

2017

Begin Again

John David Carroll
Bard College

Recommended Citation

Carroll, John David, "Begin Again" (2017). *Senior Projects Fall 2017*. 35.
https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj_f2017/35

This Open Access is brought to you for free and open access by the Bard Undergraduate Senior Projects at Bard Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Senior Projects Fall 2017 by an authorized administrator of Bard Digital Commons. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@bard.edu.

Begin Again

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
Of Bard College

by

John Carroll

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

December 2017

Acknowledgements

To my advisor, Susan Rogers, for her endless patience,
encouragement, and grace.

To my mother, for the wind.

To all my friends, for the rain.

Table of Contents

Francis.....	1
Elizabeth.....	41
Foreman.....	48

Francis

Come to think of it, we all could've seen this coming. Some of us did. Louise always said that (redacted) was out of sorts. Or some expression like that. Usually, when unemployed, which was almost always, (redacted) tied his ankles around a garden stake and his wrists to a wicker rocking chair in his small apartment. It's really a shame the boy spent his first years there. The walls were so white and so near it echoed. The ceiling stained yellow. Large splotches spread from wall to wall the color of a field in Kansas I saw in a photo once. It couldn't have been good for the boy. (redacted) had the kid help him with the knots.

They went down the block to the hardware store every Friday afternoon to pick up more rope. (redacted) wore them through. He tied himself there because it gave him comfort to know he couldn't move even if he wanted to. 'Couldn't get up even if I needed to,' I could hear him saying. Francis carried the rope to the car with it dragging on the ground behind his feet.

Thankfully, the kid wasn't in the apartment when they rolled out of the van to come get his father. Some scar that would've left. Louise had taken him for ice cream, the good aunt and sister that she is.

We didn't know what to tell Francis. But you can see it on him. He knows more than we do even if he doesn't have the words for it. He lived with the man all of his short life.

He'd seen the looks - (redacted)'s long stare. He'd heard the long silences and lived through the lost days. He'd brought the man glasses of water and stood on a stool to tip it into his mouth.

We'd been there too. It started when we were kids. Our father was a hard, distant man who found (redacted)'s sensitivity to be a weakness to be weeded out. (redacted) crumpled under our father's hands.

As his calls became shorter and the visits more infrequent we should have known he'd slipped and asked. Asked if there was a way to bring him back. Lord knows, Louise and I got it too. But, that's beside the point now.

It's a hard thing to understand- how this inherited grief works. It's passed on. There's no

choice in it and each case has a different hue to it. Louise and I got a touch of it. I imagine that most people do. You catch it in the smallest mannerisms. Usually from the parents in their quiet remorse for things they never did but feel connected to. In their removal from the present spent looking for the source. In their eyes that snap back to you and in the moment before it fades out you see the unnamable sadness and the stories of your grandfathers and grandmothers.

The parents who've put a name to this distance and the low hum of grief in their lives try to keep it from their kids. They find hobbies to place it in or at least a place to go when it gets darker. But kids are smart sponges. They know what's up even if they can't put a name to it. So, it persists and it carries on. It lives in the blood and the family history. We've all got a touch of it I think.



Louise, (redacted), and I grew up in Jerome, Arizona. The town always smelled vaguely of stale milk and eucalyptus. We were each born just a year apart. Louise said that mom just wanted to get it over with - the two and a half kids and a house with a white

picket fence and a dog in the yard. Our fence wasn't white, it was left unpainted, and we didn't have a dog so I don't know what she was talking about. Our mother mostly cooked, even when no one was eating. At all hours of the day and night each room in the house smelled like American chop suey, beef stroganoff, and Maverick cigarettes. Sometimes it was hard to get to sleep.

The only way to get to the kitchen was through the living room. It was a small living room so the couch was pushed up right in front of the TV. When we came home from school we'd either sneak by our sleeping father, Butch, on the couch to go see what our mom had for us in the kitchen or throw our backpacks onto the concrete steps and play in the yard until mom called us in for dinner. We'd check through the front window to make sure she'd woken him up and he was in the kitchen first. If we ever forgot to check or to step quietly around his feet and ended up crossing in front of his view of the TV we'd get cuffed. Louise jokes that's why the back of my head is so flat. I usually forgot to check because I was usually hungry.

Our house stood on the corner of Giroux Street and Country Road behind a line of honey locust and mesquite trees. I think it's still there. During the summers, when the trees were especially dry, Butch would go out into the yard and take a few limbs off to smoke meat in an old oil drum buried in the yard, leaving the trees lopsided and leaning like men waiting for the bus.

Both Louise and I left the house shortly after we graduated high school. Mom left dad after he lost his job at the paper mill and there was no more food to cook and moved to California. (redacted) stayed behind because he'd another year in high school and a nice job at the Safeway. He said even if he did nothing with his life at least he'd graduate high school.

Butch slept even more and the smell of stale milk found its way into the house without mom cooking all the time so there wasn't much to stay around for. Louise had aspirations and I wanted a change of scenery. Butch was sleeping when we left and wouldn't've had a lot to say to us anyhow. We left in the middle of the day in April and picked a few blooms off the honey locust tree on our way out.

Louise bought a beaten Volkswagen from a neighbor with some money she earned while waiting tables at the diner in town. I never worked in high school but I got pretty good at baseball having played every day in the field by the interstate. We'd take bets on who would be the first to take out a windshield of a passing car.

We took that car out onto 89A, the highway that cuts through Jerome, thinking we'd make it to the Midwest where I could get a job on a farm and Louise could find some work in an office, or as a painter, or a florist, or a teacher, but the carburetor boiled over and the pin broke after about fifteen miles as we were pulling into Cottonwood. So, we stayed there and (redacted) followed us a six year later after Butch died.

(redacted) had a few girlfriends in high school. One of them, Beatrice was her name, introduced him to religion. Beatrice's parents were the kind of Catholics to hang a crucifix in every corner of their house including the bathroom. Either from a predisposition to it, a willingness and a need to get closer to Beatrice, or just a simple interest that

grew into something more, (redacted) found himself to be a Christian.

He wasn't the God-fearing kind but more of an armchair zealot. When we were still talking, when he'd come to visit Louise and me in Jerome and sleep on one of our floors, the conversation would always turn to Saint Francis and his sermons to the animals. He'd sit back on the balls of his heels with his knees pulled close and his back to the TV and start in about how Saint Francis convinced the Wolf to stop attacking the villagers if they left out meat.

(redacted) ended up having a child by Beatrice but her parents didn't approve. They sent Beatrice to study at a convent near the California border and drove the child down to the Our Lady of Solitude Monastery outside of Tucson. They said that in the same way the nuns would take care of their daughter they would take care of her mistake. (redacted) saw the future his child would live in and heard of the anger that leaves cracks in the hearts of children brought up among other motherless and fatherless children.

Above all things, (redacted) feared being hated. Our father taught him to. So, (redacted) learned to fear God and took on the grounds maintenance position at the monastery. He spent his days amongst the nuns, learning the proper way to prune roses in hopes he could get close to Francis and show the church that in his hands the child would grow to become a man of God.

After five years, (redacted) became a deacon of the Church and named his child Francis.



The Ministry of Genetic Remembrance (MGR) was formed a few months before (redacted) was taken away. A temporary factory, a massive tin hangar painted blue, was erected a few hundred yards off interstate 87 near the Tonto State Forest in a field that used to be pretty good at growing wheat. The field had belonged to the State and they tried to auction it off a few years after Louise and I moved to Cottonwood. No one bought the property so they just let it be. I heard from a friend who worked for the Forest Service that some people in Tortilla Flat, a town just south of the State Forest, were using the field as a

sculpture farm. They'd go out and find rusted steel I-Beams in industrial parks around the outskirts of Phoenix and Flagstaff and bring them back to the field. I've seen photos and some of them are pretty good. They cut into the sky like outstretched arms.

The temporary factory, the residents of Tortilla Flat called it Superstition Place as it stood in the shadow of Superstition Mountain, became the operating base for the MGR's activities in Arizona. Right in the center of the state, and surrounded by thousands of square miles of state forest and mountain ranges, the spot provided them a privacy that bordered on secrecy.

However, the group was on the books. You could go into any city hall and ask and they'd tell you where the group was operating out of in your state, but not much else as their documents were typically vague.

Louise told me one of the documents she found while working for the state just read, under the heading of **Ministry of Genetic Remembrance:**
"Reconstructing societal remembrance on large to small scales through community outreach."

Although we didn't think Francis was in any kind of real danger, we were still unsure if it was the MGR

who had taken (*redacted*) and on what information. No one was home when the van came to get him and Francis, Louise, and I were the only ones that knew about the devout Catholic tied to a chair in the motel. The neighbors could only provide that the van was white and they carried him out still tied to the chair. So, we did what we could to keep Francis around. Louise thought that it was possible that given his father was taken they'd want Francis too.

Not much was asked of the boy. Louise took him out of school to stay with her and her two step-kids, Billy and Angeline. She'd found a way back into the comforting boredom of family life two years after we moved to Cottonwood through a quiet humorless man named Joshua who had two kids, a nice job, and no wife.

Louise quit her job to homeschool Francis with the savings she had accumulated from her years contracting for the government as a low-level researcher with the Abnormalities Association. I wanted to help out in that way, but my jobs never paid much and besides, I didn't think my motel room was an

environment suited for the boy. The working girls went door to door at night with their dogs. That's what I told Louise.

She had an idea of what was coming before anyone else did. Her department, The Free Associative Administration, the department that contracted the Abnormalities Association, was on a need-to-know basis, but the word spread through the department a few weeks before the MGR sent their first research teams to our town. By then, she had already quit but one of her friends in the office called. That day, Louise and Francis didn't have their lesson. They went to the park to collect pine cones and feed the pigeons. Louise kept the blinds drawn during their lessons for the rest of the week.

We tried to stay away from the cemetery and the newspapers. One of my co-workers, Jeff Langley, who lives by the church and has a pretty good view of the graveyard from his bathroom which he remodeled last year told me he could see a group of men and women walking through the graveyard on Saturday mornings with clipboards studying gravestones. Louise and I figured they were from the MGR and collecting

information on the residents of Cottonwood. I'm not sure how much they could really learn from those stones though. *Katherine Black / 1932-1996 / "She Lived Dutifully"*, doesn't really tell you much about a person.



Papers stacked up in wire racks behind deli doors, under magazines on coffee tables in retirement homes, and at the bottom of trash cans. They went largely unread in Cottonwood.

In small towns in America's Southwest, news comes slowly and when it does it's met with an indifference born from the climate and industry.

Dry heat and small towns planted in wide arid plains between helium extraction plants and oil refineries makes it so any news from outside the Transition Zone seems so foreign as to be senseless. Nothing can be said about the record-breaking snowfall in New York or the current shifts in the Pacific.

But those few who read the papers in Cottonwood understood that this story had implications within their community.

From the *Detrition Chronicles*, March 27th:

BABY BOOMERS OF DETROIT GO BUST

"Upon closer inspection, The Directors of The Census Committee of Detroit have found that the recent disappearances of the city's residents are concentrated amongst the 'baby boomers.' It is thought, as of now, that these disappearances can be explained by the recent conception of the 'Ministry of Genetic Remembrance,' a small independent organization that is thought to be funded by the State Department and tasked with researching and reconstructing societal remembrance on large to small scales through community outreach. At this moment, it appears that the community outreach is conducted by representatives of the group collecting citizens, after a state sponsored check of Life Reports. It remains unclear where they are taken and for what purposes."

A report put out by the Free Associative Fund and the Public Welfare Awareness Trust sought to explain a slew of suicides by drowning that occurred in Vermont on the shores of Lake Champlain:

From *Seven Days: An Independent Voice*, February
3rd:

**The Public Welfare Trust: Fathers Lost to The
Lake**

"For five years now the Public Docks along Lake Champlain have been under surveillance by the Parks Department following an increase in suicides. The Water Recovery Teams of Essex County and Clinton County have asked for increased funding to continue their dredging of the 567 miles of Lake Champlain's shores. Crews from Grand Isle, Addison, and Berkshire Counties have been brought in to aid in the efforts.

In each case, wheelchairs have been discovered nearby the Docks following the suicides. Families have confirmed, after initial investigations in the surrounding communities were conducted and a number of bodies were found, the deceased are all men in their early to late thirties.

As of now, the only thing that is known about the increase in suicides is that, as per the bodies that have been found and camera footage that has been acquired by the Police, the deceased tied themselves

down to wheelchairs, antique tall-backed chairs, or rolling chairs and tipped themselves into the lake.

The State Police and outside agencies have yet to come to a conclusion about the cause of this increase in suicides and the similarities between them.

However, Seven Days received an email which has been turned over to the Vermont State Police from Bjarnes Holmes, a Biological Psychologist based at Champlain College in Burlington. In his e-mail, Mr. Holes claims to have discovered a psychobiological link between the recovered bodies. Initially, he reported these findings to a very small audience of peers and was subsequently denied tenure and received no grant to continue his study nor publication. Holmes reached out to the State Police but says he has yet to receive a reply.

We here at Seven Days wish to express our condolences to the families of the deceased and to remind our readers that the Suicide Hotline is always open and ready to speak with you.



They came into town in the backs of white delivery vans on March 18th. The doors opened out onto the cul-de-sacs and apartment buildings. Cottonwood is small so there were only four or five vans from what I heard. Men and women, wearing white satin overalls and carrying clear multi-colored clipboards emerged from the vans and into the early morning light as grandfathers walked out to get their morning papers.

I saw one go by the motel, one of their white Chevy Vans. It had red fuzzy dice hanging from the rearview mirror and I swear I could hear a Queen song coming from the radio. The van slowed as it turned onto Whaley Avenue, the main road through town, and headed toward the cemetery.

They'd come to recall forgotten family memories - things as simple as when Aunt Carol slipped on ice while walking to Jeanie's front door on Thanksgiving and dropped the casserole in the driveway and the dog ate it or when Uncle Blaine fell asleep in front of the fire after dinner and the cuffs of his khakis caught fire. Simple things were as important as larger ones. To them, it's become clearer now, they were more

concerned with time lost to forgetfulness, passivity, and indifference, rather than everyone actually remembering these things.

In recalling these memories, they sought to find the thread that wove through a family's history and pick from it those painful memories that hung over the rest like a gray rain laden sky waiting for a pause in the wind to begin its descent. In doing so, they believed they could allow for a more positive future where a bloodline could no longer be corrupted by the genetic impacts of abuse, neglect, nor disease. The MGR saw a future without the pain of memory.

On their clipboards, sometimes they'd leave sheets pinned to trees or under rocks, they had written out in shorthand the collected moments of each family, taken from overheard phone calls, social media postings, and public conversations that their mass organization of individuals had ascertained through its global network. As I said, to them nothing was too small to record but what remains unclear is why they've put such importance on recording everything - things most people would assume to completely forget.

One clipboard, found smashed against a headstone with its paper still attached to the clip, read:

[Handwritten notes in cursive script, illegible]

"Concerning our return to Cottonwood, Arizona: All still remains but the problem persists - the boy, Francis Luke, continues to possess certain unseen characteristics. Given our studies, the boy does not adhere to normal protocol of remembering and forgetting. It seems he exists on a line of inaction, of attention without focus, and the effects are seen on those around him. It is this group's feeling that the boy must be removed for further study."



Louise called when they got back from the park on the 18th. It was a short conversation. Most of it revolved around Francis. She mentioned seeing a few elderly men in overalls breaking apart headstones in the McGinley Cemetery in the center of town with shovels and trowels. When I hung up, I drew all the shades in my apartment, both of them, and went to the storage room on the first floor of the complex off the main hall, locking the door behind me. There, I collected (redacted)'s wicker chair, a small side

table, a standing lamp with a cracked glass shade, a framed photograph of Louise, Francis, (redacted) and me, and a few books on carpentry. I wanted to keep these things in case the MGR came back to take them away. I needed to hold onto something of his.

I accumulated a small fortune in canned goods, which I stored in the corner of the room, stacked alongside a water heater. The canned meats spoiled because of the heat coming off the cylinder. What I had left was mostly canned green beans, corn, and cream of wheat. It was enough, I thought.

I live in apartment 42. But I've counted. There are only 39 apartments in the building. The storage rooms are labeled with an "A" following the apartment number it belongs to. My super is a man with a large gray handlebar mustache and thin wisp-like hair around the back of his head. Why he keeps it that way I'm not sure. I find old men with pattern baldness who refuse to remove the last vestiges of their hair suspicious. It's as if they're incapable of giving up on the past or unable to deal with the disappearance of their youth. He's married to the manager of the building. She's a woman in her late seventies with thin gray

hair, a hair lip, and a geriatric corgi that follows her everywhere. They walk the same speed as a funeral procession shuffling in time to a dirge played by a drunken bagpiper. The three of them share a room next to the building's office on the first floor by the vending machine. I've heard they've lived there since they were married in the late 60's- before the old lady was the landlord and before she got her husband the job as the super after he lost a few fingers when working as a machinist in the Roger and Sons factory outside of town.

I repaired the cracked glass shade on (redacted)'s lamp and brought it to my room. It's this beautiful emerald green with golden flecks. I hung a black out shade in front of the desk so no one, especially the working girls or their dogs, can see the light from the parking lot.

Some nights, when the usual din of dog fights and cooing is lower in the lot, I go over the reports Louise sent them to me a few weeks ago in the mail. We'd decided it was better to know what the MGR could be looking for and their presence in Cottonwood made it clear they were not to be ignored. She said

mailing them was safer than being seen handing them off to me. They lack the inflaming hyperbole of reports in the local papers. Their language is often sterile. Bound with plastic comb and in a decaying manila envelope, they smell of the forgotten corners of a library's basement. Whoever wrote them would write things like: "(X), Born Nashville, Indiana, Aged 59, Occupation, Retired, Deceased due to intentional drowning, Location: Valcour Island, Time: Approximately 11:00 PM Eastern Standard Time." They read more like the shopping list of a devote bureaucrat than a document on a person who took their own life. I guess I shouldn't expect much else.

When Louise got her job with the Free Associative Administration, when started working Waste Management on the Morning Shift, I noticed a change. Whenever we talked on the phone, as we did almost every Friday afternoon, she didn't necessarily seem distant, nor distracted, just streamlined and coldly efficient. She'd say things like, "Buck, I've got the pot on the stove. I need to go."

After she retired and started taking care of Francis, things went back to normal somewhat. 'Normal' has been a distant idea for a while though. What I

mean by 'normal' is this:

Weekly dinners with Francis and Louise. Once a month, a trip to Chaparral Lake outside of Scottsdale to teach Francis to swim. Every Sunday, grocery shopping at AJ's Fine Foods. Taking turns driving Francis to play-dates at the town park or the homes of his friends from when he was still in public school. For myself, every weekday, working Waste Management. For Louise, waking her step-kids and Francis, feeding them breakfast, making their, picking them up from sports practice and taking them to games on the weekend, and household chores. Louise's husband, Joshua, worked nearly seventy hours a week at Pinnacle Insurance. Ours was a regimented existence.

We found an ease in our disjointed family and let the comfortable boredom, thinking we knew what the next ten years would look like, fill the cracks left by our time in Jerome. We were aware that ours was a strange one, but it was our family nonetheless and the offerings of pity, 'ohhh it must be so hard/if there is anything my family can do for you don't hesitate to ask/I'm so sorry,' of acquaintances did little to breach that comfort.

Billy and Angeline, Joshua's kids, were part of our family too, but in the same way that a substitute teacher has a photo in the back sections of a yearbook. They didn't share our story of the disjointed family, the family of older siblings shouldering the weight of an absent parent, the family where it was easy to joke about how dysfunctional, if even in composition, they are.

Their biological mother had died from a rare, incurable cancer in her mid-thirties. But it was a long cancer. Not to say they weren't devastated. But drawn out devastation tends to have a shorter half-life and doesn't breed the same angular view of the world. For them, they weren't in on our joke.

Besides, Joshua didn't have much of a sense of humor. Whether his lack was an effect of his job or his Midwestern upbringing is largely unimportant. Billy and Angeline didn't care to be let in on our easy comforts. They're both in their early teens and very much their father's children.

I noticed that my ceiling looks a lot like (redacted)'s when Louise and I went into his apartment to collect his things. I've begun to wonder if it was

the stains and their shape that drove him over the edge.

In the fourteen years that I've lived in the motel my TV has never had more than five stations. Three of them are stations that only play infomercials for tchotchkes, new technologies in moping, or trips to Cabo. I find myself watching late on the weekends after the news goes through it third or fifth cycle. When there's nothing left to watch I lay in bed with my hands pinned behind my head and trace the lines on the ceiling. Its cracks bleed out a color that is only faintly more off-white than the rest. It travels in large amoebous splotches from corner to corner, following the cracks like a river pouring over into low lying communities. When I come home from work late in the morning, there is only a cracked ceiling. The sun cleans away the stains. It's not until the streetlights come on and the working girls start to make their rounds that I can see the splotches. In them, and within the cracks they hold, I find the stories of other men who have lived in this room. Their desperation, their late nights conversing with shadows. I begin to hear their voices when all others in the complex go quiet. They don't whisper, no.

They're trying to speak but struggle as if they're muzzled behind layers of paint. Sometimes, I try to listen. But when I begin to think about responding I cover my head with a pillow and turn away.

There's this hamper I keep in the corner for clean clothes. I don't get a lot of visitors except for Louise and Francis so I don't have to go explaining it all the time. But, I keep my uniform in there, in this shredded wicker basket, along with a few pairs of socks. Never cared for folding, so I don't. The rest of my clothes go into a dingy dresser that doubles as a TV stand.

My routine is down to a T. Wake up five minutes before my alarm goes off at 4:30 A.M. Ten if I'm lucky. The alarm is just a fail-safe and I hate the news broadcasters they got on the radio in the early morning.

The owner of the building had new pipes put into the building in the late 80's, the saint that he is. The water comes on real hot. Hot enough to have the same effect of a cold shower first thing in the morning. It gets me out the door and down to the Waste

Management Station where my partner Lillian is usually idling in our truck.

On March 23rd, while out on my rounds in the sharp Arizona morning air which was impervious and indifferent to the rising sun, I noticed flyers tacked to the telephone poles, pinned behind the little red flags on mailboxes, and blowing across the streets and into people's yards. Lillian pulled the truck up to the top of North 3rd Street, around the block from the Tavern Hotel which gives a free cocktail to each one of its guests upon checking in no matter what time of the day or night it is.

The first house on the street, a low ranch painted a spoiled taupe with an incomplete but forgotten addition tagged onto the south side and a broken ceramic birdbath in the yard, was cluttered with flyers. They stuck to the cracks in the birdbath, pinned themselves under the front wheel of a kid's trike, and hung over the ladder keeping the tarp over the windowless extension. It must have rained a little during the night because the flyers had started to dry and wrinkle. As the truck rolled to a stop, I let go of the handle and slipped off into a slow trot to

catch my momentum. I peeled a flyer off the side of the bin.

Appendix C

Official Release by The Ministry of Genetic Remembrance - To Be Read By the Public

Section 1:

Short Title

This Release may be cited as the "Official Release by the Ministry of Genetic Remembrance - To Be Read by the Public"

Section 2:

Findings, Declarations, and Purposes

(a) Findings and Declarations - The Ministry of Genetic Remembrance and its Affiliates finds and declares that -

1. all Government records related to the workings of the Ministry of Genetic Remembrance should be preserved for historical and governmental purposes;
2. all Government records concerning the Ministry of Genetic Remembrance should carry a presumption of immediate disclosure, and

all records should be eventually disclosed to the public to become fully informed about the history, organization, and workings of the Ministry of Genetic Remembrance

3. legislation, disclosure, and historical transparency is necessary to create an enforceable foreseeable and accountable public response
4. disclosure of legislation is necessary because records related to the Ministry of Genetic Remembrance would not be otherwise subject to public disclosure until at least the year 2031
5. legislation and disclosure is necessary because the Freedom of Information Act, as implemented by the executive branch, have changed the climate to such that it is necessary and beneficial to release such records

(b) *Purposes* - The purposes of releasing these government records are-

1. to provide for the furtherment of the Ministry of Genetic Remembrances goals

2. to require the expeditious public transmission to the Archivist and public disclosure, understanding, and compliance.

(b) *Compliance* - the Ministry of Genetic Remembrance wishes to inform the public-

1. *it is in their best interest to follow the directives of all disclosures including this one*
2. *it is in their best interest and that of future generations to follow the directives of all agents of the Ministry of Genetic Remembrance should they address themselves to you-*
3. *it is in their best interest not to conceal or hide acquaintances, loved ones, relatives, friends, enemies or otherwise from the agents of the Ministry of Genetic Remembrance.*¹

Lillian turned off the truck. She leaned out the window and saw me standing over the birdbath reading the flier. She'd thought it strange too. You could see

¹United States, Congress, House, The National Archives. *The President John F. Kennedy Records Collection Act of 1992 (JFK)*. Government Printing Office, 1992, www.archives.gov/files/research/jfk/review-board/report/appendix-c.pdf. Accessed 8 Dec. 2017.

them all the way down the street, loosely tacked to most surfaces and lingering in yards. She called out 'What's it say?' I just stood there looking down the street to where it ended in low dead brush, the front half of a twisted pickup, and a sign for a narrow bridge.

"It says it's in our best interest to comply."



On the morning of March 29th, I got a call from Louise around 7 saying that Francis wouldn't stop talking about (*redacted*)'s chair and the knots tied to his wrists and ankles. 'I helped. I did. I carried the rope. He said good job.' I figured it had caught up to the kid and something in him was telling him to talk it out. This of course spooked Louise's husband and her step-kids. Being part of the family, they attempted to be concerned for the boy, to try to understand what was going on. What came out was more concern for themselves and a distance. I guess you could say this comes back to the bit about families without deep scars failing to understand. Louise suggested we move Francis in with me. I agreed.

Louise showed up early the next morning with Francis and a few boxes in her minivan. I knew the boy had quite a few toys at Louise's house so I told her to have him pick out his favorite ones as my motel room gets cluttered quickly. He picked out a tin Tonka dump truck, a small box filled with pieces to a train set, a few action figures - a mix of G.I. Joes and some pro wrestlers, and his bright red bike that needed its training wheels constantly readjusted. I already had a small stack of books by my bed for the boy to read when he came to visit. I went down to meet them in the parking lot and we quickly unloaded Francis's life into my room.

Nothing's quite as challenging as taking care of a seven-year-old boy. They're like three men, two without having slept for a week and the rest in various stages of depression and elation. There are small joys in it as well. But for me, I was never used to the presence of children. Louise always laughs and says I was never a kid. I came out of the womb wearing a jumper and holding a lunch pail. We'd laugh. But that's just part of it and she knows as well as I do that she's the same way.

I have a hard time getting down to their level. They're unpredictable. They point and shout and I don't get what's exciting about an old man in a grocery store reading the newspaper in the middle of an aisle or a small dog on the sidewalk. Usually, well I did it with the only other small kids I knew which were Louise's step-kids when they a little younger, I take on the effect of a concussed cartoon character with a speech impediment and end up just confusing everyone.

For the first few weeks it was easy with Francis. He was pretty quiet during the day when we weren't looking through the lesson books Louise brought by and at night we'd watch the news together.

The local station had been running a special every night around 8 PM on the Ministry. Jonathan Lance, the head anchor for the small station based in Flagstaff, would come on with his head mounted above a cheaply rendered headline of **Government Study Expands Focus** or **Memory and Genetics - The New Diabetes**.

Our newest reports, issued by the MGR, otherwise known as the Ministry of Genetic Remembrance, a newly formed government agency tasked with determining and

altering the effects of memory and its ties to family genetics on overall societal well-being, shows that families with irregular structuring are not only more likely to harbor detrimental memories, but those memories linger in their gene pool for generations and show adverse effects for the community at large. As of now, the MGR has not released any further statements concerning how they aim to combat these genes or reverse their effects within the family and societal structure, but we have received reports of fliers, an overwhelming abundance of them, being posted around Flagstaff and surrounding communities. As the fliers suggest - we are in good hands.



The trees are in bloom down the block. When the wind blows in the right direction I watch from my window as the petals move across the lot. Francis watches with me now. Sometimes, I let him go out when the lot is close to empty to pull the delicate white petals off windshields and hubcaps. Now, instead of watching the news go through it's cycles, Francis and I sit up past dinner pasting the fallen petals into an empty notebook I bought from the CVS in the center of

town. I got one that was on sale. Its binding is a paper covered in small pink flowers and the front and back covers show a woodland scene where small fairies dart from trees and underbrush. Francis says it's kind of girly and I agree.

Francis believes in God and more importantly he believes in the power of his own name. From the moment (*redacted*) took possession of the baby, he kept a faded photograph of Saint Francis looking into the near distance, his palms up and outstretched, with a small flock of doves circling his head and perched on his shoulders he bought from a bodega in Sante Fe by the child. When Francis grew older and the photograph was torn, (*redacted*) sent away for a Saint Francis of Assisi medal he found in the back of a "Boy's Life" magazine. He kept it fastened to a leather thread around the child's neck. Young Francis spent so much time sucking on the medal it began to wear down to its tin center. (*redacted*) didn't think of the dangers of whatever chemicals were in that medal. He knew the medal gave his child power and protection in the world. That belief is one of the only things of real worth Francis inherited from his father and he holds

it delicately and keeps the medal around his neck, now old enough to know such a thing does not belong in his mouth.

When Francis sees a flock of birds overhead, or a squirrel run across the street when we're out in the town, he stops and holds out his palms and looks into the near distance with a practiced smile on his face. Some who pass who know of him say, 'There's Saint Francis.'

In the early morning of the April 3rd, when Lillian and I were just rounding the corner onto our fourth block of the day, we noticed we hadn't felt a breeze, nor seen the trees stir since we started. Some days when the wind blows out of the east it gets caught up in the peaks and diverted out of the valley. But there was something different about this absence. Like the air had been sucked out. The stillness, much like the power lines that vivisect our town and continue off through the valley, had no clear beginning nor end. My phone rang. Lillian looked at me like, "Who the hell is calling you at 6:00 am?"

Louise and I had decided that when I went to work in the morning it was okay to leave Francis there in

the hotel room alone for the hour between when I left and when she got there to take him to the park. I made her a copy of the key a few weeks ago and told no one about the unaccompanied seven-year-old sleeping on a cot in an empty motel room every morning. My heart kicked when I heard the phone. Right then was about the time Louise would be getting over to the apartment after she set out breakfast for her kids and her husband had left for work. Their house is only about a half of a mile away from the hotel, off the main drag, back on the residential roads.

"Louise?" The name sounded hollow against the airless morning. I reached for the phone without placing the can I had just emptied into the back of the truck on the curb and it rung down the street a ways. Lillian went off to bring it back.

"Buck... Where's Francis?" She makes this face, has since she was a kid whenever something was bad or was about to go bad. Like when our elderly dog fell asleep in the driveway and the mailman ran over him his last week on the job. I could see that face now. Fucking horrible is what it is. You'd rather look at the mess than her face. You hear the break and smell the emotion. She took a quick breath in after saying his

name.

"Buck...Where is Francis" Louise said again. The sun coming up full over the mountains in the East caught the top of a transformer and sent a heavy leadened ray of light down into my eyes. It seemed absurd. What a moment to be blinded by the rising sun. I turned as if I'd see him down the block, mouth agape, with the phone slightly angled away from my head, blinking slow with one eye.

"He's not there?" I could feel my voice failing behind a locked door in my throat and turned towards Lillian as if she'd have an answer for me. "He was there when I left. He was asleep and I locked the door behind me. I always do. Oh Jesus" I said.

"Buck. I've checked the whole place. The door was locked when I showed up. He's not here. How the fuck could he have gotten out?" Louise said.

"Okay. Okay. Okay. I'll be right there. I'm just a few blocks away. We'll look. We'll look." I said.

Cottonwood Arizona wears the Dead Horse State Park like a hat when you look at a map of it. The town itself has one main road with two four way intersections and cookiecutter communities set up on a grid pattern for a few miles in each direction. It's

not hard to navigate, nor does it take long to get from end to end. I told Lillian what was going on and she threw me the keys to the truck. The town seemed a lot bigger this morning. We'd been in the Andover Hills section. Fear broke through habit. Roads once taken unconsciously, vacantly now seemed new and unruly. My ears popped against my clenched jaw.

There's a memory trapped in the mornings of Arizona. You stay there in its stillness looking for it. You wonder which way the sun will come up, over which mountain, knowing all the same. You start to remember the morning before, and before that, and how the sky turned over to show its orange belly. You'd stay there if you could but it still comes.

The manager and her husband, wrapped in matching bathrobes, stood there on the landing with Louise. A few doors stood open along the second floor where curling irons worked along strands of slept-in hair.

Louise grabbed me by the arm and the super blinked hard and tried to quiet his wife's dog while the wife continued to fuss about Louise.

"We need to go. He's not here. These two are going to wait here for the police and go through the building. Oh my God, Buck, where is he" Louise said.

Back out in the lot, the wind shifted to the North and blew white petals out into the field across from the motel. There, they were pressed into the low grasses of the outskirts of the Coconino Forest by Louise's flats and my boots. We stepped out over low lying brush, broken red rocks, and listened for the sound of Francis against canyon walls, calling to only hear our own voices return but empty. Without a word to each other, we continued following the wind and the petals that moved between gusts in front of us out towards the All Souls Cemetery framed by the mesa in the distance.

An effigy of a kneeling Saint, throned by plastic flowers glued to its imitation bronze head, met us at the entrance to the cemetery. An Anna's Hummingbird found itself on the Saint's head, checking the dollar store flowers for nectar. At the back of the cemetery, a group from the MGR stood about, checking their clipboards and facing the back gates. There, Francis stood among them with his arms outstretched, feeding a wren in the palm of his right hand.

Works Cited

United States, Congress, House, The National Archives.
*The President John F. Kennedy Records Collection Act
of 1992 (JFK)*. Government Printing Office, 1992,
[www.archives.gov/files/research/jfk/review-
board/report/appendix-c.pdf](http://www.archives.gov/files/research/jfk/review-board/report/appendix-c.pdf). Accessed 8 Dec. 2017.

Elizabeth

Now, he, beginning again, sets out across a field the color of wheat paste, ignoring the din of the cicadas in the darkness, the slam of the screen door, and the helicopters in the distance. Long after dusk, he can still see the silhouettes of the telephone poles marching over the horizon like emaciated giants. He stops there for a moment. As happens sometimes, the moment settled and hung there with him, caught up in the lines as he watched. At this late hour, these giants urge him on towards their beginning and their end. Not being his first time noticing the thin line disappearing within his landscape, he shakes the notion of their autonomy and of their faces, knowing and affirming to himself that he was there the day they were built. But they persist there above him. An expression of condescension spreads across the knolls in their wood and manifests in the din of the line tied up in the fuse spools. He shoves his fists deep into his pockets and scrapes at the dried mud on the tip of his left boot with the sole of his right.

Maybe tonight isn't the night for this, he thinks and turns twice in succession to look over his left shoulder at the farm house. Lead paint chips from the eaves and the window frames and the door frames and the pocked siding.

There, right above the door, he sees a grandmotherly face with no nose etched out in the empty spaces left by the falling dried paint. His own grandmother bathed in vinegar and baking soda when she was young and the smell never really left her. Remembering this, he continues on again.

There's nothing quite like it and it can never be again - home or the semblance. An empty landscape can make up for this. A man set in his loneliness can find himself there with others. Sir Ernest Shackleton, pulling his feet through high snow over the glaciers of the Antarctic found himself with another- 'It seemed to me often we were four not three.'²

This fourth man, or third man, or second man, or any man is better company when they're quiet and they seldom speak. The memories of others can be invited to

² Shackleton, Ernest Henry. *South*. Wickford, North Books, 2000

join him but only he can give them a voice. This affords him much freedom. Freedom from choice or non-choice. Freedom to speak alone to himself.

The locks on his truck rusted out a month after he bought it from a young shirtless red-haired boy thirty miles down the road. The gas station parking lot the boy called home for that afternoon held the smell of ozone and green mold, but neither of them minded much. It's hard to mind much when business is being done. The boy wasn't much of a businessman but three hundred bucks for the truck was starting to feel like less of a deal now that he had to stand locking and unlocking the truck's door, or at least making the motion of doing so until the lock drop into place.

Locking doors was merely a precaution. He would go for weeks without seeing another person, sometimes longer if he couldn't get the truck started to drive the fifty miles into town.

The town of Valle wasn't much to speak of either. Its own gas station, a slumped motel in the northwest corner of the town facing a dirt lot, a bar where the same three men could always be found, and a post office where an elderly woman in a blue button-down

chain smoked over envelopes during the work week. But nevertheless, he felt comfortable in this landscape so he stayed on.

Having already set off, he traces the telephone lines as they dip low. When a motion is brought about, the first moments are often put to question. Even more, when the first motion is made, as an old man who is called to rise and finds himself halfway to his feet continues the motion knowing in himself that he would much rather sit back down and continues to stand, it is brought to completion again and again with each affirming step

He remembers he's done this before - set off across the field leaving his truck, the empty house, the porch behind, yet, the action feels unfamiliar. But in claiming the action, whose end is only defined by the line he follows, he finds comfort in its resolve. Without a question, this is the way to go.

The day warms and he is glad for it. With it, the cicadas grow restless and the red-winged blackbirds call to him from atop the telephone line. Continuing on in its path, he discerns a change. Off in the distance, close to the line of poles, he sees a slow-

moving form. The heat rising from the infertile ground with the early morning rush of light obscures it. It wavers in definition and bends over the horizon. The hem of a skirt pulls up from the heels of the form. He waits, watching the topsoil rise as the breeze touches its surface. He catches the breeze. With it comes the smell of vinegar and green mold.

Little Bluestem and Indian Grass fold over, some letting their nettles sift into the afternoon heat. The din of the wire makes his spine itch and he covers his face against a renewed gust of wind. Folding back the brim of his sun-bleached hat, he cups one hand over his brow to shield against the light. It looks more like a salute and he thinks about this. A cloud crosses over the sun like a sudden melancholic mood setting in and the form comes into full view.

She wears a wide-brimmed hat similar to his own. Her maroon skirt with its frilled hem cuts off at the back of her knees. On it, pansies embroidered with a rich turquoise thread circle moth-eaten holes. A loose-fitting jean shirt falls from her shoulders and over her wrists, concealing her hands as they swing in stride. With each step, a small cloud rises behind her. Above him, the sky is without moisture, save for

the haze in the distance. Without pause, he shoves his hands down deep into his pockets and hunches his shoulders as he walks.

To follow someone is to forfeit a day. He doesn't wish to give up on the spell of the poles cutting across the plane. But, there she is following the lines, and he feels a stir. There, down in the pit he had dug for himself where he shouts with forms cast against the chamber walls, he heard a new voice that said 'begin again.'

He remembers her now. She was there when he began and he hopes she'll be there when he ends. The only audience he could ever have. A captive, seated in his memory to be called to stand and speak. But with her, unlike the others, he never knows what she will say.

Works Cited

Shackleton, Ernest Henry. *South*. Wickford, North Books,
2000

Foreman

3'3"

I took the job and the next day the foreman called for another two feet. It was just about noon, but the air in the basement remained cool. Plumes of steam rose from the men around me. At his call, we rested our shovels - some against their shoulders and others against brick walls.

The foreman passed in front of the boarded-up windows as he called out. Through the cracks, I could see him struggling to reattach a phone to his belt loop and cars passing on the street.

I imagined if someone were to stop and look through the crack, we would look as pigeon's pecking at seed with our heads hanging low over our furled shoulders.

Some men raised themselves up out of the hole they'd dug, each up to his knees in it, surrounded by buckets full of mud, bricks, and clay to grab water or to light a smoke. No one looked up the steps to where

the foreman stood.



The air, dense with the particles called up out of the earth by their work, was as a thin satin sheet. On the men's faces, a mien of distance and a layer of dirt, thicker in some places than others. There were six in total. Six forms contained there in an impossible distance working towards a bottom.

On breaks, they rose out of their pits. At the center of the largest room of the basement, the last room to be dug out, a wide cement trench with an endless bottom fell into the earth. It must have been the school house's early form of a septic system, that pit. Or it was a chasm that fell forever. There, along the edge, the men took their lunches with their legs hanging down.

Joel, a man in his early forties, wore a sharp goatee and kept his hair cut short, revealing scars on the back of his head. His clothes were those of an artist who needed a break and picked up a shovel. The cuffs of his sleeves were usually bunched towards the

elbow, revealing faded tattoos of gray and black. During the breaks, he sat by Jackie.

Jackie possessed a slight lisp over his 's's and a candor I'm unfamiliar with. He would greet each worker every morning with a smile and a handshake. Out of all the other men, he was the only one who seemed able to extract joy from the process of breaking rocks and standing waist deep in dirt. Jackie wasn't one of those men who'd show you a kindness or do you a favor and expect pay out in the future. He would never call back his kindnesses. He took an interest in each man's life and nodded his head with approval when they gave him the same answers day after day.

"Wife's good. Kids are hell. House needs painting."

"It's all just fine, Jackie."

"Another day another dollar."

"Good'ta see ya too Jackie. We'll... I'm here now and will be until I'm gone."

"Just another brick on the road to glory, don't ya think Jackie?"

Jackie worked harder than three men. He told me on the second day about the meditation garden he built in his backyard. He tended to it everyday and sat on

the stone bench in the middle when he finished. He said his family loves the garden and he spends most of his time there. No one's taken him up on his offer to see it.

The other men were unknown to me. When the work was done for the day, they'd clock out on the antique time punch in the first floor of the old schoolhouse, each standing silent in line with their arms outstretched holding their card and made uniform by the cloak of dirt and dust about them. They'd head to their cars parked along the street without a word and go somewhere else.

The schoolhouse was built in 1832, or so said the brick next to the double-doors in the front. It looked it. Partially from the different zones of construction, but mostly from the decay, the schoolhouse was missing sections and others were crumbling inward like a rotten apple. Violet wisteria hooked itself through the cracks in the brick along the front wall.

But it was still grand. I'd never been to a school with tin ceiling tiles and a view of mountains inflated and bulbous over a wide river.



They each in turn looked to the other, but none at me. I kicked at the clods of dirt that continually fell into my hole. I was behind. One of the guys told me to try and have the corner under the window evened out and down at least a few inches by lunch. It was still looking more like a ditch than a planned hole. But I figured I wasn't expected to keep up on my first day.

I could tell they knew I hadn't really done this kind of work before. My boots were too new. I struggled with the shovel, straining my arms to force the blade into the earth instead of pressing it down with my instep.

They spoke to each other in low tones, their brows falling over their eyes, spitting in the direction of the bulkhead. I could pick out 'bastard, 'prick', 'done.'

Over in my corner, where one of the older guys, a man in a blue button-down shirt, had pointed me to when I first showed up, I could feel their eyes scan the dirt floor, the digging they'd already done, and

over to me and the meager oblong ditch I was descending into.

"What's he mean?" I had asked the thirty-something year old guy working closest to me. I had just noticed him. He wore bleach stained brown trousers and a blue tank top.

"He means we gotta begin again" he said without looking up. "Well I guess, for you, it's just the same" he continued. "We'd been working on the impression... we assumed he'd worked it all out... that we were going down four feet. Now Kurt is calling for six. That's gonna be another month. And most of us want out of this pit." He leaned against the wall and looked up the steps to where Kurt had stood.

The conveyor belts that stretched like arteries through the windows in every corner of the basement slowed, the last bulges of concrete, brick, and clay sifted up to the surface. By the bulkhead doors, Joel threw his shovel against the steps.

Joel

Everyday I've come here to this same spot to pick up this same shovel and start again. I know there's

been movement, progress even, but to go down those stairs into that basement everyday - I stoop the same and it all looks the same. There's no beginning to it and there is no end. The stairs leading down from the bulkhead, those heavy rusted gates unlocked and unchained every morning, are together a maw with a brutalist tongue. It opens up to you and an acknowledgement is made that you will spend the day with yourself, staring at your toes and throwing back the earth in search of a bottom.

I go from the street to the pit, then back out into the street at the end of the day. We take our lunches seated in silence looking down into the sump.

To others, there's two different people doing this work. The one man who lives above and the other who works below. I only know because my wife pointed it out when she met me at a diner up the block for an early dinner. She had to head south to see her mother that night. She said, 'Joel, is everything okay?'

Of course everything was okay. She said I was quiet with one of those thousand yard stares and a crease of mud over my mouth. She was worried but I could see the walls of dirt rising above my knees under the chrome plated table.

Most days I go for a long walk after work to air myself out before going home. In this city, every street has an accompanying alley behind the rows of businesses and apartments where lines of trash cans and loading docks make up their own cityscape. There, the murmur of the neon signs that face the streets is lower and I can walk in peace.

Down here, below the shell of the schoolhouse, the air clings to your clothes the same as the dirt does. The air wraps itself in you and picks at your ears. It begins with an introduction of sorts. A decaying tone, falling into itself. Like the tinnitus that's found its way into my head, it rises and oscillates on an unseen updraft. The more time you spend down here the more it starts to make sense.

You can strip off the clothes at the end of the day but it remains there with you. You can still hear it and feel it around you.

The air takes over, it fills the corners with a haze and dispels any thought of an end. It's what drives you to continue. This thought that it could continue on forever. You want to see an end, if even

just to know that you had done *something* and it had meaning.

So, I return everyday, to begin again, to find myself in the same hole I had been digging the day before. There, I go back to thinking of nothing but the sound of the shovel piercing through layers of clay and dirt, finding itself engulfed in a past, in the memory of the dirt, and counting the strokes. In its cadence, I find myself again.

But I've begun to feel I lost something down there in the dirt and I've been digging, I keep coming back to dig, so I can find it again.



My mom, in her infinite wisdom and unending concern for my life, told me it was time I got a good job. She said I needed to learn some skills. She didn't need to say it but I knew what she meant. With my dad gone she thought I was in need of a 'positive male influence' and to learn those things that define a man.

He's been gone for some time - I only know him through the birthday cards he sends every few years on

different dates with a simple note of *'Happy Birthday, Dad.'* To her, the definition of a man included: blue denim, expertly rolled cuffs, a receding hairline, a limp 401k, and abrupt long silences.

Growing up, this inclination of her's led me to play every sport offered in school, join the Scouts, and work outside jobs.

I never really understood the guys I've worked with. They spoke in expressions if they spoke at all. 'You gotta play to win, kid', 'One hand washes the other', 'Man's gotta eat.' I'd nod along and try out the phrases myself when they'd gone around a corner.

I was given the number of a man named Kurt Patrick by one of the guys I worked lawn maintenance with. The co-worker had said, 'Keep your head down kid. Remember, quiet man rides for free.'

Kurt 'mhmpf'd' on the phone during my pitch for the job and simply told me to show up the next day at the schoolhouse 'on third street - by the fire station' with some boots and lunch. He didn't tell me much about what we'd be doing. Just 'digging' and the pay, which was way better than anything I'd earned before.

4'2"

By the end of the first week I figured out that the job was all about inertia and keeping low and there was something for which I needed to repent. One of the younger guys, still at least five years older than me, started in on the walls of a trench I had begun to show me how to keep them even. I watched him there as he twisted on the balls of his feet, slicing down thin sections of clay and pulling out rocks with a pickaxe.

'It's an art' he said with a laugh.

I myself began to twist on the balls of my feet, letting the shovel guide itself into the clay, and lowered myself to where my knees pointed at the hilt of the blade. A natural order began to take hold and with it my mind fell.

In the absence of thought, an invader found its way into my soft soul. There, it broke all the nicely arranged china, smashed out the windows, gutted the cellar, and left the front door open.

The invader had no name to speak of but a specter of Grief followed him - a burrow filled with pitch, an

arthritic demigod, the remains of an affair ended in fallen oak and broken glass.

I kept this personal calamity silent. I thought around things not about them. I kept it all straight but still another followed behind.

Loss followed behind Grief, holding the rope that kept them both on the edge of the rocky escarpment between the mountain pass and the valley. Loss was much less defined than grief, higher up upon the bluff, pulling Grief higher and higher as the three went along - a woman shouting alone in a room where the sole light comes from a lamp on the floor, a chrysanthemum dissected and pinned to cork, a form telling riddles in the basement while the storm comes closer, where things should never be said lightly.

I always thought that past tense was forgetting. Now it seemed that it was really leaving behind to be picked up later like a perfect rock left in a field in childhood.

That's what it was. My childhood. It stood at the front of the line of all my past selves, struggling to pull itself into the light of my present.

There was something that I had forgotten back there. Or so I thought. A door that had been left open

and the breeze was just starting to blow in. Strange that it took me digging a hole to feel it.

Images of my father, long obscured behind indifference, forgetfulness, progression, began to rise up. He hung there while I dug, holding a present wrapped in a brown paper bag, getting out of his car, throwing a rock down the beach.

I got lower and pushed the shovel down deeper. An urge rose up to dig until I broke.

5'1"

I looked across the basement to see Jackie leaning against the large rusted cylinder that carries no noise except the reverberations of the shovels against stone through its side, wiping sweat from his brow. Above us, the dull thud of hammers against antique wood - there were no funds for new wood to be added to the schoolhouse and the investors felt to reuse the 150-year-old wood would be more authentic. Long gaps in the floor from pulled wood, vacated like missing teeth, filled the hollowness of the percussions. The resonance of their blows was allowed to be carried down into the bowels and there it mingled with the shovels. Electrical wires, like

slimmed eels fished from the Hudson, strung their way over the rafters, fueling spotlights clipped into the corners and a radio emitting little more than static and 2:4-time swing tunes to fend off the doldrums of the afternoon in the basement's many rooms.

Jackie

Come to think of it, I don't know where we began. Was it in the anterior room? In the back? Right here? No, it couldn't be here. We're almost done with this room and there are already four finished. Did anyone ask what these rooms would become? They should have an info session or something at the beginning of these jobs so we know what we're working towards - if that matters at all. I think it matters to me. It's beginning to matter more. It's becoming easier to picture what this room will look like. All there is now is an empty pit but the space conveys what it will be.

I've got this red leather chair in my garage. There are a few rips along the arms and one of the legs is loose, but most of the chair is supported by the floor anyway so it doesn't make much of a

difference. The chair belonged to my father when I was a kid.

He bought it when we lived in a house in Bridgeport for a few months. My father, Patrick, sat there every night when he came home from teaching at the college. His black briefcase at its side, letting it rest there propped against the chair, he'd lower himself down. It seemed like an act for him. He'd let out this long sigh which said, 'Done.' There, he'd sit in silence until one of us spoke to him.

I have this feeling most nights when I go home that I'll find him in his chair. I made a promise to him towards the end of his life. We talked a lot about when I was an infant and when I was a boy as he lay there his last months. He wasn't opposed to melancholic conversations, but we seldom had them. Not knowing where to place his new feeling - he said he had the feeling of 'beginning another story' - he had told me that he felt obligated, obliged to bestow his first son, myself, with something that mattered.

My father came from a family of Irish Catholic stoics. The mundane parts of life - trips to the grocery store, PTA meetings, dinners at home - were approached as religious experiences but lived in with

tight lips. Days spent practicing Latin mass in his youth only taught him he wanted something more. He wanted a life worshipped in the body.

But still, Catholicism and the silence of his upbringing defined much of how he raised his own kids.

That chair meant more to him than most of his teachings. More than scriptures and family values that dictated an observance and a continuance of values he knew his immediate family lacked the feeling for. So, for him, those few hours at the end of the day in his chair were more than hours spent repenting to a family dialectic long forgotten but often disclosed. He often spoke of the dialectic.

There was a lot that he said in low tones, but his voice rose when he told me 'keep the chair, the chair is yours and I want you to have it.' I think he'd forgotten that I knew of his other family. He didn't even ask with his eyes not to tell my mother. Maybe he left them and their ghosts back in Cincinnati.

I didn't know much of him, and of course it goes without saying that I still don't. So, to me that chair was the one thing my father thought important between the two of us. A confidence that I could not

neglect amongst all the space. A time lost that I could only question through this broken chair.

In good faith, I had no idea what to do with his chair, so, I set it back in the corner of my garage, away from my children's bikes, away from my wife's car, people whom he had never met, because I have and have always had this feelings that to mix the portions of my past life and my current life would be to call into question the validity of my own growth. Is it growth or is it removal? Do I still remember the smell of the street I grew up on? Where I learned to ride a bike? Where my dad, as he was then, taught me to show my pride?

Now, in my early forties, beyond the age of performative imagination, of the frills of what could be, I still see the chair everyday. It hasn't become one of those objects that are part of the background hum of life like the shelf, the frame, the knob that we come to speak to and forget their names.

I still see it. My chest rises and that twinge of the heart moves down the knuckles of my spine because I still can't bring it inside for fear that it will become just as my side table, familiar and indifferent.

I've kept his promise and I still expect him to return. Sometimes, I see him in the chair.

My mornings are slow. I keep my clean clothes in the hamper, the clothes I wear almost every day, and everything else in the drawers under the TV. I get up to put on my jeans, wash the sleep out of my face and open the garage door.

I know the chair should be in my living room, but I keep it out. It doesn't seem to matter. The chair itself keeps the early morning light like it did under the bay window in Bridgeport, but now it's positioned below the cans of detergent and motor oil, and there he sits amongst them, satisfied in his moment.

My father was a quiet man. To him, stoicism and hard work were the highest virtues along with reverence and subtlety. Our household was a quiet one where silence was a punishment and a principle.

That chair was his cathedra, his bench, his pulpit. Time there was to him a silent mass. In the folds of that leather chair, infinite knowledge of the blood, unencumbered by the ties of our history.

I made my promise and every morning I see him there for just a moment, looking down at his knees, knowing that I'm standing there, and waiting for me to address him.

I speak to no one about this continued relationship with my father. I know what they would say and I care not for their judgement. Ours is one that is to be kept amongst ourselves.

I've seen others, my family, my friends, myself, go to the graves of those they've lost to pay penance, tribute, whatever it is they need to give. I know it serves a purpose. For the first few months after his death, it served a purpose. Even more than now, I felt he was there, waiting for an acknowledgement of sorts - retribution, a naming, a forgiveness.

I'd go for myself as much as him - a balance which shifted in the passing months. I'd go to serve some sense of duty. This image I had in my head, fading, as a specter enters into one's life and demands attention to only find solace in forgetfulness and move on, was one of memory.

Memory came to serve the place of physicality, a remembrance, an echo of an impression I had once

cultivated over many of years and developed into a full image of that person as they were. My father's headstone was and is not a monument to his life but to my ability to hold in my mind a characterization of him - not himself as he was - but that which memory has left me.

What is left are the memories, the few good ones that I have- now contained in a distorted image, as if seen through a glass plane submerged in a dark lake in the summer.

Those memories that are clear, I know now, are not who he was then but the person I wished he could have been.

Every weekend I take my mother to the Milton Town Cemetery. She wants me to and I think he would have too. In life, there was an indifference but in death there is a deference as if she fears her relationship to the deceased adds her name next in the ledger. 'The deceased' - even in the first line of the obituary, the last time your name will ever be written, it starts to take it.

I pick her up at nine, or at least, I show up at nine and wait for her to get ready. She needs her hair

done, her clothes clean, and her mind steady. She prepares phrases, or so I think, for once we find his headstone she performs. As the others who come to the cemetery on a Saturday afternoon, as good Catholics do, she brings flowers, begonias, and lilies picked up from the florist up the street by the church, a page of scripture, often Matthew 27:52, *'and the tombs broke open. The bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life'*, or a piece she herself had transposed from a phrase Father Callahan had uttered that week. At the site, she, as others, positions the flowers against the headstone and slips her piece of paper between their stems and says a prayer. I watch her from the other side of the headstone and treat her to lunch afterwards.

There are different sorts of remembrance. Some for you and some not. Some exist in a lack of remembrance. This, I've heard it said, is avoidance. But, when it comes down to it, to remember someone after they are gone in an act of prayer and a passing thought is to acknowledge a time spent. In doing so one calls upon time lost - that initial grief, an acknowledgment one sustains after realizing the time

spent with that person who is never to return was never regarded as finite. Most use that grief over time lost as a cudgel to beat down their own future rather than as a bellow to flame it back up.

Remembering is to call back a previous moment, to unground it from its place, and to ask it to repeat itself once more. Can you remember as much as the moment does? Can you keep yourself from turning that truth into a caricature, for the sake of your own telling, of what it once was?

I've become distinctly aware that my promise made to the dead is empty. Once he was gone I was freed from that promise. Only remorse remains - remorse for the time I wasted waiting for him to speak to me. And for that I keep his chair.

It remains as a fixture in my existence, to be observed, remembered, then forgotten, yet distinct and separate from my own. Distinct in that I refrain from using it as he did. Unable to ask him, I maintain that his intention in giving me the chair was so he would not be forgotten and believe in his last moments and

whatever moments that may come in his future that he has stayed on in my life as a physical presence.

5'8"

Kurt, unclipping his sun shades from his golden wide-rimmed glasses, found footing against the stacked cinder blocks placed at bottom of the steps leading down the bulkhead. The blocks were put there once the men had dug well below the depth where someone could safely step down to the floor without twisting their ankle.

"Alright men" he said to us, looking at the floor of the basement. Below the crust, almost six feet down, we'd found where the clay became gray then red then gray again like the flesh below the skin. "Almost there. Just a few more hours."

Kurt picked up a shovel and stepped down into the pit. He began to knock the dirt around, throwing it towards the walls, towards the conveyor, away from himself, forgetting or uncaring to the fact that the men had a system - chip at the floor till the floor became the grade then knock down the loose soil so the soil on the grade is loose soil and easily picked up

then pick up the loose soil on the grade and throw it onto the moving conveyor belt or into one of the 10 gallon buckets placed at their feet.

Kurt didn't know the system, the system Jackie showed me on the first day. His gung-ho attitude brought him down to the basement - feeling he belonged amongst his "guys" and they needed his encouragement. It seemed he had forgotten the four one ton conveyors he rented and the men had carried down to effectively and efficiently carry the dirt out of the basement.

Nothing could be said to the man. Having spent the day on the phone in his truck, working out estimates for other jobs, he had the energy not to care about the efficiency of the work.

Joel

There it is. No going back from there. Maybe the water will fill the basement and this whole schoolhouse will fall into the earth.

I had to stop a few days ago to get myself out of this damned placed. My throat started closing up and I couldn't see straight. There seemed to be something

important I had forgotten to say. It came up in me like bile. It's name became clear to me and I didn't want the other guys to hear it in case I blurted it out. I walked out the bulkhead doors to take a walk around the block and clear it out.

Most nights after work I keep walking. I go down to the docks then to the top of main street before going home. It's better to be at work or anywhere else than going back to that room.

She wouldn't stop talking about the dryer lint - how much of it there was - how flammable it was - how flammable the house was - how flammable all her clothes were. It was driving me up the wall. That mother of mine. She slipped. I tried the best that I could, by her and my son. I got this job. I spend nine hours a day in this shit pit. She stayed with him and made sure he didn't go outside and he made sure she didn't. I wanted to get us out of that hole of an apartment. I wanted to move us to the country.

Most of my wages went to buying her damned oxygen tanks. The insurance adjuster and her doctor didn't give a shit about what we had going on. She couldn't go without it and I couldn't stand hearing her choke

at night so I handed over my weekly paychecks to the supplier. They came on a red dolly and clinked together making this hollow noise as he pulled them up the steps. She would just stand there with her mouth open. I loved her ya know. In some way. She was my mother. But it seemed like she didn't care either way and she lost my son.

She smoked. I kept telling her she couldn't smoke when she used the oxygen. But she didn't care. She lit the whole place up. Luckily, the rest of the tanks were in a closet in the back room behind a locked door and my son was playing upstairs in the bathroom. The tile and the fireman that pulled him out saved him. But the tank and that cigarette took my mother.

I live in a Howard Johnson's now. The courts took my son. He's back with his mother and her new boyfriend in Arizona.

The judge said I was an unfit father and unable to provide my son with a safe environment. Like he knew anything.

The manager of the motel told me after my first week, after he found my muddy boot prints leading upstairs to my room, that I gotta keep my boots in the truck or I'd have to find someplace else to live. The

cleaning crew is on a bi-weekly schedule and they don't touch the halls. I get it. They're the only pair of shoes I have so I sit in the parking lot on the tailgate of my truck picking dirt out of the soles and watch the sky lose all of its color.

6'3"

He dug down too far - past the already established grade and even further than the additional two feet he'd called for. He didn't notice. He kept going.

Swinging the pick from his right hip and over his shoulder, he loosened the clay and reached down far beyond the foundation of the building. The water floated up from the river and began to fill the hole. He jumped back and all the men turned to look at him.

They put down their spades and shovels, letting them land where they may, and walked towards the pit where the water was rising over. Their backs unfurled and the weight resting on their brows lifted.

Down at the bottom of the pit, bellow where anything should have ever been buried and between Kurt's bootprints was a brick with the manufacturer's

name on it, obscured by the decay of its years buried.

It read, "H(*obscured*)E(*obscured*)RE".