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UMI

Failures in Apathy

by
Jon R. Flieger

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

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Thesis Chapter	Publication title/full citation	Publication status
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Abstract

This collection of cross-genre fictional short stories and attendant artist's statement examines the results of disconnect and social marginalization on characters faced with complex social and personal situations. Various manifestations of apathy and failure are considered as the characters interact within a post-utopian society that offers little hope of betterment and is rife with social awkwardness and anxieties regarding interaction. Ultimately, the disconnect of apathy and the acceptance of a failure to connect with their lives are problematized for the characters of the work, as the thesis identifies the troubling way in which apathy and difficulty in social connectivity is overlooked in modern society.

For my mother and father,
and dedicated to the memory of my uncle Robert.

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Hi, how are you?

I've been thinking about you a lot lately.

Okay.

Or

how may I direct your

and this quarter we have what I consider to be a very attainable goal. If we stick to our S.T.A.R. keypoints,

I can't be pregnant.

Why don't they at least interview for these things

I'd hit that.

You don't say.

Someone has to die like Billy the Kid.

someone from this very office could be winning that trip to Mexico if we keep our eyes open for opportunities to

Listen, no, it's just that

Welcome to

You fucking whore

How are you?

Nothing ever happens.

Nothing ever matters.

Can I take your order?

Oh alright then. Do you have her extension, by any chance?

Big picture thinking here, ladies and gentlemen. If we look only at the Q1 BRP, we don't see much of a pattern. But if we extrapolate this same information, well it paints a rather diff

No it can't be

Okay, well great mom. But I guess I'm still

Did you want to come in?

This is your son.

It's not in the budget.

I'm sorry, but we have to let you go.

Oh, the kids just loved it. It's a great spot.

Another day, another dollar, motherfucker.

Shot in the dark. By his friend. But everyone knows his name.

Jesus. Have you seen this bill?

Mom, can I stay at Kevin's tonight?

Blood Sucking

I'm so proud of you.

You bastard. You heartless bastard.

Can't even die right.

But...but I love you.

That seems a failing.

How have you been?

I need a moment.

Did you get the results?

Yes

No

Positive

Negative

Accepted

Rejected

etc

etc

Well I guess it doesn't matter

What's for dinner?

How are you?

Katie scored the game winner!

There ain't no Billy the Kid. Not really. He ain't him. He ain't even him.

God giveth and God taketh away

Horse and buggy thinking.

Listen I don't have time for this.

"and He takes and He takes and He takes"

Okay. Well you're crying. So that's great. That's helpful.

You seem nervous.

Will you marry me?

Aw crap.

This is the happiest day of my

I ain't Billy the Kid.

Tyrannosaur

The door opens and Jane almost kind of smiles at me. For Jane, that is pretty okay. I smile back.

“Hey,” she says. “Nice shirt.” I just got this shirt in the mail today. An internet thing. It’s got that faux vintage pre-distressed thing happening which usually sucks and is on everything at the mall, but the shirt has a picture of a pretty cute looking T-Rex completely smashing some stuff, so I couldn’t pass it up.

“I am a sucker for dino destruction,” I say. She turns away and walks back into the apartment, but she leaves the door open. This is how Jane invites someone inside.

Jane’s apartment is always fantastically messy. There are magazines and books on basically everything. The floor, the furniture. Other shapes I think might have been furniture. Clothes and ashes. A million empty cigarette packs that get picked up once a night to check if there are any smokes left inside
motherfucker

and tossed back on the floor to be forgotten/checked tomorrow.

Jane sits down on the only relatively clear spot on the couch and starts to smoke. She doesn’t offer me a drink or to clear me a spot anywhere or anything, and I know better than to expect her to and it’s pretty much not a problem anyway. The television is on mute and it looks like some old slasher flick playing. There’s a topless girl screaming silently and running from a vague shape that keeps on almost coming into focus as it chases her around corners in an old house. The camera man does a pretty good job of

keeping the girl's tits in focus, though. I look away from the screen and try to keep my eyes from creeping back. I'm disappointed in myself for a small, slow moment.

"So where'd you get the shirt?" Jane asks. "That's fake, uh, fake vintage or whatever. Fake wear or whatever, right?"

"Yeah. Yeah, it's predistressed, so that's kind of lame, but I like it a lot. The dinosaur is busting shit up."

"It's good."

"Thanks."

I watch Jane smoke. She just seems to go away between bursts of conversation. It's her thing. Skinny and smoking. Black hair with bangs that look like they'd drive you goddamn crazy getting in your face but she never even notices them. She is a terrible smoker. Sucks needy and sloppy. Like she learned how to do it wrong and no one ever bothered to show her. She's got surprising magazines in here. She is not the type of girl you picture having *Cosmo* piled two feet deep and apparently being used as an end-table, and yet there they are. I would guess the quizzes aren't filled in. Trying to figure Jane out is basically always the wrong move, though. Epic wrong.

The topless girl on the television dies a poorly shot, knife related death. Now two other girls are stalking nervously around the darkened hallways, clutching at each other as they move. They're wearing only their underwear.

"The, uh. The director of this probably won some awards or something," I say sarcastically, gesturing at the screen. "I mean, this kind of gold hopefully didn't go unrecognized."

“Yeah.” She doesn’t even look at the screen. I stick my hands in my pockets and look down at my shirt. I like dinosaurs. They bite the hell from things. I’m still standing more or less in the doorway, waiting for Jane to finish smoking. It’s always like this. There are few things in life as awkward as picking Jane up. A tyrannosaur has so much stomping and chomping to do, he cannot be bothered with the awkward. It makes me feel young and not terribly awkward when I think childish thoughts. So hooray the hell for that.

“You didn’t say where you got the shirt.”

“Oh, uh, the internet,” I say and watch her search the pile of debris on what could possibly be a coffee table in front of her for an ashtray.

“The internet is a good place.” Jane finds an ashtray under a dog-eared Ondaatje. Another fashion magazine underneath. Lots of people enjoy juxtaposition; I rarely succeed at avoiding confusion in these situations, though. She was better than me at school so maybe this is her idea of art. Also she could just be kind of gross or maybe I should buy her a bookshelf or magazine rack or such. She smokes. I cough nervously. She stubs out her cigarette and stands. “Back in Windsor they have this sculpture garden by the river.”

“That sounds nice,” I say too quickly and then realize she wasn’t just saying that randomly but was leading to something. I realize this quickly the way you do when you feel like a jerk for saying things more quickly than you realize them.

“Yeah. Anyway, there’s this one sculpture of this big damn dinosaur. Just sitting there staring over the river at Detroit.”

“That’s awesome! I want to see that.”

“Yeah, okay. If we’re ever in Windsor together for some reason, I’ll show you. I don’t really know why we would be, but if we are.” She pulls her coat and purse out of a pile of clothing next to the couch. I bought her that coat last year. It’s long and tannish brownish and with a faux fur trim. It’s that kind of retro but not in an annoying way. She looks good in that coat. But skinny. Too skinny in a scary way. “You wanna go now?”

I open the door for her, which is a pretty useless gesture since she has to lock it behind us anyway. She doesn’t act annoyed, at least. We are quiet as we walk through the lobby of her building.

The wind is cold and mean as a bastard as we cross the road to my car. At least I wasn’t in her apartment long. Well, not long in the absolute meaning of the word. The car will still be warmish. I open Jane’s door for her, but she comes around the front of the car so the open door and I end up just sort of getting in her way.

“Can’t you just unlock the door with your keychain thing? I thought you had that.”

“I...yeah. I do.”

“Oh,” Jane says and sinks into the car. I shut the door and jog around the car. Get in. “Thanks,” she says quietly as I start the car. I pretend not to hear her. I don’t know why I pretend not to hear but I do.

I start driving and it’s quiet and I want to say something but it’s quiet. It usually is. My memory is a vicious bastard and for a second I remember the weekend trip we took to Niagara on the Lake. She tried to give me road head and the console thing in the middle was in the way and there was this CD holder thing I used to have and eventually we just stopped. The hotel was amazing. We couldn’t afford it. We walked around.

Looked at everything. She bought books. I bought CDs. Everything was ridiculously overpriced. If I'm honest I probably smiled more that weekend than in the rest of my entire damn life.

I hit play on the CD player. Pray for distractions like speeding, blaring ambulances or carpet bombings. Get jangly acoustic guitars instead.

"Who is this?" she asks. I don't have to look at her to know that she's staring straight ahead, too.

"Neutral Milk Hotel."

"Nice indie cred. And dinosaurs. Say 'awesome' a few hundred times and then high five someone and I think you've reached a new level of hipsterism." Her voice is as flat as ever. I think she's joking with me but this could be pure venom. I have no idea. I've known Jane five years. Intimate for four. I have no idea. I'm unwilling to fill the air, so the music from my shitty speakers does. Jane settles back. I glance at her and she's staring out the window. The city rolls by like it feels obligated. The car gets too warm now, but no one reaches to turn the heat down. "The dinosaur...the one in Windsor. They built it too close to where this playground is. Kids were constantly playing on it. I mean, it's a huge cement dinosaur. Of course they were. I think one got hurt. They put a fence up. And a sign."

"A sign?" I signal a turn. Jane stares out the window.

"They made a sign. Like a real official City of Windsor sign. It said 'NO ONE ALLOWED IN FENCED AREA. NO CLIMBING ON DINOSAUR' in huge letters."

"Oh, wow. I want that."

“Yeah, I’m surprised no one ever stole it. Maybe they did. I’ll look next time I’m back. I’ll take a picture.”

“You should steal it,” I tell her. My windshield is filthy but my wiper blades are worse, and just leave streaks of dirt instead of splotches, so I don’t do anything.

“A friend of mine saw you at the mall the other day,” she says unexpectedly.

“Oh? Which friend? What store was I in?” I try to remember if I’ve bought anything embarrassing lately.

“You were there with some girl, I guess? A redhead?”

“Oh,” my gut tightens up pretty good. I knew this would have to happen eventually but I was hoping I could put it off or avoid it or possibly die in an accident instead of talking to Jane about other girls. “Yeah. Carly.”

“Oh,” Jane says. “Carly.”

“So...you have people like...keeping tabs on me? That’s pretty not okay I think,” I say, thinking probably there are rules about this sort of thing but I’m not sure what they are.

“Relax. My friend works at the mall. Just mentioned she saw you. She didn’t know we broke up. And saw you there with some busty redhead, so...”

“Oh.” The song ends and there’s a pause before the next track starts and the car is heavy and terrible in its hot silence. “Busty? She actually said ‘busty’?”

“The word was used.” Jane shifts in her seat. “So I don’t know. We’re friends now so I guess I should high five you? Way to go? Friends do that, I think. Boys do.” Her refusal to allow inflection into her voice makes conversation feel so dangerous.

“Awesome,” I say and she laughs. Her laugh was always nice. Small and sharp as tacks, but somehow nice. A butterfly kept indoors. A butterfly knife maybe. This is the longest car ride in the history of forever and we’ve only come a few blocks.

“It’s a nice shirt, though. Really.”

“Thanks.”

“You should tell me the uh, the website or whatever.”

“I’m not- we’re not. I’m not dating her or anything. She’s just a friend.”

Shrugs. “Do what you want.”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah.”

We stop at a red light and don’t look at one another. I wonder if she’s thinking about the dinosaur sculpture. She’s probably not but right now it feels like she could be.

June the Two

We fade in on a calendar. Upon it, "Meet with Tim- 8:30" is written across the second of June's square, and underlined twice. We see that nothing else is written on the calendar so far this month, though, and the art deco painting of a woman drinking absinthe seems somewhat ridiculous in its loneliness. Certainly a single underline would have sufficed. At 7:59 Nate turns off his alarm clock. He has been on vacation for a week and has this week off as well, but he has not been able to sleep in. Or sleep much at all. Insomnia is as much a part of Nate's life as anything else is, but he felt for his meeting he should at least set the alarm and make an attempt at sleeping. He feels he owes sleep that much, at least. He gets up now from the bed he did not sleep in and moves around the small room that he calls his own, tucked as it is into a second floor corner of his parent's house. He moves around and through the detritus collected in a young lifetime and feels out of place and at home at the same time the way young people do. Moves among his books and movies. VHS tapes and the paperbacks roughly the same size as VHS tapes. He dislikes DVDs because they are too small to be books. He dislikes hardcovers because they are too large to be movies. Also, they're expensive. He likes books and movies the same size, he likes books on movies and movies based on books. He likes writing that reads like a film he likes films that unfold like a book. He is somewhat pretentious in this and he is not unaware. There are unopened letters from Universities on the floor of his room. They are not the same size as books or movies.

At 8:02 on the second floor of the Franklin Mall, Allie unlocks the door of the bank where Nate works, and lets the customers in. Four people are lined up and waiting to come in, old women who want to update their books first thing in the morning or

withdraw 20 dollars or do something else that could wait for a less Godforsaken time, and Allie wishes that modern medicine wasn't quite so keen on keeping people alive for so long as she smiles and holds the door open for them. One grumbles that the bank is late in opening today and Allie wishes for the first time that day that she could unmake people with the power of her mind. Her smile tightens. By 8:11 Allie and the other tellers have cleared out the opening crowd and settled into housekeeping, depositing post-dated cheques, updating timesheets. Allie checks the schedule to see if Nate is back to work this week and actually frowns when she sees he is not. At 8:12 the wheels of Nate's skateboard touch the asphalt of his street as he begins the skate to the mall. At 8:13 Allie resigns herself to another day at the bank and loses track of the slow passage of time. At 8:14 Nate reaches Division Street and better, smoother ground, and relaxes down into his shoes. Down past his shoes into the letters he has written on the grip tape of his skateboard. Into the vibration and hum of a skateboard kicked down a newly paved street and he no longer cares what time it is. It is 8:14.

We pull back, the viewer pulls back, the eye moves back and any cameras that feel they have to capture such a moment would be wise to pull back as well, and we see Nate pushing along on a skateboard. If we are feeling indulgent we might hold the eyes and cameras rigid and fixed and allow him to pass from one corner of our vision to the other, moving through our field of vision with the ugly grace of a man on a skateboard. Almost exactly like the ugly grace of a man on a skateboard. He is 24 and most of his friends and family regard his skating with patient, understanding smiles and knowing nods that make them feel benevolent and magnanimous. He is too old to be

skateboarding, they know, but they do not say so. It makes them feel good to allow it to make him feel good. They are very kind.

Nate had tried to do tricks on his skateboard when he was younger and had become accustomed to wheels with a smallish diameter. He read somewhere that small wheels were supposed to make doing tricks easier. He did not notice a difference in the difficulty of the tricks but he does curse himself now for not getting used to larger wheels, which make cruising smoother. Or so he has read. In any case his wheels were not supposed to be particularly good for cruising, and he found he would more or less push his guts completely out once he left the smooth surface of Division, and so he could only skate to the mall on days he did not work. If he carried his work clothes in a backpack, they would be impossibly wrinkled and his polyester dress shirts, ironed by his mother to a dull shine, would be sweat through and ruined if he wore them skating, although the idea of letting a tie blow over his shoulder as he rolled along appealed to him. He often thought of wearing his one good suit skateboarding, simply for the juxtaposition, although he did not know who he would want to witness such a visual. In his weaker moments, Nate would allow himself to indulge in ironies.

In any case, Nate was glad to kick the board up and into his hand at the entrance to the Franklin Mall. Skateboards are not allowed in the Franklin Mall, but the security guards all know Nate, and more importantly, they do not really care. The guard smoking outside the front doors sleepily eyes Nate's casual dress and clutched skateboard and nods.

GUARD NATE THINKS MIGHT BE NAMED JOEL: Hey, man.

NATE: Morning.

MAYBE JOEL: Got the board today, huh? Not working?

NATE: (more or less over his shoulder as he has mostly walked passed by now) No, just here for a meeting today.

MAYBE JOEL: *inaudible*

NATE: Yeah, you too. Later.

Nate hugs the skateboard to his chest with the wheels pointing outward. The sandpaper scratch of the grip tape against his shirt is comforting and he walks quickly to the escalator. The guards never care about his skateboard, but he is occasionally yelled at by old people, and Nate avoids confrontation when possible. He knows that he dislikes elderly people and is uncomfortable with his prejudice. Nate likes to believe he is a tolerant man and his prejudices always disappoint him. The last shift he worked, he could not understand what a Korean man wanted him to do with a large cheque and Nate found himself thinking *why can't you just speak English* and then immediately felt sick about thinking such a thing. Nate would want us to mention here that he cannot speak Korean. Nate feels terrible about a lot of things. Every time Nate notices that many Chinese people fold every fifth twenty around the other four, making large deposits time consuming, or that East Indians seem obsessed with their safety deposit boxes, Nate feels terrible. He feels he is making judgements, creating stereotypes about cultural tics. He may be right. We are not terribly concerned by it, it is merely Nate's concern we note.

The mall is largely deserted at this hour, and being alone in such a large place makes Nate feel smaller than normal. He crushes his skateboard to his thin breastbone and is slowly carried upwards by the old escalator. In the bank a customer taking a very

long time to make out a cheque asks Allie the date and she replies that today is June the two.

WOMAN WHO WILL SIGN HER CHEQUE INTRICATELY AS IF IT MATTERED:

(confused) How's that?

ALLIE: (with practiced patience) June the Two today, ma'am.

WOMAN SIGNING WITH LIP-BITING PRECISION: Oh. Oh yes. June the second, I understand. Oh. Oh dear. Should I do this again, I wonder? I've made a bit of a mess there with the loop...is that all right, dear?

Allie always says the date this way. April the four and January the seventeen. She heard it said that way once and liked it, or she thinks it is cute. Or some other reason entirely. It generally sounds somehow off to the customers and occasionally even confuses them, and Allie is not discouraged by this. Nate has noticed this idiosyncrasy several times and he catches himself smiling when he hears Allie confuse someone with it. He has not, however, adopted it into his own speech patterns. When asked the date, Nate will answer properly, and in a tone that suggests he is apologizing for the day. If the customer responds with a comment on the date,

YOUNG MAN: Jesus. The 19th already.

OLD MAN: Not many shopping days left, huh?

OLD WOMAN: Oh my goodness. Well time does fly doesn't it.

and so on, Nate generally finds himself disarmed. He will nod or mumble something in agreement and he can never quite avoid flushing until he has finished the customer's transaction and they have moved on. Nate is very competent at his job and quite knowledgeable about the products and services his bank offers. He is often rated Q1 on

monthly assessments and he was once STAR employee of the month for the district. He is professional, and friendly enough. None of this helps the fact that he is a customer service representative who is exceptionally terrible at small talk. The filling of dead air with pleasantries creates in Nate the kind of cold dread most people feel when confronted by a tiger shark or a bear of some nature. Involvement is, for Nate, problematic. His relationship with his own life is, at best, an awkward and strained acquaintanceship. A nod across a hallway and a tight lipped smile from the moment he is already awake to the moment he cannot fall asleep. We pull in tightly to the small smile Nate musters as he enters the bank. This is a practiced smile, but Nate believes practice to often be only an attempt to cover up that which is not perfect. Nate is sometimes indulgent with his pretensions. It is, he realizes, a failing.

RED-FACED MAN: Why?

ALLIE: I'm sorry?

JERK: Why should I have to show you ID?

ALLIE: Because you're asking for three thousand dollars and I have no idea who you are?

COMPLETE ASSHOLE: Well I don't know who you are! Why don't you show me some ID, huh?

ALLIE: Because I'm not asking you for three thousand dollars.

Nate's fake smile warms with some small measure of genuine enjoyment when he hears Allie fighting with the customer. He does not quite approve of how rudely Allie treats the customers, but he also feels that some of them probably deserve it. He himself is far too meek to do much more than quote policy and then stoically absorb abuse when he has

to refuse a customer for one reason or another. He generally does not mind. People need to blow off steam, Nate understands this, even if he does not allow himself to do so often. People need to yell in his face that he is stupid and that they deposit this same cheque without a hold every week, despite their bank record telling Nate that they do not. Nate rarely gets angry. His job often does make him feel sad, however. He begins to feel sad now as he listens to the customer continue to argue with Allie, and then angrily demand to speak to a manager. Nate walks past the teller wickets towards the glass windows of the sales offices. He feels self conscious as he moves through the bank in his jeans and t-shirt. He is used to standing behind the counter, held in place by the assumption of responsibility, tethered by shirt collar and tie. He has spent hundreds of hours in this bank, but here on the customers' side of the counter, in casual clothing, Nate feels decidedly out of place.

Nate does not recognize the customer fighting with Allie.

APPARENTLY WELL KNOWN ASSHOLE: (yelling now) Everyone here knows me! Ask anyone!

Monika, the manager of customer service who we now see bustle into frame from left does not recognize the man, either. She does, however, immediately undermine her teller's decision, and apologizes profusely. Of course Allie will be pleased to go get him his money. Of course. She has to look on Allie's monitor to find out what name to apologize to. She smiles through tight lips at Allie and says with aggravating sweetness

MONIKA: Remember CAI, Allie. We all want to finish with a Q1 BIRP.

We pause now to examine the subtitles that explain that CAI is customer appreciation index, Q1 is quality one, which is a rating, and BIRP is Branch Incentive Reward

Program. It is pronounced “burp,” and this has not gone unremarked upon by Allie and Nate, we assure you. In a given day at work Allie has twenty or thirty abbreviations, acronyms, and codes said at her as if they were real words. This particular crime against language means that Allie has to be more polite to customers, since if they are called for a survey and give the branch a bad rating, the entire staff’s year end bonus will be negatively impacted. Allie mentally constructs a scale and on one side places the difficulty in finding a new job and possibly dealing with criminal charges balanced against the pleasure she would feel in punching Monika in the face. She narrowly decides against the punch, and she completes the transaction. The customer smiles smugly at Allie and Allie wishes she could cause people to melt simply by looking at them. She makes this wish roughly two dozen times a day.

Through the impressive glass and steel double doors of his office, Tim, the branch manager and the man Nate is here to see, waves Nate in. Tim is on the phone but seems to be finishing up as Nate takes a seat.

TIM: Yeah. Jesus. Okay, Mike. Yeah. Will do. Sure thing. Yeah, there’s always something, huh? Yeah I’ll send a PM out to all the staff on the BIS. Yeah. Okay. You too, Mike. (hangs up). God.

NATE: Everything okay?

TIM: Yeah, we just have *another* fraud warning being cascaded down from HO through the BIC. I guess there’s a *huge* increase in social engineering frauds in the SWO district lately. People getting angry or else being really friendly so the teller doesn’t challenge them for ID and then giving someone else’s name and withdrawing large sums from their account.

NATE: (long pause) Oh.

TIM: (cheerful) Well, we just have to follow our KYC ID procedures is all. Anyway, sorry about all that, Nate. How are you?

NATE: (shaking Tim's offered hand) Oh, that's okay. I'm okay. How are you? Things (pausing) okay?

TIM: Fine, fine. (eying Nate's clothes and skateboard) Sorry to call you in on your vacation like this. I knew you were still in town though, so...

NATE: No, it's okay.

TIM: What does it say on your skateboard there?

NATE: What? Oh on the griptape?

TIM: No, on the top there.

We see now a close up on Nate's skateboard as he holds it up so Tim can see. Along the heelrail SLEEP TIGHT, YA MORONS is written in large white letters.

NATE: It's from "Catcher in the Rye."

TIM: Is it? I read that book. I liked it.

NATE: Yeah.

TIM: Is that written in wite-out?

NATE: Uh, yeah. You can get it in pens. It's good for this kind of thing. It's kind of hard to write on the griptape with anything else. It's like sandpaper kind of. You don't really care about this (trailing off into a mumble).

TIM: (pleasantly) No, no, I think it's interesting. Kind of like putting stickers on a guitar, I guess.

NATE: Yeah probably pretty much the same thing.

Tim smiles at Nate and Nate smiles at Tim for smiling at him and a beat passes.

NATE: So did I, like, do something wrong or?

TIM: Oh. Oh sorry. Jeez. Haha, you probably want to know why you're here.

NATE: (shrugs)

TIM: Right. Well, I guess you had a bit of a blow-up with Monika right before you left?

NATE: Not really. I mean, no one yelled or anything.

TIM: Okay. But I guess you refused to complete the EES?

NATE: Huh?

TIM: The employee equity survey.

NATE: Oh. Yeah. Right. Yeah, Monika told me it was mandatory and I told her I wasn't doing it. That was basically the entire thing.

TIM: (practiced manager understanding voice) I see, and I understand, Nate. You see, I asked you in today because I wanted to explain to you a little bit about what the employee equity survey is all about.

NATE: I looked at it.

TIM: (Not going to be thrown from his script) The bank is very committed to creating a tolerant and supportive workplace, and the EES is your chance to let us know how we're doing. It's a very important resource.

NATE: Okay.

TIM: Head office is putting a lot of pressure on management to get 100% participation on it, that's how important we think it is.

NATE: Okay. But you can't make those kind of questions mandatory. It's illegal. Plus, you know. Unethical.

TIM: (frowns)

We quick cut out now to Allie at her wicket. She looks up from the customer she's helping to see Tim frowning at Nate inside his office of glass and steel. The tellers rarely have anything to do with the branch manager. They have their own middle manager Monika (MMM) to report to, and then she reports to Tim. Nate coming in on his vacation to speak to the branch manager makes no sense, and Allie feels a surprisingly tightness in his chest. He had spoken of possibly returning to school, although, as was normal for Nate, he had seemed less than passionate about the idea, only mentioning it in passing. The possibility of Nate leaving the branch is the first that occurs to her, and the most terrible. What she perceives as the fast food mentality and suggestive sell atmosphere of the retail branch depresses Allie, and she indulges in quick melodramas of being alone against the pretensions of pretending to be white collar. Of floundering by herself in a sea of meaningless acronyms. She would undoubtedly mock any other living person for vocalizing the very thoughts she just had. Her bank depression magnifies.

TIM: No, no. (dripping empathy) Of *course* you don't *have* to complete it. I mean, we really encourage you to complete the survey and we want 100% participation but we aren't going to make you do it, of course.

NATE: Okay. But that's not what I was told. I was told it was mandatory. And I said no. And that's it. Kay?

TIM: Right, I understand.

NATE: (flatly) Yeah I think you mentioned that.

TIM: I just really want to make sure you understand that we're doing this for all the right reasons. If Monika was a little (considers) overzealous, it's just because we value diversity and equity so much that we're putting so much weight on this.

NATE: (shifts in his seat, kicking his skateboard over. The rattling noise it makes seems loud in the stillness of the office)

TIM: We had no intention of singling any one person, or group, or anything, out. I just want to express that if, in any way, we've put you in a position where

Between customers Allie watches Tim's practiced open face and expansive body language as it crashes against the small hunched shape of Nate. She imagines the amount of STAR speak Nate is facing. We flash back now to Nate and Allie going through training together. A course designed to make them Customer Experience STARS by using positive, inclusive STAR words. Allie could no longer remember what STAR stood for, but she remembered the instructor, impossibly bubbly for 8:30 in the morning, telling them all to remember to use big, inclusive, welcoming words to help the customer to feel at home in the branch. Words like everything and always. Nate had written *everything is always terrible* in his workbook and Allie had liked him ever since. If Allie had a skateboard, she would probably write *everything is always terrible* along the heel rail. Allie does not have a skateboard, however. She considers them somewhat childish. She is glad that Nate likes it, though. Good for him.

Allie does not trust Tim. Does not trust him meeting with her friend. Tim speaks in acronyms and from a place of authority. All of the lifers and the eager chippies in the bank do. Allie and Nate's running joke is that no one who speaks in acronyms can be trusted. Acronyms for terms that do not need acronyms. Too many capital letters all

strung together. They remind Allie of Jack Chick religious tracts. Assumed shared values that spell out the SIN and EVIL of homosexuality or of having Catholic friends or of playing Dungeons & Dragons in big, capital letters. STAR words and the TRUTH. She does not trust either. We look on this trait as we look on Nate's feelings of guilt and inadequacy. That is to say, we do not much care, and find them somewhat ridiculous in their self importance, but we present them as they are. We offer a lens, and if this camera imagery seems somewhat obvious and heavy-handed, you will imagine we are not much concerned by that, either.

We watch now as Allie watches Nate leave Tim's office. Nate is not a man prone to storming out of places, nor of leaving in huffs, but he does not look at all happy. That is to say, he looks even less happy than usual. He gives Allie a weak smile and leaves quickly. Allie grimly returns to the customer she has largely been ignoring. After a moment Tim appears behind her, smiling at Allie's cranky customer.

TIM: Excuse me. Allie, when you're finished helping (pauses to check name on Allie's screen) Mrs. Bowser, would you please come see me in my office?

ALLIE: Uh, sure.

Our scene shifts now as we see Nate exit the Franklin Mall. A different guard is outside smoking now. He nods to Nate.

NATE: See you later.

NO IDEA WHAT THIS ONE'S NAME IS: Oh, can't complain, can't complain.

We watch now as Nate throws his skateboard under his feet and pushes away from the mall, weaving between cars in the parking lot and kicking with steady, practised

movements. When he pauses to rest and roll along, we can move in close on Nate's heels partially covering the letters of EEP TIGHT YAKONS.

If this were a movie, the chore of description would be taken care of for us. That is, the audience would not have had to wait this long for a description of Nate. We accept it as a failing of the genre rather than of one of our narration, as we simply did not deem it important until now. Regardless, if this were a movie, simple observation would reveal to our audience that Nate is Caucasian, of medium height and on the scrawny side of build. His black rimmed glasses are trendy enough without actually making him look cool or stylish, and his shaggy brown hair is largely without any discernable style. Nate, we see, is fairly nerdy looking. His clothes are of the pre-distressed vintage style that his generation goes for, and his shoes are shredded from the griptape of his skateboard.

As we watch him push along without much emotion except perhaps an indulgent ennui, we wonder exactly what it is that troubles Nate. We wonder, perhaps, why Nate does not sleep at night. If it is, in fact, a discernable reason or singular trouble that tugs at this young nerd's mind, and not just the vague guilt of the young and suburban man who is utterly convinced he has disappointed his parents and wonders why he cannot feel more disappointed in himself. Perhaps we wonder if he might kill himself any time in the near future.

We imagine now the music swelling behind the rasp of polyurethane skateboard wheels against pavement. Something optimistically melancholy to capture the montage of views. Nate frowning as he skates. Nate stone-faced as he skates. A sad drop of the lip. Frowning again. Some song by Radiohead or Death Cab should do the trick. Something with just a little credibility with the hipster crowd, so they can really relate to

poor old Nate. Nothing too experimental, of course, so as not to alienate anyone.

Indulgent but not overly indulgent. Not the Cure. If the director wants the Cure we suggest scrapping the whole project.

Nate Skates aimlessly. Up Division and down. Through a neighbourhood he has never been in before but that seems familiar. Across a paved bike path through the park, drawing irritated looks from cyclists. In the park Nate pauses to watch a man playing with two large dogs. Nate likes dogs but has never been allowed to have one. When or if he moves out of his parents' home, he thinks he would like a dog.

Nate eats shit at the corner of Brass and Second. Nate never kept up with skater culture, with the lingo and the fads, but he knows enough of skater parlance to know when he has eaten shit. One of Nate's front wheels was loose and as Nate hits a bad divet at the corner of Brass and Second, the wheel throws its nut and goes flying off. This, of course, has the effect of stopping the skateboard, as the now shorthanded front truck grinds into the ground. The nature of motion being what it is, Nate himself does not grind to a halt. He is, instead, thrown rather fiercely, where his scrawny arms do little to halt his forward motion, and he smashes his face into the ground with all the ceremony of the unobserved accident. Which is to say, with all the ceremony Nate generally commands.

For a moment we have a brief over-dub while Nate remains very motionless facedown on the ground.

TIM: That's the situation.

The scene shifts to Tim's office. Tim is leaning over his desk looking somewhat frazzled, and Allie is sitting in the same chair Nate recently occupied. Allie does a markedly worse job of concealing her annoyance than Nate had.

ALLIE: Well, I don't think he is. He would have told me. And it doesn't matter anyway, does it?

TIM: No of course it doesn't *matter* but the fact is that Monika handled this whole situation wrong, and my attempts to smooth things over didn't go much better. He's reacted badly to this whole thing and well, the whole thing could just get messier than it needs to.

ALLIE: Meaning you're afraid he'll sue you for discrimination or whatever.

TIM: Well I'm not sure it's all that dire, but certainly nothing good will come of it if it all stays ugly like this.

ALLIE: Kay. So I'm supposed to do what?

TIM: Talk to him, see if he'll come back in and meet with me again. The note he left on makes me think it's unlikely he'll take my calls. I know you two are close. I just want him to know that we're not trying to separate him in any way, or put any barrier up for him.

ALLIE: Maybe he just doesn't want to do the survey on principle.

TIM: Maybe. But if so, his principles seem awfully strong here. I've never seen him to be very (considers again, the bastard) involved before.

ALLIE: No (pauses in mock consideration) I guess he generally doesn't care much.

TIM: Right. So something on this survey seems to have certainly set him on edge. And since questions of race and creed don't seem to apply

ALLIE: Maybe he's a secret Jew.

TIM: You're not helping.

ALLIE: No, I'm really not, because I'm not acting as a go-between with my friend so the bank can dodge a lawsuit.

TIM: (sighing) Allie. It's not *about* that. It's about Nate, and making sure we handle this with the deli

ALLIE: I'll go talk to Nate and see if he's okay. If he has anything to say to you, I'll relay it.

TIM: Okay. Okay, great. That's all I ask. And if he's amenable to talking, to sorting this all out, I have some papers I'd like you to bring when

Allie walks out of Tim's office. She retrieves her bag from under the wicket she's been working, and lets Monika know she's leaving early to run an errand for Tim. Monika gives her a sour look, but says nothing. Allie is glad to leave the bank early, and feels somewhat guilty for finding pleasure in a situation that has caused her friend unhappiness. Unlike our maudlin hero, Nate, Allie is not prone to self-consciousness. She is intelligent, but not terribly reflective. That is to say, she is generally comfortable with her preconceptions, and the way she shapes the world in her mind. She frequently wishes for telekinesis or some other ability that would let her mind shape the world, but in general she is content to simply seethe at idiots and wish harm upon them. Once these thoughts pass from her mind, she generally forgets both the idiot in question and the anger she felt towards them. She does not dwell, and she does not second guess her reactions. It is unusual, then, that at this particular moment she feels very much the way Nate does on a more or less constant basis. She is uncomfortable with her own thought

process at this moment. She has begun to wonder about Nate. She has already attached an asterisk to his name in her mind, and she wonders why. It doesn't *matter* if he is, surely. Or perhaps it does, and she is disappointed in herself for feeling affected. Her normal brash surety in herself is momentarily absent, and she finds that to be terribly important. We are less sure of its importance, but we dutifully relate her indulgence all the same.

We dissolve to SLEEP TIGHT YA MORONS tight against the frame as we look over the skateboard (resting on its side, one wheel missing) at Nate (resting on his face, one tooth missing). Slowly Nate stirs and pushes himself to his knees, then rises painfully to his feet. No one is around. Had someone seen him fall, Nate would have been embarrassed. He imagines he would apologize to anyone who had to see him fall, and he is not sure why. Feeling his ribs and chest to check for any serious injury, Nate appears to us strangely calm. His hair is more ruffled than normal, his jeans have a small tear in them, and he spits a small amount of blood onto the street, but otherwise we are largely impressed by his composure. Nate tongues the empty space in his mouth as he looks from his tooth on the ground in front of him to his broken skateboard a few feet away. He seems unmoved by either sight.

After a few minutes of searching about, Nate is unable to find his missing wheel or the nut that held it in place. There is a storm drain not far up the road and he expects it has captured his missing equipment. He kicks his tooth into the drain. The rattle it makes as it skids across the pavement is satisfying, but there is no splash when it falls in the drain.

Nate picks his three-wheeled skateboard up by the truck — the axle that until recently terminated on either end in a smallish diameter wheel. He does not indulge himself in a shrug as he begins to walk calmly away from our lens, but he may as well have.

Now, this part could be marketable. If we are going to make a trailer for this whole thing, we might well start here. We will need our moody music — again, if you are thinking the Cure, you are thinking wrongly — and equally indulgent camera angles. Lots of moody close shots and birds-eye where it isn't really necessary. We consider, and in so doing force our audience to consider, the image of this nerdy and boyish, slightly injured man walking along carrying a broken skateboard. His expressions range from emotionless to blank as he marches along, instrument of failures in his hand and the music swelling behind him into a creepy and slightly dangerous cadence. Perhaps Radiohead was right after all. Or Thursday, if the rights can be had cheaply. We watch him walk. We wonder, perhaps, is this a man who has given up? A man who will turn against himself? Or is this a man snapped — who will turn against others? Or is he not a man at all, but only a lost boy? Or something to that effect. The exact copy and the narration for the trailer would have to be worked out, but the melodrama would flow somewhere along these lines.

Nate's cell phone rings from his pocket. He fishes it out.

NATE: Not broken.

ALLIE: (that cheesy tinny voice over that means phone voice when it is used in film)

What?

NATE: I fell. I thought maybe this was broken.

ALLIE: Oh.

NATE: It's not, I guess.

ALLIE: Right. You fell? Like off your skateboard?

NATE: Yeah. I broke it.

ALLIE: What? What did you break? Are you okay? Where are you?

NATE: No, I'm pretty good. My skateboard is broken.

ALLIE: What?

NATE: I broke my skateboard?

ALLIE: Oh.

NATE: Yeah.

ALLIE: Where are you? Are you home?

NATE: No, I'm...hold on. (squints at the street sign nearest to him in the unremarkable suburban maze as he walks) I'm lost, I guess.

ALLIE: You're lost?

NATE: Yeah. Do you know where Bluebird Court is?

ALLIE: No.

NATE: Yeah, okay. Then I'm lost (Nate shrugs. It was only a matter of time until he shrugged).

ALLIE: You're okay, though?

NATE: I'm okay. I knocked a tooth out, so that sucks.

ALLIE: What tooth?

NATE: It's uh...(feels around in his mouth with his tongue) I don't know, like, tooth names or anything but it's I guess the fifth one?

ALLIE: Counting from where?

NATE: I don't know, I just started counting teeth.

ALLIE: What?

NATE: I guess this system is problematic. Hey aren't you at work?

ALLIE: No, I left a little bit ago. I called you earlier but you didn't pick up.

NATE: You did? When?

ALLIE: I can't hear you very well.

NATE: When did you call me?

ALLIE: I don't know, ten minutes ago, maybe.

NATE: Maybe I was actually knocked out. That's kind of neat.

ALLIE: It is?

NATE: I guess. I haven't been knocked out before.

ALLIE: I started driving towards your house, I'm just about there. Do you have any idea where you are? I could come pick you up.

NATE: This is one of those situations where you wish you carried a compass with you in day to day life, but I can't bring myself to have one, because you know for a fact that like, 99 out of 100 days you'd reach for your wallet or keys or something and be like "Jesus Christ I hate this fucking compass. Why do I always have this thing?"

ALLIE: What?

NATE: Or I could get one of those big watches like the soldier nerds have. I think they have like, barometers on them, too. Or nail clippers or something.

ALLIE: What?

NATE: Soldier guys. With big watches.

ALLIE: No, those guys are terrible. They talk to me downtown and wear dog tags even when they're not really in the army.

NATE: Who wears dog tags out to bars?

ALLIE: Guys who have those watches. Those guys have cell phone ringtones from Family Guy. Don't be that guy, Nate, don't have that watch.

NATE: I've reconsidered.

(Nate smiles. Silence.)

NATE: Hello? Allie? Lo? Lo?

Nate peers at his phone. It says **June 2nd, 2008 12:02 pm** for a moment, and then the display dies. He does not know if the time is right, or if it is, how he had lost track of so much time. Nate closes his phone and puts it in his pocket. He looks around him and after a moment begins to walk up Bluebird Court. It does not suddenly begin to downpour rain, but if this becomes a movie, likely it will. Movies are given to that type of indulgence. It is, we realize, a failing.

Allie drives her car with one hand and holds her cell phone with her other. The radio in Allie's car, turned down to facilitate her irresponsible drive-talking, could conceivably be playing the Cure, although we almost want to think better of Allie.

ALLIE: Nate? Yo?

Allie swears at her phone and tosses it onto the passenger's seat. She drives for a moment. Turns the radio up louder.

ALLIE: Where the hell is Bluebird Court?

It is at this point that ambitious, misguided directors begin contemplating changing the title of our narrative to Bluebird Court. Or perhaps Division Street. This,

we wish to make plain, is not encouraged. Bluebird Court is not an important street. There is a woman who lives there somewhat near the corner who is intelligent in her own field, but largely the street is populated by idiots. They drive idiot cars to idiot jobs and have idiot children who will beget additional idiot children. The woman who is not an idiot does not come into our story beyond our mentioning she is exempt from the label of idiot. She is not important. Not really. The street is not important, nor is the young man wandering lost upon it. He is, however, the focus of our narrative, and that narrative, for better or for worse (and do rest assured it is for better) is called June the Two. It is 12:02.

Nate walks down Bluebird Court with his broken skateboard in his hand and his broken cell phone in his pocket. Schrödinger letters remain unopened in his bedroom, rejecting and accepting him. Neither would much change his life, it is more important to him to daydream of change. This is, perhaps, why he has not yet been able to bring himself to open them. Or perhaps, in a way, he appreciates the stagnation of his life, the comfort of melancholy. His indulgences know no bounds. Nate walks past the house of a woman he does not know, but whom he would likely find interesting should they ever meet. They do not. He continues walking, slowly letting his skateboard swing with the motion of his stride, holding it as he does by its maimed truck, the unintentional spite of scarred metal in his hand. The unmalicious malice of the everyday in Nate's small life. SLEEP TIGHT YA MORONS brushing against his thigh as the camera pulls up and away, Nate's smallness reinforced by the gracelessness of obvious technique.

As with most aspects of this small life of Nate's we are not terribly concerned with attaining any source of closure for him. It is at this point that would-be directors or screenwriters can pick up the story and do with it what they will. We are quite sure the

end result will be an appropriate tribute to Nate (that is to say — disappointing). Perhaps he could walk until he died. Or perhaps he simply finds a street he recognizes and eventually heads home. He could quit the bank. He could make peace with it, himself, life, whatever. Most likely Allie would have to be dealt with for any kind of ending to take place. Perhaps Allie could find him and the two could have a dramatic conversation, revealing the great truths of lives too young to have discovered much of any truth whatsoever. Imagine the tension, the camera flicking back and forth in the tight confines of Allie's car as the two spill line after line of quotable TRUTH. Think of all the MySpace page quotations they could generate. Depending on politics involved in the making of the film, maybe the two will kiss, the music swelling up behind their passion. Because after all, they would have to be in love, would they not? Or she would try to kiss him and he would resist. Nate would have to be resolved. One way or the other. We would not want the tensions of ambiguity to cloud our work, after all. Oh no.

In Nate's hand is a broken skateboard. He walks down Bluebird.

Brick Shithouse

Windsor, Ontario
1932

He's fast and he's hittin me with almost every shot he's throwin. Not doin much but he's hittin me.

"Jesus Christ, Harry. He looks like a damned shaved bear."

These men hootin and hollerin. Payin money to see a man beat on another man in the backroom of a bar. My uncle and some friend of his yellin at each other to be heard.

Yellin about me and I can hear em. Pay more attention to them than the guy I'm fightin. The kid tags me a decent one in the jaw, moves my head a little. It don't hurt, but takes me off balance a bit. He's more surprised than I am, too prepared to duck back out and he can't follow up on me. I don't want to do this, he's half my damn size.

"My nephew," I hear Uncle Harry say, dim and far away. Outside of what this is he can swell up. Like it's somethin other than men beatin hell from one another. "Boy's only twenty, and look at the size of em."

He's just a kid, too. Year or two younger than me, even. The kid throws at my gut and I just walk into it. He ducks and jumps. I don't remember if I've thrown or not yet. Ain't touched him, in any case. This kid fights faster than I can think but he's got no punch.

"Built like a brick shithouse, Harry..."

"Haha! That's why we call him Brick!"

Yeah. Brick. I feel slow. Awkward. A dancin circus bear like the man said. But I guess that's why I'm in here. I'm no fighter, but I'm big and hittin me don't faze me

none. Hell, my father just gave up and stopped beatin on me by the time I was sixteen.

Didn't do no good, he said. Just put his damn back out.

Kid bobs and weaves. He's not in love with hittin me a half million times and me not showin hurt. Of course, I ain't hit him back, so he's still lookin good. There's a pretty girl standin alone off to my uncle's left, and she's young. Probably the kid's, as you don't see many skirts back here usually. Aren't allowed I don't think. Some rule some bastard thought up. Don't matter. I get punched again. Don't matter.

To do this to a man in front of his girl. Or at all but something feels worse with her here. I ain't proud.

Men screamin at me to throw a punch. Shoutin I been paid off that the fight's rigged.

The fight ain't worth enough either way to waste money on that. This is two men beatin on each other in a bar after workin in a damn factory all day. Means I might be able to buy a new pair of boots come next month if I save, hole in the toe big as a quarter of the pair I wear now. The kid ain't used to fights like this. He's fast and he throws in flurries and he's used to beatin men down. He needs to plant his feet and drive at me from his gut, he's too small for anything else. But he ain't used to that and that ain't his fight and he's just gonna punch himself out until his guts are on the floor. Be nice if he just exhausted himself but he's in good shape and I'm gonna have to hit him pretty hard in a minute. Damn. He gets my eye and that I feel and that poor girl is going to have to see this. Uneven damn fight should never have happened, but I need boots and I'm hungry. Don't care what women see don't care what men see when you're hungry.

I swing my left and I'm embarrassed as I do it. After watchin this boy throw crisp and clean I feel like a gorilla swattin at him. It takes a week for my fist to swing up and it's

impossible that the boy won't dodge it but maybe he's just surprised I'm finally tryin to fight him.

The noise it makes when you break a man's ribs is terrible. I feel the damn bone under these worn gloves he buckles. People like to see a nice headshot, like to see a man teeter like a drunk before he goes down. Can't be helped. Ain't here to please a crowd, or at least not the way they want. Just want some damn boots. No way can I hit his head while he's this fresh. The boy's too fast. Head too small. Throw the truck in my left fist at his side and hope he don't get out the road. He don't. Ribs crack terrible and wet. His knees go and his mouth goes slack like a fish. His hands drop away down to his crushed side and my eye stings and for a second I want to hit him again. The men yell. They want me to hit him again. Give em the head shot. He's totterin there slowly sinkin and my other hand could drive round and slam the Christ from him. I could but the hell on that. There ain't no need. He's fallin, he's just doin it at his own pace. I back up and he falls down. He's coughin and clutchin his side and this is over and it's terrible. That girl is just starin at us. At him. At me. Terrible. I can't even look to see if the kid can get up. Can't look away from her and the stare she puts right through me.

They count him out and there's shoutin. The kid is talkin but his breath sounds bad.

Someone says they're gonna take him to the hospital.

"Tell em you were playing football."

"Say it happened at work."

Pattin my back, tryin to raise my glove like an awkward formality, a terrible handshake.

My uncle gets paid and he's got money for us and is grinnin. Kid hobbles off leanin on his girl and another man. My eye ain't even bleedin. I didn't have to throw that hard but

I did and I won. Don't know why I even would fight to lose but I won. Girl lookin, glarin over her shoulder at me. I see me through her eyes. Shaved bear. Big and built like a brick shithouse and ain't no blood on me. Kid coughs just a little blood out his mouth and on her pretty dress now.

Boots. I do this to a man in front of his girl for boots. My uncle sayin I'm his pride and joy.

"You're gonna run outta factory men at this rate, Brick! We gonna have to find a new place to work just to hustle suckers," he's laughin and jokin but I want to be not here more than anything. My sweat's coolin on me now and I'm cold. I want a damn drink is what I want.

Someone I don't know hands me my shirt. A drink. I swallow harder than I punched and it's terrible but it's wet. Pats me on the back and grins huge. All these men passin modest sums of money back and forth over what I do with my fist. Callin me Brick like it's my name and actin like they know me. Tomorrow on shift they'll mostly ignore me and swear at me if I take too long at the line. A couple handshakes like debts and a knowing wink or two and otherwise just nothing. Men with metal. Cut fingers clumsy hands.

Collection of bastards. And me the biggest one. None of them punched a kid in front of his girl. None of them a bastard who puts on like a trained bear.

Uncle Harry collects up and talks around. If I guess right he'll have lined up two more fights for me before he gets too drunk to do business. Men with cousins the next town over. Big son of a My brother's boy he's a fighter born Man I heard of works the wheel on the east side Made of iron Hands the size a Don't know pain.

There's too much noise. Too many men actin like they know me like we're friends when all they care about me is that I can beat a man with my hands. What a Goddamn talent. I walk outside and the girl is there. She's huggin herself and Goddamn she's young. Hair has got them small curls in them. Don't know what they're called. The man who helped haul off her boy is talkin at her. Louder than he needs to. The way people shout at retards and foreigners.

"He'll be fine, Julie. It's just best you let Randy and George take care of him."

"I just don't see why I can't go with them, I mean, if he's hurt I want--"

"It don't make sense for you to be there. If he's saying he hurt himself playing football, they're not much gonna believe you were playing, are they?"

"Well I could have been watching or--"

"Just go on home. Get some rest. He'll be fine, you'll see. You want me to get someone to walk you home? You live east, right?"

"I'm fine," she says, more down into herself than to him. "I don't need nothing."

And so on. I walk past and they see me and their voices go low to where I can't hear em.

She stares a hole into me and if someone blames her, it ain't me.

It would be nice to have someone care about me to the point where they'd give another man that. If that ain't the strangest thought I've had in a time it's close. It would be nice, though. Women carin wouldn't hurt I guess, but I don't know much about that. She just doesn't seem like a bastard is all. It would be nice to meet her on a night where I don't break the ribs of the boy she's with, is all. I walk away west. I don't live this way but it's away from where she'll be goin and she don't need to see me. Brick Shithouse. King

of the bastards. I step in a puddle. Water seeps into my boot and I know I ain't proud but I ain't as ashamed as I should be, either.

Kaz and Zoë

Or, the Small Inevitable Romance of Two Mostly Ordinary People

Part the First- Never Quite at First Sight.

Or, Names and Other Things Neither Kaz nor Zoë Care Much About.

Humbly presented to the Hon. Suffjan Stevens and His Excellency, Gen. Casimir Pulaski, in the hopes that this record will be found a pleasing distraction in this, the year two thousand and nine of the ultimately inevitable passage of the Common Era.

There exists little in this life that is not inevitable. This is not, your humble author wishes to make clear, the same as saying that all things are predetermined. In fact, it is this author's tenuous understanding that there is considerable evidence in the various branches of mathematics coming to light every day that suggests the predetermination of outcomes, even when considering seemingly concrete and simple chains of causality, is at best a flawed concept, and filled with pitfalls. With the exception of the eventual processes of inevitability that shuffle all things towards nothingness, not much can ever be truly certain. Chaos, patterning, and the ones and zeroes of all things, however, are not the true nature of this least of narratives you now condescend with great kindness to find yourself engaged in. There is, however, a certain degree of inevitability within the story, and such inevitability must be dealt with, and that directly. Kaz and Zoë, you see, meet each other, and just as well. Kaz would have inevitably met someone and it is just as well he meets Zoë. Zoë, with the varied and many charms this author flatters herself in believing she will duly illustrate, would inevitably ensnare the heart and mind and sundry other body parts and psychosocial behavioural constructs of someone. That it is Kaz she snares seems less like a happy accident when considered in the light of inevitability and more an act of entropy. Eventuality and dissipation applying as much to human social

interaction as all things if considered from a large and impersonal enough viewpoint. Kaz, the math seems to suggest, was going to meet someone. He meets Zoë. Zoë was going to eventually allow someone to meet her (if your shamed and blushing author may be excused a certain artfulness in using such an expression). She meets Kaz. Pondering the chance of this occurrence, your author humbly begs permission the conceit of suggesting, is attempting the wrong math. The occurrence, as it were, was always going to occur.

All things eventually dissipate — the molecules that form the muscle of Kaz's arm, the matter that forms the regular and mostly lovely features of Zoë's face — eventually these things disassociate. Everything happens and then is gone.

Kaz and Zoë meet at a party one of Kaz's friends is throwing. Zoë had gone to meet a boy there, but he had not shown up. Later it would turn out that he had meningitis, but that is largely unimportant to the story. To now. Kaz and Zoë meet and begin talking. A constant annoyance in Zoë's life is that these conversations generally begin at her name. And she says

Z: No. Zed oh ee. With an umlaut.

K: What?

Z: An umlaut. Dots over the e.

K: Oh I've seen those. What do those do anyway? Like to words? What do they do to words.

Z: They don't do anything. We just put them there to trick you.

K: Who is we?

Z: Everyone.

K: Except me?

Z: You too. Maybe. I don't know. I could ask someone.

Our first picture of Kaz, then, is somewhat unflattering. To be sure, an author introducing a character and immediately casting him in the role of addressing a topic that both irritates our heroine Zoë and illustrates his ignorance of certain linguistic constrictions seems telling. Indeed, to most keen literary minds this would be an indication that the author is flagging Kaz to be an unlovable, or at the very least a highly flawed character. Such is not your poor author's intent. If Kaz's flaws are to be put before the reader, the author humbly submits that her own flaws as an imperfect storyteller will similarly be on exhibition. It is a mark of poor writing to assert rather than demonstrate, but your author must beg forgiveness for her own weaknesses as here she will simply state (as a means with which to get her diverging narrative back on track) that Kaz is by no means a stupid man. He quite simply does not know what an umlaut does. Your author, after much thought on the matter, has decided to forgive him this, and it is her most fervent wish that you will find your worthy heart also bent towards forgiveness in this instance. And he says

K: My name is Kaz.

Z: And you're making fun of my name?

K: Well it's not really Kaz. It's short for. Well it's a whole deal. It's Greek.

Z: So is Zoë.

K: Oh.

Z: Yeah. So we have that in common.

K: Yeah. We do.

Z: That's not very interesting, though.

K: No, not really.

Z: People who had sex with each other and ultimately produced me have a geographical and socio-political relevance to the people who had sex with each other and ultimately produced you.

K: Wow. Uncanny coincidence. No, it must be fate. We should get married probably.

Z: Oh so much. We should probably get married a few time.

K: Kazimieras.

Z: What?

K: Kaz. It's short for Kazimieras.

Z: Oh.

K: I don't know why I said that. I might be a little drunk.

Z: Thank you.

K: Okay.

If Kaz is here a bit drunk, it should be understood that at this time Zoë is as a fish awash in a sea of skinny bitches, which this author understands to be some sort of vodka and diet soda-based drink. Furthermore, if from this interchange the reader takes away that Zoë is a somewhat forward girl, venturing to discuss sex and marriage in her virgin conversation with Kaz, the reader would not be far wrong. An attractive young woman who is sometimes aware that she is an attractive young woman, Zoë holds certain politics that some might find liberal. Her attitude towards, and enjoyment of, sex will surely raise a few eyebrows, and yet when your author assures you that she is a mostly kind person, a

gifted musician, and intelligent, the author hopes that she will not be thought over-fond of her subject if she refrains from moralizing about Zoë's enjoyments. To the point, however, she says

Z: Kaz, hold my drink a second?

Which the reader may find significant. Or may not. In either case, Zoë retires to the upstairs washroom (the downstairs being occupied) of Kaz's friend's house, whereupon shutting the door and gaining a measure of privacy, she goes pee.

***Part the Second- Fair Warning
Or, the Plot Advances, Despite Zoë's Forbearance.***

At length the party breaks up, as things do. There are those who go away happy, frustrated, annoyed, wistful, bored, horny and all the other emotions people have when forced to interact in with other people. Not an insignificant number of the partygoers spend varying portions of the night and early morning having sex with one another. It is, in that regard, a fairly successful party.

Inevitably night passes into day and Kaz awakes, showers, and dresses for work. It should be noted here that while he appreciates the relative quiet of the largely deserted office on a Saturday, Kaz hates working weekends. It is, perhaps, the principle of the thing, and the unshakable feeling that every time he walks through the front doors of the office building he is surrendering a small part of himself to some outside force. Kaz works as a research assistant for a life insurance company, which is to say he spends most

of his working day reading case histories, crunching numbers, and writing reports. Each of the research assistants in Kaz's office work one Saturday a month, and it is generally treated as a "catch-up" day for filing paperwork and finishing reports. As most businesses Kaz would utilize in his work are closed, and most of his contacts unavailable on Saturdays, the pace is considerably slack, and the workload light. It is largely self-directed work on weekends, as management is sparse, and those who are able to avoid the office on the weekend generally do so. Despite this relative freedom and lighter workload, Kaz, as I have done myself the honour to mention, simply detests working Saturdays, feeling as he does that it is one fewer day he is able to escape the stock-still drone mindset he adopts in order to survive the mind-numbing work. As we see that on this particular Saturday Kaz is somewhat hungover and weary from the party the night before, one does not have to put one's imaginative faculties to great strain in order to appreciate that Kaz is, indeed, an unhappy camper.

If your author takes you forward in time now, past the columns of numbers that lead into and must always lead into other columns of numbers, past Kaz's third cup of bad coffee from the overworked coffee machine in the lounge, and past a particularly depressing episode of hand-washing after urinating (Kaz knows many men forgo this exercise if no splashing occurred, especially when unobserved, but he simply can not bring himself to go without) during which Kaz stared at his own face in the bathroom mirror for rather longer than he ultimately felt was healthy, then she fervently hopes that the reader will allow such an indulgence in the manipulation of narrative time. Such incidents and observances are, to be sure, important, but they the story down paths your narrator finds herself ill equipped to present here, having only a cursory understanding of

the laws of numbers, the laws of proper ratios of coffee grind to water, or the laws of staring at oneself for a prolonged period in the mirror and considering the inescapable and not altogether unwelcome certainty of death. Your author, rather, wishes to take you beyond Kaz's ham and cheese sandwich and diet soda lunch, to a ringing phone. And he says

K: Research. Kaz speaking.

Z: Hey. Did I bang you last night?

K: Uh...?

Z: Hi. It's Zoë.

K: Oh!

Here it should be noted that Kaz's previously impassive face lights. He also straightens his tie, which Zoë cannot see, being as she is, in her own house and communicating with him over the telephone.

Z: Yeah. Hi. You gave me your business card, which is nerdy, but hey. Are you really a research assistant? What does that mean?

K: Uh, nothing.

Z: What do you do?

K: Very little.

Z: Oh. So yeah, did I bang you last night?

K: No. Um. You don't remember?

Z: Yes, I'm calling you at work to ask you if we had sex while I was crazy black out drunk because I remember.

K: Ha...okay fair enough. No, I drove you home, you showed me your goldfish.

Z: Is that a metaphor, or my actual fish?

K: It had gills.

Z: Oh. Okay.

K: Yeah. That was it. We talked for a bit and you threw up for a bit then you told me to go home so you could throw up better.

Z: Yes, I'm very good at it, but I do my best work without an audience.

K: I don't think that makes sense. But okay. How are you feeling now?

Z: Basically awful. I don't remember anything from last night.

For a time there is a pause. Zoë and Kaz feel differently about the pause. That is to say, Zoë feels very little about the pause, having stated that she doesn't remember the night they spent together as a matter of fact. For Kaz, however, this statement is not simply a matter of exposition, but rather a somewhat deflating statement that ill treats his ego. Kaz is a person who wishes to believe he is not easily forgettable. Your humble author presumes much in venturing that he is, in fact, easily forgettable, and hopes to do her best to establish for Kaz at least some small place in the reader's memory, as difficult a task as that may be. Zoë, free-spirit that she is and as such unfettered by the constraints of narratives outside her own eventuality, eventually grows bored rather than awkward in the silence. And she says

Z: Well. Thanks for making sure I got home.

K: No problem. I- I had fun talking to you.

Z: Oh.

K: Which you don't remember at all.

Z: Kinda no.

K: Oh.

Z: I'm sorry.

K: No, it's okay. We just talked.

Z: You're nice, Kaz. I wish I remembered meeting you.

K: That makes me feel really bad, but I think was supposed to be nice.

Z: I think it was.

K: Okay.

Z: Um.

K: I should

Z: Yeah, you probably have to work. I'm sorry I just. Well I woke up sick and confused and had your card and I felt weird and. It doesn't matter.

K: Maybe it does. Maybe we could meet some time, since I guess we didn't meet last night.

Z: Oh. Yeah. We should meet. Only you know we're not ever going to have sex, right?

K: Beg pardon?

Z: Well, I don't want to lead you on. I mean, if I didn't bang you last night when I was crazy asshole drunk I'm not ever going to sober, you know?

K: Oh. Oh well, uh. That takes some of the mystery out of life, doesn't it?

Z: I suppose so.

Kaz hangs up the phone in a markedly better mood than he enjoyed during the morning, and Zoë snaps shut her cell phone. Nice guys and friends are wonderful things, and Zoë has nothing but sympathy for them when she eventually breaks their hearts. It is better, Zoë thinks, not to get involved at all, and yet the world is a lonely place, and lately it is a

scary one for Zoë. It is better not to get involved, but there is little point in fighting eventuality, and Zoë rarely tries. To Zoë, the notion that any man she befriends would not end up in love with her is remote. It perhaps reflects poorly on Zoë that she thinks this way, and it most assuredly reflects poorly on your beleaguered author that she is very often right. Kaz, of course, will fall helplessly in love with Zoë. Of course.

***Part the Third- Eventuality
Or, The Small Romance of Zoë.***

Here your author wishes to pause in her narrative, before then jumping ahead some days. Such conceit is not attempted capriciously, as this author understands and appreciates the severity of what must seem at first glance such a complete disregard for the proper order of time. It is not so, honoured reader. Indeed, your eternal servant, the low and unassuming author of this text *trembles* before the awe and majesty of time. Of the sublime truth of all things eventual. She does not, would not, and will not assume a mastery over time, not even within her own narrative, but begs instead your generous forgiveness of her inability to fully represent the eventuality and uninvolved apathy of the ever marching hands of the clock. It is necessary, forgiving and righteous reader, for this author to attempt such artfulness in the representation of time, simply to allow for her own weaknesses as a storyteller.

The first such weakness forces a momentary pause to consider Zoë. Certainly by now the reader will have formed an image in their mind of Zoë, and it is to the everlasting shame of the author that she has not described her characters more fully before now. To accept a description of a character long after she has been introduced is a weighty request, and this author hopes for the continued patience of her reader while the author

blunders about her various failures. Zoë, then. Zoë is tallish, if not quite Amazonian. Fully the same height as Kaz and many men of Kaz's height (which is to say, many men), Zoë achieved her height early, and moreover blossomed early, which only reinforced for the boys she towered over at school her desirability. There is, perhaps, a pheromone consideration, or it is possible that the languid and almost lazy motion of Zoë's every move produced some sort of pattern recognition within the mind of boys and men that charmed them. In any case, Zoë was never without her share of admirers. Zoë enjoyed attention through school and afterwards, and it pleased her not inconsequential vanity to allow men to fall in love with her hypnotic motions. She walked with entirely too much hip and the girls in highschool tended to hate her for it. Dark hair falling only slightly below her chin and a slender but never quite willowy frame moved in and out of the lives of boys and men, meaning far more to them than they did to her. Perhaps doing far more damage.

Zoë was occasionally called a slut. Zoë assumed that this name-calling was largely due to jealousy. Zoë believed most girls would be like her if they could. The word "slut" bothered Zoë not at all. Your author does not wish here to embark upon theory-crafting and discourse around the value (or lack thereof) of such a word, especially when applied to a subject so close to her heart, but also does not wish to have her usage of such a term misconstrued as a tacit agreement to the value of such a judgement. However, for the sake of brevity your author for once will be concise and quite simply state that Zoë is not a slut. That Zoë allows herself certain enjoyments when she deems appropriate is indicative only of a healthy self-esteem and an uncharacteristic interest in the short life by which she is otherwise bored.

Zoë is often bored, and if your author commits her second slight against the grand truths of time by jumping forward some weeks into Kaz and Zoë's friendship, she hopes you will accept her explanation that a great deal of the omitted material was, in fact, quite boring. Time having passed, then, as it must always inevitably do, Kaz and Zoë have spent a largish portion of that time together. Those who are familiar with the propinquity effect will no doubt have certain theories on what may have transpired between them, or at the very least, how their relationship may be subtly changing given the inevitable passage of shared time. It is entirely possible that such things are also inevitable, but your author professes no expertise in the study of propinquity or any other matters of sociological study, content as she is to simply relate the story such propinquity over a given timeline produces. That is, the story of Kaz and Zoë. Those unfamiliar with such terms may rest assured that any effects of any given sociological theory are ultimately unimportant to the narrative, when considered against the vastly more powerful object that is Zoë.

And she says

Z: Jesus you're boring, Kazimieras.

K: You pick something to do, then.

Kaz and Zoë have met. They were, after all, always going to meet. After coffee and awkward conversation, Zoë had found Kaz enjoyable company. He has an awkwardness and a raw eagerness to him that she finds charming. He runs his hands through his hair in his nervous awkwardness. Conscious of his habit, he always emerges from the bathroom with his hair straightened. She smiles when she notices his careful work again. And again. For his part, Kaz is of course spellbound. Kaz does not care about his life as a

general rule — he rarely finds reasons to mark his calendar — but in Zoë he has found the rarest of all discoveries. Kaz has found something in which he is actually interested. They have spent many of the evenings since that first meeting (which Kaz's second time meeting Zoë) in each other's company. Kaz's thoughts, particularly before falling asleep, are largely of Zoë, and are not at all wholesome. Zoë's thoughts are primarily of herself, and Kaz's friendship pleases her. They have similar tastes, although the movie Kaz has suggested for the evening bores her.

Z: Let's go look at fish.

K: Fish. Okay. Uh like at an aquarium, or do you have a pet store you like or

Z: Do we have an aquarium in this city?

K: I have no idea.

Z: I don't think so. I think that's something I would know. That's something I should know.

K: Probably there isn't one, then.

Z: Remember Canada's Wonderland? When they used to have dolphins and seals and whales and junk?

K: I never went.

Z: You never went to Canada's Wonderland? Like as a kid?

K: No.

Z: Kaz! What the hell is wrong with you. We should go! We should go to Canada's Wonderland.

K: Yeah, okay. Next long weekend or something if you want.

Zoë had a strange feeling then. Something akin to déjà vu except the slender strings of thought seemed burdened with wistfulness, rather than recollection. Zoë had, of course, been to Canada's Wonderland with other boys. The memory of the place was yellow and sleepy in the back of her brain. Summer and boys awkwardly sticking their hands in their pockets, unsure of when to try to hold her hand. To encircle her waist. Doctors appointments. And she said

Z: Uh, yeah I guess. I don't know, I might be busy.

K: Well, let me know.

Z: Kay.

K: Kay.

Z: Let's go to the pet store. I'm gonna get something crazy. A fighting fish or something.

K: Won't it be mean to your goldfish?

Z: Maybe I'll get a whole new tank. Put a bunch of mean fish in there and save the other tank for nice fish.

K: Why not just get all nice fish?

Z: You're so boring, Kaz.

***Part the Fourth -The Complications of Eventuality
Or, Kaz Kisses Zoë and She Calls Him an Asshole.***

And she says

Z: And it's like, he's my father, you know? I mean. Jesus. He's my father.

K: Yeah, I guess.

Z: No, I mean he's my father. He drives for four hours to my place and he's got these pictures of mom these fucking old pictures and he's crying and he's. I don't know. Like did he have to *prove* that he was sorry? Did he think he had to prove it.

K: I don't know, Zoë.

Z: Pass me the moonshine, Tonto. Shit this is bad.

K: I like it.

Z: Yes, well. You have all sorts of problems.

K: Are you crying?

Z: Not much.

K: So, today at work Bob is all

Z: No, it's okay. You don't have to change the subject or anything. It's fine. Thank you.

K: Kay.

Z: Just. Jesus. Be sorry. I'm sorry. Everyone is sorry. It's fine. Everyone is always sorry.

K: I think I spend my life that way.

Z: You deserve better.

K: So do you. Probably everyone.

Z: No. No a lot of people need to be sad. You should be happy though, Kaz. You're nice to me and I'm only ever a bitch to you.

K: Shhh. You are not.

Z: I am. I am. God I fucking hated him. You know? Like where the fuck was he before I. Before. He's sorry he needs me to *know* that he's sorry he needs me to say I know that you're sorry it's okay.

K: Probably he needed to know you love him.

Z:

K: People need that sometimes.

Z:

K:

Z: Are your parents. Uh. Do you see them a lot or?

K: Not a lot. They live in Arizona.

Z:

K: I have a brother who is a lawyer and a sister who's in med school.

Z:

K: So I don't visit a lot.

Z: Kind of the black sheep of the family, huh?

K: Kind of the failure they avoid talking about.

Z: We're cheerful tonight.

K: Sorry.

Z: I blame the hooch.

K: Yeah. I like it, but it can be a sad drunk I guess.

Z: Can I ask you something, though?

K: Sure.

Z: Your brother and sister. Do you blame them?

K: Blame them?

Z: Yeah.

K: For what? I'm not sure I understand.

Z: Sure you do.

K: Okay. Yeah. Yes, I blame them. I hate them, I think. My brother has a Greek wife and two little Greek kids and my sister is engaged to a Greek boy and it's everything my parents ever wanted. So of course I hate them.

Z: I'm only quarter-Greek, so you can't marry me.

K: Ha...that's okay. I don't think you'd get along with my mother, anyway.

Z: I'm offended. I'm completely the kind of girl you take home to mother.

K: Sure.

Z: Bastard.

K:

Z:

K:

Z: I like this song.

K: I like you.

Z: I know.

K: I'm going to try and kiss you, I think.

Z: I know.

K: And you think this is...a good thing?

Z: No.

K: Oh. You don't want me to?

Z: It will likely ruin everything.

K: Why?

Z: Because I'm Zoë. Because you're Kaz.

K: Heh. I've been wanting to do that.

Z: I know.

K: Did it ruin everything?

Z: Maybe.

K: I don't feel ruinous.

Z: You're an asshole.

Part the Fifth
Or, Anger, Like All Things, Eventually Dissipates

You may have found yourself surprised, perhaps even somewhat annoyed to notice the lack of the author's voice during the last part of her small narrative. Indeed, your humble author must admit to some small annoyance in her own lack of skill. The fact that your author's craft has not advanced to a point where she would have been able to add anything to Zoë and Kaz's discussion is not lost on her, and while she finds herself frustrated with this lack of skill, she is at least grateful that she has been gifted with enough sense to realize when to leave well enough alone. Your author is nothing, if not humble. If the reader does harbour some annoyance at your author for this abandonment, she apologizes profusely. To alienate you, gentle reader, was at no time her aim.

Bearing that in mind, the author hopes you shall continue in your charitable spirit, as a narration of any life must eventually become the story of sad news. If you feel anger with the author over her allotment as messenger, that is understandable, and she asks not to be released from your antipathy, but only that you remember that anger, like all things, eventually fades. Sadness is valuable, but ultimately unfounded. All things give over to eventuality.

We find Kaz outside in the afternoon on the first of March. It is not raining. A largish older man, his face red and his hair white, glances at Kaz every few moments. Later he shuffles up to him.

And he says,

SOME JACKASS: You're the. Uh. You were the boyfriend, yeah?

K: Not really.

SJ: Eh?

K: She wasn't into commitment. I guess maybe cuz of this.

SJ: Yeah. Jesus. Jesus Christ.

K: You her dad?

SJ: Yeah. Charlie Clausius.

K: You pretty drunk, Charlie?

CC: Yeah. Pretty drunk. Jesus Christ.

K: Well that's great, then.

CC: What's your name, son? She. We didn't talk much.

K: Kazimieras.

CC: You Greek?

K: Yeah.

CC: You don't say. I'm half Greek.

K: You don't say.

CC:

K:

CC: She ever talk about me, Kazimieras?

K:

CC:

K: No. She didn't uh we didn't talk about our families all that much.

CC: Ah.

K: Yeah.

CC: After I found out. About. About her bones, you know? About this thing with her bones. After I found out I called her. Tried to come see her. I tried to. Well, I tried. Maybe I didn't do much but I did try. Maybe too little too late but I mean. I tried.

K:

CC: You know how old she was, son? You know how Gah. How Goddamn old she was?

K: Yeah.

CC: Because I don't. I didn't even remember her birthday for Fu-huhhh fucks sake I didn't even know her. I didn't *know* her. My Goddamn dah-dah my daughter. Jesus Christ how do you how does someone do that? Tell me thu-huh. Tell me th-that.

K:

CC:

K: She liked fish.

CC: Fish?

K: Yeah.

CC:

K:

CC: Goodbye, Zoë.

K: Goodbye, Zoë.

CC: Thank you, Kazimeieras.

K: Goodbye, Charlie.

And as he turns and leaves Charlie Clausius blubbering to himself outside on an afternoon that is not raining, your author begs you to understand if rather than engaging

in the conceit of summation and perhaps giving in to the temptation of moralizing, she instead allows Kaz the final word before he returns to the routine and eventuality of his own life and death. And he says

Girls Eaten by Bears

Night phone calls are generally troublesome.

A friend Xanax'd and whiskey'd out of her mind and gasping into the phone at me. Her voice far away.

“What would you do if I died?”

“I don't know. Correct the grammar in your suicide note,” I say. Silence. For a second I'm disappointed that she doesn't start crying.

She won't die, of course. The quarterly OD threat never amounts to anything. But if it does, I want to feel satisfied with the last words I say to her.

Mostly I'm drunk ass myself and just want to sit at my table and draw random things. A ghost writing letters. A skeleton singing songs. How would I draw that. Maybe it could look like Molly.

Molly is one of these girls with frayed angel wing tattoos on her shoulder blades and a doll face. A cat named for someone dead. Tits I'd kill for. You know. That girl. She writes sappy song lyrics over all my drawings when she's over. Chats pleasantly with strangers Has old lady slippers.

She would look good underwater. Some rare and precious drowning.

Maybe done up in sausage curls with big Marilyn eyes and smashing off a bridge in a Rolls. Mink floating up gown and pearls tangling or dying of thirst in a desert.

Reaching an oasis and then drowning in her thirsty madness. Holding her under in my own. I don't know. If she calls me like this again I'm going to block her and take her off my damn facebook that much is fucking certain.

A nice girl.

Gets slanted and sad and makes it my problem. I got my own slant.

I'm trying to draw a dog with all the ink in this pen. I like this heavy ink look but I can't get it right. It's not heavy enough and then the page tears, my fat fucker pretentious art type pen pushed through the wet paper. I want to draw a dog with broken mandibles. Crooked teeth and a scabby malformed penis. The details of small burnt things. Or just a nice perfect dog, I don't know. I can't get this to work. I can't draw tonight. Fucking Molly.

I thought she was being clever when she called herself the perineum loser.

But conjugating always betrays us.

"Perineumly? What? Oh Jesus. You're just...you mean perennially. I thought you actually meant the tain't."

tain't the pussy and tain't the ass

the wonderful phrases, words, names

boys have brought into my life.

Names and Molly.

Poor stupid Molly. Stupid pretty Molly.

"I broke it off with Tim," she heaves into the phone.

“Which one is Tim?”

“You didn’t meet him, but I think I loved him.”

“You always do,” I say, already losing interest. Pen pushing through the paper fuck

“He was the best I’d ever had. I want to go back in time and bang him when he was fourteen.”

“Why would you want to fuck a fourteen-year-old?”

“I want to go back in time and ruin him,” she says, “it would make him perfect.”

I hate when Molly calls at night. Her voice wraithlike and full of damage like a ghost setting fires. Enmity and gasoline. I

“But he always pulled out when he was ready to come. He pulled out and he would finish himself off. Y’know, with his hand. Into a tissue.”

“Some guys do that,” I say, “Too much whackin it at the computer or whatever. I had a guy who couldn’t finish in me unless he was pissed, it happens.”

“Yeah, but this is different. Was different. He’d want to put the tissue inside me after. Push it up and in with his hands. He was kinda obsessed.”

I make the appropriate noises into the phone, but I’m not shocked. Before Tim had been Brad. Or Bert. Some fucking name. He would piss into a beer bottle after Molly fucked him. He refused to get up and go to the bathroom because he wouldn’t quickly abandon a place where he had orgasmed. Cosmic energy or something. Made her empty the bottles. The guy with the net. I don’t think she could ruin Tim even if she had the chance. She can’t be the predator.

Molly Molly.

She’s saying something else and I hang up in mid-sentence.

I wonder if she'll bother calling back. It's almost a game we play.

Makes me think of boys.

My boys, not her boys. I wouldn't let her boys near me. Not that my boys get near.

Almost fun. I flip through pages and find Molly's dirty handwriting.

Defeat like rhythm,

certainty

ribs risingfalling

Hmm. I don't recognize these. Don't know what Molly is listening to these days.

Hipster crap and more hipster crap.

My boys. Ian who just crumbled, because he had to. Other ones with other names.

Chuck: "This has been an amazing weekend, Kay."

Yeah, Chuck. It's a time.

"C'mon. Stop. Would you *please* call me Charles?"

In answer I'd belched. Gave him the finger. He laughed. Asshole idiot. Boys love that shit. Sit like a trucker and let him see up your skirt. Pink panties with hearts on them?

Say something filthy. He'll let you kick him in the dick all night.

"You're even cute when you're a bitch."

I'm always a bitch, you're just fetishizing it.

"I...I think I'm falling in love with you."

I'd started laughing.

"Kay?"

Really hard.

"This...this is not the reaction I..."

I almost definitely pissed myself, but I was on a serious angle of whiskey, so that may have been unrelated. He left. He's got a friend request on my facebook now. Full name on there. Charles Robert Francis Montgomery. Chuck. When he drew hearts around and addition signs between our names in his little princess diary I bet he used all the middle names he could find. Chuck hearts Kay wouldn't have done it.

Oh Jesus H. A dog. It's not this goddamn hard to draw a dog. It has been done before in the history of the world. I am not adventuring this is not moon science. I used to draw dicks all over Molly's notes in class. Molly hearts dicks, cocks plus Molly (equals babies OH NOES!!). Sometimes little stick figures whacking off on her face. She thought it was funny. Laughed her ass off and we'd get shushed or yelled at.

Big stick smile

through a drippy mask. If I felt ambitious

like making real art, I would wite-out. Facial to be proud of.

But even that wouldn't have done it for my Molly girl. She would want the stickmen to put a cigarette out on her face after.

Sizzle splat in his own

She would have been so bored with Chuck.

His Charles. His normal. His nice. I wasn't bored by him, just his need.

His presumption?

I don't know if that's the word. The word is not perineum. I did not love him.

He was not Ian. But I did like him.

L'enfer, c'est les autres. Oh well.

So many names gathered together, like words that mean.

Chuck Charles Molly Kay Kaitlyn Ian Tim BradBertwhatever Robert Francis.

My pen goes through another dog's face.

I've decided it's a boy dog but I call him Molly anyway. My little Molly.

Yeah, the faces, I guess. But whatever.

Art is obvious. Boring. Words.

The phone rings again. If she's dying, she's doing it slowly. Oh what the hell. I'll play.

"Hello."

"It's something like a sore tooth. You know you shouldn't poke at it, and it hurts to do it, but you can't help it. You were just bad for me. Me for you. But there was still poking involved. Which is crass, of course, but well, there it is."

"The hell?"

"Hello, Kaitlyn." No one calls me Kaitlyn except

"Ian?"

"Yeah. Tooth aches can have names. Mine is Ian."

"Ian. Jesus. Uh, hello." I haven't talked to Ian in two years. Three? Two.

"Yeah. Hello." A long pause. "I had that whole sore tooth opening ready and now I'm disarmed."

"Are you drunk?"

"As an astronaut at moon Christmas."

"That doesn't make sense."

"Well, I am drunk. We came to terms with that. If nothing else."

"Right," I say. His voice is so small in the phone. His hands.

I imagine he really is an astronaut calling me from space. Myself as a 1986 space widow.

Earrings and turtleneck

and then explosions and then cameras and then statements

the perfect

astronaut's wife smiling for this man

Who is a bastard

"You, uh. You think of me as a sore tooth?" My pen hangs, dog unfinished. Ian was never vicious. That's mine and I own it.

Ian, if anything, was too eager to play the victim. This switch is interesting.

My other line lights up, but I dump the call. Fuck off, Molly.

"Well, not literally, of course. Bones, roots, gums, etc. No. As a metaphor I suppose I'm fond of the image, though. Sure."

"Well," I say dryly, "that does little for my self esteem, you realize."

"I'm not unaware."

"Why are you calling me, Ian?" I don't know what to feel about this. Maybe impressed.

I thought I'd just crushed the bastard. That I'd won, in a way. Maybe I thought that without me he had shrivelled up and died. Maybe not impressed. Maybe disappointed.

I'm disappointed he exists?

The bastard.

"Whenever I'm asked where you are, what happened between us, you know-

Why, what, etc. Questions.

I say that you were eaten by bears.

No one ever laughs. It's always somehow in bad taste and off putting. It is curious to me that no one ever laughs."

I don't know what to say. It feels like yesterday he would look at me with that stupid adoration I hated, but I suppose I encouraged. *His* need never bored me.

"Bears? No? You don't like it either? I think it's gold."

"Well. That's great. That's really fantastic. Look, so you called me for what? To be a dick? Because you're doing a great job, don't get me wrong, I just want to know if that's all I can expect from this." But I don't hang up. The other line lights up again. Nope.

"You were nice to me sometimes. You used to sneak into my bed when you thought I was asleep. You loved me and you hated that."

"Okay, sure."

"Oh, you're such a tough guy, Kaitlyn. You're tougher than anyone, you win."

"Great. Good. Winning is good," this has stopped being interesting and feels just like a drunk guy calling an ex-girlfriend to be a dick. Feels just like. "Look, Ian. I've moved on. I'm glad you're firmly entrenched in the past, it's a good place for you, but I'm engaged, and"

"Liar."

"I'm not." What if he's stalking me? Molly would eat that shit up.

"I talk with Molly all the time, Kaitlyn. Messenger. AIM. Just because you disappeared doesn't mean everyone did. You think we don't talk? I've creeped her Facebook, I admit it."

He has changed. I wonder if he's disappointed in me for staying the same. I wonder if I'd care if he was.

“Why would you lie?”

“Why would you drunk dial me after two years?”

“Been closer to three. But you’re right. I’m drunk and sad about it? I don’t know. I’m tore up and thinking about all the words you used to say to me. The nice ones the terrible ones and I just hate you, you know? I hate you so goddamn much because I guess I can’t not be in love with you. I try pretty hard not to be.”

Unfinished drawings. Dogs with holes punched through their heads. Diseased phallus in sharp detail. Hearts around names. Gets slanted and makes it my problem. Ian Ian Ian Ian Ian

“Are you...are we both crying?”

“Shut up.”

“That doesn’t happen. You don’t cry.”

“Shut up.” Softer. Whispering. I’m not crying. I’ve been drawing a bear. Abandoned the dog. I can draw a bear. It’s friendlier and meaner than a dog. She’s Pooh Bear. She’s mauling.

Hunny/blood.

Drawing the Soretooth Bear killing Molly, clawing her perfect tits off.

Ripping her wings off and eating them.

Matted curls. If I tried, I could still taste Ian.

Wet eyes looking up at me. Scream lungs into water. She loves it. I love it.

Ian watching me do it. The drunk bastard who talks now with my words. Viscious because he learned it from me.

Watching. Hearing. Tastes what I do and smells me and knows me

Chuck and Tim and everyone else. All the ink in a pen.

Small mouthfuls and my phone lights up.

The Zebra and the Ghost

I get the kid I get Christopher this weekend which is fine. He's smart he's a smart kid I don't know how that happened but he is. Well maybe Carly's smart I guess but I sure as hell ain't much for that. He'll tell me things tell me about how tall dinosaurs were or how long whales can stay underwater. Carly's boyfriend put in the Internet now I guess so Christopher's using it a lot. Fine. I don't really get computers but the guys at work say you can basically find anything on the Internet so that's mostly good. Just gotta keep an eye on him when he gets older I guess. Porno and kidnappers and etc. That stuff on the news. The news I understand always sad and full of anger people having their kids taken away because they spend all their time gambling or people blowing up school buses because of religion. Everything is easy to understand on the news men are blowing up other men because they hate them. No subtlety no questions of motivation. You get told who the bad guy is and it's easy. Point A to Point etc. I'm not smart I'm not saying that but I've seen enough damn movies to know that complications are usually just bullshit. Don't want to get involved.

Jeff — that's Carly's boyfriend I should mention that — he seems to be half decent. Gets really embarrassed and just seems like he doesn't want to acknowledge the situation when I'm there. Getting Christopher. Poor guy. Seems all right. Truth be told, he could probably do a lot better than Carly but it's not my business and besides you don't say something like that to a man. You said that to me six years back that Carly was no good and what would have happened? Fists, cops at the door, etc. The time I punched that one guy outside the bar who called her a

It doesn't matter what but me an idiot and so macho and didn't hurt his head damn half as bad as I fucked up my hand and Carly drunk and swearing at cops.

Throwing a beer bottle at a cruiser. Or they said she did but where would she get a bottle outside the bar anyway and I didn't see it I was busy having my face slammed into the pavement by about forty-seven cops and her screaming he's not resisting he's not resisting Christopher in her belly a tadpole a dust mite we don't know about yet.

So I guess I hate her but maybe I don't care enough to hate her and besides it's so easy to judge in all this now. Say stupid things like she takes my money she won't let me see Christopher half the time etc. etc. blah blah. But really there's no point in that. When he wakes up in the middle of the night scared it's not me who deals with it. It's not me helping him learn about dinosaurs. She does a goddamn lot that I don't. Not that I don't wish that it could be me helping him except maybe that's exactly what I don't wish.

Maybe I'm glad to just not be bothered with it most weeks. To float through. Yeah who would say that what a rotten bastard etc. And I am. I never claimed to be a good man. I don't know why Carly wanted anything to do with a guy like me anyway. Maybe it was just booze at first and I don't know why she it doesn't matter what but Christopher came of it. Never claimed to be a good man don't need people expecting me to be one. But at least Christopher came of it.

Christopher's a good kid and he certainly don't get that from me so fine. That's good enough and I don't seem to have screwed him up too bad and Carly is doing her best and probably a lot goddamn better than I could so fine. Fine.

Jeff avoiding eye contact asking me if I saw the game. A decent guy to get a beer with but situations etc. I'm polite to Carly yes I'll make sure he gets to bed early yes I've got his allergies all memorized. Yes, up on the fridge too just in case I forget. In case I forget what a

It doesn't matter what but I'm polite when I have to see her if I weren't it'd turn into Jeff's problem. He'd have to be that guy. Step in defend etc. And then I'd get pissed and tell him to mind his business and then he'd lean over me because he's probably six damn four and I'd shove him and it'd all end in cops and Christopher seeing blood, probably mine. So I'm polite.

I'm going to take Christopher to the zoo. We went two months ago but he wants to go again wants to see the zebras he says. Asked Carly when he started liking horses, as before it'd always been monkeys and lions and animals they make cartoons about, and she says real nasty he doesn't like *horses*. He likes *zebras*. She went to college for awhile and I didn't and that's a pretty important difference to her sometimes. I'm pretty sure they're the goddamn same just the horses from Africa have stripes and the ones here don't like how people from different places have different skin or whatever. I should look this up, get one of the guys at work to show me how to use the Internet finally, but even if I'm right I'd have to find some way to bring it up in conversation and probably she'd just laugh at me.

Fine. Zebras. I'm taking Christopher to the zoo this weekend. It should be fine.

Ghost you want a soda I'm getting one, Becca says and gets up. Everyone calls me Ghost or everyone at work anyway because my name is James Spectre. Spectre, spirit, ghost, etc. Not terribly clever but there are guys with worse nicknames. Shitstain Joe in 7/A comes to mind. And about half the guys just get called fag and never their names but it's a plant. You get pretty thick skin you don't care about a lot you punch the fuck in out etc. Becca working my section has been really good for that actually. Her dad's the boss and he's a huge bastard of a Madfuck and has her just working the summer where he can keep an eye on her and everyone is scared shitless of him because he's a huge fucker and mean and he'd probably not even bother to fire you just keep you around and kick your ass all day if you piss him off. So no one really mouths off too much around her. Makes it nicer, not everyone is an asshole all day long for fear of her. Those who can work in other sections basically do and only really me, Becca, and Roy work the 12/C section now, except if the line's getting changed up and that's fine.

Yeah grape if they got it I didn't see the guy in to refill it though. Rootbeer maybe. Roy, she says, you want? Roy kinda grunts a noise that means no. 12/C is over near a little break room that most don't use but it's got a vending machine and coffee pot and they remember to stock it half the time so it's a decent little retreat for us 12/C people. If you don't smoke it's good for breaks or even lunch if you don't wanna head all the way across the floor. So Becca starts towards the break room and Roy makes another noise but this one's different and I look up and he's watching her walk away. Or watching part of her more specifically and he says Jesus if she weren't the Madfuck's kid. I'd hit that in a second.

No you wouldn't, I say, kind of laughing at him. She's nineteen, Roy. And he says nineteen's legal and I say legal doesn't mean she likes old men and he says I'm only thirty-six goddammit and I say yeah and I'm thirty-eight goddammit and to a nineteen-year-old we are old goddamn men. He grunts. Hit that. Jesus, Roy. Anyway, the Madfuck would throw you into outer space just for thinking that.

I know, he says, Jesus did I tell you? Tommy, you know, over in 4/F, the guy with that gay little Mexican moustache, you know the guy? I think I know him, I say.

Right, Roy says. Well Tommy says he was coming into work yesterday and he sees the Madfuck come in and park in his spot and Madfuck kinda drives up too far, right? He kinda goes up on the parking block with one tire. So Madfuck gets out of his truck and he's pissed off that he's up on it, right, and so, get this, Tommy says he grabs onto the front of the damn thing and pushes it back off the block and down and then even pushes it back a foot. Tommy's full of shit, I say. Madfuck drives the extended cab. No man pushes one of those things anywhere if it's in park.

Tommy swears he saw it. I believe it, too. Huge bastard is crazy. He's like the damn Hulk, the madder he gets the stronger and crazier he gets. Remember when he threw that skid of parts? Took me and Joe and Rands to move the damn thing there, then he got pissed off that it wasn't where he wants it and he fuckin threw it.

Becca comes back hands me a root beer, no grape, she says. Thanks. She stretches her back and it pops and she makes a little moan. Oh God that felt good, she says. Yeah, I say, these chairs are goddamn murder on the back. And Becca keeps stretching and she puts her hands on the small of her back and really arches with her head back the way women sometimes do and you can't not look at them when they do it and

stretching back like that means her tits go sticking way out and she's got this little shirt and under the tits sticking way out the shirt creeps up and she's got a flat stomach and a belly button ring and I see Roy is looking at her tits and then I'm looking at her tits again, too, but only for a second, they're small but when she sticks them out like that. I only look a second, Roy leers. It's me she catches looking, though. I blush she blushes I ask Roy if he saw the game and the fucker asks what game?

Do they always stand out in the middle of the field like that? I ask and Christopher nods. His hair is kind of long for a boy, Carly must like that, and his hair shakes back and forth when he nods. His hair is blonde and fine and neither mine or Carly's is but I think hers was when she was young. I should take him to get a haircut but Carly would likely shit and it's just not worth it.

They're savannah animals, he says. I'm not even positive I know what a savannah is but I have a good enough idea so I nod too. I guess probably in a real savannah there'd be more trees or something, I say. Or real long grass. Give em some shadows to blend in with those stripes. Hide from tigers and lions.

No, they don't hide, Christopher says.

They don't hide? That's what stripes were for I thought. I mean tigers hide.

They hide in plain sight, Christopher says. Sounds like a strange thing to say and I look at him hard for a second but he's just a five-year-old looking at stripey horses. He's got mustard on his cheek, but I leave it. Look back at the zebras standing and walking

together. Hard to tell where one ends and the next begins, their stripes weaving together as they move.

You smile a lot when you talk about your son, Becca says. She doesn't use my name when she talks to me, she calls me Ghost. We're in a bar I guess one that she likes it's loud and I'm the oldest one in here, bunch of college kids, but she asked me to come *keep her safe* and what am I going to say to that? She touches my arm when she talks she's getting tipsy and flirty and doesn't know how to behave. Or I assume she doesn't because she's young. Maybe she knows exactly how to behave. Like when she explained Apple iPods and talked slow and careful like us drooling old men were going to keel over at the information. I didn't know what the hell she was talking about true but Roy grunted and pulled out his video Apple iPod and told Becca she should upgrade. And at lunch showed me a disgusting movie of women who were

It doesn't matter what but I shouldn't assume I know more than Becca about anything. I should get the Internet in at my place. For Christopher. When Becca excuses herself and goes to the ladies' room I sit nervous perched like an insect in this seat in the corner. Kids drinking and having a good time and I must look like someone brought their dad. Or like some pervert. I want to leave but I'm Becca's ride home. I wish for stripes.

I've been thinking about Becca more and more. At night. You know. When she asked me to come for a drink I felt excited and guilty. I don't know why. I haven't been with a woman since Carly haven't wanted to notice women or more likely to be noticed by them. Float through walls sink into the floor I've been practising invisibility and it makes no sense that a young girl like Becca would see me. I keep constructing ways to

try to get her to come home with me and they're all terrible ideas and also not anything I could ever do. Of course maybe she's the one controlling this I don't know. Becca comes back and we have more drinks. We bitch about work turns out she doesn't like Roy at all not surprising really I don't either although he's probably my best friend and I see him more than anyone else in the etc. I keep silent on hating her dad but she doesn't and she talks about Psychology which I don't know much about other than the easy stuff that is on TV, but I guess everyone hates their dad eventually which is sad. Christopher will have some bad Psychology when he gets older. I'm not there and a nice guy like Jeff or whatever poor bastard Carly has around will be and Christopher will look for me and never see me and I'll appear and fade out again like a haunting and how could he not hate me. Carly would smirk if she knew I was out with a nineteen-year-old. She'd write it down in that stupid little butterfly dream journal and tuck it away to use against me. To use on Christopher's Psychology when he was older.

Becca's going to go to school in Toronto or Vancouver maybe even the States somewhere for Psychology. I guess to get away from the Madfuck as much as any other reason but she's smart and I tell her she'll do fine etc. She says thanks and is real drunk now and her little club shirt thing with the one strap that she's wearing keeps on almost falling off and every time she adjusts it she looks at me and giggles and any second here I should be saying something but I can't think of anything that doesn't sound like I'm trying to take advantage of her and I guess really I am. Not doing that not being that guy is exactly what I should be doing I don't know what any of this means. I'm not used to being in a place where what I say or do changes anything or thinking that it does.

Ethereal is a word she uses at one point and I latch onto it. I am ethereal. I know what it means. I'm not fucking stupid, Carly.

I drive Becca home she gives me an awkward one-armed hug because you can't do much else hug-wise in the front seat of a car and giggle stumbles her way up to her house small wave and smile under Madfuck's front light and I'm glad he probably doesn't care enough about me to know what car I drive if he happens to be looking out his window. Probably doesn't know my name.

All my imaginings and a one-armed hug is what happens. Stupid old man. Wasting time wondering if you left your place in decent shape if the Playboys are in the closet or left out like orange rinds from breakfast. Wondering if I've changed my sheets anywhere near recently. Christopher's drawings put away or not because being confronted with childhood might suddenly make us think she's closer to his age than mine. But no.

A ride home. A one-armed hug. Too drunk to drive but driving anyway and it doesn't matter. Slash at a brick wall like my car was a weapon and it wouldn't matter. Christopher would cry and when he got older and got his Psychology figured out he'd have another reason to hate me. But if I died there wouldn't be much more money from me for him. He's smart and will need to pay for school. He gets everything if I die but that's not much. No point in dying this poor. Carly has a black dress that I like and maybe she'd wear it to my funeral. Probably not. It's kind of low cut and she packs a bit too much up top for that to be good for grieving. Or fake grieving. god I miss those tits.

I get home safe and put on some music while I stumble around finding food. Kick my pants off. Do I have beer left I do that is fantastic. The CD skips Jesus I don't think I've even bothered buying an album in four years what the fuck do I need Apple iPods for. Christopher isn't ever allowed to stay here long enough for the Internet to be worth the trouble and I'd just break down turn into Roy and fill my Internet up with porno anyway. Just fuck the whole thing forget it etc. No point in getting involved with it.

Transfer part 1

words like bleak

words like

heath cept i dont use words like heath andthen

the sudden order of fields golden

or maybe not golden but pretty yellow

from nowhere canola rolling

rolling and nothing here motherfucker

cept me cept canola a dead guy

a transfer

Slow down. Yeah, there. The smoke. Jesus, look.

we call em transfers

we don't call em dead guys drive

a van not a hearse polite nondamndescript

yes ma'am of course (ma'am) when you have to talk to anyone at the pickup

cept maybe dont say ma'am again dont sound wooden automatic

dont work for a funeral home dont work for a hospital

work for a transfer service

every transfer a dead guy a no chance paramedics gone

or didn't bother

your head gets cut off they dont send the ambulance

sirens blaring tires screeching and then yup. motherfuckers head sure is off.

yup.

what do you think they ain't gonna sew that on at the hospital
ain't got that touch that time or patience
morgue funeral home butcher wherever we take em so they can put em back together so
they can put em in suits if possible in closed boxes if not in the ground anyway they all
end up in the ground we take em to the ground

We take em to the ground. Eighteen-million-ton-truck hauling two trailers hits
this guy's little Hyundai at forty over the limit. Fireball. There are parts of his car there
are parts there are parts parts

a quarter mile into the field. They don't wake the doctor up for that.
They call the police, they probably don't care, they call us, we clean it up. Well
we clean up parts

can't get the van near this. Dan here is trying to find access to the
field but where the hell do you even start.

a goddamn quarter mile a man a goddamn person thrown like
gotta wade in Have to enter on foot and assess the collect whatever pieces are still
recognizable a motherfuckin fireball and char left

Leave the wreckage for whoever, but we'll do the transfer. That's how this
works. Bleak. Words like bleak are all I can think of.
Dan still in the van useless still tryin to drive in but gonna have to walk in gonna have to
bring the bags

birds already collecting

not swarms not great savannah vultures marabou storks turning cartwheels circles in the
sky nothing so dramatic just the regular terrible birds to make my day harder
but there are always birds
they flutter and collect
when the transfer is outside like this there are always birds darkspots against the sky
crooked hunch perched on twisted things the skeletons of dead cars and rusted out
tractors

rapeseed and birds damn it goddamn it
it still gets to me still gets at me

you try not to look you get good at not thinking of them as people just a transfer a dead
guy but what did he want did he want

How people can keep birds in their homes I don't know.
Horrible little bastards will eat anything. Everything.

try not to look at the faces usually dont normally just another transfer

just another dead guy but when the birds have been
at em

it's the birds i hate the birds i hate the goddamn birds

At least with these ones — these messes by the sides of highways — there aren't as many forms to fill in. Sure, pick up times and situation reports and if we had to get the police to sign off and everything still has to be logged with the service, but

aint handshakes and smiles creepin through the rest home tongues clucking at us one old bitch callin me the grim reaper like i done this it aint my goddamn fault i would stop this if i could just take em to the ground dont mean i want em in the ground just dont want the birds to have em

I'm sorry for you loss, ma'am. Truly sorry. Please excuse us, we'll be out of your way in just a moment. The routines. It's hard not to feel for these people when you come and take the withered thing that was their mother. Their heart-exploded husband. Descend into the basement and cut the teenager down from a beam. His music still playing his computer turned on. Can't listen to that Thrice album anymore. When you cut one down, you're supposed to leave the ligature around the neck for the coroner. They want to see it. Want to see the sturdy old-fashioned extension cord the kid hung himself with. Which means his mother sees it as you gurney him out. We put the sheet over the kid and the orange cord slips down and hangs from the gurney swinging

and the father makes a noise deep in his chest that doesn't know where to go. He wants to punch me wants to punch Dan in the fucking head just so he can punch something. Wants to punch and cry and make them both the same thing.

One woman threw herself on the body as we wheeled it out. You don't mess with the abdominal cavity of the transfers. She jumped on. The woman screaming bloody jesusly murder and now there's crap everywhere

but this transfer in a field which makes part of it easier no crying no screaming
you won't take him from me you won't you bastards but the birds

what did he want did he want things what did i want

did he want things he died in a fireball he exploded and birds ate his eyes a stranger picks

what's left of him out of a field tell me what he wanted

shake them hands sign them papers

The jobs like this where it's not so much a body as it is parts.

The bag doesn't have a discernable human shape. Sagging feels like weird shopping bags. Load the heavy shapes into a van. You know you missed parts when the birds stay.

Dan in the van back in the van canola behind us there are birds but there are always birds
clipboard against the dash to start the forms but my hands are covered in

there are birds

Words like bleak but Dan says something like collective consciousness and what the hell
are you on about. Dan says

“It’s in this book I’m reading. Like it explains trends and things. The way people dress or why people care or don’t care about the rainforest or whatever at different times. Like maybe we’re all psychically linked.”

Like the X-Men.

“What.”

Like that guy who can read all the minds in the X-men.

“No, not like the X-Men. Just sort of like, people are linked in ways they maybe don’t realize.”

I don’t say anything. Don’t want to encourage him, he’ll talk about this all day. After letting that hang in the air for a few minutes he grunts and turns up the radio.

“The X-Men. Jesus.”

Maybe, though. Suicides happen in streaks. Won’t have one for months and then half the damn county needs to be cut down or fished out of bathtubs, so maybe we all give up together.

I’m sorry for your loss, sir. Truly sorry. Please excuse us, we’ll be out of your way in just a moment.

At the drop now and Dan loses the coin flip. He goes in to finish the paperwork. Sign the papers so we can bring a dead body into this parlour so they can work on it. Open caskets must be a lot of goddamn work. I don’t do that part, but I see what they have to work with a lot of the time. Not an option for this one. Parts.

“You lonely?”

Leaning against the back of the van and smoking and a hooker now talking to me. She doesn't really look anything like my sister, but the first thing I think is how much she reminds me of my sister.

Yep.

“Need a date?”

Nope.

Dan comes out of the office now and sees the girl and raises his eyebrows at me. I shrug. She's still standing around when Dan opens the back of the van. It's not that cold out yet, but she's holding onto herself. I try to act as cool as I flick my cigarette away and then feel stupid. She looked away when I flicked it and now I don't have any more smokes. Dan is yanking at the bags, messing with the collapsible stretcher.

“Fuckin Christ. The bag came open.”

And then the girl sticks her head around the door and peers in. And for a second she just looks like the saddest person I've ever seen. And then nothing. She looks at me for a

second with eyes harder than a girl her age should have and she says sick asshole like I'm the one that did this to the guy or something and she walks away. Sadness, nothing, and anger, and I don't know which one is the right response or if there is a right response anymore. I watch her cross the street still holding onto herself and I don't know why I do. I ask Dan if he has any cigarettes.

"Were you talking to her?"

Not really.

"Help me with this. Dammit. Here. Yeah. Don't fuckin talk to hookers when we're on, man."

I wasn't.

"Right. But don't. It'll be my ass that gets it if someone from the parlour or something complains."

Fuck you, Dan.

"There. Closed. The, uh. The outdoor ones, I guess. They're always worse."

Yeah. Much worse.

“It’s the eyes. Or when they don’t have eyes...y’know. Hate these ones.”

I think about the birds, but I don’t say anything.

We set up the stretcher and wheel him in, although we probably don’t need it for this poor bastard.. Do everything by the book and you can’t get in shit later. Don’t really wanna heave this poor bastard in trash bag style anyway.

service elevator down

always cold in this kind of basement you

can guess why and it’s a real nerdy guy who works this basement if I remember
always nerds work

down here this business

dnd and x-men comics and trekkers

(not trekkies I got yelled at once)

got no social skills then work with the dead

seems kind of on the nose don’t it?

a little too on the nose ain’t it

i said to dan once and he said fuck off

but it works the way it works so fine

work with the dead

put your parents in the ground put your friends in the ground put your daughter in the
ground put that one priest in the ground put the prom king in the ground
i wish that girl had a pierced nose like my sister

Just to talk to, nothing dirty. I'm not weird.

I work with bodies I get that enough.

Ten years doing this and never met a corpse fucker. Heard rumours, of course. Got no
social skills then fuck the dead. Everyone gets lonely, these nerds are just better at it.

They're probably the best men for the job, really. Late nights, terrible smells, separated
and sealed away under buildings. Normal person would go out of their mind, need the
contact.

Nerds know how to be alone in a basement.

me dan a dead guy a transfer riding down
elevator opens and cold happens in my chest through my ribs
nerdy guy meets us says through here guys
move the transfer and one wheel squeaks awful
worse when you get it inside
cold floors linoleum or words like it
cuz i'm not sure i could tell you linoleum from
from whatever i don't know what they make floors from
the wheel like terrible
metal tables and cabinets and it sounds like the worst thing

squawking like a nightmare

It's too on the nose again, I know. But I can't help it. I think about the birds.

Bothered by the noise or just awkward and the nerdy guy punches a finger at a shitty little cd player and

drive my car into the ocean

"The Pixies, right on" Dan says. The ice broken by something other than hey so what's the case with this dead guy the guy nods

"Yeah. So good. I have such a crush on Kim Deal."

It is difficult not to have a crush on Kim Deal, I offer. And we nod because she is not a real person.

My pager flutters and there's someone else for Dan and me to transfer.

Hey mom.

"Oh, you're home. Will you be here for dinner?"

Yeah. I mean unless someone dies.

"Don't say it like that."

Kay.

“Hard day?”

Kind of. Messy.

“Oh, yuck. Don’t tell me about it.”

Kay.

she stops for a moment, makes a face and

“It wasn’t. Well, it wasn’t anyone we know, was it?”

No. Wasn’t local.

“Good.”

Yeah.

“Well, not good.”

No, I know what you mean.

i hang my jacket up i wash my hands then wander back to the kitchen

“I’ll make chicken, I think.”

Okay. Yum.

that girl looked nothing like my sister.

her hair was the wrong colour, or it wasn’t, but it was the wrong brown, anyway

there are a lot of browns i don’t know why this is staying with me

I met a girl today reminded me a lot of Tricia.

“Oh? Where’d you meet her?”

Oh. Just uh. She was working at one of the places we dropped off.

“A funeral parlour?”

It was, yeah.

“I always wonder about those people. How they can do that. I mean, you just. Well, you transfer, I suppose. You don’t really

makes a face

deal with the bodies. You know. I wonder how she can do what she does.”

Lives turn out weird, I guess.

“I suppose. I’m glad you’re not doing that, though. The transferring is bad enough.”

Yeah. She seemed nice, anyway. Reminded me of Tricia.

“Are you going to see her again?”

Huh? Oh. No. Nothing like that. I just talked to her for a minute. She just reminded me, is all.

later words come around chicken parts

Have you talked to Tricia lately, mom?

“She called yesterday and we chatted for a bit. She and Jim are talking about moving in together. Not right away, of course, but maybe after next semester.”

That’s nice.

“Yes. You should call her, tell her about your lady friend.”

Yeah, I should call her.

Direwrath has come online

Direwrath says: hey man wats up

Bodysnatcher says: hey

Direwrath says: man i got that terminator achievement today

Bodysnatcher says: grats

Direwrath says: killed me a million demons
Bodysnatcher says: yeah i got that a while ago.
Direwrath says: shit ur the grim reaper.
Bodysnatcher says: i gtg. i should call my sister
Direwrath says: you have a life when ur not slaying? lol
Bodysnatcher says: not much of one
Direwrath says: hey if u have time later, help me run YHG?
Bodysnatcher says: yeah maybe.
Direwrath says: there r guys in there need killing
You have logged off

“Hello?”

Hey, Trish.

“Hi? Who is this?”

and later and the next night I drive up and down the street
where i saw her. cruising slow and looking at prostitutes and i tell myself it's just to
catch sight of her again, try and figure out why she won't leave my mind.
and nerding with the boys and i think about her. hookers tend to die
bodies delivered to city morgues not funeral homes
every time my pager goes off i feel like puking
she doesn't look anything like my sister.
the day and the night and dead kids and dead babies and dead old people
and dead everything and i feel, i truly goddamn feel for them all and my pager goes,
startling the birds. .

Artless

Jen shifts in her sleep and thank god now I can probably get out from under her arm without waking her. Don't want to

Don't want to face her rubbing her eyes/not rubbing them just slow blink open smiling

"There's my girl"

She loves me

Like the fact that she feels something makes it real and not just guilt

Obligation

Somewhere deep down in the pit of wherever I turn food to shit because I'm here and doing this and don't know how else where else to be

To get to.

Compressed air like collapsing organs but I should avoid similes.

Fuck.

She's off mostly. I slide I slip I wriggle motherfucker and I am out of the bed and she's not awake and I'm alone which is that fantastic feeling that breaks your heart. No. Do not start that do not use the word heart like it signifies something other than pumping. Valves and chambers and the plastic model from fifth grade biology. It doesn't. Do not be artful it is too early you have not had coffee.

"Em?"

Fuckmotherfucker goddamn.

"Murglefrugle slu rimbles." I've put that in quotation marks because that's what it sounded like she said. She rolled the hell over and said it into a pillow and was asleep before the rimbles was off her tongue, so I have no damn idea if I've got the spelling right

and I will make all proper apologies, etc. But I don't want to take liberties with quotation if I don't have to. I need coffee I have not slept.

Jen slept she slept something fantastic all arm flung over heavy and impeding my breathing scaring me to move and wake her because I fear conversation more than asphyxiation any day of the week. Any day of the week was my father's phrase. I can see him/I wish I could see him. He's wearing a blue sweater his glasses are out of fashion and he's saying *The Canadiens can beat those bum Jets any day of the week and twice on Tuesday is what I'm telling you.* I've italicized that instead of using quotation marks because that was in the past. It's been a long time since I've had to write to be accurate but I'll allow myself that much artfulness. Dead people deserve italics. If anyone does.

He was a large man. He was like a bear who liked to sit in armchairs but only if they were also very large and covered in a cheesy plaid pattern. A kind of bear who liked when his daughters would perch on the giant arms of the giant chair and snuggle into his giant sides while he watched hockey. That is not an actual species of bear to my knowledge, but I am no zoologist. He is, in any case, dead. Feeling sad about it doesn't change much, it only makes my mother call my house more often. I shouldn't use the word anxiety it's a loose fit it's something of a metaphor and metaphors are words like 'gossamer'. Words used by poets when they are lying. My father did not like poetry, he was not a man who read, but he loved my sister for being a writer. He loved me for being a writer who gave up. He was as large as a bear and now he's dead. My mother did not have him stuffed as one might a bear. She threw out the plaid armchair. My sister and I

do not visit. That is terrible maybe but also maybe not, and in a hundred years our bones will not argue about it.

Jen doesn't wake up not really and I leave the room. Our floors are solid (and far too cold I should own slippers but I don't) and I'm not that heavy. This sort of sneaking makes very little noise.

In the kitchen the sunlight reminds me that it's day and that I haven't slept. It does not literally remind me, visible spectrum light waves projected by the combustion of plasma

hot hydrogen/helium

energy release spaced away from Earth doesn't actually remind me/shouldn't remind me.

It does not write me a note it does not make a telephone call. I would, perhaps, welcome a letter. Everyone likes getting letters.

But I'm tired. Art creeps in. Signifiers and signified and bullshit and my sister published this thing she calls a 'chapbook' which is a name for what I think is just a short book (I don't hold authority enough on this subject to call her bullshit on using pretentious terminology, so I let this go). It was poetry that had to do with insomnia. I liked it quite a bit at the time, although I doubt I would now. I cared more for that sort of thing at the time. There were poems about not being able to sleep because you were worried about work or your children or your husband or something not coming home because he is fucking someone else or such. Husbands. Not something my sister or I worry about, but there isn't a poem about that. There isn't a poem about staying up all night wondering just why the fuck your father could die when he's the only person who was ever good in the world and everyone else is a chemical mixture swirling with viciousness, malice, and

self interest. The real reason my sister and I both had insomnia pretty much that whole year. I don't understand the politics of poetry that attempts to keep the reader at arm's length and open up to them all at the same time. It's either clever or artful or just plain lying.

Coffee is an honest thing I want coffee.

"Emily?" Jen is leaning against the kitchen doorway archway thing (is there a name for what that is? They are only ever in kitchens there must be a name) she is extremely blurry eyed. Asleep on her feet.

"Go back to bed, Jenny."

"What're you doing? You all right?"

"I'm fine. I just got up." I almost say something about having to pee but the bathroom is the other door off our room and she won't buy that even in sleep zombie mode. I also don't know why I have the sudden urge to lie. I just really want to not be a person talking to another person in a kitchen. Women lying to each other in kitchens like my childhood my sister/mother. Like my life spent
In my kitchen.

Her kitchen.

Ours. Whatever. Politics and small bones.

Jen yawns stretches leans her entire weight against the doorway thing so that if the house were spiteful and just moved a bit she'd deadfall straight into the cold hard floor like birds with amnesia. Houses aren't spiteful I am allowing myself far too many liberties. Birds, amnesia, bullshit, etc.

“What are you doing, though? I thought we were gonna cuddle up and waste the whole day sleeping in.” Jen does that sleepy half eyes closed smile thing where you know she’s thinking about staggering over to me to hug me or caress, or do something that physically reinforces the words she’s using like people feel they have to. She doesn’t though. I am profoundly relieved and it’s an inappropriate reaction. “I thought that was our whole plan to waste today.” My throat could swell up I could choke almost die/die right now it would be basically welcome. Now. Now goddammit.

“I don’t know. I’m restless. I think I want to go get coffee or something.” I say. If she says she wants to come with me I don’t know if I have any recourse other than both of us getting in the car. I will offer to drive and she will let me because she’s still sleepy. I will drive carefully and conscientiously until we get to the bridge and then I will slam the guard railing for all I’m worth and put our car and us into the river. Jen’s hair floating. Jen’s lungs filling.

“Mmm. Coffee. Bring me one back?”

Yes. That would be better than the first plan, I suppose.

“Yeah, okay, Jen. Going back to bed?”

She makes a sleepy noise and pads off (she has slippers) and she is asleep before I find my shoes. She’s such a beautiful, beautiful person. I’m usually amazed at just how much I can hate her.

The gas gauge is broken but I’m pretty sure I have a half tank or so. I back the car out I do the mirror checking, turn heat on, seat adjustment because Jen drove last and she’s taller than me by four inches. Possibly five I should be exact in all things but she’s

nearly impossible to measure while she's sleeping and I wouldn't ask her while she's awake. Estimates are the devil's work, but I make do. Or is that make due? Neither of those words make any sense.

As I drive by the park I see a remote controlled airplane circling (I very nearly wrote circling lazily) medium distances up in the air. I can't see a child controlling it, but I don't think the signal strength on those controller things are that strong, so there must be one near. I do my best to look for a child with a controller. I picture in my head one of those big, panel looking controllers of the 80s but toy technology has evolved since my own childhood and it's more likely the kid has the goddamn thing working off an ipod or such. I don't see anyone. Behind a tree or in a car somewhere braced against the morning chill I don't know. I don't know. I can't see him I can't look hard enough it would mean smashing my car into things as I turned to look. I could do it but I do want coffee.

I never had a remote controlled plane. I don't think I ever wanted one. Seemed like a boy toy. Seemed like that difference was important. My father would have gotten us one, I'm sure. Would have been a big enough present that he'd have had to wait for Christmas or a birthday to get it past my mother, but he would have. My sister (whose name is also Jennifer and goes by Jen and whose name I'm avoiding using to avoid confusion when I say Jen to refer to the Jen I've already established as Jen) and I could have sat out in the back of the station wagon and tried to make it do flips. Loops. Rolls. I don't know what the terminology is but I understand it's a goal of toy planes to do such. My father would have brought a thermos of hot chocolate. Bear hugs and spaces between then and now so delicate that you can't even cut them. Art creeps in I am so tired.

The coffee place. Trendy. Expensive but the coffee is everything you could want from an addictive hot beverage. Hits the brain chemistry just the way it should/could be better with chocolate shavings but that seems artful. Bastards from hell. The girls who work here all look the same. Young and without their natural hair colours. Pretty but all anorexic in their tight black pants. The kind you wish you looked like once every three months or so. Not often enough that you're willing to commit yourself to a real eating disorder, but often enough that it's a nagging thought you're disappointed in yourself for.

I order some coffee of the more or less regular type. The girl is decently smiley and makes an attempt at customer service enhancing small talk or whatever her shift manager has her doing this quarter. I take it and sit down to drink it here. I'll get Jen's when I leave. I can't go yet can't go home yet and she'll be asleep anyway the passage of time irrelevant. Unless she's making an effort to sit up in bed and wait for me. In which case it's cruel of me in a small way to keep her waiting and sit here and drink my coffee.

I sip slowly and it's hot and good. So there is meaning in that, at least. As I drink I people watch. Not many people around at this hour, but it's something to do that doesn't engulf me. A boy walks into the coffee shop. He's got skinny going for him and he's got dyed black hair carefully arranged to look messy and he's got androgyny. He looks like my sister. He looks hollow. Thick black rimmed glasses. Girl jeans painted on stick legs. He talks to the girl at the counter for a minute. Even after he's got his coffee and he's paid they talk. She giggles a bit but then she makes a show of looking around. Looking bored. She doesn't want him to think that she's not disaffected. He smiles at her but he balances it with the shrugs that dominate his body movements. Sure, he's flirting, but he's not *really* flirting. They paint their conversation in nuances and

don't know why. He's wearing a Muscle Beach t-shirt over his knifeblade thin ribs. He's ironic or post-ironic or whatever they're working on now. I've only ever been able to enjoy irony when it's quietly malicious. Cruelties of irony. Fire halls burning down. Policemen mugged. He's so thin it's distracting me. I'm staring. He looks like you could break him. I feel like I would want to break him. Make him exotic like dying endangered things. Special because he's delicate. I can picture him as a trail of ashes. Or in a car accident. His airbag would fail to deploy and he weighs so little the seatbelt wouldn't pull him back until he'd already struck the steering wheel. Shattering driveshaft. His breastbone punched through like wet tissue. Ice crust on snow popping under boots. My boots/metaphors involving dead fathers and an attempt to construct meaning out of words that do little. Ice, boots, androgyny. The boy leaves and I'm glad. I don't know why I resent him but I sure as hell do. His space between childhood and adulthood. His ribs. His easy flirting that he tries to make hard. Artfulness like it's safety. His bones. I buy more coffee and open the door. Walk off sidewalks into parking lots into keys into locks into cars. And drive slowly, looking for children, looking for airplanes.

Prototypes and Virgins

kiss kiss mollys lips is inviting you to start viewing webcam. Do you want to accept (Alt +C) or decline (Alt +D) the invitation?

You have accepted the invitation to start viewing webcam.

lan- she's got a system made of metal says:
cool. when did you get a webcam?

kiss kiss mollys lips says:
woooooo!!!!1 spring braek!

You have stopped viewing webcam with kiss kiss mollys lips

lan- she's got a system made of metal says:
dammit molly. put those away.

kiss kiss mollys lips says:
lol

kiss kiss mollys lips says:
u luv it.

lan- she's got a system made of metal says:
i'm in the fuckin computer lab at school

kiss kiss mollys lips says:
LOL!!1 thats aweome! did anyone see?

lan- she's got a system made of metal says:
i don't think so.

kiss kiss mollys lips says:
disappointing (sp?)

lan- she's got a system made of metal says:
don't do that, man. not cool.

kiss kiss mollys lips says:
ah ur no fun!! bsides its nothing u havnent seen b4

lan- she's got a system made of metal says:
slightly different circumstances.

kiss kiss mollys lips says:
ya ya. im bored. wanna come over? whens school done?

lan- she's got a system made of metal says:
i'm basically done for today.

kiss kiss mollys lips says:
cool come over tehn

lan- she's got a system made of metal says:
no

kiss kiss mollys lips says:
harsh! lol fuck u whats that just no y?

lan- she's got a system made of metal says:
if i come over, i'll try to have sex with you

kiss kiss mollys lips says:
lol well yeah i wasnt asking u over for fuckin tea :p

lan- she's got a system made of metal says:
i never told kaitlyn about any of this. us I mean our stuff. did you?

kiss kiss mollys lips says:
u r fuckin ruining my mood

kiss kiss mollys lips says:
no i didnt. shed lose her shit

lan- she's got a system made of metal says:
really?

kiss kiss mollys lips says:
ya kinda. its an off limits topic. kind of.

lan- she's got a system made of metal says:
oh. sorry? if things are weird

kiss kiss mollys lips says:
its not we just steer around the topic

lan- she's got a system made of metal says:
yeah. i get guilt too.

kiss kiss mollys lips says:
come over

lan- she's got a system made of metal says:
i always have irrational guilt after. like its still highschool and i'm
cheating on her

kiss kiss mollys lips says:
shed have to have wanted to b ur girlfriend to have been real cheating

lan- she's got a system made of metal says:
jesus. vicious.

kiss kiss mollys lips says:
been around u 2 for 2 long lol jk
i just mean its not simple

kiss kiss mollys lips says:
come over though. maybe we can talk then if u feel bad. do u have other plans?

lan- she's got a system made of metal says:
no. yeah, i guess it'd be cool to hang out

kiss kiss mollys lips says:
or do buttsechs. whatever. :p

lan- she's got a system made of metal says:
i'll be over at like four

kiss kiss mollys lips says:
cool

kiss kiss mollys lips has gone offline

lan- she's got a system made of metal says:
I just wish any of this mattered.

Your message:

lan- she's got a system made of metal says:
I just wish any of this mattered.

Was not delivered to kiss kiss mollys lips. kiss kiss mollys lips appears to be offline.

Come with me.

Where.

Let's run away. Let's elope.
Drink ourselves to death. Anything. Everything. Nothing.

That's what I want.

What is?

Everything. Nothing.

I can't think of nothing. I want things. I want a dog and a car and I don't
know. The first Spider-Man comic. I want that. I want you to come away
with me.

I like when you're like this.

Drunk?

Wistful. I like when you want things.

You like when I want things I can't have.

Yes.

Like you.

Why do you do that? Don't ruin the night.

I'm sorry. I'm drunk. Also sleepy.

Sleep.
I'll play with your hair.

That makes me even sleepier.

Sleep. You can want things tomorrow.

Tomorrow I won't want anything. Tomorrow I'll give up.

Shhh.

Kaitlyn's small bones in my hair.

This story like it meant

anything. Her body like her history. Can't be possessed can't be represented. Perversion and wonder and wonderful. The summer after highschool and what if that's all we get?

All I get. 19 years old and what if translating her into words is all there is to it.

Words and names. Into an object. Do I have the right? Does she have more right, with her drawings? I am artless. How do her lips become black marks on white paper? The scar high on her spine? Her bush? Do I reduce them by reducing them to language? Is this some perversion of what she is, and if so, can I be forgiven? Translating her.

My hands in his hair.

Fingers stroke his thin stubble in the dark and my leg feels his heart beating through his temple. He told me once that if you touch pulse points for two minutes, hold hands, touch wrists, put your hands on their chest, that your heartbeats will fall into synch. Science or just something he says to girls, I don't know.

Something posing as real that ruptures
falls into selfish
that doesn't quite fit

I put my hand under his shirt and feel his heart through his thin breastbone. My fingers splay and settle in the grooves between jutting ribs. Abandoned playground equipment.

As I sleep she breathes with me.

Guards my insides with small pale hands.

Hi.

“Hi.”

What time is it?

“Late. Early, I guess.”

Have I been asleep long?

“A couple of hours. You were pretty drunk. You threw up.”

Yeah, I can taste that.

“That’s gross.”

Yeah.

“You feel all right?”

Surprisingly good. Have you been sitting here with me all night?

“Yes.”

Shit, I’m sorry. Your leg must be asleep.

“No, it’s fine.”

Here. Lie down. What? What’s wrong?

“Nothing. It was asleep, I guess. Hard to move.”

Want me to rub it?

“Aren’t you fresh?”

Sorry.

“I was joking. Yes, rub it.”

She lies down and pulls me so that I’m half on top of her and half beside her, awkwardly trying to rub rub feeling back into her leg.

This can’t be comfortable.

“No. Here.” She pulls me onto her, my thighs on hers, my erection something foreign between our bodies.

“Your gun is digging into my hip, cowboy.”

Yeah, sorry, my belt buckle...

Her hand slides between us, traces my cock through my jeans.

“Belt-buckle, eh?”

Sorry. Uh, is your leg okay?

“It’s fine.” And then she opens her legs so that my pelvis lowers to hers. Her legs wrap around my ass. Pressed between our bodies. Touching it through my jeans, her teeth dim white in the dark.

Yeah, so. Whatcha doin’?

“Trying to have sex with you.”

On Molly’s couch?

“Yes.”

Uh, okay. I don’t have a condom.

“That’s okay.”

Oh.

“Is this...this isn’t your first time, is it?”

I tell her it isn’t. It is.

“Do you not want to?”

No! I mean, yes. I do. I mean, fuck, of course I want to. I just didn’t know, uh, yeah.

I’m just nervous. I like you a lot.

“I like you, too. That’s why I want you to fuck me.”

I guess that makes sense, then.

She kisses my neck and I struggle both of us out of our shirts. I worry for a moment that I will fumble with her bra but she's not wearing one.

Her nipple rings cooling on her breasts. Her hands push me back so that I'm off her and kneeling. Her small fingers tracing imagined muscles beneath my skin.

"You're so smooth. Do you shave your chest?"

Uh, no.

"Oh. Well, I like it."

Thanks. I fumble with her jeans and get nowhere. I can't slip the button out from the front so I kiss her breasts, hope she'll do it herself. She does. Arches, slides her pants down. Blue underwear that will haunt me. Hipbones sharp as knives. The curve of her body. She takes control. Guides my hands. Fingers in elastic fingers moving. Her mouth tastes warm. Tastes like ink.

Her small tuft of mousy brown pubic hair appears and then retreats into the fold of her body as she sits up to undo my pants.

"There he is." She says. My cock bouncing out. Veiny next to her pale skin. I imagine it blushing.

And then we're both naked and just sitting there. Bodies on display. It's dark but I can see her and she's beautiful.

You're beautiful.

"There really isn't a lady-like way to do this, so..." She spits in her hand and then makes a fist around me, still holding me guiding me she pulls me down into her.

"Don't come in me."

She was love and smallness. Made of mouse parts.
Improbably sexy in a way he never understood.
He never stood a chance.
She had fewer problems. She was the one who could want nothing.

“No. Don’t.” She pushes him away, but not hard.

He laughs. Bitter but careful about it.

“But you kissed back.”

“Of course I kissed back. But we...we can’t do this. It’s too much. It’s too much like a real thing.”

“But what we did before was okay? That was real? Or that wasn’t real.

“It’s different. You want me to be this part of you. This connection.”

“What do you want?”

“Nothing. You. This. Everything. But not the way you do. I know. I don’t want to be your girlfriend, Ian. I don’t want your arm around me I don’t want to hear about your day. Hearts drawn around names, names written in notebooks. I don’t want to care. Not the way you need me to. I just...I’m not that person. I can’t be the way you want.”

“Yeah. Yeah, okay.” He mumbles. To his credit he doesn’t look down. He maintains eye contact. Colours he doesn’t know the names of. He will get terribly drunk tonight, of course.

“I know it’s not fair, just to take what I want and not be...I don’t know. Not be anything to you or for you. But that’s what I want.”

“Is it other boys? Do you just not want to be with me or-“

“No. It’s not other boys. I hate other boys. I hate boys.”

“You hate everyone.”

“I don’t hate you. I don’t hate Molly.”

He flinches at Molly’s name. She doesn’t notice. He doesn’t think she would care enough to notice. He’s 19. He will be wrong about so many things in his life.

“Don’t.”

She stands and looks up at him. She realized how tall and skinny he was at the same time she realized she liked tall, skinny boys. He’d never realized he liked her until he loved her.

“Look, if you say ‘don’t’ again...I won’t. But you know I’m going to kiss you again, right?”

My favourite thing about him is that his parents are never home, and that he sleeps until two. My favourite thing to do is drive to his house and let myself in. I can draw all day and he's still asleep. Sit beside him. Draw him

Slip in bed next to him
and watch him wake up.

No formality. No names attached to it, just watch him breathe.

Just a girl in a boy's bedroom. Just eyelashes. Just the way he feels when he's asleep.

There are flickers. In biology I look over his shoulder and see my name written in his notebook. Diagram labels, my name, and Hum lyrics in his chicken scratch boyscrawl.

Labia Minora. Labia Majora. Kaitlyn. She's got a system made of metal with magnet bits inside her brain.

Naiveté and self-absorption don't matter when you're the one absorbed. It is not wrong or stupid to be young. It is not a failing. Eventuality will win out and they will be ashamed of ever being so earnest, of course. You will read these words and flinch at their obviousness. I write these words and flinch at their artfulness. It is a failing. Of course.

Molly was part of it. Molly with her damage, with her body with her sex. The damage she did, the damage done to her. Words in his ear. Filthy. Wonderful. He believed her spine to be elastic the way she could curl up, around, between, behind from any position so that her mouth could still be at his ear. Whispering filth he thought terrible.

Whispering filth he wanted to hear.

“Pretend I’m her.”

“What?” Pant pant pant.

“Call me Kaitlyn when you do that. OH. Shit oh shit. Good.”

“No...no...that’s fucked up.”

“You’re thinking of her anyway.”

“Jesus...”

“That you can’t be in her ah, fuck. No, don’t stop. Call me Kaitlyn.”

“Shut up.”

“Yeah. Get angry.”

“This is so fucked. You’re her best friend.” Sucking air through clenched wondering if most people talk this much during sex maybe he’d been doing it wrong.

“She told you to do what you wanted. You can fuck who you want.”

“Yeah.” and he can’t help but lose steam. She doesn’t notice.

“She said no. I said”

“Yeah.” Gasping the word

“So shut up and fuck. Shit. That’s better. Call me Kaitlyn.”

“No. Jesus.”

“Here. Hold on. Use this. Just give me a second.”

“Uh. Okay.”

“Yeah, yeah. Put it in there...oh OH. holy fuckin god in heavenshit”

“Are you okay should I”

“SHUT UP hit that harder, call me Kaitlyn call me shitshitohFUCK me.”

“Kaitlyn.”

Kaitlyn.

Love and smallness. Mouseparts. He's frog legs and iron. Microscopes and wound
nickel. She thinks he's beautiful/she doesn't say words like beautiful
His/Her eyes with flecks of every colour and he can always smell her in his clothes.
Daisies and gin. She doesn't wear perfume. He doesn't know her scent. Her. Just her.
He catches himself sniffing his shirts and she'll never
He is much taller than she is and it's uncomfortable for them to hold hands.
She is uncomfortable when he holds her hand. But
"Today was really nice," he says. And it was.
She squints up at him. Into the dusk behind his head, sun burning her eyes out splotches
of darkness and is she beautiful to him
His head a black shape against damage.
"Yeah, I had fun."
He leans down to kiss her. She lets him, her vision gradually fading back in.

Appendix

Up Division and Down Artist's Statement for *Failures in Apathy*

I find myself in the somewhat strange circumstance of having become very excited about apathy. *Failures in Apathy*, the creative thesis I have written while undertaking graduate work at the University of Windsor, takes the form of a collection of nine short stories that are largely concerned with apathy, with apathetic characters, with the possibility of living a life dictated chiefly by one's apathetic outlook, and with the results that such a life produces. No character within the collection is stoic — all are caught up within their own concerns and respond to the stimulus presented to them — but in each case, the characters of *Failures* somehow fail to connect with the situation, the people, or the world around them. Rather than being comfortable in such a state of removal, however, the characters fail once more — this time failing to remain unmoved by the situations presented within their individual stories. The resulting failure to fail, then, should prove a success (or at least a movement towards normative values), yet the characters, and their emotional responses to their lives, are problematized by the settings they find themselves within. Through the narration, formal conceits, and “failures” within the writing, I reinforce the notion of characters unable to successfully engage with their own lives, but equally unable to remain passionless and apathetic in the face of their marginalization from normative inclusion and involvement in life.

Each story has several self-contained sub-themes, but there are certain themes that emerge as threads I pursue throughout the collection as a whole. Aside from apathy, the most important major theme I will advance is that of failure. Specifically, I address how

failure manifests itself in the lives of these characters that are marked by apathy, and a reluctance to involve themselves in their own lives. For example, “Brick Shithouse” concerns itself with a young man who shows significant promise as an amateur fighter, so much so that fighting has presented itself as a means by which to combat the hard times he finds himself living in. Yet he is completely unable to connect with his success, seeing those excited by his prowess as distant (represented as voices lost in a crowd and outside of the ring Brick finds himself within) and repugnant, as he is disgusted by his own actions. Yet, even as Brick is unwilling to connect with the ambition of his uncle and the concerns of those around him, he still takes part in the fight while bemoaning the spectacle. Furthermore, he is unable to steel himself against his own actions, and his failure to “turn off” his emotions and act as an automaton lead him to torture himself through emotionally projecting onto the man he is fighting, and later, onto the man’s girlfriend. This projection, then, creates an isolation for Brick where he does not allow himself to connect with the events occurring around him. Even as Brick tortures himself for his actions, he is unable to fully come to terms with what he is doing, or fully accept responsibility for his situation. He perceives himself as driven at least in part by outside forces, such as his uncle or the other spectators, and he allows himself to attempt to become cold and apathetic about actions that he finds objectionable.

My aim is to present failure more fully than simply as a device that shifts the characters from one outlook to another. It is not my goal to present the reader with ready-made “moments of truth” that shift apathetic characters away from apathy. It would not, for example, serve my interest to have Brick decide to give up fighting based upon seeing the pain it has caused his opponent’s girlfriend. Such a decision to make use

of the common and often dubiously employed device of the epiphany would invest far too much agency in Brick. Rather, I leave the ending ambiguous, with very little resolved or accomplished. Such an ending is common in *Failures in Apathy*, and serves as a further complication to each of the characters, as I do not resolve them for the reader. The characters emerge from their stories perhaps slightly more damaged, but rarely changed. The characters would have to be far more involved in their own lives to undertake any great change, and to return again to “Brick Shithouse” as an example, the feeling I wish to convey at the close of Brick’s narrative is that he will be back again fighting the next night, feeling just as bad about it and doing just as little to change his life. Characters trapped within workaday lives and relationships that they hate without taking action towards any change are readily understood by readers living within a modern social structure some suggest is one without significant optimism or hope for betterment.

Russel Jacoby’s *The End of Utopia: Politics and Culture in the Age of Apathy* identifies the modern world as being in a post-ideological age. We have, he argues, little as a culture to look forward or aspire to, and as a result, “the world stripped of anticipation turns cold and grey” (Jacoby, 181). Apathy, Jacoby argues, is the inevitable response to living in the modern world that he can find fault after fault with, from pop culture icons to environmental issues to political blundering. While Jacoby’s targets are broad and many, he is nevertheless correct in pointing out that after the cold war, after the dotcom bust, and after the belief in life’s inevitable march towards betterment on the back of technology have faded, Western Society lacks the optimistic vision and futurism our predecessors predicted. Intellectual focus on identity politics, he claims, has led to a

more fractured social structure, unable to create for itself any form of utopian thinking or idealism. Summing up Jacoby's thesis, critic Glenn Altschuler states, "Jacoby maintains that without utopian vision, only apathy and life shrunk to a calculus of immediate options are possible. The fault, he claims, rests with postmodern intellectuals, professional doubters convinced that there are no facts but only interpretations and that adherence to universal norms is inevitably catastrophic" (168). This cold, grey world, then, with only its "calculus of immediate options," is where the characters of *Failures in Apathy* find themselves. If they take themselves far less seriously than Jacoby and company, the characters in *Failures* also think about their predicaments far less consciously. Indeed, I am interested in a commitment to extremely small narratives, focused on individuals and not on the greater social spheres of society they interact with, and I undertake a certain amount of mockery involving anything resembling big-picture thinking or reflection, as evidenced by my treatment of the heavy handed narrator of "Kaz and Zoë." The basic realism of the world the characters live within must be kept in mind — the stories do not occur within a vacuum nor in a universe of fundamentally different natural laws— but the focus in my storytelling is on the small details of small lives. I tend to favour the awkward conversation and turn of phrase over "plot." In "Transfer part 1," I focus on a character who himself does not experience much in the way of life altering events, but who deals every day with the events which have altered and ended the lives of others. For him, a fireball and tragic death is another day at work, and his work haunts him. In short, the immediate options and problems of the everyday are what I set before my characters to concern themselves with, when they are able to concern themselves with anything at all. Like the people described by Jacoby and

Altschuler, the characters of *Failures in Apathy* do not hold out great hope of betterment for their lives, and certainly have no driving concept of ideology or utopian vision that they wish for or work towards. In some instances, in fact, those who make attempts at engineering change in their lives are ultimately frustrated, as is James Spectre in “The Zebra and the Ghost” when he ultimately decides that there is “no point in getting involved.” For James, “getting involved” means opening himself to an involvement with the world and assuming an agency in his own life and in his son’s life that he is unwilling to take responsibility for.

In the safe and sterile world Jacoby rails against, where psychologist David A. Karp says depression and apathy are “a normal response to pathological social structures” (Karp, 80), the characters simply live their small lives and make it from day to day. It is this smallness, this immediacy of living with no particular emphasis on any particular way that life is led, that I attempt to capture. When deciding to attempt a collection of short stories, I wanted to write stories that “fail” to conform to short story conventions I see commonly published by or submitted to literary journals. One instructional cliché taught to writers and often addressed in short fiction is one of desire— what is it your characters *want*? The idea, I suppose, being that answering this basic question helps the writer to establish the basis for why characters act in the manner they do; it creates a logic to the characters’ actions, as each action should be something they believe will take them a step closer to their goal. The characters in *Failures in Apathy*, characters who are concerned with such small stories, however, do not *want* anything, or at least they want very little. Desire is largely removed from *Failures in Apathy*, and when it is present, it is generally presented as some example of failure that brings a character outside his or her

comfort zone (and possibly momentarily out of their apathy). True to form with its focus on the small scope and on failure, any shifts away from apathy in the characters are likely to be fleeting moments, themselves failures to conform to the normal pattern of the character's behaviour, rather than momentous plot-points or revelations. Kaz at the end of "Kaz and Zoe" is in the same place he was at the beginning of the story. He does not, for example, connect with Zoë's father (although he shows him a certain kindness), but remains isolated within what the narrator describes as the "eventuality" of Kaz's tendency as a disconnected person to stay within the sphere of his own small life. Nate in "June the Two" remains similarly unresolved, and is figuratively and literally lost by the end of the story. The characters of *Failures* offer no challenge to the post-ideological age. They are exactly the sweaty nightmare Jacoby must wake from nightly — they just do not care. Faced with powerlessness in a world much bigger and more powerful than they are, "then pragmatism and apathy in the face of power seem to be the only options" (Altschuler, 168), and *Failures* is an embrace of this small scope. I am far more interested in representing an awkward conversation between the narrator of "Tyrannosaur" and Jane than in creating an elaborate story in which they change the world, or even in which they change their lives.

It is sometimes difficult to separate apathy from depression, and the interplay between the two has proved the greatest challenge to me while writing and considering *Failures in Apathy*. I have had to consider just how much the medical realism of apathy will influence the literary technique of apathetic characters I am employing, and that consideration has been probelmatized by a lack of clear medical certainty on just what apathy *is*. The medical conversation surrounding apathy in recent years has largely been

concerned with whether or not to classify it as its own syndrome, or whether it is merely a symptom of other disorders, especially the disorder it is most readily equated with, that of depression. Both states involve many similar symptoms, especially value and behaviour shifts away from what is medically considered to be a healthy norm. At the time I write this, apathy has not yet been recognized in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* as a disorder unto itself. Part of this reluctance to classify apathy has to do with its close ties to depression through the history of psychoanalytic theory, and as Michelle Stephenson points out in her article covering the debate on whether apathy should be included in the *DSM*, “it is difficult to mesh concepts of motivation with a sociopolitical system that values autonomy above all else. Another problem is that people with apathy don’t present with distress and are almost forgotten by the health care system.” Citing Michael B. First, MD, Professor of Clinical Psychiatry at Columbia University in New York City and Editor of the *DSM-I*, Stephenson continues, “the first difficulty is that there is no definition of apathy in the *DSM-IV*. Rather, there is a hodge-podge of terms throughout the book... This can occur because various work groups are in charge of different sections of the *DSM*, and while they communicate with each other, the chapters are written in relative isolation. ‘You can have a concept like apathy seen by different groups through different prisms, and it will come out differently. There is really some diagnostic confusion’.” The separation of depression and apathy, and even a very basic definition of what I consider apathy to be, then, has been a significant challenge in writing *Failures in Apathy*. To that end, apathy in *Failures in Apathy* represents failure. Which, if applied to the title, again results in the confusing idea of failures in failure. This is appropriate, however, as I am indeed addressing both

failures to be apathetic and failures that are a part of apathy. Apathy represents a failure to connect, to care, to become involved, or to function as expected by the people around the character exhibiting the failure. In *Failures in Apathy*, I represent apathetic people not necessarily as sad or depressed, but as characters who fail to interact or become engaged with their own lives. Kaz and Zoë, for example, seem to be largely “normal,” happy people, and the narrator of “Tyrannosaur” is not sad, only extremely socially awkward and unnerved by Jane. Still, a confluence between apathy and depression does seem to exist, even if the two are not synonymous, and *Failures* represents this connection through Nate, James Spectre, Brick, and the other obviously melancholy characters within the work.

A book filled with the quietly different is increasingly relevant, as more and more social phobia impacts the ways in which many people interact with the world around them, and the way in which they are perceived and how their avoidance pushes them further outside normative society, as “the meanings that we attribute to apathy or shyness—for the meanings change—are less at issue than the broader consequences of our intolerance for forms of affect that we are asked to eliminate from ourselves and, indeed, from other people” (Lane, 408). And my characters, with their removal from active participation in social situations, will be in good company. In his 2006 article discussing the fallout and aftermath of *Psychology Today*’s 1993 pronouncement of social phobia as the ‘disorder of the decade’, Christopher Lane states, “a barrage of new studies confirmed that America was witnessing a pandemic of shyness. Yet until the mid-1980s, social phobia was barely reported, much less studied. In the space of less than ten years, an almost invisible problem had ballooned into ‘one of the worst neglected

disorders of our time’” (Lane, 388-89). There is, then, hardly a shortage of people who fail to connect with the world around them. *Failures* is my attempt to create a believable and sympathetic group of characters inspired by the burgeoning ranks of the shy and socially phobic and to write about them, accepting their disconnect and not allowing my narration the indulgence of playing armchair therapist, because as Mike W. Martin points out,

we need to take seriously how extensively therapeutic attitudes now permeate our culture, far beyond the psychologist's office. The public has eagerly embraced an ever-increasing role for mental health approaches to an enormous array of major social problems. The reasons for this acceptance include frustrations with purely moral approaches that have either not worked or...made things worse; the perceived growing expertise and authority of health professionals; and the advantages in being able to excuse personal addictions, failings, and even cruelties as being sicknesses. (278)

My intent has been to realize characters as more than simple sketches of their apathy, shyness, depression or other social disorders, and to create as complex a portrait as I can in a few words, rather than attempt to “explain” the characters. As Martin argues, it is far too easy to fall into simply accepting and excusing behaviour and action as extensions of “sicknesses”, when exploring the creative potential in these character’s differences may prove more rewarding. Martin believes social phobias and disorders can be potentially beneficial occurrences, citing John Stuart Mill’s breakdown which led to the creation of some of his most important work. I go along with his analysis, seeing failure to conform

to normal definitions of mental health as “a potentially creative encounter with troubled relationships, activities, values, and self-respect” (Martin, 270).

Finally, my approach to the form of *Failures in Apathy* is anything but apathetic. Much as the characters within the stories fail to connect with one another, with the world around them, and with various other story elements, the stories themselves often fail to conform to some “textbook” expectations of the short story, and to fiction in general. The blending of genre plays a large role in *Failures*, as the stories “fail” to stay contained within a single form. For example, poetry and line breaks occasionally take over from prose for a few lines before reverting when the narrator of “Transfer part 1” is moved out of his apathy by the horror he confronts. A similar blurring in poetry and prose occurs in “Girls Eaten by Bears” representing intoxication and the effect Kaitlyn and Ian have on one another. Another example of failure of form and blurred genre occurs in “June the Two” and “Kaz and Zoe,” where the narrators, who otherwise appear to be omniscient, are unable to properly script characters if Nate and Allie or Kaz and Zoe are unaware of their names or do not make out what they say. These characters’ “script names,” such as “GUARD NATE THINKS MIGHT BE NAMED JOEL” or “SOME JACKASS” are coloured by Nate and Allie’s perceptions of these characters. Combined with the interjections of a fond narrator in “Kaz and Zoë” and a disdainful one in “June the Two,” this failure on the part of a seemingly omniscient narrator serves to blur the boundaries between narrator and character, and to further complicate the seemingly simple form of the short story. This problematization of form culminates in “Prototypes and Virgins” where the narrative spirals dramatically away from a conventional style, and gives itself over to poetry. Post-modernist influenced fractured narrative, third-person narration, first

person narration from multiple characters, a fractured chronology, mixed font and form of communication as instant messages are represented, and varied forms of paragraphing before ultimately ending in a simple, wistful encounter in which the narrator outlines the failure of the situation in Kaitlyn's view, her desire for apathy, and her ultimate failure to be apathetic about Ian. The blurring of boundaries and the mixing of forms suggests an inability for any of the characters to express themselves through any one form. A failure of form or of expression within that form reveals an inability for these characters to express themselves or to expressed within a single genre, as the pieces change and incorporate other genres in order to fully engage the story. The reader, in effect, is jarred by the sudden shifting of genre and the departures and failures of form.

Failures in Apathy has been inspired by numerous sources, and specific musical influences are cited within the work, but from a literary perspective I have looked primarily to the post-utopian writing of post-modernist writers (Jacoby would groan). The mixed and fractured styles of Michael Ondaatje's *Coming through Slaughter*, the episodic nature of his *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, and especially the mixed media of Janet Galloway's *The Trick is to Keep Breathing* serve as my primary inspirations in the creative writing of mixed genre. Stylistically the stories are informed by the droll, self-conscious narration of Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* and the interweaving of theme through different voices present in Barbara Gowdy's *We So Seldom Look on Love*. The frankness and despair of modernism have also informed my work, Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* and J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (which I quote in "June the Two") were never far from my mind during the writing of *Failures*.

Ultimately, *Failures in Apathy* is an attempt to engage with the apathetic, post-Utopian time I find myself in. *Failures* both identifies the shortcomings and heartbreak of a life unengaged with, and yet offers apathy and disconnect as an alternative or defence to the weight and pressures of life and the rejection of involvement. It is, like the society it hopes to represent, somewhat confused as to its place, and largely concerned with Altschuler's immediate options. The characters do not wish to get on a soapbox and decry apathy, or any other societal ill. They are too tired, and they have to work in the morning.

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