle. There’s only one other person in my row: a withering woman in a flower-print dress, wearing glasses with thick lenses painted with depictions of the crucifixion. I bite the urge to lick the inside of those lenses and taste the sugar deposited on them. The woman has been nodding her head. I don’t think she’s heard what’s come out of His Reverence’s mouth. Her cane lies across her lap and she pets it like it’s a cat. But when I giggle, the woman’s claws tighten. Someone behind me clears her throat. Fuck.

“May Almighty God have mercy on us,” says Father Woodington, “forgive us our sins, and bring us to everlasting life.” He scratches an itch on his leg. Chloe Valentine, Our Queen rest her soul, collected stones and stamps and hockey cards. Lionel: cigarette packets and anything shiny. Tinfoil wrapping and earrings and bells from pet collars. Me:

robin eggs and beer bottle caps and hymnals and newspaper clippings and termite skulls.
Father Woodington: confessions and amens and pewter civil war figurines.

“Amen,” we moan.

“Lord have mercy,” he sings.

“Lord have mercy,” we repeat.

“Christ have mercy.”

“Christ have mercy.”

“Our Queen have mercy.”

“Our Queen have mercy.”

Somewhere in the congregation, Angela rubs her abdomen to soothe twelve-hundred expanding eggs. She will dispel them and deflate and tomorrow, she will lay twelve-hundred more. Then the day after that and the day after that. We will pour ourselves down the throat of another anthill to thief its rations, its harvest, its store of seeds and coconut shavings. We'll spoon the spoils into infant mouths. Raisins and blueberry muffin crumbs. And we'll raise those children to chant these same litanies. Follow these same sugar trails. Angela whispers, “Let us pray.”

We crawl over one another in silent prayer. Spasmodic legs entangle my own, brush my belly, knee me in the mouth. I taste cinnamon, coconut cookies, watermelon seeds, maggot, parmesan, gravy, soya beans, cream corn, cabernet sauvignon, strawberry-rhubarb pie, potato skin, scrambled egg with pepper, peanut butter, bacon bits, semen, southwest chipotle sauce, orange rinds, grape bubble gum, spearmint mouthwash, oregano, and the smallest drip of pistachio mint ice cream.

“Today,” proclaims His Reverence, halting our prayers, “I shall talk about covetousness.”

Of course you shall.

“Sisters and brothers and sisters,” says Father Woodington, “Exodus twenty-five tells us the Word of God: Thou shalt not steal. We take this as our seventh Commandment. Our ninth and tenth come just two verses later: Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour’s wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor any thing that is thy neighbour’s.”

Does that include thy neighbour’s daughter’s ass?

“And when the people of Moses heard these words they also heard thunder and lightning and trumpets, and smelled the smoke of the mountain.” Father Woodington smelled the smoke of the mountain when it rose from my pants and stuffed itself into his flaring nostrils. He thumbs his nose. Adjusts his tabbed collar. “They knew that to do these things, to act against these or any other of the Lord’s Commandments, was to sin. And to sin could bring waves crashing down on them from all sides. They would drown in the tunnels.”

Behind me: the swelling whispers of my candlelit transgression against the dead. Passed from mouth to mouth like a bean or blueberry muffin crumb.

The whispers might as well be thunder and lightning and trumpets. Lionel caws from his sanctuary. I chew the ends of my tarsal claws. Zone out to skitter through the first part of the Liturgy of the Word, through standing and singing in one, monotone voice: “Stealing From the World Away.”

Father Woodington flails his arms in his closest imitation of a living prophet. “Why do we sin? Because we’re scared? Greedy? Because we’re evil? What is stealing one tiny item, in the grand scheme of things? According to the gospel of James, ‘For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all.’ So when we break the Seventh Commandment, we break the other Nine. Stealing even the smallest of things – a bottlecap, a robin’s egg, a candle – brings us under the righteous wrath and judgment of God.”

I worship all the gods. I take the Lord’s name in vain. I defile the Sabbath. I have dishonoured my missing mother, presumed dead. I have eaten the life from breathing bodies, committed adultery, stolen bottlecaps and eggs and candles and prayers and faces and fucks, borne false witness, coveted and coveted and coveted and coveted.

“And as a congregation, one transgressor damns us all.”

Compound eyes are magnifying glasses under the sun, shining on the back of my thorax. I crisped ants on the patio after Chloe’s death. Wisps of curling smoke rose around their stiff corpses. Votive candles that no longer skittered. Catch these six-legged prayers before you send them up to the sky, smoking.

“A heart that trusts God will not steal. God will provide.” He holds his hand over his heart and sips vodka from a red water bottle. “One gentleman I presided over sought the counsel of the Lord when he planned on robbing a liquor store with his friends. The Lord bade him stay his lightfingers, and he did. One month later, he won a hundred thousand off a scratch ticket.”

Someone’s doodled a birthday cupcake in this hymnal on “We Gather Together.” Right beside the first verse. We gather together to ask the Lord’s blessing; He chastens

and hastens His will blah blah. Sing praises to His Name; He forgets not His own. Birthday cupcake. One candle.

One candle has bought everlasting winter for all of us. No summertime to forage. Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck shit. We're all going to smell like brimstone and burnt popcorn.

"Amen," we chant.

"Thanks be to God," we chant.

"Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name; Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done in the tunnels as it is in heaven."

Crawl across pages of readings and the gospel according to Father Woodington. Lord, hear our prayer.

We rise row by row to take communion. We all go marching two by two, the little one stops to sit in the pews and we all go marching down to the ground to get out of the rain. Chewing the Lord's body, swallowing pieces of rib and thigh and rump that Lionel pecks out and flings down to us from his perch. But according to the Word, thou canst only eat the body of thy sister if thou hast been dunked in the sink. So the boy in the bear toque and I both hold our arms over our chests and Father Woodington draws crosses on our foreheads with his finger and says, "May God bless you."

Except when he says it to me, he injects venom from his mandibles. Shoots it into my veins. My legs twitch and my mandibles froth. I limp back to my pew and curl up in a ball on the polished wood. Hold all my legs against my underbelly. My antennae wilt and hang limp along my back. Pistachio shells tumble out of my pockets and bounce along the carpet, under benches and kneelers.

More oblations on top of bread and wine and puke, this time for the colony. Meals they can scrape from inside the ovary walls. They swarm under me, over me, through me.

Salvation through pistachio skin.

The cherry wood chest under my bed containing robin eggs, Angela's panties, one newspaper clipping of a dead girl, beer bottle caps, two hockey cards, bubble gum from under the shelf in a church cupboard, my mother's porcelain pepper shaker shaped like a lamb, the smell of rotting robin eggs and orange peels, a wasp's engagement ring, luggage tags, a toothpaste tube, my big brother's anger at his lost Yzerman rookie card, a piece of pinewood from my mother's coffin, sixteen pocket squares, and a teaspoon from a café in Paris. A box full of crumbs that will eternally damn the entire colony to a life further underground than our tunnels. Hell will be an anthill that carves its own earth and roots into new tangles. We will be constantly searching in vain for the larval cavern, the midden, the cellar full of food. Unable to navigate tunnels that slither into new paths, new connections, new tributaries that lead to lava, swirling at the centre of the earth. A core from which we cannot extract seeds.

I puke up more offerings. My sisters collect the nuts and bile. Coat their slices of Christ's flesh with my stomach's slime and carry it back to the tunnels, the church's crypt, the confessional, the cubbies that hold the hymnals and gospel readings. Father Woodington's blessing's formic acid swirls through my veins and decomposes the lining of my stomach, dissolves the brick and mud and pistachio and yogurt and skin inside. I vomit again. Blood. The residue of Father Woodington's finger burns into my forehead. Was there something in the Bible about corroding cross-shaped scars? Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck shit.

Angela's arm snakes around my shoulders and holds my shuddering, sweating body. Twelve-hundred hearts beat from inside her swelling abdomen. Her belly drags behind her on the church floor. A new wave of workers every day.

"Jesus, Tony," she says. "You look whiter than that crow."

"One candle. Just one. Does that really mean I'm guilty? That everyone here is, because of me?"

"You shoved it down your pants," she says. "That's fucking awesome."

There's a layer of wax stuck underneath my fingernails and covering the small burn on the bottom of my penis. "I'm not sure Father Woodington agrees."

"I'm not sure anyone in this room does, Tony. But you're you. You're going to do what you do. The lingerie you took. You dropped some shells, by the way."

I clutch my rumbling intestines. Need to keep them from ejaculating again. "Wait, you know I stole your lingerie?"

The entire room silences. The buzzing colony that sends missives up from my living room vents listens for our confession. Any hint about how to evade containers of baking soda and icing sugar to conquer the Queen and take her for their own. They crave my insemination duties. Which are way better than digging trenches or organizing junebug hunts. So they sit in the pews, quiet. Even Lionel can hear us, perched on Christ's arm. Father Woodington clutches the gold jar of communion wafers to his thorax and darts back behind the podium. Gobbles a few pieces of Lionel's perch for himself.

Angela squeezes my thigh. "How could I miss those banana yellow panties? Or, you know, miss that they're missing. You not only took them, you also stole that ring you gave me. And kept sneaking back into my house every time I tried to sneak it back into

yours. And my dad's pink rosary. I've seen you light-finger a button pin from the movie store but you never wear it. That's what you do. What makes you unlike the rest of this swarm. You think these people don't have their own banana panties? Their own pistachio shells? Bottlecaps? You were the one who told me about Wayne's fetish for that cleaning supply smell. And Mrs. Cooper's affair with Mr. Brockman. The way Loraine organizes samples of her baby's shit between microscope slides. And Emery steals moulds of peoples' teeth from the dentist. You taught me we all have things we hide under our beds in little cherry wood boxes. Even God."

"The Lord be with you," recites Father Woodington.

"And also with you," says the congregation. Angela and I stop talking. Her father is so absorbed in conversation with Wayne that he hasn't noticed Angela's no longer sitting with him. I read a few words off his lips: Zetterberg, dangle, peanut butter.

His Reverence holds one hand out, suspending it over the mass of still antennae.

"May Almighty God bless you, the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit."

"Amen," they moan.

"Go in peace to love and serve the Queen."

"Thanks be to God," I croak.

We rise as one and swarm through the aisles. Angela and I cut into the crowd. When we pass the holy water, she dips two tarsi in and draws a winking face on my foreleg. Sucks the blessing from her fingertips. Twines her tarsal claw in mine. The air outside tastes of pistachios and orange juice. She peels the wax from under my fingernails and lets it fall to the grass for our sisters and brothers and sisters to forage.

AFTERTASTE OF ANTENNAE

a critical analysis

The ants I studied when I was a child carried morsels of bread between patio stones, banded together to drag leaves across sidewalks, scavenged the carcasses of dead spiders and grasshoppers. They marched through my dreams and those of my sister, two by two (hurrah hurrah), and infiltrated my bedroom when I wedged a peanut butter and jelly sandwich between my yellow plastic table and the wall. The sandwich was on whole wheat bread.

As I began to write “Field Guide to Kleptoparasitism,” I found myself following sugar trails deeper and deeper down the anthill until I picked up this question with my mandibles and tasted it with my antennae: What is an insect?

What is a human?

The tension at the dorsal aorta of “Field Guide to Kleptoparasitism” lies in the distinction between the anthropomorphic and the myrmecomorphic. My protagonist, Tony Gordon, exists in two bodies simultaneously: one which enables him to “skitter down through sand and perlite past roots and reeds, under the pond and cart lot, and up through a crack in the bar’s tile” (“Field Guide to Kleptoparasitism” 38) and another in which he golfs eighteen, crosses himself with holy water, and hosts a neighbourhood barbecue. This corporeal duality is not a one-way tunnel, for Tony slips seamlessly between his suburban human life and his subterranean insect one.

This slippage between bodies is not simply figurative, in the same way I argue the unnamed narrator of Rawi Hage’s *Cockroach* becomes an insect. In *Cockroach*, the narrator displaces his human desires and weaknesses onto what Egon Schwarz, writing of

the connection between Kafka and the European Fable, calls the “related but somehow inferior animal” (qtd. in Powell 130). Hage’s narrator imagines himself to be an insect during times of stress, guilt, or theft: “I alternated my six cockroach hands and distributed the pain of those blows [my teacher inflicted upon me]. And when my palms burned and ached, I fanned my cockroach wings. I let the air cool off my swollen hands as I stood in the corner, my face and a tender belly to the wall” (Hage 23). Hage’s narrator, while described as “part cockroach” (203), cannot escape his human body. The scenes in which he crawls along the pipes and springs from kitchen drains are fantastical descriptions from the narrator’s delirious, paranoid mind. In contrast, the transformation of my protagonist in “Field Guide to Kleptoparasitism” is not figurative; Tony’s transformation does not simply occur in his mind, but in the organic analogue world. His human body is mutable, as he twitches his mandibles or flicks his antennae or falls into an antlion’s sandtrap.

Tony’s corporeal metamorphosis places him in a similar bodily state to Gregor Samsa, the protagonist of Franz Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis*. In this novella, Samsa awakens one morning “transformed into a monstrous vermin” (117), and unable to transform back into human form. “Field Guide to Kleptoparasitism” differs from *The Metamorphosis* in that Tony’s transformation is not unidirectional. He scrambles back and forth between bodies and communities at will; his body is not a site of limitation. Tony’s transforming body does not get him fired from his job (if one can determine that he actually has a job), it does not push away his friends and family, and it does not confine him to a room for fear of being exterminated with a broom. During the time Samsa takes to learn to negotiate his new body, his family and friends gradually estrange

him from their lives. The reason for their domestic excision of Gregor implies that he has devolved into an inferior being unworthy of their affections, and that they misunderstand his *choice*. Kafka's portrayal of human beings who believe the human is intrinsically more valuable than the animal is problematic from a posthumanist standpoint. It negates the value of Samsa's new identity, and sets up his metamorphosis as a devolution into an inferior species.

"Field Guide to Kleptoparasitism" is written from a relatively posthumanist perspective in that Tony's fluid body is an end unto itself, rather than a means to achieving metaphor. In *Surface Encounters: Thinking with Animals and Art*, Ron Broglio claims that the performance art of Marcus Coates "botches or misplaces . . . proper relations [between metaphors' vehicles and tenors], which results in the death of metaphor and the rise of metamorphosis" (xxx). Metamorphosis is the exoskeleton of "Field Guide to Kleptoparasitism"; the text seeks to move beyond a paradigm in which the entomologist classifies the ant by kingdom-phylum-class-order-family-subfamily-tribe-genus-species, in which the reader reduces human-animal transformation in the literary text to metaphoric value. The paradigm it moves into is one of *becoming*, a paradigm in which Tony's metamorphoses exist as valuable outside of their metaphoric meanings, rather than valuable *only* for symbolic significance. The creatures in "Field Guide to Kleptoparasitism" – ants, supercilious cockroaches, liquor store wasps, albino crows – are not slates onto which the reader can simply scrawl metaphoric meanings. Living in a culture that conceptualizes his kind based on its technical Latin name, Tony's positioning in the liminal space between human and nonhuman is a liberating claim to subjectivity. In *Animal Rites: American Culture, the Discourse of Species, and*

Posthumanist Theory, Cary Wolfe introduces the idea of posthumanist philosophy by claiming that “the humanist habit of making even the *possibility* of subjectivity coterminous with the species barrier [between the human and the nonhuman] is deeply problematic, if not clearly untenable” (1, author’s emphasis). “Field Guide to Kleptoparasitism” challenges the humanist habit that Wolfe criticizes, because the insects and crows in the collection defy compartmentalization; they are not objects or crumbs easily arranged onto the right microscope slide. They are individuals with homes and yard parties and church loyalties and bad habits; in short, they are the subjects of fiction.

Certainly, metaphor is at work in “Field Guide to Kleptoparasitism,” given the close relationship in the text between suburban landscapes and anthills. Tony’s identity as an ant seems to be an open challenge to what both suburbia and the anthill represent: consensual conformity to the will of the swarm. Tony’s transformation does not rise out of the desire to be antlike, but rather out of the desire to escape being antlike. While the body of the insect affords Tony the liberty of existing on various planes, the social reality of the ant binds him to the swarms of suburban life, including his community’s emphasis on church attendance and backyard barbecues; his light-fingered actions during and between these communal activities demonstrate his disdain for a happy status-quo life. Not only does he steal robin eggs and curtain ties, he steals glances, phrases, scents. He seeks to disrupt, on the most microscopic of levels, the comfortable lives he believes his suburban neighbours lead. In *SuburbiaNation: Reading Suburban Landscape in Twentieth-century American Fiction and Film*, Robert Beuka claims that the suburb “functions as a heterotopic ‘mirror’ to mainstream [North] American culture in its invocation of a utopian dream of middle-class community and security and its constant

reminder of the social realities undercutting such a fantasy vision” (235). Tony, recognizing that the social events of his neighbourhood are an opportunity to “[i]nvite the neighbours over and swap the same bullshit gossip over and over and over and over and over and over” (“Field Guide to Kleptoparasitism” 71), rebels against this self-contained suburban ecosystem by thieving inconsequential items from his neighbours: shoelaces, rosaries, buttons, bottlecaps. He carries these tiny prizes away through cracks in the patio and tunnels under the roots of perfectly manicured sod. Tony, thus, skitters through what Beuka calls the “fractures that compromise the structure of a seemingly placid suburban society” (69). He undermines the rigid structure of the subdivision by exploiting its bovine placidity, distinguishing himself from the seemingly conformist, homogeneous society in which he lives. In so doing, he disrupts the image of suburbia’s neat and orderly ecosystem. Beuka claims the subdivision is not simply “an alien, nondescript ‘noplacel’ lurking on the margins of the landscape and the culture, but [is] in fact someplace far more intimate, the most profound and vexing of all environments: home” (243).

When I was a child watching the march of ants on sidewalks, I wondered: “Where are they going?”

The ants are going home. But their tether is not simply a workspace; the protagonist-specimen in “Field Guide to Kleptoparasitism” sees his subdivision as his habitat, his home. Yet he holds ambivalent feelings toward this environment. When Angela Hölldobler comes to Tony’s after having been physically attacked by Brian Forel, Tony tells his brother Emery, “This is the way of the suburbs . . . We do backyard barbecues and share gardening seeds and gossip under the hedgeroots and bring each

other pecan pie. But everyone's still a fucking animal" ("Field Guide to Kleptoparasitism" 60). Tony's disdain for – and fascination with – the suburban life lies not with the inherent homogeneity of the environment itself, but rather with his colony-mates—their hypocrisies and their Maseratis and their motor homes and lawn gnomes and backtalk and beer (with pickles shoved down the bottlenecks). He *chooses* to stay. Because male ants typically don't leave the colony, Tony's un-antlike misadventures with Lionel the albino crow at the golf course and the bars suggest that he is not tethered to the anthill, that he makes his home in a pistachio shell anywhere he wishes. His ability to relocate supports his corporeal duality, keeping him from being entirely myrmecomorphic – he draws maleness from his human side. But despite his ability to relocate he stays, and with Angela's help eventually embraces his dual-species identification, letting his self-loathing fall to the grass like the wax she peels from underneath his fingernails (110).

The suburban-ecosystematic metaphor of Tony's anthood serves as a foil for the reason for Tony's metamorphosis. The story "Origin of Species" suggests a psychological link between the ant world and Tony's mind. After Chloe Valentine and an eight-year-old Tony collect rocks from the park playground in their neighbourhood, she has a dream in which the ants come to her in her bed and tell her she has to put all the rocks back or they'll chew off her face and bury her under the hockey arena. Tony responds, "Don't worry about the rocks. It was a stupid dream. No ants are going to come and eat your face" (14). Tony's guilt and self-hatred stem from the fact that he feels he could have prevented Chloe's death if he had instead encouraged her to replace the rocks in the park. When he finds out that Chloe has, in fact, been found dead, Tony responds

with vengeance toward ants: “Kneel on the ground, open up the black case. Take out the magnifying glass. One brown forager skitters across a patio stone. Focus a point of light through the glass. Shine, follow. Single wisp of smoke. Pistachio and burnt bread. Nothing left but a charred shell” (20). This passage illustrates the relationship between Tony’s emotions about the death of his best friend and about the ant kingdom. He loathes them, and when his own self-loathing takes hold of him as an adult in the story “Infestation,” he becomes one of them. His human body becomes interchangeable with an ant’s as “Legs push their way out from between [his] ribs, forcing the creaking cage apart as they break through [his] skin and extend, wriggling, from [his] sides. They’re spindly and jointed in three different spots” (75). Rather than representing a psychological or metaphorical problem, the origins of Tony’s transformation are irrational. When Chloe disappears, the dream world and the waking world melt together for Tony, as do the ant and the human one. Yet, this breakdown is not situated only in the mental realm; Tony’s metamorphosis is also physical, and he is not the only character in the text that changes. The story “Take Take Take,” the only story in the collection told from Angela’s perspective, demonstrates that the fluidity of the human world and the animal world is not simply depicted in Tony’s mind. Angela, too, sees the antennae Emery wears slicked back, and describes her own body as liminally human-animal: “[Emery] wears his antennae slicked back. As though he wants to hide them. I touch mine with ginger fingers, feel an extra kink in the left one. So sore. Fuck” (59-60). Angela’s own metamorphosis negates the possibility that the breakdown of human-animal boundaries in “Field Guide to Kleptoparasitism” is explicable via purely psychological diagnostics.

The breakdown of the human-animal boundary is not necessarily new in literature. In her article “A Cyborg Manifesto,” Donna J. Haraway states,

By the late twentieth century in United States scientific culture, the boundary between human and animal is thoroughly breached. The last beachheads of uniqueness have been polluted if not turned into amusement parks—language, tool use, social behaviour, mental events, nothing really convincingly settles the separation of human and animal. And many people no longer feel the need for such a separation; indeed, many branches of feminist culture affirm the pleasure of connection of human and other living creatures. (163)

Many authors explore the connection Haraway identifies between humans and nonhumans, and have for decades. In Richard Adams’s 1972 novel *Watership Down*, for example, a colony of rabbits is uprooted from its warren and must set off in order to find a new one. In *Watership Down*, the characters have rabbit bodies, live in rabbit places, and have rabbit predators, but the text presents them as human at their core. The language of the novel has an inherently human focus (despite the rabbits having invented their own language, Lapine), as do the social interactions and style of prose. In *Watership Down*, the characters seem to be *like* rabbits, but the text does not address in a phenomenological way what it is to *be* a rabbit.

As Jacques Derrida says in *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question*, the silence of the nonhuman animal “derives from the properly *phenomenological* impossibility of speaking the phenomenon” (53, author’s emphasis), and is not a matter of languagelessness but of biological incapacity to communicate with humans in human

languages. Jenny Sampirisi addresses linguistic differences in her poetry collection *Croak* when Flip the Frog takes centre stage and delivers the following lines:

ub ub ub ub ub ub ub ub ub ub ub ub ub ub ub ub ub
bub bub bub bub bub bub bub bub bub bub bub bub bub
bub
bub
bub
bub (66)

Sampirisi writes a text that explores relationships between the human and an animal that produces audible sound. Her text is riddled with “bub” and “Plop!” (81) and “Ribbit for her pleasure” (64). “Field Guide to Kleptoparasitism,” on the other hand, embodies its focal nonhuman – the ant – in non-sonic ways. By contrast to both *Watership Down* and *Croak*, the confusion of the human-animal boundary in “Field Guide to Kleptoparasitism” is not an attempt to represent what it is like to be an ant from a human perspective; rather, it is in part an attempt to represent what it is to be an ant from an ant’s perspective – and, even further, an ant that can also be a human being. The language and structure of the text mimic the frenetic movements of ants, diverting attention from the fact that it is impossible to write as an ant. Such frenetic movements call for a literary form that can skitter and scramble. The short story form lends itself to a phenomenological representation because it allows the component parts of “Field Guide to Kleptoparasitism” to vary so greatly; from the two-page poetic prose of the story “Stomach Full of Bricks” to the twelve-page narrative of “Origin of Species,” the language and structure of the stories are erratic, like the skittering of an ant along a

sidewalk. The form of the text itself attempts insectness. Yet an issue remains with textual representations of what it is to be an ant: writing from such a perspective in a human language. The impossibility of truly embodying a nonhuman in the literary form brings to mind Ludwig Wittgenstein's observation that "If a lion could talk, we could not understand him" (213). Tony's language, as half-ant, is inaccessible, unimaginable. "Field Guide to Kleptoparasitism" addresses the Wittgensteinian silence of the ant by not trying to understand the language of an ant in terms of English-to-ant translation, but rather by appropriating the body and movement of an ant into sentence structure, character voice, and manuscript structure. "Field Guide to Kleptoparasitism" does not attempt to overcome the phenomenological impossibility of writing as an ant, but rather to explore the possibility of writing as a person who is not wholly human. The language of the human collides with the body of the ant, and refocuses the narrative on "A small blood smear on [Angela's] lip. Eyelids peeled back from her sclera, thousands of eyes glinting in the sun and the barbecue's flames. Hickory smoke and charring meat. Sniff" ("Field Guide to Kleptoparasitism" 72). The scale of existence shrinks itself and the language skitters across the page. Fragments. Flits this way and that.

"Field Guide to Kleptoparasitism" seeks to embody what Vicki Hearne calls the silent space of a "consciousness that is beyond ours" (Hearne 170) by acknowledging that human beings themselves are not understandable to each other. Tony is an enigma to Angela, and vice versa (to a lesser degree). In *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein notes of travelling to foreign places, "We do not *understand* the people. (And not because of not knowing what they are saying to themselves)" (212). Tony Gordon is not a character who can be understood only as a set of literary devices and psychological

analyses, not even to himself. In the story “Infestation,” Tony’s apparent refusal to tell Lionel “what” he is (“Field Guide to Kleptoparasitism” 23) seems less of an issue of fearing Lionel’s thieving white wings, but rather a fear of classifying himself. This refusal to self-define is ironic, since Lionel’s job is to “classify” Tony; like Father Woodington in “Stomach Full of Bricks,” Lionel “dissects, anatomises, and documents” (69). This refusal to self-define comes up later in the story “Infestation” when Tony asks himself, “What am I?” (26)—a question that goes unanswered for the rest of the manuscript. Even deeper runs the implied question to Tony in Angela’s unfinished sentence when she awakes in her father’s upstairs bathtub: “Why am I?” (33). The text never attempts to overtly answer these questions, nor resolves the enigmas of its characters. As a result, the unsettling question remains implied: What distinguishes an ant from a human?

The amount of legs? The compound eyes? The mandibles that Tony’s brother Emery brushes and flosses so meticulously after every meal? The webby sex Tony and Angela have in her father’s bed? The text never identifies the switch that Tony flips in order to change bodies. Yet Tony does not only *think* he is an ant sometimes. Nor does he only *seem to be* an ant sometimes. Tony *is* an ant. Sometimes. As a result, the manuscript hinges on the idea that the human being – even one so intrinsically connected to the animal kingdom as Tony Gordon – cannot fully understand, in the Wittgensteinian sense, what it is to be an insect. The relationship between ant-Tony and human-Tony is so tangled that it might be more accurate to say that Tony finds his voice and language as much through being insect as through being human. “Field Guide to Kleptoparasitism” is a text that confuses the human-animal boundary and does not seek to resolve that

confusion, taking pleasure in the breakdown of boundaries Haraway describes in “A Cyborg Manifesto.” In the story “Dulosis,” when Tony masks his scent by rolling in that of a dead scavenger and infiltrates anthill 569-A76-788F2S-33239-W9, he finds himself in Paris. He orders coffee at a local boulangerie and describes its occupants: “A group of large cinnamon-red ants sits at a table with their legs tucked under the checkerboard tablecloth, in heated debate over the superiority of Olympique Lyonnais to Paris Saint-Germain” (“Field Guide to Kleptoparasitism” 90). The story juxtaposes ant bodies with human sporting events, pupal caverns with cobblestone streets. There is no unifying factor in “Field Guide to Kleptoparasitism” that makes sense of its liminal positioning. Haraway writes, “No objects, spaces, or bodies are sacred in themselves” (Haraway 167), and Tony embodies this secularism. His ant body is no more symbolic of psychic degeneration or immoral activity than his human one.

In his collection of short fiction, *Squirrel Seeks Chipmunk: A Modest Bestiary*, David Sedaris creates modern-day fables in which animals learn lessons about dating, grieving, and being injected with viruses in a lab. Sedaris’s stories certainly forward these lessons, usually in clever linguistic twists at the end of the stories, such as that of “The Cat and the Baboon”:

[T]he baboon relaxed and searched her memory for a slanderous dog story. The collie, the German shepherd, the spaniel mix she claimed to have turned away: there were all good friends of hers, and faithful clients, but what would it hurt to pretend otherwise and cross that fine line between licking ass and simply kissing it?

The difference between Sedaris's collection and most works of fiction that figure the animal in the place of the human is that *Squirrel Seeks Chipmunk* takes pleasure in the human-nonhuman boundary confusion Haraway outlines. These animals go for massages, migrate, have bad dates, hibernate. There is no clear distinction made between human activities and nonhuman ones, no explanation for why certain animal characteristics such as communal grooming are cast against more anthropocentric ones such as sign-building or writing for the local newspaper. The metamorphoses do not seek to argue moral lessons in and of themselves, seeking instead to generate humour through the breakdown of the human-animal boundary. Every time Sedaris's animals act out-of-species, it's funny, rather than being didactic in itself.

Similarly, the boundary confusion in "Field Guide to Kleptoparasitism" casts Tony as an animal because he is one, rather than for the purposes of forwarding an ethical argument. The tension of the text, then, does not derive from the *meaning* of this confusion but rather from the unfamiliar situations that arise out of Tony's liminality. In the story "Dulosis," Tony has surrendered the idea that the human body is one of privilege by placing himself into the food chain. Not only is he in danger of being torn limb from limb by his cousins, but he very nearly is eaten by the albino crow who makes off with the pupal Elizabeth Diane May. The narrative tension in "Dulosis" comes from Tony's peril, who is at the mercy of his ecosystem. James Hatley explores the unease of reintegrating the human subject with the food chain in his essay "The Uncanny Goodness of Being Edible to Bears" when he says,

Finding ourselves in the position of being prey to an animal predator is a telling case of the natural world's provoking discomfort, difficulty and

danger within a human and humane context. Hardly anything could be more intimate than our becoming the food, and so the very body, of another animal in the wilds; yet hardly anything could be imagined to be more terrifying and inarguably inhumane. (14)

Hatley's words encapsulate how "Field Guide to Kleptoparasitism" revels in boundary confusion, in metamorphosis. Tony's integration into the ant world is the locus of both my fascination with his character and my revulsion of it; here is a person who unquestioningly puts himself in the way of antlion larvae in "Three Cheers for the Underground" and other ant colonies in "Dulosis." The integration of the human into the food chain is also, arguably, why the recurring concept of the face stealer in "Field Guide to Kleptoparasitism" is so unsettling. Tony describes thieving faces from people in "Face Stealer"; however, later in the book when Angela discovers the entrance to Tony's backyard shed in "Tunnel/Barbecue," the faces are described ambiguously—they could be from neighbours, or photographs, or masks. Thus, the confusion of human and animal becomes a narrative aspect of Tony's life, rather than a mere tool to demonstrate Tony's morality. Becoming part of the self-sustaining world is an intrinsically valuable process, for in this "universal intertwining of flesh with flesh, there is no first self, no primordial entity sufficient unto itself, but instead a continual intertwining of all entities into all other entities so that all may exist" (Hatley 22). Thus, Tony embraces the flattest, most basic hierarchy of biology in which his humanity is no more valuable and no less edible than the ants he burns with a magnifying glass in "Origin of Species." He probably tastes pretty good covered in chocolate.

The focus, then, of Tony Gordon's stories is not on Tony as a human being or Tony as an ant specimen but rather Tony as Tony. "Field Guide to Kleptoparasitism" defies the Heideggerian notion of animality-in-general as well as identity-in-general (Heidegger 12). Broglio asserts that "While the question of an animal phenomenology challenges humanism and its scaffolding of mastery, the question itself, if pressed, fragments. There is no single animal phenomenology. Indeed, each sort of animal carries itself differently on earth and fashions a different sort of world" (xxii). Broglio's assertion emphasizes that the human is not able to understand the animal-as-such, because every species exists in the world differently, and formulates its own world differently. "Field Guide to Kleptoparasitism" fragments the question of an animal phenomenology further than "sort[s] of animals," and explores the individual specimen. In the story "Swarm Theory," Angela says, "You think these people don't have their own banana panties? Their own pistachio shells? Bottlecaps?" (109). In these lines she exemplifies the type of phenomenology that "Field Guide to Kleptoparasitism" attempts to enter: one of the intrinsic value of an individual. Tony is not simply a cog in the machine of his anthill-suburb. He is definitely not only a specimen representative of his entire species. He is not merely a literary device whose function it is to forward a philosophical agenda. Angela shows Tony that even indistinguishable ants are complex and unpredictable, skittering in seemingly random ways across their sidewalks.

In his lecture "The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)," Derrida states of othering the animal in relation to human,

Confined within this catch-all concept, within this vast encampment of the animal, in this general singular, within the strict enclosure of this definite

article (“the Animal” and not “animals”) ... are *all the living things* that [hu]man [being] does not recognize as his [or her] fellows, his [or her] neighbours or his [or her] brothers [or sisters]. And that is so in spite of the infinite space that separates the lizard from the dog, the protozoon from the dolphin, the shark from the lamb, the parrot from the chimpanzee. (51)

In relation to “Field Guide to Kleptoparasitism,” this quotation from Derrida demonstrates the ridiculousness of classifying Tony simply as part of a species – and more broadly, as a nonhuman animal. Such a reduction of the character is problematic because it assumes every member of his suburban community is homogeneous with the other. Lionel the albino crow is not just another talking animal, nor is Wayne merely a supercilious cockroach; Angela is not simply a forager (one whom Tony mistakes for the Queen of the colony). Rather than taking a Heideggerian approach to animality, “Field Guide to Kleptoparasitism” aligns more closely with Derrida’s approach. By immersing Tony so fully in conflicting species dialogues, the manuscript essentially nullifies the reading of Tony into any hierarchical space or classifying him as “just one of the ants” or “just one of the suburbanites.” “Field Guide to Kleptoparasitism,” then, offers itself as a text that upholds an individualistic phenomenology of animals.

Ultimately, the breakdown of the boundary between human and ant in “Field Guide to Kleptoparasitism” is not reducible to a metaphor or a mimesis of Tony’s psychological state. Rather, he metamorphosizes. His constant metamorphoses challenge the traditional representation of the human-animal hybrid in literature, and address Tony’s dual body by making the text antlike. The short story form and the erratic language of the character(s) skitter across the page as Tony, Lionel, Angela, and the other

characters of “Field Guide to Kleptoparasitism” establish their metamorphoses as intrinsically valuable states of being rather than as vehicles for an ethical tenor. As a result, they caw, they click their mandibles, they go marching ten by ten (hurrah hurrah). They exist in a space in which the animal is no longer “somehow inferior” (Powell 130), but equal to humanity. Tony’s metamorphoses allow him to assert his individuality and shift around (symbolically, geographically, emotionally) as a character, demonstrating that personhood and subjectivity are not solely the property of the human being.

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VITA AUCTORIS

BEAULIEU, Braydon Patrick Shayne (née Mahaney) hatched at 8:03 a.m. Eastern Standard Time on Monday, 22 August 1988 in Windsor, Ontario. His colony has since been in Essex, Ontario, approximately twenty-six kilometres away from his hatching place. Every day, he ferries on the back of a stag beetle into the University of Windsor, where he completed a Bachelor of Arts with Honours in English Literature & Creative Writing in 2010, and a Master of Arts in English: Creative Writing in 2012. In September 2012, he will stow away in a navy blue luggage bag, relocating to Calgary to pursue a doctoral degree and scavenge new chocolate chip cookie crumbs, drips of meringue, and discarded pistachio shells.