

University of Windsor

Scholarship at UWindor

Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Theses, Dissertations, and Major Papers

Fall 2021

Anomia

Jade Wallace

University of Windsor

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/etd>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#), and the [Literature in English, North America Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Wallace, Jade, "Anomia" (2021). *Electronic Theses and Dissertations*. 8891.

<https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/etd/8891>

This online database contains the full-text of PhD dissertations and Masters' theses of University of Windsor students from 1954 forward. These documents are made available for personal study and research purposes only, in accordance with the Canadian Copyright Act and the Creative Commons license—CC BY-NC-ND (Attribution, Non-Commercial, No Derivative Works). Under this license, works must always be attributed to the copyright holder (original author), cannot be used for any commercial purposes, and may not be altered. Any other use would require the permission of the copyright holder. Students may inquire about withdrawing their dissertation and/or thesis from this database. For additional inquiries, please contact the repository administrator via email (scholarship@uwindsor.ca) or by telephone at 519-253-3000ext. 3208.

ANOMIA

by

Jade Wallace

A Creative Writing Project

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

Windsor, Ontario Canada

2021

©2021 Jade Wallace

Anomia

by

Jade Wallace

APPROVED BY:

C. Davison
Department of English & Creative Writing

C. Hundleby
Department of Philosophy

L. Cabri, Advisor
Department of English & Creative Writing

September 2, 2021

DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

I hereby certify that I am the sole author of this thesis and that no part of this thesis has been published or submitted for publication.

I certify that, to the best of my knowledge, my thesis does not infringe upon anyone's copyright nor violate any proprietary rights and that any ideas, techniques, quotations, or any other material from the work of other people included in my thesis, published or otherwise, are fully acknowledged in accordance with the standard referencing practices. Furthermore, to the extent that I have included copyrighted material that surpasses the bounds of fair dealing within the meaning of the Canada Copyright Act, I certify that I have obtained a written permission from the copyright owner(s) to include such material(s) in my thesis and have included copies of such copyright clearances to my appendix.

I declare that this is a true copy of my thesis, including any final revisions, as approved by my thesis committee and the Graduate Studies office, and that this thesis has not been submitted for a higher degree to any other University or Institution.

ABSTRACT

Anomia is a novel shaped by absence. Its fictional world is mimetic—it resembles our everyday world—but it exists without any reference whatsoever to either sex or gender. Gone are sexed and gendered pronouns, nouns, and adjectives. All of the characters in the novel are presented without a defined sex or gender identity, and the spaces they occupy are unsegregated by sex or gender classifications. Though there are some examples of constraint-based approaches to sex and gender in mimetic fiction, the completeness of the exclusion of sex and gender categories as demonstrated in *Anomia* is unprecedented. The novel is also shaped by absence in the sense that the events of the novel centre on the enigmatic fate of two people, known as The Lovers, who have gone missing. The narrative fixation on a material absence draws deliberate attention to the other notable, but unarticulated, linguistic absence of sex and gender signifiers. Furthermore, the fact that The Lovers have gone missing under violent domestic circumstances is an effort to nudge the reader toward a consideration of whether and how to read these incidents through the lenses of sex or gender-based analyses. The intent of *Anomia* is to create an imaginary space wherein the reader must confront their own presumptions about sex and gender, and ultimately consider whether human identities and interactions can be legible without frameworks of sex and gender.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

With thanks to Dr. Louis Cabri, my advisor, for being the first person to ever see and react to this novel. To my life partner, Mark Laliberte, for listening to my daily chatter about the process of novel-writing and offering consolation. To my mother, Laurie Wallace, for teaching me to read. And to Ari, little lion, close to me as my own shadow, who very nearly saw me through all of these pages.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITYiii
ABSTRACT.....iv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....v

ANOMIA.....1–240

AT THE LIMITS OF GENDERED LANGUAGE IN MIMETIC FICTION:
A CRITICAL ESSAY ON *ANOMIA*.....241–269
NOTES.....270–271
WORKS CITED.....272–275

VITA AUCTORIS.....276

ANOMIA

What Is Found

There are times when all gestures feel like reenactments, when life and death are clouds that cannot be pulled apart, and it is then that The Little Ghost goes to the unwood. The underbrush murmurs and gives away the rats as they crawl into hiding on their small hands. Birds vanish, but not without a clapping of wings. Stones are rough-skinned and heavy in the hand. Holding them, it is impossible to think that reality is an optical illusion, an aural delusion, or a trick of memory. Branches snap underfoot and human nerves cannot help but crackle with the electricity of living things.

The unwood is on the edge of Euphoria. If one takes main street out of downtown, past the suburbs, through farmland, just beyond the trailer park, to the forest, then, if willing, one can continue on foot through the thick and pathless forest growth. The venture seems senseless for a long while, which is probably why The Little Ghost has never met another human being there. However, with patience, one can reach the unwood, which is the name that The Little Ghost has given to a slight clearing in the trees where everything that is other than a tree grows ardent and reckless.

It is not a trip to be made often.

Today, The Little Ghost glimpses spots of lightness among the grasses whose blades are wide as rope. The lightnesses appear at first to be mushrooms, livid and smooth, gathered close in a fairy ring. The Little Ghost crouches down and brushes off the green. The mushrooms are bones. Whose bones? There is no taxonomist, no

taxidermist available to consult in the unwood where humankind can be neither seen nor heard.

For all we know, there was a carnival of predators. A raucous and callow ritual, with vines hung for ratty streamers overhead, half-chewed meat strewn on the floor. After the party, only the detritivores remained to lick the plates.

The Little Ghost laboriously clears the flora from the bones, which form no discernible shape. The temptation to rationalize the bones into a skeleton is overwhelming. Once they are ordered, the bones might mean differently. If The Little Ghost does nothing, the bones will soon be completely interred by plants, which would not be so bad for the bones, but it would be a disappointing outcome for The Little Ghost. There is some worth in knowing what kind of animal the bones used to be. Isn't there?

Stirring the bones from their rest feels like profaning a sacred stillness. Nevertheless, The Little Ghost continues with the work: ruffling the feathers of plants to see whether they conceal the last organs of a corpse, brushing soil away from its own protrusions, gathering the findings in an elegant mass. There are more bones than The Little Ghost expected, but also fewer, for though the bones are many there is no skull. Without the skull, it is hard for one uninitiated to make sense of the long, the short, the irregular, the sesamoid bones, and even the other flat bones. The Little Ghost could as easily be looking at a horse as at a human being. Perhaps if the ribs were still in one piece, The Little Ghost could articulate the skeleton and get some sense of scale. Scattered as they are, the bones signify nothing but death.

As the light leaves the sky, The Little Ghost departs.

Dawn Chorus

The Little Ghost wakes early on the morning after finding the bones. The sky is a weak lavender tea but The Little Ghost swallows it anyways along with two white pills for the pain of a long yesterday, before returning to the unwood.

Even sturdily stacked, the bones are such a scant semblance of order amidst the chaos of wild that they remain difficult to find a second time. Once located, The Little Ghost drapes a red wool scarf over them to mark their place, then begins to spiral outward, combing through grass for the missing skull. The Little Ghost is desperate to find it. The creature from whom the skeleton came must be a significant one, for there are many bones. But without the head, the body is a useless globe stand.

The Little Ghost is disappointed several times by clustered mushrooms, large flakes of white birch bark, pale stones. Overhead, the robins and warblers are all jaw in the dawn air, as though they too are looking for something.

Pawing through the greenery begins to feel like hunting or like harvesting, though The Little Ghost cannot decide which. A frog, out of place and far from water, croaks an omen that does not go unheard.

The birds have quieted to idle chatter and the sun has nearly reached its zenith when The Little Ghost stops along the edge of the unwood.

The skull is so much smaller than looming death, and undeniably human.

They

The Little Ghost knows that a human body has 206 bones and that there are far more amassed in the unwood. Some of the bones are trees cracked open by lightning. Some are rocks fallen from a height and fractioned on impact. Their count runs into the thousands.

It should be like a jigsaw puzzle but instead it is like trying to build a house from raw forest. Anatomy textbooks in the library offer The Little Ghost blueprints of the human body but do not explain how to fell a tree for lumber or pour a cement foundation.

On their own, the bones cannot snap together to form a skeleton. The connective tissue that would hold them is decayed, lost to scavengers and soil. The Little Ghost tries to envision muscle and ligament, holds the bones next to living flesh to see where they correspond, but there is too much that is missing. Not everything can be imagined.

Some of the bones that are still whole seem to manifest in fours. This could mean that The Little Ghost is confusing likeness for identity. This could also mean that there is more than one corpse in the unwood.

The Little Ghost decides that it is better to presume a plurality than a singularity. If there is only one dead person, surely they will not mind the largesse of being spoken to as if they contain multitudes. If there is more than one dead person, then they will each appreciate being acknowledged.

So the bones become The Corpses and The Little Ghost begins to speak.

Bear

Euphoria is such a small town that it still has one video rental store. Euphoria is such a small town that it has only ever had one video rental store. Standing at the cash register behind the glass counter that displays the panoramic covers of special release movie collections and a brigade of posed action figures, The One often looks like a looming background mannequin in a museum exhibit.

The store is called Utopia Video. On The One's first day of work several years earlier, The Store Owner had explained:

"I was going to call it Euphoria Video, but then my buddy said that made it sound like we were selling adult films."

The One nodded in agreement, but privately thought that Utopia Video was a worse name, the kind a person would give to a religious shop with a conversion mission.

"Utopia means no place," The One had said, not knowing what else to say.

"Oh, we got a linguist here," The Store Owner smirked.

"We had to read the book in high school," The One replied apologetically.

As the years went by, The One began to think that Utopia was the perfect name for a video rental store in a town that seemed displaced in both space and time. Euphoria is buffeted from the rest of the world by vast swaths of surrounding forest and farmland, and it is forever buffering culturally and technologically, decades behind the progress of the nearest cosmopolitan centres. The blockbusters always arrive a year late to Utopia and the closest that it gets to adult films is some tender-hearted softcore from the late twentieth century.

But for most of the past year, working at the video rental store has been significantly more interesting for The One than ever before. Each customer doubles as a suspect. The One scrutinizes their rings for signs of recent cleaning, glances covertly into their wallets for IDs that are not their own as they extract credit cards and cash, and examines their shoes for forgotten stains.

There had been a close call about eight months ago. A customer came in with dark smudges on their jeans.

“Painting?” The One asked casually, looking pointedly at The Customer’s knees.

“Butchering,” The Customer said. Blood drained from The One’s face. The Customer saw it and clarified, as if to a child: “Butchering cows.”

“Oh!” The One said and laughed the way people do when their nervous energy has nowhere else to go.

Nothing of concern has happened at the video rental store since.

Until two teenagers amble in amidst the emptiness of a Thursday evening. They are nondescript lollygaggers in dirty sneakers and hooded sweatshirts, only differentiable insofar as one of them is taller than the other. The One does not say anything, not even to ask if they need help finding anything, but watches The Kids closely, under the pretense of making sure that they aren’t stashing shop merchandise in their backpacks.

The Kids go to the horror movie section, which The One regards as the second-most suspicious section of the store, right after the true crime documentary shelves. The Kids seem as indifferent to The One as they are to the popcorn machine, which is exactly as The One would have it.

The Taller Kid picks up two movies and shows their covers to The Shorter Kid.

“You have to be one of these monsters,” The Taller Kid says. “Which one is it gonna be?”

“Ugh,” The Shorter Kid says, looking from one movie to the other. “I guess the one with fewer scabs.”

“Fewer scabs but more hair,” The Taller Kid points out. The Shorter Kid shrugs.

“Would you rather date a poltergeist,” The Shorter Kid asks in return, holding up two more movies, “or an animate skeleton?”

The One struggles to focus on their conversation. The Kids are loud enough—in fact, they seem unaware of how unnecessarily loud they were—but The One is immediately bored by their inconsequential chatter. Teenagers all seem the same to people who are middle-aged and without children of their own, people for whom adolescence is simply a relic of their past.

“Can you even touch a poltergeist?” The Taller Kid asks.

“I dunno. They must be able to touch you though, right? If they can move furniture,” The Shorter Kid replies.

“I’d date the poltergeist I guess. At least they have impressive powers. A walking skeleton just seems like half a human.”

“That’s true.” The Shorter Kid puts the cases back on the shelves.

“Hey,” The Taller Kid says, a bit quieter and more sombre than before, looking intently toward The Shorter Kid. The Shorter Kid has started moving slowly down the row of shelves, unaware of the creeping seriousness of their conversation. The Taller Kid presses on. “Speaking of, like, skeletons...”

“Let’s get this one,” The Shorter Kid says. “Listen: *A group of teens discover what seems to be a corpse in the local recluse’s basement when they enter the house on a dare. Now the neighbourhood psychopath is out to get them and they’ll have to use all their wits to keep from being killed before they can figure out how to prove to the cops that they’re telling the truth about the body they saw. Little do they know...the corpse was not a corpse and their neighbour is actually a vampire!*”

“Cool, yeah,” The Taller Kid monotones. “So, what I was trying to say—”

“Or what about this one! *Zombie rabbits have taken over a small town and the children are delighted—there’s not a vegetable left to eat!*”

“Can you listen for one second?” The Taller Kid hisses. The Shorter Kid ‘s head turns with a bewildered jolt.

“What’s wrong with you?”

“I have something fucking important to tell you,” The Taller Kid says solemnly and forcefully. The Shorter Kid turns fully around to face the other, still looking confused.

“Okaaay. What?”

“You know that person in the trailer park who’s really small and really old? Like probably the oldest in the whole park?”

“Yeah...”

“So I was walking around the park by myself the other day, nothing to do, just completely bored—”

Without noticing it, The One has stopped mechanically polishing the glass countertop and is instead standing motionless and listening intently.

“You can’t judge me,” The Taller Kid adds.

“Sure,” The Shorter Kid agrees.

“No, promise me you won’t.”

“Oh, come on. I’m not judgmental.”

“Then promise.”

“I promise, I promise.”

“Well, sometimes, when people aren’t home, I look in their windows.”

“Really?”

“You said you wouldn’t—”

“This better be worth all the build-up.”

“I saw something in the really small old person’s window.”

“Yeah, obviously! What did you see?”

“I think they were bones.” The Taller Kid looks meaningfully at The Shorter Kid.

The One drops the glass-polishing rag to the ground but does not move to pick it up.

“Bones,” The Shorter Kid repeats, nonplussed.

“Human bones.” The Taller Kid clarifies impatiently.

“What like the whole skeleton just laying there in the trailer?”

“No, just a pile of bones sticking out of the top of a backpack.”

“How do you know it wasn’t just a couple of bones? How do you know they were human bones?”

“I don’t know for sure but they seemed human.”

“Okay. Did you tell anyone else?”

“No, just you.”

“Are you going to tell anyone else?”

“Maybe? Do you think I should?”

“You could?”

“Who should I tell? Who would you tell?”

“My parents, probably.”

“What about the police?”

“I dunno. I’d see what my parents thought first.”

“Hmm.”

The Kids continue their slow shuffle through the aisles, but they do not talk anymore. The One retrieves the dropped rag, places it on a shelf of the cabinet next to the cash register, and begins sorting through a stack of movies that had been returned earlier.

The One reflects on the progress of the situation so far. The Taller Kid said that the bones were in a trailer. There are two trailer parks in Euphoria—the nearer on the edge of the suburbs and the farther on the border between farms and forest. Euphoria is a cheap place to stop on the way between larger tourist cities. The trailer parks make most of their money renting out trailers short-term to a slew of seasonal clientele, but also have a selection of long-term residents on account of the town’s lack of apartments. While sliding the movies back onto their shelves, The One devises both a plan and a backup plan to find out where The Kids live.

When The Kids arrive at the counter with their chosen films, The One ambles as slowly as possible back to the cash register, drawling, “Be riiight with you.”

Finally in place, The One thumbs through the cases, then taps pointedly on the last with a decisive fingertip.

“You don’t want this one.”

“Why not?” The Shorter Kid asks.

“You’re wasting your money. It plays on cable every week.”

The Kids looked at each other. It occurs to The One that teenagers probably don’t watch much cable TV anymore.

“What do you recommend, then?” The Taller Kid inquires.

“Glad you asked,” The One says, meandering back to the stocked shelves as laboriously as a rheumatic seal through sand.

The Kids do not follow.

“This here,” The One declares upon returning minutes later.

“What’s it about?” The Shorter Kid asks.

“Someone witnesses a murder but decides not to report it and then is haunted by the victim’s ghost,” The One answers, which is a liberal interpretation of the movie’s basic premise.

The Kids look at each other again. The One might be imagining their eyes narrowing.

“Yeah, okay,” The Shorter Kid says with a casualness so flippant it sounds forced. The Taller Kid stares carefully at The One, as if searching for confirmation of subtext.

“Great. Can I interest you in some refreshments to accompany your film?” The One has miscalculated a solicitous tone and realizes there is nothing to do except proceed as if this interaction is entirely normal. “Popcorn?” The teenagers shake their heads. “Pretzels?” Shake. “Black licorice?” Shake. “Red licorice?” Shake. “Soda? We have orange, cola, root beer, cream—”

“We’re good, thanks,” The Shorter Kid interjects.

“All right, then, just the movie.” The One is nervous and glances at The Kids, who are unreadable. “Three movies. Old releases. That’ll be ten-fifty for two nights. Let’s see how much it’ll be for five nights.” The One pulls out a calculator despite already knowing that it will be fifteen-thirty.

“We only need them for two nights,” The Taller Kid says.

“Are you sure? The longer you keep them, the more of a discount there is.”

“Two nights is enough,” The Shorter Kid reiterates.

“All right then, three movies for two nights,” The One confirms, scanning the barcodes. “Do you have an account with us?”

“Yes,” The Taller Kid answers.

“What name is it under?”

The Taller Kid spells it out.

“Phone number?”

The Taller Kid recites it.

“Postal code?” The One asks, face solidifying into an expression of indifference.

The Taller Kid gives it. The One speeds through the rest of the transaction like a character in a film being fast-forwarded.

“Thank you for visiting Utopia enjoy your movies come again anytime.” The One shoves the plastic bag full of movies toward The Kids and beams in a way that could be mistaken for graciousness. With any luck, The Kids will chalk up any strangeness that evening to another instance of adults’ enigmatic ways.

When The Kids have left the store, The One looks up the addresses of Euphoria's two trailer parks and matches the postal code The Taller Kid gave to the park that is farther from downtown. The One stands illuminated for a moment by the store's fluorescent lights and the flush of success, before realizing that the trailer park must have dozens of trailers and the postal code will do nothing to distinguish them.

By the time The One rushes out of the store, through the parking lot, to the road, The Kids are nowhere in sight.

Fizz

Occasionally, very occasionally, perhaps so occasionally that it may be called rare, people decide they are in love at exactly the same moment. The Lovers were more normal than that.

The First Lover knew by the second time they met. Then there was The Second Lover, whose reciprocity was far slower, treading long stretches of time. But once dipped beneath the water, The Second Lover grew gills. A fish for life. A reversal of evolution that could not be undone.

Time is the only gift greater than space. The First Lover brought all the clocks on earth to The Second Lover and they drew them into the sea. Hands stopped and uncountable minutes slipped into infinity.

The Lovers met, the first time, by accident at a party. The Second Lover was effervescent, clouding on a fizz of prosecco, losing innumerable secrets to someone whose face could not afterward be recalled. The Second Lover told The Acquaintance about one of many collected infatuations and The Acquaintance gasped, all tipsy enthusiasm, and waved over a friend with the same name. It was only a case of mistaken identity but The Lovers hardly knew anyone else at the party, so when The Acquaintance left for another drink and never returned, they flirted for an hour before drifting off to dally with other people because they both felt young that night, so much younger than they were.

By morning, The Second Lover had sunk back into hollow eye sockets and wished then for a phone number.

One accident is a mistake but two accidents is fate. The Lovers met again, happenstance, on a street corner. The Second Lover led them into a curio store where they found a vanity mirror stained with harebells that neither of them could part with.

They had given each other words on every day since.

First Time

“Let’s not take the car.” That was the first thing The Other said when The One arrived. “We’ll walk. Then no one can track my license plate.”

“That makes sense,” The One agreed and they left on foot, side by side. The Other set the pace, efficient but not suspiciously swift.

“So you’ve never broken into a house before.” The Other said it without question and The One felt no need to reply. “That’s funny. I’ve always thought of you as a take-what-you-can-get type.”

“Oh really? Why’s that?”

“You have a completely average level of affection for movies but you work at the video store, probably because it’s not too hard. You live in an apartment by yourself because you can basically afford to and you don’t want to fuss too much with other people. You have some hobbies, you play guitar. You don’t try to start a band or book shows. You don’t treat any of it seriously. You take what you can get, you don’t take what you could have if you tried harder. Nothing you do is a labour of love because you don’t love labour.”

The One stopped walking and looked at The Other.

“Why do you think we’re doing this?” It was a sombre question but without malice.

“Oh, I didn’t mean...”

“I know you didn’t.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You don’t have to be sorry. I’m not trying to call you out. I just think you should remember what we’re doing here.”

“I guess I thought you were doing the right thing. Being decent. Under the circumstances.”

“Well, hopefully we’re doing that, too. Anyways, don’t worry about it. There’s no way you could’ve...it’s not like I told you everything. I probably should have.”

“It’s okay. I’m here to help. Either way.”

The Other started walking again and The One followed. The sun glared down at them, a single judgmental eye. The One thought it very inconsiderate of the sky to not at least offer a few modest clouds on a solemn occasion requiring considerable discretion.

“Have I told you how much I appreciate you?” The One asked.

“Only every time you see me.” The Other replied.

“I really do.”

“You’re my friend. And it’s not like there’s much else to do in this town.” The Other offered a smirk that was probably for The One’s benefit. “How many free movies do you think I can get out of this?”

“Probably as many as you want for as long as I have my job.”

It was mid-morning on a weekday and they were headed toward the suburbs. A car passed them by every few minutes. Birds chirped intermittently in the distance. Now and then they gave the sidewalk over to a lone parent with a stroller or an old couple holding hands and The Other watched them studiously or enviously. The sidewalk ended when they reached the suburbs and they had to continue by strolling on the side of the road through the streets repeatedly looping back on themselves. It was on the dead ends

that the most impressive houses resided, a destination in themselves, not stopover points on streets leading somewhere else.

The house they sought looked harmless and unremarkable as all the others when they approached. Set back from the road by a sizable driveway and an upward-rolling lawn, it was an augmented Cape Cod, grey-bricked, with two white-framed Georgian windows on each side of a taciturn navy door, twin dormers like frank eyes on a plain and open facade.

“You’d think they’d gone out of town for the weekend,” The One said, stopping at the foot of the stone steps that led up to a wide, flat stoop.

“Maybe they have,” The Other suggested gently.

“I guess we should knock.”

“Yes.”

“I guess I’ll do that.”

The One climbed the steps, forcefully thrust the black wrought-iron knocker against the door, stood back, and checked the time.

“I’ll knock again,” The One said after precisely one minute had elapsed.

“Good idea,” The Other replied encouragingly.

The One knocked again, and then, impatient, not knowing how long it would be appropriate to wait, began to glance about. There were no chairs on the stoop. The only decorative gestures were two large, ornamental pots holding tall, scarlet gladiolus flowers that appeared to be in good health. The mailbox was not overflowing. The front windowpanes were visibly clouded, even at this distance, as if they had not been cleaned for several months, though The One felt that no conclusions could be drawn from this.

“I don’t think they’re answering,” The One noted.

“Seems not,” The Other agreed. “Let’s go to the back. You go around the left side of the house, I’ll go around the right.”

They parted. The One observed that the windows on the right side of the house were unhelpfully high and rather small, but the backyard was mercifully surrounded by a high cypress hedge that wanted trimming. The wooden deck, painted a crisp white, held only two charcoal-grey Adirondack chairs and led to a hospitable sliding glass door.

“Doesn’t look like they host a lot of garden parties,” The Other commented, emerging from the far side of the house.

“No, I don’t think they’re the type,” The One said. “Did you see anything?”

“Nothing of interest,” The Other answered. “Nice private yard though.”

“Sure is.”

“Let me know if anyone’s coming. I’m going to get this back door open.”

The One’s gaze remained carefully averted as The Other took out the lockpicking kit. The One felt that to look just then would be to watch The Other undress, revealing a secret self that could neither be wholly hidden nor should be wholly known. They were only a certain kind of friends.

“Let me know when you’re done,” The One said.

“You can look,” The Other responded. “You might learn something.”

The One did not look.

The door slid open. The Other waved a hand graciously toward it.

“You should go in first.”

“It occurs to me,” The One said, standing on the threshold, “that this will be my first time inside the house.” The words ached out loud.

“Really?”

“I’ve been as far as the porch.”

The One stepped through the door and stood at the edge of what was obviously the living room.

“Do you want us to take off our shoes?” The Other asked, doing the same.

“I guess not,” The One said, bending down. “Thieves don’t take off their shoes, do they?”

“No, but if they’re smart they throw them out after.” The Other closed the sliding door behind them.

“I’ll keep that in mind.” The One began to circle the room. Bare white couches. A sheepskin rug in front of a stone hearth. A television set, nailed to the opposite wall, so sleek in its design that it looked more like a simulacrum of itself than a functioning appliance. The fuzz of dust on its screen articulated disuse.

“Hardwood.” The Other tapped a soled foot on the floor.

“I didn’t know you cared about that kind of thing.”

“Everyone likes a good hardwood, don’t they?”

“Sure.”

The One led them out of the living room.

“Anything you think we should be looking for?” The Other asked.

“Fuck. I have no idea. A note? A journal? An itinerary?”

“Okay. How about we just stay together and we’ll discuss anything of interest we might come across.”

“Yeah, alright.” The One started to move off in the direction of the adjoining kitchen.

“But also we should keep an eye out for open maps, wallets, keys, and computer passwords. And let’s take photos of the rooms, to reconsider later.”

“Makes sense.”

“And maybe let’s try not to touch or move anything and if we do pick something up we should do it with our sleeves and put it back precisely where we found it.”

“I’ll try to remember all of that.”

The One and The Other moved laboriously through the house, twitching when they heard the voices of neighbours or the calls of birds. The Other photographed unwashed dishes in the kitchen sink, spoiled steak in the refrigerator, an empty shoe mat and full coat pegs by the front door.

“Who leaves their jacket at home unless they expect to return?” The One wondered aloud while The Other delicately patted down the pockets and pulled out a wallet.

“Cash. Credit card. Driver’s license.” The Other turned to The One, who could not speak. “Let’s check the garage.”

There were two cars, a cerise import convertible and a pearl-blue coupe.

“How many cars did they have?” The Other asked. Throat thick with bile, The Other coughed before answering.

“Two?” A long pause. “Probably two. But I can’t be certain.” The One’s eyes swept the floor and fixed on a dark stain. The Other noticed.

“That’s just oil.”

“For sure?”

“For sure. My car had an oil leak once. Bad. The whole floor of our carport turned that colour.”

The One still did not move.

“There could be a second wallet. They could have gotten a ride to the train station, or taken a cab to the airport. The fact that the cars aren’t gone doesn’t tell us anything definite,” The Other pointed out. The One nodded, a nod that was all defeat, and sat down on the cement.

“No, come on, don’t do that.” The Other waited for the pleading tone to do its work. The One did not even look up. “You can have a meltdown later. Get back on your feet,” The Other commanded with halfhearted severity, before walking over to a row of tote boxes on the back wall and pulling one open. “Help me check these. We might find something useful.”

They found: unopened bottles of antifreeze and windshield washer fluid, a tin of wax, a nearly-empty bag of plant fertilizer, a pair of dirt-smudged gardening gloves, a trowel, hedge trimmers, strings of coloured lights, two paint roller brushes, and a can with a petrified drip of paint running down its side.

“We should check the trunks of their cars.” The One was grim.

“I’ll do it,” The Other said decisively and went to get the keys.

“No bodies,” The Other reported, closing the second trunk a few minutes later.

“No clues.”

There was nothing of significance on the rest of the ground floor either, not in the dining room, not in the guest bathroom.

The One and the Other stood midway between the ascending and descending staircases.

“Which way?” The One asked.

“Let’s just get the basement over with,” The Other suggested.

The basement was far less unnerving than others of its ilk. It had light grey carpet and white drywall that could have easily shown stains but did not. There was no ramshackle root cellar or low-ceilinged furnace room or water damage creeping up the walls. Like the garage, it held neatly-packed tote boxes full of sundries and holiday decorations.

“No bodies,” The Other said with strained relief as they left.

“No bodies,” The One echoed.

The upper floor was a half-storey. A hallway connected four rooms—a master bedroom with an ensuite bath, a guest bedroom, and what appeared at a glance to be two personal rooms.

The master bedroom and the guest room were plucked straight from furniture stores. They were finely-outfitted with king-sized beds and high-thread-count cotton duvets, and devoid of idiosyncrasy. Night tables with reading lamps bookended the beds but bore no books. One table held a glass of water in which a spider had drowned.

Dressers contained folded clothes and extra towels. Sunrays became a delicate haze through the filter of chiffon curtains.

The One was transported to a hotel upon entering the master bedroom's ensuite bath. Necessities came in singles. One bar of soap for the sink, one bar of soap and one bottle of shampoo for the bath, still ringed with soap scum, one hand towel hanging on a rack. In the medicine cabinet, there was one bottle of acetaminophen and one ceramic dish filled with cotton balls. The Other checked underneath the sink for loose razor blades, or pills with ominously esoteric names, but found simple, familiar hydrogen peroxide. The only twins were the toothbrushes, bone dry.

As they stepped out of the bathroom into the hallway, there was a knock on the front door. They stopped moving, looked at each other, waited for the situation to inevitably escalate or deescalate.

Knocks came like thunder claps and they wondered how far behind the lightning. Still they waited.

“Hey! HEY!” Someone was shouting on the porch but the words that followed were indecipherable. The Other began to tiptoe down the stairs toward the sound.

“What are you doing?” The One hissed, but when The Other offered no response. As they moved forward, words came into focus.

“—every day, every day mind you, and you can't even dignify me with a response, never mind tend to your goddamn yard. I have a lawyer, you know, and I don't want to call my lawyer but I will. Your yard is a disgrace to this whole neighbourhood and I know, *I know*, that a bylaw enforcement officer has come by because there's a notice in your mailbox you haven't even bothered to pick up—”

What should we do? The One mouthed nervously to The Other, whose vigorous head shake clearly answered: *Nothing*.

“What if I wanted to sell my house? I ask you. I’d lose ten percent because of your *slov-en-li-ness*. You are compromising property values for the entire street and it’s disgusting. New money. That’s all you are. New money with no thought or care for our social mores. Our time-honoured traditions. Well I won’t stand for it. I will show you and you will see. You. Will. See.”

Retreating footsteps echoed with a repressed but increasingly remote fury. The Neighbour had presumably been referring to a distant rather than an immediate future, having left the house without showing either The One or The Other anything. Even after the sound had died to silence, The One and The Other stood motionless on the stairs.

“Maybe the police will listen if someone like that reports them missing,” The One said flatly.

“Should we finish what we started? Or are you afraid The Neighbour will come back?”

“Let’s get it over with as quickly as we can.”

The first personal room was noteworthy insofar as it clearly belonged to a single individual, but revealed almost nothing of a personality. It spoke to a set of interests. Curio cabinets displayed glass animals, the walls were obscured by large abstract paintings that shared an unidentifiable aesthetic similarity though the signatures all differed, one of the desk drawers was filled with maps. Another desk drawer contained financial documents, none of which testified to difficulty. What the room lacked was any

record of private thought. There was no notepad, no personal calendar, no diary, no letters waiting to be sent, no computer, no phone.

“This tells us nothing.” The One sighed.

“Really? I think it tells us quite a lot.”

“Like what, for example?”

“Like the fact that this person is hiding something.”

The One snorted involuntarily.

“That means they knew what was coming,” The Other looked meaningfully at The One, who could think of nothing to say to this.

The second personal room had an unnecessary number of chairs for any single person. Multiple chaise lounges with sweeping curves, a cushioned reading seat by the window, a marshmallow pouf draped in sheer muslin. A violin reclined in a stand in the corner of the room. And though the drawers of the desk in this room were teeming with sheet music, postcards that were never signed, laptop accessories without a corresponding computer, a passport due to be renewed, and photos of the homeowners when they were young—and though, still more significantly, a stack of letter paper and a fountain pen were prominently displayed on the desktop, which suggested at least a wish to communicate—still there was not one relic to confirm that the inhabitant of the room had ever actually expressed anything to anyone.

Without thinking, The One touched the neck of the violin, and would have sworn the wood still felt warm, as though someone had been playing it just minutes ago.

“What do you make of it?” The Other asked.

“Sometimes it feels like they’re about to walk in on us. At others, it’s as if they stopped living here ten years ago.”

The One and The Other left the house the way they had come into it. They stood on the deck for a moment before departing.

“What if they’re buried in the backyard?” The One asked.

“Did they wear rings?”

“They used to. Both wore wedding bands, one wore this gaudy class ring that always bugged me.”

“Meet me back here tonight just after sunset.” The Other began to walk away. “And if anyone asks, you’re a landscaper here to offer an estimate for yardwork to fix up the place after such lengthy neglect.”

This Is Not a Shovel

“Hey.” The Other’s disembodied voice emerged from the shadows of the hedge, making The One jump like a skittish deer.

“Hey,” The One said. “So. What are we really doing here?”

The Other passed The One an object with a long handle that appeared at first to be a shovel.

“This is not a shovel,” The One observed, taking the object in hand.

“Correct. It’s a metal detector. But I also brought a shovel.” The Other paused. “In case we need it.”

“Right.”

“If anyone asks, we’re just two obnoxious people with a poor sense of boundaries who are looking for buried gold.”

“We are.”

“Exactly. That’s why it’s the perfect lie.”

They dug three holes that night. They found: a dime, a bottle cap, nothing.

“Either they’re not here—” The One began.

“Or someone took their rings,” The Other ended.

Cant

The One and The Other walked away from the house, back towards main street, stopping at the corner where they would normally part ways.

“I...can’t.” The One’s voice was uneven.

“Can’t what?” The Other prodded.

“I can’t go home right now. I can’t face...”

“Yeah.”

“I don’t know where to go.”

“There’s a cafe about a block from here.” The Other checked the time. “They’re open for another hour or so.”

“All right, I’ll go there I guess. Can you show me where it is?”

“I’m obviously going with you.”

“You don’t have to do that.”

“I know I don’t.”

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have brought it up. I feel so lost. You should go home, you must be tired.”

“Shut up already, I said I’m coming with you.” The Other lead them forward.

Even the way The One walked was miserable—hunched shoulders, hands in pockets, eyes on the ground.

“You’re a pitiful sight, aren’t you?” The Other said. The One looked up and saw that The Other was grinning tentatively.

“You’re mocking me at a time like this?” The One smiled thinly in return.

“You’re a contrarian. It’s the only way to get you to stop feeling sorry for yourself.”

In the cafe, The Other pulled out a deck of cards.

“Do you always keep a deck of cards on you?” The One asked.

“Only for emergencies.”

“What kind of emergencies?”

“The kind where you don’t want to be alone but it’s hard to talk.”

“You’re better than a therapist, you know.”

“You wouldn’t know, you’ve never been to one.”

“Maybe I have.”

“You definitely haven’t.”

“Are you mocking me again?”

“No, that time I was complimenting you,” The Other said. They played wordlessly for several minutes.

“Did I tell you I got interviewed?” The One asked

“No, when was that?”

“Last week. Twice. Sort of.”

“Sort of?”

“One was by a reporter for the local paper, doing some kind of story on civilians’ opinions of the police. Apparently the police are planning some kind of public consultation in advance of releasing their new budget later this year. Anyways, obviously I had some thoughts on how they handle missing persons’ cases...”

“And the second?”

“Oh just some local newsmonger with a blog. Didn’t interview me per se, well okay didn’t even talk to me, but saw my quote in the paper and made a post about it. It was hard to get the gist of what the blog’s about. I’m still not sure whether it’s libertarian raving or just someone with nothing better to do than go to city council meetings and write up critiques.”

“A boon for our cause.”

“Really.”

They stayed until the cafe closed and left them stranded again in the night.

“Are you ready to go home yet?” The Other asked as they stood on the sidewalk.

“I should be,” The One said.

“That means you’re not,” The Other declared and The One was relieved to be understood without explanation. “Not much is open anymore except bars.”

“Right.”

“I’m guessing that’s not the kind of place you want to be right now, is it?”

“What other choice is there?”

“You haven’t had a lot of friends, have you?” The question sounded rhetorical—a dispassionate observation by The Other.

“I’ve had friends.” The One shrugged.

“Close friends?”

“Apparently not.”

“Okay, here’s how this goes: I’m going to invite you to stay with me, because we’re friends, and that’s the sort of thing friends do for each other when they’re having a

really bad time. And in the future, you'll have enough sense to tell me when you are having a bad time and want to stay over."

The One stared with a rare, plaintive look, wishing to be told what to do.

"This is where you say yes, okay," The Other supplied.

"Yes, okay."

"Great, come on." The Other walked a half-step ahead, as if it were The One's first time.

Overcoat

When The Other finally shut the bedroom door against the clamour of the world, The One sighed and looked for a place to crumple inward. Finding none, The One stood at odds with the room until The Other drew them both into an inelegant embrace that was as firm and steady as a heavy coat.

“I’m sorry.” The Other said over The One’s shoulder. “This never gets easier for you, does it?”

“Not really.” The One’s eyes were closed. “It would be worse if you weren’t here though.”

“May that be true in every aspect of my life,” The Other said, letting The One go. “You can have the bed.”

“Where are you going to sleep?”

“The chair.”

“I won’t sleep if I know you’re stuck in a chair because of me.”

“Well, the bed is pretty small, but we can try to fit side by side.”

The One had almost forgotten the reassuring discomfort of sleeping beside someone. The Other disappeared easily into the deep still waters of unconsciousness while The One laid awake, synchronizing their breath.

Blueprints

In the dinette of the travel trailer, the trailer which is home, home where The Little Ghost never speaks aloud, the kettle is shrieking, forcing a jet of steam through the shrill, pursed mouth of its spout. Sitting on the single chair pulled up to the foldout table, The Little Ghost assesses the space, considers whether it would permit a second chair, a bit of furniture which had for so long been neither a useful necessity nor a pleasing luxury. What would The Little Ghost do with two chairs? Use them on alternating days?

Gorgeous

The Coyote snouts past the layers of cloth, leaves the parts of the body thick with hair for more desperate scavengers, gorges on thick wefts of pink muscle rich with the iron tang of blood. Teeth crack the surfaces of bones and The Coyote remembers the sponge of marrow like the slight give of hard earth after rain. The marrow is not needed now—The Coyote will be well-filled by meat that requires less work to extract.

Innards leak outward and human scent scatters through tree and grass, a rare smell in the forest and stronger than it has been there for countless years.

The Coyote is not the first to the flesh. Flies are always quicker because they are never gone from any place; they lay their eggs before any mammal notices the new death. Maggots taste of swelling wounds, so The Coyote eats around them rather than through them.

As body is devoured, cloth becomes easier to claw away. The Coyote goes slowly, keeps the vultures waiting in the sky, watches for rats creeping closer to claim their piece, ready to kill anyone who comes too close before their time.

Live bodies taste better than dead ones.

Map of Misdeeds

The One was sitting cross-legged and staring at a map of the town that was laid out on the floor of The Other's bedroom.

"We've talked to the police. We've driven the streets. We've been through the neighbourhood all the way up to their door. Now we need to get inside," The One said. The Other nodded.

"The longer we wait to go to the house, the greater the risk that it'll be sold or demolished before we have time to search it." The Other was sitting on a faded swivel chair with a worn-out cylinder that existed in permanent close proximity to the ground.

"They had enough money that I bet the mortgage is still getting paid, but eventually they'll owe somebody for something and the bank will end up repossessing the house."

"Probably, yeah. Especially if they never show up."

"Right."

"I mean—"

"It's okay. I know." The One chose not to breathe, for it seemed more composed than a sigh. "When should we go?"

"If we went at night, we would be less likely seen, but more likely suspicious if we were discovered."

"It'll be easier to search with daylight rather than flashlights."

"That too."

The One looked to the window, from which the cool, dimming wash of twilight sky seeped over the room.

“Not today, then.” The One said. The Other looked to the clock.

“Not today.”

“Tomorrow then?” The One asked.

“Working,” The Other said. “Overmorrow?”

“Sure, we’ll go overmorrow,” The One said with a slightly arch inflection. The Other gazed steadily at The One, unaffected, either not recognizing or preferring not to acknowledge the tease. The One coughed delicately. “We’ll need a plausible excuse in case we’re caught.”

“We could tell the truth,” The Other said, apparently in earnest.

“I’m not sure how sympathetic the police would be. ‘Sorry for breaking the law, it’s just that we thought you were doing such a shit job we decided we’d better take over.’ You know?”

“Okay, yeah, you’re right. Did they have pets? We could pretend to be entirely concerned about animal welfare.”

“If they had pets I would have gone in already! But I’m pretty sure all they would have are plants.”

“I guess impending plant death doesn’t carry the same kind of urgency. Not yet, anyways. Maybe if they keep doing those studies on plant consciousness...” The Other was staring through the window while speaking, as if looking out into another world.

“Wait, what if it wasn’t their plants but your plants and they’d just been looking after the plants and you were going to retrieve the plants, which are really important to you, maybe rare orchids or something, your investment plants. You’re breaking in because you’re protecting your money. That’s the kind of thing some people understand.”

“There are two problems, one being that we don’t actually have expensive orchids to plant at the scene to justify our excuse and the other being that I don’t look like the sort of person who invests anything.” The One looped a finger through a split shoulder-seam.

“Not all rich people look rich.”

“But all poor people look poor.”

“I don’t think—”

“Let’s just not get caught. How much trouble can we get in for trespassing? We won’t even be stealing anything.”

“Depends on whether you have to smash a window or a door to get in. Of course, we won’t because I’ll have my lockpicking kit.”

“Why do you have a lockpicking kit?”

“Previous career,” The Other said. “Wayward youth.”

The One stared and The Other stared back. The One considered asking for elaboration but decided against it. The Other continued, “Are you sure you don’t know anyone who was close enough to them to maybe have a key? This would be so much easier if someone could just let us in.”

“That’s the problem. I wasn’t close enough to them to know who else would have been close to them.” The One resumed staring at the ground, making sure to gaze in the general direction of the map, just to make sure The Other never suspected melancholy might be the cause of the staring. The map had to be the only plausible reason.

A cacophony downstairs interfered with their momentary quiet.

“I didn’t know you had a dog in the house,” The One said, guessing at the cause of the sharp juts of noise.

“We don’t. That’s one of my roommates. Laughing, I think.”

“Really? Which roommate?”

“A new one. You haven’t met.”

“Nice?”

“Better than the most recently departed.”

“The one who kept hitting on you?”

“Trying to come in my room for late-night chats after getting home from the bar, yeah.” The Other’s voice was so level it was completely flat. The One recognized the sound, a collapse of verve, having heard it once before while The Other was laid up with a broken leg.

“I’m glad you got a replacement.”

“Ha. I didn’t have much say. None of us did. The Homeowner finds them and sends them in and we have to get used to a new stranger.”

“Oh, I didn’t realize. I thought all the roommates got together and voted on somebody.”

“We used to, until a pick of ours dipped out without paying and then The Homeowner took over. That’s how we ended up with the midnight conversationalist. Anyways, whatever, drama, right? Let’s get back to our planning. We still don’t have a reason for being in the house.”

“We can say I wanted to check and make sure nothing was wrong inside. I haven’t heard from the two of them, maybe they have a good excuse for being away even, but it seems like no one is monitoring the house itself. I started worrying after that heavy rain

we got the other day that there might be flooding in their basement or something. It didn't seem like enough of an emergency to involve the police, so we just went in on our own."

"I guess that's the best we have. It's not a very smart excuse though, so we'll have to really make it sound like we're unintelligent. Two bumbling, meddlesome do-gooders who aren't possibly clever enough to pull one over on the police."

"Like we have to insult our intelligence so we don't insult theirs?"

"Something like that."

"All right." The One stood up, wriggling a stiff neck and shoulders loose. "I'm so tired."

The Other, face softening, seemed to understand the endlessness of the word.

"We'll find something in the house. I'm sure of it."

"Thanks for everything," The One said with a tight faint smile. "I don't know how I could do this without you."

"Yeah, so I've heard," The Other replied, rising and walking after The One towards the bedroom door. They both stopped on the threshold and The Other put a hand on The One's shoulder. "Now go home and sleep, you're getting sentimental."

Polyonymous

Bodies have at least four names.

I

At the moment of birth, the living body is given a name. It does not know this name. It does not call itself by this name.

II

At the moment before death, the living body has a name. It knows this name. It calls itself by this name.

III

As a living body turns into a dead one, it becomes a different creature altogether. For four minutes after last breath, the body will not relinquish its form. After that, there is chaos. The parts of the body can no longer agree on anything. Muscles refuse to move while skin loosens its attachment and warmth leaves in waves. Cells eat themselves without meaning to. The brain cries itself to sleep. If the body has language after this, it is a language softening and guttering, losing shape and import—a language that no one can read.

Unfamiliar bacteria and insects attend the new body, which doubles its size as if to accommodate them. The body takes the colour of aurora blueberries, of purple sea stars, of nautical twilight when the horizon begins to disappear. Nails and teeth are shed. Organs and muscles rush out like meltwater—mass exodus—and the vestiges of shape do not hold.

During its last time as itself, the body will be simplified to bone. The familiar is rendered entirely unrecognizable to those who loved it most. The once living body has

become a different creature altogether. This is why, when a body dies, it may need a new name. A name it has never had before.

IV

In the end, even the bones crack open and disintegrate into the world. This is why all bodies share the same final name: Omnia.

Autostereogram

“Where are we going today?” The Other was standing in the driveway next to the car and fidgeting with the keys.

“We should leave the neighbourhood,” The One said.

“Yeah. Any ideas?”

“Not really...”

“Can you think of anywhere they liked to go?”

“I don’t know.” The One shrugged, eyes on the ground.

“Hiking trails?”

“Probably they hiked. I wouldn’t know where.”

“Conservation areas? Abandoned houses?”

“They weren’t teenagers looking for somewhere to fuck.”

“Well people don’t disappear to high-end furniture boutiques. We have to think of where they might have gone and not been seen. Farms? Cemeteries? Even slightly remote places.”

“How would I know!”

“Just try to remember anything you can.” It was only mid-afternoon but the sky was so overcast that it might have been dusk. The clouds were indistinct, and manifest in the sky as widespread murk. “Do you know where their families are buried?”

“Looks like rain,” The One said, finally looking up.

“It’s not going to rain.”

“Maybe we should call it off.”

“This isn’t going to be any easier next time.”

“We have nowhere to go anyways.”

“Okay, you said they might have been hikers. Let’s run with that. I have an idea.”

The Other unlocked the passenger side door and nudged The One toward it.

The Other’s car was a rusted-out rattletrap sub-compact hatchback whose original paint colour was no longer discernible. It might have once been any of a range of medium-to-dark neutral colours, but that hue had been permanently altered by sunlight and persistent filth, and the car existed now on a continuum between grey, taupe, and mauve depending on the relative brightness of the sky and the length of time for which it had recently gone unwashed. The car was a stick-shift and The Other rammed it bodily through its gears. It roared onto main street—the roaring being less a function of speed and more one of pure dysfunctional noise—and was almost immediately out of the minuscule downtown and in the suburbs.

“I didn’t even know you had a car,” The One said.

“I’m sure you can imagine why I only drive it when I need to.”

“Not too many kilometres left in the engine?”

“And it attracts a lot of attention.” The Other laid on the gas pedal for emphasis, bringing the growling sounds the car made to a grotesque crescendo.

“I bet.”

Within ten minutes, they were past the neighbourhoods and into the hay fields and cow barns. The day’s hazy humidity had become tangible once they reached the country, obscuring the branches of trees and the lines of houses. The One expected water to fill the cupped hand hanging out the window.

“Where are we going?” The One asked.

“It’s just a forest I know. It has walking paths in it, but they’re badly maintained and don’t get a lot of traffic. It’d be easy to go unnoticed in there.”

“Oh.”

“You know, if you got lost or something.”

“Is it that long of a trail that you’re likely to get lost on it?”

“Not...exactly...but anything’s possible.”

“Do you think they’re dead?”

“Do you?”

“Please just tell me.”

“I think maybe they just left.”

The One considered that for a moment.

“I think I’d rather they were dead,” The One said. “Is that terrible?”

“Well...” The Other began, buying time. After a weighted interval: “Why would you rather they were dead?”

“Because if they’re not dead then we really meant nothing to each other.”

“Well...”

“It’s an awful way to think. I know it is.”

“Not *awful*...”

“Monstrously selfish.”

“No I get why you’d feel that way. I don’t know if I would in your place, but I can see how it’d come to that.”

The One moaned, a lonely orca.

“Maybe they’re being held hostage,” The Other offered. The One made no reply, so The Other forged ahead. “It’s better to keep thinking they’re alive. Dead bodies are harder to find. Half the time, when they are found, it’s because some stranger wandering in the middle of nowhere stumbled over them.”

Privately, The One thought that such buoyant optimism could only be sustained by standing at a distance from the problem and making friends with contradiction—The One was unable to feel either so alienated or so amiable.

“How well do you think the police searched their house?” The One asked. “I mean, if they are dead, their bodies could be well-hidden. Maybe the police just went in, checked that no living people were walking around and no notes were sitting on the kitchen table, and left?”

“It’s possible, I guess. Death tends to have a smell though.”

“What if the bodies were buried in the basement and the hole was filled over with concrete?”

“Yeah, okay, in that case probably there wouldn’t be much of a smell.”

“Do you think we should check the house ourselves?”

“We can put it on the list of things to do.”

“How will we get in?”

“We’ll probably have to break in. I can’t imagine that they’ll try too hard to prosecute, if anyone even notices we’re there.”

“It’s not a cheap house though. Could have an alarm system.”

“Yeah, but if an alarm goes off we can just leave.”

“What if it’s a silent alarm?”

“Do you want me to go by myself?” The Other said it without anger, as if offering to go alone to pick up bread from the grocery store.

“No, of course I’d come with you. I just want to make sure we know what we’re getting into. That we’re not in over our heads.”

“We’ve been in over our heads since this started. No reason to stop now.” The car slowed and pulled to a stop on the road’s wide gravel shoulder. “Hey. We’re here.”

The countryside seemed unnaturally quiet after the cacophony of the engine. Casting eyes ahead and behind, The One noted a stretch of grass and woods beyond, but could find nothing remarkable about either of them. “Where are we?”

“There’s a trail.”

“I don’t see a trail.”

“Get out of the car, I’ll show you,” The Other said, stepping out. “And don’t forget to lock your door.”

“Right.” The One pressed down the manual lock and slammed the door shut, before following The Other to a gap in the woods that hadn’t been visible from the road.

Foliage, though trampled-down, covered even the path they walked.

“Is this a real path?” The One asked.

“You’re not dreaming,” The Other replied.

Is it on a map? Does it have a name? The One wanted to know.

They traipsed slowly, scanning the forest floor with unfocused eyes, as if trying to find the hidden image in an autostereogram.

“You’ve been here before,” The One remarked. “Do you see anything that looks different?”

“I haven’t been in years. I had an ex who used to bring me here for the...seclusion,” The Other said delicately.

“Oh!” The One replied, turning away to conceal a flush. “That’s lucky.” A pause. “I mean lucky for us that because of your ex we have somewhere to look. It’s useful to know about out of the way places when looking for missing people. Very fortunate indeed.” The One braved a swift glance at The Other—who was suppressing a smirk—and felt an ache for something lost, but could not say precisely what.

The One had resolved not to speak again until spoken to, but after fifteen minutes of uninterrupted greenery felt compelled to adorn the silence. “See anything? Anything worth mentioning?” It was a useless question; The One knew that. Asked as if The Other might be concealing some poignant observation.

“Well, I did notice some poison ivy, so watch out?”

After that The One could see nothing in the forest but trinities of leaves.

“This is maddening,” The One said, when The Other stopped to toe over something gleaming on the ground that turned out to be a bottle cap. “The woods are so dense I can’t see more than a few feet past the sides of the path. There could be a body—a person—six feet away from us and we’d never even realize they were there.”

“Yeah.”

“How deep does this go?”

“Not all that far really. We’re almost halfway. Soon it will loop back and come out about half a kilometre from where the car is parked. But we’re getting close to a clearing. That’s where people, you know, hang out. So we can spend some extra time combing that area especially thoroughly.”

They walked on, mosquito trill filling their ears and mayflies clouding their eyes.

“This trail looks like hardly anyone’s used it lately,” The One observed.

“That’s how it always looks. Okay, I think we’re close to the entrance to the clearing now. Keep an eye out. It’ll be on our right-hand side.”

Their already small steps turned to mincing for a few hundred metres, as they scoured for portals in the foliage, but The One could see none large enough to admit a person.

“Does it still exist? I thought we’d have seen it by now,” The Other said. “Let’s double back.”

They walked nearly back to the point at which they had started looking for the clearing. “I don’t get it,” The Other sighed. “I—oh! Wait. Wait wait. This might be it. But it’s very overgrown. Just stay here for a minute.” The Other crouched down and scuttled away into the underbrush.

The One stood alone on the path, watching the spot that The Other had disappeared into. The sound of rustling branches became increasingly faint, then it too vanished.

“Everything all right?” The Other called. The rustling resumed, grew, until The Other popped back onto the path with scratched cheeks.

“I found it. Come with me.”

The One was not convinced that The Other had found anything, feeling that they were only brushing through the narrow gaps between saplings.

“We’re here,” The Other announced, standing up as the woods opened suddenly into the sky. The clearing was full of tall grass and thistles, far larger than The One had expected, more like an amphitheatre than a mere break in the trees.

“The grass will take a long time to comb through,” The One noted. “Should we split up?”

“Let’s not. If we stay together we’ll have two sets of eyes on every square inch and we’ll be less likely to miss something.”

“Right.”

They walked, single-file, spiralling inward from the perimeter of the clearing, with The Other leading the way as had become their tacit pattern. The One tripped on a rabbit burrow; The Other trod on a bird carcass.

“Does this look like something either of them would wear?” The Other held up ratty fleece vest.

“Absolutely not.”

Then they found the bone.

Trace

They had walked right past the bone, scarcely visible in the tall grass, but The One had doubled back to check a tempered flash of dirty white.

“Hey,” was all The One could manage.

“Find something?” The Other turned to look.

The One held aside the stems of grass, estimated the bone to be a foot in length.

“Could this be from a human leg?” The One asked. “Should we touch it?”

“Use my jacket to pick it up so you don’t get your fingerprints on the potential evidence.” The Other handed The One a windbreaker.

“Is it human?” The One repeated, cradling the bone in nylon.

“I wouldn’t know,” The Other said. “Could be. Or it could be from a large animal.”

“Where’s the rest of the skeleton?”

“Let’s keep looking and see if we can find it.”

“Should we call the police?”

“You can try.”

The One had to redial the number three times with trembling hands.

“Yes, hello? I need to report that I have found a bone. I think it might be human.”

The One stared up at the sky and answered a series of infuriatingly mundane questions before even being allowed to tell about the bone.

“I found—I mean my friend and I found—a bone on a hiking trail—actually I’m not sure it’s an official hiking trail—but it’s some kind of path that obviously lots of people go on that’s right off Highway Four—yes today—just now in fact—well of course

it's suspicious I mean it looks like a human leg bone and it's in the middle of the woods. No, I haven't seen a lot of human leg bones, I'm not a doctor, but I get the gist of what they look like and we were out here in the first place looking for two friends of ours who are missing, so what if it's one of their leg bones? No they wouldn't be in your database. They're not officially missing—of course I tried to make a report but the officer decided I wasn't close enough to them to know whether they were actually missing or not but that doesn't mean they *aren't* missing you know and don't you think it's strange that we went looking for them and found this bone? Don't you think you should at least—you know what, never mind." The One ended the call.

"That doesn't sound like it went well."

"We're just going to bring the bone into the station ourselves. What are they going to do, turn us out of the station in front of a bunch of civilians when we look like we've uncovered a murder? No, then they'll listen to us, I'm sure of it."

"Are we going to finish searching the area first?"

"Right, yes, yes we are, how could I forget that."

"A lot has happened."

"Yes *a lot* has happened. That's right."

"How about you just hold onto that bone and follow me?"

"You got it. I mean I got it. You know what I mean."

The One was giddy with anticipation and agonism. The clearing around them refused to be still, circling them as they circled it, predators staring each other down.

"I guess if this turns out to be anything, the police will do a search of the area," The One said. If The One did not think continuously of the bone, it might cease to exist,

being as it was nearly weightless in the hand, like a flimsy accident of no consequence at all.

“You can’t trust other people to be flawless,” The Other chided. “We might as well finish our work and walk the last half of the trail as we planned. No sense in being careless.”

“You’re right, you’re right,” The One conceded reluctantly, in spite of wanting to go to the station immediately to narrow the interval between first discovery and final epiphany.

Are You Okay

“Are you doing okay?” That question had become part of the routine debriefing habitually initiated by The Other, who asked it again as they emerged from the trees and were following the road back to the car. The ditch was overgrown with day lilies bright as clementines and The One thought that it might not be the worst place to die.

“Yeah, definitely.”

The exhaustion of aftermath had settled over The One and the half a kilometre back to the car felt unbearably long. Left foot forward. *The bone belongs to someone I know.* Right foot forward. *The bone belongs to no one I know.* Fate could be reduced to a pattern of feet on stone and that was reason enough to go on.

“Which is better?” The One brooded. “The grief of death or the hope of indefinite loss?”

“What’s worse is going back and forth from one to the other like you have been for months. At least, one way or the other, identifying this bone will bring you a little closer to the truth.” Was there a measure of tired patience in that voice? “Where is the police station anyways? I don’t think I’ve ever been there.”

“That’s probably a good thing.” The One stood by the car waiting for The Other to unlock the manual door. “I’ll direct you.”

“When were you there?” A beat. “Sorry, you don’t have to answer that if you don’t want to.”

“Turn right at the corner,” The One said as The Other pulled out. “Don’t worry. It’s nothing dramatic. One of my parents was just a drunk and not very good at hiding it.”

“Sometimes I forget that you grew up in Euphoria.”

“And you can’t figure out why I stayed? Trust me, what’s stranger by far is that you moved here voluntarily.”

“Well, I didn’t fall in love with the town, I fell in love with someone here. Anyways, I grew up an hour down the road, so it wasn’t much of a stretch.”

“Turn right onto the next street. How’d you meet you *lover*?”

“Oh, you know,” The Other said. “How does anyone meet anyone?” Every time The Other spoke about the past, it became a wider chasm. “What about you? How come you never left? You don’t seem to be in love with the town either.”

“It does not elate me, no. Turn right at the next stop sign.”

“The one that’s like five minutes down the road?”

“Yeah. I’m here because of the usual reasons that people stay in their hometowns. I didn’t have anywhere else I wanted to go. It was easy to stay here, get a job, be close to my family. Am I missing out? Is the rest of the world desperately exciting?”

“I wouldn’t know,” The Other said. “I’ve only seen so much of it. I have this theory that small towns are like really dense planets. In spite of their size, they have a gravity about them. It’s hard to take yourself completely out of their orbit.”

“That sounds about right.” The One sighed and gestured the next direction. “That way. What I don’t understand is how anyone gets lost in Euphoria. I mean, how much of this town is untrodden land? None of it. There’s nowhere new to go in this nowhere town.” A bitterness rose in The One’s throat that The Other seemed to sense.

“Well, there might not be any new places under the sun but there are always places that haven’t seen daylight for years.”

“Go straight through the roundabout. I just feel like we’re running out of places to look. Like what will we do if this bone turns out to be nothing? Euphoria’s too small and the rest of the world is too much. But if I’m not looking for them, then who is? I’ve just got to go on. I guess I just have to keep circling farther out forever until I find them or I die.”

“A widening gyre. Let’s not get ahead of ourselves though. We still have the house and that’s one of the most important possible places.”

“I should remind you again that you’re a good friend.”

“And I should remind you again that, though I regret the grim circumstance, this is the most exciting thing that’s likely to happen all year.”

“See that sign? Turn into the parking lot and we’re here.”

They sat in the parked car at first, not taking off their seat belts.

“Do you want me to come with you?” The Other finally asked.

“Yeah. It’ll make me look less like a lone conspiracy theorist.”

“It’s only a true conspiracy if you have followers.”

The police station was a squat, single-storey brick building that did not look as formidable as one might wish.

Inside, the Other concealed the bone while The One told a disengaged receptionist that they had possibly found a dead body and wanted to speak with an officer.

“Possibly?” The receptionist arched an eyebrow.

The Companions waited on undersized chairs with fake leather seats while people who arrived after them were seen before them.

“I guess we’re low priority. Do they not believe that we found a dead body? I don’t even want to give a statement,” The One said. “I just want to drop this off and have them call me when they know who it belongs to.”

Probable Dead Body

“So you think you found a dead body,” The Officer said, looking up from the intake form. “But you’re not sure?”

“A dead *human* body. We found a piece,” The One explained as The Other delicately unfolded the windbreaker to reveal the bone and The Officer stared at them incredulously. “This almost certainly—I think, correct me if I’m wrong—must belong to a dead body.”

“And I see,” The Office glanced at the intake form again, “that you found this in ‘the woods’ off of Highway Four. Where, I assume, dwell any number of large non-human animals to whom this bone might belong.”

“But we were there looking for our missing friends and we have *reason to believe* that this might belong to them.”

“Ah! Missing persons.” The Officer swivels briskly to face a computer.

“Not officially missing,” The One corrects sheepishly, reiterating the reasons why the status is contentious. The Officer regretfully turns back toward them.

“Why don’t you tell me then what reason you have to believe that this bone belongs to the not-officially-missing persons in question?”

“It’s a bone we found while looking for our *suspected* missing friends in a place we *suspected* them to be.” The expression is patently clumsy. Outwardly, The One reddens and inwardly, The One self-castigates. The Other offers a consoling hand on the shoulder.

“And why did you *suspect* them to be there?”

“It was a place they loved to hike. They told The One about it. On numerous occasions. Kept saying we should go sometime ourselves,” The Other intervened. “It’s a secluded place though. Somewhere a person might fall and no one would find them. That kind of thing. It made sense to check for them there after not seeing them for a while.”

The One sat rigidly, grateful for, and terrified of, this simplifying lie.

“Uh-huh.” The Officer appeared to be considering what to say next.

“You know,” The Other plowed on. “There are some people in this town who say that small-town police are useless. Just giving out parking tickets to people who exceeded their meter by a few minutes. I always tell them it’s not true. That, sure, maybe that’s what the police do day-to-day, but when it really counts, the police still stand up and step in to keep us safe.”

“Err, yes.” The Officer coughs. “Ahem. Thank you—for that. But it’s not up to me whether possible *evidence* is sent out for forensic testing. My superiors will make that call. So I will bring this to them and see what they say.”

“And then you’ll be in touch?” The Other asked.

“Someone will be in touch with you if there’s any further communication required.”

“If you identify the bone, you’ll let us know?” The Other pressed.

“We will let you know if there’s any further communication required.”

“That’s not a yes.”

“Look.” The Officer’s hands were flattened on the top of the desk. “What I expect we will find is that this is a deer bone. In which case there will be no reason for us to have further contact.”

“Wait a minute,” The One said. “A *deer* bone? How would you know that?”

“I’m a hunter,” The Officer replied.

“Of course you are,” The Other muttered, standing up. “Well, this has been extremely helpful.” The Other gently nudged The One, who rose shakily. “Thank you so much for your time. We truly look forward to speaking with you again.”

“If—”

“Yes,” The Other said, ushering The One out of the door. “When the occasion arises.”

Voices in the Trees

The Little Ghost finds that it is easy to speak to The Corpses, for their silences are cups into which words can be poured. Any words—the dead have no need to drink and no reason to prefer one drink over another. Yet talking to them is still more than talking to oneself, for there is always a possibility that they might hear.

The first time The Little Ghost speaks to The Corpses, the forest floor becomes the basement floor of the childhood home where The Little Ghost once sat on the carpet with a workbook during a party talking to a friend of the family who was a crab apple tree—even immobile, the limbs were too long and thin for such a cramped space—a crab apple tree who was lying on the couch and drunk on cherry brandy.

“I hate arithmetic,” The Little Ghost said in the voice of relatively untroubled youth for whom school is life’s single great bane.

“Me too,” The Crab Apple Tree mumbled, half-conscious.

“All these numbers moving about, joining together, splitting apart, getting smaller, getting bigger, never staying still, and for what?” Tender graphite snapped at the press of The Little Ghost’s hands.

“Ridiculous,” The Crab Apple Tree agreed. “Like dead bodies.”

“What on earth do you mean?”

“We bury them, they turn to soil, we bury more bodies in the soil. Death in death, death on death, death augmenting death, death borrowing from death...” The Crab Apple Tree sing-songed. “The whole world is a graveyard.”

“Don’t be gross,” The Little Ghost scolded.

Talking to The Corpses is like talking to The Crab Apple Tree. *Do they hear? Will they remember?* The Little Ghost thinks no one can know for certain, but it still feels different than loneliness.

“Hi,” The Little Ghost says to The Corpses. “Hello. I feel like maybe I should introduce myself? But I don’t know what to tell you. I could give you my name, but you would have no use for it. I don’t think anyone will come here to talk to you about me. You only need to learn the sound of my voice so that when you hear me speak, you will know who is addressing you.”

The gathered bones have begun to set in the mud, prim with the artificial order of a staged archaeological dig. The Little Ghost is concerned about being outwitted, or outmannered; The Corpses know both life and death but The Little Ghost has never been dead and so seems to be at a disadvantage. *Of course, if The Corpses are truly well-mannered and wise with age and experience, they should not hold their longevity against me.* This new source of worry is a surprise to The Little Ghost, for who expects to feel a need of withholding information from interlocutors who cannot communicate?

“You might want to know why I’m visiting you, especially since it seems that you’ve been here for a long time without being disturbed by anyone. I used to come often, but before I happened upon you I hadn’t been here for a long while. Perhaps you know that age has its limits. My health was rather delicate in the recent past. Don’t trouble yourselves about it, I’m well enough now that I don’t have to care all the time about how I’m feeling. I’m sure I’ll grow out of it though.” The Little Ghost snickers.

Rain falls like music notes in the unwood, the sky a wide piano over the forest clearing. While most of the animal inhabitants have retreated to the cozy interiors of dry

trees or the hospitable verandas formed by dense branches, the earthworms, having heard the tiny vibrations of each splashing drop of water, are emerging from dampening soil to begin their slick migrations over ground made newly traversable.

“I used to come here because of the animals. They don’t talk to me any more than you do, but they do respond, in their way, when I walk through the forest and that’s a kind of comfort. I have none of that ancient hatred of the beast in the human face. In fact, I wish the animal was more obvious in us. Back in civilization, people are numbed by structure, they’ve lost the vigilance that is a kind of reverence. They have ears but they don’t really listen, they have eyes but they can stare right through you as if you’re not even there. Deer never do that. Sometimes they run, sometimes they stay, but they always know where I am.

“There is something creaturely about you dead and I know I’m not the only one to notice it. You’re not exactly like the deer—I can’t say for sure whether you know where I am—but you’re not like living people either because I also can’t say for sure that your attention is fixed somewhere else. You might be aware of me, you might not. As long as there’s a chance, I don’t mind too much.”

Dirt has snowed into the webbed crevices of bone and the sleeve of The Little Ghost descends on the fragments one by one to clear it away. One of the long bones is bisected by an unusually large groove so deep and wide that it readily admits the tip of a scouring fingernail. Is it gauche to ask questions of someone who cannot answer? The Little Ghost does not know and so refrains, time after time, from saying anything, while an inner compendium of unarticulated queries increases proportionally. For instance: *Who are you? Why are you in the unwood? Where were you before you were here? Which*

of the animals ate from your body? Do you think of your future, and if you do, how do you imagine it will unfold?

“If I were a different kind of person, I suppose I’d report you to the police. That sounds unfriendly—as though I think you shouldn’t be here. But I’m happy you’re here. I just wonder if you want someone to help you find your family. Maybe not, maybe you’re like me. Still, you might like for someone to find your killer, if you were killed. It’s strange how intimate murder is, isn’t it?” The Little Ghost allows rhetorical questions like these. “Blood on the ground, blood in the veins, they bind us the same.” The Little Ghost touches finger to lips in a ritualistic gesture. “Of course, for all I know, you killed yourself.”

Birds of wilder spaces, being so unused to human company, are generally far more timid than those who inhabit parks and other civilized foliage. This maxim holds true for most of the feathered lifeforms of the unwood, who observe The Little Ghost from a wary distance. A paragon of the single gregarious exception to this rule is perched on the antler of a staghorn sumac. The Starling scintillates among the dark leaves, clutching that bony growth of tree as The Little Ghost holds up an osseous relic of human life.

“You might like to know why I’m not going to the police,” The Little Ghost offers considerately. Ordinarily, The Little Ghost would give an interlocutor an opportunity to reply, but somehow that seems insulting when one is speaking to those who can say nothing, like trying to teach a dog to use a fork. “I will say this: the police have taken me to places where I was not safe and told me I was home, and the police have taken me

from place where I was safe and told me I was not welcome. I wouldn't want them to make the same mistake with you.”

If The Corpses do not look grateful, it is hard to say that they do not look satisfied.

The Little Ghost, reluctant to soliloquize for too long without offering the audience reprieve, stands up from the flat rock that has served as a seat. Not for the first time, The Little Ghost spirals the clearing looking for unnoticed scraps of clothing, jewellery submerged in muck, and finds nothing. It is possible that scavengers scattered the remnants of personal identity, but the completeness of the eradication suggests otherwise.

As The Little Ghost is approaching the threshold of the unwood, meaning to leave, The Starling calls, *Cor, cor!* As if trying to say *corpses*, as if this is not the first time that the bird has heard the human speak.

Pineapple

Somehow, the rucksack doesn't seem right, but there is nothing else, so The Little Ghost just tries not to pack away the bones like tent poles. Spoken words fall, snowflakes over mud.

“Other people don't seem to think I'm normal, but I can't see how I'm all that odd. I might be speaking to dead bodies right now—which I grant you maybe lots of people don't do—but I never *expected* to be talking to dead bodies, probably like most people don't expect to talk to dead bodies, and that's normal, right? I'm at most half-abnormal. I bet a lot of people are partly abnormal. They're not robots, after all, are they?

“Besides, I'd bet that there are lots of people who *do* talk to dead bodies. Morticians must. Those doctors that do autopsies, probably. And can you imagine committing murder and not even talking to the body after? Psychics, of course. Look, those are whole categories of people who speak to dead bodies. I'm just part of yet another category of people that is less easy to name but definitely does still talk to dead bodies. One of my grandparents used to tell stories to the ashes of the other, did it all the time and got along fine for years, didn't need anybody's help with daily life, no, eventually died in perfect peace. Maybe that's me then, one of *many* lonely old people who do this. I didn't know then, of course. Young people never do. If I had known...no, no, pay it no mind. Someone has to talk to the dead, don't they?”

The Little Ghost swaddles the bones in silk handkerchiefs before laying them one over the other.

“You don't look like you ever got a funeral. Every passage needs a ceremony, though—maybe this is yours. You know, if you wanted to have more say in it, you should

have left a note. I hope you like that name, by the way, ‘The Corpses.’ Your fault, again, if you don’t. I thought about it for a long time. Carcasses sounded too predatory, cadavers too clinical, dead bodies too casual, victims too presumptuous, bones too reductive, remains too antiquated, vestiges of flesh too unspeakably pompous.”

If in possession of a comprehensive dictionary and an interest in etymology, The Little Ghost might have known that the word *corpse* comes from the Middle English *corps*, which could be used to refer to the body of a human or an animal, whether living or dead. Narrowing of meaning occurred over time. As it is, The Little Ghost does not know this genealogy, at least not consciously, though perhaps may sense it, the way branches can feel the pull of other branches moving, the way trees correspond with each other through scent and slow pulse.

“Oh well, you’re beyond any harm I can do you now. A reputation matters so long as we move through the world, wearing it as our face, but there’s no good or bad that can come to you from a legacy anymore. You’re past being hurt so you must be past resentment, too.”

The rucksack does not close easily, begs to spill, but at last concedes to the thin-skinned, slow-blooded, insistent fingers of The Little Ghost, who recognizes, with a surge of discouragement upon hoisting the freight, how long the walk back to the park will feel. Foot over foot The Little Ghost goes, chanting *Can I take another step before I rest?* Sometimes, the answer is no.

Having, at last, at an hour far later than expected, turned onto the road leading into the trailer park, The Little Ghost does not stop again, not wanting to draw undue attention to the procession, only slowing once to throw a glance toward the management office,

where a dandelion bloom of lamplight brings the outline of The Manager—hand on hip, staring absently at an upper corner of the room, nodding along to someone’s voice on the telephone—into fuzzy relief. In the mobile home area of the park, The Little Ghost passes a subdued teenager walking alone, passes a small party out on a veranda, hears the bells of ice in their glasses, catches the ragged edges of their rowdy laughter but misses the communal joke.

The table is too small and the bed is too intimate, so The Little Ghost sets the rucksack down on the couch.

“There. Now you’re like company.”

The Little Ghost sits on the chair at the dinette table, watching the rucksack, which does not move, and yet, as time drips by, its appearance shifts, readjusts, until it looks like an envelope concealing a bomb that has been laid purposely out of place.

“That won’t do. You’ll never get comfortable.”

The Little Ghost removes the parcels from the canvas, slips the bones from silk of their second flesh.

“I hope you are happy here, or will be. I worry that I am wrong, that in fact you chose the unwood with intent, that maybe you truly meant for it to be your final resting place.”

A sesamoid nodule tumbles onto the floor.

“Are you trying to get back to it?”

The Little Ghost delicately arranges the bones upon the cushions.

“When I die, it won’t matter where they bury me. The only company I expect is beetles.”

Rucksack emptied, the bones occupy the length of the couch horizontally and the skull sits upright in the middle of the back.

“Still. That’s better.”

The Little Ghost goes to the cabinet, the fridge, pours juice over ice cubes in a lowball glass, toasts The Corpses.

“I can’t offer you a drink, but how about some music?”

Static crackles as the dial rolls through AM stations, settling on the emphasized off-beats of a big band swing number.

“I’m not really of the time I exist in anymore. Neither are you. That’s why it makes sense for us to be here together.”

Toothbrush

From the library, The Little Ghost retrieves books on taxidermy and trophy hunting and studies them for chapters devoted to the cleaning of bones. With horror, The Little Ghost reads that hot water will shrink them and peroxide will bleach them. This is not at all what The Little Ghost had in mind—the objective is to bathe them, not to change them to a new form. Fear sprawls, and in the end The Little Ghost is immobile, holding a bone over a bowl of cold water, tilting a toothbrush toward it, unable to be reconciled even to this minor intervention. The dust, like the colour and the size, must remain the same.

Twitch

Tires skid, handlebars shake, and The Kids' bikes come to shrill and abrupt stops.

"Fucking quitch," The Shorter Kid shouts, spitting out an electric green hard candy and flinging it at the back of the car that missed them by inches just seconds ago and is now peeling away into the night. The wet gob of sugar sticks to the trunk of the car with a diminutive *thunk* that goes unnoticed by the driver. Both of The Kids shift the weight off of their left legs and start pedalling again.

"Anyways, like I was saying," The Shorter Kid continues, "I think we should go to that party tonight. It's not that far of a ride and we can leave if there's nothing interesting going on."

"I thought we were going back to my house to watch movies. I mean, why'd we get movies if that's not what we're doing?"

"So we'll do that after we get back from the party. It's, what, like eight? It's barely half-dark yet."

"We don't even hang out with anyone who'll be there."

"Speak for yourself. Besides, how do we know who'll show up? Maybe you'll meet someone you like for once."

"I like..."

"Who?"

"People. There are lots of people I like."

"I don't even know if you like me and I'm the only person you ever spend time with who's not a blood relative."

"I like you," The Taller Kid says, unsure of whether it sounds too earnest.

“Okay. That’s cool. I mean, glad we got that established ‘cause if you like me you might be capable of liking other people, too. Come on, go to the party with me, it’ll be good for you.”

“Nah, you go. Stop by my place after, though, and we’ll watch a movie.”

“And what are you going to do with yourself all night?”

“It’s a big surprise. I’ll tell you when I see you later.”

“Yeah right. Probably going to read one of your novels, or paint with water colours or something, because you’re a ten thousand year old weirdo in a teenager’s body.”

“Shut up,” The Taller Kid says, shoulders hunching, knees angling inward.

The Kids don’t talk again until they’re out of the downtown.

“I’m turning here,” The Shorter Kid announces, slowing as they approach a corner that leads to a residential street The Taller Kid has never travelled on purpose. “Enjoy your book and your tea and I’ll see you later.”

“I don’t drink tea!” The Taller Kid shouts to The Shorter Kid’s dwindling silhouette.

Cache

Three hours north of Euphoria by wing, there is a lake, vast as a sea, chrysocolla in the gold glow of sunlight but chalcedony in the sterling mist of an overcast day like this one. Travellers reach its sandy beaches by highway, but the less popular stone-thick shores are only accessible by a two-lane road that ripples across the landscape like bedforms wrinkle the strands. Between the waterfront and the road are the trees, and an array of native plants: horsetails and harebells, pussy willows and porcupine grass—all those that have survived being choked out by the encroaching unkindness of dog-strangling vines and the smoggy sprays of baby's breath.

One of the smallest of these rocky lakesides is presided over by a bird, The Magpie, whose territory of five hectares comprises the entirety of that beach, as well as the bordering greenery. Onto The Magpie's shore there comes a human figure. It is the first of its kind today, arriving as they nearly all do, by car, though this vehicle in particular, gleaming like almandine, attracts The Magpie's gaze. The human figure is holding a shovel and cradling a shadow in its arms. It goes to the part of the beach that is above the high water line, at the edge of the trees, and there it digs a hole, a larger version of the kind The Magpie makes with its beak to store food. Each time the human figure raises the shovel, light reflects from the rings on its hand.

"Then you were with me, now you are without me," the human figure says when it is finished its work.

The Magpie waits until the human figure has left the beach before it swoops down to alight upon the shadow submerged in the sand. Pecking beak-deep, The Magpie finds

no buried metal. Though it cannot reach the shadow either, The Magpie knows now what it is—knows it by the scent of carrion still hovering in the air.

The People They Were Closest To

“What’s that?” The Other said, gesturing at a small dark mass in the gutter. *A dead bat*, The One was prepared to say, but as they got closer, it became obvious that they were looking at a more mediated relic of death.

The black leather wallet was empty, not so much as a grocery list left inside.

“Do you think it belonged to either of them?” The Other asked.

Diner. Hand. Twenty dollar bill. The One could picture each of them clearly. This was not the wallet that accompanied them.

“It definitely didn’t belong to one of them. Even if it belonged to the other, what would it tell us?”

“Us? Probably nothing.”

“Should we take it along just in case?”

“I’ll get it,” The Other said, wrapping the wallet in a kerchief and depositing it into a messenger bag.

They crisscrossed the immediate area in grid lines, scrutinizing it especially closely, but saw nothing further of note and so resumed their forward trudge.

“If you had to guess, what would you say the chances are of either of us living in a house this big someday?” The Other asked, gesturing vaguely toward the unnecessarily large, single-family homes that populated the quiet, treed street. There were no sidewalks—lawns sloped smoothly and ended abruptly at the asphalt in crisp lines that looked more

architectural than horticultural—so The Companions walked slowly and methodically along the roadside.

“Twenty-three percent,” The One answered.

“Really? That high?”

“Yeah, well, you’re very bright.”

“I haven’t made much use of it so far.”

“You have, just not for your own benefit. You’re too interested in other people.”

“Hmm. Interested in other people. That’s not the same as being nice, is it?”

“Sometimes it is.”

“You know, if you want me to be of any help to you, you’re going to have to tell me more about these people. Otherwise, how will I know what I’m looking for?”

The One did not know what to say, having never said much of anything upon this subject to anyone before.

“I’m not sure what to tell you. So many of the details are...well, they sound generic out of context, don’t they? I could tell you what hobbies they have, or what kind of food they eat, and that wouldn’t help you pick them out of a crowd. Here’s what they look like.” The One’s phone displayed a photo of two people, arms around each other’s waists, smiling the way people smile when they know they’re being looked at. An expression that conveys almost nothing beyond the fact that the individuals in question have not completely disintegrated.

“Great. Well, that will help if they’re just wandering about in a crowd I suppose.”

“What do you want to know?”

“Were they happy together? Did they ever talk about moving away? How long had they been married?”

“They were neither happy nor unhappy, as far as I can tell. I have not specifically been told that they intended to move away. About twenty years.”

“Did they have enemies?”

“*Enemies?*”

“People they were in conflict with. Did they have *antagonisms?*”

“Yeah, with each other. Like all couples.”

“I don’t think all couples...”

“You know what I mean. They didn’t hit each other or anything. And no, I don’t think they were suing their neighbours, or having a multi-generational family feud, or anything like that. I don’t even think they had affairs. Except...”

“Yeah. Normal people are so hard to figure out.”

“What do you mean?”

“Like, if one of them had an obvious vice, that could give us a lead. If one of them was a drug dealer, we could look into who got the bad end of a bargain. But when things happen to so-called respectable people, you’re just left wondering what could have possibly gone wrong. They did everything right, so what gives, you know?”

“Yeah, I guess that’s it.”

The houses cloaked themselves in wide yards, high fences, swaths of willow and ivy.

“It feels like everyone here is trying to live their lives in secret,” The One said, registering how the curtains on the windows were drawn, the lights in unused rooms were

turned off, cars were stowed away in garages, no children's toys were left strewn on the grass.

“There is no greater privacy than money,” The Other replied.

“You'd think it'd be obvious when anything is out of place here, but I suspect that, if anything were, someone would just immediately come and tidy it up.”

“You mean someone would pay someone else to tidy it up.”

“Ha. I guess.”

The streets were so peaceful that The Companions hardly even had to move aside for passing cars.

“Do you think we should be more, uh, proactive?” The Other asked when they had exhausted the first street without seeing anything even potentially noteworthy.

“How?”

“Maybe we should ask people if they've seen them.”

“Who? We're the only ones out here.”

“We can go door-to-door.”

The One struggled to predict how the people in the area would respond to two scruffy strangers asking after their neighbours, but also had no better suggestion, so shrugged.

“Sure, okay.”

The Other stopped in front of the nearest house.

“Might as well get started?”

“Might as well,” The One said, despite the considerable reservations that might be raised regarding the imposing facade of the towering red brick house that confronted them with its complex roof and its windows arched like disdainful eyebrows.

“I’ll talk,” The Other assured. “Just get ready to show that photo.”

The Other rang the doorbell while The One surveyed the wraparound porch, which was devoid of chairs. A full two minutes after the bell had been rung, someone finally attended the door.

“Can I help you?” asked the stooped figure, holding a silver-tipped and ornately carved cane of solid wood that looked like it cost more than The Other’s car. A pair of large glasses were tucked into a front shirt pocket.

“I hope so!” The Other said spiritedly. “We’re looking for friends of ours, have you seen them?” The One felt a nudge in the ribs and produced the photo.

“No,” the stooped figure in the doorway answered after casting a bare glance at the photo without bothering to retrieve the glasses from the pocket that held them.

“Do you know them?” The Other pressed.

“No.”

“Are you sure? They live so close to you.”

The stooped figure glanced up and down the street.

“Where?”

“Around the block. 11 Cream Court,” The Other said.

The stooped figure did not reply, but stared expectantly at The Companions, who were unsure of what it was they were failing to do.

“Well, thank you,” The Other said.

“Good day,” The One added affectedly.

The stooped figure did not close the door until The Companions had passed the perimeter of the property.

“I wonder what style of house that was,” The Other said.

“Gothic revival.”

“I would not have expected you to know that.”

“I knew someone who was really into that sort of thing.”

“Well, if the twenty-three percent chance future comes to pass, I’m getting one just like it.”

The One did not know whether it was because they were canvassing the houses in the mid-afternoon, or for some more disdainful reason, but few residents answered their doors. A handful did: other presumed retirees, a smattering of harried single parents, a completely insouciant twenty-something, who The One envied but did not understand.

The only people who would even admit to recognizing the couple in the photo were their immediate neighbours, who said they had not seen the pair for some time, but could never say for how long, and who, when prompted, opined that perhaps they had gone on holiday.

“For three months?” The One asked, and was met with uncomprehending looks.

“Why not?” The western neighbour said, and The Companions could think of no brief response, but only said thank you and promptly departed.

“Do they really not recognize the people they share a street with?” The Other asked when they were back on a sidewalk. “Or are they hiding something?”

“I have no idea.” People walked with blurry features through the corridors of The One’s own apartment building, stood faceless in the elevator.

“What kind of flowers are those?” The Other pointed to a profusion of blooms with yellow crêpe petals and long spindling leaves that bookended a driveway they were passing.

“You’re really fixated on names today.” The One said evasively, not knowing that they were called jonquils.

“I just want to know what things are.”

“What good is a name? It won’t tell you when they blossom or where they want to live or whether they’re poisonous or what they are vulnerable to or where they were raised or what they mean—”

“If I knew their name it would help me find out the rest.”

“Maybe it would and maybe you’d do everything you could to try to find out all about them and give them what they needed to survive and they could still die on you and you wouldn’t even know why.”

“I get it. Living organisms are very unpredictable.”

“Why are we even talking about this. We’re supposed to be gathering information.”

“We don’t know what we’re looking for. It might be helpful just to notice things.”

Dive

The One had said yes immediately, flushed in the glow of flashbacks to the dives of their decades past: in scant clothes, in the sparse illumination of neon signs and dim amber light, in the high heat of a crowded room and shots of honey bourbon, in the taut clutch of lust. Spells of time they had forgotten how to cast. *Do you need a ride?* Asked as if nothing had changed. Yes, The One said again, glad for once not to have a car.

Passenger Seat

The nearness of the passenger seat was almost too much; The One gazed out the window as they sped toward a town down the road from Euphoria.

Atomic Spacing

It was not one of their old dives, just a diner that served drinks at all hours. Sunlight was shoving its way into their weekday and The One kept trying to remember what it was they used to talk about for hours.

“What else,” The One said eventually, “is a person supposed to ask a friend—” here The Second Lover’s eyes flickered “—they haven’t seen in so long?” The question terminated in a short, nervous laugh. “How are your parents? Still alive?”

“Ostensibly.”

“Your relationship hasn’t improved at all, I take it.”

“I don’t even visit them on holidays anymore.”

“Rough.”

“Better than the alternative, though.”

“You’d think they’d get to an age where eventually they’d just...”

“Apologize?”

“Yeah. At least.”

“They still think they did nothing wrong. In their minds, it’s perfectly acceptable to emotionally cut off their only child for having a *nervous breakdown*—their words of course, not mine—quitting a high-pressure job I only sort of liked, and going to work at a video store.”

“You eventually went back to being an architect though.”

“Sure, eventually. After they’d given up on me.”

“And you married someone with the kind of job they could approve of. That must’ve pleased them.”

“Oh, it did.” The Second Lover’s eyes dropped, seeming to study the unused cutlery wrapped in paper napkins on the table. “Once I had the job back and the new spouse, they saw fit to have us over for seasonal family dinners again. Not more than that. And they wouldn’t even deign to call, they’d just send us invitations by mail. The way you’d invite a distant cousin to a funeral.”

“Well, at least you see them that much.”

“We did, until we stopped.” The Second Lover had picked up a butter knife and was excising bits of cork from a coaster. “I kept expecting them to bring it up, just once. Even if they didn’t say sorry, at least they might mention the fact that they missed the last half of my twenties and the first half of my thirties. But they never did. It was as if that decade of my life had never occurred. The pretense of it was just too much. And it was so simple to toss the invitations out with the recycling.”

“Didn’t they call and ask after you?”

“They did. Some halfhearted, *We didn’t see you on Sunday. Were you very busy then?* Not the faintest inkling of why I might resent them.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I was always jealous of how close you were with your parents.” The Second Lover looked up, finally, from the tabletop. Smiled tensely. “How are they doing?”

“Retired. Both bored and utterly content with their lives.”

“Enviably.”

“It really is.”

“You haven’t settled down yet, then?”

“I’m not sure I was ever unsettled. How could I be, living in the same place my whole life?”

“Someone should unsettle you. At least once.”

The One surveyed The Second Lover’s face for some interpretive hint, but found an indecipherable expression there.

“No significant other, then?” The Second Lover continued lightly.

“Well,” The One said. “I’m not married.”

A second round of drinks arrived, almost unnoticed; the person who deposited them would have been unrecognizable afterwards, so little were they observed.

“Well, okay, we’ve talked about parents, spouses or lack thereof.” The One said. “I think I’m required to ask about kids next. Do you have them? Do you want them?”

“Sure, let’s take this from bad to worse.”

“I didn’t—you don’t—”

“No, it’s fine. You might as well know. We almost had a child. We had a fetus, for about seven months, and that was the closest we got.”

“I’m so—”

“We were sitting together in a hospital room. The doctor came in and said, *You’ve lost the baby. And I thought, That’s foolish. That’s so impossibly foolish. How can a person lose something that’s inside of them?*”

The One touched The Second Lover’s hand thoughtlessly and would have drawn back if the grasp were not so quickly returned. There was a timeless and tireless calm just then, after the showing of wounds, a surety of being, which The One suddenly recognized as the feeling that perhaps their years of ephemeral pleasures had tried to imitate.

“You called us friends earlier,” The Second Lover said, parting their hands but locking their eyes. “Are we friends?” The One could not be certain whether the tone suggested they should be more or less than that.

“Why don’t you tell me.”

Their table was an insubstantial square, one of several lined up along a bench in the back of the dive. Their table was cornermost, only a thin foot from the wall. The Second Lover was settled on the bench, The One was perched in the aisle chair.

“You’re so far away. Come sit with me.” The Second Lover edged sideways a fraction to open up a narrow span between hips and wall. The One slid into the scanty space, held on both sides, dared a shy glance at The Second Lover.

“I’m here,” The One said, aware of how banal, how literal the words could sound, but wanting them to convey more, willing them to ascend in the alchemy of bodies, subtlety rising in the heat.

“Finally.”

I Don't Want Your Money

The Second Lover's cheek was pressed against The One's neck when the server came back around.

"Can I get you anything else?"

The Second Lover's head shook The One's jugular.

"Just the bill, thanks."

"I bet," the server replied, with a knowing look.

When the cheque came, The Second Lover laid a twenty on top of it, waving away The One's proffered cash.

"I don't want your *money*," The Second Lover said, and The One said *ha*, a bit giddy because there was so little money to offer, because it sounded like maybe The Second Lover wanted something else instead.

In the car, after starting the engine, The Second Lover turned to The One and said, "I've never seen your apartment before."

Salamander

The next time they met, after the diner, it was The One who called.

“Do you want to come over?” The One asked, suddenly and painfully aware of the persistence of adolescence.

“I don’t really—” The Second Lover began.

Have time, think that’s a good idea, want to? The One silently supplied.

“Let’s go for a walk,” The Second Lover said finally.

They drove to the same quaint town down the road from Euphoria, parked in a peaceful neighbourhood adjacent to the main street, and as they walked it occurred to The One, belatedly, that The Second Lover kept bringing them to that town so that they would not be seen by anyone they knew.

“I’ve done wrong by you,” The Second Lover said. That word—*by*—skittered like a lizard from rock to rock. *I’ve done wrong to you. I’ve done wrong through you.* Slither of disparate meanings that The One could not quite catch. “I agreed to meet you today so I could apologize.”

“You haven’t done anything you need to be sorry for. Not to me, anyways.”

“Not yet, but I will; I’m saying sorry in advance.” The Second Lover paused, a moment of due silence for the *mea culpa*. “We can’t see each other again.”

“Stop,” The One said, halting abruptly on the sidewalk. “Don’t turn this into something cliché.”

“It’s not a cliché.” The Second Lover stopped next to The One. “Endings are just inevitable. That’s why they can never be exceptional.”

“Let me guess. You’re married. You weren’t happy. You fucked me so you could figure out whether your marriage still meant anything to you. It does. You don’t need me because you never needed me.”

“You’re wrong.”

“About what?”

“It’s not like that.”

“Well, are you happy together?”

“Yes.”

“Really.”

“As happy as I can be.”

“Are you sure?” The One asked, in the way of someone wondering if they could be a vector.

“What would you know about anyone’s happiness?”

“Why wouldn’t I know about it? Because I haven’t been in a relationship for as long as you have I can’t possibly know anything about love? Is that it?”

“Why haven’t you been? Maybe you should ask yourself that.”

“I know exactly why and you do, too.”

“We’re practically strangers.”

“What are you talking about? I’ve known you for twenty years.”

“No, you knew me once twenty years ago.”

Sometimes, a sentence seems so true that it becomes reality. Those words lay hard and cold as a paperweight on The One’s chest, with scraps of fantasy and an archive of memories faded and smudged by the years pressed beneath. A question, dripping fresh

ink, hung over the sheaf ready to rewrite everything: *What does it mean to love someone who has become your acquaintance?*

The One gazed up, field of vision expanding to take in the whole sky, tried to recognize how infinitesimal they both were, but it was useless because they didn't live in the clouds so there was no choice but to look down again and then The One's eyes were filled with The Second Lover who was still standing there, immediate as ever.

"Blue..." The One said.

"No one calls me that."

"Then I'm no one and I'm not here and nothing we do matters. This is just your lucid dream." The One was motionless, barely breathing. "I'll do whatever you decide and I won't exist when you wake up."

"Do you just like things that are difficult?"

"This is only difficult for you. It's the easiest choice in the world for me."

"Right. What do you think we should do?"

"Well, I need a ride home. I promise I won't say anything, I won't touch you, I won't even look at you. When you stop the car in my parking lot, I'll get out and start walking inside and if you want to go with me you can and if you don't then you won't even have to say no. You can just leave."

"Okay."

They were halfway back to Euphoria when The Second Lover turned the car onto a deserted side road where no one could see them but the trees.

Aero

The One thinks The Other would say it is a bad idea, but fortunately The One believes that there is no objective measure of the merit of an idea, so the lack of a better idea means that this idea seems rather good and anyways The Other is not here. There are two main disadvantages to the idea, however: seventeen minutes remain in The One's scheduled shift, and The One can no longer see The Kids, which makes them difficult to follow. A phone call to The Coworker goes unanswered, so The One leaves a note on the door and makes a wordless appeal for no trouble before locking up Utopia Video.

A lone, gangling youth on an unlit bike comes into murky view on the road ahead just before the sign for the trailer park does. The One stops pedalling and the tires' frantic whine quiets to an insectival whir, indistinguishable from the ambient sounds of the summer night. It could be The Taller Kid from earlier—certainty is impossible but probability is high as the biker turns. Breaching the driveway into the park several seconds after the teenager does, The One flicks off the handlebar light, cringing at the unavoidable crackling of gravel. The teenager does not look back, but The One casts a glance behind, scouting for a short associate but does not see anyone.

As an adolescent, equally judgmental and jejeune, The One had held a view of trailer parks that was both grotesque and romantic, seeing them as a kind of trash bacchanal. Bonfires that burned all night, threatening to come uncontained. Laughter rollicking over acres. Punch-drunk colours of patio lanterns and string lights. The trailer park marked the raucous margin of all that was known, a ley line on the other side of which was only the homeless hitchhiking of the highway life or death in the county cemeteries.

Now The One envies these people who live in a house they own on land they don't, a home they can mostly take with them if they want to leave. There is a decided appeal to retaining familiar walls while the views outside the windows change. The One's adulthood has been spent in a series of apartments that have shared no more continuity than furniture and ephemera, including a single ironic artifact from childhood—a silver spoon whose handle is engraved with a hummingbird.

The biker passes through the electric white glow outside the management office and The One recognizes the hoodie. It is The Taller Kid, what luck, the very person who may have seen something important. With relief, The One observes that the inside of the office is darkened, for though The One is adamantly following a lead, not a child, appearances might suggest otherwise.

Just past the office, The Taller Kid lets the bike fall to the ground and hops a fence to sit cross-legged at the edge of the closed pool, staring into the water without touching it. Distant lights make visible the rippling surface, which glows a colour that is in fact more green than it is blue. The One comes to a gradual stop, landing tender-footed on the grass at the edge of the drive and concealing both self and bicycle behind a nearby trailer whose windows are curtained and dim.

As tongue turns to leather, and bladder begins to pinch, and feet inflame with pinpricks of pain, and eyelids falter and fall, The One fidgets almost imperceptibly, speculating about how long The Taller Kid is likely to maintain this melancholic posturing.

It lasts long enough. After more than an hour, the teenager finally leaves the poolside, picking up the bike but not getting back onto it, leading it like a pony, while

The One tiptoes behind. They follow the curving path further into the trailer park, which is as subdued as any suburban street at night, contrary to The One's childish superstitions, before stopping at a fifth wheel travel trailer that towers twice the height of the pickup truck parked adjacent to it. Bike locked outside, The Taller Kid goes into the trailer, leaving The One standing alone in the dark, possessed of new knowledge, but none of it desired. Overhead, a jet brushes a glimmering streak across the sky, much too impatient to be a star and far too lethargic to be a meteor.

Crypsis

After a long footslog through the unwood, the road leading home sucks at The Little Ghost's boots like sloppy quicksand, each step carrying a jalopy. Quicksand, contrary to what some films suggest, is not a killer, but only the triopentone that soothes to sleep before the pancuronium bromide and the potassium chloride sweep in to pull life from the body, a tide carrying away debris. Pancuronium bromide is a curious phrase, with its incidental echoes of *pan* and *cure*, as if it were a synonym for panacea, which, perhaps, death is in some sense. Then there is the potassium chloride, that salt of ancient lakes, to remind of the fatality of the same water that makes a body whole. Quicksand is not a killer—it holds the lower torso down while waves do the work of drowning.

The path through the trailer park is called Winder's Way, and The Little Ghost deadfoots the periphery of it, upper limbs wavering, a wind-thrown sapling, too small even for the nightjars who are cryptic, aerial, sifting the surrounding twilight for insects.

Nearly home, The Little Ghost almost stumbles over someone lurking behind a darkened trailer and peering around its corner seemingly to watch its lit neighbour. The Little Ghost takes several regretful steps back, like an actor retreating stageside after a castmate has stolen a few lines. A costume sewn of camouflage, a buttoned lip—these performative tricks are supposed to belong to The Little Ghost and the night birds. Now The Little Ghost does not know what to do but wait.

The watcher begins to grow moss, transforming into a fixture of the landscape. Waiting for what? The Little Ghost resolves to be known without being seen. A pebble pings against the trailer where the shadow is half-concealed, prompting a cursory and

disinterested reconnaissance of the darkness before the figure returns to their point of obsession.

Crackle of gravel. The Little Ghost recognizes still other footsteps approaching from behind, recedes between two trailers, reemerges partway only after the person passes. Distant clink of a key in a lock, thud of a closing door. The lurker, jolted, reverses the steps of the new third person and slip-steps soundlessly past The Little Ghost and back toward the park exit.

The Little Ghost wants to go to bed, or at least sit down, but continues to wait in apprehension of further potential surprises. After several moments' stillness, it seems safe enough to proceed. Through the window of the lit trailer, The Little Ghost sees the silhouettes of a presumed parent and child, supposes that the watcher might have been a parent or a spouse estranged.

Finally back at home, The Little Ghost surveys screens, tests doors, takes inventory of bare valuables, lifts the sheet that covers the bones on the couch like a shroud, but the whole eggshell is uncracked.

"You're safe," The Little Ghost says to The Corpses, retrieving the morning's teabag from a saucer to brew a second cup. "I'm glad."

The Little Ghost sits at the kitchen table, resting both head and forearms on its steady surface. Covered as they are, talking to The Corpses feels as ordinary as speaking to someone who is asleep.

"When I first lived here, I was always afraid the trailer would be broken into. It's not as big and intimidating as a house. It felt vulnerable, like a bird's nest. Like someone could come and pick it up and take it all away from me. One fell swoop, all my tiny

chickens. Ha ha. As you can guess, that didn't happen. No, I soon realized I was more likely to die of a heart attack and not be found 'til rent came due."

The Little Ghost trudged to the bedroom, sinks into bed, mutters into the pillow so The Corpses can't hear.

"But you're here now, and I've got more than myself to think about."

Zero

The One did not leave a message after hearing The Second Lover's voicemail for the second day in a row, thinking it might have been wrong to call again, might even have been wrong to call the first time. When the call had initially gone through and there was the sound of ringing, the hope of answer, The One had stopped pacing, but afterward resumed, footfalls cadenced as a clock.

"What else could I have done?" The One addressed the empty room, whose walls were pale, expressionless, inoffensively blank. A single bed with an untucked cotton sheet, formerly navy, turned more of a vague slate, was the only addition, but even alone it made the room feel small.

Would you please just tell me if you're okay? The One composed the words and then erased them. *Can you tell me you're okay?* Another erasure. *Are you okay?* A final erasure. There was no definite reason to suppose that The Second Lover was not perfectly fine, as far as living things went, life being suffering, etc.

Outside, summer went on uninterrupted. Clover populated the boulevards, gulls combed the sidewalk for orts of food escaped from garbage cans. A block from home, The One considered going back to the apartment for the phone and calling The Other, who perhaps would have something sensible to say. But The One already knew what such good sense would entail and did not want to hear it.

There was a letter in the pocket of The One's jeans, and The One's index finger found it, pressed the ragged corner of it. No need to remove a piece of paper whose contents are already committed to memory. The letter had arrived one week prior, and for five days The One had kept duly silent, conscientiously reading and rereading the letter,

patiently waiting for the paper to reveal an original palimpsest that controverted the final plain meaning of the text:

The One intended to choose directions arbitrarily, to walk the city only to keep the feet busy and oblige the mind to consider more than its sole fixation. But the mind, with its scheming subconscious, was leading them circuitously but surely toward The Second Lover's house. Once The One noticed the deception, it became obvious that, without another purpose, both mind and body would fall into desire.

Forgoing the usual polite call ahead, The One changed route and showed up at The Other's door. A roommate answered and went to get The Other.

"Was I expecting you?" The Other asked mildly.

"No," The One replied.

"Oh. Okay. Well, do you want to come in?"

"Yes please."

A haphazard cairn of footwear filled the mat, so The One's shoes took an empty space on the adjacent floor.

"Most of my roommates aren't around, so we can sit in the kitchen."

Sitting at the table, their glasses of iced soda effervesced with fervour.

"I haven't seen you in a while," The Other said. "How have you been?"

"Yeah, all right I guess. I mean, some things have happened since we saw each other last. But I'm fine, on the whole. How are you?"

"Oh, you know. Work. Hobbies. Occasional weekend out. What things?"

"Well..." The One paused, indecisive. "There is this person, we were friends—no, more than friends, but not lovers, I guess I wouldn't call us lovers—I mean we were

young, we spent all our free time together, and I thought we could just go on like that forever, but of course you can't. People grow up, get married, have kids. Some of them anyways. Obviously I didn't. But this person did get married, and tried to have kids, so we hardly saw each other for years. Then, about a month ago, this person called me, wanted to talk, so we talked, and within a couple of weeks we were entangled, in a way that married people are not supposed to be entangled. Of course there was some concern about that, but we kept ending up together anyways. Then last week I found this letter in my mailbox." The One unfolded the letter and laid it on the kitchen table, as though it were a precious lost manuscript page recently recovered. The Other read it without touching it:

I have already chosen a life.

In the silence of The Other's concentration, The One inwardly recited the lines of the letter yet again, beginning to worry that it might have been a miscalculation to reveal a document so intimate.

The roles have been assigned and they limit what you and I can be to one another.

Perhaps The Other did not feel as vested in The One's personal life as the disclosure of such an emotional record presumed.

Though we will not speak again, be sure of how much you have meant to me.

Maybe The Second Lover's confession was made in confidence inviolate and so this act of sharing constituted a betrayal.

You were my last great surprise.

What would The Other do if The One calmly removed the paper from the table before the ending could be read?

Blue xx

The Other finished reading, looked up, scrutinized the expression of The One.

Neither of them seemed willing to be the first to speak.

“So this person,” The Other said.

“The Second Lover.”

“The Second Lover, okay. This person gave you this letter a week ago.”

“Yes.”

“And you have not heard anything further since then?”

“No. And I haven’t tried to say anything either.”

“Right.” The One sat in wordless thought for a while again, eyes fixed absently on the letter.

“There are worse ways to be broken up with,” The Other said finally.

“Like what?” The One asked.

“I once had a valentine whose last words to me were *FUCK YOU DON’T CALL ME*, written in bright yellow chalk on the sidewalk below my bedroom window.”

“How did you know it was for you?”

“We’d just had a pretty big fight the night before, in which I was told that my childish unwillingness to move in together was malicious, disrespectful, and probably pathological, to which I responded that only a child needs someone else to tuck them in every night.”

“It still could have been for someone else.”

“Well, I didn’t call, and my true love never called me again either. So even if the words were originally intended for someone else, they were still meant for me in the end.

But enough about the narrative arcs of my heart. I assume you had a reason for showing this to me.”

“You already answered my question without realizing it, I think.”

“Oh?”

“I keep wanting to see this as something other than a breakup note, but, that’s really all there is to it, isn’t there?” The One asked. The Other smiled pityingly.

“You know this person better than I do.”

“But your perspective is clearer and less biased.”

“On the contrary. My perspective is more distant and therefore my vision is more blurry.”

“That was the first thing you said though. You called it a breakup.”

“Yeah, okay, but I’m not a philologist. Don’t take my interpretation as definitive.”

“Who else can I ask? I’m not supposed to talk to the very person who wrote this note.”

“Doesn’t that tell you all you need to know then?”

“What if it’s not a breakup? What if it’s a cry for help?”

“What makes you think it would be a cry for help?”

“*You were my last great surprise.* That sounds ominous, doesn’t it? A person who says that is expecting to never be surprised again, which suggests to me that either the person is really depressed or expects to die soon.”

“You want to disobey a dying person’s last wish? Or you think you’re going to cure someone of depression by destabilizing their home life?”

“I knew you would say that.”

“But you asked me anyway.”

“I don’t have anyone else to ask,” The One said and The Other’s lips rolled inward, snails retreating into their shells.

When The Other rose, The One expected to be pointed toward the door, but instead The Other went to the cupboard, rummaged and retrieved a crinkly bag, let loose a cascade of small objects that went *tap tap tap* delicately as they hit the bottom of a ceramic bowl, and set the bowl in the middle of the table. Pretzel twists.

“Are these supposed to be symbolic?” The One asked.

“If you want them to be,” The Other said lightly. “When was the last time you ate something?” The One shrugged noncommittally, and The Other turned to the counter and turned back, bringing a single object to the table, holding it in midair until The One opened a palm to receive it.

“A conference pear,” The Other said and The One took the fruit and laughed for the first time that day. “Let’s pretend for a moment that this really is a cry for help,” The Other continued. They both looked down at the note that still sat innocuously between them, as if verifying that it had not blown away, that the words upon it had not been spontaneously transformed. “What would you do?”

“Call.”

“Do you think that will solve whatever the problem is?”

“I suppose not. Whatever it is, I think it’s more than some error of communication between us.”

“Okay, so you call and you talk and it does not solve the problem. Or you call and there is no answer. What then?”

“I would go to The Second Lover’s house.”

“Where they live with their spouse.”

“Yes, with The First Lover, who may not even be there, but could be out, or working. Who knows.”

“So you show up unannounced at the house of your former paramour, whose spouse is conveniently away. And then?”

“We talk. I find out what’s wrong. I see if I can help.”

“What can you do that The First Lover can’t?”

“Maybe The First Lover is the problem.”

“Maybe, but wouldn’t that make you the worst helper? You’re more likely to inflame the situation further because of your,” The Other paused, “compromised position. Your involvement could make things *worse* for The Second Lover.”

“What if I’m the only one who can help? Then it doesn’t matter if I’m the worst helper because bad help is better than no help at all.” The One was conscious of sounding like an after school special. “What if things *have* to get worse before they can get better?” However, being unable to access an operatic register, felt that it was the only relevant script at hand given the melodrama they were bearing.

“There are seven billion people in the world. Surely, *surely*, there is someone who might be of use to The Second Lover apart from you.”

“When a flower is dying, all raindrops are the same—only the Sun is irreplaceable.”

The One startled at the sound of an unfamiliar voice intruding upon their presumption of privacy.

“Hi,” the voice said, extending a hand. “I don’t think we’ve met.”

“This is The Current Roommate,” The Other explained.

“Hey,” The One said, choosing that word because of its ambivalent echoes of both greeting and protest.

“So are you the rain or the Sun?” The Current Roommate asked, opening the fridge and inspecting its contents at length.

The One was loath to admit to being mere condensation but, sitting at the kitchen table, humdrumming fingers upon it in consternation, glooming like a rain cloud, there was no other answer that could be convincingly given. It was preferable, therefore, to say nothing.

“Don’t mind our resident poet,” The Other said.

“I won’t mind,” The One said, which could mean *I will not be upset*, but just then meant, *I will pay no attention*.

“Having a hard day?” The Current Roommate inquired, choosing the incorrect meaning from the possible two and then snapping open a pop can for emphasis.

“Yes, it’s been a hard day” The One said curtly, fully meeting the eyes of The Current Roommate—just visible over the lid of the can—for the first time. “Someone died.”

In an instant, a sound came from The Current Roommate’s throat that made The One think of a baby bird gurgling and choking on an over-sized morsel of worm. But both sound and image fluttered to nothing as The Current Roommate emitted a single, quick cough and swallowed down both soda and surprise.

“Oh fuck. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have asked. I wouldn’t have asked if I’d known. Fuck. That’s terrible.” Slight panic suspended The Current Roommate’s face in a tense and wide-eyed stare, but The One suspected that, beneath the glaze of fear, there was a crack in the ceramic from which filthy water would spill if the surface did not hold. Suspected that, given the least opportunity to relax, The Current Roommate would go right on asking afflictive questions. *Who died? How did it happen? Can I touch the cadaver?*

“We were actually just going to move our conversation to my room before you came in,” The Other said. “A communal kitchen isn’t really a good place for a discussion like this.”

The Current Roommate just nodded, perhaps held wordless by The One’s unrelenting glare.

“Come on,” The Other said, patting The One on the back in an uncharacteristically parental way.

“Actually, I think I’ll go,” The One said, palming the pear that had lain neglected on the table. “Thank you for the fruit.”

“Goodbye.” The Current Roommate offered a dazed wave.

“I’ll walk you out,” The Other said through clenched teeth.

When they reached the sidewalk, The One and The Other stopped and stood facing each other.

“Someone *died*,” The Other parroted incredulously.

“Well?” The One hissed. “That’s what I’m afraid is true.”

“Is it so hard to believe that you were just plain and boring broken up with?”

With a shake of the head, The One turned and walked away.

“Where are you going?” The Other shouted.

“I’ll tell you later.”

“Don’t do anything foolish!” The Other added, a little plaintively.

The One did not reply.

Evasion

Children billowed severally over the sidewalks, boisterous and slow on their way home from school. So much of the day had passed. The One did not want to be walking to The Second Lover's house in the late afternoon, those terrible hours when the twin spectres of family dinners and living room repose came within sight, but there was no better choice. It felt impossible to conceive of an entire evening spent at home, alone and worrying.

This is not foolish, The One thought. A fool is an entertainer. No one even sees what I'm doing.

Down the street from the intended destination, before The Second Lover's house had even come into view, The One stopped. The First Lover was locking a car's door in the driveway. The First Lover glanced up, but The One turned away before their eyes could catch.

Hello Again

“I couldn’t go through with it,” The One said, back at The Other’s kitchen table.

“You probably did the right thing,” The Other replied, and The One considered whether that hedge was a careful scarce evasion of a gloat, or whether it revealed a lack of conviction that was there the whole time.

The front door opened and there was shuffling in the hallway. From the kerfuffle, The Current Roommate emerged, calm on the threshold of the kitchen for a fraction of a second before registering that an antagonist had returned unexpectedly.

“Oh!” The Current Roommate said to The One. “Hello again.”

“Hi,” The Other responded, when The One did not say anything.

“I’ll leave you to it,” The Current Roommate muttered, retreating quickly from the room.

“Now what will you do?” The Other asked once faint strains of music had wended their way down the stairs.

The One’s head landed on folded arms.

Linger

Beneath the heather veil of rain that fell the following morning, the street leading to The Second Lover's house appeared only distantly related to the place that The One walked just the day before. It was nearing eleven, so the early migration of schoolchildren and day workers was over, and their noontime movements had not yet begun. In the interim, no one was parting the silver chill of mist to seek their leisure. That was as The One would have it.

Years had elapsed since the last real visit to The Lovers' house, yet The One did not think of that, did not register the absence of cars in the driveway, in fact noticed hardly anything about the surroundings, but walked purposefully to the door, knocked three times in staccato succession, and attended only to the anticipated sounds from the other side.

The rain stopped while The One stood on the porch, waiting for the door to move.

Bad As It Could Be

“This is terrible,” The One said to The Other as they sat on folding lawn chairs on the deck of the house in which The Other rented a room. Since the rain ended, the postliminary sun had been scorching, and the aluminum exposed between the chairs’ strips of polypropylene webbing was accumulating heat. Now it seared the skin whenever The One fidgeted and subjected a fresh strip of flesh to its burning touch.

“Is it?” The Other asked.

“Truly as indefinitely bad as it could be.”

“Explain.”

“There’s nothing else I can do, is there? I’ve visited. I’ve done the one grand gesture I was putting off and it accomplished nothing. I still have no idea whether The Second Lover is in trouble. Am I supposed to show up every day like some kind of stalker? No, obviously I can’t do that. For all I know The Second Lover was home but saw it was me and hid. It would be awful of me to just keep going back and back and back. So now I have to wait in suspense, possibly forever. There might very well be no end to this. I could just go on every day until I *die* not hearing anything from or about The Second Lover.”

“If you’d done as I suggested you could still have that ace up your sleeve.”

“You mean I could still be living in the ignorant hope of resolution.”

“Yeah. But you didn’t listen, so here we are, in the ignorant despair of irresolution.”

“Ugh,” The One sighed, eyes closed against the glare of sunlight. “Let’s not speak of it anymore. What about you? Tell me what’s going on in your life.”

“Caring about other people really is one of the most practical forms of escapism.”

But The One did not think of it as escapism—not a flight on jewel-bright wings away from the self—rather, felt it was a transfer of concern from one person who did not want it to another who might come to appreciate it in time.

Just One More

“I could try just one more time though, right? That wouldn’t be too weird. It’s been two weeks since I was there.”

The One and The Other stood on opposite sides of the Utopia Video counter—The One was behind it, setting nickels and quarters free from their paper rolls and watching them tumble into the expanse of cash register drawers, while The Other was in front of it, deliberately disarraying the brick-stacked bubblegum and candy bars.

“Do what you have to do, I guess,” The Other said finally.

“Thanks, Superego.”

“You’re welcome, Id Kid.”

“Working today?”

“Got called in for a night shift yesterday. Had to run some errands around here after so I thought I’d stop by, then I’m going home to bed.”

“That’s for your security guard job?”

“Yeah, the one where I’m like a substitute teacher for buildings abandoned by their usual guards. I can’t wait to get another catering gig. Security work is so boring. I’m sure you understand what that’s like. This place,” The Other pointedly surveyed the bare aisles, “is almost as dead as an office building after dark.”

“You’re always in here at our least busy times,” The One glanced self-consciously around the empty shop floor regardless.

“I’m just glad I never have to do the same job for long. I couldn’t stand going back to the same room every day.”

“Yes, it’s ironic, isn’t it? You’re the security guard but I’m the one who wants job security.”

“Ha ha,” The Other faked laughter. “Job security is a myth. There are shorter jobs and longer jobs and you never know which you have until you’re fired.”

“You should give up temp work and become an economist.”

“Actually I think I might give up temp work to become a therapist.”

“I’m going to choose to ignore that.”

“You are the harbourmaster of your feelings. Do not give in to the waves. Trust in the sanity of your ship.”

“Isn’t it past your bedtime yet?”

“You’re right,” The Other said, jangling car keys. “Have fun dusting shelves without me.”

Amid the fragile echo of the doorbell chime, The One tried to name a friend, any friend, besides The Other, but could not conjure a single figure.

The Right Place

Astride a bike and obscured by dusk in the parking lot of the police station, The One watched people go into and out of the low-rise building, trying to discern whether they were confident in the rightness of being there.

Blowup

After emerging from the building an hour later, The One rode down the street and stopped in a parking lot a few blocks away to make a call.

“Miss me already?” The Other asked.

“There’s a buildup of mail in the box, the grass is overgrown, there are no cars in the driveway, and no one will answer the door. I even went at night this time, when they’re most likely to be home. So I tried to report them as possible missing persons to the police but the officers—I spoke to two of them, the first got annoyed with me—just kept asking me what my relationship was to them, how close I was, would I even know if they went on vacation? And I thought maybe I should tell about everything that happened, show them the letter, but I worried that they would think I was some jealous ex-lover, not actually concerned about their welfare, you know, so I didn’t mention any of that, do you think I should’ve? Oh, it doesn’t matter now, I can’t go back in there, then they really won’t take me seriously, maybe they’d even get suspicious of me, I don’t know. What do I do now? I’ve done the last thing I wanted to do, the last thing I could think of to do, but the police won’t even investigate it, they think I’m just in there wasting their time or something, as if I would’ve even gone at all if I couldn’t avoid it—”

“Hi, okay, I’m going to stop you there for just a second. I get why you’re panicking and I’m sorry the police didn’t help, but maybe let’s not do this over the phone. Where are you right now? I’m going to pick you up and we can talk through a plan for what to do next.”

“I’m in the parking lot of that wholesale furniture store near the police station. You know, the one with the twenty-foot tall inflatable palm tree out front.”

Test Species

At two in the morning, there's a knock on the trailer door.

"It's me, let me in." The voice is hazy, hexing. Familiar under a wave of distortion.

Peering through the glass, The Taller Kid almost expects canine teeth crystalline as mountain peaks, but instead sees the top of The Shorter Kid's mossy crop of hair, more disarrayed than usual, and unlocks the door. The Shorter Kid whirlgigs inside, picking up a bag of corn curls and pacing the floor with them.

"How was the party?" The Taller Kid asks.

"You should've been there."

"But how was it."

"Kinda boring I guess but I did get high for the first time."

"You biked home stoned and alone at night?"

"Oh stop pretending to be an adult. You're taller than me, not older."

"Actually I'm nine months older than you."

"Nine months, woowow. That's like not even one-fifteenth of our lives."

"Nine months is the difference between an invisible cell and an entire baby."

"Well what'd a baby ever do for anybody anyway?" The Shorter Kid stands on a chair in the kitchenette while The Taller Kid continues to hover cautiously near the door.

"Did a baby ever make a beautiful piece of art? Did a baby ever feed a city? Did a baby ever save someone's life? No. I don't think so."

"Neither of us have ever done any of those things either."

“I’m just a single cell that isn’t even its own organism yet. What’s your excuse?”

“I have no idea what your point is.”

“Did you find the gun yet?”

“What gun?”

“Maybe it was a knife.”

“Who has a knife?”

“Maybe they went really old school and used a bow and arrow. Have you seen any gouged apples lying around?”

“I don’t—”

“Target practice! Keep up, kiddo.” The Shorter Kid holds up a corn curl, mimes the arc of a throw. “Do you think your fish would like these?”

“No!” The Taller Kid crosses the room in a few sweeping strides to stand defensively in front of the sensitive neon tetras, who have almost disappeared into the vallisneria. They are only visible as glimpses of the oversized black marbles that are their eyes, or as glimmers of the red and blue that iridesce in parallel down the length of their lateral lines.

“Hopefully it wasn’t a ligature.” The Shorter Kid’s arm lowers. “That would be difficult. You think you’re looking at a shoelace but really you’re looking at evidence of a homicide.”

“Is this about the bones?”

The Shorter Kid sits down and begins layering corn curls as if playing a block-stacking game, creating a precarious tower of unsaturated oil and processed grain.

“Did you go see them again while I was at the party?”

“No, I did not go visit the bones.” The Taller Kid says, eyes rolling.

“Did you decide how you’re going to handle that *volatile situation*?”

“I thought maybe I’d finish high school and then spend a couple years training to be a police officer and then get a job with the local station and slowly accumulate evidence in my spare time while I spend my working hours walking the beat until I am ready to bring charges.”

“Hey.” The Shorter Kid points a cheese curl accusingly at The Taller Kid. “Don’t get snarky with me.”

“You started it.”

“I’m on your side.”

“How’s that?”

“I support you by challenging you.”

“Are you sure you’re not just annoying me?”

“Mhmm,” The Shorter Kid nods. “You’d be boring without me.”

“You mean I’d be bored with you.”

“I meant what I said.”

“Okay whatever. Can we watch a movie now?”

“Yeah, all right. Which one?”

Pink Spiders

Sunbeams pour in through the windows of the trailer, which are uncovered because neither of the teenagers bothered themselves with drawing the curtains last night. But this is not what wakes The Kids from their slumped sleep at opposite ends of the foldout sofa. Rather, it is the clang of the trailer door opening that rouses The Taller Kid, who jostles The Shorter Kid awake in the haste of rising, and it is only thereafter that both of them register their mistake, holding up their hands to protect their dilated eyes from the excesses of light—a reflex that precedes even their atavistic alarm, the frantic scanning of their habitat to determine the source of the loud, unidentified noise that woke them in the first place.

“Don’t get up on my account,” says a voice from the entryway, with a familiarity that calms the panicked slugs squelching their way through the synapses of The Kids’ slumberous temporal lobes.

“Morning,” The Taller Kid says.

“Mmm,” The Shorter Kid choruses in pale imitation.

“Late night watching movies, I take it?” The television set is still on, images of the film menu looping ad nauseam.

“Yeah,” The Taller Kid confirms, fully sitting up.

“Do you want breakfast? I can make some—” a kitchen cabinet opens, cans are pushed aside, restacked— “hash browns?”

“I’m not really hun—” The Taller Kid starts.

“Yes we do,” The Shorter Kid says.

“Good. It’ll be nice to eat dinner with company for once. Somehow my child is never hungry in the morning.”

“I eat with you when you work days,” The Taller Kid protests.

“I haven’t worked days for months.”

“That’s not *my* fault.”

“You can invite me over for breakfast anytime. All we ever have at my house is cereal,” The Shorter Kid puts in.

“You know you’re welcome whenever you want. As long as you get here before ten, because that’s when I fall unconscious.”

“Invariably,” The Taller Kid nods. “Like the opposite of an alarm clock.”

“You’re so lucky,” The Shorter Kid whispers loudly to The Taller Kid. “You get twice as much attention even though you have half as many parents as me.”

“We can share,” The Taller Kid offers, and The Shorter Kid nods to seal the contract. From the kitchen, oil in the frying pan can be heard crackling like popcorn.

“Are you going to mention the—you know?”

“Maybe after you leave. There’s no point in waiting, I guess.”

Calculated Compliance

The Shorter Kid speeds through two-thirds of the hash browns, four pieces of toast with peanut butter, and a glass of apple juice, before disappearing out the door with a fifth piece of toast in hand.

“It worries me,” The Parent says, holding out the last of the bread, “that you’re a foot taller than that child and yet you eat so much less.”

“I eat when I’m hungry.”

“Do you want jam?” The Parent asks, already layering marmalade over butter. The Taller Kid calculates the value of compliance.

“Sure.” The Taller Kid takes the toast and chews a placating mouthful of bread.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Yes.” The Parent replies, contemplating a mug nearly drained of decaf coffee that is opaque in the absoluteness of its dark.

“You have to promise you won’t get me in trouble because of it.”

“There is no way I am promising you that.”

“Promise me you will try to be calm and fair and not freak out?”

“I’m not sure what it says about my parenting style that you feel the need to ask that, but sure, I swear I will try not to abandon all good sense when you tell me this thing—though can I point out that this long introduction is not making me feel better about whatever it is?”

“Hmm. I’ll keep that in mind for next time.”

“Next time?”

The Taller Kid pauses to consider, once more, the consequences of this confession. If The Shorter Kid can be thought of as a test species—a water flea, a sheepshead minnow, or a mysid shrimp, chosen because they are small and easily observed, young because the young are the most sensitive of their kind—then the signs are grim. Yet, separate from any probability of success, The Taller Kid must also think of the even more dire potential effects of neglect. If nothing is said, a murderer may persist. The Taller Kid knows that the police have not been to the trailer park because, whenever they have, gossip about their visit circulates inescapably, as if diffused into the drinking water.

Surely, surely, The Taller Kid must speak to The Parent. But is it enough that The Parent is at home, sitting in the same room, eyes expectant? This is not penance. It is not a gesture to assuage The Taller Kid's conscience, the kind of disclosure that can take place whenever the teller feels compelled. There must be a strategy guiding the approach. If The Parent is not in a receptive mood, The Taller Kid's suspicions will be dismissed as the woolgathering of a fanciful adolescent mind that idles away its days in meadows of idyllic make-believe. It is unclear whether this is, or is not, that kind of time. What is obvious is that The Parent is a grass carp with a bubbling gaze—far larger than a flea, or minnow, or shrimp—and The Taller Kid has disturbed the water with unnecessary movement.

“I'm sorry to inform you that The Shorter Kid finished all your chips.”

Road Trip

From the passenger seat, The Corpses mutter their discontents. The Little Ghost steers the old trailer with unsteady hands as it clunks and shudders over the country highway, every rut in the road jarring the bag of bones and making them complain. It is late afternoon, and the sun is poised above the edge of the windshield, almost ready to dip and slant directly through the glass. It was no better earlier with The Corpses on the floor. Or on the couch in the back. Or even stuffed into a cabinet, an indignity for which The Little Ghost had afterwards apologized profusely. No matter where they are, no matter the time of day, the bones will not be still or silent.

“Just a few more hours of driving before we stop, I figure.” The Little Ghost is beginning to feel excluded from The Corpses’ conversations, their concerns. They exist in the secret intimacy of that closed bag, a miniature home belonging to them alone, into which The Little Ghost can only occasionally peer like an outsider.

The Corpses clatter their reply.

“No, we can’t stop before then. You know the rules. We only stay in places big enough that we won’t be noticed. If we spend any time in a town so small it’s only locals, people will see a tiny old person, travelling alone, in a big trailer packed with a lifetime of stuff. And they won’t understand what we’re doing. Won’t see that there’s a *we* here at all. And they’ll get suspicious. That won’t be good. We don’t want that. I’ve already picked the next town we’ll stay in. The campground is big, touristy. Perfect for us. We can disappear into a crowd of adventurers.”

More click-clacking from the bones.

“I don’t know what that’s supposed to mean. Why do all your words sound the same?”

The next stretch of road is smooth, so The Corpses’ objections cease.

“Can’t tell any of these gas stations apart,” The Little Ghost says as they pull off the road. “Neverending pattern of brand names lining our highways.” Not that any of the towns they pass look particularly distinct to The Little Ghost either, all of their houses stratified into neighbourhoods that each represent an obvious architectural era, the horizontal correlative of an archaeological dig. But The Little Ghost will not mention such cynical observations to The Corpses, for whom this trip is supposed to be a sort of pilgrimage.

Inside the station, The Little Ghost pays for the gas in pocket change.

“Do you carry maps?” The Little Ghost asks The Clerk, who gestures toward a half-empty stand of ragged paper. “Hmm,” The Little Ghost casts an anxious, parental glance toward the trailer, before perusing each of the maps in turn while the haggard attendant counts dozens of nickels and dimes. “These aren’t what I’m looking for.”

“Do you want anything else?” The Clerk asks, probably hoping for, if anything, a simple request for cigarettes or lottery tickets.

“You know what,” The Little Ghost says, scrutinizing The Clerk’s face. “Maybe you can help me. Are you from around here?”

“Uh, yeah. I mean I grew up near here.”

“Ever been anywhere else? Gone abroad? Taken a cross-country road trip?”

“Just within, you know, the province. And I went on a cruise once for my honeymoon.”

“Good. That’s good. Okay, I’m going to ask you a question. Are you ready?”

“I think so?”

“Forget about your honeymoon for a minute. Pretend it never happened.”

“Umm—”

“Tell me: where is the most beautiful place you have ever been?”

“I don’t know. I guess I’ve never really thought about it.”

“Please try. It’s very important.”

“Okaaay,” The Clerk drawls incredulously, then sighs and stares up at the ceiling in concentration, as though a film of the past is playing there on fast forward. The Little Ghost offers privacy, turning away to face the station window. “Hmm, well…” The Clerk hedges after a minute or more. “So I can’t say this is definitely the most beautiful of any place I’ve ever been, but I can’t remember any place that was more beautiful—will that do?”

“I’m going to write down my phone number,” The Little Ghost says, copying it in black ink onto the corner of a free community newspaper, and handing it to The Clerk. “Promise me you’ll call me if you do remember a more beautiful place.”

“Sure.” Despite the tentative sound of that vow, The Clerk dutifully tears off the phone number and pockets it.

“Now,” The Little Ghost says, “what’s the place you do recall?”

“Lac Lemot.”

“Where’s that?”

Pulling a map from the stand, The Clerk’s finger traces a line that staggers approximately north through the region.

“It’s fate,” The Little Ghost says. “That’s the way we were already headed.”

“Oh, I didn’t know you had a crew with you.” The tone offers a friendly *my mistake* that is followed by confusion when The Clerk looks out the window and sees no one in the passenger seat of The Little Ghost’s trailer.

“We’re meeting up later,” The Little Ghost says quickly, checking the time. “In about ten minutes, in fact! I’d better hurry. Thank you.”

A strident chime above the gas station door automatically remarks on The Little Ghost’s abrupt departure.

A More Beautiful Place

“I was going to buy the map. I was going to remind The Clerk, *call me if you remember a more beautiful place*, but then I thought, no, better not to draw more attention to us. It was bad enough that I mentioned you at all. No offence.”

The Corpses make use of the next pothole to voice their complaint.

Clover

At a gas station on the other side of town, The Little Ghost pulls over even though the tank is full, and buys a map of the region just like the one that was left behind.

“Let’s see,” The Little Ghost mumbles back in the trailer, perhaps addressing The Corpses and perhaps not. “Page 23. Square 7-C. Luck luck luck.” Now The Little Ghost turns purposely toward The Corpses, tilting the map to face them. “What was I thinking? That won’t do you any good. You’re in a bag. Right, so you can’t see it but I estimate it’s about 150 kilometres from here to the lake. We won’t actually go to the lake today, but we will go a bit farther than I originally planned. It looks like there’s a campground,” The Little Ghost taps a spot on the map where a triangle sits like a hat on a green amoeba of land, “in a town just south of the lake. We can stay there tonight and go to the lake tomorrow. I know, I know, that means at least another couple of hours of driving. Yes, probably more like three hours because it’s mostly two-lane roads, a lot of stop and go. Hey, at least you don’t have to drive. Do you think these old wrists appreciate such a rough ride? Yeah, okay, fine, you’re *all* bones with no tendon or muscle or anything to cushion the shock for you, and all right, I admit I don’t know how old you are either. We can sympathize with each other though, can’t we? Let’s leave it at that.”

Most of the campground they stay in that night is populated by tents: lightweight green nylon for the backpackers, polyester sprawling in bold blues for the families, and a handful of old stalwarts in bland shades of canvas that almost disappear into the scenery. Feeling conspicuous, The Little Ghost selects the lot at the far end of the trailer section—which sits between a massive RV and a row of trees—then backs up until the license plate touches the leaves.

“We got a nice, secluded spot,” The Little Ghost says, turning off the engine but not unbuckling. “That trailer beside us is so big, you can tell someone bought it because they don’t like to ever have to get out of it. That’s why there’s no awning, no chairs, nothing outside, but it’s got a satellite dish on top. Those are the neighbours you want to have if you’re aiming to be left alone, all right. And no one has any reason to drive past us, except if they’re on their way out of the park. You don’t have to worry too much about people who are on their way somewhere.”

Often, at the end of the day, The Little Ghost will describe the sights that The Corpses have missed, euphemizing a little to make up for the fact that they have not witnessed them firsthand. Rows of wilting tulips will perk up in the park. In the diner, glossy slices of cheese extracted from thin plastic film will be replaced by thick wedges of hand-sliced cheddar. It is a performance of levity, and tonight the prospect of it exhausts The Little Ghost, who hopes The Corpses will not notice the omission.

“I have a surprise for you.” It is a distraction for The Corpses, but also true.

The two chairs from the trailer’s dinette are relocated to the grass of the lot. Obscuring darkness has emboldened The Little Ghost, who cautiously removes the satchel from the passenger seat and places it on the newer chair, where it reposes like a shadow among shades. Crouching in the grass, The Little Ghost tends to the ground, whispers.

“Maple. Such a good hardwood for burning. When I saw that they had it at the office, I couldn’t resist.”

Feathery amber light wings out into the darkness. Settled back into the empty chair, The Little Ghost’s words rustle, decibels below the faint sizzle of kindling.

“I know you can’t see much, but I thought you might be able to sense the warmth of a fire. Bet you’ll feel it even more as it grows.”

Children’s giddy voices warble across the campground like wild bird call. An acoustic guitar sings in a major key. At this distance, when sight is blurred and sound is muffled, The Little Ghost can almost enjoy the noises that signify human life.

“This is just for me. Sorry. Don’t think you’d like it much anyhow.” On the tip of a spindly twig, the sugary skin of a marshmallow caramelizes to a crisp shell that can barely contain the melting fluff of its milky guts.

“I wasn’t asking.”

A disembodied voice issues forth from the inscrutable night. Rib bones, which The Little Ghost usually does not notice, begin to ache against the strain of the heart.

“I wasn’t offering,” The Little Ghost snaps back, covering fear with a blanket of anger.

“Don’t be offended.” Words are laid over a percussive of footsteps. “I was just joking with you.”

Into the circle of firelight, an unfamiliar person steps. Younger than The Little Ghost by a good ten years, though not likely more. Taller by four inches at least.

“I don’t like jokes,” The Little Ghost says, deciding not to stand. Not yet. “I don’t like company all that much either. Hope that doesn’t offend you—it’s nothing personal.”

“All right now, I can tell where I’m not wanted. I was only trying to be friendly, but I’ll let you be.”

With one swift step, the face retreats from the circle of light, and The Little Ghost listens as the sound of crunching gravel slowly fades.

Aftershock

By midnight, most of the tents are darkened and there are few persistent sounds of activity, yet still, in the locked enclosure of the trailer, The Little Ghost cannot be calm.

“What did that person want with us?”

No reply is forthcoming from The Corpses, who may or may not be resting, as living people do.

“I won’t be able to sleep tonight. That person might come back.”

Evensong

Constant motion brings The Little Ghost a version of security. Out on the pitch-dark roads, too rural even for streetlights, there is hardly anyone around. The few cars they pass are hurtling towards their own sense of purpose and want nothing to do with a ramshackle house on wheels. Hawk-looping the highways around Lac Lemot, The Little Ghost keeps them near their destination without quite reaching it.

“We’ll close our eyes when the sun shines,” The Little Ghost singsongs to The Corpses. That chorus carries them through until morning, when they are finally allowed to land.

Bloom

An algal bloom in the waters of the lake looks more like spilled acrylic paint than a living organism to The Little Ghost, who stands on the shore amid the first rays of daylight carrying The Corpses in the satchel. The seeming toxicity of the bloom's blue-green glow is only intensified by the absence of visitors, and the schools of fish skeletons washed up on the beach.

"I heard it's because of the farms around here—their fertilizers wash into the lake," The Little Ghost explains to The Corpses. "Algae just explodes. Then no one can go in the water, it's so full of bacteria." Cyanobacteria, specifically. "Would you want to stay here for even five minutes? Me neither. This is not the place we're looking for. Not even close.

What, exactly, they are looking for, has never been clarified by The Little Ghost, and The Corpses have never asked.

Decamp

Northward, they drive again, The Little Ghost's eyelids faltering, lashes casting shadows on the road ahead. The sun has just fully breached the eastern horizon when they reach a town so populous it might even be called a city.

“Let's leave less to chance and not camp today.”

Luxe

In the motel office, The Attendant raises an eyebrow at the trailer.

“I guess you want a bit of luxury for a change?”

“That’s right,” The Little Ghost says. Relic smells of cigarette smoke still cling to the office’s burnt orange carpets. Embossed wallpaper that probably used to be gold has faded to a sheen of beige.

As they walk about their room, The Little Ghost informs The Corpses, “The bed in the trailer is just as good as this.” The Little Ghost places The Corpses in their satchel next to a corded telephone on a desk of ersatz dark cherry wood. “But the windows here are thicker. And the locks are doubled.”

Hardly a minute passes before The Little Ghost is lying on the bedsheets, asleep, breath reverberating like cat purrs.

Guardian

Tagged key in hand, The Little Ghost stands undecided between the bed and the door, observing The Corpses as if they were sleeping children.

“I have to go out,” The Little Ghost announces. It would be helpful if The Corpses would react in some way, any way, offer the subtlest inkling of their wishes or fears. *Do you want to come?* would not even be the correct question, though. Perhaps, *What do you think will happen?* Not that dead bodies necessarily know more than living ones about the promises of the future, or lack thereof, but The Little Ghost would appreciate a group consensus, even a group preponderance—anything, really, other than self-doubt swinging like a pendulum in a world without friction.

Three blocks of night-dark road have passed beneath the wheels of the trailer when The Little Ghost decides that The Corpses cannot be left alone in the motel room. Doubled locks stand no ground against meddlesome hoteliers. The Little Ghost goes back, scoops the satchel from the desk with a resigned sigh, and leaves for a second time.

Tavern

They drive the length of the downtown main street twice while The Little Ghost surveys the nightlife. The Corpses haven't said *What are you doing?* but it would be a reasonable question to ask, so The Little Ghost answers it preemptively.

“The Clerk in the gas station was no help at all. Lac Lemot was hardly more beautiful than a landfill. We need to find a stranger who gives better advice, but we also need someone who won't remember us later. So we're going out to find a barfly.”

The Little Ghost dismisses the sports bars as too loud, the late-hour restaurants with liquor licenses as too subdued, the lounges as too charged, the dive bars as too empty, and the live music venues as over-crowded with standing patrons. By the number of bars alone, it is obvious how much more of a city this is than Utopia, which is a relief to The Little Ghost, who finally chooses an establishment set in the middle of a line of row shops. They are, by appearance, the oldest buildings on the street. Two-storeys of red brick, commercial spaces on the bottom, residential apartments on top, a dozen windows blinking from a long, shared mansard roof.

Stepping inside the bar, noting the walls of wood and exposed brick, the plainly-dressed patrons at most but not all tables, the lack of theme or pretension, the mid-volume music and mid-level prices written in chalk above the cash register, The Little Ghost nods approvingly. It is the kind of bar where no one has any reason to be suspicious, or even to pay all that much attention to each other. Nevertheless, The Little Ghost maintains a one-handed grasp on the strap of the satchel.

“What can I get you tonight?” The Bartender asks once The Little Ghost is seated at not quite the far corner of the bar, between a pair of people in deep conversation on the

right side, and a lone drinker on the left. It is a predictable question, but The Little Ghost is afraid of asking for the wrong thing, of being identifiable as an outsider. Countless bottles, some crystalline, some in tints of amber, juniper, cornflower, gleam like insect wings in the dim light. The Little Ghost holds fast to the satchel, which hangs from one abbreviated arm of the stool. On the left side, The Barmate holds out an empty shot glass to The Bartender.

“Another, please.”

“Sure thing.” The Bartender takes the glass without breaking the gaze of The Little Ghost.

“What’s popular?” The Little Ghost asks.

The Bartender smiles knowingly and walks away.

“You must not drink very often,” says The Barmate, continuing to contemplate the middle-distance before them.

“I can’t remember the last time I did,” The Little Ghost admits, studying The Barmate briefly. Grey-haired, just finished a drink, not craning at fellow customers as if seeking attention. Desperate people, The Little Ghost thinks, are too easy to make an impression on. It’s preferable to find someone like this, who is neither friendly nor unfriendly.

“Why are you having one today?”

“It’s a special day.”

“Happy birthday.”

“Oh, it’s not my birthday.”

For the first time, The Barmate turns to consider The Little Ghost.

“What’s special about it then?”

“I guess you could say I’m on vacation.”

“Very hedging,” The Barmate says, with a barely visible tilt of the lips.

“If you don’t like it, it’s on the house,” The Bartender says, as a tumbler of ice and orange fog materializes, though The Bartender has already been swept away to another part of the bar by the time The Little Ghost looks up.

“What do you think this is?” The Little Ghost asks The Barmate, who is fully grinning now.

“That’s a pussyfoot.”

“Sorry I don’t think I heard you right.”

“The cocktail’s called a pussyfoot. It’s what The Bartender always gives someone who can’t make up their mind about what they want to drink.”

The Little Ghost lifts the glass suspiciously.

“Is it safe?”

“Are you allergic to fruit, cream, or rum?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Then it’s probably safe. Though whether you enjoy it or not...” As The Barmate trails off, The Little Ghost takes an experimental gulp, shrugs, sets the tumbler back down.

“I don’t have much to compare it to.”

“That’s to your benefit.”

“What are you drinking?”

“Brandy. A far better use of fruit than yours.”

“Next time I’m in a bar I’ll try that instead.” The Little Ghost glances quickly at the satchel, which has not moved beneath the hand that grips it, then does another reconnaissance of the room. Beside them, a new pair of people have replaced the old. They are laughing boisterously, touching each other’s forearms, shoulders, knees. The situation is tolerable. “You must live around here if you know The Bartender so well?”

“Correct.”

“Maybe you can help me with something then.”

“Does it involve lifting anything? I’m not as strong as I look.” The Barmate slaps a placid bicep.

“You actually don’t—” The Little Ghost stops, pivots. “Need to be strong. I just have a question you might be able to answer.”

“Try me, then.”

“Where is the most meaningful place you have ever been?”

“That’s an odd question. Meaningful to whom?”

“To you, I suppose?”

“Like my parents’ house—most meaningful to my development as a person? Like—the place I have the fondest memories of? Or?”

“Yes, I see why the question is a problem.” Protruding ice cubes have melted, swelling the orange cocktail to a depth The Little Ghost feels capable of drowning in.

“What about this: which place on Earth has moved you the most?”

“You want me to talk about how a fixed place, a single geographical location, has *moved* me. That’s kind of funny.”

“You’re picking my words apart. You know what I mean, don’t you.” It is not posed as a question because The Little Ghost has already presumed the answer and is annoyed.

“You want to hear about how I climbed a mountain and went into ecstasies over a double rainbow, or about how I fell to my knees before the sublime beauty of a painting. That sort of thing.”

“Well have you?”

“I’ve seen some nice sights, but none that made me faint. Sorry.” The Barmate rotates away from The Little Ghost, and night settles back over the world.

“Can I get you anything?” The Bartender’s voice echoes in the void.

“The cheque.” Under The Little Ghost’s index finger, a button on the satchel is as frictionless and smooth as wet ice.

Last Road

Pacing the motel room, The Little Ghost assesses their progress while The Corpses observe the proceedings from the table.

“We’ve accomplished nothing, and worse, I see no prospect of us accomplishing anything. We don’t even know where we’re going tomorrow morning. No one is any help. No one is ever any help. I’m alone even when I’m not alone. And you—” Small is the skull that The Little Ghost lifts from the satchel. Such an insubstantial presence without the expressive heft of muscle, fat, skin, hair. The Little Ghost’s impatience gives way to pathos. “What will I do with you, whom I have taken from your grave?” Shadows shiver in the deep sockets of the skull, as light flickers in a living eye. “Yes, there is only one road now, and it is the one that leads us back to Euphoria.”

Doubleback

Mind unchanged by the illumination of morning, The Little Ghost herds The Corpses back into the trailer and sets them on a path heading south.

“I’m sure you have figured out by now why we’re doing this?” The Little Ghost flicks a glance toward The Corpses. “I’ve been driving you over all these landscapes, thinking I could pick the right one for you to rest in. The most beautiful, or the most peaceful, or the most touching. But it’s like trying to pick the perfect wedding ring for a stranger. Impossible. I need to find out what it is you want, which means that I need to find out who you are, and who you have been, which means that we need to go back.”

Gossamer

Two days later, on a balmy evening amid the blush of dusk, The Little Ghost and The Corpses drift through the orchards on the outskirts of Euphoria. It is late in the summer. Branches of cherry trees are barren; crab apple trees have begun to offer up their fruit. Cicadas, loudest of the world's five million insects, have already been foretelling the coming frost for weeks. Through these signs, the season is reminding The Little Ghost that the time for endings is approaching.

They drive past the trailer park, stopping on the side of the road a few hundred metres from the forest. The Little Ghost shoulders the satchel and proceeds on foot. In the unwood, the dry hollow of a dead tree becomes a temporary home for the bones. Bedding them down in fallen leaves, The Little Ghost swallows, uses the bottom of a cotton shirt to disappear fingerprints from the buttons and buckles of the satchel.

“There,” The Little Ghost declares. “Now our relationship is invisible.”

True Crime

Trying to come to terms with one's neighbour possibly being a murderer can reasonably lead to an intense interest in accounts of real-life violence. Or, at least, this proves to be the case for The Taller Kid, who has begun to hover on channels broadcasting melodramatic true crime reenactments by theatre school dropouts late at night; to leaf through the newspaper seeking hints of sinister circumstances afoot in Euphoria that could explain why there are bones hidden in the trailer of someone who had never previously given offence; to wander the non-fiction section of the library skimming synopses on the backs of books looking for a depiction of a comparable situation that might prove educational.

The Parent does not share in this interest and so does not really understand why the living room they have always sat in to watch TV together has suddenly become populated in the evenings by mobsters and con artists, scorned adulterers and serial killers. At first, The Taller Kid had hidden these burgeoning morbid fascinations from The Parent, but has come to believe that The Parent would benefit from being made to confront the prevalence of violence, and to be reassured of the real or feigned capacity of forensics to uncover and amend such widespread harms. The Taller Kid thinks this will all be good preparation for the big reveal, and continues to monitor the influence the macabre TV shows are having on The Parent's worldview, while also trying to determine the opportune moment to throw open the curtains on their neighbour's misdeeds.

After the breakfast table incident, there are several further false starts, before The Taller Kid finally settles on an evening when The Parent has just switched back to day shifts and is, if not relaxed, then somewhat suggestible thanks to the combined effects of

alcohol and exhaustion. There is, furthermore and fortuitously, a story on TV about a remarkably harmless-looking individual whose root cellar had been searched, after death, by the unfortunate and unwitting estate trustees, and had been found to contain a full sixteen skeletons, later identified as the remains of various missing persons, mostly hitchhikers and other vagrants from the surrounding region, some of whom had been lost for decades. It was a shocking discovery for the neighbours, many of whom still spoke as if wondering whether their own lives had ever been in danger. *It was never anyone from our street, you know*, one person being interviewed said. *The victims were people coming down the highway*, the person's spouse added.

The Taller Kid keeps offering to get The Parent another beer, and is repeatedly rebuffed, and so finally stops asking, but instead goes to the refrigerator during a commercial break, returning to the couch with a can of grape soda and a beer, silently replacing The Parent's old bottle with the fresh one.

"It really makes you wonder about the people around you," The Taller Kid says when the segment ends.

"You can't trust anyone," The Parent agrees. "That's why I stay single." The Taller Kid expects laughter, but none follows.

"You know, I saw something strange in the trailer park a few weeks' back," The Taller Kid starts.

"They're all fucking weirdos around here. Too much time on their hands, not enough expensive shit like travel and antiques to waste it on."

"Right, yeah. But this was extra weird. It was that neighbour who used to live at 7A, the one whose trailer's been gone for like the past week."

“The tiny old one who never speaks?”

“Exactly. I mean, even just the moving out is a bit weird.”

“Could be taking a trip.”

“The person who is like ninety years old and has never taken a trip since I was big enough to walk?”

“Probably only eighty years old.”

“There’s more though. A couple of weeks before the move-out, I saw something suspicious in the trailer.”

“What?” The Parent straightens abruptly and stares pointedly at The Taller Kid.

“Why would you be in that trailer?”

“I wasn’t, I was just, you know.”

“Just what?”

“Looking in the windows.”

“Why are you going around looking in strangers’ windows? Are you trying to get into trouble?”

“Is someone we have lived a hundred feet away from since I was born really a stranger?”

“Yes, really and truly.”

“This is beside the point.”

“No, this is definitely exactly my point.”

“Don’t you want to know what I saw?”

“Fine.”

“Bones. It was bones.”

“Bones.”

“Like a whole skeleton’s worth, at least, just laid out on the couch. It was creepy.”

“Did you ever think that maybe they were animal bones from a hunt? Hell, they could be theatre props. Halloween decorations. A taxidermy project. Any goddamn thing. But you assumed, what? That we’re living shoulder to shoulder with some kind of homicidal octogenarian?”

“I’m pretty sure they were human and pretty sure they were real—”

“Pretty sure, were you doc?”

“I think it’s a big coincidence that our neighbour is discovered to be in possession of human bones and then uproots their entire life two weeks later.”

“*In possession of.* You are watching way too many true crime docs lately. Can’t you be a normal teenager and stick to sitcoms or something?”

“*You* said no one can be trusted. You said that!”

“I meant don’t give anyone the PIN for your credit card. Lock your door when you’re away from home. That kind of thing.”

“I don’t have a credit card.”

“You know what I mean.”

An hour ago, The Taller Kid had bet against The Parent’s capacity for sustained argument and now senses that it is about to be a losing gamble unless there is a turn of circumstance in the homestretch.

“I hear what you’re saying,” The Taller Kid says calmly. “And I know the chances are low that I’m right. *But what if I am?*”

“They’re not our bones, so it’s some else’s problem.”

“I’m not saying I want to become a vigilante out for revenge on behalf of the dead. I’m just saying maybe it would be a good idea to tell someone who can look into it. Someone whose job it is to do that kind of thing.”

“The police will probably think you’re pranking them.”

“I could tell park management.”

“The Manager will definitely think we’re busybodies. And what are they gonna do anyways? Sift the dirt for bone fragments?”

“What if rent is owing? The Manager might call the police.”

The Parent laughed heartily.

“It’ll get put on our neighbour’s credit report, same as happens to everyone else, and that’ll be that.”

“You’re wrong,” The Taller Kid mutters inaudibly, huffing off to bed.

Are You Dying

Sleep is as untouchable as everything else for The Taller Kid, despite the previous night's lack. When finally The Parent is immune to worry—dreaming, probably, of neighbours separated by acres—The Taller Kid lightfoots out of the trailer and into uncompromising morning. The sun has not relented, its heat intruding even through the rubber toes of sneakers. Despite knowing with near-certainty that The Shorter Kid is at home, dozing off exhaustion, The Taller Kid is on the qui vive, seeing a mass of curls in the lichen growing on a tree, the glint of hazel iris in the wing of a flitting wren.

A gaggle of children approaches, zigzagging and jostling each other so they occupy the entire roadway. Grinding teeth, The Taller Kid drops off onto the grass, throws a covert glance toward the pandemonium, estimates the number of strides that could cover the distance between them.

“Hey!” one of them says. “What are you doing?”

“Walking,” The Taller Kid replies.

“Walking where?” It is unclear whether this is the same child or another.

“Into town,” The Taller Kid lies.

“Why?” A child asks. The first, the second, a third? It is like talking to an entire hive of bees.

“I’m going to the hospital.” The Taller Kid expects this kind of solemn, adult disclosure to shut them up.

“Oh no, are you dying?” Evidently, that was a miscalculated tactic.

“Does that *look* like a person who’s dying to you? Do dying people just walk around like *la la la I’m going into town now?*”

“How would you know what a dying person looks like. Who do you know who’s died.”

“For your information, I had to watch my dog die.”

“That—” A finger points pedantically in The Taller Kid’s direction. “Is not a dog. It’s a person.” *It*, The Taller Kid repeats inwardly. *It*. Like a pet name for an iteration, or a short form of itinerant.

“If you’re so smart, why don’t you explain to us all what exactly the difference is between a dog’s death and a human’s death.”

How many children are there? The Taller Kid does not want to stare long enough to count them. In the turmoil of their argument, The Taller Kid hurries away without being given further notice.

Squeak, click, thud. That is how the door of the management office will shut, and then there will be the cool, soothing static of the air conditioner. White noise like steady rain, or the engine of a car. *Hello, how can I help you?* The Manager will say, purposeful and civil. Volume a necessity rather than an extravagance.

Reality inverts the order of fantasy. Approaching the office, The Taller Kid hears first The Manager, who must either be on the telephone, or who has quelled replies with yelling. *You said our order would be delivered on Monday*, The Taller Kid discerns. *It’s August. What are we supposed to do without a stock of ice?* Next is the arrhythmia of the air conditioner, an elliptical sound from a circular swing. The closing door chirps a hesitant noise that does not serve to interrupt The Manager.

“Don’t just sit there and idly promise me a discount, what use is that. I expect a specified percentage. Yes. Yes I am asking in advance for the exact fucking number. That’s hardly an exorbitant request.”

Trailer park hearsay held that The Manager had once moved to the city, spent six years at university, and dropped out midway through law school, either because of involvement in a drug-dealing scandal on campus or out of a sentimental attachment to a dying parent. Watching The Manager now, The Taller Kid can see that parallel life attorney bickering with a judge, indifferent to the fretful tittering of courtroom onlookers.

“Ten percent? Call me back when you change your mind.” With a furious fingertap that must feel unsatisfying, that must make a person nostalgic for the avoirdupois of a landline phone, The Manager ends the exchange. “Straw boss. It sounds like an insult, doesn’t it?” The Taller Kid is unsure of whether to answer this query. “Straw boss. Paper pusher. Lightweight. Don’t go into middle management, kid. Buy something and learn how to fix it yourself.”

“Okay.” Does The Manager own the trailer park? “Thanks.” Not yet having faced The Taller Kid, The Manager is scrawling a note with a ballpoint pen. “I can come back later if this is a bad time.”

“Now, later, doesn’t matter. Life itself is a bad time.” Laughter drums from The Manager, but not from The Taller Kid, who observes, bewildered. “What is it you want?”

“Actually, I’ve come to see you to discuss a matter of grave concern.” More disconcerting laughter from The Manager. *Grave concern*—The Taller Kid resolves not to say that again, not to use any phrases that might be mistaken for wordplay, puns being the antithesis of the punctilious manner that The Taller Kid is trying to effect. But that

can't be what The Manager is laughing about. "I'm serious," The Taller Kid insists. With a sigh, The Manager flips to a fresh sheet of paper and holds a hovering pen over it, a jaded lawyer doing an intake with a less than auspicious new client.

"Tell me about it."

"I have noticed a series of suspicious occurrences." How to begin? "Involving a long-time resident of the park." Not with the bones, the most difficult claim to believe. What then? Subsequent events are only significant in view of that first cause.

"First off, did any of this take place on park property?"

"Yes."

"Very well. We can proceed. Who is the resident?"

"Honestly...I'm not sure of the name. But it's the person who lives in site 7A."

"Ah. The one who is currently away."

"You noticed that, too!"

"When a trailer leaves the park for the first time in decades, yes, I do tend to notice."

"Do you know why it happened?"

"Why would I tell you if I did?"

"Is there rent owing?"

"Again, why—"

"You don't know, do you? And you don't care because rent is paid."

Putting down the pen, The Manager leans back in the chair, elbows on its arms, and appears to scrutinize The Taller Kid.

“Surely you didn’t come here just to tell me that one of the residents is currently away from the park. And surely you didn’t expect me to tell you why they are. So you might as well stop wasting time and tell me how any of this is suspicious and what makes you think I will care.”

“Because there were human bones in 7A’s trailer!” This admission, made without lead-up, without decorum, is not at all as The Taller Kid intended, and failure feels imminent.

Instead, The Manager straightens attentively, matching the posture that The Taller Kid has held since first sitting down.

“When were you in 7A’s trailer? Under what pretext were you invited there?”

“I wasn’t.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I saw the bones through a window.”

“Where were they?”

“In the trailer.”

“No, I mean were they on the ground? On a table? Were they in proximity to any other objects of interest?”

“They were just sort of sticking out of the top of a bag.”

“A body bag? A grocery bag?”

“Like a backpack. What are they called. The ones adults carry.”

“A messenger bag?”

“Something like that.”

“That sounds like quite the obstructed view.”

“It was...” A pause. This time The Taller Kid waits for the right word to surface. “Sufficiently...” Yes. “Unobstructed.” Not a graceful articulation, but adequately formal. The Taller Kid exhales.

“How did you become familiar with the appearance of human bones?”

“I watch a lot of...documentaries.”

“Oh I see.” The Manager’s neatly trimmed fingernails pulse against the arm of the chair, transmitting a series of sixteenth notes like an illegible parody of a tap code. In The Taller Kid’s peripheral vision, an indiscernible insect hurries along the floor—the urge to track and identify it must be suppressed. “Television is quite educational these days, isn’t it?”

“It can be.”

A former portable classroom serves as the management office building, and it still retains some of the atmosphere of its earlier life. Binders lining the shelves of the walls and a large, teacherly desk behind which The Manager sits only reinforce this impression. Without moving from the hard plastic chair with its gaudy orange seat, The Taller Kid has somehow morphed from belligerent client to misbehaving student.

“What happened after you saw the bones? Were you observed?”

“I don’t think I was. Nothing really happened at first, but then within a couple of weeks the trailer was gone from 7A. As if...”

“As if what?”

“As if something was being hidden.”

“Aha,” The Manager replies, though the Taller Kid cannot be sure what has just been revealed. Both of them startle in unison when the office phone rings. “Hello? Yes.

I'll be with you in just a minute." The Manager lays the receiver down on the desk. "I do appreciate your concern for park safety, but I hope that you appreciate that I also have to respect the privacy of park residents. It is not appropriate to go sneaking around other people's trailers—neither for me, nor for you. Do you understand?"

"I understand." Rising, The Taller Kid means to leave, but stops. "I *understand* that you can't solve violence with, with—"

"Pedantry? Bureaucratic inertia? What is it you'd like to accuse me of doing or failing to do?"

"*Incuriosity.*" To The Taller Kid's surprise, The Manager records a brief note on the paper, as if transcribing.

"Your assessment is noted. Now, if you don't mind being on your way, I have a call to take."

Giddy confusion buoys The Taller Kid on the walk home. Though the meeting is hardly to be counted a success, the reception from The Manager was no worse than that of The Parent or The Shorter Kid. And if an unstaked acquaintance can be as equally persuaded as two people who should be swayed by affection to believe what The Taller Kid says, then this suggests that there might someday be a stranger for whom these dangling observations, these flailing suspicions, will mean something.

Quodlibet

“I did something you’re not going to like.”

“How do you know that?”

“You’re a person of ordinary qualms.”

“That sounds like an insult.”

“I just mean that you’re normal.”

“Ouch.”

“You have a conventionally-calibrated moral compass?”

“Ethical *atrocities* have been justified by ordinariness, normalcy, and convention.”

“I followed some kids home and surveilled one of them for a few hours.”

“You’re right, I don’t like that. How about you tell me why before I start telling you off?” Above The Companions, a revolving disco ball tosses sequins of light that fall scattershot on the glossy wood floor. “But take your turn first, we look weird just standing here.”

The One chooses the nearest specimen, shelled with hot pink coverstock, from the ball return and launches it like a bottle rocket down the lane.

“I think I saw sparks fly,” The Other says.

“I’m a fast throw,” The One agrees, as they watch the ball zing into the electric blue gutter. “But not very accurate.”

Bowling had been The Other’s idea, proffered because The One was anxious to get out of the house and even more anxious not to be overheard. It had proven a sound suggestion. Dance hits, all a decade or more out of date, blare exuberantly through staticky speakers. Herds of teenagers, families, seniors overwhelm the alley, making a

rat's nest of motion and noise. A menagerie of neon adorns the walls with irrelevance: tropical fish with fanning tails, verdant trees of indiscernible species, a single horse. Anyone trying to pay attention to The One and The Other will be confronted by a such an excess of stimuli that it might as well be a wall protecting the two persons of interest from prying eyes or prurient ears.

“Two kids came into the video store a few nights ago,” The One starts.

“Kids you know?”

“I'm sure I've seen them in the store before, but I don't even know their names.”

“How old?”

“With every year that passes, I become less and less capable of estimating anyone's age. Does that happen to you?”

“Yeah. I think it's because the older you are, the more times you've guessed someone's age wrong, and when you realize how often you're wrong, it just becomes more and more obvious to you how vague the body's signs of aging really are. Probably as a child you were even worse at guessing people's ages, but you got corrected on it less often, so you didn't notice how bad you were at it.”

“Probably. In any case, I'd say these kids were probably high-schoolers. Sixteen maybe? The two of them came in together when the shop was totally empty.”

“When is the shop not empty?”

“You're so fixated on this. We get busy sometimes, I swear. *Anyhow*. The shop was empty so I could hear everything they were saying and one of them talked about having seen a body in a neighbour's trailer.”

“A body! A whole body?”

“Like a dead person. I don’t remember how they worded it exactly.”

“Okay.”

“The problem was that they didn’t mention which trailer it was, or who lived there.”

“And you didn’t want to ask them because...”

“That would’ve been creepy. *Sorry, I couldn’t help overhearing your entire conversation...*”

“So you followed them home, which is much less terrifying, obviously.”

“I followed one of them home. The other turned off, went somewhere else. I was at a distance, they didn’t notice me or anything.”

“Are you sure?”

“Very sure. If you thought you were being followed, would you go sit by a pool alone for hours?”

“I guess not. So did you find out where the body was hidden?”

“No.”

“Right.”

“That’s the problem. I can’t follow these kids around forever, hoping they lead me to the body.”

“I’m glad you’ve come to realize that.”

“Do you think I should go talk to them?” The One picks up another ball, butterscotch-swirled as the bands of Jupiter.

“No, they’re children. I think you should leave them alone.”

“What kind of morbid kids go about looking for dead bodies anyhow?”

“You don’t remember childhood very well, do you?”

“I remember some parts of it with improbable clarity.”

“Maybe the kid didn’t even actually see a body, was just talking big to sound tough. And even if it was an actual dead body, it might not be the dead body you’re looking for. It’s high-risk and a long shot. Just leave it alone. Wait to see if the situation develops. It’s not like someone is holding your friend hostage and you have to act immediately.”

“I respect your opinion very much, but I have to ask: what’s the harm in my following children around? You know I’m not going to hurt them. The whole point would be to get the information and then leave the kids out of it as quickly as possible.”

“Excuse me,” an unfamiliar voice interrupts them. The One startles, colliding with The Other’s shoulder. “Sorry.”

“Sorry!” The One parrots at no one specifically.

“I need that ball.”

“The ball in my hand?” The One asks, nonplussed.

“It’s the only ball in the whole place with the perfect weight block. I use it every time I bowl. Every Tuesday.”

“You can have it,” The One says, handing it over and waiting until the intruder has diffused into the crowd. “Can you imagine the nerve to just go up to a complete stranger and ask—”

“For what you want?” The Other supplies.

“Don’t make this about that.”

“To answer your question more directly: the harm is that you will frighten the children. Or their parents. Or get yourself into trouble because no one will believe you when you explain why you’re following them around. Or your sense of personal boundaries will begin to dissolve and next you’ll do something more invasive.”

“I just want to find someone I—care about.”

“Come on,” The Other says, gesturing toward the scoreboard and then prodding The One toward the exit door, “Let’s get out of here before you lose for real.”

They return their shoes, walk out of the building past a small lake of smokers casting clouds overhead.

“What am I supposed to do?” The One demands of the stars, remote and obscure, once they are nearly across the parking lot, beyond the earshot of the milling crowd.

“You need to wait,” The Other answers.

“Wait for what?”

“Wait for something to happen.”

“I’ve spent my entire life in Euphoria waiting for something to happen.”

“There will be a more opportune moment than this, I’m sure of it. The kids might come into the store—a place you’re obligated to be and so there can be no question of you having followed them—and you can gently ask about the conversation you overheard last time. The risk in that case shouldn’t be *too* high.”

“Too high for what? What precisely is the threshold in this scenario? This sounds like a bad idea.”

“Well, we ran out of good ideas months ago,” The Other says casually and The One makes an indiscernible sound that might be a sigh or a curse. “Or maybe the police will get involved and identify the body they found and you won’t have to do anything.”

“Why is everything always up to someone else?”

“I don’t know what to tell you. And it’s almost twelve. I’m going home.”

Neither of The Companions bothers to offer a goodnight, perhaps because the night is nearly over and there is little chance of it becoming good. The One, watching the departing shape of The Other become more and more vague until it diffuses completely into the dark, is tired of people disappearing.

Gothic Revival

“I have to bury you.”

There is no reply from the addressee in the passenger seat.

“I cannot carry you with me to the end. I would, you know, but you have made it impossible.”

The driver’s eyes flick in repetitive succession, from windshield, to hood, to asphalt, to shoulder, monitoring a progression. Raindrops, soft as light snow, stipple the windshield, texture the garnet hood of the car, gloss the asphalt, darken the dusty shoulder by degrees. Nothing is soaked yet—what will be done if it is, if the sand is too heavy to lift? They are still a half hour from the lake, far enough that the rain could become a problem even if it is not at present. The addressee, the very one that has necessitated this trip, is excluded from the cycle of the gaze.

Windshield, hood, asphalt, shoulder. Eyes, hands, ankles, shoulder. On such an intensely concentrated journey, it is hard for the driver to differentiate body from vehicle.

“We could have done this together, but you wanted to do it alone, to do it your own way, as it has always been. Do you remember the first time we slept together? It was in your apartment, in your bed. Do you remember when we bought the house? It was a specimen of the architectural style you chose. You were so in love with Cape Cods. You said they were the only kind of house that felt like home. Ironic, wasn’t it? You didn’t grow up in a house like that, grew up in the opposite, in fact—a gaudy Second Empire, with its tower and balcony and wrought iron gallery, a place for luxurious people to fret and pine and languish. When I longed for a Gothic Revival you dismissed the idea, saying they were too complicated, too intimidating, blood red brick too harsh, spider-silk

vergeboards too shivery and slight. I think they just reminded you too much of your terrible parents and the elaborate trap they made you live in. We did go to see a Gothic Revival, of course, just so you could placate me, and as we left you said, *How could anyone ever feel settled there?* you said. Yes, your exact words.

“I keep asking you if you remember this, remember that, but I don’t think you do. Since the beginning I have been the hippocampus, the container of our memories—I wrote them down if I had to, constructed calendars of our hours. You didn’t. Preferred to reimagine our history, over and over, building and rebuilding to suit your capricious moods. I wouldn’t indulge that and you resented me for it. Hated the way I would bring out my papers mid-argument just to show you the record of what really happened. *You wrote it down wrong*, you would say when your emotions disagreed with my archive. Jealous, I think, of the constancy of my purpose, a feat you yourself could never quite achieve. You stayed with me for a long time, though, I’ll grant you that, longer than I expected, and when you left it was not in the manner I predicted. But you did leave.”

They reach the beach parking lot within minutes of their projected arrival time, a fact that the driver notes with satisfaction.

“3:00 p.m. and we are here. Just as I said we would be.” It is 3:03 p.m.

The beach is empty of human guests. Toeing the sand, the driver finds that there is only a scant dampness on the surface, beneath which the ground is dry and yields easily to the press of a shovel.

“Everything falls into place as it’s supposed to,” the driver says to the addressee, removed from the passenger seat and now sitting on the shore. “Except you. Usually. Well this time, for once, you will go where I put you.”

Deeper and deeper goes the hole, the driver worrying foot by foot that it will be too shallow, particularly given that a beach is hardly an ideal location for a burial even under the best of circumstances.

“You deserve this,” the driver says, at last lowering the addressee into the cache. Black fabric huddles there like a wounded mammal, until it is covered over completely with sand. “To be interred on the ground where we were married.”

Skimming the shoreline one final time for visitors, The Second Lover meets the eye of a bird watching the proceedings from a nearby tree. Crow-like but streaked with white, the bird’s name only comes to The Second Lover after a moment’s reflection: magpie.

Conflux

Without The Corpses, The Little Ghost does not know who to talk to when alone in the trailer. The clock has a face but no expression; the toaster has an arm but its panels are mirrors; shoes have soles but their tongues are tied. None of them offer reprieve from the feeling that one is only ever talking to oneself. The Little Ghost sits at the table cracking saltines into craggy shards and chewing them as carefully as if they were glass. Into the empty space of this seemingly inevitable seclusion, a knock on the door comes stumbling like an accident.

The Little Ghosts waits stiffly for a word to follow, but none is forthcoming. Tawny lamplight and a trickle of music through the thin panes of the windows will have already disclosed The Little Ghost's presence in the trailer to anyone outside—there is no hiding that now. If only the visitor would reciprocate and reveal something of themselves, The Little Ghost might engage.

Another knock on the door, tentative rather than demanding, but it is nevertheless evident that, accident or not, this matter will have to be handled. The Little Ghost goes to a window, nudges the curtain an eyeball-width to the side, and peers out at the visitor. There is a shock: two people. One lanky and equine, the other smaller but with a mass of hair that leaps like wildfire in the slight breeze. It is difficult to discern much more of them than that in the mud of the evening. The two are familiar to The Little Ghost, who thinks they might be teenagers from the park, though it is hard to be sure.

“Who's there?” The Little Ghost calls quaveringly from behind the curtain. Confused, the visitors crane to trace the source of the voice.

“I don’t think we know each other,” the rangy one says in the window’s general direction. “We live here in the park, too, and we don’t want any trouble, we’d just like to talk to you.”

“About what?” The Little Ghost asks. The two visitors bend their heads together in conference.

“We’d rather not say it out in the open.” It is the smaller one who speaks.

“Have it your way.” The Little Ghost lets go the curtain and walks with great, deliberate, stomping steps back to the table.

“You’d also probably rather we don’t say say it out in the open,” one of them adds loudly and pointedly. The Little Ghost scarpers surreptitiously to the door, answers with a defensive hiss.

“Oh really.”

“It’s about the...you know.”

The Corpses, The Little Ghost surmises. What else could it be? Dread spreads like pain through The Little Ghost’s limbs. Cracking open the door lets loose a sliver of light.

“The what? Whisper it to me.”

“Bones.”

“Bones? What bones?”

“Human, I think. I saw them in your trailer.”

“There are no bones in my trailer.” The Little Ghost snaps the door shut with a smirk, secure in the conviction that all the best lies are true.

Falter

Security proves unsustainable, a circumstantial advantage narrowly gained. The Little Ghost paces the trailer on tender legs, a tremulous glass of bracing pineapple juice in hand, desperately afraid of being tailed in the future by The Kids, who might thereby discover the hitherto secluded hinterland of the unwood, with its obvious agglomeration of human remains. Worse—what if they have already done this, their recent efforts at contact just the first steps in an extortion plan? What they might expect to obtain from someone as under-resourced as The Little Ghost is a matter of doubt, but it is not for the childless to fathom the minds of the young. There is only one way through this. Tomorrow, The Little Ghost must go at will to talk to The Kids.

Complot

Pool noodles in radiant shades of pink, green, and yellow populate the surface of the water like sprinkles on a sheet cake, between which a far smaller number of children's neutral-toned heads bob like errant crumbs. On deck chairs draped with towels, The Kids are lounging in their sunglasses and sopping bathing suits, letting their wet hides dry in the sun.

"Nice day," The Little Ghost says mildly after sitting for several minutes unnoticed in a chair nearby, startling The Kids.

"Nice day," The Shorter Kid replies, nodding excessively.

"Definitely," The Taller Kid chimes.

"It's going to rain later, though," The Shorter Kid says.

"Oh?" Turning, The Little Ghost assesses The Shorter Kid. "Watch the weather report this morning, did we?" The 'we' is a nice touch, establishing collectivity.

"No." It's The Taller Kid who answers. "There's a smell before rain. Apparently."

"I thought it was a smell after rain," says The Little Ghost. "What's that word? Not petrification."

"Petrichor," The Shorter Kid supplies. "That's the one everybody knows. It can even show up ahead of a storm. If you're downwind of wherever the storm starts, the scent will blow right in ahead of the clouds. But I can smell rain before it's begun at all.

"Allegedly," The Taller Kid adds.

"Isn't that something," The Little Ghost says. "I've never heard that one before."

Likely, The Kids are trying to play it cool, politely evading the very subject they want to broach, in the hope of easing everyone into a conversational mode that will

prompt The Little Ghost to disclose some detail of interest. It has been a long time since The Little Ghost so readily held anyone's attention, and there is a temptation to make a long and digressive address, to watch the listeners' faces as they try to parse the speech for subtext, for some hint of what they actually want to know.

"Would you two mind helping me with something?" The Little Ghost asks. "I need to move some furniture in my trailer and these old bones won't carry much anymore." Both of The Kids pitch forward in their chairs.

"We can help," The Taller Kid rushes to say. They leap from their seats in synchrony.

"Excellent." With exaggeratedly feeble steps to ensure that none will question the pretext that has been spun, The Little Ghost leads the covey to the trailer, teenagers crowding behind.

"I need help with the trunk in the living room." The Little Ghost gestures The Kids in the direction of the couch, then carefully shuts the door and checks that the windows are closed so they cannot be overheard. "Sit down. Can I get you some, uh, water? Juice?" Head shaking, The Taller Kid declines.

"Do you have whiskey?" The Shorter Kid asks.

"No." The Little Ghost remains standing in the kitchenette, preferring not to sit down though unsure of how long that can last. "I don't drink."

"Oh, okay. Nothing for me then." Leaning back on the couch, The Shorter Kid glances casually around the trailer, as if trying to avoid taking on the look of a crestfallen would-be underager who was really angling for alcohol, putting on, instead, the

disaffected airs of an adult who knows they have a stocked liquor cabinet waiting for them at home. The Little Ghost reads this as a kind of power play.

“As I’m sure you know, I did not bring you here to move furniture.”

“We figured,” The Shorter Kid says.

“I have a few questions for you first—then I will tell you about the bones.” Words are rocks on a footpath, to be stepped over deftly and precisely, in this sort of conversation. Conservative use of contractions, no informality except in the form of carefully selected, casual affectation. The Little Ghost has been overly conscious of linguistic rigour while speaking, in a way The Kids don’t seem to be, though The Taller Kid is noticeably taciturn.

“Shoot,” The Shorter Kid says, and The Little Ghost pockets a nervous hand.

“Which of you saw the bones?”

“Me.” Eyes lowered, The Taller Kid raises a hand, as if they are in a classroom.

“And what exactly did you see?” The Little Ghost asks.

“Oh no,” The Shorter Kid interjects, standing up. “You want to know what we saw so you can tailor your story to fit. Uh-uh. We’re not doing that.”

“Fine. Then get out of my trailer.” As they stand across from each other, eyes locked in a challenging stare, it occurs to The Little Ghost for the first time that they are about the same height.

“I didn’t see much.” The Taller Kid touches the wrist of The Shorter Kid, who grudgingly sits. “Just some bones in a kind of backpack thing. They looked human, or human-sized at least, so I got suspicious.”

“Have you told anyone about this?”

“Yeah, but they didn’t believe me.”

“Did you tell the cops?”

“No.”

“Who then?”

“My parent. The park manager.”

“What did they say?”

“Told me to mind my own business.”

“You’d be wise to,” The Little Ghost watches The Taller Kid hunch even further inward. “In the future.”

“Your turn,” The Shorter Kid says.

“First of all—” Legs aching, The Little Ghost remains upright only with concerted effort, noticing—with the flicker of a small epiphany that will only come to full flame sometime later when all thoughts at last converge upon that single point—how unfair and irrational it seems that people so often try to read truth through the cipher of the body. Tremors in the hand taken to signify a lie, the literality of shifting feet refigured into a shiftiness of character. As if frailty were an infection that could spread from limbs to mind to morals. Momentarily edified by anger, The Little Ghost proceeds. “I did not kill anyone. They are human bones, but I found them in the forest. I don’t know whose they are and I don’t know how they got there.”

“Where are they now?” The Taller Kid asks.

“Back in the forest, where I found them.” That apparent clarification—*where I found them*—is actually, ironically, an obfuscation, a deceitful feat of which The Little Ghost is well aware and even rather pleased.

“So you brought them from the forest to the trailer and then back to the forest.”

The Taller Kid sounds unimpressed. “Why?” This makes The Little Ghost laugh.

“Why? *You’re* asking me why?” More laughter from The Little Ghost, who stands, begins to shuffle deliberately towards The Kids. “I’ll tell you why.” Step. “Nosey parkers.” Step. “Finks and buttinskies.” Step. “Babblers.” Step. “Busybodies.” Step. The Little Ghost leans down, face within a foot of The Kids’ faces. “Prattlers and tattlers and fussbudgets and flibbertigibbets.”

“No,” The Taller Kid whispers. “I mean, why’d you take them out of the forest in the first place?” Straightening up, The Little Ghost considers The Kids for a moment and then returns to the kitchenette. “I didn’t want anything bad to happen to them.”

“They’re dead. How much worse can it get?” The Taller Kid asks.

“They could be separated. They could be desecrated,” The Little Ghost replies. “Same reason you put your dead family members in cemeteries instead of just tossing them by the roadside.”

“Actually, we do that because it’s the law,” The Taller Kid says.

“Really?” The Little Ghost scoffs. “That’s extremely disappointing.”

“If you took us to see the bones, we could help you look for clues,” The Shorter Kid offers.

“Identity documents, phones, that sort of thing,” The Taller Kid adds.

“We could report it to the police for you so you don’t even have to get involved and they won’t suspect you.”

“I don’t trust you enough for that,” The Little Ghost says. “And even if I did, I am not taking two *children* to gawk at dead bodies.”

“I’m fifteen,” The Taller Kid says. “I’m not a child.”

“And I’m sixteen,” The Shorter Kid adds. “I can drive.”

“You can drive with supervision.” Removed from the harsh light of interrogation now, The Little Ghost sits down.

“Wait a minute,” The Taller Kid says. “Did you say *dead bodies*?”

“What?” The Little Ghost is confused.

“A minute ago you said you didn’t want to take *two children* to look at *dead bodies*.” No longer shyly evasive, The Taller Kid gazes levelly at The Little Ghost while quoting.

“Oh wow, you’re right!” The Shorter Kid flicks an admiring glance at The Taller Kid, before turning haughtily to The Little Ghost. “How many dead bodies are there?”

Being long past youth and having never raised children, The Little Ghost feels suddenly and unprecedentedly bereft of some crucial awareness of their habits, which might explain why the exchange at hand is not going particularly smoothly. *Children do not like to be called what they are*—this observation The Little Ghost tucks away for future conversations that have not already been damaged beyond recognition.

“I don’t know.” Surely, The Little Ghost thinks, this frank admission will counteract the earlier, inadvertent tone of condescension.

“What do you mean you don’t know?” The Taller Kid asks.

“How can you just *not know* something like that?” The Shorter Kid choruses.

They both stare like cops and The Little Ghost knows that control of the discussion has been lost, if it was ever possessed at all.

“Have either of you found human remains in the wild before?” They shake their heads. “That’s good.” The Little Ghost pauses. “When an animal dies—human or otherwise—the forest does not just leave it alone. There’s a whole ceremony. Predators and scavengers come one by one and strip the flesh from the body. They make use of everything; even what’s too small to see is eaten clean away by insects and plants. All that’s left is the skeleton. But without ligaments to hold it together, the skeleton is just pieces of bone that get scattered by animals, wind, water. Do you know what a pile of bones looks like?” The Kids shake their heads again. “Not much. I didn’t even know I’d found human bones until I saw the skull. The rest? Could’ve been deer bones, could’ve been a dog bones.”

“But once you assembled them, you’d be able to tell,” The Taller Kid says.

“What do you think bones are? You think they’re like those toy kit cars with tiny pieces you click into place until you have a full model? No. They’re just a bunch of different-sized bits that don’t look like anything much.”

“Well how many skulls did you find?” The Shorter Kid asks.

“Just the one.”

“Isn’t that your answer then?” The Shorter Kid retorts.

“Maybe there was another skull but it was dragged away by a hungry animal,” The Taller Kid suggests.

“Exactly,” The Little Ghost says.

“Why didn’t you tell the police?” The Taller Kid asks.

“Why didn’t you?” The Little Ghost returns.

“Thought they wouldn’t believe me.”

“That’s what I thought as well.”

“What’s there to believe? *I found some bones, here they are.*”

“*I found some bones but I didn’t kill anyone.*”

“People find bones all the time. Normal people. Not even murderers.”

“Innocent people become suspects all the time, too.”

“Wait a minute,” The Shorter Kid says. “I can understand why you might not tell the police. But why are you telling *us*?”

“You’re the firebrand of the group, are you?” The Little Ghost directs the question at The Shorter Kid.

“Why do you say that?” The Shorter Kid frowns.

“It’s easy to suss out a troublemaker—they’re the one asking all the questions,” The Little Ghost replies.

“We switch, actually,” The Taller Kid says. “Depending on the circumstance.”

“Yeah, like if I try to suggest we go to a party for once, it’s that one,” The Shorter Kid points at The Taller Kid, “who won’t shut up.”

“In which case I’m trying to keep us *out* of trouble,” The Taller Kid says. The Kids face one another.

“But that’s just between us. You’re always quiet when someone else is around.” The Shorter Kid says it as if noticing for the first time. The Taller Kid just shrugs.

“Anyways,” The Taller Kid says, turning back to The Little Ghost. “We look out for each other. That’s all.”

“Yeah,” The Shorter Kid agrees. “Which reminds me: are you going to answer my question?”

“Right, of course, you want to know why I’ve brought you here, why I’m telling you these things.” The Little Ghost sighs. “I wasn’t lying before when I said I need your help. And you weren’t wrong when you assumed I want to know who those bones used to be.”

Blue Language

It is The Rat who finds the letter. That crumpled paper, still damp in its creases and darkened with blood and yellowed with stomach acid, tucked alone into a plastic bag in the landfill. Paws parse the folded layers until they all lie open.

I did not expect to be standing in my kitchen when I was told how and when I would die. Why there? I still don't know. Maybe it was the filthy plates strewn, not even stacked, across the counter, sulfurous skins of fried egg clinging to their rims, or the latic crusts of hot sauce stuck between the tines of the forks. Maybe it was the homunculus, made from our shed hair, dead skin cells, and the exoskeletons of insects, who lived hidden behind the fridge. Maybe it was because we hadn't made love that morning, or yesterday, or even on a nameable day in recent memory. Maybe it was just gravity and passing time—the same causes at work when a cracked tree branch collapses, when a trickle of water flowing to the lowest point guts rock as if it were the delicate underbelly of a fish.

Maybe there was no reason, not even one as simple as passing hours. Did I want there to be? If there was a reason, that would imply intelligibility, or worse, a justified order underlying being and event. The lurid trajectory of my death warrants no such flattery as that. And if I believe there was a cause that produced this effect, then I must ask myself whether I contributed to that cause, whether I had an unintentional hand in manifesting my own calamity. A rabbit hole for dust bunnies—I won't go down.

I didn't and I don't and I'll never know what it was that morning that made you face me and say: there really is no joy in living, is there? I said of course there is and you

said there are moments of joy, yes, but what use are they? Marbles to hold back a flood when we need mountains made of sand. I said: what flood? And I regretted it for I had heard you crying often enough through the weight of doors.

You said: look. I've never loved anyone more than you. No one, not even myself. Especially not myself. You're the most splendid thing in all the world in all my life and we have done our best to be devoted to each other, haven't we? I said yes. I think so. And you asked: but are you happy? Are you glad to be alive? Or do you wake every day dreading the repetition of tiresome routines? Worse—do you wake up feeling nothing at all? Your life just a series of gestures you make because your muscles remember when you do not. And even when our skins should be slipping against one another like sheets of silk, instead we are bells clanging inharmonic. But this is it, the best of life, the best of love. I can't go on watching all these things that meant so much to us become more and more trivial. I know you feel the same. And if we don't make each other happy, then who ever will? Who ever can?

I said: we can fix this. You said: we haven't done anything wrong. We have been faithful and patient, we have been the best versions of ourselves, nurtured our lives within one another and without one another, and it is never enough. Well honey, I'm tired. I can't just go on trying forever. It's not forever, I said. Someday we'll be dead.

And you said: death! Yes, isn't it what we've been waiting for? Let's not wait. Let's not allow life to have its way with us as if we were rats in its paws. I want to die in your arms. I want to die before it all keeps getting worse. We can disappear from this world together. A dreadful and impeccable ending that cannot be a failure because it's precisely what we intend. Beloved, what do you say?

I could not say anything—startled, of course, but also too miserable to speak. Had I been crestfallen before you mentioned it? I could no longer recall, which meant I could no longer disagree. Life is tiresome, love inevitably tepid, a situation we endure two by two in the ark of the ache so it follows that we would leave by an arc as well. Arc of the drama, arc of a falling star, electric arc that makes a luminous line from one body to the other. There was nothing for me to say. My empty mouth gaped before you and you tucked words into it like stones. I was dead before you killed me.

I wanted to leave a note before we went. Why, you said, who will look for us? Maybe that was true, but I was less afraid of being lost than I was of being misunderstood. They might accuse us of torrid affairs, call our deaths crimes of passion, or suspect us of embezzlement, label our suicide pact an escape hatch. Cast us extraordinary and assess our catastrophes improbable. Ours a predestination they could expect never to share.

How would we compose the note, you scoffed, by consensus? Futures unwound before me, wormy skeins of wool. We both write the note; neither of us approve of what it says. One of us writes the note; it is no longer representative. We both write separate notes; now we are each on lonely trajectories that only happened to collide. I don't think we should leave a note, you said, we mustn't let anyone suppose that our deaths were meant to send a message to them. I resented the way you took charge of our mortality, had to keep reminding myself that most of us never get to preselect the details of our deaths.

And really, if you trace the genealogy of the event, it originated in me. We were in the dim corner of a bar, the sort of place where secrets crawl out from the crevices where

they hide. Floorboards, folds of skin. We had only been on a few dates, we barely knew one another, and there I was talking about how I wanted to die. You were already in love with me, mooncalving, spilling dreams all over the floor the way other people were tipping their beer. I didn't have to ask for anything because you had already spread your world beneath my feet and I took it: the phone calls, the letters, the cufflinks with opalescent eyes. How are you? Your hourly question. Sometimes you didn't need to ask—needlessly, my face has always betrayed me to any observer as keen as you were—but often you asked regardless. I said, well I am having a very nice time, rather exquisite really, unbearable even.

You did not understand. You had never thought about dying, except as an abstraction, as an event that happened to someone else. I asked, have you ever had a precise slice in your skin, just one small, sublime rift? Your blood rushes through it as if that opening were a holy portal, as if that was the ultimate vein through which your current was meant to flow. Red and white blood cells form a river of jewels gushing from your cut and the pain is clear as ice, tart as lemons, bright as sunlight. A rupture so flawless that you are in awe of it.

Excising a lemon wedge from a glass dish on the table, you placed it, flesh and rind, into your mouth and swallowed it whole. As if you were a common sea snake. Only after did I see that you were eating the lemon but envenoming me through your version of sympathetic enchantment. It wasn't real magic, just one of those sublunary spells through which we all must pass in some form or another.

I was The Second Lover but I would be the first corpse. That was how it had to be, for I possessed neither the gall nor the guts to murder anyone, not even myself, not even by consent. There was no such lacuna in you. No gaps in the manuscript, no minute cavities in the bone. Your absence of lack approached inhumanity. You did try to goad me, though, I'll grant you that—you said, if I'm to die by anything then I want it to be by your hand, which was only Romantic in the literary sense. Passionate, morbid, stubbornly unreasonable. I was not sufficiently convinced.

It's not as if I have ever been the one to be relied upon. You have always been the mapmaker, the adjudicator, the driver. There was one thing, though, that I chose. You asked me by what means I wished to die and I considered my options.

Burning? Too flagrant.

Drowning? I couldn't take the dead duck drama of it.

Bludgeoning? Humanity has lived too long to see me succumb to the brute atavism of such a telos.

Hanging? I didn't trust you to get it right on your first try and I dreaded the prolonged suspense.

A gun? Abrupt, impersonal, unacceptable.

Maybe you'll have to stab me, I said at last. How intimate, you replied. Your life will spill over me. Yes, that's what I thought, I said. I should inure myself to blood, you added. I can ask the butcher for especially flooded cuts of meat. I don't think that will prepare you for living flesh, I said. Would you rather I practised on live animals, you asked. No, I said, of course not. That's good, you said, I don't know if I could. Remember

how you were vegetarian when I met you, I said. And we both laughed. I thought our plan popped like a balloon then, too thin-skinned to hold its own absurdity.

Did you know, you said, that you can drink yourself to death with too much water? It's so sweet and clear that it will wash the salt from your veins, until you are so pure that your brain swells and you perish. That's what happiness is like.

Are you having second thoughts about our plan, I asked you one night over dinner. Why are you asking me that, you said, spearing a string bean. Is it because you're having second thoughts? No, I said, pausing to take a sip from my water glass, I'm just checking. Forgive me for thinking so, you said, I'm sure you can see how it looks from where I'm sitting. Of course, I replied, but try not to get so excitable over a simple question. Communication is essential in a situation like this. You can't let yourself get carried away by your suspicions. I never get carried away, you replied. You do often think you're right and won't hear otherwise, though, I said. Only when I am right, you added. Your certainty, I said, is the part of you I understand least of all. And your uncertainty is the part of you I like least of all, you rejoined.

Days later, I stopped in the middle of our staircase, whispering to myself, manifesting l'esprit de l'escalier: uncertainty was the only thing that could have saved me.

The Rat arrived expecting almonds but whatever is here is otherwise—something acrid that incinerates the tongue. Unwilling to swallow, The Rat returns it to the earth.

Subminiatures

Dozens of public databases, hundreds of pages, thousands of listings. Each features the hylic, often smiling, face of a missing person, or the vestiges of unidentified remains. Some of the missing have been gone so long that their sole photo is sepia-toned to a sunset hour, others have vanished so recently that you can match the digital image of them to an active social media profile, and others still are so obscure that they have had to be sketched from memory, though even these last are not as obscure as the found but nameless dead, who must be photographed, drawn, or moulded from autopsy. In some instances, the recovered dead get no human image whatsoever, and instead scraps of clothing stand in metonymically for the form they once adorned. These thousands do not represent the extent of the chaos. Elsewhere, in archives invisible to the public, lay untold numbers of other missing and unidentifiable persons from across the country, no one even bothering to count them all, never mind compile a complete and comprehensive list of their particularities.

The Taller Kid had always supposed it would be difficult to disappear yourself or someone else, a presumption that had only been hardened by so many true crime documentaries, which make it seem as though the whole world is crisscrossed by ley lines of skin cells, hair roots, bodily fluids, and singular synthetic fibres that render it possible to trace the significant passages between one person and another. Human beings as complicated snails, writing out their routes in elaborated slime.

Now, here, in the library, impatiently parsing every last ambiguous listing, The Taller Kid is convinced that disappearing must be terrifyingly easy if so many people are able to pull it off, especially since most of them, probably, manage it without ever

intending to. Forward, back, forward, back, The Taller Kid flips between pages, sweeping across unfamiliar faces, skimming measurements that repeat into meaninglessness. Inches away, The Shorter Kid fidgets in a matching, inflexible chair, head bent phoneward, performing the same laborious internet scroll, a proofreader for The Taller Kid's analysis. On the opposite side sits The Little Ghost, clicking through scans of microfilm and scrutinizing the innumerable irrelevant newspaper articles on an archaically large computer monitor. When they first arrived at the library, The Kids had introduced The Little Ghost to the missing persons databases, and The Little Ghost had primed The Kids on microform, but in the end they had found that they proceeded more quickly by working in the medium to which they felt most accustomed, with an agreement to consult one another if they happened upon an item of interest, of which there are several:

1. "It's too bad you didn't work a bit faster and find more than the bones," The Shorter Kid says to The Little Ghost. "If someone finds a body, with flesh, the police can provide useful details to the public. Take this person, for example, who is described as having, and I quote, *hairy legs*."

"Pity," The Little Ghost says.

"Don't a lot of people have hairy legs?" The Taller Kid asks earnestly.

2. "This person wore *distinctive shorts*," The Taller Kid says.

"What's distinctive about them?" The Shorter Kid asks.

"They've gone some red and blue stripes on them I guess?"

"Like your tetras."

“Yeah. Kind of.”

“It’s a more useful description than the one I’m reading, which says that the person wears black socks and blue jeans.”

The Taller Kid turns to The Little Ghost. “Did you ever find any clothing with the bones?”

“No.”

“Don’t you think that’s weird?”

The Little Ghost looks to the mineral fibre suspended ceiling tiles overhead, just an absent gaze, not really seeing them, for they are so quotidian, such a lacklustre harbour grey, that it is difficult to give them much consideration. Yet they are made of:

- wool spun from molten rock;
- glass fibres twined with plastic;
- perlite, born in a volcano, bubbly as pumice stone, *spuma maris*, the froth of the sea; and,
- coincidentally, newspaper.

A cosmopolis hangs over their heads.

“Yes,” The Little Ghost finally admits. “It’s sort of weird.”

“At first I found it unbelievable that dead bodies could have sat around decaying for a year or more in the forest in a town as small as Euphoria without being discovered by anyone but you, but some of these bodies—” The Shorter Kid gestures at the phone screen “—are just, like, *right there*, metres away from a road or something, and still no one finds them for ages.”

“It really is amazing how much people don’t notice about the world around them,”

The Little Ghost agrees.

3. An embroidered frog, dirt or blood shadowing its contours, is the only emblem offered up of an unnamed newborn laid on a bench in a graveyard. The Shorter Kid studies it, but does not speak of it aloud.

4. Holding the phone in the line of sight of first The Little Ghost and then The Shorter Kid, The Taller Kid shows them a photo of a figure, wearing a suit, bearing a cane, and sitting on the stone post of a guardrail intended to keep the faceless public, milling at the periphery of the image, away from a grassy slope that descends sharply to a waterfall. “A photographer took this picture of a stranger. As soon as the camera was lowered, the stranger swung over the railing and out of sight. When the photographer went to investigate, the person could not be seen either on the grass or in the whirlpool below. The photographer went to the police, reported the person as missing. Suicide was suspected. But no one ever found the body. Usually people who die in the falls float downstream and show up on the river banks. I thought it was interesting so I did a bit more digging about the story and get this. Police say that going over the falls and then being stuck in the water sometimes *destroys clothing*.”

“Cool,” The Shorter Kid says.

“Well we were just talking about how weird it is that The Corpses have no clothing.” The Taller Kid points out.

“So the murder, what, drowned them and then retrieved them from the water ages later and placed them in a forest?”

“Well no, not that necessarily. I’m just saying there can be reasons why some dead bodies don’t have clothes on. Like natural ones.”

“Maybe someone just murdered them in the forest and stripped their clothes to minimize the evidence left behind,” The Little Ghost says, unimpressed.

5. “This unidentified body was found when contractors dug up a forty-five year old cement floor in a car dealership. Dead bodies really can be anywhere, can’t they,” The Little Ghost marvels.

The Kids stare at the carpet beneath their feet. Though of interest, none of these cases are of any discernible significance to The Corpses in the unwood. Setting the phone on the table, The Shorter Kid collapses forward melodramatically beside it, head on wrists. “What, exactly, are we looking for?”

“You’ve asked that like five hundred times,” The Taller Kid replies, eyes raised from the screen for the first time in half an hour.

“Tell me again.”

“Anything. Everything. Nothing.” The Taller Kid’s answers have become increasingly gnomic with each iteration of the question. “I mean, if you find a record of someone from Euphoria, or near Euphoria, who’s missing, that could be important.”

“Obviously,” The Shorter Kid says. “But there aren’t any.”

“Yet,” The Taller Kid adds.

“Besides that, what could possibly be of interest?” The Shorter Kid presses.

“Use your youthful intuition,” The Little Ghost answers gruffly.

“My youthful intuition says we’re wasting our time. We don’t know a single fact about our person. Not their age or their height or their hair colour. We can’t even really be sure they are from Euphoria. They could be from somewhere else. Visiting or hiding or —”

“Dumped,” The Little Ghost supplies.

“That reminds me,” The Taller Kid cuts in. “Did you ever notice any damage to the bones? Marks from bullets or a knife or anything like that?”

The Little Ghost rounds on The Taller Kid. “Tell me—do I look like a coroner to you? Do I look like someone who has a medical degree? Do you suspect that I am secretly withholding key evidence and making us skim old case files without any useful direction because I am—what—bored? Snakelike? Harebrained?”

The Taller Kid stares back, twitchy as a housefly. “I—” But already The Little Ghost is waving the smoke of the outburst away.

“No, that was uncalled for. I’m sorry.” Without offering an explanation, The Little Ghost’s attention returns to the computer screen. *What was that?* The Shorter Kid mouths to The Taller Kid, whose head shakes and shoulders shrug.

“Is there anything I can help with?” Thee three of them startle at the voice, chirpy and harmless and nerve-wracking as if it belonged to a bird who flew by accident into the basement archives of the library. “Gosh, I didn’t mean to alarm you! I just wanted to see if your research was going well.”

“Fantastic!” The Shorter Kid replies, smiling and nodding at length.

“If you told me a bit about what you’re looking for, I might be able to help,” The Librarian says, out of sweetness or boredom, it is difficult to discern. “I’ve been working here a long time. I have seen a lot of things.” The Taller Kid hitches up a vacant and defensive smile to match The Shorter Kid’s. What kind of things?

“I don’t think we need any help,” The Little Ghost supplies.

“All right then. You just holler if you do. I’ll be around.”

“Thanks!” The Shorter Kid says.

“I like librarians,” The Little Ghost says to the computer monitor, once The Librarian has disappeared up the stairs. “Sometimes they’re the only people who talk to me.”

“That one seemed kind of weird, though,” The Shorter Kid says.

“That one’s always kind of weird.” The Little Ghost does not elaborate.

Magic Lanterns

“What if we treated them like lost pets?” The Taller Kid suggests.

“What does that even mean?” The Shorter Kid asks.

“We could put up signs around town. Found: one, or possibly more, human skeletons in the forest. Call to claim.”

“Are you joking?”

“Obviously,” The Taller Kid says, absently beginning to sketch a poster. “But also maybe not.”

“I don’t follow.” The Shorter Kid’s eyebrows crease.

“Clearly we’re not going to literally put flyers up all over town.”

“Oh good.”

“People would see us. And who would attend the phone?”

“A murderer might call and try to get the bones back to conceal the evidence.”

“Sure. But what if we just set up a website, anonymously, with an email where people could send us tips?”

“No,” The Little Ghost interjects. “Absolutely not.”

“Why?” The Taller Kid asks.

“One: that will possibly, maybe even probably attract the attention of the police and unless you two are web geniuses, which I have reason to doubt, they’ll find out it was us. Two: there is no possible useful information that strangers on the internet could give us. You’ll just get a lot of sob stories from people looking for their missing loved ones and we’ll have to tell them well, sorry, we can’t confirm whether these bones belong to them or not. At which point they’ll probably get angry and call—who now?”

“The police,” The Taller Kid answers grudgingly.

“Right. So we’re not doing it.”

“I think you just underestimate the power of the internet because you’re—” The Taller Kid falters before the end of the sentence. “From another generation.”

“You two have been all over the internet and what have you found there? Case after case that can’t be solved. Not very persuasive, in my opinion.”

“And what have you found with your antique magic lantern, your last-century holdover technology?” Occasionally, The Taller Kid becomes rather eloquent when irate, and The Shorter Kid beams approval.

“Don’t be impatient,” The Little Ghost scolds.

“Don’t be a hypocrite,” The Taller Kid retorts.

“How am I being a hypocrite?”

“You never should have touched the bones after you found them—”

“Would you keep your voice down.”

“You should have called the police straightaway. Instead you contaminated the crime scene.”

“We don’t even know if there was a crime. A hiker could have died in the woods.”

“But if there *was* a crime we’re unlikely to ever find out who’s responsible because most of the evidence will be disputable, if not inadmissible, thanks to your inability to let other people do their jobs.”

“Maybe if they’d done their jobs and found the missing person or persons a little sooner, it wouldn’t be up to me to figure out how to manage this.”

“You didn’t have to manage anything. You just had to leave it alone. You could’ve even called in an anonymous tip to help them find the bodies. Do you think we believed your bullshit about not wanting to become a suspect? That was an excuse. Maybe you even convinced yourself it was true. But you’ve been selfish this whole time. Selfish and impatient. So don’t sit there and try to dispense advice to *me* about how to behave.”

“Uh-huh,” The Little Ghost replies, flexing tender knees and preparing to rise, if needed. “Are you finished berating me now?”

“Sure. I’ve said my piece.”

“I would say *the past is the past*, but that’s not really true is it?” By this, The Little Ghost means something like *the past is the infrastructure of the present*. “The point is, I can’t change it now. So, knowing what I’ve done, do you want to continue working on this with me or not?” *And the present is the infrastructure of the future*. The Kids exchange glances.

“Yeah, we’ll keep working with you,” The Shorter Kid says.

“It’s just a bit unbearable when you get, like, self-righteous about it,” The Taller Kid adds.

Still nettled but desperate for the help, or perhaps, one might argue, for the company, The Little Ghost compromises with an insult The Kids are unlikely to understand: “Okay popinjays.”

Kew

Amid September's waning temperatures, The Kids announce that they have exhausted the relevant missing persons databases. The Little Ghost regards this waypost with both relief and alarm. Back in school as they now are, The Kids' capacity for assistance is limited; it is better to have them be through the thick of the work. But The Little Ghost is alone again, fishing through reels of microfiche that, while decisively finite, vastly exceed foreseeable energy and time and so seem otherwise.

"Is there anything we can do?" The Taller Kid asks The Little Ghost as they pass each other one Saturday on the main road of the trailer park. The Taller Kid is coming into the park—from where, at this early hour?—while The Little Ghost is leaving the park for another day at the library.

"I'm not really sure." The Little Ghost has heard of entire online realms, but responds to them probably the same way other people feel when they read about fantastical lands in books, with their names that are familiar in syllable only, characters recognizable by their archetype but not by the details of their identities. "I'll let you know if I think of anything."

"I've been hovering around some forums. Local and regional ones, crime ones. I've read about people going missing but never really making it onto police radar, so they don't show up on the databases. Like maybe the person is transient, or for some reason the police believe they left voluntarily, and they won't even really look into it, never mind treat it as an official case. None from around here that I've found yet though."

"That's great," The Little Ghost says. "That's something." The two of them study their shoes.

“Okay, see you around.” The Taller Kid heads off in the direction of home.

“Sure,” The Little Ghost replies, belatedly.

“Kew.” That warning word, sharp and musical, comes from a dark-eyed junco, feathered charcoal over snow, sheltering in a shrub by the side of the road. Dark-eyed junco, the bird of seven names who is now confined to one.

“Cue? A cue for what? For treason?” The Little Ghost laughs.

“Kew, kew, kew.”

“Just tell me what to do. I can’t take a hint.”

Residual

Staggering out of the haze of sleep, having woken only once before not knowing where The Second Lover is in the past twenty years, The First Lover could be forgiven for reacting strangely to being alone in an empty bed, for hyperbolically supposing that absence meant The Second Lover must be in the midst of an emergency, might be dying. Recollection returned slowly. It was only after leaping from the sheets and lurching toward the door of the room they used to share, that The Second Lover remembered what had come to pass and collapsed shoulder-first against the frame. Yesterday there was the sudden realization, the shock of action. Tomorrow, perhaps, or the day after, would be the reification, when the event lost the last pearly glimmer of dream, and became instead sundry, fixed, habitual.

That today, however, was the immediate aftermath, the sweeping away of dust and ashes. The promise of seeing remnants and damage clearly. Down to the basement The First Lover went, collecting supplies from cabinets and water from the sink along the way. Beneath the amber glow of low-watt incandescent bulbs, The First Lover knelt, pressed a white sheet to the floor, scoured the cream carpet with a scrub brush and a shimmering slime of dish soap, then soaked it with hydrogen peroxide until it was a foaming mouth. Splatters of lemon-yellow milkshake made of rind and vinegar, dried-up ponds of pomegranate turned to maple syrup, these were rendered invisible if not undetectable by the cleaning. The once-white sheet now held the washed-out pastels of vomit and blood.

Abhorring a vacuum, The First Lover collected by hand the thousands of head hairs threaded through the warp and weft of the carpet wool and lifted several of them up

to the light. Nearly every strand, obviously deliberately extracted, was a complete tree that had retained its root.

“Disgusting,” The First Lover said.

Into a black silk bag The First Lover placed the folded sheet, smelling of the detritus of human life, and the tumbleweed of fallen tresses. Actual tumbleweeds form when a plant—sometimes amaranth, flower of immortality—severs from its roots and, though technically dead, continues to move, scattering its seeds. Some tumbleweeds have done more; they have blocked roads, they have buried houses. Figurative and shrouded, that tumbleweed snarl of hair seemed unlikely to migrate, less likely still to wreak devastation. To the cotton and hair The First Lover added the small bottle of sodium cyanide, half-empty. Death by poison was an eventuality they had never discussed.

Upstairs, The First Lover retrieved the handwritten letter—read yesterday morning, though The Second Lover had composed it some indeterminate amount of time before that—and included it in the black silk bag. The First Lover stood at the window in The Second Lover’s study, twisting the loose fabric of the bag around and around on itself. A pearl grey sky articulated the possibility of rain, but did not swear to it.

“No,” The First Lover said, untwining the bag, grabbing the letter, wadding it smaller than a lamb’s heart. “This isn’t you.”

Once the letter had been transferred to a throwaway bag that lacked all personal character, accompanied by stacks of correspondence that were removed from The Second Lover’s desk with a terse sweep of the arm, and the address of the landfill had been confirmed, The First Lover packed the two bags and a shovel from the garage into the car.

“Our last little trip together,” The First Lover said to the slumping black silk.

Fiche

“Another day of fiche-ing?” a voice inquires over The Little Ghost’s shoulder. “That’s my word for it. Like fishing, but with microfiche. Ha ha.” It is The Librarian, the one who is always around, stocking shelves or retrieving items from the archives, but never working the front desk. The Little Ghost suspects this is a purposeful choice, though whether on the part of management or The Librarian it is hard to say and, either way, it elevates The Little Ghost’s feeling of affinity between them. Though The Librarian is younger, The Little Ghost senses a world wariness, which is not to say world weariness, there—the apprehension of a dog that was once abandoned by the side of a country road but found its way back into town.

“I’ll probably be here ‘til I’ve read every last newspaper you have.”

“You trying to set a world record or something? Most out-of-date newspapers read in a single year?”

“Just looking for something I don’t expect to find.”

“I wish you’d tell me what it is. You know, I’ve read most of these papers myself over the course of my twenty-three years here.”

“Have you?”

“I have. Research for my website.”

“What’s your website about?”

“Holding the local government accountable for their social policy and fiscal choices. You can’t trust institutions, right? And the thing with city government is not so much that it’s secretive, though sure, sometimes it is, but really the problem is that no one

cares enough to compile and study all of the information, and the ones that do are getting paid to make the bureaucracy run smoothly, they're not there to propose reform."

"But you care."

"*Deeply*. I'm the gadfly of Euphoria." There is a self-satisfied smile on the Librarian's face. Though likening oneself to a biting insect would ordinarily smack of self-deprecation, The Little Ghost is impressed by the unexpected but obvious pride with which The Librarian delivers this comparison.

"Maybe," The Little Ghost admits, "you can help me after all. I'm trying to find... examples...of people who have gone missing but who haven't been officially declared missing by the police." The Librarian nearly trembles with glee.

"People from where?"

"I guess starting with people from around here. Though I might be willing to branch out."

"Branch out! Ha ha. Is that a library joke?"

"No."

"Disappointing. But regardless, I *can* help you. Surely I can." The Librarian reaches into a pocket, pulls out a business card, and hands it to The Little Ghost. "That's my website at the bottom. I think you'll find lots of information that will be of interest to you, so take a look around. For now, though, I do specifically remember one rather recent case. Let's see if we can find it. I think it would have been last year in the summer...Ah! Yes, here it is." The Little Ghost follows The Librarian's finger to the screen, scans the text. Long-time resident. Two friends disappeared. Police refused to help. What's the

point of police at all? So much town money funnelled to them but why? It is unclear whether this latter opinion is that of the resident or of The Librarian or both.

“Do you have a phone number for this person?”

“No. It was just something I read in the paper. Here’s the date I posted it...the article probably would have come out in the paper about a week or so before?”

The Librarian’s estimate proves correct—the article was published on the Saturday before the blog post. It was front page news but the quote from the resident only appeared after a jump, as part of a barely-noticeable couple of paragraphs on an interior page. There is hardly any detail in the article beyond what the blog post offered, save for a name, unrecognizable to The Little Ghost.

“And you know nothing more about this person?” The Little Ghost presses.

“Only as much as you,” The Librarian replies. According to the clock on the wall, school will be out in an hour.

“Thank you for your help,” The Little Ghost says. “I have to go now.”

“Did you find what you needed?”

“Maybe.”

“Will you be back tomorrow?”

“Who can say.”

Accident

It looks like an accident. A small adult, fully dressed in black work boots, blue jeans, red and grey flannel, is lying on one of the deck chairs next to a pool that, while not yet closed for the season, has been kept vacant by the nip of near-autumn.

“Is that...?” The Taller Kid asks.

“I think so,” The Shorter Kid replies. They break into a trot, hurrying along the main road of the trailer park toward the pool.

“Hey!” The Taller Kid calls when they are a few metres away. The Little Ghost rises.

“Oh good, you’re home from school. I have news.”

“Why are you lurking by the water like some kind of kelpie?” The Shorter Kid asks.

“We thought something was wrong,” The Taller Kid adds in a huff.

“On the contrary,” The Little Ghost fishes a scrap of paper out of a pocket and hands it to The Taller Kid. “I think we have finally made progress.” On the paper there is a name.

“Who is this?” The Shorter Kid asks.

“That’s what we need to find out,” The Little Ghost replies. “I would do it myself, but it’s not in the phone book, so...” Whether that is a joke is unclear to The Taller Kid.

“So you want us to look this name up online?”

“Do you think we’ll find it?” The Little Ghost asks.

“Maybe,” The Shorter Kid says. “Probably.”

“No one’s home right now at my place,” The Taller Kid offers and The Little Ghost waves it off.

“We’ll go to the library. I’m not hanging around your trailers without your parents home.”

Ring

“You’re back already!” The Librarian says brightly when The Little Ghost skitters into the library with The Kids.

“Very helpful, you were very helpful,” The Little Ghost answers in passing.

The three of them huddle around a free computer, The Taller Kid poised over the keyboard.

“Look it up, look it up,” The Little Ghost mutters.

“I am looking it up,” The Taller Kid hisses back. “Must be a very common name. Lot of matches.” Diligently, The Taller Kid calls up site after site, hoping for some further hint at an identity.

“Do an image search,” The Shorter Kid suggests, impatient after whole minutes of skimming.

Pages of photos rush past them like landscape through a car window.

“Wait!” The Shorter Kid says, pointing to a minuscule, grainy photo. “That person looks familiar somehow.” Zooming in, then out again, The Taller Kid struggles to make sense of the pixels.

“It’s so blurry it looks like one of those photo mosaics.” The Taller Kid leans back, leans forward, squints.

“Well it’s no one I know,” The Little Ghost says.

“Oh my fuck.” The Shorter Kid taps several times on The Taller Kid’s forearm.

“You know who that is.”

“I don’t.”

“Yes you do.”

“Who is it?” The Little Ghost asks.

“I bet they’re in now. We can go see them.” The Shorter Kid says.

“In whe—” The Taller Kid falters. “I see it! I see it!”

“Let’s go!” The Kids stand. The Little Ghost tries again.

“Where are we going?”

“To Utopia.” The Taller Kid answers.

“It doesn’t exist,” says The Librarian, who happens to be walking by.

Mayhem

Waking to a desolate bed for the first time in twenty years, The First Lover thought that The Second Lover must have gone downstairs for a glass of water in the middle of the night and died. Blood pulsed in The First Lover's ears. After 128 beats, The First Lover sat up and called out, *Where are you*, counting another 32 beats before rising and methodically inspecting the house, room by room. In the ensuite, the towels and toothbrushes were dry; in The Second Lover's study, mail opened and unopened lay like fallen leaves on the desk; in the kitchen, last night's unwashed dinner dishes loitered on the counter; in The Second Lover's jacket pocket there was still a driver's license, a debit card, a set of car and house keys, and, in their shared safe, every last dollar from the stack of emergency cash could be accounted for. When The First Lover turned the knob, the front door sprang smoothly open, revealing the tree-lined street, which was motionless but for leaves shivering in the slight wind, and a neighbour's cat, sleek as a fish-fed seal, who promenaded along the sidewalk past their house.

The house was pristine but for the basement, where The First Lover found an unintelligible mayhem of clues. Splashes of blood and vomit, tangles of hair, a partly-depleted bottle of sodium cyanide, with its characteristic bitter almond smell. None of it necessarily belonged to The Second Lover, but the onyx strands, splintered at the ends, the stomach contents, with rinds of salted lemon like those they had eaten the night before, were familiar.

"It doesn't make sense," The First Lover said. Cyanide poisoning would explain the vomit, but after ingestion death would descend within mere minutes, not enough time for The Second Lover to get far from the scene. And why would the ground be covered in

blood and hair, as though The Second Lover had grappled with an attacker? There had been no disturbances in the house the night before. The First Lover could contrive only two explanations. Either The Second Lover was incapable of staging a convincing death scene—unlikely—or else, The Second Lover wanted to create an impossible tangle of confusion and suspicion, so that The First Lover would never go to the police for help.

Presuming the death scene faked, The First Lover made a list of events that could have followed:

- The Second Lover left the house to die alone.
- The Second Lover left the house to die with someone else.
- The Second Lover left the house and is still alive.

In all instances, The First Lover had been spurned. In all cases, The Second Lover was probably not coming back.

Unable, or unwilling, to remove the mess in the basement, The First Lover walked slowly upstairs to the living room and cowered, faced pressed into the corner of the couch. Spectres of The Second Lover came upon The First Lover like a migraine, possessing the body. In the aura, there were faces, barely recognizable, some were the faces of The Lovers when they were young, and there were tremolo notes of catgut. Time passed, but The First Lover went on being exhausted, being weak, being numb, being pained by the sunlight dripping into the room. Throbbing blood echoed, fist on flesh. Even death had lost its glamour.

Swarming Utopia

Stamped on the burlap sack are the lithe, green-limbed lines of a tree, flaring into a thick wool of white flowers. *Thrace*, the name of the company perhaps, though it's not familiar to The One, curls cursively through the tree's topmost leaves. Drawing an almond from the bag, The One splits its molluscan shell with a nutcracker, and promptly drops both seed and implement when the bell over the door of the video store tolls to tell of incoming customers.

Flitting toward the counter are the very teenagers The One had been waiting to see, shadowed by an unfamiliar person at least four times their age—a triad that inflames both delight and fear.

“I was right!” The Shorter Kid buzzes. “Oh, I was right!”

Onto the counter, The Taller Kid places two pieces of paper, computer printouts, to the left a partial newspaper page featuring the continuation of an article about the police force that The One has to read to recognize, and to the right a grainy photo that mirrors a past self.

“This is you.” The Taller Kid points to the photo. “This is also you.” The Taller Kid points to the article. “Right?”

“You must have had to dig for these,” The One says. “Why were you digging?”

The Little Ghost, who has been standing behind the teenagers, taps their shoulders so they move aside and steps forward. Palms flat on the counter, The Little Ghost studies The One. “You've lost someone. We've found someone.”

“What does that mean? Who did you find? Where?”

“I can show you.”

“Hold on a minute,” The Shorter Kid interrupts. “So you’re going to take this random to see the bones that you still won’t let us see even though we’ve been helping you for months? That is so...uncool.”

“Has anyone you loved disappeared on you?” The Little Ghost turns first to The Shorter Kid, then to The Taller Kid.

“You’ll notice that this one—” The Shorter Kid gestures toward The Taller Kid “—is being raised by a single parent.”

“That’s different,” The Taller Kid says. “The Deadbeat just left us. No one shrugged off this mortal coil.”

“Shuffled,” The One says. “Shuffled off this mortal coil.”

“And when did you last hear from The Deadbeat, exactly? Months ago, right?”

“Yeah, several months ago now I guess.”

“How do you know where The Deadbeat is then? That The Deadbeat is still alive?”

Dazed as a pigeon denied by a window, The Taller Kid stares at The Shorter Kid. “I never thought about it like that. I just assumed...it’s not like it’s out of the ordinary...we rarely get more than two calls a year.”

“But you don’t *know* do you?”

“You don’t really think...”

“I’m just saying.” The Shorter Kid flicks sharp eyes back to The Little Ghost, who gives no indication of being moved by this development.

“If you were all listening closely, you’d have noticed that I said I *can* show what I’ve found. I didn’t say I’ve decided yet whether I will.”

“Show what, though?” The One asks.

“The bones in the woods,” The Little Ghost replies.

“Are you sure they’re human?”

“Hard to argue with a skull.”

“A skull? One skull?”

“Yes, just one.”

The One slips down to sit on the floor, fixating on the geometric cool of the tiles, faintly aware but not caring that the three strangers are leaning forward over the counter to stare with concern.

“This is going well,” The Shorter Kid says.

“Pass this over,” The Little Ghost mumbles to The Taller Kid, whose long arm in its green sleeve stretches toward The One like a stem of asparagus. A trailer park address has been handwritten on the delivered scrap of paper.

“Pay me a visit when your shift is over,” The Little Ghost says.

“Sure.”

“We’ll talk things through. Decide what to do next.”

“All right.”

“In the meantime, maybe we should leave you to your work. You might get a customer.”

As the three of them walk out of the store, the chimes ring, and The Shorter Kid says something like *What exactly is our role going to be? We’re not just sitting backstage after this, you know.*

The Almond Tree

This story, like most, is a shapeshifter that can, and sometimes must, take several forms, particularly as it grows older. Within each iteration, there live two people, and they are lovers, and that is really all you need to know about them. You certainly don't need their names, for though the story is theirs, and its events happened to them—in fact, keep happening to them—the events could have happened to anyone, and they still might.

The first time the story happened, one of the lovers was set to depart on a journey, while the other was to remain homebound, so the homebound lover gave the journeying lover a gift, a small ornamental casket, a memento mori, and said, *Open this only if you are not coming home to me*. In the middle of the voyage, the journeying lover was caught in a terrible storm and washed up on an unintended shore. There the journeying lover opened the casket and was possessed by an image of demise. In horror, the journeying lover took flight and sped, inadvertently, directly toward death. For ages, the remaining lover waited, withering with despair, limbs turning brittle as those of a dry tree, until both of the lovers had perished.

Most people did not like this version, so the story had to retell itself anew.

Another time the story happened, the journeying lover left and was delayed, unable to reach the homebound lover for a long time, and if the journeying lover was delayed because of a fixation on death, this was a coincidence and not the kind of preoccupation that made love impossible. Nevertheless, the homebound lover had to linger, and in this waiting withered to a tree. A friend saw what had happened, and took pity, and called the sun and the rain to attend. Under this care, the lover-turned-tree was able to persist, but would not blossom. Finally, one day, the journeying lover returned,

and wept with regret over the roots until the lover-turned-tree bloomed with white flowers. That summer, almonds fell like confetti in the field.

This second version was more popular, and some people still tell it today, though the story has since gone on, reenvisioning itself, never quite resolved.

Ambit

“Do you think this is it? The Other asks from the driver’s seat. “Do you think you’re about to find what you’ve been looking for?”

“I’m not sure if it is and I’m not sure if I want it to be,” The One replies, eyes fixed on the side of the road as if it were the shoulder of someone familiar.

“I’ve lived in this town for, what, over ten years now? And I can’t remember ever being inside this trailer park. I might never have even gone down this street.”

“Why would you, I guess. It’s not like the road goes anywhere. Just a dead end.”

“A dead end? I hope not.”

“Ha.”

“You’ve been here before, of course,” The One observes as they turn into the park.

“That was about the only time.”

“What does it feel like to be a kid growing up here?”

“Or to be an old person dying here?”

“Literally marginalized. On the periphery of Euphoria.”

More lonely, less lonely. Higher risk, lower risk. Louder, quieter. The One tested and dismissed possible answers. “Probably not that much different from living with six roommates.”

“Maybe not.”

“Did you tell them you were bringing a friend?”

“No. But I didn’t swear to come alone either.”

“Where should I park?”

The Other manoeuvred the car so it sat mostly on the corner of The Little Ghost's lot, tires just barely trespassing on the adjacent roadway.

"Who's that?" The Little Ghost calls, out of the trailer before The One or The Other have even shut their doors.

"This is my friend." Aware of how generic that sounds, The One embellishes in compensation. "My collaborator. My accomplice. My spine. My true-blue." A blush for that last word, significant beyond what The One intended.

"Hi," The Other says with a tentative wave.

"This isn't a hiking troupe," The Little Ghost complains, as The Kids materialize beside The One and The Other.

"What's going on?" The Shorter Kid asks.

"Who's that?" The Taller Kid scrutinizes The Other.

"Doesn't matter," The Little Ghost says. "I'm only taking one of you with me. Let's go." The Little Ghost starts walking, tapping The One on the shoulder in passing.

"I'll—" The One starts.

"Call me when you need a ride home. Or if anything happens," The Other whispers back.

"You don't have to...."

"I know."

"Thanks."

"Good luck."

Take Thy Form from Off My Door

“We still don’t know who you are.” The Shorter Kid has put on that slightly haughty affectation reserved for adults whose trustworthiness has yet to be proven.

“It’s not important,” The Other replies, glancing briefly at the teenagers before walking off in the direction of The One and The Little Ghost.

“Where are we going?” The Shorter Kid asks as The Kids move to follow. No answer from The Other, not even an acknowledgement that a question has been asked.

“Where are you going?” The Taller Kid tries. Still nothing.

Last of the five, The Taller Kid watches the straight line formation of the flock ahead. The Little Ghost, The One, The Other, The Shorter Kid, The Taller Kid, each tailing the person directly ahead. Cranes stretching their necks toward an invisible forthcoming.

When they reach the end of the road, The Little Ghost and The One pass the checkerboard warning sign and vanish into the thick of the woods. The Other stops, snaps a photo, and turns back toward the trailer park, walking through the sightline of The Kids who have paused to watch.

“Who should we go with?” The Shorter Kid whispers to The Taller Kid.

“This wouldn’t even be happening without us, and yet we’re being left out of it.”

“It’s insulting.”

“Yeah.” Still, that morning in Utopia Video, The One had become the first adult that had ever melted like a burned-out candle to the floor in front of The Taller Kid, and this seemed equally relevant to consider. With a sigh, The Taller Kid trails The Other back to the trailer park.

“Okay then,” The Shorter Kid mutters from behind.

They find The Other sitting in the car outside The Little Ghost’s trailer, leaning back against the headrest, eyes closed. Sometimes, after a long shift, The Taller Kid’s parent dozes on the couch and strikes the same cadaverous pose, an expression of exhaustion so complete that it approaches death. Eyelids too tired to flicker, lungs scantily respiring.

“Hey!” The Shorter Kid raps on the window, nettlesome as a raven. It is too late for The Taller Kid to say shut up, or to pry them both away from the scene. The Other opens one leery, avian eye to regard the teenagers, The Shorter Kid leaning an elbow on the car doorframe, The Taller Kid looming a few paces away.

“Hey.”

“Can we talk?”

“Go ahead.” The Other does not roll down the car window but does open a second eye.

“Okay. Who are you?”

“Just a friend who’s been helping look for two missing people for the past year or so. Who are you?”

“We’re the ones who found your friend. We set this whole meeting up, really.”

“Good job.”

“So are you just going to sit in your car until they come back?”

“I might.”

“Are you mad that you couldn’t go, too?”

“Why would I be mad? It’s not my friends who were lost.”

“People cut you out as soon as they no longer need you, don’t they?”

“That’s a childish assessment.”

“Doesn’t make it wrong.”

“All right, thanks for the chat.” The Other closes both eyes again, and The Shorter Kid turns to The Taller Kid.

“Some people have no curiosity.”

Spontaneous Human Cessation

Moving through the clinging, gossamer dark of the woods, the stranger ahead is small, limbs delicate as spider legs, and invokes that familiar arachnid fear: a visceral near-terror that cannot quite be quelled even though the creature who causes it could be extinguished by a careless toe. If there is a path, they are heedless of it, forging ahead in accordance with The Little Ghost's inscrutable sense of direction. Soon, The One loses not only the intuition of space but also of time. Sunlight, such as it reaches them, is obscure, diffuse, a ubiquitous glow. Grasping for a clock, The One finds only empty pockets, realizing with a jolt of alarm that the phone must still be in the console of The Other's car.

"Are we close yet?" The One asks.

"If I can walk the distance, so can you," The Little Ghost replies.

All at once the forest changes, opens abruptly as a door. In the glade, ground cover tangles around their ankles, friendly as snakes, and dry leaves hiss and crackle under their feet, but their faces and arms are free again.

"We're here," The Little Ghost declares.

"Where are the bodies?" The One asks, and The Little Ghost points to the earth directly in front of them. "I don't see anything." Sighing, The Little Ghost kneels and parts the grasses like tresses of hair. Many of the fragments are so small that, by sight alone, The One might have mistaken them for grey twigs, irregular pebbles, though when touched it is obvious somehow that they are animal relics. "Where are the personal effects, the clothes?"

"I never found any."

The One scoffs at this improbable reply. But if The Little Ghost has been a graverobber there is nothing to be done about it now.

“Where is the head?”

From the centre of a desiccated shrub, The Little Ghost extracts the skull and hands it to The One, who grasps it with hands against the temples, staring into the eye sockets. At first The One does cry—hardly the first time this has happened since The Second Lover disappeared—but then this soundless rain is interrupted, unexpectedly, by laughter.

The Little Ghost shapes an indistinct syllable, perhaps about to ask a question, something like, *Why are you laughing?* before falling silent again. Someone who has lived that long can probably surmise why a grieving person performs nonsense.

“It’s such a big head,” The One says finally.

“Big enough, I suppose.”

“You heard that I was looking for two people?”

“Yes.”

“And I was, but I only cared about one of them.”

“All right.”

“The one I did not care about had a big head. Big like this skull.”

“Oh.”

The Little Ghost steps aside, sits on a grounded tree trunk while The One sifts forest soil through urgent fingers.

“People don’t just walk naked into the woods and spontaneously die,” The One says, after exhausting the clearing.

“Why not?” The Little Ghost asks.

Lavish

They have been sitting by the window of The Taller Kid's trailer for most of the afternoon, watchful as dogs left behind, and when they see The Little Ghost and The One trudging laboriously up the park road, they go bounding out to meet them, though from the hounded grimace on The One's face, they recognize it is better to say nothing and so fall into step at the tail of the procession.

Back at The Little Ghost's trailer, The Other is fully asleep in the car, startling awake when The One opens the passenger door. Their eyes meet, but only the engine mutters as it comes to life. The Other waves, mostly to The Little Ghost, and they are off. The Kids shift to stand in the tire tracks left on the grass.

"Well?" The Taller Kid asks.

"Come inside, I guess," The Little Ghost replies.

Without inquiry, The Little Ghost places glasses of pineapple juice and a plate of crackers on a TV tray in front of the couch where The Kids sit, a gesture which The Shorter Kid appreciates immediately and The Taller Kid does not even notice.

"Well," The Little Ghost says and The Kids wait, expectant. Finally, The Little Ghost continues, "No one's going to the police. It seems like that skull belongs to one of the two friends that were missing."

"Seems," The Taller Kid repeats.

"The One thinks it is, and that's enough for me."

"You're joking," The Shorter Kid says through a mouthful of wheat dust.

“If you went to the police they could test DNA, check dental records,” The Taller Kid points out. “You don’t all have to resign yourselves to uncertainty just because you’re—”

“Because we’re what?” The Little Ghost asks.

“Old and jaded,” The Shorter Kid replies.

“Let’s pretend someone goes to the police about this,” The Little Ghost says.

“Let’s assume they are able to identify the body. If it is the person we think it is, then either The One’s other friend is there and dead as well, or the other friend becomes a suspect, and we still might never find out how death occurred. In either case, The One wants it left alone.”

“What if those bones don’t belong to either of the friends?” The Taller Kid asks. The Little Ghost shrugs.

“Maybe The One needs a reason to stop searching.”

“And why are you satisfied with this?” The Taller Kid presses.

“While we were in the woods, The One told me what happened with the missing friends, and I don’t feel there’s anything more I need to hear. And I’ve lived long enough to see that greater certainty than this is rarely offered.”

“And what about us?” The Shorter Kid asks.

“You’re young. You’ll find something else to do with your time.”

“No, I mean, don’t you think we deserve to hear the friends’ story, too?”

“Sure you do. And when you’re older, when there’s nothing left for you in Euphoria and you’re ready to leave, I’ll tell you everything.”

“What if you die before then?” The Taller Kid’s voice falters.

“I’ll write it down for you. I’ll make sure you get it.”

Touch Me Not

With a crystallizing patience, refined as blankest sugar, The Other waits until The One is ready to speak.

“I have to leave town,” The One says as they are driving past fields occupied only by autumn-blooming wildflowers.

“Oh?” The Other asks. “Did you get a lead?”

“Yes,” The One replies. “And no.”

Lungs full, The Other brakes, pulls the car off to the side of the road, rolls down the window, stares at the yellow blossoms in the lea. Sleeping goldfinches.

“I believe the bones belong to The First Lover. I can’t say for sure, though.”

“Have you thought about going to the police, if the skull is obviously human?”

“I have thought about it, yes. I think our lives are complicated enough already, don’t you?”

The Little Ghost, The Taller Kid, The Shorter Kid, The One, The Other, all of them could be caught up, spectators to a gruesome unveiling, fish in a net. A legacy stuck like a barnacle to the muddied skeleton of The First Lover. And what was The Second Lover breathing now—air, fire, water, earth?

“I’m not sure if I was really looking for The Second Lover.”

“It might be okay if you weren’t.” The Other chances a glance at The One, whose arid and vacant eyes are fastened to the dashboard, but does not dare to lift a hand.

Instead, The Other looks away again, searching the field for another focal point and finding a jittery dragonfly, whose azure body glints as if it were moulded from a

stolen piece of the sky, and who, alighting on the pod of a touch-me-not, sends forth a starburst of dark seeds.

The End

“I do not forgive you. I will not go looking for you.” The First Lover was opening the earth with a shovel for the second time in as many days. “I will take nothing of you with me.” Reciting these litanies was meant to be a kind of edification, fortification, reperfusion. “It does not matter, for in death we are all alone.” Dark forest soil was more easily displaced than beach sand and quickly, rather more quickly than The First Lover hoped, a minor cavern materialized in the ground. The First Lover undressed, folding the clothes and laying them in the crater. Only the act remained.

For several hours, The First Lover sat in the company of the knife, willing a transference. Whatever understanding once existed between The Lovers had to be transmogrified into an intimacy between The First Lover and Death, which winked and gleamed among the leaves. This clearing in the woods had been deliberately chosen. It was a quiet place, insulated from human chaos, exempt, especially, from the handprints of The Second Lover. It was land The Lovers had never seen together.

When the act was done, The First Lover, wincing and gasping, tossed the knife into the dug hole, and buried it in dirt and gushing blood. A gesture of reverence and obfuscation.

“You should have been here,” The First Lover rattled, and The Deer that had been foraging nearby leapt farther into the gloom of the woods.

Sweet

The One and The Other have just sat down on The Little Ghost's couch when there is a knock at the trailer door. After flicking suspicious eyes in the direction of the guests, The Little Ghost goes cautiously to the door.

"Did you invite someone to tag along behind you?" The Little Ghost inquires before peering out.

"No, of course not," The One returns.

"Well then who has the nerve to...oh." The door opens and in shuffle The Kids.

"We saw you drive up," The Shorter Kid offers.

"Hello," The Taller Kid adds.

"I didn't realize we had a pop-over sort of relationship." The tone of The Little Ghost's statement is pitched somewhere between observation and complaint.

"Don't worry, we won't be expecting muffins," The Shorter Kid replies lightly, settling uninvited and unabashed onto one of the kitchen chairs, while The Taller Kid idles tentatively in the doorway.

"Fine. Unless my company has any objections." The Little Ghost stares meaningfully at The One. "Any at all."

"None," The One answers. Is that a smirk? It disappears before The Little Ghost can decide.

"The Kids are here because you're here and you're here why? I don't think you mentioned yet."

"As I said before, I agree with you about not going to the police. And I think your decision to leave the bones in the woods makes sense as well, but we were thinking..."

The One turns, addresses The Other instead of The Little Ghost. “We were thinking it might be good to have some kind of memorial or whatever. Something to acknowledge that someone died...”

“Yes. It’s important to acknowledge death explicitly. If we don’t put up a tombstone, anyone passing by might mistake The Corpses for living people.”

“I think it sounds nice,” The Taller Kid puts in.

“Do we really want to draw more attention to the bones than necessary?” The Little Ghost asks.

“If someone goes into that clearing, they’re pretty likely to find the bones anyhow. Besides, the sign can be small, inconspicuous. Even at a slight distance from the bones if you want.” The One says.

“Is this important to you?” The Little Ghost presses. “Or do you just think it’s the customary gesture you’re supposed to make? Last I heard you didn’t even like the person who died all that much.”

“Oh come on.” The Other startles everyone by speaking for the first time. “You don’t even really have a problem with the idea, do you?”

“Why do you say that?”

“You’re obviously attached to The Corpses. You’ve named them. You’ve got a whole congregation,” The Other waves a hand to indicate the four guests, “assembled around them. You’re only disagreeing because you’ve lived alone so long that you’ve forgotten how to integrate other people’s ideas into your own life.”

“Thanks for the analysis. Very incisive.”

“I’m not wrong.”

“I paint,” The Taller Kid cuts in, and everyone turns to stare perplexed. “I can paint something. Like, on a rock maybe. So it’ll last a pretty long time, several years probably, even though it’s outside. And it’s a rock so it can be painted again later if we want. And if we turn it face down it will just look like a rock. Nothing anyone will even notice.”

“You’re trying to weasel your way into seeing the bones, aren’t you?” The Little Ghost asks.

“Yes,” The Shorter Kid answers.

“No. I’ll just give you the rock and you can take it to the bones,” The Taller Kid says.

It is possible, The Little Ghost realizes—over The Shorter Kid’s incredulous *What?*—that The Taller Kid’s interest all along has been not morbid, as The Little Ghost long supposed, but the exact opposite of morbid. It might be more than possible, plausible even, that The Taller Kid has not been seeking to encounter the dead, but to confront the living.

“That sounds...” Eight eyes hover on The Little Ghost like honeybees investigating a flower. When did such a thing last happen, before today? “Apt.”

“We can do it today.” The Taller Kid leaps up, tugs at the sleeve of The Shorter Kid. “We can do it right now.”

Chanson de Geste

“What kind of flower do you think it is?” The Other regards the painted memorial rock that sits, wordless, at the foot of a tree on the periphery of the unwood, a short way off from where The Corpses repose. “A white daffodil maybe?”

“Hard to tell.” The Little Ghost squints. “It could be a jonquil. A moonflower.”

“An almond blossom,” The One suggests.

The three of them stand, facing the stone, childish and earnest in their clumsy approximation of funerary rites.

“Should we have added text?” The Other worries.

“Like what?” The One asks.

“A word. Any word.” The Other kneels, touches two fingers to the top of the stone.

“*Anonymous?*” The One improvises. “*Anomaly? Anomie?*”

“Don’t fuss.” The Little Ghost says. “Kisses are a better fate than wisdom, and a flower is a better fate than some generic requiescat.

“Should we at least offer a few words,” The Other presses, “while we’re all standing here?” Two faces turn, expectant, toward The Little Ghost.

“Well...” Having spoken so many times to The Corpses, The Little Ghost does not believe that anything more needs to be articulated. Hello, goodbye, these are phrases that The Little Ghost expects to repeat countless times to the bones, and whatever peace or lack they have will be a condition of which The Little Ghost is also a part.

A single, melancholy howl emerges from the woods. Other voices join, resounding high and several, surrounding the three people who stand astounded in the clearing.

“Hello, song dogs,” The Little Ghost says, as if a few humans had just joined their company.

“Are those wolves?” The One whispers.

“Coyotes,” The Little Ghost answers, at regular volume.

“A whole pack of them?” The One continues in a hushed tone. “Are we safe?”

“Could be two, could be ten. Not surprising this time of year. It’s when all the young start to go off on their own, find new groups.”

“Why is it so hard to tell how many there are?”

“Any given coyote makes so many different and complicated sounds, it’s hard for strangers like us to tell their voices apart. I think it’s supposed to help them scare off predators and rivals, that kind of thing. Or maybe it’s just a joke they like to play on unsuspecting visitors.”

“I’m fine with leaving if they want us to leave.”

“They’ll let us alone if we don’t approach them. They might not even be talking to us.”

“You didn’t spend much time outdoors as a child, did you?” The Other, who has been standing by silently, asks The One.

“Not as an adult, either.”

“I think it’s sort of sweet,” The Other says. “The Song Dogs are carrying the dirge.”

“Just as well,” The Little Ghost adds. “You wouldn’t want to hear my warble.”

“You could still add your melody to the chorus,” The Other replies.

“What would you have sung, if you had to?” The One asks.

Hushed, so hushed it hardly sounds like words, sounds more like a susurrus of wind through brush, The Little Ghost hums.

Under the earth,

‘neath grass and leaf

into the dark do our dead go.

But they return,

watered by grief,

in the faces of blooms that grow.

The Little Ghost coughs self-consciously. “I haven’t thought of that for years. We sang it at the funeral of a family friend who died quite young. Drank too much. Liver gave out. I think they chose that song because it made the death seem like less of a hopeless waste.”

Mourning Portrait

“I dunno, sounds kind of grim to me. I mean, obviously I support you and I’ll help you with it, but that’s just my honest opinion.”

“Okay, it’s grim. So what?”

“People don’t even want to look at *real* dead people.”

“Yes, they do.”

“Right but they’re not supposed to want to.”

“Don’t be so *modern*. Did you know that back when daguerreotypes first became popular, they were still really expensive, so sometimes the only photograph people would have taken of them was after their death? Families took advantage of that last chance to have a likeness of their loved one.”

“You’re on another research bender, I see.”

The Kids pass the management office, the landmark that, once attained, gives The Taller Kid the settled feeling of having arrived home.

“Anyways,” The Taller Kid continues, “with what I’m doing, no one will even really be looking at a dead person. They’ll be looking at living people made to appear as if they were dead.”

“Because that’s so much better.”

“It is. Death becomes familiar. Then it’s less overwhelming when it actually arrives.”

“I don’t think my parents would agree.”

“Well I won’t show them the painting.”

“Okay, whatever. If you want me to pose so you can paint me up to look dead, I’ll do it. But I still think it’s abnormal.”

“Yeah, probably. On the bright side, you don’t even really have to pose. You can basically just take a nap while I work.”

“Sounds easy enough I guess. Is this what you were thinking about while you were being a wallflower all night at the party?”

“I got the idea from someone passed out on the couch.”

“At least you actually came to a gathering of your peers for once.”

“Hey,” The Taller Kid points in the direction of The Little Ghost’s trailer. “Look who’s back.”

They meander, magnetized but riverly, preferring not to seem too eager to reach their inevitable destination. As they approach, The Taller Kid is surprised to find only two people playing backgammon on a folding table outside the trailer.

“Where’s the other one?” The Shorter Kid asks, prompting The Little Ghost to look up from the game.

“Gone,” The Little Ghost says.

“Taking a bit of a road trip,” The Other clarifies, still staring at the board.

Recognizing the deliberate evasion of euphemism, The Taller Kid puts on a look of wide-eyed naivete. “Why? Where?”

“Hard to say,” The Other replies, unaffected.

“For how long?”

“Until the day of return,” The Little Ghost says. The Taller Kid turns, whispers into the shell of the The Shorter Kid’s ear.

“Maybe I should ask them.”

“Don’t.”

“Why not? I think I’m owed a favour.”

The Shorter Kid leans back, considers, leans in again.

“Actually, you’re right. These are probably two of the only people we know who might hear about your project and still be willing to talk to you afterwards.”

“Yes, exactly, thank you.”

“What are you scheming about?” The Little Ghost asks.

Gingerly balancing impatience and indulgence, The Shorter Kid handles the question: “*Someone* thinks it would be a good idea to paint living people as if they were dead and is looking for volunteer models.”

“Oh, I am so out,” The Other says immediately.

“Hmm.” The Little Ghost deliberates. “I will probably never get a chance to see myself when I’m dead. It could be interesting to see it now.”

“Really?” The Taller Kid asks.

“Sure,” The Little Ghost says. “But you have to really set a scene. Let me go out, roadside, wearing leather and aviators, clutching a pineapple.”

“Why a pineapple?”

The Little Ghost shrugs. “Why roadside? It adds narrative potential. Gives people something to think about.”

“I’m sure we can negotiate, something,” The Shorter Kid says.

“Thanks,” The Taller Kid adds.

“But for now we’ll leave you to your game.” The Kids begin to step away. The Taller Kid offers a tentative wave, which The Other returns with equal hesitancy.

“Yes, and you should try to go to bed before noon,” The Little Ghost says, with an inflection that might be mistaken for affectionate.

Echium Vulgare

Weed to some, wildflower to others, the lush corolla of *Echium Vulgare* can transmute from dusky pink to afterglow blue on even the most impoverished land, on even the glassy sand of a freshwater shoreline. Possessed of nutlets formed like viperous heads, it has been said that the plant can nullify the bite of a real reptilian snake, though whether that rumour is true no one can now recall, and it scarcely matters here, for snakes have little interest in the beach of a cold lake. This *Echium Vulgare* rises precariously skyward, vulnerable to gravity, aggressive vines, but these it meets with a gritty if finite persistence, snarling its roots further into the earth, coiling through bloodied silk and strands of human hair.

Fungiculture

All of the jelly-soft wood ears growing from the bark make it appear as if the dead tree is listening to the group of visitors assembled before it. Though the mushrooms are many, they constitute a single organism, held together by impossibly gauzy wisps of mycelium. The instructor is still speaking—rhapsodizing about honey fungi that are thousands of years old, thousands of tonnes heavy, thousands of acres wide, too vast to measure except by the vaguest of estimates—but The One, feet numb and legs restless with cold, soundlessly tiptoes out the door of the shed.

Outside, the sunlit October air is scarcely warmer, but it is far drier and brighter than the dim and dewy cloud in which the fungi grow. Every week, The One leaves class early, but every week after still returns, bewitched by the mushrooms, those fleshy psychopomps who intercede between the living and the dead, turning one into the other and the other into the one.

The mushroom shed is a modest A-frame structure in the small but flourishing community garden that is a mere few blocks beyond downtown Valence. Today, as has become customary after class, The One sets out on the fifteen-minute walk that leads to a barely-populated cafe off the main street, where The One has made a ritual of proceeding alphabetically, visit by visit, through the long list of loose-leaf teas, some familiar, like chamomile, others unexpected, like fennel, none of them as exhilarating as coffee, which is just as well, for often The One finds that the central nervous system more than justifies its name, amply frenetic even when confronting ordinary life.

Transparent as a fishbowl, the whole front of the cafe is windows, including the door, which today slips, suddenly scaly, through The One's hand before it can even be

opened. In the glass The One sees that, across the street, a familiar figure is walking, collar up, head down, but it couldn't be anyone else.

The One is sure. The One is not sure. The One is sure enough. Turning around, only The One's gaze follows as Blue walks away.

AT THE LIMITS OF GENDERED LANGUAGE IN MIMETIC FICTION:

A CRITICAL ESSAY ON *ANOMIA*

Problematizing. Obscurantist. Silent. Paradoxical. Metamorphic. Though varied in their approaches, the five novels *The Opoponax* by Monique Wittig, *Sphinx* by Anne Garréta, *Written on the Body* by Jeanette Winterson, *Jonny Appleseed* by Joshua Whitehead, and *The Death of Vivek Oji* by Akwaeke Emezi all present characters who only become apprehensible if one conceptualizes their sex/gender as existing beyond binaristic views of sex/gender.¹ The intent of this essay is to first delineate the five novels' respective approaches to depicting sex/gender. I will examine how the novels' diction, with particular attention paid to the pronouns, nouns, and adjectives, reflects characters' sex/gender and demonstrate how that language is used in order to subvert the sex/gender binary. The novels' approaches to sex/gender fall into two broad camps: *The Opoponax*, *Jonny Appleseed*, and *The Death of Vivek Oji* make explicit the fact that their protagonists defy the sex/gender binary, while *Sphinx* and *Written on the Body* allow one, or at most two, of their characters to be depicted without any reference to sex/gender, which acts as an evasion of the sex/gender binary. By delineating the boundary-pushing language of these previous examples of mimetic fiction, I will be able to contextualize my own novel, *Anomia*, and to show how it traverses new ground with respect to sex/gender representation outside of a sex/gender binary by being the first novel to extend sex/gender ambiguity to all of its characters. My approach in *Anomia* is an attempt to see whether it is possible for individuals, fictional or otherwise, to be legible outside of the limiting and oppressive logic of the sex/gender binary.

Before beginning my literary analysis, however, I must make some clarifications. Firstly, this essay does not attempt to elucidate the totality of *Anomia*'s formal or thematic concerns. I have chosen to focus on one aspect of the novel that is of particular salience and interest, but ultimately *Anomia* is also concerned with other issues as well, such as ecocriticism, which are related to but distinct from issues of sex and gender. Secondly, I need to define two key concepts at work in this essay: mimetic fiction and the sex/gender binary. The term mimetic fiction is used here to refer to fiction that "will attempt to correspond to experiences in the world," in contrast to non-mimetic fiction that "will follow non-realistic conventions" and anti-mimetic fiction that "contains events that are clearly and strikingly impossible in the real world" (Alber et al 102). This distinction between mimetic and non- or anti-mimetic fiction primarily comes down to "actualizability," insofar as only mimetic fiction presents events that "*could* exist in the real world" (Alber et al. 104). Of course, what constitutes a recognizably 'real' world will be culturally and historically specific. Spiritual beliefs, for example, that are received as true by one segment of humanity may seem fantastical or impossible to another. The circumstances of the text's production and reception should therefore be considered when attempting to determine whether a text is attempting mimesis, which is what I did in order to select the five novels examined here. This essay will not explore or explain the mimetic qualities of the novels in any detail, I am merely noting this as a deliberate limitation of my sphere of study, one I have chosen because my own novel *Anomia* is mimetic, and because, when I attempted it, a survey of sex/gender binary-defying novels that included non- or anti-mimetic texts proved unwieldy in scope and often digressive.

It is worth additionally noting that I have opted for the term mimetic here, rather than realist, because although the term mimetic fiction might be considered an approximation of the “exceptionally elastic” (Cuddon 729) definition of realism as a critical term, realism has also been associated with more exacting genre connotations that are not appropriate for the subject at hand.² The term realism has, for instance, been used to refer specifically to the nineteenth-century European “recognizable and conscious movement in literature” in which fiction is a kind of “copy of nature” that “reveals to us the literature of truth” (Cuddon 730). Such realism is concerned with “the here and now, with everyday events,” with the “environment and with the movements (political, social, etc.)” of the author’s time (Cuddon 730), and with “that form of closure which is also a disclosure” in which “the sequence of events will be made clear and the motives of the characters laid bare” (Belsey 55). Despite the fact that the term realism has been used in far more expansive ways at other points in literary history, this iteration of realism that is concerned with the revelation of a truth about humanity is not only inapplicable to the novels under consideration here, it is perhaps even antithetical. These six novels—I include my own in this—are invested in ambiguity, by which I mean they are engaged with realities that seem to defy fixed understanding and elude categorical perception. To connect these novels, however obliquely, to a realism that purports to be able to provide one comprehensible version of the truth would be to do them a disservice.

I turn now to defining the sex/gender binary. Binaristic views of sex/gender are based on “the assumption that there did exist two distinct sexes and only two sexes and that, accordingly, each body ought to be limited to one, in theory and in practice” (Dreger 109). Julia Serrano explains that, when operating within a binaristic understanding of sex

“we purposely ignore the variation that exists in sex characteristics and create the illusion that there is absolutely no overlap between the physical sexes” (103). The binaristic approach to sex corresponds with a binaristic approach to gender, as “we assume that people can only be attracted to women or men (but not both), they can only be feminine or masculine (not both), and they can only identify as male or female (not both)” (Serano 103). Serano suggests that a scientific view of sex as containing two polarized categories, male and female, tends to be associated with social views of gender as similarly polarized, with the poles of manhood/womanhood and masculinity/femininity existing singularly in the individual and oppositionally to each other. Furthermore, Serano says, we presume “the typical inclination for each sex holds true for all people of that sex,” such that femaleness, womanhood, femininity, and attraction to men are, by default, believed to be co-presenting, while maleness, manhood, masculinity, and attraction to women are construed as the alternative (103). Individuals who challenge this binary—for example, by displaying same-sex attraction, or being gender-nonconforming, or being intersex—tend to be dismissed, delegitimized, or treated as ideologically threatening (Serano 105).

I will not claim that there is a single existent binaristic view of sex/gender, for arguably there may be multiple historical examples, but a common one, and the one which is most relevant for the novels discussed here, is that which has been fabricated, propagated, and repeatedly finessed by Western medical science since the nineteenth century. As Jack Halberstam explains, “Our current investments in the naming of all specificities of bodily form, gender permutations, and desire emerge from this period,” with the work of doctors like Richard von Kraft-Ebbing, at a time when “Europe was

engaged in a large-scale imperial orientation toward classification, collection, and expertise” (7). Despite the scientific conviction regarding the existence of two distinct and differentiable sexes, the problem of how to accurately categorize individuals as either male or female was, and remains, a contentious one. As Alice Domurat Dreger observes, “What makes a person a male or a female or a hermaphrodite? [...] the answer necessarily changes with time, with place, with technology, and with the many serious implications—theoretical and practical, scientific and political—of any given answer” (9). In *Hermaphrodites and the Medical Invention of Sex*, Dreger catalogues the anatomic and behavioural features that Western medical scientists have attempted to rely on in order to definitively categorize people as either male or female: external genitalia (80), the presence of ovaries or testes (84), voice (87), sexual orientation (88), gendered behaviour (89), ‘sexed emissions’ of ejaculation or menstruation (96), the presence or absence of breasts (100), pelvic size (102), skeletal size (102), body shape (103), facial features (103), and hair growth (104). The result? “Remarkably little agreement [...] on the true nature of sex” (Dreger 83). Evident from this list are two patterns of note that reinforce Serano’s view of sex/gender as articulated above. One is that scientific constructions of sex and social constructions of gender mutually constitute and reinforce one another, with sex read as an indicator of gender and gender read as an indicator of sex. The second is that constructions of sex and gender are both intertwined as well with beliefs about sexual orientation. Within a binaristic view of sex/gender, attraction to a particular sex/gender can be read as an indicator that one is likely, or necessarily, of the opposite sex/gender.

The interrelational nature of sex and gender becomes even more obvious when one considers the historical practice wherein “British and French medical men sometimes

let a case of ‘mistaken sex’ go, and sometimes even worked to create a sex that matched the social sex rather than the gonadal sex of a doubtful patient” (Dreger 157). Dreger is speaking here specifically of the treatment of people who are intersex, or whose sex for whatever reason could not be readily differentiated into one of the binary categories of male or female. This practice of sometimes privileging the so-called ‘social sex,’ which might also be called the gender, of the individual over their anatomic features to determine their purportedly true sex, demonstrates both the conceptual inextricability of sex and gender, as well as the extent to which relations between individuals—their perceptions, actions, reactions—are constructive of sex/gender realities. Accordingly, conceptions of gender, even within the binary, have proven as inevitably unfixed as conceptions of sex. As Judith Butler puts it:

Terms such as ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ are notoriously changeable; there are social histories for each term; their meanings change radically depending on geopolitical boundaries and cultural constraints on who is imagining whom, and for what purpose. That the terms recur is interesting enough, but the recurrence does not index a sameness, but rather the way in which the social articulation of the term depends upon its repetition, which constitutes one dimension of the performative structure of gender. (10)

The sex/ gender binary is therefore not a static system, though it is a persistent one, and one which only persists through consistent reinforcement. This makes the sex/gender binary both a stubbornly adaptable survivor, and paradoxically also a vulnerable one, for, without constant, repetitive tending to, it runs the risk of becoming irrelevant, or nonsensical, or even dying off altogether.

And, lest anyone believe that the sex/gender binary system is a receding historical artifact, Dreger notes that, at the time of her writing, which was the late twentieth century, “present-day medical treatment protocols for intersexuality [...] call for the creation, as soon after birth as possible, of a ‘believable’ masculine or feminine anatomy via plastic surgery and hormonal therapy,” protocols which “maintain many vestiges of nineteenth-century medical theory and practice” (168). Even today, the world-renowned, U.S.-based Mayo Clinic, described as “the first and largest integrated, not-for-profit group practice in the world” (“Welcome to Mayo Clinic” n.p.) states that, in cases of ‘ambiguous genitalia’:

your doctor may suggest a gender for your baby. The suggestion will be based on the cause, genetic sex, anatomy, future reproductive and sexual potential, probable adult gender identity, and discussion with you. In some cases, a family may make a decision within a few days after the birth. (“Ambiguous Genitalia” n.p.)

Several elements from this passage are worth noting. Here, the medical problem of ambiguous genitalia is focused not, *per se*, on preventing injury or harm to the infant, but on maximizing reproductive potential. Furthermore, the gender of the baby is assumed to be somehow estimable by both the doctor and the family, despite them knowing almost nothing about the few-days-old baby apart from their physical makeup. This process underscores how sex/gender is not inherent, but actively constructed via social dynamics, potentially with little input from the individual.

Prescribed treatment for “ambiguous genitalia” today includes “hormone medications,” as well as surgery which may be used to “[c]reate genitals that appear more

typical” (“Ambiguous Genitalia” n.p.). More typical of what? This is left tacit in the text, though one presumes that what is implied is ‘more typically male or female.’ Rather than being an innate phenomenon that medical science merely observes, the sex/gender binary continues to be one that medical science actively creates and perpetuates. It is also helpful to compare this contemporary treatment of intersex people to the current treatment of transgender people. Rather than being imposed upon children by adults, “feminizing surgery” and “masculinizing surgery” for transgender people are “typically deferred until adulthood” (“Masculinizing Surgery” n.p. and “Feminizing Surgery” n.p.) at Mayo Clinic. While it is apparently acceptable for doctors and family members to presume and impose gender upon an infant, the individual is given comparatively minimal particular say in the matter until much later in life.

Jack Halberstam has suggested that “Gender is attributed as much as it is declared” (58), which I take to mean that gender is a confluence of what others project onto the individual, and what the individual asserts about themselves. However, I would suggest that sex/gender might be attributed even more often than it is declared. Consider, for example, how many times, on a daily basis, you assume the sex/gender of people you encounter, and how few times per day people declare their sex/gender to you. The process of sex/gender attribution is what Serano calls “the act of gendering,” which is the active projection of one’s ideas of maleness/femaleness, manhood/womanhood, and masculinity/femininity onto others. But if this attributive act of gendering often “remains invisible,” even unconscious, it is because “in the vast majority of cases, our assessment of a person’s gender tends to be in agreement with that person’s gender identity and the gender assignments made by other people” (Serano 164). Gendering is significant

conceptually because it is applicable both in the medical sciences, as I elaborated upon earlier, and to laypeople in everyday life. Sex/gender, after all, is socially upheld by many actors, in addition to medical professionals, and, as Halberstam notes, “vernacular forms of expression and definition” of sex and gender “are not necessarily less regulatory or less committed to norms than other modes of classification” (12). These mundane acts of gendering are socially perceived as necessary because, as Judith Butler articulates, gender “figures as a precondition for the production and maintenance of legible humanity” (11). It is these very qualities of binaristic sex/gender—that it is often attributed by others, that the act of attribution is often invisible, perhaps even unconscious, and that it is often assumed to be a necessary component of a legible person, real or fictional—are ones that I both rely upon and challenge in *Anomia*, as I will elaborate on later.

Moving into the literary analysis component of this essay, I begin with an assessment of the five novels’ approach to diction, or, in other words, how they make their characters apprehensible via language. For each novel, rather than considering the relevant aspects of speech—pronouns, nouns, adjectives—in isolation, I will examine their use in a more holistic sense to determine the overall approach to depicting sex/gender that it offers. This analysis will begin with the three novels least like *Anomia*, all of which seem to accept the proposition that some language regarding sex/gender is needed in order for people or characters to be legible to the reader.

In *The Opoponax*, the earliest of all the texts, Wittig does not seek to dismiss the embodied sexual differences of her characters. She opens the novel with a scene in which a little boy, Robert, cries to the class “Who wants to see my weewee-er?” (*The Opoponax* 5), and soon after the protagonist Catherine Legrand, a “little girl who wears panties and

who is not exactly a little girl” (*The Opoponax* 16) must “squat down” in order to “make weewee” (*The Opoponax* 30). This articulation of the anatomic sexual differentiation between male and female bodies is accompanied by a clear acknowledgement of the social differentiation of the sexes: “On the wall of the school on one side of the big door it says Girls’ School and on the other side Boys’ School” (*The Opoponax* 113). Yet despite this broad acknowledgement of female/male sexual difference both anatomically and culturally, Wittig is also subverting gendered expectations that emerge from sexual difference. Catherine Legrand, despite her conventionally feminine name and female anatomy and sex-segregated education, remains “not exactly a little girl” (*The Opoponax* 16). Wittig’s use of pronouns emphasizes the not-girlness of Catherine. In the original French, she uses the indefinite *on*, which “is not marked by gender” (“The Mark of Gender” 83) to refer to Catherine. Though this pronoun has at least an approximate English translation, *one*, “it is so systematically taught [in school] that it should not be used[,] that the translator of *The Opoponax* managed never to use it in English” (Wittig 82–83). Hence, in the English translation by Helen Weaver, *you* and *she* are used instead of *one*, despite *one* being the more accurate translation. One can sense the frustration in Wittig’s wry comment about the translator managing never to use the proper pronoun. Murat notes that “the problem of translation, frequently conjured up [...] is one key to the reception of Wittig’s work [...]: how to render forcefully the ‘on’ (‘we,’ ‘you,’ and ‘one’ together) central to *L’opoponax*” (601). Wittig says that she chose *on* because she “needed a strong device, something that would immediately be beyond sexes, that the division by sexes would be powerless against” (“The Mark of Gender” 82–83). For

Wittig, sexual difference may have some physical or social reality, but gender and individual identity need not, in fact, cohere with sex.

And, like Serano, Wittig sees the sex/gender binary as being intimately associated with heterosexuality. As Wittig says, “In the same way sex, man and woman, gender, as a concept, is instrumental in the political discourse of the social contract as heterosexual” (“The Mark of Gender” 77). Sex, gender, and sexual orientation are, in Wittig’s, like Serano’s, view, mutually-reinforcing conditions of social being. This notion comes to the fore in the last chapter of the novel, when the subversive use of *on* in the vast majority of *The Opoponax* is briefly replaced by *je*, or *I*, “which signals the emergence of the speaking subject through the bliss of lesbian love.” (Campbell 91). Specifically, the first-person subject makes an appearance in the closing, untranslated line of the novel: “*Tant je l’aimais qu’un elle encore je vis*” (*The Opoponax* 256), which Wittig herself translated as “I loved her so that in her I live still” (“The Mark of Gender” 88).³ Subsequent to writing *The Opoponax*, Wittig famously said, “Lesbians are not women” (qtd. in Hale 94), implying that non-conformity with heteronormative expectations regarding sexual orientation is effectively a subversion of the entire sex/gender binary system. The ending of *The Opoponax* supports this assertion: Catherine’s queerness has rendered Catherine illegible as a woman throughout the text, but Catherine’s emergent relationship with another woman allows Catherine to become legible, finally, as a lesbian subject. The lesbian subject is treated as a gender category separate from binaristic, heterosexual womanhood, which is necessarily the opposite of, and complement to, binaristic, heterosexual manhood.

Despite approaching the issue from a different epistemological lens, Joshua Whitehead's view of the relationship between sex, gender, and sexual orientation, seems at least comparable to Wittig's. Whitehead's novel *Jonny Appleseed* features an eponymous Two-Spirit narrator and protagonist. Speaking of himself, Whitehead has said, "I identify as Two-Spirit, which, within Western ways of knowing, describes much more than my sexual preference. For me, it means that I am queer, femme/iskweyayi and male/nâpew, and that I exist in relation to my homelands and communities" ("In Fragments" 35). Here, as in Wittig, queerness and a sex/gender identity that defies a binary are coexistent conditions. A similar articulation of the meaning of the Two-Spirit identity plays out in the novel as well. In *Jonny Appleseed*, despite the consistent use of the *he* pronoun in reference to the narrator-protagonist Jonny, and despite the character's conventionally masculine name, author Whitehead makes regular use of adjectives and nouns to qualify Jonny's identity, and to firmly situate it as something outside of any binary sex/gender normativity. For example, Jonny refers to himself as "an urban NDN, Two-Spirit femmeboy" (*Jonny Appleseed* 45) and a "little femme-boy-fatale" (*Jonny Appleseed* 62). Both expressions defy any binary logic of sex/gender because they insist that both poles of identity can exist simultaneously, in the same individual. In the words of Jonny's kokum: "you girl and you boy" (*Jonny Appleseed* 63), a phrase Jonny internalizes and reformulates later in the novel: "Like the leech, I too felt like a hermaphrodite: part boy, part girl" (*Jonny Appleseed* 81). Rather than the exclusive *or* required by a binary, as in man *or* woman, masculine *or* feminine, Jonny's kokum uses the non-hierarchical and inclusive *and* to show that Jonny contains both boyhood and

girlhood within him equally, and Jonny also uses the non-hierarchical and inclusive formulation of *part-this, part-that*.

Jonny's Two-Spirit identity, which refuses to be divided by any sex/gender binary, is, like Catherine's lesbian identity in *The Opoponax*, closely connected to his sexual orientation. Speaking of his friend and lover, a man called Tias, Jonny recounts: "he also says he isn't gay and I tell him me neither. I still don't think he gets what that means, even when he's inside me" (*Jonny Appleseed* 33). The reader, of course, is told in the first line of the novel that Jonny "figured out that I was gay when I was eight" (*Jonny Appleseed* 7), and is subsequently told of Jonny's affairs with various boys and men, and occasionally a woman. However, Jonny is simultaneously able to shrug off the precision of the term gay when with Tias, precisely because of how flexible Jonny's own sex/gender is. As he explains, "At first he [Tias] used to will himself to love me if I made myself more feminine, when I told him I was still Lucia. I'm fine either way, to be honest. I'm like an Etch-a-Sketch—every cell in my body is yours to define" (*Jonny Appleseed* 33). Jonny depicts his own gender as relatively mutable, capable of transformation, and therefore his relationship with Tias is accordingly neither firmly straight nor gay. As Siepak reminds us:

Two-Spirit, as a concept, was coined in 1990 at the Third International Gathering of American Indian and First Nations Gays and Lesbians in Winnipeg. Since then it has functioned as an umbrella term encompassing the diversity of traditional, as well as contemporary, Indigenous North American gender identities. (496)

There is ample historical semantic basis, therefore, for Jonny to use Two-Spirit as an encompassing description for both his sexual orientation and his gender, and to treat these

concepts as inseparable from one another. And because they are inextricable, the inevitable conclusion is that, inasmuch as Jonny's simultaneously masculine and feminine gender situates him outside of the sex/gender binary, so too must his queerness.

In *The Death of Vivek Oji*—the final novel I will look at that makes sex/gender explicit in order to problematize binary conceptions of it—sex, gender, and sexual orientation prove to be as inextricably connected as they are in *The Opopanax* and *Jonny Appleseed*. Nevertheless, author Awkwaeke Emezi's linguistic strategies differ from those of Wittig and Whitehead. With respect to pronouns, Emezi opts to move from using *he* to refer to the masculine-named protagonist Vivek Oji at the beginning and middle of the story, to using *he* and *she* alternately once it is revealed that the character does not identify as a man. As the protagonist's friend Osita explains, "he said we could refer to him as either she or he, that he was both" (Emezi 217). Like Jonny, the protagonist of *The Death of Vivek Oji* has a fluid conception of his/her own gender, and asks that pronouns be used interchangeably to reflect his/her identity. Underscoring this fluidity is the concurrent transformation of the protagonist's name over the course of the narrative, beginning with the masculine Vivek Oji and becoming the simultaneously masculine and feminine Vivek Nnemdi Oji. This change of proper noun is enacted by both the narrator and the other characters of the novel, and complemented by a change of common nouns. In a crucial scene toward the end of the narrative, the protagonist's parents replace his/her old gravestone, so that in place of the protagonist's masculine birth name Vivek Oji and the noun *son*, the inscription instead reads: "VIVEK NNEMDI OJI/ BELOVED CHILD" (Emezi 244).

Emezi's use of figurative language also emphasizes the gender fluidity of Vivek Nnemdi. Early in the novel, before Vivek Nnemdi's gender has been revealed, Emezi foreshadows it with this gender-blending imagery and simile: "Picture: the boy, shirtless, placing necklaces against his chest, draping them over his silver chain, clipping his ears with gold earrings, his hair tumbling over his shoulders. He looks like a bride" (10–11). The notion that a boy looks like a bride—in other words, looks like someone who is not a boy—emphasizes the malleability of how sex/gender can be perceived and asks the reader to imagine how sex/gender might appear when not constrained binaristically. Rather than using adjectives or nouns that directly describe Vivek Nnemdi's sex/gender presentation, as Whitehead does for Jonny, Emezi uses instead a more indirect and associative approach to show how their character eludes a binaristic sex/gender classification.

Like Jonny and Catherine, Vivek Nnemdi's binary-subverting gender also influences and is influenced by his/her sexual orientation, an issue which is focalized by the romantic and sexual relationship between Vivek Nnemdi and his/her cousin, a man named Osita. Speaking of the embodied facet of his/her loving relationship with Osita, Vivek Nnemdi says:

if that pleasure was supposed to keep me from being a man, then fine. They could have it. I'd take the blinding light of his touch, the blessed peace of having him so close, and I would stop being a man. I was never one to begin with, anyway. (Emezi 131)

Here, Vivek Nnemdi expresses the fact that other people in his/her society will find his/her claims to manhood undermined if s/he participates in what is perceived to be a

same-sex or non-heteronormative relationship. Of course, for Vivek Nnemdi, this is somewhat irrelevant, as s/he does not wish to make a claim to manhood anyhow. This view that a non-heteronormative sexual orientation has the power to preclude the individual's participation in a sex/gender binary is one common to *The Opoponax*, *Jonny Appleseed*, and *The Death of Vivek Oji*, all of which are novels that seek to subvert the binary while continuing to make explicit references to the characters' sex/gender.

Far more difficult to articulate is what exactly novels, like *Anomia*, are saying about sex/gender and sexual orientation when their very *modus operandi* is to be evasive with respect to these subjects. To approach this issue, I turn first to my novel's most direct predecessors, *Written on the Body* and *Sphinx*. In the opening section of *Written on the Body*, the nameless narrator is introduced as a sexless and genderless first person subject, through the pronoun *I*, and the lover is introduced using a sexless and genderless, second person *you* (Winterson 9–10). In the second section, the lover is still not sexed or gendered *per se* but it is hinted that they may be a woman, with the depiction focusing on their long red hair, how their nipples “grazed the surface of the river”, and how they have a husband (Winterson 10–11). Though the third section reinforces this presumption of the lover's womanhood by suggesting that the narrator primarily romances ‘girls’ (Winterson 11), it is not until the fourth section that the *you* pronoun ascribed to the lover slips definitively into *she*, before returning again to *you* (Winterson 12). Later the lover is given a name: Louise.

Throughout the novel, however, the narrator remains sexless and genderless, and it is unclear whether the coupling of the narrator and Louise is a gay or straight one. At the same time, there are seemingly offhand comments by the narrator that prod the reader

to consider the issue of the narrator's sexual orientation and sex/gender identity. The narrator, for instance, describes dancing with Louise "tightly sealed like a pair of 50s homosexuals" (Winterson 73). 'Like' indicates a simile; the narrator and Louise are not literally '50s homosexuals,' but is it because they are not 'homosexuals' or because they do not live in the 1950s? Either or both could be true. Later in the novel, it is revealed that the narrator has had boyfriends, in addition to girlfriends (see, for instance Winterson 92, 143), so one is left to assume that the narrator must be bisexual or queer in some sense, even if the narrator's relationship with Louise is never categorized. With respect to sex/gender, Louise says to the narrator, "I thought you were the most beautiful creature male or female I had ever seen" (Winterson 84), drawing the reader's attention to the fact that they have not been told whether the narrator is male or female.

Sphinx is even more evasive than *Written on the Body*. In *Sphinx*, neither the narrator nor their lover is ever explicitly sexed or gendered. Like *Written on the Body*, the nameless narrator of *Sphinx* is easily veiled by a sex/gender-indeterminate first person pronoun—*je* in the original French, *I* in the English translation—but their lover is far more difficult to linguistically disguise. While author Garréta readily evades the problem of proper nouns, ascribing to the lover simply the name of A***, more difficult is the task of how to speak about A*** without constantly repeating the character's name. Unlike *Written on the Body*, which makes use of *you* when it prefers to avoid gendering the lover, Garréta opts instead for a more complex third-person approach. In the original French, this mission was particularly difficult, because as the translator Emma Ramadan explains, "French contains grammatical gender, meaning nouns are assigned either masculine or feminine gender, and pronouns and adjectives then take on agreement,"

whereas “in English the subject’s gender can only be identified through personal pronouns and possessive adjectives” (Ramadan 123).

It was, accordingly, possessive adjectives that gave Ramadan the most trouble when attempting to render *Sphinx* in English. While in French the possessive adjective takes the gender of its object, not its subject, allowing Garréta to make frequent use of possessive adjectives to obscure the genders of the narrator and A***, in English Ramadan had to make use of several circumnavigational linguistic techniques, such as using a demonstrative in place of a possessive pronoun (Ramadan 124): “I wanted to dismiss, destroy all those who were thronging around A***, keeping *this* presence from me” (Garréta 39, emphasis added). There is a certain amount of awkwardness in such an approach, though only insofar as the phrasing is uncustomary; the meaning, that it is A***’s presence being referred to, is discernible. It is an awkwardness that I accepted, though tried to mitigate, in *Anomia*, as evident, for example, in the following lines:

The Other intervened. “It’s a secluded place though. Somewhere a person might fall and no one would find them. That kind of thing. It made sense to check for them there after not seeing them for a while.” The One sat rigidly, grateful for, and terrified of, this simplifying lie. (58–59)

If I were writing in prose and not deliberately trying to avoid gender, I would likely have said instead ‘his simplifying lie’ or ‘her simplifying lie,’ depending on the sex/gender of The Other, who is doing the lying. To minimize awkwardness when using the demonstrative, I tried to ensure that the referent was amply clear, even without sex/gender markers to provide specificity.

In both the English and French versions of *Sphinx*, Garréta and Ramadan were able to use other techniques including pluralization (“We discussed everything down to the most trivial details” (Garréta 45)), sentence fragments (“Hands dangling, wrists slack, gaze abandoned and lost in the emptiness, then focusing on me as I entered” (Garréta 58)), and the repetition of a character’s name, in order to avoid gendering either the narrator or A***. You will also see these same techniques at work in *Anomia*. For example: pluralization in “For all we know, there was a carnival of predators” (3); sentence fragments in “The promise of seeing remnants and damage clearly” (196); and repetition of a character’s name in “The Little Ghost wakes early on the morning after finding the bones. The sky is a weak lavender tea but The Little Ghost swallows it anyways” (5).

What differentiates *Anomia* clearly from *Sphinx* and *Written on the Body*, however, is that there are in fact many characters in both *Written on the Body* and *Sphinx* who are sexed/ gendered. Louise in *Written on the Body*, for example, is definitely a woman. In *Sphinx* we are told about the narrator’s friend, the feminine-named Tiff, for whom the pronoun *she* is used as expected, and how there is “a flood of hurried men” in the cafe the narrator and Tiff attend together (Garréta 2). In the fictional world of *Sphinx*, sex and gender exist, as does sexual orientation, which is made obvious, for instance, when the narrator says, “I entered indiscriminately into clubs that were gay or straight, male or female” (Garréta 30). Though sex, gender, and sexual orientation are conceptually and practically real, at least in a social sense, in *Sphinx*, the narrator is able to elude them. Garréta never explains how. Is the narrator’s appearance sufficiently sex/gender-ambiguous to easily allow this? Is the narrator simply wilfully ignorant of

these distinctions and able to ignore them solely through brazen force of will? Further, does A*** have a sex/gender or sexual preference that the narrator elides, or does A*** too exist in some kind of blithe irreverence for such social norms? *Sphinx* does not deign to answer any of these questions.

While *Written on the Body* calls upon the reader to accept the sexless, genderless subject in the form of the unnamed narrator—a more surreptitious version of the call *The Opoponax*, *Jonny Appleseed*, and *The Death of Vivek Oji* make to the reader, who must reckon with characters who explicitly refuse any conventional sex/gender binary—*Sphinx* makes an even more demanding call than any of these novels, requiring the reader to recognize a *relationship* between lovers, the unnamed narrator and A***, that exists without reference to sex, gender, or sexual orientation. Whereas the other four novels offer at least a partial grounding for interpreting interactions between the protagonist and others, insofar as the other characters' sexes/genders are specified, *Sphinx* denies the reader even this with respect to the foundational relationship in the novel. Yet in *Sphinx*, sex, gender, and sexual orientation all still exist, all permeate the fictional world of the narratives in some capacity. With the exception of the two main characters, all of the other characters in the novel are sexed/gendered, their social spaces conventionally organized along lines of sex, gender, and sexual orientation. Though I borrow some of the techniques of *Sphinx*, the only one of all five novels to grant more than one of its characters any respite from the sex/gender binary, my objective with *Anomia* was to extend that much further, and to create an entire world where sex, gender, and sexual orientation are never specified. Are they non-existent, or just unspoken? *Anomia* opts to be as cryptic and riddling as *Sphinx* and never hint at the reasons for this exclusion,

preferring instead to focus on what I consider a more crucial question: can fictional characters be interpreted and understood by a reader without reference to sex or gender? And if they can, could people in the real world likewise interpret and understand one another without reference to sex or gender?

As I have detailed above, all five novels in question, despite being the ones I have found in my extensive research to be most like *Anomia*, nevertheless each offer examples of considerably different approaches to subverting the sex/gender binary than *Anomia*, while still being contained within the bounds of mimetic fiction. I thought it would be helpful to attempt to demonstrate this breadth of possible approaches, in order to show that what is attempted in *Anomia* is unprecedented, and to explain why I ultimately decided on the particular method of subversion I have chosen for *Anomia*. Before I quite get there, however, I should mention that I considered other linguistic approaches to sex/gender as well, in addition to those suggested by the novels discussed. Lindqvist et al., for example, speak of what they call “gender-fair language strategies,” which they use to refer to gendered language that is inclusive and non-hierarchical with respect to sex/gender, and they identify three as being possible and in use in contemporary English: paired pronouns (ex. *he/she*), newly created pronouns (ex. *ze*) and traditional, gender-neutral pronouns (ex. *they*) (109–110).

Though *The Death of Vivek Oji* does not directly juxtapose *he* and *she* pronouns for Vivek Nnemdi, the novel does use a comparable combinatory approach by alternating between not only *he* and *she* pronouns, but also nouns and adjectives as well. I did not see this method as being useful for *Anomia*, for two reasons. Firstly, in *The Death of Vivek Oji*, the effectiveness of the approach to diction is at least partly conditional on the

transformation that unfolds over the course of the narrative. Vivek becomes Vivek Nnemdi, he becomes both he and she. This strategy is manageable when it is applied to the narrative arc of a single character, but in a novel like *Anomia*, where none of the characters are to have a binary sex/gender designation, I thought such an approach likely to create chaos and confusion. And to alternate between *he* and *she* at random would be even more chaotic. Secondly, the use of pronouns such as *he* and *she* at all, while it may defy a rigid sex/gender binary, still seems to leave open the possibility of a sex/gender spectrum, with male/female, manhood/womanhood, and masculinity/femininity existing along a continuum, and each individual situated either at or between the poles. This, quite simply, was not nearly as complete of an attempted escape from the sex/gender binary as I envisioned.

For *Anomia*, I also considered using the newer sex/gender neutral pronouns such as *ze*, though because these are often used to refer to individuals who explicitly identify as non-binary, it would seem to me to produce less of an enigmatic or ambiguous effect and more so would create the appearance that the world of *Anomia* is populated by self-identifying non-binary people, which was not my intent. Once again, even a non-binary sex/gender identity requires an acknowledgement of sex/gender as a structuring social reality, and my intent with *Anomia* was to see whether it would be possible to write legible characters without any such acknowledgement. Similarly, I could have made use of any of the many nouns and adjectives that are increasingly part of a widespread vernacular to talk about transgender and non-binary identities, such as agender, genderfluid, etc. This is comparable to the techniques used in *Jonny Appleseed*, and its use of words such as ‘femmeboy.’ The problem for me was that, again, these types of

adjectives and nouns seem to locate the characters within a particular sex/gender identity, which, even if they do serve to subvert the notion that sex/gender is necessarily binary and show how an individual can move across a range of sex/gender identities, still allot some measure of value to sex/gender identities as expressions of human existence, an allotment I am not prepared to take as given, and one that I wanted *Anomia* to thoroughly question.

Of all of the available options, the one I came closest to using was *they* pronouns, which could be paired with gender-neutral names for characters. As Konnelly and Cowper note, “*They* has a long history as a singular pronoun in English, and has occurred [...] since the late 14th century [...] to refer to non-specific and quantified individuals” (1). Bodine adds that “prior to the nineteenth century singular ‘they’ was widely used in written, therefore presumably also in spoken, English. This usage met with no opposition” (132), though this changed with the publication of J. Kirby’s *A New English Grammar* in 1746. *A New English Grammar*, followed by a “virtual explosion” of successor texts by prescriptive grammarians, advocated for the sex-indefinite form of ‘he’ as the preferred gender-neutral, third-person referent (Bodine 136).

They has since been widely revived, though not without contention, and “in recent years, singular *they* has expanded to yet another context: in addition to its long-standing usages, it is now also used to refer to specific individuals of known (but not necessarily binary) gender” (Konnelly and Cowper 1). It is this very development, which, while socially and culturally useful for many people of non-binary gender identities—including me, in real life—made it not quite right for *Anomia*. *They* would essentially suffer the same difficulties as *ze*, in that it might easily be mistaken for a pronoun

referring to explicitly self-identifying non-binary characters, which I did not want because it too seems to concede the existence of sex/gender as a meaningful marker of human identity. I could, perhaps, have used *one* as in *The Opoponax*, but the register in which one can speak of what one does was too formal and affected for *Anomia*. I wanted the characters' lack of sex/gender to be, at least at first, casual, unnoticeable, to present itself as a problem only after prolonged exposure or protracted reflection.

After much consideration, what eventually became clear to me was that I needed to take the approach in *Sphinx*—complete sex/gender obscurity for the lovers—and extend it to all of the characters in my novel. This necessitated removing all sex/gender divisions from the world they lived in as well. My reasons for this choice were several. Crafting a narrative without sex or gender was, firstly, the only thought experiment I could imagine that would actually interrogate whether Judith Butler's statement about gender being a necessary condition of human legibility is an unavoidable truth, or merely circumstantially true. Are there conditions in which it might be untrue? The job of *Anomia* was to find out. Removing sex and gender from *Anomia* was also an act of wish fulfillment, the creation of a mimetic, but possibly impossible, fictional utopia. A world without sex or gender, as in *Anomia*, would necessarily be a world unconstrained by binary sex/gender systems and their attendant oppressions.

My objective was to goad readers into struggle—total lack of clarity about all of the characters' sex/gender identities would leave the reader grasping for answers about how they could possibly interpret the characters' unstated sex/gender, and whether they ought to, and what might be gained or lost by so doing. Once I had my objective in mind, however, there was also the difficulty of execution. Opting for complete sex/gender

evasion not only affected my choice of pronouns—no *he* or *she* ever, and no single, third person *they* to refer to any known individual in *Anomia*—but also nouns and adjectives in a panoply of both expected and surprising ways. Nouns at first seemed simple enough. I would employ neither nouns nor adjectives with any form of sex/gender referent. At the outset this requirement excluded the obvious: man, woman, male, female, feminine, masculine, character names that replicate the sort of names people have in real life. But it soon became clear that this mandate required even more extensive exclusions. I had to think about how I was describing body parts. For instance, when depicting how the roots of the *Echium vulgare* plant coil around The Second Lovers' hair, I first wrote of “bloodied silk and long strands of human hair,” and, despite being amply aware that long hair is not necessarily associated with a particular sex/gender, but also being aware that it may be associated with a particular sex/gender in certain cultural circumstances, I opted to change the line to a less sex/gender-evocative “bloodied silk and strands of human hair” (233) to prevent a reader from assuming they had found some clue to clarify The Second Lover's sex/gender identity. While I recognize that it is perhaps impossible to ensure that no sex/gender-suggestive words or phrases are present in the text, since I do not presume to be able to know all such words that might exist for any imaginable reader, I have been as thorough as I could be to this end.

By prodding readers into a struggle with deciding whether and how to interpret the sex/gender identities of the characters, while providing little to no basis for interpretation either way, *Anomia* aims to enhance the reader's attentiveness to the assumptions that underlie their perception of sex/gender, and the value of such assumptions. This aim is informed by the Social Constructionist iterations of feminism,

queer theory, and transgender studies, which question “the extent to which everything having to do with gender difference is human construct, created to reflect and reinforce a set of power dynamics” (Hall 111). The novel’s refusal to acknowledge sex/gender requires the reader to either engage in a re-enactment that mirrors the social production and construction of sex/gender, or to opt to forego sex/gender altogether, either of which should prove epistemologically illuminating in some way for the reader.

To further encourage readers to critically engage with the problem of sex/gender in the novel, I decided to focalize the novel around a central event that would particularly invite assumptions about sex/gender. The event I am referring to is the volatile disintegration of the relationship between The Lovers, which ends decisively with the departure of The Second Lover (204), followed by The First Lover’s suicide (222). The end of the relationship is precipitated by The First Lover’s attempts to coerce The Second Lover into a mutual suicide pact (177–182), which The Second Lover sees no escape from, except to depart their life together completely. The Lovers’ relationship is meant to replicate patterns of domestic violence and abuse. Domestic violence and abuse (DVA) can be defined as “Any incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive or threatening behaviour, violence or abuse between those [...] who are or have been intimate partners or family members, regardless of gender or sexuality” (Donovan and Hester 5). Significantly, “LGB and/or T [lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender] people remain largely invisible in DVA policy and practice” because their relationships are “often seen to sit outside of predominantly heteronormative, cisnormative, feminist, social-structural analysis of violence and control in intimate relationships” (Donovan and Barnes 554–555). In other words, DVA is frequently interpreted as an outgrowth of

sexism and patriarchal norms, with men being the frequent aggressors and women being frequently the victims or survivors of that aggression, so there has been comparatively little awareness about how and why DVA would manifest among people who are non-heterosexual and/or not sex/gender-conforming.

With *The Lovers*, I purposely depicted a situation in which one could readily read The First Lover as being an abuser—controlling, coercive, and violent—and The Second Lover as the abused partner, forced to flee, a situation which might make readers tend to ascribe manhood to The First Lover and womanhood to The Second Lover. There is, however, nothing to suggest this beyond real-world statistical probability, which may or may not be applicable to the fictional world of *Anomia*, let alone to the circumstances of these specific characters. I did this not at all to be dismissive of the sex/gender factors contributing to DVA in real life, but to gesture toward two salient issues: the ‘invisibility,’ as Donovan and Barnes say, of the realities of DVA for people who are sex/gender non-conforming or queer, and two, the question of how we can possibly imagine a world beyond sex/gender when, in the present and for the immediate future, it meaningfully informs so many of our real-world social relations, including matters of life and death.

Anomia is, as I have said, a kind of extended thought experiment, one in which it is the reader who is primarily called upon to reason through the problems that the absence of sex/gender poses for our understanding of human relations. As Butler indicates, sex/gender is what makes an individual legible—so what is left to read when sex/gender is removed? Ivan Coyote says in *Gender Failure*, “I wish we could figure out a way to talk to and about each other in this language that didn’t involve constantly using a pronoun, but we haven’t yet” (221). This wish seems to be for far more than the mere

absence of a pronoun, but also for, among other things, an escape, a sanctuary, from sex/gender as a defining facet of our lives. Similarly, Geo Wyeth says that “Fugitivity could be another mode of telling—like when someone runs away from visibility, makes themselves scarce, what does it say? What truths does it hold up? Refusal can be a sort of protest of all of these conditions of being” (Adsit et al. 200). This is how I see *Anomia*: a fictional world that is both a sanctuary and a protest. It is no accident that I called the central town in the novel Euphoria, its video store Utopia. The world of *Anomia* is joyful, and it may be impossible, yet I continue to identify *Anomia* as a work of mimetic fiction because I see its sexless and genderless world as potentially, if not necessarily, ‘actualizable,’ to return to that term from Alber et al. that I introduced earlier. Gayle Salamon insists that “Genders beyond the binary are neither fictive nor futural, but are presently embodied and lived” (qtd. in Carroll 15). And what about life beyond gender and sex entirely? Could that, too, become presently embodied and real? The world of *Anomia* is a fictive space in which we may consider this possible future in which human relations are not structured by sex/gender, or at least not in a way that oppresses us and restricts the range of our existence and expression.

I began this essay with these words: problematizing, obscurantist, silent, paradoxical, metamorphic. I used them as shorthand descriptions for the approaches to sex/gender in the five novels, besides my own, that I examine in this essay. *The Opoponax* problematizes the sex/gender binary by refusing to associate the expected gender with the explicit sex of its characters. *Sphinx* hints at the physical realities and personalities of its two central lovers, but obscures their sex/gender. *Written on the Body* is silent about its narrator’s sex/gender. *Jonny Appleseed* paradoxically insists that its

narrator is equally masculine and feminine. *The Death of Vivek Oji* allows its protagonist to metamorphose from troubled boy to an adult who euphorically vacillates between manhood, womanhood, and the space between them. What I want for *Anomia* is that it should perform all of these functions with respect to sex/gender, in a way that none of these preceding mimetic novels have opted to do. *Anomia* problematizes by putting its sexless, genderless characters in situations of violence and romantic love, which are both so often usefully interpreted through a lens of binary sex/gender. It obscures by offering comments about the characters' bodies and inclinations, without allowing these comments to add up to anything determinate. It maintains a stubborn silence with regard to sex/gender. It paradoxically both evades sex/gender and makes itself wholly about sex/gender through its very refusal to discuss the subject. It works toward metamorphosing my own frustrations with the stifling insistence of the sex/gender binary into one preliminary gesture toward a future in which we might be able talk about human life without relying on concepts of sex or gender to make that life apprehensible.

NOTES

1. To be clear: I do not accept the view that sex determines gender, or vice versa. I also do not believe that sex is equivalent to gender in any context. In this essay, I have opted to use sex/gender as a recurrent term in order to acknowledge that, while sex and gender are differentiable concepts semantically—sex has often been used to refer to physical and anatomic human conditions, gender has been used since at least the 1960s to refer to behaviour and other “social and cultural aspects of sexual difference” (Glover and Kaplan 11)—sex and gender are epistemologically interdependent, particularly in the sort of binaristic system I am criticizing. As Gayle Rubin says, “Sex is sex, but what counts as sex is equally culturally determined and obtained” (165), just as gender is. What Rubin refers to as the “sex/gender system” is “the set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological reality into products of human activity, and in which these transformed sexual needs are satisfied” (159). Furthermore, even though sex would seem to have a more material, inarguable reality than gender, “beliefs about sexuality have been revolutionized over the last hundred years,” reinforcing the notion that sex, like gender, is in fact an “inescapably cultural” category (Glover and Kaplan 17). The expression sex/gender, for my purposes, adequately reflects the fact that the two concepts have typically been conceptualized as interdependent, even as their definitions and the ways they interact remain readily mutable.

2. There is a further history to the term realistic, which precedes the term realism, but I have also opted not to use the term realistic because it so readily invokes the tradition of realism that I seek to avoid.

3. This line paraphrases a line from Maurice Scève's poem XLIX (for the full poem, see: "Maurice Scève (1500 – 1563?) : « Tant je l'aimai... »" n.p.), from the book *Délie*, "which is the first sequence of French love poetry in the tradition of Petrarch's *Rime Sparse*" ("Maurice Scève (1501-c.1560)" n.p.). It is significant that Wittig chose to subversively end her novel about a lesbian relationship with a revised and recontextualized line of traditional, heterosexual love poetry, as it signals her expressed attempt to "to destroy gender in language (at least to modify its use)" ("The Mark of Gender" 81).

WORKS CITED

- Adsit, Lexi, Sydney Freeland, Robert Hamblin, and Geo Wyeth, roundtable participants. "Representation and Its Limits." Moderated by Tavia Nyong'o. *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Invisibility*. Edited by Reina Gossett, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2017.
- Alber, Jan, Stefan Iversen, Henrik Skov Nielsen, and Brian Richardson. "What Really Is Unnatural Narratology?" *Storyworlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies*, vol. 5, 2013, pp. 101–118.
- "Ambiguous Genitalia." *Mayo Clinic*. <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/ambiguous-genitalia/diagnosis-treatment/drc-20369278>. Accessed 25 Jul. 2021.
- Belsey, Catherine. "Poststructuralism." *The Routledge Companion to Critical and Cultural Theory*. Edited by Simon Malpas and Paul Wake, 2nd ed., Routledge, 2013, pp. 51–61.
- Bodine, Ann. "Androcentrism in Prescriptive Grammar: Singular 'They,' Sex-Indefinite 'He,' and 'He or She.'" *Language in Society*, vol. 4, no. 2, August 1975, pp. 129–146.
- Butler, Judith. *Undoing Gender*. Routledge, 2004.
- Campbell, Marie May. "Chapter 2: Monique Wittig's *Le Corps Lesbien/The Lesbian Body*." *Postmodern Studies*, vol. 50, 2014, pp. 75–109.
- Carroll, Rachel. "Introduction." *Transgender and the Literary Imagination: Changing Gender in Twentieth-Century Writing*. Edinburgh University Press, 2018.
- Coyote, Ivan. "Their, There." *Gender Failure*. Arsenal Pulp Press, 2014.
- Cuddon, J.A. *Dictionary of Literary Terms & Literary Theory*. Penguin Books, 1999.

- Donovan, Catherine and Marianne Hester. *Domestic Violence and Sexuality: What's Love Got to Do With It?* Policy Press c/o The University of Chicago Press, 2014.
- Donovan, Catherine and Rebecca Barnes. "Help-seeking Among Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and/or Transgender Victims/Survivors of Domestic Violence and Abuse: The Impacts of Cisgendered Heteronormativity and Invisibility." *Journal of Sociology*, vol. 56, no. 4, 2020, pp. 554–570.
- Dreger, Alice Domurat. *Hermaphrodites and the Medical Invention of Sex*. Harvard University Press, 2003.
- Emezi, Akwaeke. *The Death of Vivek Oji*. Riverhead Books, 2020.
- "Feminizing Surgery." *Mayo Clinic*. <https://www.mayoclinic.org/tests-procedures/feminizing-surgery/about/pac-20385102>. Accessed 25 Jul. 2021.
- Garréta, Anne. *Sphinx*. Deep Vellum Publishing, 2015.
- Glover, David and Cora Kaplan. *Genders*. 2nd ed., Routledge, 2009.
- Halberstam, Jack. *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability*. University of California Press, 2018.
- Hale, Jacob. "Are Lesbians Women?" *Hypatia*, vol. 11, no. 2, Spring 1996, pp. 94–121.
- Konnolly, Lex and Elizabeth Cowper. "Gender Diversity and Morphosyntax: An Account of Singular *They*." *Glossa: A Journal of General Linguistics*, vol. 5, no. 1, pp. 1–19.
- Lindqvist, Anna, Emma Aurora Renström, and Marie Gustaffson Sendén. "Reducing a Male Bias in Language? Establishing the Efficiency of Three Different Gender-Fair Language Strategies." *Sex Roles*, vol. 81, 2019, pp. 109–117.
- "Masculinizing Surgery." *Mayo Clinic*. <https://www.mayoclinic.org/tests-procedures/>

- masculinizing-surgery/about/pac-20385105 Accessed 25 Jul. 2021.
- “Maurice Scève (1500 – 1563 ?) : « Tant je l’aimai... ».” *Le Bar à Poèmes*, 15 Feb 2020.
<http://www.barapoemes.net/archives/2020/02/15/38025171.html>. Accessed 1 Aug 2021.
- “Maurice Scève (1501-c.1560).” *University of Virginia Library: Rare Materials Digital Services*. <https://www.lib.virginia.edu/rmds/collections/gordon/literary/sceve/index.html>. Accessed 1 Aug 2021.
- Murat, Laure. “Monique Wittig and the Revolution of Pronouns.” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, vol. 13, no. 4, 2004, pp. 600–602.
- Ramadan, Emma. “Translator’s Note.” *Sphinx*. Deep Vellum Publishing, 2015.
- Rubin, Gayle. “The Traffic in Women: Notes on the ‘Political Economy’ of Sex.” *Toward an Anthropology of Women*. Edited by Rayne R. Reiter, Monthly Review Press, 1975.
- Serano, Julia. *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity*. Perseus Books, 2016.
- Siepak, Julia. “Two-Spirit Identities in Canada: Mapping Sovereign Erotic in Joshua Whitehead’s *Jonny Appleseed*.” *Studia Anglica Posnaniensia*, vol. 55, no. 2, 2020, pp. 495–515.
- “Welcome to Mayo Clinic.” *Elsevier B.V.* <https://mayoclinic.pure.elsevier.com/>. Accessed 25 Jul. 2021.
- Whitehead, Joshua. “In Fragments.” *Canadian Art*, vol. 36, no. 2, 2019, pp. 35. ---. *Jonny Appleseed*. Arsenal Pulp Press, 2019.
- Winterson, Jeanette. *Written on the Body*. Vintage Books Canada, 1993.

Wittig, Monique. "The Mark of Gender." *Centro Interdisciplinare di Ricerche e Studi delle Donne e di Genere*. https://www.cirsde.unito.it/sites/c555/files/allegati/22-01-2016/wittig__the_mark_of_gender.pdf. Accessed 24 Jul. 2021.

---. *The Opoponax*. Translated by Helen Weaver, Simon and Schuster, Inc., 1966.

VITA AUCTORIS

Jade Wallace completed their B.A. in English Language & Literature and Philosophy and their M.A. in Social Justice & Equity Studies at Brock University. They are also a licensed paralegal who has spent the majority of the last several years working in legal clinics.