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## Human Eclipse

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Human Eclipse

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

by

Elizabeth von Klemperer

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May, 2014

This novel is dedicated to my parents, who support me endlessly.

Robert, Mary and Michael –

Thank you for your patience and mentorship.



Merna is not a paper bag full of air, but she feels that way sometimes. Certainly, who doesn't, on occasion. Most of the time, though, Merna is an unripe plum. A stiff, hard nodule. She waits to be carried and placed on the windowsill above the sink, where she will get ripe in the dark. She will hear the rushing sink water. It will be as unfathomable as the depth of a clouded pool. She will hear the brief clinking collisions of what sounds like rock or metal. It will be a soft hum-coo and it will last all night. *What a world to be reborn in*, she thinks. A wet sweet pit lolls in dark purple meat. Then again, sometimes Merna is the bright, unyielding air. Sometimes she is the paper shell that surrounds it.

MERNA HAD DINNER WITH HER RELATIVES. SHE WAS TWENTY-SIX.

Uncle Jerry owned a business that manufactured butterflies pinned to corkboards.

“The finished product is decorative as hell,” Uncle Jerry proclaimed at dinner one night as he spooned soup into a bowl and passed it to Merna.

“You know, people don’t realize how difficult it is to actually *catch* those fuckers. They don’t realize how much juice we need to inject them with to preserve their bodies either,” he said.

He glanced over at his wife, Agatha. She was twiddling bits of bread dough between her fingers and forming small angry balls.

“That’s why I have my team with the kill jars. Eight bucks an hour to catch ‘em. I send them out with nets and empty jam jars. Gotta soak a cotton ball with fingernail polish and wedge it at the bottom too. Last week one of the boys on the kill jar team was lucky enough to catch a Monarch. Gave that kid a bonus. Bruce, I think his name is.”

Merna could hear the sound of Agatha’s long fingernails digging into her nylon tights and raking them across her thighs with a frantic, rhythmic motion.

“That is disgusting, Jerry,” Agatha spat.

Agatha shot Merna a meaningful look, which Agatha hoped would be infused with the sentiment, *I hope that in the future you do not end up in this type of situation*. The situation she was implicitly referring to was the state of being stationed at a table with a man like Uncle Jerry. Unfortunately, Merna took this look to mean, *please, clear the table*, or, alternatively, *it would be rude of you not to clear the table*. Merna stood up and collected the plates. She swore she could hear the sounds of scratching and the silence from the kitchen.



The next day, Uncle Jerry brought Merna to the butterfly pinning shop.

“That’s very nice of you, dear,” said Aunt Agatha. “Totally unnecessary, but very kind.”

She dropped two white pills into her tepid coffee.

On the ride over, Uncle Jerry talked.

“Some people ask me why I stayed small, why I didn’t go to what they call the bigger leagues,” Jerry said.

Merna was staring out the window. She was trying to read a billboard advertisement. The sun was in her eyes.

“Why don’t you go for bigger things, they’d ask. Stuff rabbits, for example. Lots of people want their dead cats stuffed.”

Merna blinked hard. The sun was still in her eyes.

“I said I didn’t want to get into that stuff,” said Uncle Jerry in response to the follow up question that Merna had not asked. “It’s a complex art to master, for one. There’s more money in bugs anyway,” he said.

They finally got to the pinning shop.

“Look at this, one of our best workers,” said Uncle Jerry as they approached the shop.

Merna, with the sun still in her eyes, looked out from under her right hand, which she was using as a shield. Bruce thought that she was saluting him, and he nodded cordially. He was on his lunch break, smoking a cigarette.

“Get back to work, Brucey boy! We don’t want you out here smoking, looking like some delinquent, scaring all the customers away,” Uncle Jerry said lightly, and nudged Merna.

Bruce, again, nodded cordially. Merna continued walking.

The windows of the shop were lined with the stiff bodies of insects pinned to cork with thin needles. The type and species were hand written in heavy but miniscule print on thin strips of cardboard. There was an array of frames ranging from simple to ornate. This, for the most part, was the work of Bruce.

## THIS WAS NOT WHERE BRUCE WANTED TO BE

One summer when Bruce was twenty-five, his father gave him a sum of money and said go somewhere. Bruce chose a place he could not pronounce. According to BugzWatcher.com, this unpronounceable place was becoming an “entomological playground.” Due to aggressive oil mining efforts in the unpronounceable country, pollution had become unregulated and rampant. Environmental theorists speculated that the toxic runoff had soaked into the soil and permeated the roots of local vegetation, including flowers that many insects fed upon. BugzWatcher.com blogger Ken Mecrute babbled excitedly about an unpronounceable forest area that was located in the unpronounceable country. It was purportedly filled with drowsy insects lolling from one poison flower to the next, sleepy, drunk, losing their wits. Bruce took his fathers money and bought a ticket.

At night he would sit on itchy sheets that covered the squashed mattress in the cheap hotel in the unpronounceable city in the unpronounceable country. At night he would scratch the insect bites on his arms as he listened to the sounds of an unknown language bouncing from wall to wall above him. When the people of the unpronounceable city spoke, he could not tell if they were angry, flustered, or overjoyed. Such was the unpronounceable language. According to the locals, the insects in the unpronounceable forest had developed new tastes since the mines were built. They were quite fond of the tender area near the crook of the elbow and the bend of the knee.

By the light of the hotel desk lamp, Bruce severed the insects he had caught during the day. For the first week, the electric crackle of the lamp gave him a headache. He turned on the sink and put his head under the faucet. Still, the sound. When he left the hotel for his morning

expedition, the sound persisted. *Perhaps it is the sound of many lamps all over the city*, Bruce thought. But in the forest, the sound was still there. After two weeks, Bruce realized that this was merely the sound the place made. After three weeks, he had heard the sound so many times that eventually he forgot it.

It took Bruce a month to learn how to handle the insects carefully and gingerly enough so that they did not collapse at his touch. He trained his fingers to approach the bodies slowly and deliberately, to apply a light but sure pressure onto the torso. In the evenings he gave names to the insects he had caught during the day. The Somamus Floratus, or the Flower Sleeper, with its engorged grey wings, its red hind legs, and its translucent antennae. The Cadus Tumulus, or Hill Faller, which was grass colored and had a tubular body and shrunken wings. When Bruce finally looked up from the queasy hotel desk lamp, the season had changed. It was fall in the unpronounceable city in the unpronounceable country. It was like nothing he had ever experienced. The sun remained in the sky until late at night. He covered the windows with heavy construction paper so that he could sleep, because the curtains were not enough. In the forest, the insects had become so swollen that many of them could no longer fly. The environmental theorists speculated that this was due to increased mining activity. On his final morning in the unpronounceable forest, Bruce had to avoid stepping on the bodies slumped in the grass. He was running out of money. It was time to go.

When Bruce arrived at customs in the national airport of the unpronounceable country, his bag was full of insects encased in wooden frames.

“We can’t let you through with this, sir,” said the customs official who, thank God, spoke English.

“Well, as you can see, these specimens have been preserved. They are so sterilized that if their buddies waddled up to them in the forest they wouldn’t even recognize them.”

Bruce smiled slightly at his own joke. It had been two and a half months since he had spoken a full sentence.

“Can’t. Against the law.”

Other sentences were exchanged, it was all a great strange blur that Bruce, now, tries as hard as he can to forget.

When people asked him where he went, he mumbled something that began with a hissing sound and ended with a vowel. Sometimes he scratched his nose in the process. They nodded. This was how Bruce found that some people do not ask questions in order to get an answer.

“Ah, I think I had a cousin who went there,” they would say. “Beautiful landscape.” Bruce spent the rest of the summer loitering around low hanging street lamps. Occasionally he lingered on people’s stoops, hovering close to their porch lamps. He had to wait until the light blinded the insects. Mostly mosquitoes. Other times he got lucky, and they were already stunned and piled like an offering at his feet.

## ALL OF A SUDDEN

Merna was blindly traversing the concrete path that led to the pinning shop when Bruce jumped in front of her. All of a sudden. He leaned in very close, his eyes fixed on Merna's collarbone.

Now, Merna rehearses the details of their first encounter in her head in case someone might ask her. She has the version she tells people, and she has the account of what really happened. They are stored away in her head, somewhere. The problem is that she has rehearsed so many times that she can't remember how it actually went. When she tries to conjure the event as it truly happened, a mixture of the two histories appears to her in a sort of mist.

Merna sincerely believes that it is necessary to have a series of funny anecdotes. A self-help book assured her that this would come in handy in any social situation. The name of the book and who wrote it has evaporated from her mind. "Boost your Small Talk, Boost your Life," something like that. All that she can recall now is a blurry vision of the cover. Pink? A woman in a business suit, smiling?

"Yes, well it's a funny story actually..."

She was flattered, no one has even taken such intent interest in her collarbone before.

All of a sudden he reached his hand out. His forefinger and thumb slowly approached her collarbone.

"Excuse me," Merna said nervously. She stood absolutely still.

Retrospectively, she wonders now why she didn't flinch or move away. It must have been the sunlight, the way it blinded her, and how she saw spots when she walked into the pinning shop. The way he looked sort of harmless. Bruce squinted and with poised fingers

plucked a huge and hideous insect from the collar of her shirt. He held it by one of its legs. It squirmed between his fingers. He cupped his other hand below the insect in anticipation, incase it jerked violently and escaped.

“A *huge* bug, the size of my fist! Well a little smaller, actually, I exaggerate...”

The bug was truly hideous and the 2 o’clock summer sun was too bright. It bounced off the asphalt and made her ankles itch with sweat.

“Hideous. Little red eyes, looking at me like I’d killed its mother.”

It was the first time she thought that it would be nice, perhaps, to have someone to warn you about these sorts of things. The sorts of things that are right in front of you, but you not aware of. The sorts of things that cling to the hem of your shirt and stay there simply because they are out of your line of vision.

“I was scared stiff, couldn’t even breathe. He just dropped his cigarette on the sidewalk and walked up to me, calmly. He didn’t even wince, just snatched it right off me and held it in his hand.”

Uncle Jerry popped his head out of the shop door.

“Merna, you comin’ or what? Time’s money, darlin’,” he called out, or at least that’s what she remembers, now. It was definitely something like that, she reassures herself. A typical Uncle Jerry line: harmless, cliché, a pastry full of air.

When rehearsing, she considers adding how Uncle Jerry couldn’t find his special tweezers in the back room of the shop, and how he eventually found them right in front of him as soon as Merna stepped of the room. She thinks of adding how, when they got back in the car, Uncle Jerry could not for the life of him find the twelve-ounce cherry Slurpee that he’d bought from 7/11, and how he swore he left it in the cup holder. That how, when they parked back at

the house and she stepped out of the car, he dislodged the key from the ignition and looked down to see the Slurpee, oozing its red froth all over the edges of the cup holder. She thinks of mentioning these things. But that is a rehearsal for a different story, a story that would come later.

Now, in her mind, Merna looks back over her shoulder as she walks towards the pinning shop. In her mind, she sees Bruce, perpetually transfixed by the insect twitching between his fingers. She sees him there, in the light that made looking at things hurt. This, in her mind, looping. The thing, perched, resting near her neck. When she thinks about it now, she shakes her wrists as though she is shaking off water.

## MERNA GOES BACK, THINKING SHE MIGHT CATCH A GLIMPSE OF BRUCE AGAIN

“So,” said Uncle Jerry at dinner. “Merna fancies one of my catchers.”

Agatha winced. The look she had given Merna the day before did not get her point across, apparently. Uncle Jerry spooned more peas onto his plate.

“I just wanted to go back to the store, you know, the sun was so bright, I was almost blinded by the time I actually got in the place,” Merna explained sheepishly.

“Right,” Uncle Jerry said in an exaggerated voice, and nudged Agatha with his elbow. She jerked dramatically in her seat as though he had injured her.

The next day, Merna walked into the shop. She found Bruce in the back room. He was hunched over, plucking the wings of a gassed butterfly with tweezers. Another butterfly that was contained in an empty pickle jar flapped frantically beside him. A pair of Praying Mantises pawed and bumped their feelers against the glass of an old container of marinara sauce. Bruce smelled like cigarette smoke. He wheeled around in his chair.

“My lunch break is in fifteen,” he said, simply.

Merna waited outside. It was less bright today. A tree cast generous shade over a bus stop bench. In twenty minutes, Bruce immersed.

“Apologies,” he said. “Got caught up.”

## CONVENIENCE

Once in bed, Bruce called Merna's breasts "convenient."

"They aren't too imposing," he explained.

He passed his palm over her nipple, the way the palm of a snake charmer hovers over a basket. It wasn't the fact that he had called her body convenient that bothered her. She knew that Bruce was a man of utilitarian motivations. Nothing about her protrudes in a particularly offensive way. She never has to say excuse me more than once when she scoots her way through the aisles of an airplane.

He held her and cooed, "You, my darling, are the most practical woman I have ever encountered."

No, this didn't bother her. What bothered her was how his hands smelled faintly like the preserving fluid. How cold they were from being washed in the kitchen sink with its faulty water heater. These were the two anatomies Bruce was concerned with: the corpses of insects and the body of his wife. Their hard, sleek shells, their spindle legs. Her convenient breasts.

## BRUCE SHOWED MERNA HIS HORNET STINGS

Bruce peeled off his shirt like a skin.

“This one, right on my belly,” he said. “Went after a hornet the size of your left eyeball. Had a perfect frame for it and everything. But that hornet had other plans.”

Merna noticed the soft pouch his belly made as he sat up to meet her mouth. His belly was like a pillow of tortellini. She thought of how the body can be seen in fractured segments.

## MERNA SHOWED BRUCE HER SCAR

Merna whisked her hair away with her fingers.

“Right here,” she said, pointing.

She was not pointing to the correct spot, and she knew it. *Strange how we cannot gesture to things we cannot see, even if it is ourselves*, she thought. She had the strong desire to make noise. In the silence she could hear his fingers parting her hair. Bruce guided her finger to the jagged line of her scar tissue, but Merna’s hand halted and turned into a fist. Merna did not mind the brittle bodies of insects. This is one thing Merna refuses to touch.

Bruce got very close. He squinted. He even thought of moving the lamp closer but then decided against it. Instead he cupped his hands to his eyes as though the lamplight obstructed his view. The scar travels like a knot from the base of her neck and disappears in a thicket of hair. Bruce was a little theatrical about it all, despite the fact that there was no one to be theatrical for, as she could not possibly see him seeing her. Perhaps he was being theatrical for himself. The only beings he has seen dissected and put back together are the corpses of insects, and he was seeing Merna. Merna is alive. As she breathed he could see the scar bob. He wanted very badly to touch it but did not, because he could see that her shoulders were drawn up towards her ears. She twisted a patch of hair that dangled near her shoulder. Her fingers were exclamation points.

## BARNACLES

Her scar is a series of barnacles, stubborn lumps like inflamed pebbles. Perhaps *this* was the last part of Merna's body Bruce really saw. It is the part he remembers, certainly.

## FIVE YEARS LATER

Fifteen years later, Merna finds herself in a position that would have prompted Agatha to make an army of dough balls. The last dough ball Agatha rolled was during a hospital meal. She split open a roll and went for the center.

“Agatha, the doctors say you really need to eat,” Uncle Jerry said fretfully.

She silently rolled five small spheres into one large ball. When the nurse came back, she asked for another roll.

Merna and Bruce get married. Despite the fact that Bruce does not read the newspaper, he has a habit of walking to the end of the driveway to retrieve it. It is a long and winding trek. It is especially difficult during snow season.

“Why do you walk all the way down there in the cold to pick up a piece of paper you have no interest in?” Merna asks.

“Exercise.”

After his retirement, insect pinning becomes a hobby that expands to include less commercially marketable insects, such as moths and houseflies. Bruce sometimes finds his prey crawling in the cupboard among the cans of soup and boxes of rice. The sack of kill jars that Bruce used to sling across his back feel heavier nowadays. He sits in the kitchen until a Daddy Long Legs meanders by, and bends with precision to lower a glass over it. Simple. The trapped insect paces for hours.

Merna sometimes wonders if there is a scream, some pulse of breath inside that vacuum.

“Our most industrious worker,” Uncle Jerry had said, leaning against the doorframe with a look of sincere pride. “Bless his heart. Look at his attention to detail. The feelers! The feelers! Those are the hardest, they slip right through the tweezers.”

## FOR A LONG TIME

For a long time, Merna liked to think that Bruce was what a tree looks like a window as the sun goes down. To Merna, he was the cluster of leafs that make the distance appear speckled.

## PAMELA ANDERSON

Merna and Bruce went to a wax museum for their honeymoon. It had a \$25 entry fee and all of the sculptures were of outdated celebrities, but Bruce was determined to go. It was as close to seeing a human cadaver as Bruce had ever gotten. Seinfeld beamed blankly in a corner. His gaze was directed at Pamela Anderson, who was wearing a red spaghetti-strap top. As Merna approached, she realized that Pamela had a thick layer of dust on her teeth and lower lip. The blond wig that had been placed atop the sculpture was slipping, making it appear as though she had a receding hairline. *Strange*, Merna thought. She had always assumed that as she got closer to another person, or, in this case, an object masquerading as a person, they would become less mystifying. Merna looked across the room at Bruce, who was inches away from Elvis's right earlobe. As time went by, Merna's view of Bruce as a rustling tree across the street evaporated. He became the grubs squirming inside a hollow tree. He became the mysterious way that the grubs make their living.

"You can stare at grubs as closely as you want," Uncle Jerry told her once, "but you'll never be able to predict what direction they'll decide to squirm in."

## BRUCE KNOWS JUST WHAT TO DO WITH SOMETHING AFTER HE HAS CAUGHT IT

Bruce likes to remind people that what is most challenging about his pastime isn't catching the insects, it's pinning them. Butterflies, for example. It is important to make sure that you have injected enough glycerin solution into the body. It can be hard to tell how much will be necessary, and there is no standard amount as size varies. For example, butterflies in the Birdwing family have larger bodies and stronger wing muscles. Because of this, they must be injected multiple times before the wings can be effectively removed. One April, Bruce chased a *Nymphalis antiopa*, more commonly known as a Mourning Cloak, down the driveway and all the way into the street. Its brown wings blended into a tree at the fringe of the wide forest that lined the little road. Bruce wouldn't have been able to find it had it not been for its outer wings, which were yellow like they had been dipped in butter. He caught it in his hands, a first, and it fluttered savagely against the cage of his palms until he walked back up the driveway and guided it into an empty mason jar. By the time it was immobile at the bottom of the jar, it was severely battered. The oil on Bruce's hands had stained its wings. One of its antennae had come loose. This was how Bruce came to know the injury of a frenzied thing trying to preserve itself.

## PATIENCE

Bruce was and is a patient man. He paces the hall and pokes his head into his study while waiting for the preserving fluid to take effect. He makes soup from scratch to pass the time, waiting for the wings to soften. He touches his wife's shoulders or rests his forehead against the crook of her neck. Waiting for the wings to soften.

After much trial and error, Bruce finds a method that can be used for smaller butterflies, as their bodies are typically more difficult to inject.

"Grasping the body of the butterfly with tweezers and dipping them in warm water works like a charm," he told Merna. Merna nods politely.

Finally, he puts the butterfly on a spreading board.

Once, Bruce placed a trail of crumbs the led to a kill jar.

"Convenient," he explained to Merna.

If it is boredom or cruelty or both, Merna doesn't mind. As long as it keeps his mind busy.

Capture, kill, reassemble, frame. Bruce squints, stalks spider webs.

## FRAMES

Merna is losing picture frames.

“Sometimes when people get older they lose their memory of people and places, I just lose my pictures of them,” she half jokes.

The mantelpiece display has thinned over the course of two months. Merna notices more than anything the sequence in which they vanish. First, the pictures of Bruce and his family. Then the picture of the house she had lived in as a child. Merna stamps her foot hard on the thick living room carpet when she realizes that the picture from Yosemite, in which Merna and Bruce smile tiredly with their giant backpacks, is gone. Finally their wedding pictures are the last to go.

“I am losing my mind,” mutters Merna, “where could they possibly have gone?” She chews a loose cuticle on her thumb.

“Don’t know. You’re fine, Merna. You’re fine,” Bruce tries to reassure her.

Merna is proud of her picture frames. One of her favorites has candy hearts glued to it. She bought it from a boutique type place in town, even though she knows how Bruce feels about those sorts of places.

“Bits of high end do dads from the dump,” he scoffs. He holds the frame close to his face and licks a heart. “Pure sugar, no preservatives. I give it a week till the flies land.”

The next day he stations himself in front of the frame and waits.



Later, she finds them. They are spilling from a drawer in Bruce’s study. Dozens of spiders and a handful of fat bumblebees soaked in formaldehyde lie behind glass cases.

## POP SONGS

Bruce doesn't like the pop songs in the gas station or the saccharine friendliness of the cashier at the liqueur store. Bruce has lived in this town all his life. He has kept his nose to his work, and has only recently looked up to find that he is surrounded by a bunch of softies. Bruce's words, not the authors.

To some, he seems unrelentingly terse and bitter. Whenever people have conversations with him, they assume that he is either scowling or going blind and cannot see them properly. Really, Bruce is squinting because he is looking for any trace of an insect in his peripheral vision. He is constantly tracking, finding an appropriate time to snatch whatever crawling thing comes into his line of vision.

Merna doesn't mind the pop songs. At the doctor's office an old boom box cycles repeatedly through the top 40 songs of that week. She doesn't mind. She is there to get her warts frozen off. She hides her hands in the sockets of her sweater sleeves.

"I just don't understand," Merna says.

Merna is embarrassed, flustered. Her hands are under her thighs, despite the fact that she has come here to reveal them.

"Nothing to worry about," says the nurse, who does not look up from her clipboard. "Some patients are more prone to getting warts than others, not correlated to your lack of hygiene at all."

The nurse coaxes Merna's hand into open space. She holds Merna's hand with her gloved one, but it is not what can be called a holding, really, Merna realizes. *It is more of an examining, but no, Merna thinks, that's not it, because examining can be done with the eyes*

*alone.* The nurse picks up the metal canister of frozen mist. Merna cannot say that her hand rests in the nurse's hand, because it is not resting at all. Her hand feels humiliated in its exposure. It is abbreviated at the wrist. It has become a slab of meat, an artifact that two unlikely companions inspect.

The nurse counts the warts on Merna's hand. Her name is Rachael. Five warts. Merna clenches her hand into a fist to protect her palm as the nurse presses the nozzle of the canister. She doesn't mean to. Instinct. She looks away and thinks of how to describe the act of holding a hand in a way that is not intimate. The word holding doesn't work. Resting doesn't work either. Why does touching always have to be intimate? Suddenly, a cold searing. She saw it coming. Still. How could the council who decides which words should be in the dictionary sit in a circle and combine syllables to describe a circumstance in which the toucher and the touched are detached. Essentially, it would be a word that means, "I look at your body like it is a thing instead of like it is you." Sure, they come up with words like "war" and "genocide," Merna thinks as the nurse pats the adhesive wings of a bandage onto the heel of her palm, but this is somehow too painful in its specificity. If there is a word for a clinical holding, holding with purely the intention of examination, Merna does not want to know it.

Rachel goes to the sink, removes her gloves and reaches for the water faucet.

"Wait," Merna says.

Merna is humiliated again. She has forgotten that there is a wart on her heel and it is the biggest one.

## KILL JAR

Bruce had made his living by killing things, then taking them apart and reassembling them. No different from a car mechanic. Over the years he has inhaled a lot of fumes from the kill jars. He has spent a lot of time prodding the flailing legs of crickets into the mouths kill jars. One night, Bruce dreams that his collection of Katydid sings as they had in life.

“Katydid are known for their loud mating calls that last from mid June and straggle on until mid October,” Uncle Jerry told Merna as they stood hunched in the small back office of the pinning shop. “Like most insects that die as autumn comes, Katydid get sluggish. Katydid don’t get quieter, though, they just get slower.”

The first summer Merna and Bruce were married, the Katydid sung as one pulsing, chugging engine. They called to one another. The ones behind the glass case were caught in mid July, during the summer Bruce worked at the pinning shop. Their yammering was not yet in full swing. Bruce caught them before their staccato hit, before their mating call was dipped in the syrup of autumn. Now, he dreams that in death they still have not stopped. He dreams that their chatter has dwindled to a croaking chirp that sounds once every thirty seconds. In his dream their limbs wave despite the pins lodged in them.

## WAITING

Bruce submits a thorough account of the insects he found in the unpronounceable forest to the Journal of Applied Entomology. Although he has no concrete evidence, he argues in his letter that visual proof is vastly over rated. Bruce seals the letter and deposits it at the post office. He waits. One thing Bruce takes pride in is his ability to remain cool about these sorts of situations. Every day, Bruce walks to the end of the driveway.

“Exercise,” he explains to Merna, who requests an explanation less and less frequently.

The walk takes approximately four and a half minutes. Despite Bruce’s pride in his ability to remain cool about these sorts of situations, the four and a half minute walk gives him just enough time to muse. On one walk to the mailbox he envisions himself accepting a gold encrusted scroll from a white haired man in a lab coat. A crowd of people claps, naturally. Each vision builds on the one before it. The next morning he sees himself foraging in lush, tropical undergrowth. In his mind he plucks an unnamed, squirming specimen from a sprig that juts conveniently onto the path he walks on.

He reaches the mailbox. Nothing. Like this, many days.

## WHAT TYPE OF MAN IS BRUCE

Once Merna's friend Tabatha, trying to be funny, gave Merna and Bruce "Sensual Chocolate Body Spread" and rubber gloves for their wedding anniversary. "Fun in your advanced years," the card read. The Sensual Chocolate Body Spread sat in the back compartment of the refrigerator until Merna fished it out one December when the snow was too heavy to drive to the grocery store. She microwaved it and served it over pancakes.

This was the first time in a decade that Merna deviated from her breakfast routine. Merna had eaten the same thing for breakfast for the past decade. A soft-boiled egg, toast, marmalade jam, and a glass filled with half orange juice, half water.

When she was in the fifth grade, Merna watched eggs hatch in science class. How would you tell, exactly, if an egg housed a chick, Merna wondered.

"Sometimes you don't know until you crack them open," said Tom, who was the kind of kid who got all up in your face about "googolplex" being bigger than infinity. "Once my mom cracked open an egg into the frying pan for breakfast and out popped a baby chick!" He said, inching closer, too close until he was inches from her face. His breath smelled the way children's breath smells, faintly like milk and a little like an empty basement full of mousetraps but no mice.

"The pan was hot, piping hot," he said, rubbing his hands on his pant legs and leaving a dusty orange Cheeto trail. "And it was too late! That little chick got up and hopped around on the pan. Ouch, ouch my feet!" He mimicked, hopping on one foot.

Merna knew what happened to eggs when people knocked them against the rim of a bowl. Merna knew what happened to eggs when people dropped them on the floor by accident.

She marveled at how such a similar effect could be produced by two totally different acts: a hand making an egg hover over the lip of a bowl versus a hand swinging blindly, coming into contact with something.

In the fourth grade, Merna gave a presentation on the history of the eggcup. Her mother gave her a plain, sturdy looking white eggcup to show the class. She told the class that the earliest eggcup was found in the ruins of Pompeii in 74 B.C., and that it was preserved under the lava of Mount Vesuvius after it erupted in 79 AD. To Merna, this was proof that her concern about the fate of eggs was in fact something that people had worried about for a long while. Little pedestals. She realized that it was of great importance that things be kept as they are. Devices must be made to protect things from getting out.

Merna wondered what would happen if she fell hard or far enough. She thought of the monkey bars, the sidewalks, the rusty jungle gym. Would her entire body split? The danger of fissure was everywhere. If she were to be cut into deep enough, would the crack spread like a fault line? Would whatever it was that was inside of her spill like runny fluid?

In gym class she wandered the baseball field in a daze for the fullest patch of sunlight. Once, she roamed right onto the pitchers mound. The pitcher, who was in mid swing, released the ball right as he saw Merna stepping into a sunbeam. He watched, horrified, as it struck her. She made the sound animals make, she imagined, when they are lying in a dark place and have a thorn lodged in their paw.

She lay on the ground and waited, the sun blasting in her eyes. She could feel something warm slipping out of her head. The faces of children hovered over her.

“Are you ok?” The pitcher.

“What kind of question is that, Percy.”

“Yeah Percy, she’s bleeding, what kind of question is that.”

“It wasn’t my fault, it wasn’t...she stepped right in front of...”

“Out of my way,” said Mr. Perry, nudging the halo of children that had formed over Merna.

“Oh God, Merna, Merna, ok, lets move you slowly, we can, we can...” Mr. Perry didn’t finish his sentence about taking her to the nurse. One particularly nervous student who had been stationed in the outfield had called 911. Merna heard, dully, an ambulance. She was lifted onto a stretcher.

Merna imagined her center, whatever that was, a yellow orb, oozing.

Percy would go on to play varsity baseball in high school. He would get a full scholarship to some university Merna couldn’t remember. It took Percy months to shake the feeling that someone on the outskirts of the mound was waiting to immerge as soon as he had willed his muscles to hurl the ball.

Stitches. Eight of them. Merna was shocked that she had been so lucky. When she got home that night she lay in bed with a pail of ice fretfully handed to her by her mother. As she spooned melting ice cream into her mouth she felt relieved that people weren’t like eggs, but she was alarmed by the question that ensued: if we are not shells with penetrable insides, then what are we.

## FORK TENDER

Martha Stewart insists that scrambled eggs be fork tender. When you prod a cake when it is still in the oven, it should also be fork tender. People are not fork tender. This is probably a good thing, since we have to do things like push our way through turn styles. Sometimes you may be feeling fork tender, and that is ok too. Sometimes, despite the fact that you remind yourself that you are certainly not fork tender, it is no use. You simply feel fork tender, like you are a Boston cream doughnut.

On those days, it is good to avoid pointy edges. With this in mind, it may also be helpful to avoid people, as one can never know what jagged things people have in their pockets.

When Merna laughs it sounds like an egg frying. Thin crackles. But sometimes when Merna laughs it is incredibly high pitched like a child and she covers her mouth with both of her hands.

Someone showed her once how to squeeze an egg as hard as she could without breaking it. She found this fact reassuring, frailty and the unbreakable living in the same entity. She picked an egg out of its cold plastic nest. She held the egg over the sink, just incase. She cracked the egg and watched it spill into the metal bowl. There was no yolk. There was only translucent fluid and the bottom of the bowl showing through.

Merna consulted the Internet. Answers.com reassuringly informed her that, "Occasionally, a hen will produce a double-yoked egg. It is rare, but not unusual, for a young hen to produce an egg with no yolk at all."

*Ok*, Merna thought to herself. She cracked open another egg. Again, the same. Another. Another. The bowl filled with clear fluid. She got a bigger bowl. Soon, she got through the entire carton and was surrounded by bowls. Their murky contents like ghosts.

## MERNA BUYS A MEMBERSHIP TO AN UPSCALE GYM IN TOWN

An icy cooler filled with lemon wedges decorates the counter. On Fridays it is usually cherry, and on Wednesdays the cooler is garnished with a bit of bloated melon. Merna starts jogging. Her legs ache pleasantly, until the treadmill spontaneously shuts off. The screen declares, “no user detected, shutting down in 10...” and then it counts down from ten. *God damn it, I am here, I am here!* She thinks to herself. It infuriates her that she can be on top of something without it knowing that she is there. Merna approaches the muscular man behind the front desk.

“Excuse me sir, but my treadmill doesn’t seem to be working.”

“Oh?” says the man.

His nametag says Mike.

“Well, lets go take a look at it.” Mike shuffles out of the booth, which is a precarious task as he jostles stacks of member application forms and boxes of protein powder.

“Well, every time I start running, it insists that I am *not* running,” Merna explains.

Mike peers at the machine. Merna puts her hands on her hips and peers with him. Mike gets on the machine, increases the speed, and starts jogging. After about thirty seconds the machine insists that Mike, too, is empty space instead of a human being trotting along its surface. Merna finds this immensely comforting, as she had suspected briefly that she really hadn’t been there the whole time.

“Ah,” Mike says, triumphantly. The distance increases slowly as he trots in place.

“Nothing to worry about.”

The next morning, Merna is sore. She touches her toes and winces. It is a good feeling. The night before, she fell into bed without showering, and this morning she can smell herself, crisp and sour. It is a good feeling. As she waits for the bath to fill, she decides to strip and admire herself in the mirror, but it is too dark and she cannot see herself clearly. She reaches up, holds her breasts in her hands.

When Merna gets into the bath, she looks through the water and sees that her hands are fuzzy. She assumes that the water is just murky and that she has added too much soap. Merna gets out of the bath and gropes for a towel. It seems to have gotten darker in the bathroom. She can barely see her hands in front of her. She turns on the light.

No, it had not been the lighting. Her entire body is murky. The edges of her are fuzzed over and grey like a molding peach. When she touches her forefingers together their respective fuzz edges combine to create a fleshless, noiseless static. This is alarming, of course, but somehow it does not come as a surprise. As with many alarming things, the shock comes after. Merna walks to Bruce's office, still covered in soap foam.

Bruce is reassembling a picture frame to accommodate an Anise Swallowtail. The frame he tampers with once housed a picture of Merna on her wedding day, smiling, her arm draped around her Bruce's neck. Merna pays no attention to this.

"Merna," Bruce begins, but before he can form a sentence she crouches in front of him.

Her soapy hair drips from her temples. Wordlessly, she puts her fingers on the dissecting table, and touches them together. Bruce blinks hard. Bruce continues blinking even in the dark, all through the night.



In the morning, Bruce goes to the eye doctor. The doctor puts drops in his eyes that dilate his pupils. She tells him there is nothing wrong, and sends him home.

“Well, we paid for diddly squat,” he announces as he steps into the house.

The doctor had advised Bruce to get a ride home from a spouse or a friend. Bruce did not want to take a cab, and he does not have any friends. In addition, his wife complains of being fuzzy around the edges. He decided to drive. When he arrives home, he sees Merna on the couch. She is predictably hazy.

“Damn eye drops, can barely see a thing,” Bruce blurts.

Bruce goes upstairs and lies in his bed. Bruce blinks until his head hurts too much to blink anymore.



When Bruce wakes up he does not know where he is. His eyes feel like two fried eggs in his head. He goes downstairs and realizes that it is evening. The television is on. A Talk Show host is in the midst of loudly suggesting that everyone go out and find a stone that “speaks to them.” It is five pm. The Talk Show host suggests a marble, perhaps, or a bead.

“Carry it with you and hold it when you are feeling anxious,” instructs the Talk Show host.

She holds up her own worry stone. The camera zooms in. Her fingers pinch the stone so that the viewer can see her long pink talons, which are to be featured in the next segment of the show.

“Bah, turn that crap off, Merna,” Bruce says.

Merna stares past the television out the window and onto the lawn.

“You’re not even watching the damn thing anyway.”



The next day, Bruce goes to the driveway. He looks out and shuffles a patch of gravel with his foot. He bends and slips a small stone into his warm, lint filled pocket without looking at it. He strokes its surface. Later, as he eats dinner and Merna looks out the kitchen window, he holds the stone under the table in his palm.

“How are an egg and a stone the same,” asks Merna blankly, breaking Bruce’s concentration. Her eyes are still directed out the window.

“You know I’m not one for riddles,” Bruce responds coolly.

“Come on,” she says, her eyes drift lazily to Bruce. “Just one guess.”

“Merna I really don’t…”

“They are both things that you can try to hold onto,” Merna blurts before he can finish his sentence. Her eyes become bright, manic. There is a piece of spinach covering her entire front tooth, but she doesn’t seem to care.

“But ultimately,” she continues, “the egg will break and eventually you will want to put the stone down because it will become too heavy.”

Bruce thinks about this. “Stones are very small,” he replies. “They barely weight anything.”

“That’s not the point,” she scoffs.

“If anything it’s easy to lose the stone because it is so small,” Bruce continues.

Merna is silent. She furrows her brow, thinking.

“Well all the better for illustrating my point then!” she says triumphantly. Too loud.

Bruce stands up and cleared the plates.

“I’m going to bed,” Bruce announces.

He feels the weight of his stone in the pocket of his pajama pants as he brushes his teeth that night.



In the morning, Bruce wakes to the predictable voice of the Talk Show host. He walks past the living room, where Merna is not in front of the television. The host giggles politely at the silence of a dermatologist who has nothing to say.

“Merna, the TV, turn it *off* if you’re not watching the thing. God damn electric bill...”

He goes to the kitchen and sits. He shakes some cereal out of its box. He eats the cereal. The Talk Show goes to a commercial break. As Bruce stands to wash his bowl, he puts his right hand in his pocket to feel the stone. It is smooth on one side and rough on the other, which he quite likes. He has never seen it, so he imagines that the smooth side is a soft blue color. The rough side is the color of dusty clay. But it isn’t in his pocket. He pats his thighs where the pouch would have kept the stone suspended. But it isn’t there.

He thinks of the relative composure he felt the night before when the stone was in his pocket. He thinks of the day looming before him with its empty hours and uncertain activities. He marches to the bedroom and tears the sheets of the bed. He lifts the mattress on its side and inspects the bedsprings. He paces the house, flipping pillows and bending to peer under furniture. In the process he finds Merna, who is looking at herself in the bathroom mirror. She lifts her hair and then drops it.

“How long have you been here?” he asks, although he suspects that she has been there all morning.

“I don’t know.”

Bruce does not ask her if she has seen a stone that is smooth on one side and rough on the other. He goes to the driveway. Picks a bigger one.

## MERNA DOES SOME INTERNET RESEARCH

Merna Googles: “My hand looks fuzzy at the edges.” She Googles “My hands appear to have no distinct boundaries anymore.” A Wikipedia page is the first hit. She drums her fingers on the keyboard impatiently as the page loads.

# Aggressive Invisibility Syndrome

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**Aggressive Invisibility (AI)**, referred to some specialists as **Non-Receptive Pigment Disorder (NRPD)**, is a condition in which the sufferer and the objects he or she is in close proximity with become imperceptible. Although there has been some debate as to the physiological basis for the disorder, it is most commonly theorized that it is caused by the cessation of light reflecting off the surface of human skin. Typically, as the disorder intensifies, decreased human invisibility affects other surfaces, such as the fabric of clothing, the surface of a table, etc. Scholarly articles and reports regarding AI are few, as a limited amount of research has been conducted. Approximately 2% of the population suffers from some degree of AI. [1] AI still remains a medical mystery, as no other physiological changes occur in the body.

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## Epidemiology [\[edit\]](#)

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The [Enviros Against GMOS](#) have speculated that agricultural use of GMOs are responsible for AI. Enviros Against GMOS petitioned to press the FDA to assess the link between AI and GMO usage, however, the FDA has not taken action. [2]

There are further hypotheses that hold that AI is a congenital issue that becomes aparent later in life, as the ages of those afflicted with AI typically range from 25 onward. [3]

Advanced stage sufferers of AI carry what is called an [AI Aura](#), a radius ranging from a foot to less than an inch in which external objects may be effected. At the most advanced stage, the AI Aura effects objects in direct contact with the sufferer. Visible people who have been caught in an AI Aura may find this alarning, but is ultimatley a temporary effect that wares off after the visible person removes themselves from the AI Aura. [4]

## History [\[edit\]](#)

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The first recorded subject to have suffered the full effects of AI was [Janet Mackel](#) in 1982. [James Mackerton](#), Professor of Human Physiology at the New York University, chronicled the case. [5] Mackerton ran tests on weekly over the course of five years. The main focus of his research was the body's response to different levels of brightness and types of light, including UV. Mackerto measured her shadow, which remained the same length throughout the course of her illness. This led Mackerton to conclude that, despite the fact that visual stimuli was decreasing at a predictable rate, the physical structure of the body was not at all compromised. Although the body could no longer refract light, light still affected the body by allowing the body to cast darkness.

Mackerton also found that once particles were separated from the body and have been cast from the AI Aura, the particles become visible. Mackerton collected copious hair samples, saliva and fecal matter.

Upon Mackel's death and despite the wishes of her family and loved ones, Mackerton insisted that her body be preserved in a morgue in a refrigerated vault. There, he continued to visit Mackel on a weekly basis, and monitored the receptiveness of her skin cells to light. In his groundbreaking book, "The Invisible Woman, a Story of Janet Mackel," he recounted his findings, concluding that, after a period of fifteen days, Mackel's body "flickered into focus." [6]

Mackerton concluded that the cause of AI is the incapability of flesh and other material of refracting light. This sparked debate amongst the medical community. Questions as to which system was dysfunctional were raised. Leading Ophthalmologist at the University of California Lisa Thompson speculated that it is in fact the system of the human eye that becomes dysfunctional in its ability to perceive objects. In her groundbreaking article "AI Sufferers and those who Perceive Them," she wrote that "it is not a deficiency of the flesh, but a deficiency of the human eye observing the flesh." [7]

Physicist [Lia Soorenian](#) offered a counter argument in her book, "[A Common Blindness](#)," [8] stating that AI cannot truly be classified as a persistent or degenerative disorder, as the sufferer of AI can only truly suffer from the condition when he or she is exposed to a light source. In darkness, there is no evidence as to whether or not the symptoms of AI are in effect.

## Symptoms[[edit](#)]

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- In some sufferers, afflictions remain localized. [9] Most commonly these singular regions are appendages including fingers and toes. Some research has shown that AI begins typically in sections of the body that jut out, including the nose, lips, ears, and eyelashes, and spreads to more central areas of the body.
- [Short-term memory loss](#): a clouded memory of events that have recently occurred.
- Some sufferers have noted that a preliminary stage of AI includes the heightened attention to objects and phenomenon that lack clear, concrete boundaries. In his book "[Scanty Division](#)," [Marcel Recorneau](#) [10] explores this experience through the personal accounts of five AI sufferers. This symptom remains speculation, as it is based upon first hand anecdotes and not published research.
- A distorted perception of ones own body, loss of awareness of the parameters of the body. [11]

## Treatment[[edit](#)]

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There is no known cure for AI.

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Merna scratches her nose. She bites dead skin from the tips of her fingers. She goes to the bathroom mirror and gets so close that she bumps it with her nose. She looks very hard at her eyelashes until she feels dizzy. Yes, a fog has certainly developed where those fine hairs end and became air.

Merna returns to her computer. She puts her fingers in her mouth. She tucks her knees into her chest and continues scrolling with her other hand. The page will not load. The computer screen flickers. She goes to the bathroom again and fills the sink with cold water. She lets the water run until it sloshes over the porcelain rim of the sink. She sticks her head in the water and lets the water slosh out onto the tiles on the floor.

After a week, Merna looks through her hand and sees straight through to the other side.

## BRUCE GOES OUT TO DINNER WITH HIS INVISIBLE WIFE

Sometimes all Merna can do is sit until afternoon with the cabinets open. The mouths of upturned cups gape. *Too furious to swallow*, she thinks. Choking on air, maybe. *Look at these things that are also filled with cavities.*

Bruce looks down at Merna, who is sitting on the floor. He nudges her with his foot and tells her that they are going out to dinner. The author would like to point out the use of the word “tell,” as opposed to “take out,” “invite,” or “suggest.” Merna gives him a blank stare. She is blank, her stare is blank, all of it is blank. Merna’s clothing is still visible, although she can see the fabric dull on her body. Sometimes it appears to be unraveling. She has been on the sofa for most of the day with her motionless bulk. She looks like a scarecrow with a breeze blowing through its coat.

“It’ll be good for you,” he says, putting on his hat.

“Wait,” Merna says, picking a feeler from the collar of his shirt. It hovers in the air briefly, lands on the table. “Where are we going?”

Bruce tries to find her eyes. His eyes pan over the room, as though looking from the top of a misty mountain. His eyes hover over her shoulder.

“That new restaurant that just opened, the one with the tablecloths and wine glasses that make a noise when you drag your finger across the rim,” he says, mimicking the circular motion with his finger until it falls to his side like a dropping fly.

She reaches wordlessly for her coat.

“Merna” Bruce says, “I’ve been meaning to mention something.” He shifts to one leg, scratches the back of his ear. “It might scare people, you know, if you go out like that,” he gestures to where he calculates her to be.

“Well how else am I supposed to go anywhere?”

“Take that off,” he says.

She drapes the coat across the back of the sofa.

“Well no, I mean,” Bruce shuffles, “well I mean...”

“All of it?”

“All of it.”

While walking to the car Merna notices the air, her bare feet, the texture of ground, everything is cold. Merna is not the type to order a stiff drink, but Merna orders a stiff drink, and quickly realizes that there is nothing more disturbing than a stiff drink dangling solo, draining itself anonymously. It is possibly more disturbing than tubes of cloth with no hands poking through. She waves her napkin for another round.

Bruce is uncomfortable, but pretends not to be. He is no good at small talk. He nods occasionally at no comment in particular. This is somehow simultaneously enough and not. Merna feels the cold back of the chair against the void of her nakedness. Bruce’s hand skirts along the table like a blind thing on the ocean floor, trying to find her arm. Merna looks around the room for other floating beverages, sees none. Merna never sees any.



“Welp,” Bruce announces, and puts his keys in the little wooden bowl near the entrance.

He disappears to his study. Later that night, Merna clips her fingernails. She sees them slowly reappear on the carpet as little moons. She remembers sitting on the bed and inspecting the ends of her hair just a month ago. How restless she was, waiting for it to grow.

In his study, Bruce realizes that he has lost another worry stone. He mutters to himself agitatedly and taps his forehead with his finger. He feels as though he has lost a shield. All at once his worries rush at him. He tears open a sealed garbage bag, trying to find the stone, only to find that he had left it on the soap dish while he was washing a stain out of his pants. At night, Merna hears many stones clanking in the washing machine, dislodged from their dark pockets.

## MERNA ESCAPES

Merna wants to leave like there is a lover waiting for her across a long road. But there is no lover, only a long road, and the longing for something that she cannot identify. So, finally. She walks to the end of her driveway. She gets all the way to the mailbox. The truth is that Merna has never stood alone at the end of the driveway before. Sure, she has stood with Bruce. Always hurried and brisk. But never alone. Merna suddenly gets the sense that there is a lot beyond that mailbox. Many things. She keeps walking. Around her the edges of the leafless trees pulse with her presence. In their unconscious way they sense her, they know she's there. They are aware in their brainless, eyeless sort of way of what she is carrying, of what she is, of the invisibility that clings to her. They know it with their bodies. This is a sort of knowing that Merna does not have.

Merna heads east towards the town. It is the first place that she can think of to go. The thing is that Merna has never really explored the town, mostly because of Bruce's reluctance to go there. Up until now Merna has not fully realized how long it takes to get to town without a car. She walks along the sidewalk that is pocked with weeds struggling upward and roots heaving their spindle bodies from tight spaces. The concrete of the sidewalk seems to have eroded into the street. She keeps walking. It is bright and cold. She squints. An insect buzzes frantically against the void of Merna's neck. Merna muses that her invisibility provokes confusion that the bodies of insects are not equipped to navigate. She dislodges the creature from the crook of her neck. Its little body wriggles in her fingers. Its torso vibrates with the sound it emits. She releases it. It zigzags into the bushes. She keeps walking. Finally, after what seems like a long time, Merna comes to a traffic light.

Perhaps you have encountered the futility of a traffic light on a vacant country road. Perhaps you have experienced the inclination to run a red light because no one is present to enforce the law. Perhaps you have been subject to the paralyzing conundrum that, despite this itch, what is more powerful is the fear that a cop will see you. A policeman squats in the bushes, despite the fact that the country road stretches on for miles in front of you with no one in sight. Buckley Unsworth feels this paralysis at roughly 1:35 in the afternoon as he slows for the yellow light that has, up to that moment, been ushering forward and halting the vacant landscape. Buckley, Buck for short, stops slowly as the light turns red. At moments like these Buck likes to imagine that he is in a cartoon. Behind his closed eyes a tumbleweed floats by and the wind sounds hollow. A pair of comically large yellow eyes lined with dark circles looms from a nearby shrub. Buck coughs a deep rheumatic rasp. He has been driving for five hours straight. The reason is not relevant to this story, all that the reader needs to know is that Buck has been on the road for too long to keep his eyes open. He drums his fingers on the wheel. He opens the window so that the cold air will sting his eyes open. Buck is surrounded by empty soda bottles filled with his own piss. The stack of blankets in the back seat that he uses as a bed has sprouted a thin layer of mold. Moisture has crept into the car through a crack in the backseat window like the breath of something sinister. The only thing he has eaten since Tuesday evening is a stale muffin that was hurled at him from the drive through window of a Dunkin Doughnuts. Buck gave the woman at the drive through window two dollars for a five dollar fifty order and asked for some “fuckin human charity.” He was declined. It is now Thursday afternoon. Gas money is the number one priority.

Buck coughs again. This time he coughs so hard that he starts to vomit. He leans halfheartedly towards the open window. Vomit dribbles down the window and streaks the truck.

Buckley feels his body shudder with the volition to expel poison. The need is invisible but it is certainly and undeniably there.

What Buckley does not know:

1. That soon an invisible woman will steal his car.
2. That for the past five and a half days that he has been driving, a morsel of deadly fungus has clung to his left shoe.
3. The fungus grew spores that burrowed into the cocoon of the backseat.
4. The spores were infecting his lungs. So microscopic they were invisible as they traveled into the dark cavern of his throat and belly. As he gasps for breath after each hacking cough, he contaminates himself more.
5. That Merna will cast his body gingerly into a thicket of bushes. To a passing pedestrian he would appear to levitate, briefly, before his head hits the concrete and his arms drag above his head, as though he is stretching after a long nap.

By now the road has completely overtaken the sidewalk. Merna walks on the muddy snow sodden dirt that lines the road. The traffic light is the first sign of human influence on the landscape in over a mile. There is a sturdy looking sidewalk on the other side of the road. The box blinks with its little red man. Merna waits. The white crosswalk lines are faint and nearly invisible. *Just because something is invisible does not mean that it isn't there*, Merna thinks to herself. A comforting thought. Merna looks up. The light changes from green to yellow. The truck is still stationary. The light turns red. As an invisible woman, Merna is especially cautious

about approaching vehicles, moving or not. This is why she speaks as she walks towards Buckley's truck.

"It's a nice day," she says.

Her voice rises, which made her sound like she is asking a question.

"My name is Merna," she says very loudly. She stops and inspects the crumpled man in the drivers seat.

She is surprised that her shouting has not woken Buckley, who is not Buckley to her, but just an inert man. His forehead is pressed into the steering wheel. He is covered in his last meal. She leans closer to the open window. The stale smell wafts into the street. *This man must be dead*, Merna thinks. The bright stoplight persists in its message.

Merna stands fixated. She has never seen a dead man before.

"Sir," she entreats anyway. "Sir, it appears to me that you are headed into town."

She pauses. The man does not respond. She reaches into the car and nudges his shoulder. The stoplight turns yellow for the third time. Merna makes a decision. She opens the door. Buckley slumps out into the street. He is held, barely, by his seatbelt. When Merna leans over him to unclick the harness he tumbles out onto the concrete.



Merna opens all the windows. She opens the skylight. She drives two miles under the speed limit, just incase. She feels an invisible sensation rising in her invisible guts. It occurs to her that if she were eviscerated, her small intestine, say, would materialize. Merna does not know how to feel about this. As she enters the town she considers the distinction between what is hidden and what is invisible. The sensation she feels is desire, which is indeed invisible in all people.

Merna passes right through the town. She hadn't originally planned on this. She keeps going. The colonies of spores that had kept themselves warm are killed by the gusts of cold air whipping through the windows and ceiling. Merna prefers the cold to the smell. She has the sense that she is moving, that distance is accumulating behind her and that the farther she gets the more difficult it will be to turn around and go back. Gas money, for starters. Other reasons.



After thirty miles, Merna's cell phone rings. It's Bruce. An especially useful function of any phone, Merna finds, is to switch it to vibrate. If that isn't effective, she finds that it was even more useful to simply turn it off.

## MERNA USED TO TELL PEOPLE

Merna used to tell people to take their time.

“Oh, I’ll just be a minute,” so-and-so would call out from the bathroom.

“Just a sec!” her friend would call her to say as she drank tepid coffee in a café downtown.

“No worries,” she would say, casually, “take your time.”

Merna almost always never meant this. Almost always never. Merna had time for the long rays of sunlight that cast themselves over her lawn on Tuesday mornings. Come to think of it, she had time for long rays of sunlight on any morning that she didn’t have a place to be. She had time to whip egg whites for the frosting of a chocolate cake. She found more and more that she had less time for people. No worries. Almost always never.

## WAKING UP

Bruce wakes up. He knows that Merna is gone. It is in the way the house feels. He lies in bed for a long time with his palms cupped over his eyes.

Bruce opens Merna's dresser drawer. He is greeted by the smell of suffocated lavender. He plucks a bottle of Merna's anxiety pills and closes the drawer. He takes two with dinner, which tonight is a microwaved hot dog on toast. He waits. Nothing. The room grows darker. Bruce takes this as a promising sign until he realizes that the sun is setting. He gets up and microwaves another hot dog. Bruce begins to feel drowsy but he cannot tell if this is because it is late in the evening or if it is because the pills are working or if, perhaps, he is having an adverse reaction to the pills and he is actually dying. Bruce has always prided himself on remaining calm in these sorts of situations. He reads the label. Among the possible side effects include drowsiness and an increased inability to clench ones fists. He compresses his fist into a knot. He squeezes so hard that even his wrist shakes.

As he falls asleep, Bruce remembers a remark that Merna made once. It was a month ago, two months ago, perhaps, he really can't be sure, it is so dark in the room. The smell of lavender and something stale mingle pleasantly.

"I feel like a white washed wall," she whispered in the dim warmth. She had been next to him, a body losing sight of itself in the dark.

This is why she had stopped taking the pills, he remembers now.

## A NOTE ABOUT BRUCE

Bruce has never needed anyone to talk to about the weather. There are many things that Bruce takes pride in not needing, but eventually, like all people, Bruce gets hungry. It is important to mention that we are talking about hunger in the most basic sense. Bruce is not hungry for another person's eyes or even hungry to be touched, however simply. His hand, his shoulder. He has no ache for his cheek to be brushed by an anonymous lapel in a crowded subway car. None of that for now. Bruce makes a mental list. Cold cuts: roast beef, turkey, Munster cheese. A loaf of bread, some tomatoes, lettuce, a box of Milano cookies, and a carton of eggnog. Bruce feels hesitant about the eggnog. He fiddles with his car keys. Does he really need eggnog? Aren't the cookies enough? Bruce hasn't had eggnog in years. What if he opens the carton, has a sip, and realizes that he has no taste for it anymore. What if it is so sweet that it makes his teeth ache? What if it goes bad in the fridge and he has to pour it down the sink? It would have to be a last minute decision.



Bruce listens to the local news on his way to the grocery store. There have been two cases of bears lumbering into suburban backyards in the past week. The news reporter reminds Bruce that it is important to keep garbage cans inside instead of on the street at night. Do not leave grills or picnics unattended. Do not provoke the bear by getting out of your house and trying to shoo it away. You may watch from your living room or kitchen window, if you wish, but try not to tap on the glass or wave your arms violently. The bear will leave on its own. Bruce takes a note of this but feels satisfied by the fact that his driveway is so long that even if a bear became enticed by the trash at the end of his driveway, he would not encounter it. Despite

the fact that this warning does not apply to him, Bruce shakes his head at the radio, where the newscaster has switched topics and is discussing a wildfire in California.

“Bullshit,” he says softly. Not many things leave on their own.

Bruce gets lost on his way to the grocery store. When he finally gets there he is almost out of gas and cannot find a single parking space. Merna always did the shopping. Bruce walks through the frozen food aisle and realizes for the first time that his pant legs are too short. The cold nips his ankles. He bends to tug his socks up but they have lost their elastic and slip below his heel. He picks up the pre sliced cold cuts instead of going to the butcher section. Too much plastic, too bright, all of it. All the people with their paper lists. Bruce wants to get out of there fast but he decides to linger around the produce section. Bruce read somewhere once that the cold dewy mist of the produce aisle attracts all sorts of small insects. In Milwaukee a woman found a black widow in a bag of grapes. *You never know when a profitable circumstance might arise*, Bruce thinks. Bruce shuffles his fingers through the leaves of a head of lettuce and peeks into the puckered stem of a red pepper. Nothing. Bruce pushes his cart to the checkout.

In the checkout line Bruce looks in front of him and sees the back of a young man’s head. This is when everything changes, because up until this point Bruce has been trying very hard not to look at anyone for too long. There is something startling about the back of this young man’s head. The pattern of dandruff at the base of his neck, his do-it-yourself haircut with a little too much taken off the sides, all of it looks familiar. Bruce peers closer, rubs his eyes. Bruce is struck with the immediate urge to buy this young man’s groceries. Bruce has never felt the desire to buy anyone’s groceries. He blinks hard. All of it looks familiar. In the bright, bright florescence he knows he cannot be mistaken. The line scoots forward, a procession of people

and vegetables. Children paw at packets of gum. Bruce moves forward in line. The back of the young man's head bobs towards the exit.

When Bruce reaches the front of the line the cashier asks, "and did you remember to bring your reusable bags?"

Bruce is frustrated because this is not the right question. Bruce has been inside pinning bugs for the entirety of the green eco-trend. *The right question is, "paper or plastic,"* Bruce thinks to himself. Bruce has a policy of not answering the wrong sorts of questions and so he responds instead, "paper." Bruce scampers with his bags to the parking lot. He nearly trips on the box labeled "holiday donations," which is filled with discount store-brand green beans. Bruce follows the man into the parking lot.

Bruce sees him across the lot, and looks at the young man's face for the first time. Bruce blinks hard. He blinks so hard that he fears he may have loosened the cord that connects his eyeball to the rest of the wiring that goes on in his head. The young man looks like Bruce twenty years ago. The only difference that Bruce can see is that he is not wearing bifocals, yet. The craziest thing is that the young man is wearing the same sweater Bruce had when he was in his early twenties. Bruce can hardly believe it. It is grey with sleeves that are a bit too short.

Now Bruce must speak. Not only does the young man look like Bruce in his early twenties, Bruce can place the exact day in history that this younger version of himself seems to have teleported from. It was a month before his trip to the unpronounceable country. His remembering is like pulling a long wad of Merna's hair out of the shower drain, now that she has left. It is like seeing the color of his wife's hair for the first time in months. It pleases him despite the fact that it is not on her head anymore, which makes the whole experience sort of bitter. He remembers walking a ways into the backyard until he found a tree that shaded him

from the sun. He remembers sitting and he remembers the seat of his pants getting wet from all that dewy grass. He remembers how it soaked right through to his underpants. He remembers that sweatshirt and those jeans, and he wonders where they went.

Bruce would later admit that the young man's outfit was, in fact, non-descript. Bruce confesses later with a sore sort of pang that he had looked at the young man like one would look at horoscope in a magazine.

Bruce knows that he must speak. Bruce's voice cracks. The young man waits patiently while Bruce rummages for the bottle of eggnog. Bruce extends his finger, snaps the seal and takes a swig. If you have ever tried to clear your throat with eggnog, you will know that it is a deeply disappointing experience. *A long lost son*, Bruce speculates dizzily. Or perhaps it is just the lighting that makes the young man seem earnest and unmediated. The light of midday makes everything seem vulnerable and ripe.

"Excuse me," Bruce says and coughs. It is at this moment that Bruce feels more than ever and with a vast certainty that when one body approaches another body, it is actually two continents meeting each other again. It is Pangaea realigning.

"Excuse me," Bruce says a third time.

"Yeah? What can I do for you?" says the young man hesitantly, just as the young Bruce would have done.

"Hello," Bruce begins. "I know this is strange and out of the ordinary, but I just saw the back of your head in the grocery check out line. I, well, I couldn't help but notice...I know this is strange but..."

The young man holds Bruce's gaze patiently but keeps his distance.

“I know this is strange but I can’t help but notice. I’m not trying to pick you up or anything...like that...um, its not like that at all, I just want to suggest...would you want perhaps, maybe, to come home with me for some lunch?” Bruce pauses and huffs for breathe. “As you can see, I just bought all these groceries, I really misjudged how much food I bought. I never grocery shop for myself, you see, my wife always did the grocery shopping but now since she’s gone, and, well, this is the fist time I’ve shopped for myself in years, actually since I was your age, probably, and you see I’ve gotten too many groceries, enough for two people I just realized, clumsy of me, too many cold cuts...”

Bruce shrugs, shifts his grasp on the handles of his paper bag.

Bruce cannot read the young man’s expression. The young man is hard to read, just like Bruce had been and still is. There is a long pause.

“Well, sure, I guess,” says the young man. He removes his hands from his pockets and crosses them against his chest. “The only thing is I have this ice cream,” he says, gesturing to the bag beside him. “It might melt.”

“That’s not a problem,” Bruce says hastily. A wild sense of relief and surprise comes over him.

“Well you could follow me in your car, I live a little out of the way, about fifteen minutes past route five. Once we get to my house you could put your ice cream in my freezer, and take it back out when you leave. Industrial size freezer, real sturdy. Zero degrees.” There is another pause. “Fahrenheit, that is.”

“Well, in that case,” says the young man, “I could use a little lunch.”

A part of Bruce did not expect the young man to follow. But he did.

## BRUCE DOES NOT DRIVES HOME ALONE

While driving with his younger self in pursuit, Bruce does not think about the likelihood of a bear attack. He does not think about the radio at all, in fact, and he does not regret having purchased the eggnog.

The two cars pull up the long driveway and the young man hops down from his truck. *Certainly the young man will turn around now that he has seen how long this driveway is*, Bruce thinks. When the young man keeps following Bruce thinks, *certainly the young man will turn around once he has seen my house*. The lawn is severely unruly. Once clipped into tight bulbs, the hedges now spit tufts of green that sag onto the grass before it. *Now he will certainly turn around*, Bruce thinks for the third time. The two walk silently. Bruce opens the door.

“It’s a nice place,” says the young man as they walk single file through the hallway and into the kitchen.

The hallway is too thin for two people to walk side by side. *How kind of him to say that this place is nice even before he has seen the whole house*, Bruce thinks to himself. The light switch is at the end of the hall, and so they shuffle down the hall through the dark.

The kitchen is illuminated. The film of coffee grounds and other debris that litters the kitchen suddenly appalls Bruce.

“Well, I’ll just put everything on the table,” Bruce says, nudging a browned rind behind the microwave. “You can choose what you want. I’ve got a toaster too, if you want to toast your bread, and a little butter.”

Bruce shuffles around in the fridge and produces half a stick of butter covered in toast crumbs. The wrapping is torn haphazardly.

“Um, here,” Bruce says as he attempts to scrape off and dislodge the multitude of black dots.

“Hey, its ok,” says the young man. “I’m not much of a cook myself. I’ve been living off mac-and-cheese and bagel bites for the past few months since I’ve graduated and boy it’s nice to have some greens.” The young man looks meaningfully at the bulb of lettuce.

“Ah. Well, good.

Much like Bruce had been and still is, the young man is not much of a talker. Bruce and the young man make sandwiches without speaking. Bruce does not find the silence uncomfortable.

Bruce has a revolving toaster. Every once in a while a piece of bread gets caught in the spokes of the revolving toaster and burn to a crisp. Bruce admits that the toaster design is not ideal, like so many other things, but who has time to go downtown to the toaster store. While Bruce tries to find a way to discreetly sweep the unidentifiable crumbs off the counter, he notices that the young man has placed his piece of toast back in the revolving toaster for a second round of toasting. This strikes Bruce. *Exactly what I would do.* He is giddy. Bruce coughs like there is a piece of charred toast in his throat.

“Excuse me,” Bruce says.

Most first encounter conversations are like spreading cold butter on cold toast. For some people, in fact, many conversations continue to be like spreading cold butter on cold toast until eventually the butter becomes a little softer. Slowly. The conversation between Bruce and the young man is no different.

Silence. Only the gurgle of old pipes.



Merna used to say that it sounded like they were in a stomach, the two of them. Every day was a variation of this same observation.

“Its like we are in the stomach of a whale,” she said last month, as she cranked the faucet to wash a teacup.

“Its like we are in the stomach of a tiger that has just seen its prey,” she said fifteen days ago, as she turned the garden hose with her foot. Even from the front lawn, she could hear it.

It was difficult for Bruce to admit that he was losing his hearing. In the summer the anger of the cicadas was muted. In July, Merna accompanied Bruce on his morning walk to the end of the driveway. She described to him the swell of the cicadas, how the sound rose and fell as though they were walking with an invisible conductor.

“Mmm, I see what you mean,” Bruce had said tepidly.

On the way back to the house Bruce bent his neck meaningfully downward at the mail he had collected. Merna wondered if perhaps there was a particularly large bill in the mail or if Bruce had gotten news of a dead relative. After they had gotten back to the house and Bruce had retreated to his study, Merna rifled through the stack of letters. She found two letters soliciting a magazine subscription, and a free sample of perfume wrapped in plastic.

Bruce remembers how he hunched in the tall grass in a field in the unpronounceable country. He was surrounded by the unconscious chugging of the Katydids. Bruce remembers how the Katydids looked like plump green leaves, a tactic that allows them to disguise themselves easily in leafy fields and wooded areas. They are commonly found perching on tall stalks of grass blades and on tree limbs. Like Bruce at this later stage of his life, Katydids travel slowly and do not migrate very far from their homes. Many stay near the same tree or patch of field for their entire lives, despite the fact that they have wide and capable wings. Unlike Bruce,

the Katydid's eyes are located on the top of its head, so that they must constantly, perpetually look upwards. As Bruce fell asleep in the unpronounceable hotel in the unpronounceable city in the unpronounceable country, he would imagine what the Katydid saw: the sky, their entire lives. In the long stretches of waiting, too, thoughts like these would occur to Bruce in flashes as he bobbed in neutral colors among the stalks. A vision appeared to him of a field of people clutching the tops of grass blades, standing atop reeds, eye sockets on either side of the line where hair is parted. In a haze he saw them, looking up forever but never at each other. A blur, dehydration, Bruce reasoned. He reminded himself that, based on the anatomy of the Katydid, catchers manuals suggested that they be approached from the periphery as opposed hovering with your net above them. These are important pieces of information for Bruce to hold onto.

The hum of an invisible fleet. A sound that is also felt. When Bruce finally netted one, he inspected it. He put his ear to its back and watched the mechanism between its shoulder blades click. Another incomprehensible language. All together they sounded like a faulty radiator that had been amplified. When he went home and fell asleep, he was startled by the sudden silence. He woke in a halo of thin green blades that had gotten lodged in his hair, and when he rolled over, his vision was crosshatched with Katydid colored wisps. The dead quiet rung. Now there was nothing but.

Bruce occasionally heard the twitch of a cricket's muscle, no matter what the season was. A phantom noise. A week ago, in bed, midnight, Bruce was asleep. Still more stomach talk from Merna. At night, every sound is illuminated in the dark. "Its like we are in the stomach of a very small bird that has eaten too many red berries," Merna said, a statement that Bruce could not agree or disagree with. He pretended to be asleep. Made a show of snoring. Although he

could not be sure, Bruce sensed that there were many things that he could not hear, and this was very difficult for him to admit.



They toast bread and pile on thin clips of turkey. Still no talking. There are only the sounds of the house, audibly and inaudibly chugging. Bruce puts two glasses on the table and the jug of eggnog in the center. The two sit down across from each other. Bruce is exhilarated despite the fact that he cannot conceive of a single thing to say. Bruce realizes that the young man is the first visitor he has had in many years. Bruce has trouble breathing and he can faintly taste salt that has collected in the corners of his mouth since breakfast.

“Well this is really amazing,” Bruce manages to say.

He cannot stop looking. While he is looking the room gets dark. Perhaps it is his looking that makes the room dark. Perhaps his intent focus obscures the outline of everything except for the young man.

“Should I turn on a light?” the young man asks. “Yes, I didn’t realize that the sun went down at this hour,” Bruce says, despite the fact that there are no functioning clocks in the room to consult. The young man crosses the room and turns on the light.

“So,” says the young man. He picks up his sandwich carefully as not to disrupt the balance of turkey and lettuce. The slab of tomato lolls out of its bread bed. “This is a nice place,” he says again. “How long have you lived here?”

“Oh, years,” says Bruce, covering his mouth briefly to suck lettuce from his tooth. “Decades actually. I moved here with my wife when I was twenty-five. When I was about your age. I had an urge to be alone, I can’t really explain it. I guess that’s why I moved so far away from people. Anyway I lived up here and met my wife, Merna. She...well it’s hard to explain.

So many things I cannot explain. She left. I don't know where she went but she's not here anymore." Bruce doesn't know what to do with his hands. He takes a swig of eggnog. He coughs and a bulb of eggnog spit flies from his mouth. "Excuse me."

"Don't apologize," says the young man. "That sounds unimaginably difficult. I like being alone myself, but you can't do it all the time."

Bruce nods. He knows this to be true.

More conversation, back and forth, like an insect hopping between branches.

They discuss their appreciation of simple, bland foods. "I can't stand too much spice," Bruce says. "Keep it simple, that's my motto." The young man hums in agreement a register of sound that Bruce cannot hear. He nods and swallows his food quickly.

"Have you ever heard of Sracha?" The young man asks. "My ex roommate loved the stuff. Poured it all over his eggs. Made out of chili powder. Its bright red, the color that's going on behind your eyeballs, right now!" Bruce nods. He hadn't heard of Sracha, but he was struck by the knowledge that an invisible red stream was flowing inside both of them at that very moment. Bruce thought to himself for the fifth time that this was something he would have said.

When Bruce replays this interaction in his head later he finds that this is not in fact something that he would have said. He would do this many times. This does not stop him from conjuring the bright red image right before he falls asleep. It is comforting. He cannot hear what a stomach sounds like anymore. He cannot hear the cricket calling to its mate in the long grass near his porch. But he knows with certainty that the inside of him is red with livid rushing.

The young man explains the origin of the crescent scar on the inside of his lip. He tells women he acquired it in a bar fight, although in reality the injury occurred when he was eleven when his brother slammed the screen door on him. Bruce shows the young man a similarly

shaped scar located just above his hipbone from when a fishing lure ricocheted back and caught the skin of his belly instead of extending outward into the water.

“I bled out onto the shore until I got home to a first aid kit,” says Bruce. He admits that he never considered using it to pick up women. “Well those days are long, long in the past,” Bruce says.

He takes a sip of eggnog. Bruce wishes he were drinking beer. Bruce wishes he was in a bar with the young man with the sound of a woman scraping her heels on the wooden legs of a bar stool.

“Come on Bruce, you’ve still got it,” says the young man.

“I guess I could tell the chicks that I got this little gash fighting a bear away from my lawn,” Bruce says. Might as well keep the references topical.

Bruce falls in love with the young man as someone falls in love with their own image.

Bruce feels viscous. He lets the afternoon slip by like mud, slip by like the sun through the kitchen window. Time feels speckled, the way it appears in patches through the trees. The room slips into darkness.

Bruce talks. Bruce continues talking. Bruce forgets about the soreness in his chest. He feels in brief waves the soreness behind his eyes, was the result of looking intently at himself for what feels like a very long time.

## AREAS OF SUSPICION

After, Bruce creates a list entitled:

Areas of Suspicion.

1. The young man never told Bruce his name. Not that Bruce had ever asked. He supposed that that was what it was like to eat lunch in front of a mirror. No one ever asks the reflection what sort of condiment it wants on its sandwich.

Bruce will not have the heart to continue his list. He will leave it on the kitchen table until he decides that it is better off in the drawer.

## LUNCH

The young man takes another bite of his sandwich and makes an exaggerated sound of satisfaction. “I knew the minute I saw you that you were an ok sort of guy.”

“Well,” says Bruce, “I can tell when a young man is in need of a good meal. As I said, too many groceries. You know, practicality.” The young smiles with what seems like unequivocal sincerity.

The young man picks up his plate, crosses the room and turns on the faucet. He washes the sandwich crumbs down the sink. Bruce notices how the young man dispenses a minimal amount of soap onto the sponge and then rubs it in sweeping circles across the plate. *Just as I would have done.* Bruce waves the plate out of the young man’s hands.

“Later, don’t worry about it, not a big deal, later,” Bruce says.

The young man wipes his hands on his jeans and nods at the door.

“Well, better be going,” he says.

“Wait,” says Bruce. He twists a wad of paper napkin between his fingers. “Would you like to see my collection?” The young man’s eyes rise from the suds of the sink. “Would you like to see my collection?” Bruce asks again, in case the young man did not hear him, in case the noise of the faucet was too loud. He repeats himself a third time, in case the young man is hard of hearing, which didn’t seem to be the case but who knows, anything is possible, he might have been suddenly afflicted with acute deafness, things like that happen.

“Huh, what kind of collection?” Asks the young man. He swivels to find a dishrag. His hands are still frothy with soap. He wipes them on his pants.

“Well, its better if I just show you,” says Bruce as he walks backwards towards the hallway.

The young man chuckles. “You’re not going to show me a room of human skins are you?”

Bruce does not catch this reference to the popular psychodrama, “Silence of the Lambs.” “Well,” coughs Bruce, who is taken aback by this startling image. “Wouldn’t cross my mind.” Bruce nods towards the hallway, and the young man follows him.

## TRAGEDY

Merna has a theory. Merna has many theories. One of Merna's theories is that everyday a person experiences an average of five tragedies. It is important to mention that Merna's definition of the word tragedy has been shrunk down from its grandiose size to include more particular events. Merna would have objected to the term "smaller," because they aren't smaller, only more particular. For example, a man holds the door open for you when you are walking into a 7/11. You are standing at an inconvenient distance but the man waits patiently for you. You are apologetic, perhaps excessively so, as you scurry past him and through the door that he is holding for you.

"All I can imagine," Merna had said, "is this man, you know, a pace behind his original trajectory. I see the cashier handing him his change as he approaches the register, I see him already facing the street as he thrusts his shoulder against the door. But he is still holding the door open for me, despite the fact that it will take minimal to no effort to push it open myself. You see?"

Bruce did see, but for some reason he had said, "no, not really, Merna." Why did he say that. *Why did I say that*, Bruce wonders to himself later. He had wanted to be difficult. Not just that, Bruce realized with a pang that made the meat behind his eyes ache. He wanted to be one of her five tragedies.

For Merna this was tragedy number two of the day. She had already forgotten the first. This was a strange feature of tragedies that she could not explain. There, a tragedy in itself.

Now in the cramped hallway, the young man is experiencing a tragedy. Bruce did not understand the reference he had made to "The Silence of the Lambs." Again, this does not seem

to warrant the label of “tragedy,” but, as Merna would say, “anything that serves as a reminder that the human you are communicating with is in fact a separate entity is certainly one of the highest forms of tragedy.”

The young man chuckles, “you’re not going to show me a room of human skins are you?”

“Well,” coughs Bruce, taken aback by the startling image. “Wouldn’t cross my mind.” Bruce nods towards the hallway, and the young man follows him.

Merna used to say that walking down their hallway was like twisting in an ill designed coffin. “Too narrow for the shoulders,” she said.

“Its like I’m in an ill designed coffin,” Bruce says, which seems like the right thing to say before he says it.

“What?” says the young man, who is shuffling slowly behind him. Bruce gives a gruff grunt of dismissal, and they keep moving. The young man feels that he is part of a badly made smoothie. He feels like an unblended piece of fruit stuck in the straw. The young man shifts so he can side step his way along the path instead of hoisting his bulk against the resistance of the narrow walls. This should have made their physical difference apparent to Bruce. The young man looms above him as he scuffles along. All that Bruce can think about, however, is how, to his ears, their footsteps sound similar. Their weight squishes with dull pounds into the absorbent carpet.

“Ah, here it is,” Bruce says finally, shoving his shoulder against the door purely for dramatic effect. In the past, Bruce had the habit of asking Merna to follow him to his office. He would shut himself in and direct her, from the other side of the door, to prod towels into the crevice between the floor and the door so that it wouldn’t swing open.

The smell of cotton balls soaked in nail polish remover hovers in the room. The young man makes no attempt to cough discreetly or cover his nose surreptitiously.

“Jesus, Bruce,” the young man says. He nudges Bruce’s shoulder playfully but stays on the threshold. Bruce pulls the filing cabinet open and gestures to the young man.

“Pick a frame, my boy. Plenty to choose from.”

The young man peers at the variety of picture frames. Some are displayed so that the wings can be seen, others are displayed belly up. An Aphis Pomi, more commonly known as the Green Apple Aphid, is encased in a plastic frame masquerading unconvincingly as silver. It is bright green with translucent wings. Its legs are bent as if it has been reassembled upside down and backwards.



One spring Bruce attempted to plant an orchard. He drove a whole hour to buy the apple trees. The saplings with little apples already budding cost extra but he didn’t mind. He built a fence. He filled empty Poland Spring jugs with piss to keep the deer away. He marked his territory. The man at the plant store said that it would take at least a year for the tree to bear fruit that wasn’t too sour to eat. He didn’t mind. Bruce was and is a patient man. He dug a hole that was five times the width of the root ball, just as the man at the plant store had advised him. He locked the fence.

The fruit trees seemed to die overnight. Bruce was and is a patient man. He pissed angrily on the trees, and waited. One afternoon when Bruce had no piss left in him he went to his office and took his “National Audubon Society Field Guide to North American Insects and Spiders” off the shelf.

Sure enough, Bruce found one. The Green Apple Aphid was hidden in the curl of a leaf, resting in its shade. When Bruce nudged the lip of the kill jar towards it, it hopped right in. *It is dozing*, Bruce thought, *filled with all that sour fruit*.



The young man remains planted on the threshold, his fingers are clamped on his nose. Bruce fiddles with the stacks and pulls out an *Actias luna*, more commonly known as a Luna Moth. Its wings are a pale green and lined with bright purple. Visible hairs jut from its belly. Bruce hands the frame to the young man.

“You did this?” asks the young man, looking at the beautiful dead thing.

Bruce nods casually. “Just something I do in my spare time.”

“Well looks like a lot more time went into it than casual work,” says the young man.

The young man traces his forefinger along the outline of the wing under glass. He presses his shirtsleeve to his nose.

“Beautiful,” he says from the other side of fabric.

Bruce swells. Bruce turns. Bruce feels as though he has ripped a child from the lodged and melting seatbelt of a burning car. Bystanders cheer him on. From the corner of his eye Bruce sees a cricket he caught the day before battering itself against an emptied jelly jar. He forgot to put a wad of alcohol soaked cotton in the jar. The cricket is weakened but livid. He hears the phantom scuffle of antennae and stick limbs.

“Well,” says Bruce abruptly, “that’s what I wanted to show you.”

The young man steps into the hall. Bruce slams the door. The young man fills his lungs with air.

“Beautiful stuff, Bruce” says the young man tepidly. “Wow.”

## BOMBS, OCCURANCES OF MAGNITUDE

Merna divides tragedies into categories. For example, tragedy of dream: dreaming about someone touching your face and waking up to realize that they are dead or just simply not around. The good thing about tragedy of dream is that its acrid taste usually dissipates by lunch. Bruce objects to this categorization because it leaves no room for the more severe calamities.

"What happens if you break both your legs falling down a flight of stairs and no one is home and you haven't paid the telephone bill?" asked Bruce. This was one of his chief fears.

Merna had never given a name to the larger tragedies. She paced the kitchen as she tried to formulate names. She watched the light through the slats of the window shade. They striated the table, the boxes of cereal, her hand, her torso. She tested words out and winced once she had said them.

"Well, they are ineffable occurrences" she said finally. "What is beyond tragic cannot be expressed."

Much, much later she realized just what they were, and of course this realization came to her when Bruce was miles and miles away. They were bombs, occurrences of immeasurable magnitude.



The young man is again a clog pushing through the hallway. He frees himself and traverses the kitchen. He opens the freezer and reaches for his Cherry Garcia ice cream.

"Well," says the young man. He then says something so inane it sends a pang through Bruce. "See you later."

Bruce can feel Merna's strange ghost sag under this particular tragedy. Bruce feels that he has lost an inch.

"Wait," sputters Bruce frantically, "I have one more thing to show you."

"Ah," says the young man simply. "Ah." He grips the lid of the ice cream with his fingers.

"You see, I want to edify you," says Bruce quickly, "show you something that perhaps you, perhaps no one has seen before." He thrusts a finger in the air. "Be back in a flash."

Merna would have noted that "be back in a flash" had never been in Bruce's repertoire of phrases. It would have been something that she would mention later on as they were falling asleep. Bruce usually falls asleep quickly. It isn't that there's nothing on his mind. He just feels that if he is doing one thing he might as well do it correctly and thoroughly.

"Just wait here," Bruce commands tepidly. Soon he stands on the back porch, staring into the overgrown thicket that leads to the shed.

## BRUCE CONFRONTS HIS BACKYARD

Were his ears suddenly restored to their youthful accuracy, Bruce would have been overwhelmed by the menagerie of sound. The trees rub their naked limbs against adjacent naked limbs. A shrunken dead leaf scuttles across the crusted snow. The neighbor slides a sheet of frozen snow from the window shield of her car. The sun hurts Bruce's eyes. He tugs at his flimsy socks. He dimly accepts the fact that they will be filled with snow soon. Bruce puts his shoulder to bramble. Bruce anticipates the smell of the shed, the smell of old wet wood and dust. Bruce designed and built the shed in his younger years, when he was about five years older than the young man. Bruce calculates. Twenty-seven.

The sheds lack of windows is its only design flaw. At twenty-seven, Bruce assumed that windows occur naturally. He was sure that windows are an intrinsic part of the process. Bruce realized later that exit routes are almost never intrinsic. Almost always never. Bruce did, however, think to construct shelves and print labels. He got a label maker and everything. *For God's sakes*, Bruce thinks to himself as he walks, *I had it all figured out except the damn windows!*

"How are you supposed to find what you're looking for?" Merna had asked, tapping the wall where she suspected a window should have gone.

"I'll put in a light. I'll hang a light bulb with a pull string switch," Bruce explained. Unfortunately, he never found a cord that was long enough to stretch from the house to the shed.

Now, Bruce scrambles through the brush (the path has not been cleared in a very long time). Bruce has not visited The Unidentified Specimen in months. Months! He is too afraid, maybe. He has searched in every entomology book he has. Nothing. He has measured the

wingspan of the The Curious Specimen, another name he has given it. He has measured its thorax with Entomological Society of North America approved measuring devices. Nothing fits the descriptions.

Bruce is caught in a briar patch. Burrs stick to his sweater and beard. He falls and his palms are caked with mud. He doesn't even stop to brush his hands on his pants. It occurs to Bruce that the young man might have lost patience and left. He remembers faintly what it was like to be a young man. He wonders how long the young man will stay.

Bruce reaches the shed and finds that the front door is sealed shut by a hearty vine. It drapes itself across the doorframe. If Bruce had been in a more leisurely state of mind he might have admired the way the individual leaves look like many small tongues. He might have noted how they mimic each other. He might have concluded that the identities of things can be reduced to being, simply, a watery, dewy bundle, much like himself, Merna, and even the young man. Bruce kicks the dirt at the roots and pulls, ripping the vine off the door. Even as he peers in from the outside, Bruce realizes that the lack of windows is not the sheds only flaw. He breathes in clean outdoor air, and steps in. Much like the kitchen, a film of grit covers everything. A roll of label maker tape lays glossy and uncoiled. Another roll lolls from its thin-lipped plastic mouth.

Soon, Bruce's hands are full of dirt dust and various bolts. It is a wonder that Bruce cannot find The Unidentified Specimen immediately it is so huge. Finally he finds it. It is face to face with a patch of ceiling Bruce was planning on converting into a skylight.



Bruce found the Unidentified Specimen lying belly up in frost. At first Bruce thought it was a boulder or an old loaf of bread that Merna had tossed out whole. Bruce thought of kicking

it with his foot until peered closer and saw four thin spindles protruding from it. He moved slowly as to not disturb the object, although even from far away it appeared to be dead. Its unnaturally long hind leg seemed to twitch in greeting as a gust of wind blew through the yard. Bruce finally took the exposed belly of the Unidentified Specimen as the defeat of death. It seemed to invite the sky and whatever predator loomed there. Bruce had no apprehension about handling insects. He bent and grasped the curved outer parenthesis of the Unidentified Specimen as though he was lifting a child. He cupped his hands around its frame, waiting, he felt, for it to cling to his torso. When Bruce tried to budge the Unidentified Specimen, however, it seemed to have grown roots into the ground. Bruce later found that the strangest thing about the Unidentified Specimen was that its weight seemed to fluctuate spontaneously. Bruce didn't know anyone who could verify or debunk this claim, and even if he did he would have been too embarrassed to ask. Perhaps, Bruce considered, it wasn't embarrassment that would hinder his asking. Perhaps he would not be able to find the words to ask with. Strange, Bruce thought, how asking is contingent upon words.

Bruce went to the shed for a shovel and searched for a surface to carry the Unidentified Specimen. Merna was in the kitchen, looking out the window. A sunbeam grazed her knuckles.

“Tray?” Bruce asked.

Merna's arm wafted to the cabinets above the stove. Funny, Bruce thought, how words are necessary to ask a question, but sometimes no words are needed to answer one. Bruce returned to the site of the Unidentified Specimen. He prodded it with his shovel. He tried to pry the shovel under the Unidentified Specimen to lift it from the dirt. Nothing. It refused. Bruce dug a moat around the insect in an attempt to wedge his shovel under its back. Still, nothing. Somehow the dirt had hardened. It was stiff like concrete.

Bruce went back inside feeling discouraged. Merna was still staring intently out the window. Although she did not appear to be looking out the window, her face was inches away from the windowpane.

“Merna,” Bruce said in greeting. Merna didn’t break her gaze.

Bruce put water in the kettle and turned on the stove. As he waited for the water to boil, he tried not to look at Merna. The water took a very long time to boil. The kettle screeched, and relief washed over Bruce.

“Merna,” he said again as he passed her. Had her hair gotten shorter?

He walked as quickly as he could outside. Bruce stood over the insect with his kettle in hand. He carefully poured boiling water around the insect. To his relief, the dirt crumbled, and his shovel slid easily into the earth. He felt it give, and with great effort he heaved the specimen onto the cookie tray. Bruce stood huffing, his hands on his hips. He didn’t know how he would carry it inside without a forklift. Bruce went inside a third time. He did not pass through the kitchen. He walked upstairs and by the time he reached his bed, the muscles in his arms and legs felt like they had locked in place. *This is how the earth must feel when it is holding an Unidentified Specimen*, Bruce thought to himself.

Bruce awoke. He had not changed his clothing from the day before. Dirt coated his palms. He went downstairs, put water in the kettle and turned on the stove. In the early morning light he had difficulty making out Merna’s figure. She was slumped on the kitchen table. Her head rested on her outstretched arm. Bruce poured himself a cup of green tea. He stood over her. He looked down at her head. Had her hair gotten even shorter? He wrapped his fingers around the mug for warmth. He looked closer. Her hair seemed to be disappearing at the roots.

Bruce carried his tea into the morning chill. He stood on the front steps and as he took his first sip, his eyes wandered to the spot where the insect was still lying on the cookie tray. A layer of frost had blanketed the Unidentified Specimen. Bruce walked over with his nose perched above the steam rising from his mug. He nudged the cookie tray with his foot. To Bruce's surprise, the tray scooted across the ground easily, as though its bottom had been buttered. He put his mug onto the ground and did not notice when it spilled into the grass. He felt the tray lurch into his hands, as if by its own volition.

Bruce carried the Unidentified Specimen into the kitchen and set it on the stovetop. He allowed himself, momentarily, to exhale. He grabbed a roll of paper towels. As he carried the tray to his study, Merna wondered, foggily, about where Bruce had gotten the pot roast, and how nice it was that he was cooking dinner tonight. She looked down at her palm. The sun that was coming through it.

Bruce tried soaking the Unidentified Specimen in the preserving fluid. The standard eyedropper looked comically small next to it. Bruce filled a deep salad bowl with preserving fluid and immersed the engorged body of the Unidentified Specimen. Still, the slick, translucent encasing did not take to the shell. Bruce went upstairs and took a nap.

Days passed. Behind the smell of preserving fluid was the scent of an entire bottle of perfume spilled on a rug. A sick sweet flower smell. This, Bruce realized, was the natural smell of the Unidentified Specimen. Bruce found that he could not go back to his study for several days. He walked by it, but when he would reach for the door his hand would cramp, or his legs would suddenly take on the same sore heaviness that they had felt the day he first encountered the insect. When he finally entered the room, an act of sheer will power, he noticed that the left feeler of the Unidentified Specimen had inched across the windowsill. The next day, it had crept

towards the Encyclopedia of Entomology as though the tip of its feeler itched to lay itself across a word, a definition. Bruce did not quite believe it. He pressed his fingers into his eyes until he saw a kaleidoscopic image, a host of crawling colors. When he reemerged, they hovered in front of Merna, whose fingers were resting in a pool of light on the tabletop. She hummed.

“Mmm,” she said to herself. She wondered where her shadow began and her finger ended. A relevant thing and important thing to wonder.



“Do you hear that?” Merna asked one night. “It sounds like a hissing or a scratching or something.”

Bruce pressed the heels of his palms into the sockets of his eyes. He massaged the plump berries. Merna, blind to his response, breathed a rupture of hot air on his neck and fell asleep.

The next day, Bruce moved the Unidentified Specimen into the shed and hoped that the cold would stunt its growth process.



Now, Bruce approaches the cookie sheet. The cold has indeed stunted the growth of the Unidentified Specimen. A feeler lolls over the edge of the table, as though pointing with stubborn certainty at something Bruce cannot see. Its hard shine is somehow visible in the windowless room. Bruce notices its color for the first time. Its shell is deep black. Bruce blinks hard. It has been a long time since Bruce first saw the Unidentified Specimen. He notices its edges, which were once two smooth parentheses, are now sharp and lined with small prongs. Bruce lifts the cold and heavy tray and feels the strain in chest, shoulders, arms, and forearms. He kicks open the door of the shed, which has swung shut, and stumbles back along the overgrown path. Bruce is not overly concerned with appearing sane. The Unidentified

Specimen, the Great Insect, the Colossal Find eclipses all that. A low hanging branch tears his cheek, and he wipes the blood with his sleeve. It smears across his face.

Bruce walks in through the front door. He is covered in bramble, burrs, and little scratches all up his arms. He takes off his shoes and leaves them on a towel laid near the door. A force of habit. Merna had always liked white carpets. Bruce heaves the Unidentified Specimen onto the kitchen table.

“Young man,” Bruce calls out, “I am sorry to have kept you waiting, young man...”

It is at this moment that Bruce realizes he does not know the young man’s name. He wonders briefly if he has been talking to himself the entire time, all though the turkey sandwiches, the eggnog, the Aphis pomi. What does one call out when one is approaching oneself? He persists.

“Young man, I am sorry to have kept you waiting, young man...”

The young man isn’t at the sink washing dishes. The sandwich remains still litter the counter. The young man is not at the table. He is not looking out the window where Merna once extended her hands and saw for the first time her knuckles blending with the dust motes. Everything is caught in the fog of light. Bruce sees that there is no one, but calls out one more time anyway. The young man does not respond. Bruce looks out the window and sees that the young man’s car is gone, and for the first time, Bruce notices all the empty spaces in the house. He notices the hollow socket of the chair that has sagged under repeated weight.

Bruce is not surprised. Bruce is surprised. Bruce is not surprised that the young man is gone. He reminds himself that he was expecting this the entire time. It was a miracle that the young man followed him in the first place. Still, Bruce berates himself.

“Why did I bring him into my office?”

Because he knows that there is no one around to hear him, he says this out loud.

No, Bruce is not surprised that the young man is gone. Bruce is surprised at the strange hollow feeling in his throat. He feels with acute awareness the air passing his windpipe. The space just in front of his eyes is so vast he has to blink fiercely. He waves his hand in front of his eyes. Bruce knows that this is what it is like to feel lonely. Bruce knows that this is a phenomenon that is vastly different from but often mistaken for simply being alone. Bruce sits down. Bruce stands up. *Enough, time to get back to work*, Bruce thinks to himself. He traverses the expanse between the kitchen table and the countertop to make another sandwich. He reaches for the package of bread and the cellophane encased grey pink turkey, but it is not there. He pats the surface of the counter, in case he his eyes are playing tricks on him.

“Wouldn’t be the first time,” Bruce mutters.

Up until this point it hasn’t occurred to Bruce that the young man might have taken anything. The torn bulb of lettuce is gone. Even the mangled tomato, gone. *Ah, well a growing young man*, Bruce reasons. Bruce goes to the fridge and opens it.

Bruce paced the kitchen. In a desperate fit to maintain a sense of composure, he opens the refrigerator. Women’s Health magazine once informed Merna that the average American opens their refrigerator an average of five to ten times a day. Merna estimated that at least twenty percent of those times were out of boredom, and at least thirty percent were fueled by the desire for something that the looker knew was not inside, but hoped in vain that its contents had changed since their last visit. This, Bruce realizes, is what he is doing. Dark dried matter rims the nozzle of a mustard bottle. Bruce opens the freezer and sees the carton of Cherry Garcia ice cream. Bruce closes the fridge. He opens the silverware drawer. There is no known statistic for how often the silverware drawer is checked. *Probably less*, Bruce supposes. Bruce passes his

fingers over the spoons forks and knives until his fingers stumble over the velvet sack that contains the good silverware that belonged to Merna's mother. He expects its jagged plumpness, like the pointy joints of a soft but underfed animal. Instead it is empty. A snakeskin.

*Perhaps he needs something to slice the tomato and the lettuce,* Bruce reasons, quite understandable, a young man on the go can't be bothered with whether or not a utensil is a "good" or "valuable" one or not. He is not the sort of young man to concern himself with how things cost. *He probably didn't even think about it.* Bruce knows that this is a good enough justification for now. Bruce thinks of the emptiness of the words "nice" and "good." The nice and good things. The young man went off with the nice and good things. He turns these words over in his head as he slumps down against the cabinets. He watches a dust mote flecked beam of light graze the bag. Someone told him once that dust is just dead skin. He thinks of the clashing skin in the air. His skin, the young man's skin, Merna's. How much of Merna? What is the ultimate ratio?

Something suddenly occurs to Bruce. He puts the velvet sack down. What else did the young man take? What else had he found valuable enough to take with him? All of Bruce's insects are in their rows behind that faulty door. Pluckable. Bruce would have given the young man a specimen as a souvenir anyway, if he had asked. He wouldn't have minded, really, even if they young man had taken one without asking first. He would have understood if the young man had taken two, even. *Young men are often in a hurry,* Bruce continues reasoning, *young men often forget to ask before they take things. Of course, young men these days are also short on cash. Hand crafted pinned insects are more enticing than a few forks,* Bruce decides with certainty. As Bruce scoots down the hallway, he thinks of his Monarch rushing through town in the passenger seat of the young man's truck. A similar route, perhaps, to the path it had taken in

life during its winter journey from the suburbs to Mexico. The image of a big tree in the small brain of the Monarch guides it as though in a trance. Surely it dreamed of drifting to a tree and hibernating with its kin. Surely the tree did not know that it would sag with unfamiliar fruit, or perhaps it did, somewhere in its inner trunk rings. A tree, slumped with orange wings. A tree, on fire for an entire season. In his mind Bruce sees the Monarch, now, pinned, immobile and asleep for another long journey.

The door to Bruce's office is open. He rips open the filing cabinet full of framed specimen and rifles through the stacks, nicking his fingers on their uneven borders in the process. He counts his housefly in its blue plastic frame, the grasshopper in a frame garnished with the image of an outdated super hero. He sees a Katydid from the glory days. Everything, the families of spiders he had laid poison for, everything was there. Bruce counts again. Ten, fifteen...everything is there. The Dung Beetle with its faulty wing, the Daddy Long Legs, everything. Bruce sinks to the ground. He rests his temple on the cool metal filing cabinet. Bruce does not know what to do but sit and feel the mysterious sensation that swells in his chest and behind his eyes.

Bruce gets up and paces. He counts the frames again and notices with a strange and surprising relief that one picture frame is, in fact, missing. The place on his desk where a silver picture frame sat is empty. It is a black and white picture of Merna at age eighteen, another gift from Merna's mother. Her hair was huge and she was wearing pearls and a smile that suggested that she had smeared Vaseline on her teeth right before the picture was taken. Bruce had always suspected that Merna's mother had gotten the picture from a high school prom photo, mostly because the right side of the picture was cut precariously close to her face, suggesting that she had cut Merna's prom date out. This was why he didn't feel any apprehension or regret when he

snuck it off the mantel and into his study. It is intended for something grand that he had not caught yet.

Bruce searches but can't find the picture frame. Bruce isn't sure if he wants to find it or not. He feels pulled by two opposite forces. He feels the relief of being cocooned by his objects. Bruce feels the presence of his dead things, if he can call them his. Again, he feels palpable absence in the space before him. There, the lip of the windowsill, there, the inside of the vase, the only object in the room that is purely decorative. He finds this confusing and a little painful because it is not, like most things, something he can swat away. The abundance of hollow spaces are unequivocally his own.

Bruce goes back to the kitchen. He feels dizzy. He considers getting in his car and driving. There is only one route to get back into town, so he can probably find the young man, or at least run into him. Movement, something. The woman on the Talk Show says that behavior repeats on a loop until we do something to force ourselves out of repetition. Movement, something. Bruce knows this to be true. Bruce sits where had Merna sat, looking at her hands for all those weeks.

## WHAT BRUCE KNOWS TO BE TRUE

One Christmas, the neighbors fumigated their house after they found that their Christmas tree was infested with insects. They dragged the tree into their house and screwed the stump into the Christmas tree stand. To their horror they saw a red trail appear from the front door to the where the tree now stood. It stained the carpet and the couch. They even found traces of the red stuff on the cats fur. When Daisy tried to clean it off with her tongue, it made her sick. Even her hairballs were red.

“Our tree is bleeding!” yelled the children. “We killed the tree!”

Soon the red streaks spread upstairs into the bed sheets and the cupboard with the towels and linens. Thinking they had invoked some sort of plague, they consulted their priest.

“Perhaps it is foreshadowing Christ’s imminent death on the cross. Perhaps the tree is inflicted with stigmata, or it is the blood that came from Jesus’ wounded hands and forehead,” said the priest. “Things like this happen every decade or so.”

They were about to take a jug filled with tap water to be blessed when they looked closer and saw a small squirming insect, a round dot with eight stubby legs, squished into the carpet.

“Ah, this,” Bruce said when they brought it to him in a napkin. “Looks to me like the *Oligonychus ununguis*, more commonly known as a Spruce Spider Mite.”

He stared disappointedly at the napkin. The Spruce Spider Mite was completely squished. Its red insides had soaked a circle into the napkin. He folded the napkin and threw it into the trash.

“This sort of infestation is extremely rare, I’ll tell you that,” he muttered.

Bruce knew this to be true. Bruce knew that the Spruce Spider Mite nests in the lower branches of fir trees, but once the tree is brought into a warm environment, the mites think its spring. They start to wake up. They stretch their little legs and think its mating season. They lay their red eggs near radiators and between couch cushions. They get comfortable on the dead branches and start their families.

“Could you help us with the extermination process?” they asked. “We’ll pay you.”

Bruce told them that he wasn’t in the business of extermination, he was in the business of collecting.

“Well what’s the difference,” they asked, “couldn’t you just collect all of them then?”

“No,” Bruce said, “it doesn’t work like that.”

They left.

Bruce saw the extermination truck rumble down the road the next day. He knew that fumigation wasn’t necessary, and that all they had to do was turn off the heat and open all the windows for a few days and the mites would leave. When a place is infested it is important to make it inhospitable and then leave. Bruce knew this to be true.

## AFTER A FEW DAYS, BRUCE GOES TO MOVIES

Bruce must go on. It is necessary to keep moving. An object in motion stays in motion. On and on. So is Bruce. Such is Bruce. Another one of Merna's theories is that the body is built to force itself outside. The body is built to seek. This drive is demonstrated by the need for food and sex. The search forces us to band together. Someone must hold a log in place so another can twiddle a stick furiously, waiting for a spark to ignite. In the unconscious search to find a bite to eat or someone to lay next to we must first sit next to many people, on the bus, the train, the restaurant, the street. This is how the body is designed to force us outside of ourselves. And so it was the same for Bruce.



“If you move food in front of someone's face they will *want it*, they will *want it!*” cries the hotdog vendor.

He waves chunks of severed meat product in Bruce's face. They loll on a plastic platter. The platter is painted silver, and the silver paint is chipping off. What is left is dull and blunt looking. Bruce finds it odd that the salesman is so open about his technique.

“Now its here, now its there, you want it but you'll have to catch it first!” exclaims the hotdog salesman, who can barely speak he is hopping around so vigorously.

A blur of soggy buns and pink meat whirrs past Bruce's face. If Bruce had stopped to ask the salesman for a more extensive explanation the salesman would have said, after having caught his breath and taken a bite of his product to sustain his fortitude and voice, “Well, since the beginning of time people have had to hunt for their food, right? Well, today people get their cheeseburgers delivered to their pudgy little fingers while they sit at a table with napkins

bursting from their containers. Sickening really, I'd love to see one of those fat fucks chase a fucking cheeseburger in the wild. So here's the theory, here's the entirety of it: if you move something in front of someone's face it triggers the natural instinct to hunt and there aint nothing more motivating than primal fucking instinct."

Bruce shrugs to himself, to no one in particular. Must be a full moon or something.

Bruce decides to see a movie. This is a spontaneous decision so he has to wait in the lobby of the theatre for about half an hour.

"Would you like some popcorn, sir?" asks the girl working behind the snack counter.

"What?" Bruce asks, and makes a show of cupping his hand to his ear, "can't hear you, miss."

"Would you like some popcorn, sir."

*Why not*, Bruce thinks. There were no more turkey sandwiches at home, might as well. "Yes, thank you," he says.

"Anything to drink?" the girl yells. Bruce asks for a coke, hold the ice. The girl brings Bruce the popcorn and the coke. Bruce smiles and takes a sip of the coke. It is good to drink something that isn't eggnog. Bruce smiles at the girl.

"Ok, that'll be \$10.50," she says.

Bruce wanders into a screening room. No one explicitly asks him to pay for a ticket, and its silly to pay for something that no one has explicitly told you to pay for. This is Bruce's logic. Perhaps he got there so early that the theatre employees stopped noticing him.

Bruce wishes he could remember the name of the film decided to see, because every scene felt like a place he had been before. The first scene opened on a house of a distant relative he visited in North Dakota. Bruce swears it's the same house. The camera follows the main

character into the house, which has a long hallway lined with pictures of children in various stages of growth. Every cramped space looks like a space he has been in before.

Unfortunately Bruce has no one to whisper to in the illicit and rude joy of whispering in a movie theatre. Tragedy number three. Bruce leans over to whisper a grim looking boy of about sixteen.

“Can you imagine, when I was a little older than you I walked through a hallway and sat in a room with big French windows and lots of books on the shelf just like that man you see there! Uncanny! My god, the things you have ahead of you young man...”

Bruce can't stop talking. Things spill out. Not just words, specks of saliva, a crumb of moistened bread dislodges from his back molar.

Bruce does not realize that his actions are deeply tragic, which sends them into the dangerous realm ineffable occurrence. Merna is apt for diagnosis. Her only rule for diagnosis is that she refuses to diagnose anyone she doesn't know personally.

“That makes no sense,” protested Bruce. They had been watching a film called “Spies in Love.” Bruce asked Merna what she thought about the inner motivations of Jack, the main character, and whether or not his seedy choices reflected his tragic childhood. She refrained from answering. “Don't you need to be an objective observer?” he asked.

Merna felt just the opposite and, like most, things she felt adamantly about defending her opinion. Bruce wonders what Merna would diagnose him with now, at this particular moment, but he had the suspicion that she would not be able to diagnose him with anything, because Merna would find Bruce to be a completely indistinguishable man, now. Although Bruce does not admit this to himself, somewhere inside himself he knows this to be true.

## REVISION

Now that Merna has time to reflect, she considers revising her term “tragedy” to “shards-of-glass,” or “a-multitude-of-paper-cuts-on-the-tender-part-of-the-forearm.”

## ON THE STREET, BRUCE HAS A MEMORY

Bruce remembers. Three months ago. It was evening. Bruce walked into the living room, where Merna was squatting on the ground. She had taken the lamp off the coffee table and placed it on the ground in front of her. Her hand was inserted in the space between the shade and the light bulb. Bruce watched as she moved her fingers like they were bugs trapped between a screen and a windowpane. Bruce approached her and put his hand on her shoulder.

“Merna.”

Despite her keen sense of hearing she had not heard him come in, had not seen him approach her. She winced when her fingertips brushed the hot bulb.

“Merna.”

She didn't turn around to greet him. Her fingers continued darting, tapping the lampshade.

The Internet told Merna that this is a common symptom of the terminally invisible. AI sufferers feel that they have already become invisible before the complete transformation has taken place, and so they must constantly affirm their own materiality. This manifests most commonly in the intense inspection of a particular body part. Mirrors and bright lights often facilitate this inspection. In extreme cases, sufferers may resort to battering their limbs or their entire bodies against a wall. This made Merna feel a little better. This was not especially helpful for Bruce, though, who occasionally craned his head from the kitchen to see Merna tirelessly staring at her hands through the lampshade. Her pupils pin marks.

## BRUCE IS VERY, VERY TIRED

When Bruce gets home from the movies he realizes that he is very, very tired. His tiredness outweighs his hunger. His belly is filled with. Bruce sleeps, heavy and dreamless, like a rock, one might say, or a mayfly in caramel colored amber. When he wakes he finds a morsel of popcorn in his peripheral vision. When he sits up more pieces tumble from where they had been lodged in the nook between his neck and shirt collar.

## IN TOPEKA, TREKWEIGHT APPEARS AS A DISPLACEMENT OF WATER

It is seven pm, cold, mid winter, Topeka. Merna wanders concealed with mittens and a scarf that covers the majority of her face. A regular suspicious character. She gets out of the car to look for something to eat. Over the past few weeks she has been in the habit of slipping off all her clothes and snatching a cold sandwich or a Danish from any deli or café she can find. Merna searches for such an opportunity, but she has chosen a particularly desolate part of town. From what she can see, there are no restaurants or corner stores for miles. Only rows of desolate buildings. Big square blocks of concrete. Merna takes off her glove, pulls the scarf from her face, and scratches her nose. She feels suffocated under all that fabric. Oddly this is a sensation that she forgets, at times, until she remembers in a fit. It is like waking from a long dream. *It is easier, perhaps, to forget the body entirely*, Merna thinks. It is easier to forget ones suffocation by moving at a steady pace.

Merna is about to head back to the car when she sees a glowing sign a block away. As she approaches it, she can hear it hiss and click. Soon she stands under the words, “Snack Bar” in neon lights.

“Hello?” Merna inquires to no one in particular.

The smell of chlorine wafts down the empty street. Merna turns the corner, and sees a public swimming pool protected by a mesh fence. The pool is still uncovered, and brown leaves soak in a bath of chlorine. They revolve around the jets like schools of fish. She leans against the fence that blocks pedestrians from the brown oasis and stoops to tie her shoe.

Suddenly, Merna sees a dimple in the water. *A frog gasping*, she thinks, lured by the warmth of the jets. The splashing becomes more vigorous. The disruption of water moves from

left to right, leaving watermarks on the concrete lip of the pool. Merna presses herself against the fence and feels the hard netting make grooves against her gloved palms. The water calms. A plume of breath issues from the middle of the pool. Ripples give birth to more ripples.

“Hey, you,” says a watery voice.

A jet of water spurts through air like it is being spat from an invisible mouth. Merna gapes. Silence.

“Hey, I see you staring at me. I mean, I guess you’re not technically staring *at* me, but you seem to notice my presence. Yes, that’s what I’m trying to say.”

The water around the voice froths as though it is treading to keep the voice afloat. Silence. Merna is taken aback. She realizes that she hasn’t spoken to anyone along the course of her travels. How long has she been moving?

Merna coughs, a bubble of air coming to the surface of a pool and popping.

“I’m sorry, I...”

Merna can’t tell for sure but she senses that the displacement of water is waiting for her response.

“I don’t know what you are, but I think we are maybe...”

Merna trails off again, searching for a word.

More splashing. Merna watches breathlessly as foot shaped patches of water approach her. The patches halt. From behind the fence, a pool forms in front of her. As the liquid nimbus expands, Merna again senses that the being in front of her is waiting for a response. Merna pokes her finger through the mesh fence. Steam rises from the water halo. A wave of chlorine scent and the smell of an unopened mouth unhinging hit her. A cold wet finger meets hers.

In the Topeka public swimming pool \$5 admission for visitors free for members, Trekweight is a puff of steam. The gate swings open.



Trekweight leads Merna inside. The two sit next to each other on a cold metal bench in the locker room.

“The pool technically closed a month ago,” Trekweight explains, unprompted. “Being invisible and all, you know, its not too hard to find ways around these sorts of things.”

Merna doesn’t know what to say. Water sounds come from her throat. She coughs again.

“Trekweight, by the way,” says Trekweight.

Merna feels a hand on her shoulder through her thick coat. She flinches.

“I find handshakes rather ineffectual these days,” Trekweight explains, “what with all the miscalculation that can happen with hands meeting in space.”

Merna takes off her glove and puts her hand on top of the weight on her shoulder. Trekweight’s hand is clammy and cold. Hers is clammy and humid.

“My invisibility is at a more advanced stage than yours, apparently,” Trekweight explains. “See.”

Merna looks over at her shoulder and sees her coat disintegrating. Empty space creeps along her shoulder blade. She flinches backwards, nearly falling off the bench.

“I’m sorry,” Trekweight says, pulling away. “I’m sorry, I didn’t realize...” Trekweight’s voice gets softer.

Merna sees her body re inflate.

“I’m not contagious or anything.” Trekweight laughs. “Well, temporarily contagious, I guess.”

Silence. Merna thinks of things to say. *I am so glad to have found someone like me*, for Example, or, *I have been traveling for so long I have forgotten time*, or, simply, *aren’t you very cold?* Instead, silence.

Merna feels a weight on her lap. She cautiously puts her hand down and feels slick hair. Her hand continues traveling, down the nape of a neck, shoulder blades, passing her fingers along constellations of moles and freckles. Trekweight’s skin quakes like a horses back shaking off flies. Trekweight grumbles as if apologizing for not having been touched in a long time. Merna removes her coat and drapes it over Trekweight.

## CONVERSATION

Trekweight wakes up and stretches like a cat.

“How long have I been out?”

“About ten minutes.”

“How can you tell?”

Merna motions to a clock on the wall.

“Oh.”

Merna feels the weight of Trekweight’s head lift from her lap. A locker door opens and shuts. A t-shirt, underwear, pants, socks, shoes are placed on Trekweight’s body and dissolve.

“Lets get out of here,” Merna says.

“Where?”

“Well I have a car.”

“I didn’t catch your name.”

“Merna.”

“What? Sorry didn’t catch that. Water in my ears.”

“Merna, my name is Merna.” She coughs and elevates her voice. “Why do you go swimming in the middle of the winter anyway?” She asks.

“It reminds me I have a body. I can’t actually *see* it, so...” Trekweight trails off.

At this moment Merna realizes how hungry she is. Her stomach makes the sound of a bubble that has escaped from under a deep-sea rock.

“So,” Merna says. She stands up and stretches. “Anything to eat at that snack bar?”

Trekweight laughs. When Trekweight laughs, Merna feels something in her chest. It is not pain, really, it is a weight, a heaviness. Merna presses her palm to her chest.

“Oh, those lights have been on since mid June. I think the kid working at the snack bar forgot to turn it off for the season. The boss barely shows up,” Trekweight’s voice said from a remote corner of the room. “He only stops by to check if the pool jets are getting clogged with rats and other thirsty critters.”

“He’ll probably close the pool soon though,” Trekweight says, pausing. “For good.”

“So you’ll probably have to get out of here?” Merna asks.

“Yeah.”

Merna leads Trekweight to her car, and Merna starts driving. Much like at the beginning of her journey, Merna passes right through the town. She hadn’t originally planned on this. She keeps going. Trekweight doesn’t seem to mind. The radio station changes sporadically, in the middle of a song or right before the newscaster is about to announce a breaking story. Merna doesn’t seem to mind.



Merna drives. She loses track of time. Neither is sure of where they are going. They agree that they will stop when they find a cheap hotel in a town with plenty of corner stores with checkout workers that look too sleepy to halt invisible shoplifters. The radio gets tiresome. Trekweight turns it off, and there is only the sound of the old truck clucking to itself.

“I haven’t been on a long car ride in ages,” Trekweight breaks the silence. “Really, since I was a kid.”

“Oh,” Merna responds in a way that is neither encouraging not hindering.

“Yeah. We’d drive from New York to D.C. to see my grandmother. It would take about six hours which isn’t too bad, but when I was a kid it was a lot to handle.”

“Ah.” Merna’s stomach makes another deep-sea noise. She is beginning to notice her hunger more acutely. They swipe cheeseburgers from diner grills, they snatch paper sacks from drive through windows, they bury their hands in containers of unwrapped penny candy sweets. Nothing is enough.

“My grandmother used to make the best sandwiches,” Trekweight continues. “Simple. Just white bread, turkey, a thin layer of butter. Maybe a little salt, but that was it. We would eat them during the car ride home. Anyway, I guess what I’m saying is I learned to appreciate the value of bland things that are assembled correctly. Not that I’m complaining. Now I’ll take what I can get.”

Merna remembers the half roasted chicken they snatched off a rotisserie wheel in a grocery store. How they sat on the curb and devoured it.

“I know what you mean. God, I still have chicken grease on my fingers,” says Merna.

Merna had been transfixed behind the fence until the splashing stopped and a trail of water advanced towards her. She still feels that way, at times, when she stares into where she calculates Trekweight’s face to be, and imagines what it looks like, feels like.

Trekweight rambles like a thirsty person drinking water. “Sandwiches. I’ve been thinking about sandwiches lately. There is just considerably more fumbling involved now,” Trekweight continues. “I mean it’s nearly impossible to spread butter into the corners of a piece of white bread now. The whole goddamn thing disappears and you end up getting butter all over the countertop. It’s made things very complicated. I never had to worry about scaring children before. Now moving my arms in water terrifies them.”

Merna nods. She can feel her layers of fabric moving with her. She knows what Trekweight means.

“I know what you mean,” Merna says. “Bruce, my husband, well, ex husband?” She hesitates. “I don’t really know about that but it’s not especially relevant to the story.” Up until now she hadn’t considered what the status of her marriage is. She collects herself and continues. “Well anyway, he would throw everything into a pan.”

Merna signals spontaneously and took the next exit.

“Vegetables that hadn’t been cut up, whole carrots and entire stalks of broccoli. He would pour olive oil into the pan while his head was turned, changing the dial of the radio. I couldn’t stand it.”

“Is that why you left him?” Trekweight asks. Skid marks appear on the dashboard from elevated shoes.

“No, no he wasn’t a sporadic, messy man in any other way. Its not that the food he made tasted bad and its not that I didn’t appreciate it, either. Actually it was all delicious, the unlabeled spices in the cupboard, the way he cooked like he was hacking down a forest.” Merna sighs. It is becoming easier to breathe, to speak for longer periods of time without losing her breath. “I think,” Merna says, “he only has room for one type of specificity. Particularity. I suppose specificity and particularity are the polite words, though.”

“What is the impolite word?” Trekweight asks. Merna can feel warm breath near her face. It is unyielding.

“Obsession.” Merna announces. “Obsession is the right word.”

Merna feels Trekweight’s face inch away. They look around for a sign, an indication of the name of the town they are now driving through.

## PUBLIC POOLS

History and its murk.

The brain and its tendency to fill in areas of blank space.

BRUCE DRIVES FIVE HOURS TO THE CENTER FOR THE NORTH AMERICAN  
SOCIETY OF ENTOMOLOGISTS

Bruce has had enough. He is tiered of his house. He is tiered of being hungry and not knowing what he is hungry for. Bruce fashions a trough out of a plastic storage bin by filling it with newspaper, a carton of cotton balls and five ice trays worth of ice. He lifts the Unidentified Specimen. It has become surprisingly lighter since the last time he tried to budge it. It is the weight of a child who has just begun to get too big to be lifted into its parents arms. Still, Bruce struggles to lower the insect into the bin, and realizes that he its long snaking feelers will not fit within the parameters of the bin. In its previous life the plastic bin had been used to store for wrapping paper and an assortment of ribbon. Merna shoved it under their bed.

“It’s a good thing to keep around for holidays,” she said.

Bruce raised his eyebrows. Merna and Bruce had not celebrated Christmas in years. Each year they would buy the each other something they already owned. Merna gave Bruce tweezers two years ago, thinking it would be nice for him to have a second pair in case he misplaced his. She purchased them from CVS, and they were the kind used to pluck unwanted hair from ones upper lip. They were nothing compared to Bruce’s Hemostat, a surgical tool he had ordered from a website specializing in medical supplies. Its conventional purpose is to keep skin tissue in place and stop bleeding during medical procedures, but it “worked like a charm” when Bruce was trying to pin the body of a dragonfly without it slipping off the corkboard.

“Thank you,” Bruce said, trying to be polite.

One year, Merna gave Bruce a stone beetle. It was green and the size of his entire palm.

“What am I supposed to do with this?” he asked, feeling its weight. It was too clunky to carry in his pocket as a worry stone.

“I don’t know, put it on your desk when you’re working,” she said. “As inspiration.”

When Bruce inquired as to where Merna had purchased the amulet she explained that the church was having a yard sale to raise money.

“The woman who sold it to me said it’s made out of Jade,” she added, as though this detail might change his perspective towards the object.

Bruce shrugged.

“Well she also told me that it comes from ancient Egypt. The ancient Egyptians used to call them Scarabs. She said that it protects people.”

Bruce nodded in feigned interest. Merna balled up the wrapping paper and walked to the kitchen to dispose of it in the garbage can under the sink.

Merna did not know that the woman had only told her half of the story. The pastor was eyeing a pocketknife, and the prospect of another sale had distracted the woman.

As Bruce searches for something to cut the plastic bin with, he finds the tweezers and the stone beetle in the bottom drawer of his desk. Bruce uses Merna’s tweezers to pierce a hole in the thick plastic of the storage bin. *They finally came in handy for something*, he smirks to himself. He twists the sharp point of the tweezers until a he creates a hole the size of the puncture in a popped soda can. He carefully guides the two great feelers through the holes he has made. *Perfect*. He places the cookie sheet on the bed of ice, newspaper and cotton balls. He holds the stone beetle. He has forgotten how big it is. It covers his entire palm. When he feels its weight, it reminds him of Merna.

With the Scarab in his pocket, Bruce drives very slowly the entire way so that the Unidentified Specimen does not tip over. Bruce is sure that there is an easier, more efficient way to do this. It is very frustrating to know that there is a better way to do things but not know exactly how to do it.

When Bruce approaches the Center for the North American Society of Entomologists, the members of the society stare from the windows in their white lab coats. They are horrified and motionless as Bruce drags the bin to the front door. Stray streamers trail from its haunches.



The North American Entomologists look thoroughly for a hidden mechanism that will reveal the human fabrication of the Unidentified Specimen. They searched for a thin line of glue connecting the roots of the wings to the body. They put the Unidentified Specimen through an MRI, then a CAT scan. After their tests they find to their disbelief that the Unidentified Specimen had in fact been a living creature. They have never seen anything like it, they conclude. Such a robust abdomen with such a feeble wing structure, unfathomable. Yet there it is.

The chief Entomologist concludes that if there is one there must be others of its kind. The North American Society of Entomologists sends a team to Bruce's house, the site where the Unidentified Specimen was first located. Many are young interns who are ready to get their hands dirty, so to speak. They are itching to get into the rough and tumble world of genetic mutation. The team steps off the bus, already clad in eye goggles and plastic protective gear. They tread along the weed-clotted driveway around to the back of the house and around the cracked cement porch to the site where specimen had been found. The area of brown-patched grass and gravel is contained with yellow caution tape.

The PhD candidates are already at the site. They scour the lawn. Their gloved hands look like shadows. They bend to peep under a leaf, looking for droppings. They crawl with their faces parallel to the earth. Nothing.

“Perhaps it is our eyesight failing us,” says the senior Entomologist, stepping aside for the young interns.

After a week of observation, no eligible mates, no nests, no signs of any lineage, no excrement can be found. No other corpses. They question Bruce but Bruce insists.

“I found it where I found it, that’s it.”

In a last effort, they dig to find possible underground nests and routes. Again, nothing. After the week has passed, Bruce watches the team pack up their equipment as he smokes a cigarette on his broken stoop. The team nudges the dry soil back into the pits with the sides of their plastic wrapped shoes. They drive away.

The team of interns leaves with a detailed report that explores the possibility that the compost bin, an inactive albeit present feature of the household, has been stuffed with foods saturated with artificial sweeteners and hormones. They conclude that this has helped to breed the monstrous creature. Due to the lack of any traceable cohort of similar species, the paper swiftly is disregarded and now exists in a dusty file in the Center for the North American Society of Entomologists labeled “Theories of Insupportable Evidence.”

Bruce insists that he stay at a local hotel while the North American Entomologists run their tests. He does not want to be away from the Unidentified Specimen for too long. When the tests have concluded, the Entomologists invite him to their headquarters. They ask him repeatedly if he would like sugar, milk or cream in his coffee. They pat him on the back. The

head entomologist, Dr. Browning, insists that Bruce move out of “that dingy motel,” and stay at his house. Together, they plot a lecture tour.

## WHAT MERNA LEARNS

Trekweight only laughs at jokes that are funny. There is not much about Trekweight that is hollow, despite the fact that you can see right through her. This leads people to believe that her silence makes her absent, lacking in some way.

When Trekweight speaks, it is like small pebbles are being thrown at Merna's temples. This sounds like an unpleasant phenomenon. It is more like a bright light is being flickered in Merna's eyes at unexpected intervals. I am really not doing Trekweight any justice. What I am trying to say is that at first people find Trekweight to be a jarring person to be around, but jarring in this case does not mean unpleasant.

After having been invisible for some time, Trekweight has amassed an astounding number of facts about the human body. This is a way of divorcing image from function. After years of invisibility, Trekweight is obsessed with what is invisible to everyone: the inside of the body. The highway of veins that populate the dark map that tangles without words or light.

"The acid in your stomach can dissolve razorblades. Hydrochloric acid," Trekweight announced once after they swiped two scones from a bakery.

"Just because I can't see it doesn't mean it isn't there," Trekweight explains.

## FLICKFIELD

Merna and Trekweight drive until they find a town that is filled with unobservant people. They walk into a convenience store, where the shop owner is dozing. His arms are sprawled on the cash register as though he is clutching a lover in sleep. They pocket a few pre-wrapped sandwiches, a bag of cookies and two sodas. They keep moving.

“Fuck, this town is dead silent,” exclaims Trekweight.

Merna nods. She expects to see tumble weed, but there are only tufts of trash rolling lazily into the gutters. They see a tourist info station next to the convenience store. When they enter, a delirious looking man almost barrels into them.

“Hello, friends,” he says, staring intently at the floor. “Ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to the illustrious town of Flickfield. We have an illustrious history here, filled with...” he trails off. “Gosh darn...repeated a gosh darn...word.”

Merna and Trekweight shuffle quickly to the corner of the room. The man doesn't seem to notice Merna, who, despite her sleeves starting to disappear, is still clad in her layers of fabric. The man continues pacing.

“The town was founded in 1932, I mean 1832. Yes. 1832. It was a prospering mill town, where traders from far and wide came to buy and sell their goods. Indeed, Flickfield was a booming metropolis,” he says. His right arm swings manically, gesturing to nothing in particular. “Unfortunately,” he continues, his voice dropping a few solemn octaves, “this good fortune was merely temporary. In 2003, the local Somnamblast plant exploded and dusted the entire town with the pollen of pulverized, powdered...” he trails off again, “pulverized, powdered sleeping tablets! The whole city! The once active Flickfield became, quite literally, a

sleepy town. The citizens of Flickfield were not the only ones to suffer,” his voice gets even lower. “The tall and perilous smoke stacks of the Somnamblast plant blocked the path of many species of migratory birds. For this reason, a man was hired to man a radio tower and flash a signal every time he saw an aviary friend approaching.” The man halts. He repeats the word “aviary friend” several times before scrunching his nose and sticking out his tongue, as if he is trying to expel a bad taste. “When the watchman, like the rest of us, awoke five fateful days later, he looked down to find three bald eagles at the base of his tower! The company has since relocated to the neighboring town of...town of...” The man slumps against a wall. His head flops down and snaps back up, flops down and snaps back up. Finally, he starts to snore.

Merna and Trekweight leave. They walk down the street. Although it has been over a decade, the town is indeed still held by a drowsy haze. The eyes of the pedestrians seem to be diluted. They bump into walls and trip over the air in front of them.

“This will do,” says Merna.

Trekweight nods.

After a few blocks, they come to a hotel called “The Flying Weka.” Merna rings the bell at the front desk five times before the woman slumped in front of it jerks upward.

“Hello,” she says. She keeps her eyes shut.

“A room for two.”

“Ah, yes. One of Flickfields finest establishments,” she teeters over, her head launches back onto the table.

“A room for two, please,” Merna repeats, and rings the bell a sixth time.

“Ah, yes,” the young woman grumbles.

Merna feels a tap on her shoulder. She spins around. She hears the jingle of metal against metal.

“Room 805. Got two keys.”

## CONVERSATION 1

“You can’t see me, but I am carrying around something and it is very heavy!”

Merna reaches out. Her palm meets a bulging canvas sack. It has many zippers and parts of it seem to be sewn and patched.

“Ah,” says Merna. “I can feel it now.”

## CONVERSATION 2

“How do you want to be buried?” Trekweight asks.

“I always thought I’d be buried next to my husband. Now I’m not so sure.”

“Do you think we’ll be visible when we die?”

“I hadn’t thought of that either.”

## STATEMENT

“Traveling with you is like traveling with a part of my body that has grown overnight,”

Trekweight’s voice says suddenly behind Merna.

## COLLISION

Merna and Trekweight walk down the street in search of food. This is usually how the morning starts. They veer into a grocery store where the smell of ripe fruit is thick in the air. Merna sees a shopping cart swerve then vanish. She looks at expiration dates. She picks things up and puts them down. They too snap into nothing at her touch.

Suddenly, Merna feels the gust of a body propelling itself towards her. This is how Merna crashes into Trekweight in the produce aisle, but it is not the kind of crashing that Merna expects. Trekweight is smaller than she originally imagined, her waist tapers and swells as Merna's hand swipes downward. It is often the case with people who cannot or do not see each other that they will either collide or scatter into disparate corners. This seems like a paradox, but it is inevitable. Instead of rebounding, Trekweight remains planted in front of Merna. Merna can hear soft jagged breaths, and when she lifts her hand to Trekweight's face she feels her smooth mouth. Her hair hangs in incongruent wisps around her temples and cheeks. When Merna closes her eyes there is only darkness. The heaviness of Trekweight's forehead on her shoulder.



Every day, Merna forgets and remembers. This is to say that certain things get foggier as others get sharper. Merna forgets the color of her palms and their grooved intersections. She forgets the reddish splotches that had populated her calves.

“Not enough exercise, get the blood flowing and you’ll see a world of difference,” the doctor had said on her annual visit.

She forgets her jagged toenails. She forgets the white dead skin that clung to them. She forgets the contour of her own face.

What Merna remembers is not an event, or even a sensation. It is something older. She remembers something her grandmother had known, no, she remembers something even farther away. She recalls what a remote ancestor had known while they waited for embers to ignite over cold meat. It is something, even, Merna speculates, the first sea beings in their primordial soup had known, when their fins brushed or their blind antennas ricocheted in a dark ocean. Merna's mind flies to the first time her aquatic ancestors wiggled past each other and, instead of moving in their separate trajectories. They moved together, their bellies brushed the muck of the sea floor. To be touched is a sort of remembering.

## ALL THROUGH THE NIGHT

The eclipse infects everything. Objects fuzz around the edges. Instead of losing their sharpness, they appear to become weightless. The sole of a shoe resting on the ground appears to levitate. The place where the heel would have met the floor becomes a haze. All through the night the bed covers ache with fever. When Merna and Trekweight turn the lights on everything quivers, restless in various stages of transformation. This leaves Merna with a profound ache in her knees, and in the space where neck and shoulder meet. As time goes on, she aches in every place the body bends. All through the night, lips meet with a strange and untold force. They also ache. Where she had been surrounded by the weight of glorified carcasses, Merna is now in the midst of flickering things. Everything jumps.



All through the night, animals howl outside the hotel window. The strange and wild creatures leave their prey half eaten in the courtyard. The edges of the half eaten things are caught in a halo of maggots and flies. Merna notices that this is unlike the delicate twisting of the molecules of the bedpost disappearing. It makes her stomach ache.

At night, huddled, Merna and Trekweight hear antlers clashing. They hear the sob of wounded animals. In the morning, however, when they walk into the dewy courtyard, only a small rodent is dead on the lawn. Indistinguishable, a smear.

“Must have been a mouse,” declares Trekweight. Merna lodges her hand in Trekweight’s pocket for warmth.

“No, it must have been something bigger, a ferret, maybe.”

“There aren’t any wild ferrets around here,” corrects Trekweight briskly.

“I don’t know, maybe someone let their pet ferret out, maybe someone’s pet ferret escaped when their owner was taking the trash out and something caught it.”

This seems to be enough of an explanation for Trekweight. Merna feels her arm tug gently as Trekweight nods, adding, “Well, maybe now that its been well fed it’ll leave. Animals like that don’t stick around one place for long.”

*What kind of animals*, Merna thinks of asking, but decides not to.



That night in an entanglement of knees and hips Merna awakes again to the noise of animals growling in the courtyard. She suspects that a smaller animal is trying to fend off a larger one. Merna tries to lift herself to look out the window, but before she can propel herself upward Trekweight rolls, cradling Merna’s head in crook of her arm.

*The Graduate School of Entomology Presents:*

**“THE MAN BEHIND THE BUG:  
TALE OF THE UNIDENTIFIED SPECIMEN”**

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A Lecture by Bruce Altaver  
Moderated by Professor Jeremy Taylor

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February 19, 2014 at 7:30 PM  
Fulton Hall Theatre 1, Kansas State University

## BRUCE GIVES A LECTURE

“Some achieve fame through creation,” announces Professor Taylor from the heavily lit podium. “Some stumble across an entity whose greatness shines so bright that the finder, I shall call him, is illuminated by association.”

Bruce cannot hear the pair of Myrmecologists snickering as he climbs the steps to the podium.

“Why must he store the specimen in that horrid suitcase?” asks Amelia Twimpell, chair of Dipterology at the University Arizona.

“He has some theory about pressure, that the leather preserves the specimen,” says Ray Burke, head of Vespology at the University of California-Berkeley, and gives a look as if to say, *what is the field of entomology coming to, really*. From across the room, Ms. Twimpell raises her eyebrows in approval.

“It is my great pleasure to announce,” Professor Taylor sweeps his arm to the left, where Bruce stands in the wing, “Bruce Altavar.”

The audiences polite clapping dissipates as Bruce reaches the top step. He huffs into the microphone, “ladies and gentlemen,” he begins. “Ladies and gentlemen.”

Bruce unsnaps the latches of his suitcase. He tilts the microphone towards the suitcase latches so the audience can hear the pop.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he says a third time. “Let me begin my presentation. First I will extract the specimen from its holding chamber.”

Bruce takes a pair of rubber gloves from the pocket of his suitcase and puts them on. The snapping of rubber against flesh reverberates through the speakers. Two Lepidopterists in the

front row wince. Bruce hoists the Unidentified Specimen from the suitcase and places it under a camera that projects its image onto a screen behind him. The crowd inches closer.

Ms. Twimpell and Mr. Burke stifle their muttered exclamations. The Unidentified Specimen is indeed colossal.

“Right,” Bruce begins. “Well I first encountered this specimen in my very own backyard. It was a blustery winter day, and I was taking my daily sojourn from my entomology activities when I saw the specimen lying on its back, near where my wife and I deposit our trash. Now usually I have to be stealthy, sneak up on an insect to ensnare it. But there it was, almost waiting for me. Please note, ladies and gentlemen, that I live in a typical northeastern climate. How did this specimen travel to my backyard on that fateful, blustery winter day? That is for us to speculate.”

“Brilliant,” Professor Taylor whispers into Bruce’s ear as he guides Bruce down the stage steps.

The audience claps. This is a phenomenon that needs no artificial amplification. To Bruce’s ears, the clapping sounds like the roar of his first cicada season, seventeen years ago.

“I hope you will come to dinner with me and my associates, to discuss and congratulate you further on your findings,” suggests Professor Taylor.

“Yes, I would like that very much,” Bruce replies. He presses his fingers into his ears as if trying to dislodge the sound.

Professor Taylor escorts Bruce and his suitcase into a taxi. Bruce eats a robust dinner. Over the course of his tour he eats steak, cuts of veal, tiramisu. One night he eats a bowl of linguini the size of the Unidentified Specimen itself. In these moments he forgets almost entirely that this is the post-Merna era, the post-young man era, and dwells in the possibility that this

perhaps was the Unidentified Specimen era. It is the era of large dinners at the expense of a University. Each night he insists on carrying his suitcase into the restaurant, and props it against the leg of his chair. Ever so often he reaches down to pat the handle of the suitcase. This gives him immense comfort.



Bruce does not tell the crowds of esteemed Entomologists that each night the suitcase seems to get heavier, so much so that in Akron, Ohio he is forced to stop at the local shopping duplex and ask Anna the sales associate where to find a roller bag.

“Something sturdy, preferably with a hard shell exterior,” he specifies as he lumbers under the weight of his suitcase.

“Are you going on a trip?” asks the sales associate, eyeing the Bruce’s cargo.

“Sort of.”

Bruce chooses a suitcase with wheels and tough, grey plastic. In the parking lot Bruce climbs into the back seat of his car and transfers the Unidentified Specimen to its new vessel. He toes the increasingly acrid smell.



At the University of Alabama, Bruce is invited to dinner after his lecture. Reggie Watts, the head of the entomology department, insists that he join the rest of the entomology department at a local restaurant. Reggie is an attractive woman who wears pencil skirts and heels. What Bruce finds most attractive about her is the way she touches his shoulder. Lightly, with the tips of her fingers. This is the reason he accepts.

“We are so glad to be honored by the presence of the aloof entomologist,” says Reggie, outdoing herself. The group sits down at a table draped with a waxy looking checked fabric.

Bruce props his suitcase against the table leg. Still, it nudges itself into the open air of the restaurant.

“You should hire a bodyguard for that thing,” Reggie says, eyeing his suitcase.

Reggie leans in to say this, despite the fact that the restaurant is not loud at all. In fact, it is nearly empty.

Few people understand why women are attracted to Bruce. One hypothesis is that he is always staring off into the distance at things, and that makes people believe that is thinking about something beyond their reach. They imagine a thought that must be uncovered slowly and with precision. Bruce orders the most expensive thing on the menu then quickly changes his mind. Bruce looks at Reggie. She is buttering a piece of bread. Reggie is buttering her bread in the way that the etiquette teacher taught her: rip off a bit of the roll then butter it. Don't put the entire roll in your mouth at one time. Etiquette classes were held in the basement of the local high school, twice a week. Bruce does not know that this is the reason Reggie is buttering her bread this way. The only thing that Bruce notices is her knuckles, the way she holds the knife and grazes the top layer of the butter from the little porcelain tub instead of diving the knife into it. He respects this kind of delicateness.

Dr. McCoy, a large man in suspenders, leans over and whispers to Bruce in a wet gust, “Reggie is a real type A personality.”

Bruce nods and coughs. A speck of bread flies from his mouth and lands on the rim of Dr. McCoy's water glass. Dr. Buckley leans in closer.

“Yeah,” he continues, “a type A personality in *all* respects.”

Bruce can hear Dr. McCoy smack his next to his ear. Bruce wonders why everyone was feeling it necessary to encroach upon his personal ear space. He sticks both of his pinkie fingers into his ears and twists.

Everyone calls Reggie “Reggie.” No one knows her real name, but they are all pretty sure that it isn’t Reggie.

The group walks out of the restaurant, and Reggie brushes Bruce’s knuckles with her fingers. It is the same hand that he is carrying the suitcase with. Bruce clenches his hand around the handle of the bag.

“Remember,” Dr. McCoy pats Bruce on the back, “a real type A. In *all* respects.”

Bruce goes to his hotel room after dinner. He massages his shoulder and inner forearm, which ache from carrying the case. He knows what Dr. McCoy means when he says that Reggie is a type A personality. In all respects. He knows that Dr. McCoy does not mean that Reggie is an accomplished entomologist, or that she matches the color of her shoes to her handbag. This makes Bruce tiered and a little sad, and so he sits at the edge of the bed and holds his suitcase in his arms.

While holding what is perhaps the closest thing Bruce will ever have to a child, this memory comes to him: The sun of the catch. He looks down at the constellation of freckles on his inner forearm. These are the spots that waiting has given him, while crouching in a thick mist of sun, hoping for a wing to rustle. In this moment Bruce feels as though he is holding a child. Not his child, necessarily, but certainly a soft, living creature. Not only does he feel the sensation of holding a child, he also feels somehow catapulted to the moment of its conception.

## BRUCE GETS LAID

Bruce gets laid. There isn't much to say about this event. Reggie comes to his door with a lame excuse. "What is the University of Alabama if not a paragon for hospitality?" she asks rhetorically. Some line she had practiced beforehand, Bruce suspects.

Reggie removes her heels and the room is filled with the smell of her feet. She seems to be aware of this, because she tucks her feet under her thighs. Bruce scoots the suitcase under the bed. The handle protrudes into the open air of the hotel room.

"Nice place you got," she says. She scoots farther onto the bed. "God, what a long day." She stretches her arms and flops back.

"Yeah," Bruce says. "Long."

Reggie yawns dramatically. Her head lolls to the bedside table, where the stone beetle Scarab sits next to a half eaten candy bar.

"Bad boy," she says playfully, gesturing at the candy bar.

For a moment Bruce is sure that she has seen right through him. *She sees the stone beetle*, he thinks, *how does he know about Merna?* Bruce reflects nervously upon Dr. McCoy's instance on emphasizing Reggie's type A personality. To Bruce's relief, she picks up the candy bar and takes a generous bite.

"And who is this?" she says with her mouth full, picking up the stone beetle. She wipes the corner of her mouth with the heel of her palm.

"Oh, that, nothing, its nothing, just something I carry with me for good luck," Bruce fumbles.

“Wow,” Reggie says with genuine interest. “I’ve never seen one of these things in person before.” She strokes the Scarab’s dark green back with her index finger. She puts it carefully back on the bedside table. “Funny that this is your good luck charm, though.”

“Would you like a drink?” Bruce changes the subject.

“Well it’s funny because this is a Heart Scarab.”

“Must have something, probably some dinky little bottles of gin in here,” Bruce announces and traverses the room to the mini fridge.

“Yeah,” she continues, “they used to wrap these up with mummies. They’d put the Scarab on the heart of the deceased, and it would keep them from confessing their wrongdoings when Osiris was judging them. Sometimes *two* Scarabs were put over the heart. I guess that was for people who *really* made a mess of things when they were alive. Did I tell you I studied in Egypt during my semester abroad in college? It was marvelous.”

Bruce approaches Reggie and takes the Heart Scarab from her palm. He feels its weight.

Bruce feels her fingers start near the base of his spine and trail slowly upwards to his shoulder blades.

“Yes, I think I’ll take one of those dinky little bottles of gin, please,” she whispers.



Bruce gets laid. There isn’t much to say about this event. Bruce fucks on top, but he is very quickly out of breath. He is aware that he is sweating too much.

“I apologize, its difficult to support myself, you know,” he huffs, “out of shape, really embarrassing, you’re so, so attractive...” he is aware that he is rambling.

She rolls wordlessly on top of him, and looks down into his face. He is still aware that he is sweating too much. He pinches a wad of a sheet and attempts to dab his forehead, then the bulge of skin that bridges the chin, neck and collarbone.

What else is there to say? His mind wanders. He imagines the acrid smell, the smell of earth and rotting fruit coming from under his bed. The insect refusing to be preserved. This mixed with the smell of Reggie's feet.



Bruce isn't even sure that the Unidentified Specimen can be considered an insect. Researchers from the North American Society of Entomologists inspected the specimen, prodding its body with their gloved hands.

"It's definitely not a beetle," one said.

Despite its hard exoskeleton, a telltale characteristic of beetles, it researchers could not seem to find where the wing flaps separated from the back. This gives Bruce a sort of spark of hope. Maybe this specimen is something greater, a celestial being that plummeted to earth with no family or mate. Bruce finds this notion very comforting.



Yes, he smells it. It's definitely there. Her, her socks, him, the insect, all of it melds together. She comes. He comes. No one comes. Bruce can't remember. What I mean to say is that whether or not anyone comes is not an integral part of the story. Reggie gets up. She puts her socks back on. This is the detail that Bruce remembers when she leaves, as he lies in bed covered in himself: the image of Reggie putting her socks on first, before anything else.

That night, Bruce dreams. He dreams that there is a massive and invisible body under his house. It is so huge and so invisible an army of entomologists cannot detect it. He dreams that

the invisible corpse has ascended and is standing naked in front of Osiris. In a fit of anxiety the invisible corpse pats its chest. All its shameful truths pour ceaselessly from its mouth.

## BRUCE, POST REGGIE

When Bruce wakes it is six o'clock in the morning. This gives Bruce a solid two hours to shower, eat a complimentary continental breakfast, use the hotel gym, or stare out the window. Bruce does none of those things. Bruce slides the suitcase from under the bed and opens it. He stares for a long time, trying to find the eyes of the Unidentified Specimen. Suddenly, a bellboy knocks on the door. Bruce opens it.

“Time for check out,” announces the bellboy.

Bruce puts his clothes in his backpack and zips the suitcase with the Unidentified Specimen tucked inside. He scoops ice from the icebox in the hall that advertizes:

*Complimentary. For use in beverages of sore muscles.*

Bruce salutes the bellboy on his way out. The bellboy does see him. His head is down, scribbling. Bruce gets into his car and heaves the roller bag into the back seat. Because he has not taken advantage of the complimentary continental breakfast, he is hungry. He listens to “oldies” that had become “oldies” without him even realizing it. He comes across a diner called “The Starboard.” He parks the car and withdraws the key. The interior of the car drops in temperature immediately. He glances back at the roller bag. As a now highly esteemed entomologist, he surmises that the drastic shift in temperature will send the Unidentified Specimen into shock. The type of shock he envisions is unclear even to him, but the absence of a continental breakfast in his stomach inhibits him from asking any more questions. He hoists the suitcase and walks in. A waitress nods to him.

“Anywhere you want, sweetheart,” she says in a good-natured tone.

Bruce chooses a booth. He puts the roller bag on the opposite cushion that faces him. It is a typical American diner. The booths are clad in red plastic cushioning. The floor tiles are checkered and linoleum. A cat clock hangs on the wall; its tail twitches on the hour. Bruce removes a napkin from the dispenser in front of him. He reaches into a front pocket of the roller bag and extracts a pen. Bruce notices a waitress hovering above him.

“What’ll it be?” she inquires cheerily.

“Oh,” Bruce says, caught off guard. “Well, I suppose I’ll have a cheeseburger and a milkshake. Chocolate.”

The waitress glances suspiciously at the suitcase propped on the bright red seat, but she seems satisfied by his answer. She holds her knuckles to her nose as she scribbles his order, and walks away. As he prods a wad of protruding napkins into its container, he hears the waitresses voice in the background. She sounds frustrated. A family with two young boys passes by Bruce. They hurry past and choose a booth on the other side of the restaurant.

The waitress reemerges with the steaming food. Bruce extends his arm politely to receive the dish, but she does not advance.

“I don’t mean to be rude but the boss says it’s making the eating environment unsavory for the other customers,” she announces in a sudden, jarring monotone. Her knuckles are pressed so close to her nose that he can barely hear her.

Bruce stares at her. He stares at the yellow cheese oozing off the sides of the cheeseburger. He looks longingly at the layer of frost on the metal milkshake container.

“The boss agrees,” she repeats. Taking his silence for stubbornness, she clarifies, “Whatever’s in the suitcase has to go. Its driving people away.”

He swallows the surge of saliva that has accumulated in his mouth.

“You could leave it in your car, sir.” She glances quickly to the adjacent table apologetically, and turns sternly back to Bruce.

“Well, you see,” he begins, still staring at the food that is just out of his reach, “there is a delicate specimen in is bag. It is quite likely the only one of its kind and, you see, and it’s very sensitive to temperature. I admit it is in fragile condition, but if I could perhaps leave the specimen in another room, I would be very grateful. Surely you have a break room of some kind?”

The waitress blinks.

“It has to go.”

“Well,” fumbles Bruce, “could I at least eat my meal first?”

Instead of answering the waitress turns on her heel, skillfully propping the plate on one hand as she walks in the opposite direction. Bruce stands up. He walks across the diner to the door as though his fly is down.

Bruce slowly gets back in his car. Unsurprisingly, he is hungrier than he was before. He turns on the car. Some pop star wails about a breakup on the radio.

It is unmistakably there. The waitress and her boss were right. The family, even the two little boys knew. The Unidentified Specimen stinks. It stinks of more than rotting fruit and earth. It smells like death. Bruce shifts in his seat. His seatbelt rubs uncomfortably against his shoulder blade. A very obvious fact, far more obvious than the weight of the Unidentified Specimen or the exact coordinates in which it was found, becomes blindingly apparent. The Unidentified Specimen is dead.

## BURIAL, ELATION

When Bruce was eighteen, his grandfather died. At the burial, he and his brothers took turns with the shovel while their parents and grandmother watched. They emptied dirt into the hole where the urn of ashes was placed. He saw his grandmother put her lips to the smooth wooden box. He saw her thrust a handful of soil at the hole in the ground, and he saw the clump of dirt land at the mouth of the pit. He felt the weight of the shovel as he heaved it forward, and he felt his arms turn into branches that tugged at the roots of his ribs.

That night when he returned home he was filled with elation. He turned his music up so loud that his parents thought he was drowning out the terrible noise of his sobbing. When they came in they saw him dancing, kicking the bedpost, making turbines with his arms and faces in the mirror.

Bruce imagined that his parents were very ashamed of him at that moment. The house was quiet and cold that night. His father sat without socks at the kitchen table and dribbled the few drops of olive oil from an almost extinguished bottle into a half filled one. Bruce stopped dancing. He turned the music off. He sat on the edge of his bed and tried to feel solemn but his feet tapped, twisted on their axis.

## BRUCE LEAVES THE BODY IN A THICKET OF MOSS

Bruce passes the first exit. The feeling in his stomach is becoming unbearable. He knows that it is hunger, but he also knows that it is far more than that. Bruce passes the second exit. *Get out and find a rest stop, anything*, he thinks to himself. He opens the glove compartment but there are no bags of salted nuts, no individually wrapped mints, nothing. Bruce pulls over and stops on the shoulder of the highway.

“Watch it, dumb ass!” shouts a fellow driver as Bruce carelessly opens the drivers seat door onto oncoming traffic.

A Buick swerves to avoid running over Bruce’s toe. Bruce apologizes into the roar of traffic. He scampers quickly to the other side of the car. He faces a deep and cool forest. From where Bruce is situated he can almost imagine that he is sitting by a forested lake filled with turbulent water. The sound of traffic is the roar of waves. He closes his eyes. From above him he senses the looming presence of the roller bag, its dark shell pressed against the window.

His body feels like a boulder. Bruce stands up. He opens the car door and drags the roller bag onto the patched grass. He unzips the bag slowly and holds his breath in anticipation.

Merna knew that the stone beetle was a form of protection. Merna did not know was that the stone beetle was a form of protection from oneself. Merna had unconsciously given Bruce the ultimate worry stone. The Scarab flops out of one of the front pockets of the bag. Although Bruce is quite sure that the Unidentified Specimen has not committed any profound transgressions in life, and although he is quite sure that there is no queue to a great and looming judge, Bruce places the Heart Scarab on the Unidentified Specimens back. Bruce knows that the

heart of the beetle is segmented. It is a tube interrupted by a series of bulbs that runs through its body. *Perhaps this means that the Unidentified Specimen has many hearts*, Bruce thinks.

## HUNGER, ELATION

Bruce turns on the car radio. Some pop star wails about a breakup.

Baby, I always wanted you.

Baby, I never wanted you.

Baby, baby, baby.

For reasons unknown to even himself, Bruce rolls down the radio and turns up the radio. He swings his arms fast like windmills. He chops the air with his arms, he swings his head back and forth until he is so dizzy he swerves right into the opposite lane. Luckily the surge of traffic has dissipated. The road is empty.

After an undetermined number of exits, Bruce is out of breath. He sighs and closes his eyes and, in an act of blind will, keeps his foot on the accelerator.

“Goddamn it,” Bruce exclaims suddenly, and angrily hits the steering wheel with his palm.

He has forgotten the napkin and the pen at the diner. It is too late to go back now, partially because he is already driving, and partially because there is no way Bruce is showing his face in that diner ever again.

Bruce had scrawled a message on the napkin. Although it is intended for Merna, there is no address or postage stamp, and it is not addressed to anyone in particular. Due to this evidence it can be assumed that it is an open letter, intended for anyone who stumbled across it.

I look for you everywhere and it makes me very tired. You are no place. No place? If you are no place, then you are every place.

## TUESDAY, DRUG STORE

A woman squats. She lowers herself to the height of a low hanging mirror, which is flanked by the image of a woman with puckering her Pepto-Bismol colored lips. Behind her is an image of a woman gazing up at her electrified eyelashes. The squatting woman grazes her cheekbones with her fingers then twists a crusted bottle of mascara labeled “Tester.”

Trekweight’s pack bumps noisily along the aisle. It dislodges bottles of lotion, a few boxes of hair removal appliances. This does not seem to concern Trekweight. An employee who is shelving foundation tenses visibly at the dull thud of containers. At the end of the cosmetics section are the perfumes.

Vanilla Crush – \$7.95

Bubble gum supreme – \$8.89

Cinnamon coconut dream – \$12.50

“What is this,” Trekweight says.

A bottle of “Ruckus Raspberry” hangs in the air.

They test rows of cheap perfume. They can’t stop. They are not sure why they can’t seem to stop. Perhaps the weight of the bottles is pleasant in their hands. Perhaps it is the smell, which seems to give line and contour to their bodies. Trekweight wanders to aisle of packaged snacks. A game. Merna’s eyes start to water in aisle three. Trekweight hides amongst the stacks of sanitary pads. Trekweight does not smell good or pleasing in any way. In fact, it is

quite the opposite. Trekweight reeks like a sickly sweet syrup. It is impossible for Merna to go near her without coughing and holding her nose. Lavender Lips, Amber Skies, Cotton Candy. Trekweight is the collective smell of a seventh grade school dance. The employee shelving foundation flinches as they pass, as though a ghost has gotten very close to her face.



That night the smell gets trapped under the suffocation of blankets. It escapes in gusts through the open channel of fabric made by their necks. In the morning Trekweight's skin smells like moss, earth, the odor of the ground after it has rained. She smells like a trowel full of soil in the morning.

Merna and Trekweight spend what feels like many days stopping in stores. They pocket things that fade and disperse when they are held.

## WEDNESDAY, SLUSH

Merna and Trekweight stay in the hotel room until hunger forces them to leave. Their invisibility fills the room. It creeps up the wall and into the coiled rope that holds the curtains in a bunch. The domed light in the middle of the ceiling still casts a dull glow. The numbers of the telephone are a mist. Everything is a swarm of dust.

Like most days, Merna and Trekweight walk aimlessly. In the afternoon, the sun hangs suspended like a burning fruit. The puddles are lit lemon colored in the aftermath of a snowstorm. Children kick their way through patches of slush.

As usual, Trekweight carries all of her belongings with her. Merna can hear the metal clasps clashing together as she walks.

“Why do you carry everything with you when you could simply leave your toothbrush and your extra pair of underwear in the hotel,” nags Merna.

“It feels good to carry things on my back. To remind me that I am on the ground.”

Fair enough.

They stop in a bakery. There are scones on display at the counter. Containers of orange juice the color of egg yolks sit cozily in a troth of ice. Muffins heave their crispy weight over the paper wrapping, so full they almost tip over. The woman at the counter daintily picks her nose. She sighs and goes into the back. The clank of dishes is audible. A muffin hovers briefly, fuzzes at the edges and disappears. A container of juice is plucked. Trekweight wedges it into the front pocket of her coat.

“I don’t feel like getting their attention this morning,” Trekweight says, although Merna has not voiced any opposition.

## WEDNESDAY, FOG

Time moves strangely. Chunks of seem to evaporate. In the morning, Merna and Trekweight consult each other. They attempt to trace the events of the previous day in a process that feels like sifting through sand for a seed. Evidence is sparse. Even sandwich wrappers dissolve. They lick the corners of their mouths to taste what they had already forgotten they had eaten for dinner.

“Ah, takeout from that Indian restaurant,” remarks Trekweight.

Now Merna remembers the rich curry they swiped when the waiter placed take out bags on the counter for retrieval. Even the memory of dinner is thin. The muscular action of her jaw is the only thing she can recall. Only the body seems to remember.

Merna tries to remember the streets they walked down, but comes up with only singular incidents. The protruding ridge of sidewalk that she tripped on, for example.

Merna and Trekweight wake up. Everything is predictably indistinguishable. Merna rolls over and sniffs her fingers for signs of curry. Nothing. She opens the window and the smell of grass clippings waft gently into the room. Somehow it is spring.

## SATURDAY, DEPARTURE

Trekweight is surprised at how warmth has crept up on them.

“Even one of seasoned invisibility,” she chuckles to herself.

As they walk they shed their winter coats, hats, scarves. Trekweight leaves her layers like an old skin in the street.

“No use in lugging them around till next winter,” Trekweight explains without prompting.

Merna looks back at Trekweight’s parka, flickering into focus.

The street leads them to a suburban offshoot. They can still hear the winding metal of city machinery can still be faintly seen and heard.

In the process of walking, they forget the place they have just immersed from. They stumble across a yard sale where tables are set up on the lawn. The smell of mothballs seems to swell and push itself in gusts through the street. Merna and Trekweight file wordlessly through the gate and into the yard sale. A middle-aged couple barter for a half empty boxes of matches. A man gets a discount on a lamp because it won’t turn on.

“Seems the electrical wire’s been chewed by rats or something,” the man says smugly.

A mother instructs her child to inspect an old Afghan rug for fleas. Everywhere, broken things are being eyeballed.

“Sometimes I just don’t understand why these people come here,” Merna hears a voice say.

She turns around and sees a man hunching over a picnic table.

“Folks could get any of these things from the Walmart down the street for a buck or two more, would last a year or two more too if you ask me.”

Merna looks into the young man’s face. He scribbles numbers onto a piece of graph paper. The paper is a mess of recorded sales.

“God damn it,” says the young man abruptly, “really shouldn’ta caved on that ironing board sale.”

Merna’s hand scans space, searching for Trekweight’s hand like a flounder patrolling the ocean floor for a morsel of food. Her hand flutters frantically when it does not encounter anything. She stands very still for the sound of Trekweight’s breathing, which is usually labored due to her pack. She waits for the smell of earth, the sick sweet perfume they had doused themselves in. She is not sure where the ground ends and Trekweight begins, Trekweight seems to be an extension of the ground, attached to the earth but somehow always in motion. The heavy smell of things far past their use drowns out these signals. Merna’s nose is filled with dust, mothballs and air freshener sprayed liberally onto water soaked bathmats. All these choking things.

Merna breathes in short hiccupping puffs. She considers going back to the hotel. By now the room would be whole again. In its materiality it would be unrecognizable. By now Trekweight’s body is curving, bending into, past, the crowd.

## LATER

Later, Merna makes a list of the things she remembers. Again, only slivers.

1. Her slick mouth.
2. Her smell, the way no part of the scent she emanated was hers. The way all of it had been acquired from other places, sprayed from samples of perfume, pumped from bottles of lotion in the aisle of a CVS. The tub of coconut oil she opened in the supermarket and slicked across her mouth and temples. The little tin of rose scented hand cream she swiped from a woman dozing on the bus. Underneath: earth, fungus, a wet washcloth with soap residue clinging to it, moisture.

## EMPTY SPACE

The empty space of Trekweight looms. Merna finds it in all the cavities of the chipped vases for sale. It is in the wine glasses with lipstick stains intact on the rims. Merna calls Trekweight's name very loudly. It occurs to Merna that Trekweight does not have a last name. *This information would be been helpful at this particular moment*, she thinks. When you are in a thicket of people bartering for scraps, it does not do much good to yell a name that sounds like a tractor or a lawnmower or even a kitchen appliance.

“We all know that people are selling their old crap for a reason. If you're lucky, the reason is that it reminds them of something they don't want to think about. She got that espresso maker as a wedding present and now her husband is screwing some lady down the street, for example.”

It is the young man. Merna makes a full circle of the yard sale and is now staying very still, in case Trekweight is also trying to find her, in case Trekweight is simply looking at an object and wasn't sure if it is worth carrying around.

“It takes experience spotting these ‘bad memory items,’ that's what I call them, and the people they belong to. When you ask them the price and try to haggle it down they don't try to fight you. That's how I know. They aren't looking for money, they just want to get rid of the damn thing. When you do spot them, you better snatch them up quick. Opportunities like espresso makers don't come along often.” He shakes his head. “Not everyday.”

Despite the fact that this is not a place that Trekweight would feel compelled to linger, Merna stands next to the young man.

“God damn it” he repeats, “really shouldn'ta caved on that ironing board.”

Merna realizes that the young man is talking to no one in particular. People pass by and pick up objects resting on the picnic table. They put them down again. She edges out of the way as the young man reaches for a blender. He looks around for a rag to clean the blender, which seems to have hunks of banana crusted to the blades. He shrugs, pinches the fringe of his t-shirt and dips it into the blender.

Merna considers asking the young man if he has seen Trekweight. She reframes this question in her mind: have you seen anyone looking for an insulated canteen, shoe glue, fresh laces.

“Excuse me,” Merna says.

The young man does not budge. He puts his nose on the edge of the blender tentatively and winces. Merna shuffles closer and pokes the young man’s shoulder with her finger.

The young man and the picnic table jump, sending a collection of chipped glass animals into the grass.

The young man rushes to pick his merchandise from the overgrown tufts of grass. Merna instinctually bends to help. She plucks a tiger by the jaw and flicks a wad of dirt from its belly. Her absence consumes it.

“Hey, you, whatever you are, I see you stealing my porcelain animals!” yells the young man, not knowing where to direct his eyes.

Adjacent yard sale goers turn to see the young man’s frantic gestures. Upon noticing that he has an audience, he holds a koala in his raised palm.

“Look at this fine specimen, ladies and gentlemen! Salvaged from the porcelain animal collection of a diplomats wife! So rare people are willing to *steal* it!”

When no one approaches, he adds, “animals missing noses are half off,” gesturing to a snoutless fox. “Half off!”

Merna sets the tiger on the table. She watches materialize. The young man continues to paw through the grass. She puts her hand on the tablecloth. The splintered picnic table comes into focus through the tablecloth. She scans the myriad of items on the table. Many are waterlogged or chipped, or both. The young man looks every which way, but not in her direction. Next to the materializing tiger she sees the picture of her eighteen-year-old self at prom in her mother's silver picture frame.

Her grandmother's silver soup spoons are propped up against a damp box of Jenga. The young man stops his advertizing. He is out of breath. He sits back down and steadies the picnic table with his palm. He picks up the porcelain animals that have reemerged on the table during his fit and inspects them. He swivels them around with his fingers and holds them to the light. Since the last clean patch of his t-shirt is now coated with banana, he licks his fingers and rubs a basset hound between the ears.

“Sir,” Merna says. Her mouth hovers above his left ear. “Sir, I can't help but notice, well, I can't help but notice, well...” Merna trails off.

This would probably be a good time to mention Merna's somewhat crippling politeness. When she was twelve and a soccer ball hit her nose during a game and it took her five whole minutes to get the referees attention, despite the fact that pools of blood were running through her fingers. This is about to change.

Merna knows with certainty that the young man had stolen objects that belonged to her. Despite the fact that the life in which she owned these objects seems distant and unreachable,

they are hers. *But perhaps this meant that they were no loner mine*, she speculates. In any case, one of the objects sitting on the table for sale had her face on it.

“Sir,” she snaps.

The young man tenses his shoulders. He glares at the porcelain animals like they are puzzle pieces that do not fit together.

“Sir.” She is getting frustrated. “Sir I know for a fact that that picture frame and the silverware belongs to me, or belonged to me, anyway.”

This would probably be a good time to mention that, although the young man appears to be quite smug, he sincerely believes that ghosts are perusing him. He fears the anger of the hoards of people he had stolen trinkets, heirlooms, and wads of cash from. Bruce flashes before him along with the rest. The memory of turkey sandwiches garnished with tough, under ripe tomatoes and the tight suffocating hallway amble in his memory by and vanish.

“I don’t know what you are talking about,” he gasps.

“I am the woman in that picture frame.”

The young man begins packing his things into crates. His fingers shake as he wraps the wine glasses in newspaper.

“A figment, a mere figment, I am hallucinating,” the young man mutters to himself.

“Sir!” Merna shouts.

“You have a picture of me when I was eighteen, and you also have my grandmothers silverware. My God, there is not much that I have in this world. When I touch things they disappear. I infect everything! I am a walking infection! Who knows how I stop light from being refracted, my *God*, I cannot fathom. How old am I? I can barley remember, I am surely filled with lines and grooves that have no doubt appeared since the transformation, I can feel

them sinking into me, crows feet, I know they're there. I know the way gravity works on people. I've seen the way the cheeks and mouths of old women sink. There are not many things that I know to be mine but what I do know, sir, is that you have my picture frame, you have my picture, and you have my grandmothers silverware."

Merna realizes that this is the largest string of words that she has uttered in months. With one motion of his arm the young man sweeps the remainder of his merchandise into the crate. The porcelain animals and the silver clank together painfully. He turns abruptly and elbows his way through the crowd.

"Bruce," she calls after him. "You must have encountered him. My husband." The word feels strange in her mouth. "Husband." Far and remote. "Middle aged gentleman," she continues, "about 5'7. Bugs, he likes bugs, he has an entire office of bugs, little things you'd find in the backyard or crawling caught in between the screen and the glass of a window, mostly."

The young man stops.

"Yes," Merna continues hastily, "the hallway, you must have been down that hallway. A big guy such as yourself must have had a hard time getting through that little space. All the picture frames, that fluffy rug catching on your boots."

Physical memory, the most potent, halts the young man. He puts the crate down. He does not know which way to turn. His back faces Merna.

"Yes," he begins, slowly. "Yes, many bugs, the strong smell of rubbing alcohol, I couldn't take it, so many bugs in a strange assortment of picture frames. Yes. The velvet bag with the silverware, that's when I knew I hit the jackpot."

Merna touches his arm lightly. He howls and skitters across the grass. The young man is selfish and scared. An unfamiliar sensation comes over Merna. She suddenly feels powerful.

“You have a car,” she says. Merna is not entirely sure if this is true. The young man nods frantically. “I am hungry. Take me somewhere and you can answer my questions.”

Silence. The young man, who still believes with a deep chilling panic that he is being haunted, says, “yes, mam, lady, this way, my car is this way, anything you want.”

The young man cannot see Merna smirk.



The young man pulls into the first diner they come across. He chatters to himself the whole time, asking and answering his own questions. The billboard in front of the diner advertizes: “Soda So Cold It’ll Hurt Your Teeth.” Merna orders what was the menu refers to as “the works”: a large root beer float and a jumbo cheeseburger with fries. She takes a sip of root beer and winces.

“Your husband, right,” says the young man. He stares vacantly as french-fries across from him as they hover and rapidly disappear.

“Right, well, a sweet man. Very...well meaning. Yeah.” Silence. “Well, he showed me his collection. Yeah, he was about to show me something else, a big bug, I think he said. He said something like ‘it’ll make me famous, the entomological community will revere me and no one will forget my name.’ Some shit like that. He went out to some shed to get it. That’s when I split. Honestly I thought of taking the bug too, if it would have made him famous and all. He seemed like a nut case though so I couldn’t be sure,” the young man stops abruptly, catching himself. “I mean, no offense, that was just my first reaction. Anyway, what really stopped me

was the smell. Fear of the smell. That god awful stink, like a waiting room of a doctors office mixed with something not right, an open wound.”

The young man shakes his head and takes another sip of his milkshake. Merna looks down at the vicious swirl of bubbles in her root beer.

“Give me that,” she demands, pointing to the milk shake in its icy metal container.

“What?”

“Your milk shake. I want to trade.”

The young man pauses, then nods vigorously.

“Yes, of course, here. Take all of it. I can get another order for you if you want.

Vanilla? Chocolate? I think I saw strawberry on the menu.”

“This is fine,” Merna takes a gulp of the milkshake. “Tell me more.”

“He was a nervous fellow,” the young man says, looking increasingly nervous himself.

“It seemed like all he wanted to say were things he thought I wanted to hear. I felt a little sorry for him.”

Merna gets up to leave.

“I never hurt anyone,” he says, scrambling from the booth. “I just take things, things I don’t think they’ll ever use anyway. I mean a guy like Bruce, I’m sorry, your husband, he didn’t seem like the type who would ever use nice silver. I mean, with all due respect.”

The young man watches in dull horror as a napkin is extracted from the napkin holder and unfolded. The uneaten half of a cheeseburger is placed in the center and wrapped up neatly. He hears the plastic booth cushion squeak as Merna slides out. The young man sighs audibly, and motions towards the waiter.

## MERNA EXCUSES HERSELF

Merna slides the stall latch closed. She sits on the toilet and crosses her arms around herself as though to contain everything. No one has ever seen an invisible thing dispersing. Merna thinks about the novel she found in Trekweight's spilling and abandoned satchel in its half materialized state. Its binding was smeared with ripe fruit. She turned it over with her hands, bent and smeared the clumped fruit onto the grass. Perhaps Trekweight had been waiting for visibility, actively looking for it, even. Surely she had anticipated a day when the book would materialize and remain legible as she turned the pages. Perhaps she had been simply waiting for a visible person to stand at an arms length from her and read her the story. She makes a mental list of the other objects found in Trekweight's pack.

- 1) A half eaten bags of salt and vinegar chips.
- 2) Three half eaten sandwiches lolling out of their wrappers.
- 3) Unidentifiable crumbs at the bottom of the bag.
- 4) A crumpled sock.
- 5) A crust of bread.
- 6) Sick sweet fruit, the skin exploded.

She thinks about Trekweight in line to get on a bus. She thinks about Trekweight looming behind the tallest man and filing silently along without causing any commotion. She thinks about over ripe fruit. She thinks about fruit seeing the light for the first time since it was firm and waiting to be scooped from burlap and bitten. She thinks about Bruce and his bugs.

She thinks about the Unidentified Specimen. She thinks about the “entomology circuit” that Bruce had talked about without looking at her, how he looked way above her as though some bright thing was hanging above her head. She remembers the Unidentified Specimen on the table, silently and patiently stinking. She remembers Bruce with his chunky white shoes, and she imagines that they had grown darker with all the walking. He must be on the circuit by now.

When Merna returns, the young man’s hand is twitching agitatedly in his wallet. The red plastic seat cushion squeaks mercilessly as Merna slides into the booth. The young man looks up.

“Well, I’m in a sort of funny predicament,” he announces.

He crushes a french-fry into pulp between his fingers.

“For a ghost lady I didn’t think you’d eat so much, you know, you being without a body and all...” he trails off.

“Listen,” she begins. “I will still be requiring your services.”

“Not enough bills,” the young man blurts, “I’d ask if we could go Dutch but, you know, what with female liberation, feminism and all, you’re a feminist right? Would you call yourself that? Just wondering, just a transgression, I was thinking...” he trails off again. “You know I realized I never caught your name, your name,” he begins again, jolting back from his momentary verbal lull.

“You pay.” Merna says, simply. “I’ll be waiting by the car.”



The young man is parked next to a sizable tuft of daffodils. Mearna leans against the car and feels the warmth of metal. The spot he chose was an inconvenient distance from the diner. There were closer spaces free, *but he was so nervous, who could blame him*, Merna reasons. A

subtle yet noticeable twitch had begun to develop in his right eye during their ride to the diner, and persisted as they placed their orders. Inside, the young man swats his lower lid in attempts to quiet the muscle fluttering beneath. He leaves a wad of cash tucked under the heavy dish littered with half eaten French fries. Exactly \$10 short.

Merna shimmies until she stands in front of the hood of the car, which was nudged into the daffodil patch. She tramples a few flowers as she shuffles to the hood of the car. She looks down and is pleased that three daffodils have been crushed, severed at the neck. Their bright yellow heads loll in the dirt. Merna bends and rests her cheek on the hood of the car.

The young man approaches his car slowly. He jerks his head, looking for something that cannot be seen. He jumps briskly into the drivers seat and locks the doors. He is about to put the key in the ignition when he hears a thud on the hood of his car. He slaps his eye. He hears a brisk series of strikes on the hood of his car. He fumbles for the key but drops it in the crevice between the seat cushion and the door. The back door opens, shuts.

“Take a left when you get out of the lot, I saw a public library a block away. I need your hands for some Internet searching.”

The young man, surrounded by chachkies collected from the dead, begins to weep.

## PUBLIC LIBRARY

The public library is quiet, frigid, and smells like mothballs. The young man halts at the entrance and stiffens the collar of his jacket for warmth.

“It’s like my grandparents attic in here,” he says.

Merna jabs him between the shoulder blades, urging him forward. The library is empty except for a woman hunched at the front desk. She wears a parka with the fur-lined hood pulled over her head. She types on a colossal computer with fingerless gloves. Merna prods the young man again, this time in the soft space between the rib cage and hip. He yelps. The librarian jerks her head towards them.

“Hello sir, this is a library, please refrain from making noise.”

He walks stiffly to the desk. An open packet of mothballs sits next to the behemoth computer like a bag of mints.

“I was wondering,” he begin, “I was wondering...” the young man trails off.

At this moment he makes the fatal mistake of looking at the librarians left earlobe, where some species of beetle appears to have been punctured and dangling by a hook. The assemblage tugs at her ear, making it sag like a wilting petal. Upon closer inspection, her entire face seems to droop. Gravity, time.

“First kill,” she says, noticing his gaze. The young man tugs at the skin under his eye.

“Right, well we need a computer, we, I mean, I, was wondering if you had Internet facilities,” blurts the young man.

“We’ve had a real Cigarette Beetle infestation problem,” says the librarian, ignoring his question. “They live on average three months in humid climates. The females lay eggs in the

spring, ‘in their food material.’” She makes a face of disgust, and holds her finger up. “Just a moment.”

She reaches beside her desk and opens a mini refrigerator. Merna peers into the frigid shell and sees a stack of books gathering frost. A tray of ice flanks the heap. The librarian hoists an encyclopedia and gingerly lowers it onto the table. She takes a moment to breath hot air onto her fingers.

“That’s where I keep the important books,” she explains, unprompted. “You see, according to this book, the females lay their eggs *in* the books,” she holds up a book entitled: *Book Worms: A Guide to Ridding your Library of Hungry Insects*. “I’m no entomologist, but personally, I don’t think the title is very accurate,” she says. “Worms don’t feed on paper, binding, or glue. It’s the Book Lice, the Cigarette Beetles, the Cockroach, and the Silverfish that are the menaces.” She shudders. “This piece of literature advises that guardians of books such as myself should wrap their collections in a towel and refrigerate them.” She clicks an empty mechanical pencil. “Our air conditioning budget won’t allow for refrigeration, sadly. This is why I have instructed my intern, Josie, to put the books in individual zip lock bags.”

She paws in her desk drawer and extracts a vile filled with mechanical pencil led. Merna turns to see Josie, a girl who appears to be twenty-three. She balances on a ladder. A box of zip lock bags is tucked under her arm. Josie appears to be halfway through bagging the Local Authors of Merit section.

“The mothballs, yes, not protocol from what I have read in the literature. My idea of a preemptive strike,” she smirks to herself. “Can’t be too careful. If you want to browse our collection please be aware that you *must*, and I mean *must*, reseal the bags after you are

finished.” Josie turns carefully on the narrow ladder and nods blankly. “Nasty things,” the librarian concludes.

The young man teeters, unsure of where to go.

“So...”

“Right,” she responds and points, “in the back.”



Merna and the young man walk through the stacks of mummified books to the computer section.

“Type in ‘entomology circuit,’” Merna instructs. This was a phrase that Bruce had used for the activities of the Society of North American Entomologists.

Merna scans the page. Nothing.

“Type in ‘North American entomology society lecture series.’”

A site pops up, but Merna cannot track Bruce’s exact location.

“Well,” says the young man. He leans back in his chair. He looks satisfied. “Looks like he isn’t on ‘the circuit’ after all.”

On their way out, the young man taps a bookshelf affectionately.

“Adios” he says, too loudly. The librarian reeled around in her seat.

“Shhhhh,” she hisses, and returns to her phone conversation. “To think, some people *study*, no, they actually *enjoy* being amongst arthropods. Yes, I put some flyers up in case any of those entomologists the next town over would want to come study the specimens in my library,” she says in a sort of stage whisper.

Merna wraps her forefinger around a belt loop in the young man’s pants. He jerks forward.

“Please,” he whispers. Flakes of dried saliva linger in the crevice of his mouth. “Let me go,” he pleads. “I have a wife and kids,” he lies. Merna scoots closer to the front desk to eavesdrop more effectively.

“Mhmm, a woman came by, she dropped off some fliers for the event. A nice woman named Reggie Watts, had a smart looking suit on. She didn’t seem to take an interest in doing a field visit to the library though. She’ll change her mind though, I can feel it.”

A leg of the creature dangling from the ear of the librarian twitches. The young man lets out a sound of muffled disgust like a tire losing air.

“No, no money for an exterminator. Just not in the budget. An extermination *intern*, what a novel idea. I’ll look into that. Brilliant idea, Margaret.”

The librarian scribbles the address of a local exterminator on a piece of paper with her newly refilled mechanical pen.

“Yes, I wrapped the flyers up too. You can never be too careful.”

Merna leads the young man in a circle around the library. Merna sees the pamphlets on a display table. Each pamphlet is separately packaged. She unwraps one from its solitary container, and unfolds the pamphlet to see Bruce smiling rigidly up at her from a box on the left flap. His shirt is fastened to the top button.

“This weekend,” the caption reads, “Bruce Altavar presents the Unidentified Specimen, a modern entomological mystery. Live talk and showing with the specimen itself. \$10 Admission, discounted price for members of the North American Entomological Society.”

“Here.” Merna points to the bottom of the flyer where the address of the venue is printed. “This is where we’re going.”



They drive for two hours. Merna instructs the young man to park lot of the lecture hall and in the camp out in the car until morning. Once the doors open, they will go in and find Bruce.

A fragment of the librarians chatter surfaces in her head as she huddles in the back seat.

“The good thing about the book eating Cigarette Beetle is that it is wingless. This means that it cannot roost in the rafters, or hide there when they sense an onslaught. The only evidence are long hairs found in the pages of books. Molted larvae. They also leave faint, sticky trails on book pages, but it is the tunnels that leave the most obvious and noticeable proof.”

Merna reflects upon the act of nesting, of burrowing into the snug warmth of ones food source. She thinks about Trekweight. For a moment she swears she can hear sounds of the animals, the ferocious creatures battling.

“Damn dogs,” says the young man, half asleep. “Damn mangy good for nothing mutts won’t shut up, barking at each other from across the street, from across electric fences, star crossed lovers my ass, my *ass*.” After a pause, he starts to snore.

Merna thinks of the soft light that emanated from the half eclipsed lamp in the hotel room.

“Time to leave soon,” Trekweight had said, tapping on the wall. Seasoned. She know that pointing was useless.

Time to leave soon.

## MORNING

They wake up. They twist to shake off the inertness of night. Merna looks down. She is sitting in a pool of her own invisibility. It has successfully eaten away at the seat cushions and she can now see straight through to the engine of the car. She watches the machinery clicks and whirrs inaudibly beneath her.

“Let’s go,” Merna exclaims. She kicks the back of the young man’s seat. He jolts forward.

“Yes, attention, that’ll be \$5.95 cash.” His hand flies to his right eye, rubs it with his palm.

He stumbles out of the car. His circulation has been compromised during the long hours of driving and sleeping. He clutches the door handle for support.

“Over here,” says a voice at the other side of the parking lot. “Lets go.”



Merna walks behind the young man so that the swarming people do not trample her. The lobby is very crowded. Everyone has laminated nametag. Their eyes squint and look ahead in either determination or farsightedness.

## AN OBJECT IN MOTION

Bruce must go on. It is necessary to keep moving. An object in motion stays in motion. On and on. So is Bruce. Such is Bruce. Bruce drives blindly to the lecture hall.

Because Bruce is very important, he is assigned a personal assistant named Mercury. Because Mercury is named Mercury, she has very little patience for pleasantries including conversation starters like, “what a unique name,” or, “wow, your parents must have been a bunch of hippies.” Mercury does not have time for that sort of banter. Bruce is very thankful for this as they walk silently to the stage.

“There is the podium,” announces Mercury.

She looks at her watch and chews a sliver from her left thumb.

“Where is the specimen, I need to bring it to the display table,” she states rather than asks.

When Bruce pauses, she adds, “Don’t worry, it’s temperature and pressure controlled.”

When Bruce still does not respond, she looked up from her clipboard. She processes Bruce’s half tucked shirt and the yellow crust of what appears to be egg yolk clinging to the edge of his mouth. She huffs and stalks off to find a superior who is better equipped to deal with unkempt people of scholarly pursuits. This leaves Bruce alone, shuffling gracelessly trying to avoid the people around him who swoop to catch falling papers. Bruce hears faintly the voice of the announcer, who is delivering a generous account of Bruce’s credentials. The people who had been dropping and snatching their papers stop to look at him.

“Excuse me,” he says to the woman bending to pick up a leaf of paper.

Bruce is half aware of himself stumbling onto the stage.

“Excuse me,” he says again to the man fiddling with a big panel. Bruce gets on stage. Everything is very bright. The auditorium is packed. People are everywhere. Bruce does not notice, however, one empty seat located in the middle of the auditorium.

“Hello, my name is Bruce Altavar. I am here to tell you, excuse me, I am here to tell you...” Bruce trails off and bents to tug at his left sock. “I am here to tell you about an extraordinary circumstance I found myself in rather recently. I came upon the Unidentified Specimen, or, rather, the Unidentified Specimen came upon me, and it has changed my life in ways I could never have expected.”

He is deviating from his regular speech, the one he could now deliver without strain or even thought. In the past he had been amazed by the way he could feel his lips moving, how his mouth hung open when he pronounced the “u” sound in the word Unidentified. Now his mouth was filled with saliva and stumbling.

“Right well, the funny thing about the Unidentified Specimen is that it has no family. Surely it must have had parents, beings like him that conceived him, but even in that area we have no proof, and if there is no evidence we entomologists are wary of saying anything with certainty. There were no traces of its habitation in the surrounding area. Believe me, entomologists much more accomplished than myself surveyed the perimeter of my house. They tramped through woods miles from where the Unidentified Specimen was found. Nothing. Sometimes I wonder if the Unidentified Specimen felt lonely. He, it, rather, perhaps she, must have trekked for miles before finally resting in the frost of my very own backyard. I cannot help but wonder this. Now everyone is searching for his family, his brothers and cousins. They are dying to know what he, she, it ate for breakfast last month, what he made his bed out of, the length of his spine,” Bruce swallows. Phlegm gets caught in his throat. He coughs. “Maybe this

is proof that even in death our journey is not over. I personally do not know how I feel about this. I mean, shouldn't we let the Unidentified Specimen rest? Is it fair to drag him, it, her, I don't know, rotting into eternity?"

He peers out at the crowd. A man sitting next to the one empty chair lurches and gasps in alarm at an area of vacant space.

"Well, I have taken up enough of your time."

Bruce attempts to shuffle off the stage, but the man who announced him takes him by the arm to a chair to the left of the podium.

"And now for any questions the audience might have. Please, don't be shy," the man broadcasts to the teeming people.

He beckons to a woman who strains her arm upward. He retreats from the podium and, smiling, nods to Bruce.

"Excuse me, yes well, this is all very well and good, but, if you don't mind me remarking, the program advertized a live showing of the specimen in question."

The crowd murmured. Then, silence. Indeed, the device that was set up to project the Unidentified Specimen is markedly empty. A blank screen buzzes in the now silent room.

"Ah," Bruce says.

The auditorium continues to stare in silence as a collective unit. Bruce picks at the dried crust of yolk at the corner of his mouth

"I will be honest with you all." Bruce begins. "The Unidentified Specimen, you see, the Unidentified Specimen..." Bruce leans to grasp the bottle of water he has been provided. He takes a long sip.

“Excuse me again, you see, I will be honest. I am no longer in possession of the Unidentified Specimen. It appears that I have not been completely honest with you all.”

“Bruce,” hisses a voice. It is surprisingly close, and he can feel a warm wind on his ear. There is also the smell of a sickly sweet lotion and underneath the unmistakable smell of Merna’s skin.

“It’s time to go.”

## THIS IS NOT AN ASIDE

In the suspense of things vanishing, the heart must become a blind forager. It must scramble for what renders the lover animate.

Merna and Trekweight loved each other with the fury of impermanence. Everything turned to fragments before their eyes. Bus seats. Even the food they held before it entered to their mouths, everything. For them, it was necessary for shadows to become material. The wisp of a thrashing arm sweeping across the wall. The smell of hotel sheets. The complimentary soap that, when toweled off the body, remained in chalky streaks. A blanketed mass signified a person more than when the blankets were pulled away.

SEEING SOMEONE YOU HAVEN'T SEEN IN A LONG TIME, AND THE LIST OF THINGS YOU THOUGHT YOU'D SAY BUT ULTIMATLEY DON'T END UP SAYING

Merna leads Bruce by the hand out of the auditorium. Sometimes people have known each other for so long that neither words nor sight are necessary, even if they have not seen each other in quite a long while. Bruce knows whose hand he is holding. It is warm and soft. The fingernails clipped blow the quick. Behind him, Bruce hears the announcer reclaim the microphone.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we apologize for the, erm, inconvenience. There seems to be a glitch, a technical problem. We realize that some of you have traveled far to come here today to see the Unidentified Specimen. I regret to inform you that refunds will not be made available.”

The crowd buzzes. Some spectators in seats closest to the stairs later remarked that they noticed the strange way in which Bruce held his hand as he walked out of the auditorium. It was molded into a half ellipse and swinging.

They walk through the heavy auditorium doors. Bruce is immediately blinded. Glass windows stretch from floor to ceiling before him. Merna continues to tug Bruce forward, but he stops. The things Bruce intends to say are stored in his head like canned beans and fruit. Need making everything unbearable. *I just needed to tell you...I know this might come as a surprise but...the woman I slept with, she wasn't you, this seems obvious but I didn't, well, I didn't...* These were things he could not help but think about while waiting for the toaster to finish or for the bath water to get hot and fill the tub. These things occurred to him in the inevitable pauses in which there was only the toaster clicking, the water rushing, the thoughts battering his head.

He holds Merna. He presses her to his body. He wraps his arms around her shoulders. He breathes very deeply. Merna does not smell exactly like Merna, she smells like a series of other places. The sour smell of unwashed car seats, soaked and dried multiple times. Soda, catsup sweat. But then there is skin, buried and familiar.



“Well,” says a voice behind Bruce.

Bruce twists around.

“Well, I guess I’ll be going then,” says the voice again.

Bruce lets go of Merna. He can feel the weight of her beside him. *This is quite nice*, Bruce remarks to himself within the confines of his own head. Bruce turns to face the young man. Although the light has stopped bothering his eyes, he squints. The young man’s hair extends in every direction. Dandruff dusts his shoulders. He looks absently at a patch of wall clad with a markedly inoffensive painting of a landscape. His shoulders are slumped sheepishly.

Bruce walks closer to the young man. The young man flinches but does not recede.

“Ah,” says Bruce. “I believe we’ve met.”

## WHAT THE YOUNG MAN IS THINKING RIGHT NOW

The young man wants to go home. The young man wants to go home. Home, per say. For the young man it is an amorphous place with no location. His truck is, at the moment, his only stable location, and an invisible woman had recently commandeered it. Sometimes he feels comfort in the enclosure of the plastic picnic tables that he stored in his trunk. He likes to set them up near trees during the yard sales he frequents. They give him a sense of enclosure. He is proud of the blue tarp that he lays over the table. It is eye catching. It brings the porcelain collection to the foreground. Sometimes when it is warm enough and the yard sale traffic has slowed, he covers his merchandise with a second tarp and lay behind his table, under a tree. This is an increasingly rare opportunity due to the unstable and porous nature of backyard grass.

The young man wants very badly to put his feet in a bathtub full of hot water. This, of course, is not in his reach. The young man briefly considers locking himself in a public bathroom, stopping a sink with a wad of toilet paper, and letting the water run until the steam erases his image from the mirror.

“Bruce,” states the young man. His eyes are downcast. A final parting acknowledgement.

## WHAT BRUCE IS THINKING RIGHT NOW

Upon closer inspection, the young man looks nothing like Bruce's younger self. If anything, the young man looks like Bruce's older cousin, Gerald, who was, by all accounts of his immediate family, a bum and a recluse. Bruce has not seen his older cousin Gerald since he was twelve and since Gerald was seventeen. Still. *The act of comparison is an unavoidable human tendency*, Bruce remarks to himself within the confines of his own head. We see people based on what we need to see at any given moment. Bruce doesn't know why he needs to see his older cousin Gerald at that particular moment. Perhaps this theory doesn't hold true in all cases. The brain, at times, a spasm.

## THE YOUNG MAN IS GONE

“Drove off in some fit,” Bruce says gruffly.

He rode right over the curb and into a garbage can on the way out and didn’t even stop.

“I guess some people are like that,” he adds.

The air between them feels like a balled up piece of tinfoil. Silence.

Merna and Bruce drive home. Halfway home Merna realizes that she forgotten to reclaim her silverware and her picture frame. *All the same*, she thinks to herself. A reasonable compensation for an unwilling chauffeur. Bruce seems to have forgotten that Merna is invisible, and that this might have alarmed the young man. Perhaps he has grown accustomed to it. Life resumes. Sometimes this is the only thing to do.

## INVISIBILITY AND EXPANSIVENESS

When Merna speaks, Bruce hears her voice extend to each corner of the room. Her voice bounces off the cups and tins on the shelf above the stove. Her voice bounces off the windowsill and onto the back of a chair. He feels overwhelmingly compelled to reach out, to touch her, her waist, her shoulder, where her forehead becomes a thicket of hair. So many times he reaches out and there is nothing, no soft outline covered in flannel, no flesh. Merna never guides his hand to meet her. Merna never moves closer so that he can graze her with his fingertips. On these occasions Bruce does not dare ask, "please, your hand, Merna." Suppose she says no, or even worse, suppose she says nothing at all.

Merna, if you are nowhere then you are everywhere.

## SWELL

Hunger, endlessly, daily, every moment. Suddenly. It happens upon them like an external force as opposed to a sensation that comes from their bellies. Merna fitfully makes a grocery list:

1. Guava
2. Mango
3. A bundle of garlic cloves
4. A tub of butter
5. Two dozen eggs <sup>1</sup>

When she gets home she chops up the garlic, makes a slit down the middle of a baguette and wedges them in. She puts it in the oven and serves it with the butter. Soon the table is piled with bulging fruit. Nothing can be eaten quickly enough. Bruce requests fish bought fresh from the market.

“The ones with their eyes still in their heads.”

Merna carries the fish home in its brown paper wrapping. Its eyes are garish in their false animation, and when she unfurls it its head tilts and lolls off the counter. Its scales are slick under the kitchen headlamp. It is not enough.

“Look at us, like a bunch of pregnant women,” Merna announces as they hold council on the best way to prepare oysters.

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<sup>1</sup> There is still the hunger for predictable things. Routine.

“Maybe we are about to go into hibernation,” Bruce responds with his eyes to a cookbook scrounged from a forgotten cupboard. It is not enough.

The kitchen is in a constant haze. Smoke hangs so thick that Bruce gets lost going from the living room to the kitchen. He finds himself outside, somehow. The onslaught of spring light hurts his eyes and the melted ice from the gutters drips onto his head and down his temples. When he finally finds his way back he sees Merna on the kitchen floor, sucking the juice from a smashed coconut.

The smell of bacon lingers on the furniture. The bed sheets smell charred. When they crawl into bed they shift lazily to avoid the accumulating crumbs. A package of macaroons sits on Bruce’s bedside table, they are pink, robin egg blue, soft, Easter colors. A box of éclairs purchased from the pseudo French bakery in town is wedged under Merna’s side of the bed. Powdered sugar dusts the pillows, mixes with dandruff, become paste.



Their taste turns quickly. The two pick shreds of pink meat from the bones of a roasted chicken purchased in foil. Merna nibbles on watermelon rinds, leaves maraschino cherry stems under her tongue. Nothing is clean. The traces of consumed things are everywhere.

On the fifth night after their arrival, Merna gets into bed. Bruce is snoring and she notices the bed sagging in the places his body is. Merna reaches over and lays her hand on his puffed belly. It rises and sinks in the way of all sleeping stomachs. Merna begins to itch. It starts with her left arm, right above the elbow. At first she tries to ignore it. She lays very still so that she does not disturb Bruce. If she waits, it will go away. The itch travels to the underside of her chin. She drags her fingernails across her skin and rolls over. She feels Bruce’s heat, his dough stomach is a loaf of bread baking. She stops. She stays very still again. She closes her

eyes again and imagines that long red acrylic fingernails are scratching the afflicted patch of skin. Instead, it escalates. It feels like an insect is crawling over her right wrist and onto her palm, finding its way with its spindle feelers. Bruce must hear the sound of her fingernails raking her scalp and the back of her neck. She nudges him, nicks his calf with her overgrown big toenail.

“Bruce.”

A bubble of phlegm rises in his throat. He coughs.

“Dear, an awful itch, everywhere, everywhere I can’t, can’t seem to get it, a spot I can’t reach, can’t possibly, would you mind?”

Silence.

“I won’t be able to get back to sleep until its gone.”

Bruce remains inert. Merna shifts, hoists herself and looks down at Bruce.

A trail of drool drips down his cheek and onto the pillowcase. *Not unlike the flattened cigarette beetle dragging itself along the pages of a balmy book*, Merna thinks.

Her entire body itches now. A prickling sweeps across her shoulder blades in spots she cannot reach. She prods Bruce awake. He grumbles and flops out of bed. He stands sagging, shoulders sloping. Merna goes to the attic where the smoke has not reached and opens a trunk full of sheets. They are white and clean and cool. They smell like mothballs and antiseptic. She carries them outside and stands on the lawn in her bare feet. The grass is wet with dew and melted snow. *It is really spring*, she thinks to herself. She shakes out the sheets. They billow in front of her and she snatches them up before they hit the ground.

At night the smoke in the house clears, for the most part. Some of it escapes and rushes out the door. She finds her way back to the bedroom easily. Bruce is how she left him, standing

like a tree with his chin resting on his chest. She throws the blankets to the floor and peels the sheets off. She smooths the creases of the fresh linen and presses her face to the cool flat surface of the bed. Bruce droops back downward. He is filled with exotic fruit, an entire jar of capers, a handful of dates, a bite of a pickle. Merna gets back in bed, but still it is endless. Fidget, thrash, still, again. She props Bruce up and anoints him with the hand sanitizer she keeps on her bedside table. His hands, his arms, shoulders, the backs of his knees. He is heavy, hard to lift. He winces passively at the smell of alcohol. Fidget, thrash, still, again.

## THE NEXT DAY

Merna has not slept well. Bruce wakes up and gets out of bed. He brushes his teeth but remains comatose. He sits at the breakfast table with his eyes half open and spoons milky pulp into his mouth. The Raisin Bran sun smiles heartily. It grasps two trowels of raisins in its outstretched rays. For the first time in a week, Merna is not hungry. She continues to itch. After breakfast she presses her forehead against the cool windowpane. She takes a long hot shower until the water runs cold. She finds an overripe pineapple that she purchased and forgot, and scrapes its bristles across her stomach.

Merna takes off all her clothes and sits sat in the armchair that Bruce had inherited from his grandfather. Stems of feathers jut from it, and they scratch the backs of her legs nicely.

Bruce sleepily picks at an unlucky ladybug that he plucked from the colony infesting the kitchen windowsill. Bruce mumbles something to the severed insect. Its wing is disconnected and floating in preserving fluid.

“Sorry, what did you say?” Merna asks, craning her neck forward.

In doing so she maneuvers her body, and the feather stems brush an itch on her calf so constant she had forgotten about it.

“Looks like they found the sunniest spot in the house,” he repeats.

Although it is spring, there was still a chill in the air.

“Funny creatures,” Bruce says, talking more to himself than to Merna.

“For tiny things they eat voraciously. Pesky garden insects, mostly. Who knows why we find them so beautiful.”

Merna is only half listening. She watches the dust motes orbit each other in a beam of light. It is midday.

“That’s in their larva stage, anyway. For three to four weeks they gorge themselves and molt numerous times. Slough off their skin, you could say.”

Bruce plucks the wing from the preserving bath with his tweezers.

“What happens after that?” Merna asks, relishing the way the arms of the chair rubs her skin.

“The pupa stage. They find a tree or some sort of plant to attach to. They curl up into a ball and cover themselves up to stay in their molted shell. Kind of disgusting if you think of it, you know? They and shit while bumping up against their own dead skins. They don’t eat or sleep either. I suppose that they just wait.”

Bruce leans back and stretches.

“Want any tea Merna, a biscuit, perhaps?”

Merna isn’t hungry. Merna isn’t listening.

“How long does that last?” She asks.

Bruce is halfway out the door already.

“How long does that last?” She asks louder.

“Oh,” Bruce says without turning around.

He pauses, to consult his memory.

“A week.”

## MOLTING

An insect must shed its skin. They release hormones when their growth reaches the physical limits of its exoskeleton. The process isn't as violent as it sounds. A praying mantis molts six to eight times in its life. A silverfish and a firebrat may molt up to sixty times during a lifetime, which can span up to two years in a warm, hospitable climate. Cicadas leave their brown husks intact when they step out of themselves. In the summer you can see their casing perched on tall leaves, sitting like specters. The moment after molting the body is soft, tender. Eventually it hardens. The body of the cicada is light, a diluted green the moment after it molts. After a few hours, new colors begin to form. A second birth, a birth from the self, an explosion.

## THAT NIGHT

Two in the morning. Merna gets up. She kicks the old bed covers aside. Bruce, less inert tonight, gets up and watches her. She goes to the fridge and cracks a container of ice. She holds two cubes under her armpits until water dribbles down her hips. She fills a large metal bowl with warm water and scrubs herself with the neglected kitchen sponge. She lies on the bristly rug in the narrow hallway. She crushes a banana under her bare feet while pacing the cool mint colored linoleum. It squishes between her toes. She is naked but she feels covered in a crawling itch. She opens the front door again. Choked smoke spits through the wooden rectangle. *The chill will help*, she thinks.



Outside. Wet grass, naked. Slats on the side of the house. Looking forward, a dark thicket. Woods. Trees eaten by termites, hollow in the middle. A crescent of trees all with hard rough bark. She crosses the lawn like an agitated ghost. She presses her shoulder blades to the bark of a big old elm. She moves, up, down, sloughing something off. Droop. Slump to trunk.

Bruce, who has silently followed, stands in the doorway. Bruce, clad only in his checkered boxers, steps tepidly onto the wet doormat with his arms crossed over his chest. Staring out, unsure. He looks out at Merna, a tree on the fringe of the greater forest. In the dark his belly is a globe. The automatic porch light clicks itself awake. It shines over the yard and casts everything in shadow. Grass blades prick out of the earth and send sharp black spikes into the air. Even Bruce's belly is surrounded by a dark halo.

The automatic porch light makes Merna visible to Bruce for the first time in six months. She shivers, covered in shreds of grass and shards of tree bark. Chapped, red, a part of her shoulder bleeding. Her fingers are heavy. Exclamation points.