THESIS IN TWO PARTS: 1.THE PHOENIX PAPERS 2. TOOLS OF CONSEQUENCE

Bonnie Lykes

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Part One

The Phoenix Papers
(Pulp From The Big Desert)

THE BELLY BOX
Growing Up In The Walls Of Wright…

No other house has a room like mine

Because it's not a room

It is a box born from the ego of an artist

Not fond of children

The container doesn't throw a party for youth

It is small

9 x 9 are the dimensions

I saw it on the blueprint

The wood completes the box

The walls, the dresser, and end tables are all of the Wood

The built-in desk is an outgrowth of the Wood

Modern, to be sure

But the Wood is cherry-colored

So there's half-baked, hyphenated warmth

Dolls who come alive at night are on the highest wood shelf

They smirk with glass eyes in the bright afternoon

I'm protected by 8" of cinder block

This wall shields me from a cactus desert

The desert outside is unpredictable

A beetle migration crept through the cracks once

And marched across the shag rug with backs like Zulu shields

I stacked books around the bed

To steer them off my skin and hair as I slept

The bed is a simple rectangle

A rectangle meant for sleep

No gender show of ruffles

Even the bedcovers are built in and match the rest of the house

The fabric of the spread on the bed

Is the same green fabric

On the sofa cushion in the circular living room

The house is designed to look like a bird from an aerial view

I am swallowed, deeply and easily

Into a great bird in the middle of the desert

My room is the belly of the bird

Am I being digested—like food—by a bird posing as a house?

I know the box is not made for who I am

I am being used

Even though I tape posters with psychedelic designs to the wall

This room has another plan

To match the rest of the house

This room doesn't matter like the other rooms

Is someone home now?

I'm not sure

But I'll roam the long-hall'd neck to find out

Because I won't stay inside—too long

The walls are thick I barely hear my brother pop gum

His room is also the same wood box

With the exact same built-in furniture

But pointed in a different direction

We tug of war with a small portable TV

When it's my turn I get to watch movie of the week

Once a week

Here in the belly box

I admit, there is music

Records get tossed at the turntable in the corner

Like forks in a busy drawer

I listen with great, great pleasure

And sing along with even more

The window frames my personal screen

Of desert rocks

I smell creosote bush after a rain

But it's hard to open the window

So I keep it shut

This room is in the middle of the bird

The middle of the desert

And the middle of my youth

To create something new

I leave

I rotate my wrinkled clothes in the very small closet

And try to thrive

Down in the valley

The closet is also framed

With the Wood

The closet contains my way out

And when I open the doors

The hinges loose a warning groan

I sing

Unfurl a small pair of strong wings

I then fly downward

Down the jagged gray mountain road

The End

We Leave Us

Many skins ago, in the pre-surveillance era when the Phoenix dust merged into young lungs and we'd beg rides to El Taco, Merry was my *real* friend. We'd spend the night at each other's houses with a red running line across our parents' calendars. If I went to her house Friday, she should come to my house Saturday, and on and on, as many nights we could get away with it during the week.

We were neglected prepubescents who struggled with pasty self-images. *Were we too hokey for boys?* Low on the flour of wisdom, muffins with too much milk, we morphed into half-wit teens. We'd ride bikes through Oleanders; eyes and lips squeezed tight, risking the poison sap. Entirely ignorant of others; our antics included pouring sand in the gas tank of a square, equally pasty, neighbor. Another scene caught us peeing behind some fancy townhouses; our bare ends halted by a guard's flashlight. We'd go to church, but ditch the oversized glass doors at the last second, then fly like a pair of hell-bats to a nearby alley only to ramble peacefully, scratching the ground with found sticks.

Our favorite ritual was creating "crazy comics." We'd take opposite sofa sides with colored pens and draw characters with strange names, frame by frame, with fast, dangerous arcs. Our rule; the spoken narrative must start with "*Once there was a girl*…." Themes ranged from "…*Betz grabs Dad's steering wheel*" or "*Jammy visits Satan's Lake Of Fire with ice-cold Tab for the Crowd*" Laughing up from the gut, we'd story ourselves to complete exhaustion. Then before bed, maybe grab a peacock feather and tickle the "white meat" on each other's arms. By and by, a smirking mother would materialize with folded arms in the doorway. Eventually, laugh bones spent, we'd slide into unconsciousness.

After too many sleepovers and folded notes passed secretly under our rubber flip flops in Math class, our separate wheels of teen-drama began to spin in different directions. We'd hit junior year and a new attention hijacked Merry's wild side, knick by knack. There's always a twist of pain; an undeniable losing, when two shared-attentions begin to fork, then spin toward evaporation. Nostalgia mocks the one who's left behind. The constellation of old, used-up seconds shift to a new void as memories fold into a subverted reality. Past laughter changes form and divides from what once was a magnet of shared ground. When outside influences worked us apart and slowly took form, like a threatening wave dressed in superficial glitz, I felt a shiv jab my spoiled complacency of friendship. Also came the Great Lesson: no individual can ever really be owned.

Gangly but pretty, Merry claimed cosmetology as her future brass and renounced her dusty, windblown look. Bit by bit, over accumulated softball games and cafeteria lines, she joined a clique of aspiring super models who bandied bourbon lip rouge and silk blouses. A small group who wrote poetry and peeled oranges chose me. We kept purposefully away from anything too stylish. Merry and I slowly changed horses; a teen divorce with my wordlessness as a soundtrack. But eventually, it was plain and real that our shared attentions required new evolution. Time passed as required.

After graduation I aimed myself toward stiffer shoes and prescribed lady-clothes. I met my then-husband and his beam swept across me like a sweet frost on a grassy slope, but I mistook the experience completely. With both of these bonds, friend and lover, I thought I *was* them, sharing an ethereal some *thing* woven around us; thick and immutable. I'd bought, with the jaws of my heart, a propped up story about shared attention. When my father passed away, I discovered through his grandmother, as she poured lemonade, where my new husband's feelings

really thrived. Instead of the funeral, he wanted to go sailing with a male friend. I ran; unabashedly, straight for the quality-controlled air of a law office. Divorce doesn't actually bury you alive but it comes close.

Through the next decade, Merry's emails occasionally burst over with creative warmth. Then, another spilt; split us. As techy devices spread-- gulping up collective attentions, her messages went stark, impersonal, gun metal. Her words read harried and hurried. Her replies to my nostalgia were dumb-light and perfunctory. The ethereal peacock feather, gone for good, had left even a second time—abandoning the vagary of our vulnerable white meat as dead-on-the-vine; that softness replaced easy with alien vapidity. Besides all the adult responsibility, both of us childless; a virus claimed her. I'd be more alarmed if it weren't for the fact I became just as infected, mostly every minute, definitely every day. Something *human and right;* everywhere, far beyond the two of us*;* had been altered. A lush emerald, with all its cut prisms and capacity for light-- switched, by an unseen hand, to a hunk of shine. The data beast, with its cold devices of convenience, had stolen a precious thing and put down a surrogate comfort of much less value. I ask myself if I'm too stringent, too sensitive. I worry I might be a prig. Where we point attention changes every *thing*, especially if we forget what is real.

Looking, possessed people much differently before out devices began roving and collecting for us. *Simply looking*, raw and naive, turned the collective Catherine Wheel of life. My own looking happened with surprise visits on desert porches probably with the sweet smell of pinon smoke. Moments charmed with the nuances of dusk, or oversized full color summer postcards, or enjoying fringy perfection without realizing it was there at all. We felt things more seriously. We'd meet in living rooms far from engineered trends. You wouldn't budge till someone called who said they would; with a built-in passivity to wait by land lines, so damned

ridiculous now. We planned picnics with bird chirping views and couples ice skating at night, no e-Harmony, no Grinder. Futures were imagined from a softer, striving awareness. I do benefit from our brave, new world; hair trigger conveniences, and fall fast for tailored click-bait. And I will rattle my electronic leash into the light of a different sun that screams: *not*-knowing is beautiful. And these days: it's not that people can't love—they just may not care *where you've been looking...*

For Merry's eyes, I stoke the impetus of my latest comic: "*Starla Bakes A Benadryl Chicken."* But I avoid tapping her virtual shoulder; because she's plum busy. Or she's some other unattainable plum of distraction I can't share. I refuse to blow on faint embers that have turned disposable. But I know emotion holds magnitude in the math of time and space so I cherish the grit of my history. *Once There Was A Girl….two girls.* And, I know Merry is still in another dimension, maybe playing poker with my ex-husband just past the gate of this reality.

But we don't go to that place; the place of before, that place of rooted happiness. We're careful to point ourselves to other things easier swallow, other mental locations. If I didn't lie to myself, I might finally understand that people's driving forces are rarely what you think they are. Even if you're more sure than any other thing, right front of you. Not many turn away from **the brave new. We've all changed. We're puppets on each other's stages, that's it.**

So, I'll play the killjoy, the type that you wish you could be; patient, understanding, attentive, responsive, but won't interrupt omniscience because the brave new mind won't have it. I'll design myself from a feeling; one that doesn't even recognize itself because it's brand new. I'll fold myself with hospital corners, like a sheet on a tight bedframe, and put me in a blanket that smells like an alpine mountain. I'm a genuine thing, something the two of them, pal and

partner, can't replace. Something they can press inside the pages of an album that sits inside a boarded-up attic formed by an angry, tainted kind of love: *for real.* **Because there's only one problem, as I see it. I haven't felt a peacock feather in years.**

The End

Loaves Of Wonder

A line glowed under Becky Drigg's otherwise tightly sealed kitchen door. Through the fast-setting dusk, it morphed into a luminous scepter, beckoning me. I knew I belonged on the other side. As our Ford Fairlane idled next to her grease-free carport, I willed my seven-year-old self to liquify under the sill straight into her family's super world. But as I watched her wedged haircut bounce away from the car, I crashed. I knew I'd never get in there. But the sight of that of that luminous line, twenty or so yards away, initiated a baptism of self-inquiry: *What makes a damn light crack so untouchable?*

Just before Becky had wiggled out of our car in her white sandals and peach-terry-playsuit, mom had wound through the rows of landscaped homes. The sight of pin-neat lawns triggered a mental snapshot of our wild desert mountain, and our tripped out art-house where I was frequently alone. These pointy rooftops, were not like the flat, orange cinder block one we had. And this is where everyone was! Here, everyone clanked their morning dishes almost in each other's lap--no one could possibly be lonely! I noted the carefully tended squares of tidy green grass with sassy, spitting sprinklers. An antithesis to the grit of our barren washes, clumps

of beetle exoskeletons, rotten cactus, every dead and live thing swallowing the tiniest God-given scrap of moisture.

At my house, lonerhood was the only choice. Sharp rocks and knee-scraping play, darting to and fro, freaking myself out, from actual or fear-concocted rattlers, getting hooked with cactus, my shins perpetually gummed up with grey slate. At my house, the sun got too hot, too quick. And with no combs or soap from a reliable other, the whole of me, head to shameful ankle, was left half tossed, neglected.

As our dusty car rambled down Becky's clean street, I absorbed her delicate vibration. There was something strangely out-of-context about Becky being in *our* car. Before this moment, I hadn't realized how powerful self-image was, and how mine lacked, painfully. I compared my scrappiness to her slight, puffed smile, white pearly teeth, and shiny, bowl-perfect haircut. We didn't say a word to each other. We kept our eyes rounded, with soft, steady glances out our respective squares of glass. With her there across the car seat, I realized she had completely different atoms.

After mom angled into her driveway, Becky's tender soles gently met the concrete, then she turned to us, like a little top and gave a suggestion of a curtsy, to issue "thanks." Mom's engine gurgled loudly. Fascinated, I watched Becky skip to the safety of her door-crack, the luminous and perfectly deserved magnet. I sat staring, harnessed by my oily safety belt. The lovely port opened to show a glimpse of bright royalty, a flawless creamy dinette with white plastic placemats, that she'd been born unto. Becky was an untouchable fairy.

We'd been on a school field trip to the Wonder Bread factory to watch the production of loaves by hair-timed machines. My mother volunteered to drive and we'd just dropped off Ethan, a loud, skinny boy with a red rash moustache. Becky and I were wordless as he rode half way out

the window, widening his mouth to "dry out his tongue" with my mother's insertions of "…that's not safe, dear…" . His scrawny unruliness underscored Becky's magic all the more. She sat quietly, her eyes flitting down, then shifting to the window. His lunacy couldn't permeate her shimmer. The sight of them both in our Ford and my ticking assessments of their auras, whirled like cotton candy in my head. I was also busy processing the visit to the factory, which had captured my more submerged attention.

As our class had filed past, we saw the mechanics of heightened, pre-planned focus; placing, setting, turning, with a few cranks and mathematically calculated twists, to "ploop," perfect loaves that swished in gleaming plastic, glowing with societal purpose and agenda, to ride blindly down a conveyer belt, only to disappear—somewhere outward-- toward a sharp-toothed, hungry city ready to consume every mathematically-cut slice. The loaves trajectory shoved my psyche with the obvious cliché for conformity. But later on, as my life experiences culminated, I viewed the breads' trip quantumly, sort of like a hologram. Years after, the loaves journey explained a story, one that blew up in my head: our environment will reflect our most hidden desires, or lack of realizing them—outward-- to whatever is in front of us that captures our attention. Both Becky and the loaves sent me a time-released message: we are just like the bread, or we aren't.

Becky sure did this for me, with her cameo in our car. Her hologram told me I existed as her precise opposite. Solipsism is a workable concept to understand our place with others, what we think of ourselves, and what we think the whole world thinks of us. And I saw that Becky Driggs had purity of purpose. She, a perfect-made loaf, just had to sit tight for something to devour her presumed value. My future waited not for a set of worldly teeth, but for more dirty, torn T shirts and a load more snakes. Buddhists teach how our attention is precious and powerful,

that it's focus both creates and destroys our internal world. Both Becky and the trip to the factory that day started a deep, on-going question. Where, who, and what, deserves our beautiful, valuable attention?

The End

Developing World

I was barely ten when we lived on the side of an Arizona mountain, in the very last house designed by Frank Lloyd Wright. That year, Pop left to marry someone else. After the divorce, my mother wanted us to "grow like flowers;" without "micro-coercion, excessive grooming, or physical punishment." But the long dirt road to the bottom of the hill, and the harshness of the desert felt like punishments. I was left alone most nights. My loneliness sharpened, and the peculiarities of the house seemed to compound my anxieties. The walls curved to vanishing points that gave way to a series of half round windows; the eccentric lines combined with the rough desert magnified my longing for security. The property-- a showcase of artistic vanity-- sprung from a bed of tough granite. All around me, I felt the ego of grown ups. I didn't know I was neglected.

That year, swarms of difficult moments rearranged my world. Fresh confusion plagued me as I walked to and from the school bus through the grey slate. Left to my own wits, I became a kind of creature with tangled hair and dirty ankles. Right after the divorce Mom switched me from a private to a public school so I'd "blend in with other kids." No one engaged my interior world and I assumed I was broken, in some unfixable way. Later that summer, there would be a hazing—like a payment to some hell bent force. I

would face a crossroads to my self worth that took shape like a distant thunderhead; its formation began when Mom knocked on my bedroom door at the top of June.

She wanted to discuss the month of July. She told me I'd stay with Mrs. S. at some doublewide trailer near Tijuana. Mrs. S. was a funny, outgoing British lady who my mom had met at a party the year before. She was divorced too, and had become Mom's favorite acquaintance. Her American daughter Chimmie, also ten, would also be there. Chimmie had crystal blue eyes and stunning white hair. She went to a catholic school, so I only saw her when Mom sent me to their Phoenix house to play the role of "friend," at their beautiful adobe home in a gated community. Mom pruned her eyes; a shot a look she'd use to evoke sympathy at charity functions, "Chimmie needs a playmate." I nodded. But a pit of anxiety expanded in my gut because Chimmie mocked with a particular math. Years later, I finally told Mom how mean she was. But these days, I never told Mom anything. Her mind was too full.

For her July, Mom was set for China. She was off to an Asian folktale workshop having studied Mandarin for years. My brother would visit another friend's family. My 19-year-old sister had been diagnosed with Schizophrenia. She ran down the mountain in her nightgown and broke the window of a small church. She drank furniture polish later that night. I remember the day she left forever to a half way house. Her chemical vomit left an amber stain that went right through to the mattress.

As if to prepare for the worst, I packed my red suitcase for Mexico days before the trip. I thought of Chimmie's games where I'd jump over a big stick and she'd hit my calves in mid air. But sometimes there were Clark bars and swimming in their shimmering turquoise pool, so I'd go numb. I shoved my feelings down to what felt like a dry towel. It burned in my gut. However, there was another minor consolation.

I liked Mrs. S. She had curly orange hair and made me laugh even though I didn't always understand her jokes. She acted in London theaters and played bit parts in movies. I loved the drawing of her exaggerated cartoon face that hung on their kitchen wall.

Twice mom sent me to their house in town for a sleep over. I learned to brace myself for Chimmie's dares, her jabs at my natural way. On the second visit, I ran down their hall and told Mrs. S I was homesick and wanted to leave. She never seemed to notice anything Chimmie did. She just said, "You're from the mountains, we live in town. It's alright darling." Then she patted my cheeks. Her hands smelled like Benson and Hedges. She'd habitually snatch them up from a spinning spiral holder on their coffee table.

On both visits, Mrs. S disappeared past the kitchen's swinging door for long stretches. I thought she was baking something complicated, maybe Baked Alaska. Eventually, she'd go upstairs to bed. I knew Chimmie would always get me, tripping me, ripping stuff of my hands. I just wanted Mom to take me back to the mountain and the dirt road.

Mom's psychiatrist told her to go out as much as she could to get back in the world. She'd head out the door for folk dancing, singles parties, alumni retreats, bridge games, luncheons, and sculpture unveilings. Sometimes, maybe I'd get dropped off at a weird church for a talk on Buddhism or sex education.

And before Mexico, I mostly stayed in my room. In days of summer, who would care? I meandered past Ocotillo at dusk, sat on flat rocks looking out on the valley, tanned myself with baby oil in 105 degree heat, played Alice Cooper loud. I ate TV dinners and ice cream. I might talk on the phone with my legs slung high on the wall. I ran down the long hallway of shag carpet like a rail that connected food and sleep. My hair had enormous mats as big as doughnuts, but became a gold halo when my sister would brush it out, before they sent her away. At night, no one heard the portable black and white TV blaring ads for burgers and detergent. My brother yanked it away if I went to the bathroom. I'd shriek. He'd slap my head.

The nearest neighbor was a half-mile down the hill. I'd check windows for Mom. We'd say hi in the front entry, if I were still awake. Mom's silky shirt collars offered a kind of affection. Her perfume; exact

with gardenia, floated like a drug; helped me feel love. I watched her dress or undress by her vanity. Did Chimmie really need me in Mexico? She might turn a tennis racket into an electric guitar, so I'd focus on zany games. It was finally time to leave.

On the plane, I sat next to a man with a red face who chewed a ton of ice. I hated his noises, his belching, his weight shifting, and smacking face. Grown up men made me nervous. Mom knew a man who lived down our road, Mr. Saks, who kissed me too hard on the cheek and sent me flowers on my birthday. His dark suits and rough face scared me. I tried to sleep in the seat but the man stole my armrest.

I landed late, around nine at night. I stood at the Mexican airport. Beautiful Spanish faces shone from ads. I felt bread-white. I held my suitcase like a dead balloon. Past the gate, Mrs. S lumbered over, "Did you fly alright, darling?" Chimmie smirked when she saw I'd really come. She pushed the ends of her white hair; "We're going to Tijuana tomorrow." Then she looked past me, like I'd already left.

Mrs. S's guided us along; her large lips greased with lipstick. Outside, her big hand steered us to a small rental car. We whizzed off on a quiet highway. Spanish billboards flitted by, sparking my curiosity. I stayed quiet in the back. I heard them mumble between the headrests. We came to the trailer park. The tires crushed gravel and salty sea air surrounded the car. Soon, my head stuck out from cot covers at the foot of Tracy's bed. Before I knew it, morning pushed in with loud light.

Stepping into the living room, it felt like I stood at the top of a slide with out no bottom. There was a green, oversized shark poster and flat, tan carpet. Mostly cheap furniture; fine for a summer home. Chimmie and I shared a room on the left side and Mrs. S was way on the other end.

In the fingernail kitchen, Chimmie slid an orange, plastic bowl of flashy cereal toward me. *Why did the trailer smelled like fish?* Chimmie looked sweeter than I'd ever seen her. She watched my face like a funny paper. I took a bite. Her eyes prickled, "It's just a little crawfish juice." The first strike. I looked down

and pushed the bowl toward her. I swallowed fast. She looked so happy. Mrs. S came in and smiled too. Her orange curls were wild and she whisked eggs. I looked at the cereal and felt the towel twist inside me.

Soon, we got in the car and headed into the long, busy neck of Tijuana. I stared out at palm trees by the road, some ratty, others bright green. I saw round, brown mamas in loose cotton skirts who didn't hurry toward a thing. We parked, and started down the main street, eyeing the lay of small shops. Small kids ran in and out of side doors. Adults sat on the pinkish rim of a giant fountain and spoke in complicated clucks.

Young men pointed down alleys to get Chimmie and I to make a run for it and go with them. They chirped and whistled, "Puta! Puta!" Some hissed from dark archways. Chimmie whispered, "Puta means whore." I knew they saw us one better than street dogs. They wanted us dumb. I felt like Sunday morning bacon. Like special tangy meat they wanted to consume down grimy alleys. Chimmie said it was our blonde hair. School flashed behind my eyes, I thought of the boy who followed me at lunch and threatened to rape me. Whenever I saw him, the towel in me burned.

Mexico was hotter than Phoenix. My cheeks flushed as I followed Mrs. S past doorways with my eyes half shut. Chimmie darted to whatever caught her eye. The sidewalk had chunks missing so I watched my red rubber thongs. Shop owners waited in red and blue doorsills. They tugged wooden toy snakes on the dirty cement. Clothing, fresh and orderly, was folded tight in plastic bags on high shelves. I thought about my leather school shoes on our grey dirt road. A rock broke one heel so it spun in a circle and finally came off. I went to school anyway. My ankles now white but usually tattooed with grey slate.

I knew the Mexican people saw my shame. I looked at the curio and big-eyed dolls strewn across the walls. Their hair brushed; their alabaster legs and arms, so clean. I tried to comb my hair out before getting on the plane, but hid the mats in braids. The part on top of my head was a crooked clue. I looked up at a row of carved faces and leather coin pouches. Money really upset Mom after Pop left. I remember her

cleaning the bathtub; tears streamed down her face. I put a rock in my lunch bag so I could leave more bread in the fridge.

As we walked along, the dilapidated stucco buildings and dark alleys pushed their smells in our face like an invisible fist. Poverty mixed up with bright colors overwhelmed my senses. I figured the entire town wanted Mrs. S to pull an endless roll of cash from her big red tote bag, usually pushed tight to her rolling hip. She did pull Pall Malls out and lit the tips with cheap flicks. Her sandals snapped as she led us in her long, blue shorts hemmed above her bulbous knees, with Chimmie and I in our sundresses. We turned the corner, and saw the groceries Mrs. S bought that morning were gone. She'd forgot to lock the car. She yelled, "Bugger!" Her voice sounded like a kazoo.

We saw taco stands selling peso tortillas with mysterious fillings. Of course, Chimmie wanted me to buy one and chuck it down. "No, you." I mumbled back. Down the street, older men lined up outside a crumbly stadium for jai alai. I knew how they'd chatter at our hair if we went close. Tired of feeling so white; we faced the traffic and headed back to lot nine.

As the dusty dark settled on the trailer, we opened our shopping bags on the coffee table. We took out brand new embroidered peasant tops, feminine and fluffy, set free from factory pouches. From thick tan paper, I unwrapped a puppet with a sombrero. Chimmie admired a blue bead bracelet against her tan wrist.

Then, Mrs. S sat on a stool in the center of the room. The air slowed down. She had a blue ceramic cup in her right hand she'd brought down from a high shelf. Chimmie's cheeks changed color slightly. I felt a change coming from Mrs. S. A pretend theater curtain, strung high with dark velvet and fringe, slowly opened on imaginary cables to show her in a new way. Now she was ready to begin a surprise. I wondered, *will she sing?* She held the cup tight; her tan knuckles curled around the rim. She hid a bottle behind her, but I saw it. With robotic motion, she turned and poured. She drizzled in the cup, then into her face while her

shoulders stayed stiff. She tipped the cup down her throat fast, in expert, measured sips. Chimmie started to rummage in the drawers of an end table. Two minutes passed. Mrs. S had things to say.

She began to gurgle half-sweet insults, "Why don't you girls put on your bikinis and show yourselves off down at the beach?" Chimmie rolled her eyes, "It's way too late to go swimming." Mrs. S shot back, "Why should you girls take up so much room inside here, after I took you everywhere, following your every whim?" Chimmie pulled out a board game. She started to inspect the pieces.

The air was charged. It felt like an agreement was being broken. Mrs. S was no longer a grown up who looked after us. She became more agitated; "Must I sit here and twaddle through the night like some ridiculous Auntie?" she spoke like she scored a prize for each syllable. Chimmie and I sat cross-legged on the hard carpet under the lamp's haze. Chimmie knew how to mind herself. We both knew we had to play the game with minor fascination. I hated board games, but not now. Mrs. S wanted to give us everything she had, as though a hidden director lived in the acid of her gut. When she stood, the trailer boards creaked beneath her long, bent toes. Her lips, juicy with chewed lipstick, tightened. Chimmie and I limped half mindedly over the rules with the fake money mostly missing. We both wanted inside the two-dimensional plot on the floor.

Cigarette smoke pulsed from Mrs. S's nostrils like a canon at rest. She spat a bead over the hedge of her stiff bosom, "Don't bother to pretend, girls! I don't give a damn bang if you have fun!" Now she eased into a real swagger. Her body relaxed. She interrupted herself only to pour, away from our line of sight--*why bother* --behind a chair, straight into the cup. The air crackled with chemical change; the light turned grey. Her performance framed by the thin trailer walls meant to tell a truth; her truth. The alcohol loosened envy from the dark side of her brain; the unblended bits from her dark kitchen held down in the day. Her large jawbone, now well oiled, wanted to slam us hard and good. She wanted expose things that would hurtle beyond this moment.

She bellowed how perfect little Chimmie popped farts like a pellet gun all through the night. How we both had nothing but bird scat between our ears and would never learn what we need to know about what makes the world worthwhile. How we understand nothing of what it meant to be intelligent or useful to anyone. How we ate like pigs and are, in reality, two perfect goats. How we thought we were beautiful but were only broken, dumb dolly dolls with "stuffing for purpose." She moved the angle of her body and pitched herself toward me. I felt an imaginary red dot on my forehead. She leaned low, right in front of my nose, "Chimmie is faaaar more practical than you!" Spit hit my eye.

Practical? It was nothing to make me run out the door and cry. I looked down then saw her turn for me again. Her eyes sharpened, "Poor you, you could walk outside and get lost and no one would miss you!" Chimmie smirked at the game board. Mrs. S's spine straightened, "You'd be lucky to be like Chimmie—she's got far more reason to exist!" The spotlight on me felt like an apology to Chimmie. A burnt offering, an unspoken "I'm sorry I drink, darling. We'll make this other girl a sacrificial lamb, from my blood to your blood."

But like the absurdity of fish oil on Fruit Loops, none of it added up to a real world. I worried. *Was she telling the truth about me?* I remembered Mrs. S from all the hours earlier. The one who smiled in shops when we held ponchos against our chests, checked in with my mom on the phone, recited a silly poem to soften a hard minute. She's gone. Gone; like the planes that fly here. The towel burned and twisted in my gut and shot a question to my brain; *Can I still like Mrs. S?*

I stared at the red game piece in my hand. In the world of the game, it was my move. Sitting cross-legged beside the pilly sofa, there were no other moves off the painted board. White buds of saliva pressed out of Mrs. S's mouth corners; "Just what the high holy hell do you girls expect from me?" Then she slumped over with a thick exhale, her performance complete. The imaginary curtain bumped shut on the thin carpet. Chimmie snapped, "Good night!" But the night was not good.

Long after the days of this time, we learned Mrs. S was Chimmie's grandmother. Chimmie's sister, Grace, was Chimmie's real mother. If the world were right, perhaps neither Chimmie nor I would've been in that trailer with Mrs. S, at all. Grace lived on a ranch somewhere in Arizona. But we didn't know this in Mexico or on any other visit. The night or the cup never mentioned.

I saw Chimmie only one more time. Late in the summer, weeks after Mexico, Mom and I went to their turquoise pool for a barbeque at their Phoenix adobe. There were Clark bars. I remember meeting Grace there, too. She sat quietly, he pale blue eyes watching Chimmie swim. Her striking white hair beautifully arranged.

Eventually, in the next few years as my moments flung gradually toward adolescence, my days became brighter. I learned how to care for myself. I made real friendships and found love in new places. And so did my mother.

That Mexico night, under the cot covers inside my minds theater, Mrs. S's misery made an encore. I watched her painted lips twist and smile. I changed my thoughts out, like currency, into shredded sleep. I decided, that second, how nothing could matter unless I said so. Soon, it all traded for sun through the thin curtains. Chimmie's flaxen hair looked like a soft cocktail onion through the top of her bedspread. I looked at the small digital clock on the nightstand: six a.m. They, and the trailer, were still. The outside air sent a cicada's chirp through the window. I slipped out the front door not letting it hit the metal frame. I knew the beach was very close. I chased the smell with bare feet.

The End

Wild Bikini

By the river, the Verde, in the extra hot days when the mesquite was lush with airborne pepper, I saw Shandy B. hitchhike on the Interstate in a wild bikini. It had ties on the hips and a big gold ring separating the top, with green swirls on a laser lemon background. The three psychedelic triangles masking her sex, under the clear azure dome of Arizona, contrasted her deep tan and incandescent teeth in such a way, there was no doubt she was a roman candle sprung from a perfect Endless Summer vision-vortex. We were all 16. Us girls loved how she repeatedly sent herself up from the hot bunny stereotype. She always had the answer, ever-shooting amending retorts smarter than smart. She'd correct a teacher, or she'd say something to a boy who wanted her breasts like a birthday present but had no hint of who she was.

Things led up to Shandy waiting on that bend of highway. Maybe the sexual revolution was a part, but that was the least of it. Cars weren't what she was looking for. She'd run hard to the highway; the hill mud squished underneath her feet, and cracked dry a minute later from the heat. Black inner tubes, set to ride the Verde, roped to tops of small cars, flung around the dirt roads and past cattle guard gates. Shaggy boys, the kind with chin stubble and oversized belt buckles, threw brutal hoots at her from backseat windows. She looked past them.

She was never allowed out, anywhere real. Her mother, first generation Italian-Catholic, constantly yelled and picked. Shandy stayed behind a heavy kitchen door with an extra tight spring that whacked hard against the sill. That door slapped people away. Sometimes we'd see one brown eye inside three inches, and she'd shake her head *no*, *can't*.

She worked her tan on the cheap lounger in her backyard with shots of iodine and baby oil; the poor girls Coppertone. That yard was her altar for homework and impeccable report cards. But bare-torso'd by the river that day, suspended there on Interstate 87, her thumb stiffed sideways, I sensed heavy doors would soon open for Shandy. Her life force couldn't be blocked forever. At school, we shared clothes with her;

Indian skirts, tube tops, and the bikini. And, that day on the highway she wasn't showing off. She was an accidental nova; her long hair streaming like a beautiful blonde squid in the summer wind.

If silly boys would stop throwing rocks at her bedroom window, they might grasp, for a just a second, who she might be. But Shandy couldn't know them. That she was allowed at the river that day was a farce; her mother had gone down the street to a neighbor's. Shandy filled a big suede bag with an old towel, cutoffs, paperbacks, lotion, cigarettes and tangerines and ran. We met her in the alley behind a mini mart.

Unwanted attention from poor fools made her a little cracked. All the fawning; some too harsh, some over-sweet, came to her in sick rushes But she imagined her life would fast forward to something else. Under the olive trees at school yet another boy tried to wrap himself around her so she began Rudyard Kipling's poem, the one about rape.

"Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools, Or watch the things you gave your life to, broken, And stoop and build 'em up with worn-out tools: If you can make one heap of all your winnings"

The boy looked dizzy, as though Shandy cast a spell on his family. She laughed too hard and snickered for the rest of the week.

That day, before she ran up to the black top, we'd been down by the east bend of the Verde, a popular bank with ceaseless parties. We were shiny on towels with a little black radio on the dirt. She fanned pages of a beat poet on the terry cloth. Friends left, floated on puffed tubes, heading to another bank for a few hours. I was sun-tired in a baggy t-shirt, and Shandy read. We stayed back, numb and serene. Everyone besides us moved down river.

It was this moment, when the sun started to dip just a fraction, glancing beyond the dark tree line, when the worst boys came in an oversized truck. The wind whipped behind the rear bumper, like a devil's zap pushed them. The week before, Shandy had said something too flippant; something that gave them a terrible idea when they saw her on the towel, stretched out, in that bikini. The one boy looked ruthless with

patchy skin. He dragged a loose joint and fixed his gaze on her bare back. The truck came as close as it could, next to the wash we were north of. "Hey Shandy, let's go for a ride." Shandy tightened, like her brain couldn't solve what was set to unfold. She knew these boys would go further than anyone before who'd hurt her; farther than her mother, the handsy teacher, the lechy neighbor who threw rocks at her window, even the nicer boys who didn't understand a thing. We felt pre-violence hang in the air, right next to the mesquite pollen, scratching against us, our peace; this time.

Her eyebrow flicked, she had the idea. I already knew. She had to tear through the dense groves that led up to the highway. She got up to run, powerless like a genius rabbit, up the embankment. She took off and I went invisible. Eyes from the truck glass followed Shandy as she ran into the thick. I ran behind a line of rocks and scrubs, and willed myself to mix with the slope. I used different footing and stayed imperceptible. Then the boys tried to turn their tires around but fishtailed, giving Shandy a shot of time. When they slammed doors to run for her, the divide was steep. They were slow and stoned. Shandy ran again, relentless.

She made it to the rim of the highway, and I waited. I knew exactly what she was doing because we'd talked about the big diesels earlier. We knew grey beards usually manned them. When her sandals slapped asphalt, she ignored station wagons and cars. I didn't yell for her, because that would've blown it. We knew the big wheelers came like clockwork and would hurtle over the pass. They were giant, the biggest things I'd ever seen swaying across the mountains and with a single soul inside. In less than a minute, a 17-ton truck bent around the curve of the highway with a beautiful grizzly man at the wheel. The wall of palo verde'd mountains that circled the Interstate had white caps on them; jutting elevated and neutral, and they shrunk Shandy, the highway, and the wild bikini. As I crouched behind the pale scrub brush, I heard the brakes squeak high, their harmonics bounced off the heat of the sunlight; and the internal, enormous clutch made all 20 wheels, as though God had to gradually wield it, slowly come to a tight stop.

The driver with his forearms bent to the wheel, looked entirely shocked. With eyes like fried eggs he waved his flannel arm, directing her to the high side step as he leaned over to open the door. Shandy, with a small fraction of whom and what she really was, with all her summer magic, manifested 40 tons of moving steel to an inactivated pause. The boys landed on the black top and watched as the wheeler ate the horizon in front of them; their mouths slacked. Slung to the clear sky, Shandy was going somewhere.

The End

The Rancher

Lane Five. White Russian across and over the desk. Tributaries of milky booze. I nailed a Whiskey Sour on Lane Nine with the big yellow sponge. It's a wet night. I clean 300 Bowl; lane to desk, bench to shoe. The only entertainment on the barren side of Phoenix. Two mops; wet and dry, three rectangular towels, a pail, one box of scorecards, thousands of tiny pencils, a bottle of blue spray, and my hidden rebellion, all push on to the next sit-pit. It's the tiny things that make me do it.

Billboards on the Interstate and the gigantic pins in the parking lot read *300 Bowl*, but to me it's the "Vault." Everyday, except for two odd days off, I appear, seeming by magic, after a 17-mile drive through the desert. My 20-year-old flesh became indentured here, by my own choice. For the past two years I call silent, to no thing, that I might someday wipe different sweat; one from hot lights, drums, boys with long bangs, and screaming hard. It's still 1981. I write power pop songs. But these aren't the tiny things that keeps me going.

Jen, also 20, became front desk manager a week ago. She makes announcements into the overhead PA, "Sign up now for Wednesday-Leagues!" along with quips for me, that echo through the building;

"Come see my new sandals."

"Split hot fries in five?"

I ignore the rotten-toothed heavers who want to get laid. They roost in the desk pits and harang me robotically. "Can I have a side of you?" or "Stick your finger in my Heiny and make it sweet." They hoot, slowly tip sideways, and sometime after eleven; sloop completely over the blue plastic benches in their silly rented shoes. Then there are kids who finger paint with nacho cheese, gluing point pencils to the floor. Wives eye me like I'm the fine print on a ticket. *Am I good?* My grin gives the illusion I think it's super ducky these folks came here. Crinkle cut fries sticking up from ketchup splotches and other found food art, like smashed hot dog bread, get lost in the camouflage tile. Some unhuman *thing*, some unseen eye of the lanes, forces me to use my fingernail to scratch it loose.

May I ever leave? Nope. I'm in the vault. Tiny things keep me inside.

I moved out from mom's just so I could work here. No jobs in the city. I can't own up to feelings or they start to blister, then I'll outright cry like a sucker. It's really better to not think any thought too long. Better forget it. I get a paycheck with an insult tax bite. I alchemize 24 bowling stations to a vinegar shine in less than 31 seconds—the time it takes the machines to loop a ball back to a greedy hand. Tiny things are a huge help.

As bowling alleys go, the Vault's location is supremely isolated. Just when a car hits high desert and they start to whiff Creosote Bush through the AC vent, they'll spot the high volume parking lot with a million spaces open. With only gas and a quick mart near, 300 Bowl attracts locals from a short line of adobe homes. The marque announces it's "*COOL INSIDE!"* and has a jukebox bar. The place lounges like a 1950's starlet wrapped in a sidewalk of sparkly pink cement. On any day, till one a.m., you're welcome to heave an eight-pound ball down a free waxed lane. Eventually, you're sure to get tiny things, yourself. Everyone does.

The Vault barely covers my studio apartment on the edge of town where I keep a small closet of Levis, cutoffs, sneakers, flip flops, a few tube tops, and a red futon with gigantic king sheets. The sheets were taken, right before the final door slam, from mom's dryer. I fix Folgers in the fingernail kitch and zap fish sticks. When everyone caravans to float the river, I'm in the Vault. On breezy, lush nights, I wear rubber gloves. I toy with delusions of leaving the Vault. But even though I write lyrics and sing as good as any cassette you'd hear, I can't quite find the guts. Tiny things are sort of to blame.

The Vault is special but pretty much no one knows. Just inside the doors you'll see a space age chandelier jutting chrome spikes in every direction. To your right, there's a short hallway to a long vintage bar, the sides quilted with crimson padding. Eight tables with napkin holders and Tabasco wait for your hash browns, and 45's from Johnny Cash to Frank Zappa wait for coins. From the bar room, if you follow the vermillion carpet, (the ferocious color gives a good jolt at one a.m.) you'll see a high sided welcome desk where shoes, clipboards, talcum powder, and the day or night clerk, service incoming bowlers. There's probably not an inch anywhere, including some people, I haven't shot cleanser at. The Vault's darker nooks collect an amalgamation born from varied chemicals and lubricants, (food grease, pin machine oil, shoe spray, splashes of hard liquor), mixed with an earthy foam that seeps out from bowling shoe leather; a kind of dead gunk that loves plastic furniture. And then there's the mascot; the pusher of tiny things.

He's an old man who stands just inside the front glass doors. He wears the same pin-stripe suit with a yellowy tan shirt. We call him Jolly Rancher because he hands out sweets in shiny foil. With his chin open and his eyeballs spread wide like fried eggs, he asks anyone who walks by to "*Please enjoy a piece of candy!"* In spite of wearing heavy combed wool in 115 degree heat, his skin looks bone-dry. He stands by the welcome mats and quivers. An imperceptible breeze seems to rock him back and forth in his long, pointed shoes. He reaches down into his thick, square pocket and gives out butterscotch, coffee nips, mints, strawberry, lemon, even pineapple. I'm sure I've had most every flavor. Jolly Rancher never bowls, eats or

drinks, and I've wondered if he knows where he actually is. I guess a retired dandy, perhaps lost at a greyhound station, who somehow started a life from coins buried in a box by the river wash. Who knows. His tiny bits are sometimes everything to me. He keeps me coming back, and back again. I count on the Rancher. I like to see his eyes shift and the little red feather in his tweed hat as he forks it over. I like to see his withered hand surrender the bright, tiny treat. His candy is special.

When Jen got me an interview, I didn't understand how much life force I'd be shoveling to the Vault. "Oh come on, it'll be fun!" she yipped one mellow day when I snug at mom's. I squashed out my post application smoke and before I knew it; my head pushed through a bright orange 300 Bowl poly-blend. I empty butt flowing trays, herd up rental shoes and douse them with anti-bacteria spray, dry mop the bar and pit floors singing to repeat juke plays of Blondie's *Atomic*, and build up my 'ceps stacking boxes of gin bottles behind the building. I rock it hard, I sing through every scrubbing. But, the job wears me down. From the parking lot, even before I get to the doors, my verve swings out from my body. It flies back, out to the road. I almost turn to leave before I see Jolly Rancher. He's way more than a giver of sugar. He's funny and kind and his tiny things get me back inside.

But I want the music trapped in my head and body to explode. I hear full drums and cracking guitars behind my shoulders. I want to sing across the map; a long way removed from stub pencils and hot dog paper. I practice anywhere I can; while I pull a shirt over my head, behind the wheel, or when I scour the bar floor with a torn cloth under my knees. I'll escape this piddle-pay scene. I need to sing for real, outside of tape decks and car windows, in places where I'm not conquered by cardboard dish-boats and, well, tiny things. One day, one second, I'll drive away and relish each mile. But that feels unlikely. My legs can't screw up any jump.

I grab crash naps behind the lanes where the pins tumble like shot soldiers—over, and over. If you've paid dues the night before, the waffled sound of bowling pins are pretty fine. Harsh and buttery, their

muffled noises knock me to the center of a perfect Delta sleep within a minute. I open my eyes, shocked, forgetting myself. I wake up from these underhanded sleeps and remember: *I'm an Alley Porter*. I reappear in front of the lanes, in a hypnagogic state.

"Where were you?" Jen fires through the PA.

I spot her frazzled "out-of-menthol-100's" look. She shuts off the mic, "I've been paging and paging. Can I have one?" I smooth my hair and open my bag under the counter, "Here. I got distracted stacking hand towels." She sits high on her stool and snaps "Right!" through a sharp snort of smoke. She knows those towels were under my skull. Her tiny 5' frame and freckled cheeks make her look way younger than she is. It's hysterical how most guys don't get how whip smart she is. With scratch paper and some quiet, she'll draw the hairpin twists of the shrub-covered trail that will get you to the next weekend kegger. Chad knows she's smart. He lassoed her from the backroom of the kitchen, out to the front desk.

Chad is the 6' 6" 40 year old day manager who irons his slacks to a finger-bleeding pleat, saunters like a kaki panther with oiled blonde hair. He scours each lane for whatever might challenge his idea of glamour. He cross checks for unruly bowlers, misfits, drugged fidgets, irate losers, pushy hook ups, and winners who might score free dinner in the bar with the never-won Perfection Bonanza; "300 games at 300." He flashes salutes to his stable of warriors; the prideful bowlers who swing their monogrammed bags, model tasseled shoes, and satin jackets with sequined titles, like *No Pity Diamond Backs.* All day Chad groans softly as he strokes the bottom of his left sideburn. That's a tiny thing for him. It might curl off one day, like paint. He's content with the way I squirt spray in the sit-pits. I swagger to an internal chorus that plays in my brain. I empty, scour, shove back in place; and sing low and hard under my breath. Keeping the Vault clean is my act of art. It must be or I couldn't come back. Not without tiny things!

Chad retreats up a side stair to his mini fridge, open cans of Vienna sausage, an over sized tumbler of year round Christmas Corn—all in reach of his pocked up desk. A lot of tiny things. He watches us

through a square of one-way glass. I know he believes in the suicide of losers and the ecstasy of winners. I know he believes there's a larger reason why we're all here. But really, because of the desert that surrounds us like a drained aquarium, he knows he has the locals by their eight-to twelve pound balls. There's also Doris, who works the bar; a charcoal haired 60 plus who'll always slide a little nosh down the bar, "Need an olive, hon?" Olives are her tiny things. And there's Jen. She's got the microphone. Other than the vending stockers, machine repair, bathroom janitor, and kitchen staff, we're the blotchy, smiling face of the Vault. And we all have our tiny things.

I slink to the back, just to watch the pins slide through the metal. The air is rare and strange back here, like a casino, or a library, or any place where the clock is slowed. This is the true bones of the dream, the true Oz of how things go, and the falling pins remind me, of me. I see how they're taken up, spun around, clobbered, and put back for another round. It's messy and oily, softly violent, but timed so the pins meets every suck with just the right pressure; after the sweeper pushes them to this back world like dead dolls. Their fat bottoms and thin necks give right gravity to tumble into a moving car, only to drop to a perfect elevator for the split of a second. I picture my own neck like a helpless tube, waiting to be hooked up to the next thing, whether I suck candy or sneak a nap. Next, the pins are clipped by a magnet in a carousel and set to dangle in the rim of a vertical wheel. Flawless and white; they're dropped in rows to stand clean, only to go down again. I got taken into the vault and then hypnotized; so I stay. I'd be lucky if I landed soft like columns of hard dough, like they do. But I don't. I twist and complain. We all need a force to yank us out. Or getting pulled into a machine will be our sorry Oz and something inside us will die off. Who knows what could whip us to a new wheelhouse. There's an alley myth that once a ball nudged a pin just right and it flew way far, like a mute dove. Almost made it to the doors.

I sneak back, out to the front of the lanes. I head for the lobby. I'll go see Jolly Rancher, and watch him, so gently, sway in his unsuitable suit. "Thank you!" I'll tell him, as I guess what flavor I have. I go

with fatal cottonmouth. I know I'll unwrap the bit and leave him as he slides shoe to shoe with his gooey smile. I get the sense he thinks-- that I think—he's secured my high regards. I stride wide, charge across the nasty rug, make a blur of the shellacked lane boards and get myself past the lane pits, mock a teethy-smile to stool-bound Jen, and burn heel through the lobby and past the bar, to the fresh country of the front entrance. I see him now.

I see his mouth begin to move, to ask me for the third time this afternoon to, "Please, enjoy a piece of candy…" I'd love a coconut nip. As though cued by Pavlov's ding, my mouth waters up. But before I sew even a half dot of sense, something different happens when I extend my hand. The Rancher's eyes look different. He has beady slits that don't see me.

He snarls, and throws his arm with a back arch thrust and lunges for my breasts. *Isn't my Vault shirt like company armor?* Jolly misses my chest by three inches as I swiftly step back from the arc of his hooked paw. Before I can read the glint shining from his eye, his other hand turns downward and does a scooping scratch for my groin. *Does he really want sex?* Now I see he is an old javelina, or a vulture that some wife, or mother, forgot to give a breast to. I fall back and snicker but the sound doesn't come from my throat. It comes from the back of my neck where my own survival hides; the place that looks out my apartment window to see if I can haul ass to the trash cans in my nightshirt. He's way too slow. He breathes hard and mutters some broken thought. I don't say a thing. I walk backward two steps and slowly angle myself in the opposite direction. I go quickly. I go to Jen.

"Jen, Rancher just attacked me."

"Who… the candy? Whad'he do?" Jenny has enjoyed zillions of pieces. But she would never let this happen. I imitate the old man's rusted moves, his snarled noises, and I do it to Jen. I miss her chest by a short inch. My head buzzes with freak shock tempered by my own silly theater. Jens eyes darken. She booms into the PA:

"Chad, please come to the front desk."

My heart thumps a double beat. "What…?"

Chad strides up. His face looks ironed flat. Again, I tell the story in mock theater style. I flash how I'm cut off from tiny things! I feel secret disgust. Wordless; Chad's sideburns, like a mood ring, change to dark blonde. He starts to sail and we follow him footless. We glide like mindless fish to the door. There's Rancher, bent over like a dark hook. Right as we arrive three feet away, even with Chad and Jenny right there, Rancher lunges—again-- for my company breasts. Now it's official. Rancher does not see me as full person. He releases a sharp growl, a rashed-out rage. His frustration has waited too long. He's overcooked, strung out, again he bursts like a caldera, copious from somewhere, maybe many years away from these welcome mats. Or, his hate is brand new and meant for me.

As Rancher settles, Chad grabs the shoulder pads of his suit. He picks up the old man's frame, and in a split second dangles him like gangly wire. They push out to the hot particulates of the driest wind you'd ever feel anywhere on earth. Ranchers shoes scuff, and his leather soles lose balance on the sparkly pink pavement. He nearly falls and lets out a squawk. His grey eyeballs glow utter confusion. I sense the Vault's immensity behind me. The pink bricks weigh in with an ooze of shame. Chad scoots Rancher to the driver's side of a faded yellow Cadillac and makes the old man slouch under and in, like a bad tiger to his cage. I'm scrappy and blank. Chad yells something through the car window, and makes sure the engine turns over. The torn white hubcaps aim for the road. The tailpipe blasts two tumbleweeds straight at us. The Rancher turns his head back, his lips move.

I think I see "Get out dumb fool." Don't know for sure.

Later on, I drive home and watch the early night dust merge to sunset inside my windshield. Far off, I spot a band of coyotes eating a white carcass by a Palo Verde grove, and they twitch when a 16-wheel diesel slams wind behind me, almost changing their mind. Hundreds of seconds later, I pull up to my studio

and feel different than I ever have over these two years. Later, after a cold cheese sandwich, I roll up in my sheets. I'm far too tired. I shut off the light and close my eyes. Electricity buzzes thin from the fridge. My bones feel finished and fall down hard to the foam under me. The vault, the cleaning, all the ground my feet covered in a day, this week, this year, snatching millions of tiny things, and what happened with the old man, takes me to a half-happening dream. I'm on his back. He's a board, a stiff plank I'm meant to ride. We dip and soar through waves of Vermillion carpet. I feel a coconut nip in my hand, the one I didn't get. He cranks his head to see me, "I don't want you." In my almost awakened state, it occurs to me how candy tasted different in the Vault. I never even liked hard candy before, even from coffee tables.

Next day, I tell Chad and Jen. I'm leaving.

No more running for cocktail rivers, rolling bottles, rented shoes that look like melted down action figures, hard naps on small towels, or the millionth juke play that took me no where else. A band I know is moving to San Francisco, and there could be drums that will pierce my chest perfectly. We should always aim for the best Vault.

I pull my car away from 300 Bowl. I know Rancher was terrible in an obvious way. I know, besides his explosion, and as much disgust as I felt for him and myself for being so stupid, that he somehow made things work. He shoved me out and into the distance. I cast my blankness to a fresh sky. Maybe my nails will be my next meal. But I imagine Rancher's wool pinstripes and watch them vibrate information; a secret song. I drive easy, glancing the desert with free and open eyes; I spot the grove of Palo Verdes and the white carcass from yesterday, hollow and open. The coyotes have all left.

The End

Half Car

Energy was all ours and we burned it. We'd run down the Verde river beach, us girls, until the edge turned us around. We'd hop stairs to the roof and scream until a flashlight halted us. We danced loony at the worst Phoenix bars till the DJ himself, crumpled hot and finished. We'd sneak through the projects and tear up black fire escapes until the back of our throats were raw from hollering through metal. We'd just turned 18 and understood whatever games we shot ourselves toward. But these were the longer, sweet days before Jenny's dad did what he did. After half-car came, everything shifted.

Jenny's dad was a raging alcoholic and an expert welder. He'd weld things together just to take them apart. He'd cobble strange machines that'd run all night for no apparent reason; maybe to mix toxic fluids or constantly shake a vat of oil—needlessly. One night, we got home late and Jen parked her Blue Ford Fairlane in front of her dad's townhouse. Just before dawn, some hack slammed nuclear hard at the back of it. That car turned trash for no reason other than someone aimed their shit at it—no pity—as it sat under a beautiful elm minding its business. The tail went accordion, most would've deemed it RIP on the spot—never to ride a legal road again.

But Jenny's dad didn't see it that way. He somehow managed to hork it over behind the townhouse, to his little carport. Then, he lowered an asbestos visor over his eyes and aimed a slim torch with the hottest ice-blue flame he could dial up. This was the afternoon, when the locusts left their husks behind -- when the sun was a goddamn bright beachball in the sky-- this the never-again day, that Jenny's dad went and concocted half-car.

The second your eyes got over how he'd cut the Ford in half (the hefty-ass trunk and gas tank totally burned off) you had to force your brain to understand what your eyes saw—more hysterical than words could paint. Half-car told an instant fable: appearances are ridiculous comics of nothing! When we drank up what Jenny's dad had done, it took 20 seconds for us to ball up on the grass, in halters and cutoffs, to laugh hard smashing the dandelions. Jenny's dad, in his "wizard-trance," connected an oversized portable gas can onto the wide open back, totally exposed. Right behind the still-there back seat.

Of course, we had to drive it seven hours to L.A. because we craved what that car wanted. The car wanted to teach us something we'd never forget. We had no choice! Our tan legs stuck out the window, Jenny's giant lemon-yellow-puff-ball key chain swung vain over a hang-ten foot cover on the gas pedal.

We began to collect a devil's due. Mocking hollers gushed out speedster windows. Slaps of humiliation chipped our pride--our feminine shimmer. Mile to mile; half-car changed the past. By the time we got to the Six Pence hotel off the interstate, we became hot-babes-no-more. The car ingested what we thought we were; made us over but good. Now, half-girls with legs swinging out twin bedcovers; we faked sleep next to the braggy clock radio. Eyes half-closed, we got a taste full of terror; a rancid eggyolk over our skulls. The explosion came outside.

The End

Step-Mama

The first time I heard the nuclear slam of Step-Mama's front door, the last shred of joy in my nine-year-old gut evaporated. A warning--an omen--that door let me know change was aimed my way. Even shut, the thing simmered with tension before we even got to the porch. She and Pop just eloped, and this was the day Pop drove me across town to meet wife-person. Before my sneaker even touched Step-Mama's welcome mat, the look of the entry hit me hard; stern, gladless angles, no flower in sight, mounted security lamp. From under its dull metal paint, the door grew a mouth: *no kid special here*. Just then, a cub scout hopped on the steps doing rounds with his donation box. He mistakenly thought he heard Step-Mama yell through the open window; "*Please! Come!"* but she was actually castigating my new step-brother with an unwrapped McMuffin on the kitchen tiles; "*Freeze! Crumbs!*" Thinking this was his cue--the scout pushed inside--not realizing the door was jacked with heavy-duty hinges. It whacked back hard! *Boof!* His navy-blue bottom and thick glasses flew backward and bounced on the sidewalk. With grass stains and flushed head, he gathered himself up and burrowed through a hole in an oleander hedge. Step-Mama never knew he was there.

Now came my turn. Even with Pop in front, pushing the handle, and just as I thought I'd made it through, the door's chomp branded my calf with a red mark at the very last second. I lost all color from the waist up. No longer a daughter, I knew I'd just mutated to juicy prey. I knew I was too soft for this place. Soon, I found out Step-Mama had the door fitted with industrial springs because she didn't want it "…swinging in the breeze." It was soon added unto me; a new covenant; that this house --wholly bald of dirt--must be maintained with a quality control so exact, all who crossed Step-Mama's threshold must be evaluated:

Are you an asset or a sucking, needless parasite?

Once inside, Step-Mama touched the top of my head and gave me a nod. Her lipstick curled to two upward points. From behind, a pair of hands rudder'd my shoulders to install me in a line up with her five children, me the youngest, for a quick photo. Step-Mama winked at me and with a stiff jaw; tapped the tip of my nose. I tried to morph into the house with a half-baked smile, but I knew deep down--I'd be barely safe here.

Pop left mom after a string of nasty quarrels, divorced in half a flash, and then married Step Mama after a long, secret affair. He adored her larger than life personality and explained to us that Step-Mama was like his mother, and that my mother was not enough like his mother; my grandmother whom I'd never met. My mother loved silk scarves, gardenia perfume, and a languid giggle at a sexy comedy. Step-Mama, on the other hand, was tough, business minded, and shot out hasty judgments like a pellet gun. Pop found her feminine vigor magnetic. As if to emphasize her appraisals, Step-Mama's lips were permanent cherry red—always. The color ever-steady after swimming, sweating, yelling, beaching, haggling, slurping; shaming whomever sat in her Datsun's back seat, even after a long stretch of self-possessed laughter.

And, it was no family myth that Step-Mama made a car salesman cry one day, at high noon, in front of Pop and a hundred Chryslers. Step-Mama had a sharp, tinny voice box, and linked with her clever mind, however steeped in projection, her speech could vivisection pride like a heat-seeking scud. She verbally pounced on the salesman, who tried to change his price quote in mid-sentence. Admittedly hard to believe, but the story has it, after the dose of degradation she chucked him; the guy wept--openly. Her uncanny ability to invoke deep shame streamed through those red lips, topped by her two grey iris's, coming from an utter lack of forgiveness for all people who created dirt of any sort; karmic or material. To Step-Mama, that salesman had slung unqualified filth, so he must *pay and dearly*.

Actually, Step-Mama was non-biased, she despised everyone's natural made dirt equally. And in spite of her difficult-to-navigate mood swings, I also discovered, many years later, how much she loved my father; his understanding eyes were her north star. Pop would smile, and sing quick, on-the-fly songs to smooth out household-dystopia; "…oh my baby, baby, she ain't happy again, but I sure love her sugar-bottom…"

My little dolly eyes were completely overwhelmed by Step-Mama's largess. Her body was both tall and wide; she lived in a different dome of sky bolstered by long, loggish legs. Her big-boned frame capped with tight, white ringlets. Her day-to-day uniform was stretchy knee length shorts, sweat-tough blouses, and wheat-colored hospital shoes that didn't make a sound. There were many times I thought I was all alone, but her shadow oscillated behind me, watching my hands. Whatever my hands were doing mattered terrifically. If they were too relaxed, she'd direct them to the dankest spot in the house; "Why don't you clean *behind* the toilet tanks today?" In these early days, my goal was to manipulate with overly chipper quips, always with false brightness, to try and harvest Step-Mama's approval by the barrel full. I was used to chores, but not in such a ubiquitous paradigm. Never the rebellious type, my new job was predicting Step-Mama's unpredictability. The woman terrified me.

Step-Mama was quick to anger, and the basis for her irritations were sometimes hard comprehend, until I understood her. Cleaning and sleuthing out grime, sure, that was fairly easy. But there was another realm I had yet to parce. Mostly, this other more hazy puzzle seemed connected to, what, and when, I ate. I found out, one night at dinner, my value had sunk to bacteria because I'd taken two drumsticks off the platter of chicken she'd put down. I should've left the other for her son, Brian, who wore size 16 Levi's. Step-Mama's anger was not fleeting. She remembered all details and took photographic mind shots of whatever you did. Why she

thought you did it, and then, in her special psychic laboratory, she'd concoct the way she'd make you pay. The punishment would come about much later, like a dull pin inside creamy casualness. I might be snuggling under a quilt watching a favorite tv show when I'd hear a passive dig almost a purr, of how I must have a stomach ache because I'd eaten so much at dinner. But the punishment with this first offense was only bewilderment. I'd never really crossed the line before.

For some sense of control, I decided, one morning, on the sidelines of her super-sanitized kitchen waiting for a ration of Cheerios, that she was built like, and was the same size as, a refrigerator. She was a hard-working appliance that required careful organizing. Her internal "shelves" required steady attention from all of us; as we constantly checked and cleared them to make room for more and more incoming, moment to moment, dictations of work to be done. New demands always fresh toward the front; and if you didn't answer it should be because your hands—or your snoot-- were already assigned a gross focus; "*Who's pullin' hair out of drains, and I need someone to smell sponges…"*

And shrewdly, maybe to offset her frame, she wore a sweet, lemony fragrance that could get Pop beneath something broken. When addressing Step-Mama's bullet list, Pop'd peel out another tune with a low, soft gentle phrasing while he worked on anything from changing a pool filter to squirting WD-40; "…God, I love my woman and she likes it clean, not broke, okey doke…." Step-Mama insisted her cleaning directives be performed, by all of us, with pious elation and then when done, we should keep quiet as though nothing worth a dot of pride had been executed. And, like FBI agents, we should stay on high alert to address any setback, real or imagined, even if it appeared out of thin air, "*Why didn't anyone put that case of oil away?"* her voice flapped like a bat through the house, yelling from the carport, to call attention to a case of

shrink wrapped cans that had been sitting in what was now the wrong spot for over six months. The carport was officially outside her territory, that is, until she stood in it. Like with a fridge, I tried to "ignore and shove" her outbursts to the side best I could. But I was only nine.

And, many food related bombs began to explode, here and there, like cans of torched aerosol to ignite my naivety. One occurred when she drove the lot of us--my three siblings and her five--through McDonald's. I announced I wasn't hungry, but Step-Mama's oldest daughter, Linda, was a gentle hippy girl who didn't really like fast food and urged me to take her burger, the cheapest and smallest on the menu. The doughy bun suddenly made my stomach churn with desire, so relinquishing; I accepted. In a blink it was gone; we were both glad. Oblivious to the incoming reality shift, I had no idea our exchange made Step-Mama's internal aerosol gather wick—silently and stealthily—overnight. It wasn't until the next day, Step-Mama approached me as I was grinning at a comic book, saying that I had wrongly stolen food last night and that I should work now, as compensation. Feeling totally misunderstood, with tearstained cheeks and unlaced sneakers, I was soon standing in a stretch of alley behind the house. I worked the entire afternoon and began to take relish in moving rocks, raking, adjusting cans, breaking down boxes; really--making the dirt shine. When Step Mama came to survey, she knew I'd paid and paid well; not an inch of chaos left. She knew I now rode high on her wagon as a cult initiate who would venerate carports, kitchens, bathrooms, alleys, sewing rooms, up, up, up to their puritan potential; any space or place where rogue gluck *could, might, will always and ever*, collect. *To clean was why we suck air.*

Another time her goat was got when the family bunch drove to a rental house in Monterey for the weekend. After a long swim in the ocean, I plopped down, rung out from dodging waves, to tan. A seven-year-old cousin ran to my towel, as I was wiping sand off my

feet, to spit; “You gotta come right now!” he looked soaked too—but not with saltwater—with worry. Not able to guess what rattled his little rib cage, I slouched after him and started the long trek to the house, hopping with piston feet over the blistering hot sand, double stepping up a three-story wooden stair that zigzagged to street level, and then making the final 200 yards to our familiar deck. My messenger had eerily disappeared, and once inside, all was quiet. With just a bikini and my ten-year-old pot belly as a shield, I didn’t know where to point myself, *“Hello?”* I wove back to the bedrooms. Hovering over the dresser which I’d been assigned the bottom drawer of --was Step-Mama; wearing an invisible hazmat suit looming over what could be a gurgling tub of jet fuel. I’d left my drawer open—*again.* What happened after that is lost in a fog of stuttered excuses and shifting colors—I think the punishment was the lung-ripping run from the beach. The lesson I came away with was what an open drawer could do to another human being’s peace of mind.

So, I gathered staying organized was rudimentary. At home, Step-Mama maintained a wall dedicated to a micro-compartment system, little push-pull containers labeled for anything from different sized zippers to rejected shapes of velcro. Understanding her various systems, and schooled hard by beach-drawer and purloined burger; I was beginning to understand how I needed to *really dance*. I began to read her body language like a junior detective. I had to make choices before my brain knew why; not unlike sliding through her slapping door, that very first day. Food, labor, and knowing where to put things, spun in a constant, high-stakes loop.

In these days, my own mother was not a strong presence in my life. She meant well but was off as a productive divorcee drinking chardonnay. I was volleyed between her gently shutting mahogany door and Step-Mama’s slamming one. It became obvious Step-Mama felt

competitive with my mother and I sensed this motivated new, incoming shards of kindness toward me.

Once, on a cross country trip, Pop took a second car with a half-family load and I drove with Step-Mama and three others. Somehow, I'd scored the prize throne of the front seat. Going 60 on the Interstate, in between her flare-ups at kid-fidgets in the back, Step-Mama taught me to how steer the rental car with my knee. "*You'll need this as a tool all throughout your entire life,"* With her red lips in a dead-pan line, my lesson ignited before me. Realizing the profound responsibility; my forehead totally drained of blood as she positioned the crook of my thigh under the slick polyurethane wheel. I managed to keep two-tons of metal hurtling forward; only swerving a few hairs over the center line. I was thrilled Step-Mama respected me enough to free up my otherwise dubious hands, at high speeds, doing 60. "You'll thank me when you start drinking coffee." She added.

More unexpected affection came the evening when she switched on her sewing machine. With a pointed finger to the ceiling, she announced she was set to sew me a nightgown. Step-Mama began to measure, cut, and apply mannikin-me with a homemade pattern. I stood tall on a metal stool as she opened three boxes of pins, sticking the stiff, rosy Victorian fabric; piece by piece. I began to notice how the flowery bounds slowly engulfed my personality. I also began to notice the wrists and high neckline of what should be a comfy sleep garment, take shape as oxygen-constrictive casing. I'd never had a nightgown with a turtle neck before and wondered how I would actually sleep in something that might slowly choke me. She sewed the wrists with oversized plastic buttons; clamped wide and tight; looking more and more like flannel shackles. I felt a mild terror at how I'd dance my way through this, possibly as a white corpse at dawn. After a four-hour sewing marathon intended to create a sweet gift, I swished down the hall

wearing what felt like a mid-evil curtain. I pretended to fall asleep, but when the lights were out; the bodice creaked eerily as I yanked what felt like 10 yards of fabric over my head.

As the years wound in and out, with nozzles, needles, oil cans n' velcro, open and shut drawers, sponges, burgers, cleansers, rags, and Hell's dirt repeating and being wiped away yet another time; I became a teen. The drive to tidy engrained in my shifty hands had taken too strong a root. I had to learn to relax. It came to my attention through friends and boyfriends, that I was too pedantically conscientious. But my collaborative connection to Step-Mama chugged along, because now--I thoroughly understood her.

With Step-Mama being the fridge she was, I eventually saw her really good stuff hiding back behind the usual fare; hidden in the dark. It was after five years of being under Step-Mama's beam that Pop became very ill. Alzheimer's crept into our lives; first, with small forgetful mishaps of where obvious things were and then the total loss of simple words. We'd pace by the phone, as Pop went on unannounced walks only to be found when he managed to blurt to a neighbor or shopkeeper that he didn't know where he was. He began to carry a card around his neck with our home address. His memory began to shred fast, and my step-mother was there at every angle; gently guiding, and explaining. Pop began to take his surreal dimension to places where we could barely keep up to protect him, like the time he went into a hardware store to earnestly ask for "…. flashlights that shoot juice…" He also became very attached to his polaroid camera that made a *zzzzzzssst* sound when he took a photo of whatever caught his eye; maybe a tin can, or a cloud. One day, wanting to snap a shot of a random man on the street, he tried to imitate the camera's hiss; "Sir…. may I please *zzzzzssssst* you?" During these difficult, wrenched-with-reality times; Step-Mama was always a hand length away, watching out for him,

carefully feeding and dressing his body, cubing his steak and baked potato, wiping his hands and beard. I would watch them and felt grateful for her channeled tenacity. Her inclination to make

things right was exactly what we needed.

As the days wound in circles, through the hours of his care, his routine well inked as hers, with all the attention his disability required; I noticed a little song held traction in Pop's brain. He'd sing it as she slid the arms of his wool sweater over his or when she eased him down to his leather recliner. He'd sing it softly, with such affection I knew every word melted her ever active mind from going anywhere but right there, never leaving her man. His low, gentle voice sang to his wife-person with quiet shoes, *"My baby knows, she knows, she knows just what to do…."*

The End

Part Two:

Tools Of Consequence

Miscelaneous Essays of Speculative, Personalized, and Non Personalized Fiction

Violence Often Hides

The consignment shop is only a yard from vicious traffic. It doesn't seem fair the sweetness of so many ancestors and dear uncles suffer the exhaust. Flimsy tapestries, shaky wood shelves, a nickel cooktop, beaded wallet, a painting of post-modern ladies fanning fans all crammed up, order-less. I have an open wall that needs something.

I shuffle, in neutral, and wish for what I don't know. A path winds through these mismatched histories. The owner wears army shorts and a thin white tank. His boney hands grab at the piles. He snatches at pleather, wood, and canvas cranked all around us. His skin is alive and peculiar. An intensely complicated tattoo covers his face, neck, ears, shins, and arms, and I'm sure, sweeps down to his dark inches. The ink is delicate and crawls over his body like a fine, red lace. No macho flowers or smiling snakes, no Sanskrit. No philosophical quotes, no irreversible ex lovers– only dark, angel-hair lines. They look like the fragile twines of an antique doily stretched in all directions to cover him completely. Jesus, he's stuck in a net! Whenever he turns, I avoid his eyes and look at his big black boots. He has no open flesh. Not an inch of real pigment. No shine of plain sweat to commiserate with. I can't look straight on, but I feel his eyes beam, caged and frenetic.

I rest my hand on a table statue of a fisherman with a bent spine. I move on to a black ashtray with yellow lettering; "*Belle Of Baton Rouge Riverboat Card Room*." I linger. He bleats out, "You want that one?" He hunches and lurks five feet away consistently. I answer to his boots, "No, no thanks." He floats a fragile nightstand up and away from a throng of loveseats.

I know why he's here. Clearly, drugs and heartache have obliterated his brain, now dried metal. He feels closeness from what's left behind by strangers. He lives for objects left by "almost people." The ghosts that hover on the ceiling are his family. Yes, someone tossed him in a wastebasket before his first teeth came in. As a child, I see him wait hungry under a table, ribs popped. Anyone who would get a tatt

like that is mentally off. Maybe he was shoved in a real jail cell for years and the day he got out he made his own bars with the ink. Maybe arrested for squeezing a pure, clean throat.

He starts to pepper me with points and chats. "If ya like meat, a portable smokehouse just came in." "Be careful--that vase has a hole!" His nervous system radiates and affects the entire room. I sense ripe anger. A pink shame lying in wait. I'm quiet.

He shifts furniture away from my advancing feet. When he turns, I steal shots of the bright lines around his eyes. I spot the way it wafts right up to his tender ear tips. He doesn't wear body art well. His bones are too sharp. He must have been really conked out for that needle to finish. I glance across the crap-pond to re-boot my secret opinions. I don't see a thing for my wall.

I don't like to surrender to stuff. I surrender to people. I absorb easy truths from bodies in public; that person isn't friendly, this person is sweet, that man looks rude, or that clique chats stupid. A casual grimace or a dirty look in traffic; all seep right under my open skin. But when people disappoint me, I take care of them. I give myself over to this irony. People hook me with their worthy problems, their nagging neediness, their demands for praise, their right to abandon humility, their need to constantly outdo every other person. They suck marrow from the heart of my patience. *We're pack animals, yet we separate ourselves with utter perfection.* And what would spill out of him if I were imprisoned in this room? *What rotten selfishness from this ruined ink man would I have to drink in?*

He pitches an embroidered stool to a patch of bald floor, just to clear space for my now-fading hunt. *Sir, you're working much too hard.* His green shorts tent on his sharp hips. Black Doc Martens, loose on his stick shift ankles, are scuffed from kicking too many sofas. I try to bop nonchalant through a mirage of cigar smoke. I'm ready to bolt through the glass doors.

I twist around to the exit. I'm mixed up between a hard deck of framed paintings and a stack of coffee tables. *Ahoy…!* I see a soft orange flash about a foot and a half from my sneaker. It's a painting, about

16 x 20. The schema beams like an ignored testament page: *The Responsible Woman*; is penciled on the backside paper. With freshened wonder I heave it up. The sudden success makes my head crane, without a hitch, to see him. I could never look otherwise, *but I do look at him now.*

"Oh, that one!" he reveals the sides of his teeth. Then, he smiles broad. He stands a half an arms length away; the crappy wheat carpet underneath us. As if in the harmony of a predestined appointment, together, we fall into the wood frame. We see her tiny candle, a shimmering dot of light, as she flies wingless, burdened with responsibility told by holey pots and pans that swing heavy, hooked to her dress. She clanks herself into deep space, into the abyss of a black loveless night.

His long, first finger points to a carved initial "U" on the frame. He stares evenly into my face, and his eyes sizzle, high and clear. Now, he stands so close; no word said. I am suddenly embarrassed. In a wave, I understand he's much more than what my brilliant mind calculated between scene and assumption. Then, as if to drive it all the way home; his hand scans the wood and oils like a magi; like he's reads the picture through the heart of his palm. He breathes inward and peruses. He absorbs an equation, a quantum parable, a meeting of hair, breath, flesh, motion, and canvas and then, to me. In a flash, his grey orbs flicker insight, spun from his lively inner sun cued by intelligence and life. I see he creates connections I don't understand; connections coiled at the end of his worthy impulses. I thought I knew him; nearly his every inch-- just like the ink. But his real history is undiscovered--especially by me.

Through the lines of ink, he lives in this room, this big block of dust. And beyond my hidden lies of his buckshot past, he knows what is true. I see now, that he knows very well. He knows I'm a martyr because it's right here on the canvas. Who else would want this work? And how I tried to cover him up with slurs, my slander. *Who the hell do I think I am?*

So now, I am far less. I am not an educated avoider of others, not one who understands anyone or anything at all. I am the one who's starved. I wait hungry under tables. Now both of us at eye level, the ink spills away clean --to a small, bright, ginger colored boy. He smiles even wider, "You want this one?"

The End

Here's some speculative fiction…

PsychoPomp

Body Dysmorphia:

"Pathological preoccupation with an imagined or slight physical defect of one's body to the point of causing significant stress or behavioral impairment in several areas (as work and personal relationships)" --Merriam-Webster Medical Dictionary

Isaac Ganny, a six foot-two, red-freckled-butcher by-trade, loped around his house oblivious to the neighbor's eyes. The row of tight brick facades, like a gauntlet to their stoop, housed mostly young families with only numb interest to the next lot. He'd run outside to try and kill himself this morning. He had the knife, but didn't. It wobbled in his pocket, his fist not owning the handle. Isaac, in full surrender to his internal drive, kept both eyes stuck to his boots as he spanned the yard crushing his

wife's flower bed, mostly miniature daisies. Half-awake through the night, his ruminations were a solid bank of agony, but now, even in the morning light, his mind blocked the tiniest fragment of relief. He felt odd irony as he squished through the mud and grass; he noticed his thoughts pulsed electrically- each one, mercurial to death. Yet a death, of some sort, is what he most deeply pined for.

Something needed to die …was it the body… ? Or… only his nose? Like it or not, he smelled everything—*every thing*—individually-- in each and every micro pocket in a 4.8-acre radius. He smelled the dirt underneath the roots of celery, he smelled the folds of an unwashed torso next door, the sweat behind the knee of a panty-hosed leg. He never could tolerate the oily smell of the highway behind their house and he loathed colognes and perfumes. The way his nose changed shape and potency, every day, with not a tiniest squeak of warning, was what he couldn't tolerate. His nose grew heavy, peeled, chaffed, and shrunk, exhaustively, against his shredded will. So, around and around his brain and his boots took him robotically, not stopping for a second, unable to choose the kind of death he really needed. But there was a tiny strand of a thought, that flitted in his inner vision like a membrane that could tear so easily, that he, Isaac, was really, most certainly-- *terribly magnificent.*

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New Baby Isaac screamed straight through the night. The mama, a mother so young, barely 15, wished she could've shoved him out of her, weeks before her labor, with all the grunt she could muster. She might have flushed him right down the toilet! But she decided to have him—it didn't matter what the crazy meanies at school said, she didn't care either way. Isaac came out with a colic so shrill it sported a visible sheen of bright purple. She figured his screams were torture due for the shame of getting knocked up. Isaac's dad was a no-good-icky-nick, not a valuable father at all. He'd taken her
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behind a shed after inhaling four angel dust bongs. She couldn't remember his eyes, only his dull red bangs swinging across his forehead. And--that he smelled strange--like a rotting candle. So sensitive to aromas, she couldn't stand anything pungent, or too human- and this made motherhood rough. Diapers, digested baby food, blasts of gas, the list was overwhelming with what she had to inhale these days.

Isaac's shrieks piped through his little throat from all the Hells on earth, all the bad places where terror points itself to grow. Here was her little bun from the oven. Isaac *almost* frightened her, but not quite. Mostly, as a mother, she was angry about her lot. She knew the baby also sensed her shame. Ashamed for having sex, ashamed for being female, ashamed for hauling Isaac inside her belly, plodding around the school hallways –her stomach tight as a tether ball -- and ashamed for actually having him. One-Time-dad really did smell like a turned fruity candle, oddly foreign—like holidays and vomit. With no surprise to her, Baby Isaac wailed into the atmosphere with a shock of hair color one could only name--*violent carrot*.

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In the split of a split second, Isaac's wife Wren, noticed their little white fence's perfection appeared sinister; mocking the blade's flash. And she thought it was the right thing for a wife to do; she *should* chase him round and round the house. But she lagged, never wanting to catch up. The point shot straight up—a utensil sharp and ready for cruelty. The thick vinyl handle swayed loose in the pocket of his tan cargo shorts while the sweet, darling pickets outlined Isaac's special circus. The knife waggled as he paced and wept, back and forth, hairy cheeks hot with tears and snot. He dodged her lunges repeatedly; his bride of twenty years. He couldn't let the knife point down or his pocket would slice open--then likely slice his leg. He ran from her outstretched arms; her nails sparkling lilac; as she trailed his heels past the house's siding.
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He was almost eight, two days before Jesus's birthday, and it wasn't the first time he'd knocked over the Christmas tree. This time, though, Isaac did it out of pure hate—like a milkshake made of a single, thick thing. He rode his Big Wheel in circles on the carpet, building up speed. He couldn't control his mother but he'd control that tree. He'd make the tree pay. Even though there was popcorn strands on it, and gifts below waiting like magnets, he worked up steam and knocked it over.

Worst: it made the room smell unfairly sweet.

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Suicide Morning, as Wren came to name it, had begun indoors. Isaac crumpled embryonically next to the fridge when he smelled a rogue bacteria in the back of a passerby's throat combined with a streak of perfumed soap next door. The claustrophobia from his nasal prison converged so profoundly, his skeleton seemed to evaporate. Wren was pouring water into a dehumidifier, he needed at least six churning, throughout the rooms, here and there, to control imagined chaffing around his nostrils. Right before he melted on the floor, a second before, he'd been quiet as snow when he produced a pan for breakfast. In the next second when he lost control, she nearly crumpled herself at the sight of him. Then, Isaac shot to his feet with a bonsai scream to grab the biggest one from the kitchen block meant to vivisection huge flanks. *Butchers have connections!* he thought, as he bolted out the back door.

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Isaac, felt his psychosis launch, bit by bit, way after they were married. His various obsessions escalated to the absurd, over the years; needing to sit in a particular seat away from the smell of particular people, buying hard-to-find scentless products, carrying wads of tissues and ointments in a small leather satchel. His terrible magnificence unfolded, layer by layer, until that innocent, perfectly
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fine thing that most everyone has, that life-enhancing-antennae, that sculpture of cartilage, that vacuum of the face, utterly consumed him. His conk unleashed, running amuck, the two, large, masculine fleshy tunnels that held unfathomable control over him; his shnoz, his smeller, his honkadoo. Body dysmorphia lived like a sandworm in Isaac's brain. He was absolutely handsome; a Viking prototype. No one but lab-coats believed it when Wren would share their secret; "His nose?" All normal-nosed people scoffed. Then, they'd pull their own knife: they'd laugh. *Laugh!* These hacks understood nothing. The truth was, especially as Wren saw it, Isaac's nose always looked perfectly fine.

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Leaving the airport at midnight, Isaac smacked Wren's thigh so hard she thought her femur went dark blue the next second. They'd rented a car and his nasal wiring wouldn't do strange cities or the smell of a brand new Ford Fairlane. Moreover, he declared that the famous "Archway to the West" had an unbearable odor. They were in Saint Louis to visit her cousin. She cursed herself for letting him drive in an unfamiliar environment. She noticed his worse explosions came just after his face turned stone-like; his eyes would go nearly yellow, like Yosemite granite. This occasion was very bad because he'd hit her so hard. He'd taken the wrong exit after the airport and Wren simply pointed to the map. Without a hint, his entire body hurled a spiritual invoice at her.

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His mother left him at school for hours. He waited in the circular drive sitting like a dumb dope. And that morning, she burnt toast and made the entire apartment smell like smoke. It mixed with her sharp perfume, making her a walking, flowery fireplace. He would throw the cheese sandwiches she made him under his bed, just so she might ask, one day, about the rotting smell. "Isaac, what's that smell in your room?" "I dunno," and next, he looked so forward to saying, "maybe it's your perfume."

Each morning, his mama took flight--like a tough, urban-fairy--so adept in her high heels. So young and ambitious, polyester scarves to the wind, always grasping at things very far from Isaac.

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With the biggest knife, Isaac bolted through the backscreen door and kept the thing straight up in his pocket as a threat to himself. All at once, yet one by one, he smelled a million off-putting aromas has he ran; wet cocker spaniel fur, a drop of fresh oil in a door hinge two houses down, sugarless gum stuck to the lining of a nearby glovebox. But his high theater, this display, was merely unchained self spite--an imploded hatred that woke a new force of punishment. An over the top distraction to claustrophobia of the very worst kind; invisible, unnamable, that overtook him. His thoughts inflated like a toxic spirochete and propelled his shell, the form that he despised, around and around the yard. That was when Wren thought she *should* chase him. But she could never sneak up on him. He always smelled her coming.

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Twenty-two years ago, Wren leaned into the slanted glass, smiling. *It's always nice to flirt with a handsome, red-haired butcher*, she thought. She pointed at a row of thin sliced wild boar with raw, pink centers, selecting the one easiest to his reach. "Just one?" Isaac asked, fishing back at her life situation. "Yeah, just one." She grinned, noting the devilish curl to his lips. That day, he closed shop and followed Wren's scent for 11 short blocks till he smelled her through the door of a coffee house. As she lifted her eyes from a whip of white foam, street gazing from a stool by the window, Isaac popped by her side. He flashed there, as though made of ethereal pixels, like he'd sprung from a glistening film. Isaac loved the art surprise; it was a quality natural to his kinetic flair. His mind always tightly wired, distracted, impulsive, motored up. So what if his particular suit is a bloody apron most

hours of the day? Wren knew she couldn't ever do any better. That day, he told her he loved the smell of meat.

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Isaac went crazy when mama put albums on the stereo; they'd twist and jerk and mama looked so neat. Her hair like a mermaid's; so suave and silky. His twelve-year-old chest moving side to side, laughing, as she went bananas to the beat. Isaac couldn't picture life away from her. A fantastic mama, so young, so beautiful.

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It wasn't long into the relationship, as exciting as Isaac could be; like covering her car in roses on their six-month anniversary, that Wren noticed how Isaac, here and there, presented her with *spiritual bills* of sorts, or really: *energetic invoices*. She paid a bottom line; small alms of undetectable sweat. He thrilled her with wit and excitement but balances came due when she least expected. The invoices were steep in the worst moments; paying dearly as the days unfolded, absorbing his terrible rants, his indulgent stories, his over dramatized sensitivities, his criticisms of silly things she did. And sweet Jesus, all the scents his brain dissected. Wren knew he had a kind of genius, like a tiny patch of velvet in his brain, but his self-possession, his arrogance, would rob the atmosphere, steal her mind and breath, like they were just nothing. Something, she sensed, lived inside him not rightly genetic. Whatever captured Isaac's ego, his sense of self-image, came from some other place.

Actually--Isaac has a shocking lack of wastebaskets inside his soul, she thought.

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The episode went twelve minutes before she thought to call 911. He ran out the back and bolted toward the highway. After that, he streaked down the side strip from the back yard to the front. He tripped and fell trying to grasp the knife out of the bottom of the ground level bird bath so she rode his
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bare back, leaving long, red scratches. Isaac's 48-year-old back side, wide and muscular, juiced from adrenalin. Wren's five-foot frame couldn't begin to control his arms--let alone his mass. Her hands slid off his flesh, as he raced to climb over the furthest fence to face the noisy highway that sullied their home. Furious; he lost the nerve for a swan dive into traffic to let the soccer moms and truckers, with bread and soda in their haul, kill him dead. *Leave this shit on their shoulders.* But his gut was void of umph. Isaac stood on the rim just yelling, and insisting, to the blurry gods of the highway, that he'd do it. His vanity, his Terrible Magnificence was but a blip, a directionless insect in the made-up fold of his mind map. It wasn't a real thing that would ever begin to rescue him now.

Barefoot, in her Japanese robe, Wren chased him to the ridge but couldn't reach him through the wild branch. She felt the briars and reeds scratch up her calves while curdled pleas shot from the roots of her lungs, "Come back here! Isaac, stop! You cannot do this!" Pale with shock, she stared, wiping her forehead, hating him for putting her through this but saving him fiercely. Wren couldn't fathom how this all exploded now—literally-- from his nose, *his nose!*—the knife, the desperation, the conversations that led right to this second. Because what no one understood --as it was so darkly hilarious-- was that Isaac's nose wasn't only for smells, not just for mindless exhalations. No. Isaac's nose was a big, holy-Jesus problem. Soon, it was the next moment by the white picket fence, as he and the shiv strode to and fro the front patio steps, that the cops arrived. "No!" Isaac screamed, "I hate the smell of police!" With an ambulance almost hooked to their bumper, Wren knew he had not a dot of sanity left to spend in the outside world. Not to mention, there was the social rejection Isaac insisted occurred continuously—but Wren never saw it, not once.

Three years before Isaac's suicide dawning, the constant fear began; sure his nose and face were falling apart, molting like a desert rattler. Wren supported them both from then on. He

sold his meat shop, unable to focus on people's dinners. His real, regular, harmless nose—the one everyone saw—became a leaking cork to every thought in his head. He swore all people, everywhere, saw him with this mangled distortion, this cyclops on his otherwise perfect face. His olfactory gained rapidly, now weighing, he told Wren, at least six pounds. He swore profusely, till a blue vein ripped across his forehead, that people were embarrassed and would show it by twitching nervously, holding their Adam's Apple, swiping their noses, in ways unimaginably related. He'd smell the collective emanation of a particular musk—the smell of human repulsion. Whatever people did, Isaac owned as his true mirror. If they didn't do it, he'd concoct a response. He watched people stare at him when he carried groceries, walked across lobbies, or fidgeted at the DMV. Isaac's nose became the center of every black hole. He knew they spotted the tiny microbes of skin coming off, or the swelling; he swore his nose was expanding, layer by layer, and that they judged him in the worst way. "See that lady?" he'd say as Wren eased their truck back home to safety, after Isaac's internal lava flowed silently in the grocery aisles, "She twitched her lips by the bakery counter. She reacted to my nose." Wren diagnosed her husband *cosmetically psychotic*. He knew his nostrils could house two Buicks, a toll booth could operate behind his teeth, and the celestial purpose of his nose was to be a two-lane monstrosity, to categorize every bug, bird, and soul, every food, disease, invention, reaction, feeling, chemical label, in the ever-expanding cosmos. *So terribly magnificent, like two Holy Holland Tunnels, side by side, rightly and simply, performing their Divine Vocation.*

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"Jesus, no!" Wren'd say--first with total surprise, then a rotted, crushed feeling--because his crazy-nut-words choked her now, "Isaac, there's nothing happening…no thing…nothing. You're perfectly beautiful!" But their bandied debates were nothing to the coming caldera; his
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sunrise blast with the blade. He'd smell the macabre odors of dreamt up daemons, foods that hadn't been cooked yet, or an old can of athlete's foot spray. Then the fantasy red rashing, starting from the tip to the base, would come. He tried every minute he could to initiate her into his nasal cult, trying to get her commitment that it was all real, or using her as a mirror when her guard was down—maybe right before they'd head into a building downtown; "How does it look now? Do I look alright?" A therapist, behind a busy clipboard, averred, "No safety behaviors. You should never ask Wren anything about your nose. No applying ointments more than once a day. You need to rely on a new logic about who you are as a human being." Back when they first met, it was never like this. The worm in Isaac's skull became more and more magnificent. Certainly more terrible.

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Shopping for creams and ointments, Isaac would squat, roosting in Walgreen's 4-B aisle telling Wren he would just "…*run in.*" An hour and fifteen minutes passed, and he'd walk to the cash register with a basket of five different tubes, gels, and lotions; some "old school" variety insisting they didn't work but buying them over and over again, maybe a quart of pressed olive oil, and a cluster of "organic" creams with a conspiracy of ingredients that he claimed only made his nose peel more. But into the wire basket they'd flip, to recycle once again. The worm in his brain wanted him to try and fail, try and fail, over and over and over. It was his church, his sacred self-care, this hour-plus-crossed-leg-perusal, there, on the drugstore linoleum.

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The cops chuckled at Wren's report. They strode past the white picket fence to a quieted Isaac, now a burrito in a blanket, indoors. She explained the knife had zero to do with drug use, and told them about his *nose.* "It's body dysmorphia. Do you know what that is?" she plowed

onward, invoking a weak sense of Zen. Medics funneled Isaac--now a white-linen'd mummy--into the ambulance. And now, the neighbors ogled.

After a stay in the psyche ward, three days after the white-picket-circus, they drove him to the crewcut grass of a nearby behavioral center. The brick building was forewarning to the more enormous incarcerations for the mentally ravaged; the unusable savants, the lost-but-good-unfixable-ones. Wren wondered if they'd chosen this property because it was on Morningside Street—*morningside*, such a cheery, hopeful thought for people with dysphoric ideations. Not much here to prop up even a tiny degree of terrible magnificence.

It was here she'd look kindly into her husband's eyes and count all the ways she'd given and waited, all the ways drama whipped out of him and was so absent-mindedly encouraged, his overblown, preposterous sense of self, his magnetic gravitas, his way of exacting payment from her when she craved love. But she'd dutifully filled dehumidifiers to the plastic line, and morphed into his flesh made mirror. Blame made her drive to the square-cut grass of doctors, to see him now. It couldn't possibly be love. Isaac shuffled toward her in paper slippers and a hospital gown. Three little bows down his wide, freckled back. Tears ran into her throat. She looked out the window and blew her nose. As she folded the tissue and put in her purse, she felt genuine relief from the pressure behind her eyes. Such a handy body part, it was.

The End

Lives

In one second, before sixteen summers together passed, I realized how my then-groom carried a dry arroyo inside him. I found out he was dry of love when I'd just thrown some sandwiches together. He and his grandmother were sitting on the sundeck talking about some detail of how we'd spend the rest of the day. I'd noticed plenty of hitches between us, but it became my happy work to cover them up. And in all our moments strung together, I didn't fathom how he couldn't, didn't, and never would really love me. His love had been something I thought I controlled but now realized, I never did and never would.

My father had just passed away and I was raked with grief. My new groom hadn't been too expressive about what I might be feeling, but I figured when we flew down south for the funeral in a few days, he would find a way to tell me how sorry he was. My father was a beautiful person, on a million different levels, and I was certain it was deeply understood how devastated I felt. But I knew my feelings weren't always understood.

In the early days, our dates were fresh with flashy restaurants and his motorcycle rushed us to and fro like a Hollywood film. I figured if I wore a cute hat (he loved hats) or said a joke that made me look less smart, this would help propel our relationship squarely into bliss and newness. Like the unveiling of a thrill to be experienced, I saw our love no differently than biting into a little square of chocolate and being surprised at what waited mysteriously in the center. I didn't know what that center would be, but I figured if I just said and did the right

things, and didn't take myself too seriously, everything would turn out perfectly. I kept my spirit apart from me like a high balloon, separate and away from my flesh.

So that day on the sundeck, I brought out the sandwiches and asked the groom and his grandma if they wanted lemonade. They did, so I went back to the kitchen. But this time, his grandma got up pretty fast for an eighty- two-year old woman and to my slight surprise, followed close behind me. I thought she just wanted to help carry the glasses but I felt a kind of secretive energy as I heard her nylons swish. I sensed she wanted to tell me something. I didn't know her very well but she was staying with us for the week and it felt good to have another female around. Whatever she had to say couldn't be too momentous because groom was on the deck, waiting for lemonade.

She and I strode to the refrigerator door and I reached in and turned to her with the big, wet glass pitcher in my hands. Next, her face changed to a kind of light violet, sort of red. I looked around at the counters and a flash of concern washed over me because the groom had a thing about counters and I thought maybe she did too. The counters had to be so clean that if you had to perform surgery on them, no one could pick up a staff infection. The chrome on the sink also had to gleam just right, as if God's ray visited specifically to show the religion of sterility against the morning light. When we'd moved in, I'd used the wrong cleanser on the chrome and he'd gotten so mad and said I should go out and get jeweler's polish to try and sand away hairline scratches I'd made in my scrubbing-haste. I couldn't see them, at all.

It was little things; small details that seemed to get to the groom. Things most people didn't even notice. But I felt so compelled to jump through his daily hoops like a circus animal—and a part of me almost liked it. I wanted the treat, or the mystery inside the candy, which I knew I'd surely harvest on the other side of all my contrived obligation, one stunning day.

Anyway, standing in the kitchen, I turned to his grandma, and feeling slight nerves, I felt the pitcher slip a little in my hands. It was a strange, unstable second, as the bulb of the fridge illuminated her face over my waist and shoulder. The artificial beam glanced against her engine red lipstick. Then, with a whisper that sounded more like a hurricane, she said, "I'm so sorry about your father. I don't understand why he won't go to the funeral. I tried to tell him as a husband, he just has to. But, he says he's going sailing with that friend of his. I think that's awful." The kitchen counters, the lemonade, her nyloned legs and downcast eyes, and then the entire house, vanished. I only saw a pair of bright lips, moving.

The End

Speculative Fiction:

An Errand Of Unsettling Proportions

Where is the riskiest place on our planet?

I'll tell you where it is.

The Ladies Room at Home Depot.

I'd been lightly trotting aisle to aisle trying to look for a quarter inch of something I fervently hope I require. Then without warning, with my grey matter abandoned in the parking lot, the body, my body, this body, turns itself from the pointy shapes and uber tough plastic to hit the ladies room. I float now, my feet have become something else. They are chemically changed. They have mutated from crouching in a heel to rear pose. Yet, I nearly pirouette down a dull, white hallway, made a right turn, 2nd door on the left, and enter this mercurial –(because the goal is to leave as quickly as possible)—nadir, where typically only the most mundane of events goes down. But a sprinkling of supernatural science introduced itself to me, at these coordinates, last Thursday at around 4:56pm.

One moment, I imagine I'm inside the third stall from the right, the next —*I'm not*.

With not another lady banging around, the place is totally empty except for *what used to be me.*

The third stall in the ladies room at the Home Depot is in reality—a threshold—a sucking, trans-mutative waveform of possibility-- in the time space continuum! Cheap toilet paper notwithstanding.

Wondering where I am -- and frantic doesn't begin to describe my mental state-- this "me" darts out of the now wavering toilet stable. As soon as I'm in the outer space of the restroom the mirrors melt off the shaking walls so I'm standing next to "up in the air" plumbing. I wave my

missing hands at the sensor on the basin. Why I care if my disappeared hands are clean is the first of many un-explainables. But not one drop springs forth. Maybe a lemon faucet—but, no water springs from any of the six sinks. Should I call a Home Depot specialist to come in and tighten something—like my sanity? These virtuous, aproned-beings appear to be handy. Yet, due to my lack of self-- I don't give the absence of water any credence. As a mom with a stroller pushes in, the whole scene normalizes, except my own visibility. I am invisible. Knowing a bit about metaphysics I know fear breeds more fear, so I decide to put any feelings of an internal melt down, shakily, on hold. I refuse to feel afraid—as *yet.* Maybe I lost consciousness and I am under a tree somewhere, dreaming. In this bizarre state of awareness, I haul my newly erased self—quickly-- through the flapping door. Only the baby sees me. I read his lips. I think he quotes Decartes.

"I" –whatever that is now-- skulks over to a row of fake kitchens, to peer sheepishly into some suspended stainless steel, over an oven. I aim to gawk back at my two terrified eyes, but I soon note they are totally non existent. Earlier, my original "me" arrived in the parking lot sporting a lime colored top —but not one thread presents to the world now.

My heart begins to pound, in what apparently was, my chest. Where the hell am I? Where's my bra? My wedding ring? *My Liver?* Is my epidermis captured somewhere in the store—squished inside an industrial tube of electrician's ointment? Or is my essence wrapped in a flattened paper box down some ether-sucking aisle, and my physical shell swallowed somewhere in this matrix of planks and mailboxes?? Are parts of me in many mailboxes? No one sees who I am, no one looks my way—only that ladies room baby 1.7 minutes ago. I look in the direction of my dissolved hands --they feel alive ---but not in the fleshy sense.

To the eyeball, they're just gone-o.

In spite of this new and shifting gone-ness I begin to feel round and rubbery. Am I turning into something? Is this store cobbling me within a mystical vortex brought on by the congealed inspiration of millions of do-it-yourself projects? **I** believe I've changed into some sort of *item —but why and for what purpose*?

Quickly: I transfigure into an invisible rubber sphere. Am I some sort of shock absorber? A holographic plumb bob? An intellectual weather balloon? Am I available for purchase and *will I re-appear when someone shops for me??* In spite of reeling from trauma and wistful psychosis, I can *fly*! So I push off from a gorgeous dishwasher and set sail.

I maneuver fast and *skillfully*-- gliding past designer outlet covers and *Yes, We're Open!* signage. I swirl my formless form into a snazzy shower stall. Why? No reason whatsoever. I bounce high under the ceiling fans and slither low through big shovels in the "dig a hole" section. I hover in a high corner and spot a herd of vacuums — not a shred of enlightenment here. Soaring numbly, I weave through potted plants and nuzzle a set of tough patio cushions. I soar beyond industrial cleansers and thread masterfully between a grove of aluminum pipes.

After a sizable chunk of timeless time, I start to feel more and more numb and even more rubbery. Have I become the official bladder to the store? Is it my role to process consumers' fluids? I grasp for some tiny degree of identity! But really, don't most souls *grasp at some unsolvable mystery* in Home Depot? For some wrench, prong, tweezer, for some *thing* they haven't the first idea how to use…? Just a side thought. Whatever!

Mouthless, I yawn bitterly as I levitate past a long phrase of flaccid, self important tarps. They really think they have all the answers with their "just cover it up" thing.

Soon, I hear the collective sea of products mock me with voiceless voices.

Look at her! She's one of us now!

Without a real target of revenge in my chemically transformed heart, I start to rage through the aisles. I push baseball hats off bald heads. I sideswipe leather pouched contractors and fly between arguing couples, giving my two cents; “Stop being such an ass!” Dimensions of drywall zip by as I speed past batteries and paint samples. An army of barbeques—pulling duty by the front entrance-- blatantly refuse to help me. They scream that it’s *me* who should help *them*! Mustering a clump of digits from my side haunch, really more of a fin, I try to flip them off. I notice a bar code emerging on my wavy roundness. This development feels both freaky and scratchy, so to self-soothe, I casually flop over to the cash register candy. Despondently, I realize sugar fixes are utterly useless now. I may as well eyeball the Liquid Nail display with the same note of desire! And just like the candy, I’m a frivolous object. In fact, Liquid Nails now holds a distinguished seniority over me—at least Liquid Nails has a job, a *raison-d’etre*.

I shove my still transparent rubberiness through the electric doors and decide to float around a stack of bagged peat moss. I try to network; “Howdy gang.” Of course, the lazy bastards whisper that I shouldn’t be allowed to fly. Perfecting flips and summer salts over the parking lot for at least 4 hours, I forget what I originally came for that day. Am I supposed to wait for a team of inventory clerks? What do I deeply desire from this profound mash of make your life better via this zany bottomless wormhole of gadgetry? Not a single thing here will permanently repair the dry sucking in my rubbery spine, make sturdy my internal cardboard display of false happiness, or conceal the canyon now posturing as my heart.

As fast as it began, my parallel life as a piece of invisible rubber sphere is now succinctly actualized. I not only see that I’m connected to everything in this universe, but I feel it --on a much grander, yes, more chewy spectrum. I ‘spose the rubber detail meant to delineate some sort of “boundaries are an illusion” thing. However, just because we’re connected to “whatever” or

"whoever" doesn't mean we have to buy it, nail it, shove it, power wash it, or marry it. *And do we launch these efforts for the right reasons? Why* do we fix, mend, repair, and marry? Of course we should replace the flaky caulk if it's upsetting us but….can't we go to a much smaller store to get it?

Next to a parking lot lamp, my old self reappears – naked-- wearing only my wedding ring. But no one notices my flesh—not even the ladies room baby now deeply absorbed in a Three Muskateers bar. Good it's not a pack of Liquid N's.

I try to shed a tear again--but like the high tech Ladies sink, nothing springs out. Another me, somewhere else, is tearstained, slamming head to fist, writhing embryonically, flailing crazy in my own juices. This "me" gets in my car. My cells begin to regroup. My skin softens, my eyes drink in the flat colors of the strip mall, and my lungs re-inflate. I am wide awake now. I drive my quantum-ness, with all it's uninstalled, unhardened, and unfixed lessons, back home.

The End

(Adult fairy Tale)

Truly Good Sterling

Fully dressed, he lies on a faded pink bedspread, legs crossed at the ankles. A trio of ceiling bulbs cast a scuzzy glow over the two-bit motel room. The brim of his sable Stetson hat lops down, over his eyes. Time to meet a man-witch, why don't you. You could use a 'nick of his name such as Truly or Truly Good, sometimes Sterling. But never Good. In his rattler-tight boots, vertically six foot six, Truly G sports a thick, brown moustache atop his wide-slung jaw, which houses four additional back molars than you and I enjoy. Truly Good Sterling is

meticulous with the care of his teeth, and will park his car by the side of the road to floss with thick thread, swish with plain alcohol, then he'll brush to a vinegar shine.

He lives to drive and drives to sell. Leaving the roadside flop, he drops off his key, then his windshield is a frame to his private tragedy. The road ahead will never end. His wares-to-sell travel in a cherrywood case with a generous leather-bound handle on the backseat of his '66 Corvette. If you posit his merch to be forks and knives, you are warm, but not there quite. Truly Good Sterling is a bones trader. *One who never-not comes out ahead*. And Truly Good's trades consist of *one thing, and one thing which are many*. It, and they, lay hard and clean, inside the black velvet-lined case, there, on the seat behind him.

His brain, really more of an antenna under his dark, receding hairline, receives signals. When to slap cologne, when to roll east or south, book a cheap room, or the exact hour to pull over and polish—either his merch or his choppers. He is not his own master, no. Truly is driven by a deep, riling hunger to which his antennae is linked up. Truly Good Sterling, in his triple stitched, too-dark-for-summer Western shirt, is one-single thing at both his worst and best. T.G. S. is a hardcore, balls-to-the-wind salesman.

Truly S. steadies his white, larger-than-normal steering wheel with easy finger notches in full surround. He, with turquoise on all fingers, unflinchingly bullets at 93 mph. His hard-creased eyes squint down the highway. His eyes are slits that gate-keep all the little details about you and me. His antennae-sight is far reaching, to anyone he needs to peer over at, and upon.

As he makes his way, the mean lemon sun seems to liquify the four whitewalls on each Corvette tire to a working, rolling nectar. The sun, unbearably bright, and mostly ubiquitous like Truly himself, blasts the whole damn dealio with a near blinding glare. Sterling only need press the gas with a tip of his boot-point to make the Corvette charge like a panther. He drives like he

were angry at the road, as though it were his personal, petulant sash. But he spins ever-forward, with the four beautiful licorice tires churning below Truly Good's own wire lankness. His bones are likened to pipe cleaner; he can stretch, bend, and wrap to move or meld to any surface or situation--on this plane of existence or the next. This you will soon negotiate on your own.

The Man-Witch's machine, meaning his entire enterprise, aims for the miserable shack of a young widow. She is not older than twenty-five but appears to be sixty. Ravaged by deep loss, she awoke suddenly last night, not knowing why. She waits without knowing she waits. When the hot sun rose, she dressed in a thin robe and positioned herself in front of her torn screen door. Her chicken brain, having turned that way since the loss of her parents and husband from poisoned water—oddly, it did not affect her—doesn't comprehend the man-witch will be coming soon. But the deeper mind inside her physical structure knows it. The network of bones, her scaffolding, that holds her body curved and slumped know it. The inner network of her bones, with all its messy preciseness, is what Truly Good Sterling aims his entire undertaking, straight for.

Fact in point, a cloud cover of Truly Good Sterling's cologne arrives a good twenty minutes before he does. Truly G. sweets up the air all around her, long before the widow spies him on the road. Before Truly has even turned on the turnpike that bends to her lonely house, she smells and feels something ethereal encroach her half acre property. The molecules that compose the air are something so magnetic, she can't even name what the they now are. A transparent rain? The lime-y, slappy wafts, as she stares out at the far away road, feel like a transluscent silk; the kind you'd see on the most expensive, fanciest chair in someone's rich Aunt's house, who has since her death, donated it to a museum. The rarest rare invisible textile there is, consumes

the atmosphere around her, only to be likened to an upholstery of some anonymous, dead, rich aunt. Death is something the young widow knows well.

To the widow's unsharp, grey eye, the man-witch is a distant dot on the way-distant, near-by road. But soon, she sees Truly's Cadillac wrapped in an enormous mink stole of dust. As the network of bones inside the young widow instinctively begin to shake, the lower half of her face slackens. Truly Good Sterling is heralded by the bluster of dirt--yet another layer, besides his cologne, to settle all around her tilted house. She's stuck in an atmosphere of dusty, limey satin. Now, at fast-last, Truly Good Sterling's white wall tires slide to a perfect champagne stop.

One Diamond Rattler boot gives a swing beneath the car door slowly, then the other lowers. The young widow thinks she has taken a standing nap for fifteen seconds at least, because next, she sees Truly's mustache and teeth appear directly in front of her. His pipe cleaner bones whisked him there, like a whooshing winged eel. So quick, a normal mortal eye could never comprehend the shrinking and expanding of his size and swiftness. In the next second, he slides into the house, but again, she doesn't catch glimpse of this, at all. In the midst of her stupor, he already sits with his long, denim legs crossed on the sofa, waiting for the cup of coffee the young widow is silently told by a voice beneath her hair, to bring him. T. Sterling likes it woody with a dash of Pine Sol--yes, the floor cleanser.

The young widow is simpering now, as she scuttles from sofa to kitch to kettle, and back again, not saying a word. She feels as though she is caught in the sumptuous silk of Truly's glow that came from the air outside; like a small buglet wrapped in his atmospheric threads. She no longer cares about life, due to heavy grief, so she rather likes this incapacitation. She pours just a dash of Pine Sol into his cup, *no need to stir*, his brain throws the message from the sofa. She

trots like a new born fawn, wobble-legged and sniffing, down next to him, where he pats with his turquoise ringed fingers for her to land like an air born bubble.

"What I have is a treasure for you, sweet Junis, sweet Junis." She hadn't told him her name but of course, Junis was it. He holds a knot-knuckled, pipe cleaner-like finger to a single strand of her dark auburn hair, gently placing it behind her ear. Then the finger points to the floor, where the beautiful antique case, locked tight, upright, proud and stable, sits to be opened now, by T. G. Sterling.

He yanks a slurp of brew, sets the chipped cup down on a three legged side table that should have four, and looks into Junis's grey eyeballs as deeply as his pitch black eyes can drill, "Junis, I know your heart has bled a sorrow so rotted with mold it has infected the bones inside you, the bones that have become mildewed themselves, the bones that no longer can hold you up properly to face another day."

"oo-oh." Junis could barely utter, as her throat tightened and wrenched, feeling she was not fit to answer him at all. But she knew she had to say something.

"Yup." She clucks.

The perfect moment is here for the forging of T.G. Sterling's execution, so an overtly bendy arm is swung down to grab the case on the floor. He scoots a few inches back to place the case on the sofa between them, to then pop open the clean silver latch. As he draws open the top cover, a brilliance so extreme fills the room, like that of the lemony sun outside. In a flash, every corner and cobweb within the shack of Junis is bathed in pure, silver light. Truly's silver is so polished that not one crevice on the wares themselves would want for another rub in all the days of Horus or Jesus. Shiningly stunning and perfectly ready, for Truly Good Sterling to render his ultimate selling point. He is now set to crow a pitch from his scruffy liver-heart. Inside the red

velvet-lined case are over two million, zillion, thousand, hundred, silver bones: thoracics, sternums, clavicals, and hyoids, along with all the little bones in your feet. But really, a body only requires 207, grand total.

"My dear lady, my poor, sweet Junis, who has lost all who knew her to sudden death, I offer you fresh stability, new internal ribs, legs, and arms to stand and perform your everyday living. I've come with heavenly bones to hold your lonely eyes upright to become the new overseer upon your future days. I have here new strong replacements to your old, worn out hinges. Just look at your sad, shabby freeloaders that no longer support you, dear woman, they that no longer works, or cares for the skin that wraps you!"

"ooh…" Junis coos slightly smoother this time. "Yup…uh-huh….really?"

"Allow me to plant your life, your smart savvy self, with good bones now. Allow me to take away what you no longer need, allow me to give you what need to stand proudly and walk with the purest form of life, dear Junis." Junis sees the man-witch's moustache slightly shake, and she swears she hears a tiny bell tingle. "Will you allow me to match you with your brand new, ideal, never will mold, snap-on Truly Goods?" …*ting-ting*… The silver bones vibrate now; slightly jangle in their velvet; a muffled clang on top of Truly's voice. The two noises together made Junis's neocortex tingle from front to back. Then, Junis peers back, starting at the top of his brooding eyes that glow over his shining teeth, over his triple stitched western button down collar, down to his eight silver ringed fingers, then to his dark, paint-tight jeans, all connected like a perfect phrase, stretched out from her cream sofa, her eye slid down to his skin tight rattler boots.

"What do I need to do?" Junis, swallows, gathering a few hairs of business sense inside her, and can now produce a working remark.

“All you need do, sweet Junis, is look here.” Truly Good Sterling’s two pipe-cleaner-like fingers point up to his eyes. “…and I look back into yours.” Junis does so, as she has little choice, his enormous moustache is directly in front of her nose, just three inches away, *..ting-ting…she hears the bushy bar over his lip, ring.* “And now--dear Junis, simply repeat my name, over and over.” He’d never uttered his name to her, but the three words were draped in the air all around them. Clearing her silky throat, she began to render a weak, mouse wheel recitation; “*Truly Good Sterling….Truly Good Sterling….Truly Good…..”*

As Junis repeats the Man-Witch’s moniker, a transmutation begins to rattle and unfold. Out from her sides, her own bones began to seep like liquid. Really that, and solid. Out they came, one by one: her humas, ulma, and radius from a bloodless, opening flesh of both her arms. The bones came quickly like an ooze of lumpy milk. Next, turning to a white syrup now, her legs produced from their blood-free sides, tibulas, fibias, and femurs, seemingly liquid—but soon landing solid, all around her. Nearly all of Junis’s bones, in their different forms and weights, seeped onto the floor around the couch, without a superfluous drop of blood or plasma. Her sternum squeezes from her chest and a parade of ribs melt down and outward, like the exhange-currency they are, for Truly Good’s hungry, hidden wallet. Lastly, her feet, with all their many: the tarsal, calcaneus, and talus, came out and about, grouping and gathering, categorizing and cueing, just in the order they should, upon the floor. Junis is now a floppy bag, no longer able to straighten herself.

“Let our exchange begin now, dear Junis.” A slippery kind of rattle sound begins in the velvet lined case, the bones of shine, of brilliant silver, wriggling more, as though excited to fulfill their work. They stand themselves up on end, and Truly Good takes to his feet, standing over them, with his hands on his sides. He looks onto them, watching and maneuvering, with the

beam of his narrowed stare. Each silver bone, with innate puzzle fit intelligence, aligns inside Junis's arms. They flew, like gentle plates, sliding into her chest, and legs. The only bone spared was Junis's head-bone. This one Truly Good has no use for.

"Stand, my dear, and feel inside you, your new structure, your new future!" Junis felt a heaviness, throughout her internal form, akin to a tractor of rocks all clunked up inside her. Unsteady, she held onto the sofa's edge and fell back down: splat. Her first thought, she requires a moment or two to negotiate the weight of the silver. She tries to adjust and stand, but the poundage inside her spreads and lumpens with more and more severity. She now begins to sob, intensely. Truly Good Sterling's condescension starts to swim around her scalp, "That's it…don't resist the silver, the pull of the masses, the true sterling goodness of who you shall be now!" The widow fears she's made a wretched mistake. The silver bones clang inside her as she flops again, over on her side. There on the sofa, she cries, harder than she ever had wept ever-a-day prior.

Now *should be* the moment when Truly Good Sterling should crawl to his hands and knees to scoop her old bones, the ones strewn on the ratty carpet, to callously wag them in his jaws. These bones are his meal, his sanctified supper. He'll masticate to so nourish his innards for another conquest of marrow. The sweet marrow, he had lied to the widow, was as fine and good as a protein could be. His mustache drew saliva has he imagined the first crack into his teeth, to be sent straight to the maw of his gut-wallet. Yes, her marrow was perfectly good, *Truly Good*, as it were. After he does chew the final morsel, his beautiful silver bones inside her will return to their case. The lovely silvers just a temporary trade. They are but gravity weights, to squelch any degree of rebellion and assure passivity of the target's nervous and muscular networks. These Sterlings, will surely fly back from Junis's body and slide hither to their case,

polished and ready, to leave Junis as the deflated hollow bone-bag, that she now be and always was, in Truly's eyes. *Just as Truly draws breath to instigate the return of the silver bones to the case, and to now firstly change to an invisible eel of movement so he may swirl amongst the delectable clatter of her old bones, to so be devoured:* Junis looks up from her sobbing.

As Junis rights her head, her tears begin a chemical change in a most delicate way, yet churning a broth of medicinal potency. Truly knows well of her immediate background of dead and dying family, her isolation, but he has no concept of her ancient lineage. The young widow hails from a family tree of sainted nuns and whose devotion has rung through the halls of Anglo-Saxon convents since the time of Saint Scolastica, from the year 480 A.D. First she and Truly hear a low chord of exultation, then a high one as though the ethereal keys of a pipe organ are right in the kitchen. Then they must be wingless, without form, because the house begins to shake, as does the sofa, and the entire collection of silver bones inside her, and her raw bones that lay around them. The nuns and mystics, mouths agape with chordal choir, summon their resolve to quote exactly the candles of infinite prayers upon the three room shack of Junis: "To the god Mars Thincsus and the two Alaisagae, Beda and Fimmilena, and the divine spirit of the emperor, the German tribesmen from Tuihantis willingly and deservedly fulfill their vow." This precise votive inscription rang without sound, changing the air around them, breaking the spell of Truly Good's cologne.

The tremor so incredible, Truly Good Sterling, rose up from his knees and began to wither like waterless cactus, as though not a drop of other marrows, of customers long past, had ever passed through his mouth. The bones of all his targets ooze out his back molars and his sinus to make his own bone and body wretch in pretzel shapes that have no mortal sense. Too fast to realize, Junis looks down to a small, oily pool of silver on a heap of western style clothes.

Outside, the sun releases a moisture, a bright silver rain that falls and plucks the dry dirt. It pours and pours a silvery juice, while in the house, the original, still worthy, uneaten bones of Junis begin to rearrange themselves. They stand on their ends while the silver bones that had lay so cruel within Junis, start to release and flow in a flight of reversal. A great exchange had been decreed by Junis's anscestors and it is now in full swing. Truly Good's Sterling's transaction is nulled and avoided. Truly Good Sterling's other-dimensional contract materializes, that which Junis mistakenly agreed to, spirals then falls into her flowery wastepaper basket in the corner, like a lifeless leaf. And he lay, now a boiled down reduction resembling a flat, shiny worm on the carpet, by Junis's barefeet. She stands, rights her form, and is three inches taller than she ever has been before.

Junis grabs the silver case handle filled with silver bones, gathers up a smaller suitcase of her favorite things, puts on her most fine pants, boots, and plum suede hat, and slides out the torn screen that whacks the sill behind her. She strides, magnetized, to the now glimmering, opalescent Corvette. Before she pulls the door, she bows her head, with purposeful thanks to her aunts and grandmothers. Junis, the young widow, will soon feel the hot winds of the desert, streak through her dark curls. Her first destination: a pawn-bodega in town that trades silver for cash. Windows down, she presses a dainty heel to metal, a powerfully exultant mélange.

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