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CHAINWRECK

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CHAINWRECK

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

by

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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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RUBBERNECK

Everything important that happened in Gravel, North Carolina on the afternoon of Friday the 16th ground into motion at exactly four-forty-six pm within the same one-mile radius. In every sense of the word, it was a night of collisions.

Stephen Webb at the Bellcastle-Gravel Commission Stockyard weekly sale looped the final cursive B on the check purchasing fifteen black Certified Angus Beef (CAB) Cattle and finalizing the new direction of his wilting dairy farm. H. B. Allison Honeycutt (certified paralegal and cashier) at the Circle K fished an unbent coat hanger out of the box in the breakroom for the registered sex offender – public urination and three acts of fellatio in a library on the same night in 2004 – in the parking lot who had locked his keys in his Subaru Forester. And, on U.S. Route 321 southbound, the gift bag containing the silver rosary and 24 oz. Whitman’s Sampler box that Tim Carrillo had bought for his niece’s Quinceañera struck the dashboard of the green sedan as it took fourth place in what would become a twenty-five-car pileup.

Four minutes after six, and two since she’d clocked out, H.B.’s beltloop caught on the wire shelf of the candy display and they both went down together. Jackson – she hadn’t caught his last name yet -- had been waiting on the curb next to the propane tanks for her to clock out. He’d given up on jimmying the coat hanger through the rubber seal of his driver’s side door an hour ago and hadn’t wanted to call AAA or a tow truck. And H.B.,

drifting through a hypomanic episode and fogged-up inside from a ten-hour shift, immune to consequences, had offered to drive him to his house and back, where he had a spare key.

Her arm pinwheeled as she overbalanced in the middle of the neon confetti of candy bars. A tiny fracture cracked open deep in one of her molars as her teeth came together *hard* when she landed on her ass. She blinked a few times before she stood and started to put the display back together.

A lone, six-foot preteen spared her a glance and then went back to intently studying the energy drink selection in the fridge section. The bell on the door jangled, and in an instant Jackson was on his knees handing her bags of gummy worms. His fingers lingered over hers for a moment, sickly pale against her dark skin, a beat too long and he smiled as his gaze – tiny pupils ringed with cold blue and set too far apart – speared her.

Between buckling her seatbelt and putting her keys in the ignition, as her head cleared enough realize that in the world she lived in, this was a kindness that wouldn't go unpunished, she noticed absently that Jackson didn't scoot his seat back even though there wasn't room for him to sit with his legs straight. The way that he moved was somehow a step to the left of her comfort zone, his body language unreadable and strange. She pulled the gearshift down one pop into reverse and cut the wheel.

Mister Stephen Webb, going out to buy cat food and a new phone charger after leaving the stockyard, turned left onto Arthur Street. Following the detour signs and frantic direction of orange-vested NCDOT workers had led him off of 321, right before it became a blaze of floodlights and coplights and reflective traffic cones and barrels. He knew vaguely

where he was and was considering his route as he passed a car going five over in the right lane and his mind blanked.

Jackson Webb recognized the Grateful Dead bear stickers and license plate HNYDEW as the car that had just passed them whipped back into the lane -- close, too close. H.B. braked hard. Jackson's knees hit his chin on their way up to the ceiling of the little car. Both vehicles slid diagonally onto the shoulder, kissing bumper to hood.

He stumbled out of the passenger side, shoes slipping over the wet grass as H.B. put on the hazards. Both of their teeth hurt, though he didn't know the sensation was shared, and she didn't know that the ache in her jaw was a cracked molar. The situation fell back into focus for Jackson, or maybe jarred enough that the hyperclarity of his vision wasn't focus at all, as he watched the brother he hadn't seen in ten years hoist himself out of the other car.

Stephen didn't have a single thought in the hours between catching a glimpse of Jackie in that car and pulling back into his driveway. His muscles moved on their own, abandoned by thought and memory. He told himself that, told the court that later, towards the end. Maybe he even believed it.

He squeezed down the thumb safety of his subcompact 9MM and swore he saw daylight through the hole he put between Jackie's bladder and large intestine.

Time for Stephen and Jackson had stopped, the older reduced to a single pinprick of light that shot out and became, in motion, a silver arrow in flight, the younger sixty-five percent of the way to unconsciousness and sitting criss-cross-applesauce, blood spreading over the crotch and legs of his pants like he'd wet himself.

For H.B., time was a seizure-inducing slideshow of images – a powerpoint going 70mph. She braked. The cars crashed. Her car's nose embossed in negative in the other bumper. She was standing on the roadside -- legs crackling static. Her registration – in the glovebox – was it up to date? The other driver was out of his car. A second's glance. Tall, white, fifty-maybe, pointy nose, rosacea, gun. There was a gun in his hand. Pointing. At her? No, Jackson.

Gunshot.

The sound of it hitting wasn't what she expected. Jackson sinking, sitting, listing backwards. The blood – his stomach. A bullet to the gut kills you just as good as one to the head says the detective on TV when she was five. She didn't know this man. She didn't even *like* him. Bad, bad thought, what if he died? Shouldn't speak ill. Her hand was under his head and her other hand was (apply pressure? right?) on the wound. She could? Push the blood back in? No. Stupid idea. Was that funny? Not really.

She looked up, and the other driver was *gone*, just tire tracks in the mud. Gone? He'd left? The crash had been intentional. He shot him. He knew him, and he shot him, and why? She had meant to sleep well tonight. She'd already been having trouble, had pills for it. She was taking her little cousins to the mall tomorrow. Her mom's birthday was coming up. Should she get a present? "Ma'am, are you still there?" the 911 Operator asked. She was, apparently. "I'm sorry. I lost focus. Yes, right off of 321. Arthur street, next to sixteenth. No, the other one, sixteenth southwest. Okay, okay, thank you." Her phone dropped from her hand. Hand under his head and the other one all bloody. Lights. Flashing red. The light was pretty on the trees. The Elk's Lodge yearly Christmas light display – more disappointing

every year. Her hands were moved. The moon was a, waxing, no, light on the left, waning crescent. Were they just going to leave her car?

She fell asleep in the ambulance.

Some increment of time later, she was sitting in a hard plastic chair in the ER waiting room, the seat upholstered by the same people who did bowling alley carpets. There was an end table next to her seat with a stack of year-old US magazines on it. Brad Pitt stared up at her. Jackson was bleeding out somewhere down a maze of hallways. Most likely.

She didn't think that she'd done a good job explaining herself to the hospital staff.

("No, I met him today at the gas station I work at. Oh, the Circle K, the one right on Williamson, I mean. We were going to get his keys. Sorry, his spare car key, I mean. He'd locked his in his car. No, I told you I met him today. I don't know? Doing something nice for a stranger? I already *told you*, the other guy shot him and left. Yes, left, and no, I didn't know him either. Just shot him and left. I *told you*. I've already told you everything; I really don't think I have anything else useful to say. Fine, okay. Fine. I'm going to go sit down now.")

In forty minutes, a nurse would come out and tell her that Jackson Austin Webb (according to his driver's license) had died seven minutes after arriving at the ER, a ruptured colon and Class IV Hemorrhage. There'd been huge pileup on 321, and they been able to spare anyone to tell her earlier.

Later, the cops would come to question and then detain her. H.B. Allison Honeycutt would remain the prime suspect, the charge murder in the second degree, until the arrest

of Stephen Webb, found at his home – cooking chili. The trial would headline the local papers for weeks and make national news towards the end. The proceedings would drag on and on, despite the evidence. Within the first week, she would dismiss her court-appointed defense attorney and represent herself.

Stephen Webb's defense, flimsy in the first place, would eventually tear open, and the gruesome history of the Webb brothers would spill out of him in front of the whole court, convulsive and foul. The case would wrap up soon after, the jury only conflicted about whether or not Jackson deserved it (arguably yes, if Stephen could be believed, but most would say that he couldn't). Press coverage would focus almost entirely on the inspirational story of the paralegal-cum-gas-station-cashier who so bravely stood up and spoke on her own behalf. Aside from the not-guilty verdict, she would receive no compensation.

H.B. Honeycutt would move to Norfolk within the year, teach herself how to play the oboe, and work at a different Circle K.

In the ER waiting room, though, half an hour before all of that, she watched the little TV mounted up in the room's corner. It was turned to the WTAB-16 coverage of that day's mass car accident. They were broadcasting live helicopter footage of the scene, an aerial shot of floodlights and cars-become-shapes and busted guard rails. On-the-scene Reporter Justice Andrews interviewed an oily red brick of an EMT with wet eyes, then passed the story back to News Anchor Nicholas Snow.

News Anchor Nicholas Snow managed to scrape out another hour of coverage before going off-camera, despite there being no developments to report.

Loosening his sweaty tie with a two-finger tug under the neck loop, Nick dodged a cameraman and found himself roped into an impromptu circle-up about whether to add the Arthur Street Shooting to that night's Breaking News or to save it for the morning. After a few minutes of getting absolutely nowhere, he managed to weasel his way out and hoof it before anyone could stop him. After a fourteen-hour shift, he was off for the night and wasn't a morning Anchor, not on weekends, so they really didn't need his help with that one.

If he got on the road within the next five minutes and hit all of the lights right, he could probably make it for the end of the reception. He'd already missed Mass when the accident coverage had thrown his shift off the rails. He'd texted Tim earlier that he wouldn't be able to make it, but his boyfriend had never responded. And now, he might miss the reception too. He would apologize when he got there, but he'd still been a no-show for most of what was supposed to have been his first-time meeting most of Tim's family in person. Apparently, Tim's mom had been absolutely dying to meet him (*Nick, I swear she already loves you more than her own son just from phone calls*).

He lit a cigarette the moment he got to the parking garage, took a drag and massaged his left eye, where a migraine had set up shop, with the heel of his hand. The cigarette was canoeing down one side, and the cherry dropped out as he got into his car and burned a hole in the upholstery before he could grind it out with his shoe.

He was handing his parking pass card to the booth attendant when his phone in the cupholder chimed: an unknown number.

Tim Carrillo woke up in a fentanyl haze. The last thing he remembered, with startling clarity, was quietly choke-laughing to himself in his flipped car before passing out. It had seemed like the funniest thing in the world at the time, that his music was still playing through the car stereo as he passed out, him and Fergie going down with the ship.

Tim blinked sleepily. He wouldn't find out that his left leg had been amputated below the knee for a little while yet, and he smiled muzzily at his boyfriend asleep with his head slumped on his shoulder in the chair next to the bed.

Smiling, he sunk back into the pile of thin hospital pillows and let all of his thoughts slip downstream, listening to the sounds of night drifting through the half-open window: cicadas, swishing leaves, and the gentle roar of cars on some distant road.

INTERLUDE: ROADTRIP

The clear, vivid mind of the faithful man sworn to deprivation, devoted wholly to fasting down to bones and skin, eventually comes to a point where everything levels, ice-skating on a glacier without end, no twists or loops – just the endless forward glide. Biting flies gather around the emaciated almost-corpse, but still, he dreams only of ice. This state of suspension is not the steady-breathing, expansive peace of deep and practiced meditation. It's a tool hard-won, found on the ground right next to death, a blade. With it,

it's so, so easy to sever the thread of thought. With the slightest push, a soft twitch of willpower, everything can be laid down so that there's nothing left but a forward-moving neutrality, travelling at great speed, constant speed. The man passes on filled with nothing in his stomach, joy in his heart, and blades on his feet, in his hands.

All that's needed to follow him is the act of telling the brain *no*, to breathe in and clear the mind of thoughts, images, every shred of generation. All that remains is pure consciousness. Not the subconscious, but the waking mind unmoored/untethered/just-existing. This is the state given by adrenaline to the mother who lifts a wrecked car off of her child, the birdwatcher who bare-hand strangles a coyote.

But here, here there's no feeling of speed. It's watching the world move backwards from the window of a bullet train. The quivering power of overexertion that breaks the body is so easily grasped. No whirlwind of disaster, no pistoning heart clouds the strength that builds up, and then past, every obstacle, every breaking point. The mind becomes the knife. In suspension it's Zeno's arrow that flies forward forever. To be the knife is to well over with emptiness. It feels like ecstasy. It feels like being caught in the cycle of laughing then sobbing between every other breath, head vice-gripped between knees with hands caged around the scalp to stop it from falling in half. It's nothing but the overwhelming rush of speed that pervades everything and cannot be felt. The fish that doesn't even know what water *is*. Seen from the past it's a sick anticipation, from the future a horror movie. The present is gasoline. The fuel. The knife. The starving man. The arrow. The bared, gliding mind. The skater who never grows cold.

It isn't a metaphor, but metaphor is the only way to approach it without scaring it off.

It's the reason that, after a week without sleep, she had only become a better driver.

The road changed as it pleased from hour to hour. Sometimes becoming the yellow line disappearing under the car's nose, sometimes the little mile-markers ticking up or down, accurate to the tenths, and now it was the truck climbing lane hugging the steep grade. It was the dirt runaway ramps that branched off from the interstate every once in a while. Soon it might be antique malls, the red balls on powerlines and their warning to airline pilots of live voltage. In that week, there was nothing to eat, no rest. There was the blessing of frequent rains filling the water bottle that she held out of the window. She knew that there was no need to drink either, but she allowed herself this one thing. As long as she did it without thinking, deviation, intent, it was okay to allow herself this.

It had been a week since she'd left the car.

For a while, she'd circled loops in and out of New Jersey so that she didn't have to get out and pump gas. After, when she'd gone away from those places, she would give someone at the pumps her debit card to do it for her, with a crumpled five-dollar bill as compensation. She knew that no one who looked her in the eyes would consider running off with her card. And even if they did, it would be okay. Something would happen afterwards, and she would go with it, see where it led. It was okay. It was all working out.

She'd improvised stretches to stop the blood from settling into clots in her legs. It was a fine balance to strike between waking the bloodflow that washed away numbness and finding a position that wouldn't overbalance her body/car into the guardrail. All of this

happened. Things happened. There was no need to intervene because things would happen anyways, and maybe she'd done them, but still, she hadn't intervened. The week had been the best day of her life.

At a Brew Thru in the Outer Banks, she picked up a 30 rack of Yuengling and four bottles of gutter wine. Not to drink – when she saw one of her favorite road signs like *FALLING ROCKS* or *BUCKLE UP! IT'S THE LAW*, the moment it came into sight, she'd shake up a can as hard as she could and see if she could slug the it against the sign. Usually not, but the one time that she'd aimed true, the crumpling explosion of foam had been so electric that she'd been able to drive on autopilot, without sorting through the trash of sensory input, for a full twelve hours.

The bottles of wine were for *[STATE] WELCOMES YOU* signs, when she felt like it.

Lithe grey animals darted, blurry, across the road, faster than the eye could follow. Curls of black smoke, or something like it but not-quite, would curl across the top of the windshield, glide over the rearview mirror. She'd read the French translation of the airbag warning on the sun visor aloud so many times that it had become both memory and meaningless. The stereo was kept at the lowest possible volume, almost sub-audible.

There were three things that'd be playing at any given time: local radio stations found by chance, the same set of *Learn Bird Calls!* CDs, and a YouTube playlist of hours-long videos of old men woodturning silently, the only sounds the hum of the spinning lathe and grainy slide of wood strips shaving off in clean curls.

On I-84 West, all through one midafternoon, she didn't see a single other vehicle for over a hundred miles, not 'til she was on the outskirts of Scranton, where there were spontaneously many cars.

This wasn't a scenic coast-to-coast or sightseeing trip. Those were things with through-lines, where the isolated moments lined up like beads on a string and wove into something. This was a box of assorted, carefully sorted beads dropped to the floor, stared at, and then walked away from. If she had a big container of beads, it would probably burst like nothing else against a sign.

But nowhere with a drive-thru sold beads in bulk, that she knew of.

There was a period of time when the road hugged the coastline, never mind which one, and she crossed wire-balanced bridges over or tunnels under thin strips of ocean cutting into the land. Eventually she started to run low on toll quarters, took a sharp turn west, and cut straight for the heart of the country. If all of the vistas stacked up into some revelation about the nature of America or some other neo-transcendentalist road trip garbage, she would either die or vomit. All types of revelation were unwelcome. Any sort of perspective shift, any change of focus, just meant losing the speed, the sharp mental glide. Scissors through wrapping paper on and on forever and on from that and a bit further still. She would crash if it stopped – mentally, maybe literally. Balanced on the knife's edge, she could keep going ceaselessly, so long as she had the strength to maintain the state without trying at all.

At the beginning, when she cared about things like that, she'd worried about stopping to piss, but the urge simply hadn't ever come. The (her?) body was a closed

system now, nothing in and nothing out, except for sweet, germy rainwater and cycling breath. It seemed like the moon phases were going in no particular order.

On day eight, the creeping fear appeared that everything might actually come together into some sort of meaning, despite all efforts otherwise. Could the rushing, empty mind crystalize into something when there was nothing in the middle? She remembered how piñatas were made and swore.

Where before every car driving behind her had been a cop, now they were transforming into an encroaching sense of significance, low and dangerous. Something physical becoming metaphorical. That was a bad sign. If there was going to be meaning, if everything came to a stop and then booted back up, back into the burdensome state where decision lived, she was going to decide what that looked like – before the choice was made for her. If the action of stopping was going to beat down the non-action of going, she would say when, where, why, how – maybe find some totality that, when it really came down to it, didn't come down to anything, lead anywhere. Maybe.

She pulled into a parkway overlook. It was overcast, an insignificant time. The sun was up and covered, hovering vaguely between day and night. She was on a ridge, and both sides fell away into the vast cups of forested hollows and valleys, ringed by mountains and sprinkled with tiny buildings at the bottom. The side of the road with the little parking lot overlooked a quarry, close, but not immediately below the fence on the edge of the drop-off point. There was also a metal picnic table in a nearby copse of thin trees and thornbushes. There was one of those trashcans with a brown plastic top and a body studded with hundreds of ugly little stones. There were some cigarette butts in the cracks of the short

sidewalk lining the side of the lot facing the view. There was a single black athletic sock laying in the grass. It was wet.

Standing up was no problem. The body didn't feel any different. There was an ache in the ankle from working the pedals, but no weakness in the legs, no headrush, no tightness in the jaw. She felt only lightly exerted and clearheaded, ready to face the meaning if it came before she could make her own.

She went and pissed messily in the bushes next to the picnic table.

After re-parking her car with her bumper-stickers facing the overlook, she heaved herself up to sit on the trunk with her last bottle of wine and a single can of beer. With a prized move out of a meager collection of talents, she popped the cork out of the wine bottle with a smooth stab-twist-and-yank of her house key. She took a short pull. It tasted bad. She hadn't bought it for drinking.

It wasn't sunset, sunrise, or a clear night full of stars. The thin cloud layer didn't part to let down rippling sunbeams. Still, she imagined space beyond the grey blanket of atmosphere, and wondered if there was anyone up there, looking back down and waiting for some sort of revelation.

She shook the can of Yuengling hard and chucked it overhand, a perfect pitch sailing down towards the quarry's depths. It looked like it might actually make it. She continued to glide and passed out against the rear windshield before the meaning could arrive.

If she'd chosen to look down instead, maybe she would've seen the lit windows of a house in the model-train town, where another woman stood frozen, with vomit down her front and sweat-soaked -- in the chokehold of indecision.

TRUTH MACHINE

The toe of her boot jammed under a root in the dark. Her other foot, bare, lost traction, skidding a long track through the soupy ground and splattering red mud up her leg. The first point of contact with the ground, the elbow that she'd shattered slipping off of the deck and through the glass top of a table as a child, took the brunt of the fall. A clear sharp note moved through her head. A tuning fork struck electric down every bone. The hum of spring frogs and spattering rain moved out as the threat of passing out moved in. The mud in her mouth tasted like iron.

Between one deep breath and another, the lattice of tree branches and sky overhead resolved back into night-vision monochrome. She curled a hand around the lump in her shorts pocket. Waited. The familiar buzz didn't come. She had yet to make a mistake.

Everything was going well.

....

She woke facedown in the couch cushions, groggy, her toes numb from being jammed up against the armrest. She'd napped too long. Shadows played long across the living room carpet, and the light through the curtains was a bleached out dusk-green.

Phlegm had clogged up her nose and throat, and her tongue tasted like it had gone bad. There were three missed calls on her phone, and it took a minute to recognize the contact name as her sister's.

Putting a tray of fish sticks into the oven an hour later, the haze of bad sleep still hadn't left. The choice of what to eat had fumbled from one option to another. Somehow, there was a correct option, and it was important that she chose it. She burned her thumb taking the tray out of the oven and moments later found herself doubled over the counter in tears. It hadn't been right. She'd gotten it wrong. She'd gone wrong.

A pair of men with ugly shirts and flat voices advertised their way through a display of cheap knives as she dunked a cold fish stick in tartar sauce and ate it without looking. The tv had long moved past actual shows, and the infomercial light warped around the shapes of her hands folded over the soft skin of her stomach. She was only wearing alligator print pajama pants and the pilling upholstery of the couch had spent the last few hours embossing itself into her bare back. Everything was still off, moved a foot to the left, and the doors and windows of her apartment had settled into strange places, the places they'd always been. Her eyes flicked around the room, from the chipping paint of the windowsills to the overflowing basket of unread mail on the table by the door, everything was new, new, new. The shaking curtain that'd been drawn in front of everything since that afternoon had yanked back, and, waiting and watching in the audience for the reveal of an empty stage, she'd lost track of her surroundings and suddenly found herself somewhere else entirely. Somewhere where she couldn't trust anything she'd known before. Even physics were in question, light, motion, gravity.

If she went outside and let both feet leave the ground, who was to say that she'd touch back down again? Suspension in ever-thinning atmosphere, with the model-train airplane-view of fake houses and roads and quarries seemed just as likely, just as real, as the rosy blue veins on the hands of the man on the television, their texture under her fingertips, wrapped around the handle of a knife. Her keys on the table (house key, car key, plastic cow keychain, Krogerplus card, mother's house key, miniature bubble level, work master-key) were the promise, the threat, that she could open any door or drive anywhere. The keys were urgent. There were doors to unlock, roads to take, and the ugly, open choice of it all taunted her. *You need to go, they said, but do you know where?*

The popcorn ceiling was neutral. It promised nothing. It asked no questions. But there, she saw. A cluster of little brown water stains were a phenakistoscope that spun at an impossible pace, animated, became a running horse, a blinking eye, rats as jesters waltzing the same few steps forever. The water stains were a grinning Rorschach test that asked with bared teeth if she *dared* to call them any name, was so arrogant as to tell them their own name. Or worse, if she had the sheer, obscene audacity to go so far as to rename them *herself*.

The water stains were just a home improvement to-do that she'd never get to. Even closing her eyes, the near-imperceptible shifting light through closed lids whispered mocking questions that she knew, that they knew, that she had no acceptable answer for. She counted out her breaths and gently receded into the base of her brain: in the nose two three four, hold two three four five six seven, out of the mouth two three four five six seven

eight, in the nose two three four, hold two three four five six seven, out of the mouth two three four five...

Horns blared, vaguely patriotic, as the fanfare of the early morning news threw her gracelessly into awareness. She moved to click on the sidetable lamp and faltered. The first move would set the shape of the day. Turning on the lamp was an option, but it was already light enough outside.

Her hand hovered over a pawn. There were paths where it would be taken almost immediately and paths where it found the other side of the board and became a rook, a queen, whatever it wanted. Every step was weighted, specific. Every step was important. She'd never won a game of chess in her life. A news anchor introduced the picture of the day, a line of deer on a hillside, sent in by a local woman. Her hand hovered in the air.

Seeking something, anything, that didn't shatter into dozens of conflicting metaphors at the lightest touch was getting harder and harder. In a good story, maybe, some things (but not everything) would hatch into something meaningful, abstract, but then all of that would grow together into something that made sense: a delicate web of connections waiting patiently to be discovered by a reader that cared enough.

She could be gentle like that, careful like that, but here, with this, she just couldn't find that quiet, shameful narrative thread that runs through human sanity and transforms refracted light into a chain of electricity into the vision of a world where each person is protagonist.

Photons, massless, lightspeed, every fraction of a fraction of a fraction of a second, burden each eye with an incomprehensible mess of stimuli that the mind shapes into a

pretty lie. The brain lovingly sorts through sensory data and throws most of it out, smooshes the input of left and right together into depth, flips the upside-down picture and puts up and down in their proper places, and by the end of it all, makes it possible to go to a theme park without your head exploding.

She shuddered, breathing growing more and more shallow, sinking into motionlessness.

She knew how it all worked, or at least had the afterimages of college psych classes. There were facts. There were still facts. Handholds. It's all just the bouncing of particles, vibrations, waves, into whatever sensory hole they fit into and the ensuing motion of ions being pumped in and out of gates in countless neurons until each one hits the right charge, fires, and spits out whatever neurotransmitters happen to be appropriate for the situation, and then something, something, the human mind pops out of the end and has to turn around and study itself.

Handholds. Handholds. Textbooks, lectures, anything, anything at all.

Any competent neuroscientist can talk until they're blue in the face about sodium-potassium pumps and acetylcholinergic receptors, but all of that leads into that big, dark tunnel where human consciousness crawls out of the other side. And what happens in there? All of the same competent neuroscientists throw their empty hands up in the air, always the same answer: *no one knows*.

She wished they knew, that anyone, anyone knew, if not scientists, then the apologetics of priests, or children, maybe. But whatever usually happened in the black stretch of that tunnel, wasn't. Not for her. Maybe something different was happening, but it

really seemed more likely that nothing was happening. Sensations, heat, equilibrium, thought, nothing was getting sorted or flipped or made comprehensible. Moments were no longer slices of memory, but instead a torrential flow of data, lancing from outside to core completely untranslated.

It was the same as becoming conscious of any other automatic bodily process, the sudden awareness of breathing or blinking or the position of your tongue in your mouth.

She was trembling. Her limbs had been locked too long. Could she use the keys on the table?

The only way to kill that sudden awareness was to take deliberate control until you remembered how to forget about breathing, so that you could go back to breathing. She had forgotten how to forget like that. The only option in the meantime was to, somehow, take charge of all of the hidden processes, to turn vibrations into music and learn to read in sequence from symbol to letter to sound to word to sentence to paragraph to, what? Meaning? Narrative? Information? And to do it all by hand?

Every little piece of the world around her was a poisonous little clutch of fish eggs, hundreds of them, orange and jellied together into the shape of an object, concept, smell.

Taste. There was a taste and an aborted movement? Or convulsion?

Each egg mass burst the instant it crossed into her mind, releasing a swarm of every meaning, association, consequence, all of it, all of it. Getting up in the morning had dissolved into lists of other lists, the physical melting into the metaphorical and back again,

a hollow head pumped full of pinballs click-clacking into one another and knocking dents in her skull. She was translating everything into a language that she couldn't read.

She should have a headache, all things considered, but she didn't. Which didn't feel right, that a total malfunction could slip in silently, painlessly. A headache was a name that could be put on something. She was short on those.

A gyroscope spun too fast, dipped too sharply. It was something to do with equilibrium. Equilibrium and, convulsion again? Spinning and spinning, but standing in the same place: the gyroscope, sore, shaking. Sore? Spinning, shaking, sore floated free; there were the adjectives, and they belonged to, they belonged to what? What was the right thing, the important thing?

In the midst of it all, she still couldn't neglect breathing. In four, hold seven, out eight, and repeat ad infinitum. She just had to keep breathing and, and do the thing that was the thing to do. Just, figure that out and then do it. Easy.

Everything was everything it could be, and she had to pick what was important and then, even after she'd chosen, there was a meaning hidden amongst every other possible meaning, one that fit the situation. There was always a right answer. Only one. All of the rest were wrong. It was important that she knew the right answer, that she chose it. It was important to know what was important. Everything was important, and everything about everything was important.

There was a prism that could split anything that passed through it into every radiant color it could be. Every radiant color was a set of fine oil paints mixed one by one, dab by

dab, with a palette knife and an expert hand, until every color at once was ready for the canvas, a muddy brown.

There *was* a muddy brown. In what context? There was also a thick yellow, a set of toenails painted with sloppy strokes of glitter polish, a smell. A sharp smell. The twin taste of that smell on her tongue. Her tongue.

Her tongue was in her mouth. She held it suspended with conscious effort. It was thick, swollen, an amnesiac of the movements of sounds, a fat pink worm, a staircase that she pushed her lunches down, a forked thing that could taste the air or mark a liar, an insult that children showed one another, an ugly lump of muscle whose name could also be the sum of an entire language, a sensory organ. It was a sensory organ in her mouth. It tasted. Her tongue was her tongue in her mouth. That's all it was.

The important thing was the tongue. The important thing about it was that it was her tongue and that there was a taste on it.

Vomit.

Her hand was frozen in the same position, reaching for the lamp. She'd been? She'd been going to turn it on, faltered on the decision, and then? And then? Every muscle in her body trembled under her skin which crawled under a layer of cold sweat which burned, somehow, despite the relative chill of the room.

She hadn't moved in...a while, probably. In the brief moment between waking and going to turn on the lamp, she'd checked the clock over the DVD shelf in the corner, an analog one that she'd had since middle school that struck each hour with a call

corresponding to each little bird painted next to the numbers. She checked it again. It took considerably longer than it should've, but the position of the hands in relation to the numbers resolved into what was apparently the current time. She had lost more than ninety minutes.

She was running late for work, which wasn't an issue, because she wasn't going.

That decision hadn't prompted another spiral for some reason. The lamp was important, but work wasn't? Had it been a one-time thing?

But the room still shimmered around her, every wall and piece of furniture edged with bright newness, bright, awful, promising newness. Dripping possibilities grew from everything, sprouting branches that bowed deep under the weight of ever-ripening sick-sweet fruit. Interacting with an object would mean picking one, eating it, and all of the fruits were poison, save one. She had to make the right decision. It was imperative. It was important.

And, she very deliberately gathered her focus. Simple thoughts, she had to stick to simple thoughts, no planning ahead, no abstraction. She would move from simple task to simple task. One step at a time. No need for the tasks to connect. That wasn't quite the same as making a decision? Maybe if she didn't think about it, or about anything beyond the moment. She did not look at the room and thus it did not shimmer.

She snapped into a rigid present, braced there. One moment, she looked down. She remembered, the gyroscope, the smell, the taste on her tongue. The silver polish on her toes glittered, adorning feet that she'd thrown up on, at least twice. One big lump in the mess seemed to be a partial fish stick. The next moment, she fought a surge of renewed

nausea, realized that she was still frozen in a shaky grab for the lamp, only having moved her head to look at the clock and her feet. The next moment, she collapsed onto the floor in front of the couch, thankfully at an acceptable distance from the puddle of sick. Her chest heaved. Black spots did a little dance for her viewing pleasure as she waiting for the swell of pain that had replaced throbbing numbness when she'd broken her pose to fade a little bit.

Moment. Lying down was nice. Moment. It was good to just take a lie down sometimes. Moment. There was some show playing in the background. She wasn't going to move, but she could at least listen. Moment. She tried to wipe some of the vomit off of one of her feet by rubbing it against the couch. Not very successful. Moment. It was a cooking show. She didn't really want to think about food, but the host's voice was soft, gentle. That was okay. Moment. She tried to figure out what was being made as different ingredients were described. Moment. She realized that she was still shirtless, still wearing alligator pajama pants, and had also thrown up down her front. Moment. The situation, the one that existed beyond lying on the ground and listening to cooking shows, edged back into her thoughts. Moment. She did some measured breathing. Moment. She did some measured breathing. Moment. she did some measured breathing. Moment. She did some measured breathing, which cut off with a sharp inhalation as her phone, apparently not dead, began vibrating urgently from somewhere on the table above her head. Moment. She rooted around for it with one arm without looking. Moment. She had it in her hand. It was her sister. There was something, yesterday afternoon? Missed calls? Moment. She picked up.

She laid back again and closed her eyes. "H'lo?"

“Now you decide to pick up.” Her sister’s tone was completely flat. That was a bad sign, worse than if she’d started off yelling.” The icy voice continued, “Stop blowing this shit off. It’s not like it just affects *you*, or that it’ll like, go away if you avoid it for long enough.”

“I know that.” She cut off an attempted interruption, “I do!” Even flat on her back with her eyes screwed shut, concentrating exclusively on the conversation. Putting together words, coherent words, was proving to be *very* difficult. Speaking was too fast. There was no time to figure out the thing to say, the thing to do. “There was, sort of, last night, and the also afternoon too, I guess, it was,” she trailed off and started over, “Look. Yesterday was, was something we can talk about in person, okay?” she said, “I wasn’t blowing you off, I swear.”

There was a pause, nothing but background static on the other end. She took the moment to realize just how strong the smell of the room was, nausea returning a little. Her sister let out a long sigh that crackled from the phone speaker. “Fine. We can talk. I know you’re smarter than that,” she said. “Just avoiding shit forever, I mean. When are you free to come over this week? Ideally, as soon as you can.”

“I could honestly get ready now and be there in a little while. If that would work for you.”

“And your job?” her sister asked.

“It’s fine. Vacation day. Rough week.” There was a section of ceiling without any marks on it that was safe to look at, cooling on the eyes. “I need to go shower,” she said.

“You do that. If you haven’t eaten yet today, I have some leftovers you could heat up if you want any of them.” Her sister continued, “Oh, also, some of your mail got sent here again, mostly junk, but there’s a package.”

“Okay, thanks. I’ll get that. I’ve already eaten, though,” she lied, not particularly hungry. “I’ll text you when I’m headed over. Love-you-bye.”

Her sister echoed her goodbye, and she hung up. She had no idea whether she’d gotten the conversation right. It had all gone so fast. Had she sounded okay? Had her sister noticed? It hadn’t hurt like dinner the night before, though, so she probably hadn’t gotten it too wrong, hadn’t ruined anything important.

The decision to go to her sister’s had already been made for her. She rolled the plan around in her head; it felt comfortable, a safe path. The decision had already been made for her. She didn’t have to choose anymore, didn’t have to grope around for the right way through a thousand mistakes. That was nice.

She wasn’t there yet, though. There would be still be obstacles, but she sat up anyways. One moment at a time. She staggered to her feet and wobbled towards the bathroom with a hand braced against the wall. If she could just choose clothes without spiraling out again and still drive, she’d figure out the rest.

She opened her front door and stepped into a carwash.

It was the tactile illusion of rolling forward as light warps and refracts through glass and colorful foam and spinning brushes. Standing still, the world moved around her. Everything outdoors was painstakingly edged with brilliant color. The road speared into

the horizon, houses and trees clinging to its sides. It was a geometrically perfect one-point perspective, a physical manifestation of forward motion falling into itself, as if the landscape were a painted backdrop being pulled from behind to create an illusion of depth, of dimensionality.

She was out of alignment, seasick from standing still. Walking to her car, upstream, running up the escalator, she saw through a fisheye mirror, melty at the edges. Her neighborhood was still pulling itself off as far as the eye could see, but when she moved, she moved against it. The edges of her vision stretched and curved backwards. Her depth perception was convex. Detail wasn't lost to distance.

Traffic moved in jewel-tones, a swarm of beetles that shimmered as they flew. She looked up. It was grey out. The light, the color, had to be coming from the ground somewhere. A silver foil balloon, the sun hung in the sky, unenthusiastic. Dangling from a few fingers, her keys swung on their lanyard and slapped rhythmically against her thigh. She flicked her wrist a little and arced them into her palm with a jangle.

It was chilly in the car, but the driver's seat was so familiar, so safe, that she could've slept then, if she'd wanted to.

Instead, she torqued the key in the ignition.

Her left hand settled on the wheel, 10 o'clock, fingernails digging into the soft rubber, squeezing.

A pulse.

Her right hand rang the doorbell of her sister's house.

Somewhere in between those hands, muscle memory had taken over. There'd been no blackout, no abrupt jolt from one place to the other. Her brain was prioritizing neck-whipping sensory spinout, uninterested in anything but tipping off into that melty inner space that it had become enamored with almost immediately after she'd woken up, joints popped out of place in every sense but physical. Oh, dislocation! That was the best name she'd found for it yet: the word split: dis-location, a wrenching removal from wherever she'd comfortably rested before. She was out of place and outside of space. No wonder it was so hard to move. Her consciousness was spinning out, useless. It drifted through a world half-formed, made of shadows and runny paint. Somewhere under the hood, dredged up by necessity and out of experience, the layered electric impressions of lever-pulling hands and pedal-pushing feet finely sketched across thousands of celluloids had reeled into a breakneck loop and, flipbook-style, animated her body. She had projected herself from place to place, pre-recorded, but now she was back on air, back beneath the crushing expectation of live performance.

Maybe separating Brain and Self, like there was any real divide between those two, like they weren't one and the same, the Body included. The personification of her own dysfunction kept it at a nice distance. She assumed no responsibility and wilted under lack of control. That was something to think about later (she hoped her brain would banish the thoughts).

She rocked back onto the balls of her heels.

Shattering the lovely numb lull of transit to release free will again, her sister opened the door. Eyes closed and collapsed on the carpet, the phone call had still been so, so

difficult. Adding gesture and expression was unthinkable. There were countless variables. There was only one solution. The face in front of her defamiliarized as her limbs and gaze locked still. There was no comfort in motionlessness. Choosing to abstain was still a choice. Nonaction was the action of Not Acting. A boltgun shot of cold lanced through the crown of her head and into her guts. There was no opting out. There was no way to always get it right. Somewhere off in distant perception she felt herself going fish-mouthed and hollow-eyed. The path running through the afternoon and back to her house was nowhere to be seen, maybe didn't exist. Abstention was choice. Nonaction was action. Indecision was decision. Something terrible, sweaty, beautiful, and completely uncharted waited under the horizon and rode the approaching land, and she *could not* face it. But it was inevitable, wasn't it?

She was tired of spending more time inside her head, very much wished that the day would get on with it, whatever that would mean. (Pay attention. Pay attention. Pay *attention*).

Her hands were warm and – she looked down – clasped in her sister's.

"You with me?" there was a familiar worry crease between her eyebrows that was going to become permanent before she hit forty.

She shook her head, glitter bouncing and refracting her vision through a mosquito-eyed kaleidoscope. She reminded herself that a smile only looked real if it reached the eyes, and she did the best that she could.

"Of course," reassuring, *reassuring*. "Sorry. Sorry, I spaced out."

The generally abstract challenge that she'd been struggling against had followed her into physical space, and took the shape of labyrinth that layered double over the bright entryway. The chaos of the wire-shelf shoe rack lodged halfway in a hedge wall that loomed and stroked glossy, velvet-green leaves over the top shelf of flip-flops and neon children's Crocs. A maze, then. That meant a way out. That strategy that was, what, always turning in the same direction? That didn't feel right. He only needed to forge her way to the center and slip back out. Her sister, she supposed, holding in a grimace, would have to be the minotaur.

The air pressed thick against her back. She could do a trust fall. It would catch her. Maybe. But it also gently, *firmly* let her know backtracking was off of the table. The black steel reek of a train burned past, right under her nose. Its whistle pierced through her in a doppler rush, a bone-deep tooth rattle, the pumping machine reminder that there was no reverse, only two options: bearing down gleaming tracks or derailing.

Mazes, trains, labyrinths, stop-motion, optical illusions – it was getting hard to keep track. Excessive. Saccharine. Tacky. Too disorienting to break from. Washing in mid-conversation.

Wait.

Mid-conversation.

How long had she stood there with a rictus grin? A moment? A minute?

"I've been working doubles every other day, closing even more than that, for, god, weeks I guess?"

The frown did not fade, “you do look tired.” They broke eye contact. A silent agreement passed between them to at least get inside before any arguing.

“I heated up those leftovers. Make you feel better?” She shut the door behind them. “It’s pork chops and apples.” Even reheated, the smell was good. She hoped that eating them would be right.

The entryway opened directly into the living room, cleaner than usual: a blanket in a crisp diamond-fold over the back of the couch, stacks of books straightened, water guns and various plastic toys in a big plastic bin in the corner. In the center of the room, the stack of moving boxes (and a beat-up lamp) – the reason for her visit — waited all taped-up, menaced. The room bowed deeply in the middle, a gravity well plunging towards its hyperdense center.

A hand squeezed her shoulder and passed her a warm plate in passing. They both settled on the couch, watching the boxes. Her sister rolled a can of Cheerwine across the cushion. She popped the tab. So far...so good? Her fork skipped a screech across the plate; they both winced. The meat was good, just the right amount of sweet and peppery, if a little tough. Eating this time was just eating. There was silence. She didn’t spin out, just gently tipped back, blanked.

The food was gone. Her sister tilted her head in a question. The line of her shoulders was hard, her eyes soft. The boxcutter in her hand had an orange plastic handle, and she flicked the little triangular blade out. Its edge gashed through empty space as it moved, opening little tears that glittered inside and closed back up near-immediately.

It tilted towards her. “You want the honors?”

“Mm, not really.”

Her sister hoisted herself off of the couch. “Damn, alright. Suit yourself.” She stood for a moment, facing away. “I wan— I need you to stop lying to me. We’re going to talk about what’s *actually* wrong with you.” Her earrings jingled with her head shake. “I wouldn’t press, but...there’s not anyone else, huh? Should probably get to that too. Uh. Anyways. Not right now.”

Her fingers clenched the edge of the cushion. The precipice tipped her forward. The minotaur crashed out of the hedge, and gushed from its quivering nostrils. “Guess I can’t argue with that. You gonna crack those open?”

With the practiced confidence of a mother who’d perfected gliding scissors through wrapping paper, she zipped the boxcutter through the tape.

It didn’t take long to unpack everything. They hadn’t been left much. Cheap jewelry, porcelain angels, a bundle of extension cords, familiar, predictable little things. She already had enough junk, and only claimed a set of dishes and flatware with braided flowers painted around the edges of the plates and bowls, faux-gold gilding the edges. They were nice. They didn’t represent a threat; taking them had been a soft and easy choice. They had a simple clarity – were nothing more than what they were.

She smiled, genuinely. She could imagine eating off of them, slowly revealing the little clusters of lilacs as the plate emptied. Her sister wordlessly passed her a square leather case, about the size of a camera, but without room for a lens.

She took it and turned it in her hands, insignificant all around and without any identifying marks. The surface was smooth and well taken care of, but old. It had its own sort of clarity, but not the same – sharp...important. It was *important*. It was the first time that she'd known the step before putting her foot down. Her breath clogged her throat.

It only took a gentle thumb to snap the clasp free and flip it open. Sliding the case off revealed... something... made of metal the matte green of oxidized copper but with a brand-new unscuffed finish. It was sort of rectangular and the exact shape of the case overall pretty featureless. It was shockingly light. Investigation yielded a single, useless clue: an opening in one of the narrower sides, easily overlooked, the width of a coin-slot, but twice as long. She held it up closer to her face. There was the faintest little set of old-fashioned Libra scales pressed into the metal above the slot. That was all.

“The hell is that?”

She jerked hard in response to the sudden presence over her shoulder and the little box flew from her hands and hit the floor hard with a dull thunk that belonged to an object that *was not hollow*.

They both stared at it.

A bubble burst in her head and dissolved into a gentle rainbow spray of mist and prismatic confetti and a *decision*. “I want it.”

“...Okay? It's all yours, whatever it is.” Her sister picked it up and shook it. “I think it might be a piggybank? Like, it's just a box with a coin-slot. Kind of a big one but, still.”

She didn't like seeing it in her sister's hands and reached forward, gently pulling it from her grasp without breaking eye-contact. This was her choice – her one choice. It was hers to have. She wanted to be the only one to hold it, to *look at it*.

“Don't banks generally have a stopper? So that you can get the coins out?”

“There are ones you have to break.”

“*Break?*” she hissed. “We're not breaking it.” She clutched it tighter. “Did you hear it drop? You think it's built to shatter?” Best not to take any risks. The sudden gripping tension only went away when she had it back in the case and safely in her inner jacket pocket.

“Stop being difficult for like, two minutes. I don't know, that was just my only guess,” her sister said. “But. I think that's everything interesting unpacked?” She stopped to suck in a breath and looked at her feet. “Do you have anything else going on today? I think we're going to need a while.”

Ah, it was time for that.

This was significant... answering that question was so far out of her reach; there was nowhere to even start. She...

She...

She, uh...

There was a gentle buzz against her size and a little click, more felt than heard. Half turning away and slipping a hand into her pocket as discreetly as possible, she half-pulled

the device from the case and slipped a couple of fingers inside. Her fingertips alighted on a little slip of paper, sticking out from the slot. It pulled free easily, and she palmed it.

Still staring down the barrel of that question, that impossible question that should've been so easy to answer. Carefully magician-tucking the paper flat to her palm with the edge of her thumb, she pinched the bridge of her nose and dragged the hand down her face, miming exasperation. Lowering her hand from the gesture, she snuck a split-second glance at her palm, hope that, assuming there was any text on the paper, it would be facing outwards.

She had time to clearly see the single word printed on the little slip, a single word in crisp, stark black all-caps:

MISTAKE

Her eyes widened. Her hand jerked into a fist, crushing the words out of sight. She had to go.

"I have to go."

Her sister started, "Wait *what*. What are you talki—,"

"I need to GO," she repeated, and, despite everything, despite the noise and color overflowing all around her, despite the strange coating that had grown inside her skull, something about the strange, hard edge to her voice scared her. Beyond a doubt, it had scared her sister, who had taken a few unconscious steps backwards, clearly shaken, and, as much as she seemed to be trying not to, cutting glances towards every heavy object that could be used for self-defense.

She tried again, more softly, "I need to go. I need to leave *right now*." The quiet tone was actually much worse, somehow. She turned tail and ran. The other woman broke out of her stupor seconds before the door slammed shut.

"You! I – not even a fucking excu—" her voice was drowned out by the door audibly striking its frame hard, bouncing off with the aftershock, and then banging closed, possibly broken.

A ten-year-old girl two houses down, breaking bricks against the sidewalk and collecting the red dust in a bucket to see what would happen if she mixed in water, watched a woman sprint out of the house down the street and towards one of the cars in the driveway, long black hair whipping violently around her head like it was really, really windy (it wasn't) and moving like the scary puppets in that one show she hated. The woman stopped with her hand on the driver's side door handle and shoved a hand in her pocket, pulling something out, eyes wild looking at whatever it was, and then started running again, somehow even faster, right down the middle of the road. She was moving away from the girl's house, but, still, it was probably a good time to go to the side of the house to uncoil the hose and drag it over, probably also a good idea to take her time doing it.

Completely overlooking the girl, she pelted down the road, the machine in her jacket pocket slapping against her hip with every footfall as she ran directly down the yellow-dashed center line. She knew now that driving was a **MISTAKE**, but so far, she was going the right way. There was an answer to every question. She'd made it far enough on her own

that she'd been rewarded. Everything was fine. Everything was great, actually. Everything was *right*.

Another buzz and click as she was passing a bus stop. She took the bus. She got off of the bus five miles away from her house, because she'd almost made a **MISTAKE** missing a stop. Walking the rest of the way back, nothing went wrong.

Taking a shower was right.

Taking her wallet was a **MISTAKE**.

Grabbing the jar from her dresser was right.

Wearing both boots was a **MISTAKE**.

Wearing one was right.

Answering her phone as it rang and rang was a **MISTAKE**.

Going to the store was right.

Buying anything besides energy drinks was a **MISTAKE**.

Paying with her jar of coins was right.

Going back into her house when she got back was a **MISTAKE**.

Sleeping on the porch couch for three days was right.

Almost letting herself be seen by the people who came to her door was a **MISTAKE**.

Going back inside was right.

Closing the back door was a **MISTAKE**.

Unscrewing every lightbulb in the house and putting them in the shower was right.

Keeping track of any time outside of the cycle of night and day was a **MISTAKE**.

Slipping out of the back door, still hanging open, and out into the forest behind the house one night was right. She wore only old athletic shorts, an oversized t-shirt, and a single boot. She had no flashlight. The machine was, of course, in her pocket, silent; it approved. Recent heavy rains had reduced the forest floor to a thick mudslick, ankle-deep in some places. The mud was pleasantly cool and squished up between the toes of her bare foot, soothing the little cuts and blisters that it had gathered in its shoeless-ness.

Everything was right. She'd escaped that place trapped in her head and now existed entirely in the real world, the real world which was so simple now, now that she could see it. That night, the gibbous moon was bright enough to see the shapes of individual trees, to avoid fallen branches and ditches. It didn't do anything to keep her from slipping and falling.

She laid back in the mud, head pounding, elbow throbbing, content. If something had gone wrong, she would've known. It grew darker as the moon dipped towards the horizon and the cloud cover thickened. She laid there and hummed to herself.

Eventually, she dug in her pocket and pulled out the machine.

Half of it.

It was completely hollow. Both halves were.

She sat up. She'd walked in no particular direction but the right one, for a long, long time. It wasn't a small forest. She clutched at a thick branch sticking from a fallen tree and

hauled herself to her feet. She was, maybe, possibly, probably concussed. Her arm was almost certainly broken. She didn't know what to *do*. She didn't really know how to, anymore.

The machine was still in pieces on the ground. The moonlight had only dimmed. The clouds covered the stars. She wasn't entirely sure which direction she'd come from. Her hands were little more than silhouettes, no matter how much she squinted. She brought them up to her face, feeling the arch of her brows, softness of her cheeks, scar on her jaw. She kept them there, mapping out something long forgotten.

Her breath caught in her throat. "Rebecca," she whispered "Becca, no, *Bec*."

Oh.

Oh.

She felt her smile curve under her fingers. Felt her elbow grind and whine at her as she moved her arms. She felt something warm swell up from her chest and bubble out as a single breathless laugh.

She didn't know where to go, couldn't see, was badly injured, but that wasn't important.

She wiped the mud from her good hand onto her shorts and held it out to feel her way forward. The last sliver of moon sunk below the horizon, taking its light with it. She watched it go, turned, and began to walk, choosing to leave it behind.

A young girl, who'd long stuck by her decision to shorten 'Leticia' to 'Tick', watched as people once again gathered around the house across the street. They liked to stay in the yard – pacing and making phone calls and serious faces as they crossed their arms. Her parents had refused to tell her what had happened, but she had remembered the running woman and hadn't pressed, hadn't really wanted to know.

Still, she watched the people with their furrowed brows, watched as cars pulled in and out of the driveway. There had been police a few times. She really didn't like it, but was still drawn to watch the people gather. She hadn't seen that woman again. She hoped that she was.

The TV in the corner, which she'd had to change from her little brother's stupid puppet show *again*, was instead turned to some science channel thing about space. Doctor

Michio Kaku was gesticulating expansively tracing the shape of the animated simulation of the formation of a nebula on the other half of the screen.

On the show, which no one in the house was watching, squeezed in between the overflowing shelves and Pepsi can piles of an office that he hadn't cleaned for his television appearance, Doctor Guillaume Dubroc of the American Association of Variable Star Observers drew the constellation Vulpecula out on a whiteboard. He alternated between enthusiastically punctuating his points with little stabbing gestures of his marker and scratching at the juncture of his neck and left shoulder through his shirt. He only realized much later, on a train from Tours to Paris, when the teeth started to develop, that he was growing a second head.

BETTER THAN NONE

He'd initially gone to his doctor, thinking that he'd most likely pulled a muscle.

In the waiting room, an elderly man had been loudly telling his wife about his recent research into cases of people falling into crevasses. Guillaume had been imagining how much his friends would laugh when he told them about it later, when their conversation had devolved into a discussion of the Nutty Putty Cave Incident. He'd looked it up on his

phone and then immediately and dearly wished that he could forget the first image that'd come with the search.

Later, as a nurse took his blood pressure, he could almost feel the rush of hot pulse in John Edward Jones', twenty-six at the time of his death by cardiac arrest, head in the twenty-sixth hour when search-and-rescue had given up on extracting him, just before midnight on November 24th, 2009. Upside-down and trapped by geometry -- a zip-tie pulled tight -- there was no angle that could pull him up and out the way he'd come.

Guillaume had wondered if any of the one-hundred-and-thirty-seven people who'd joined the rescue effort had found themselves at a Black Friday sale in nearby Salt Lake City three days later and cried when they realized that they hadn't been thinking about it at all, just staring at a display of discount toasters, half-price flatscreens, once-in-a-lifetime bargains in the kitchenware section. He'd wondered if the ten members of the Jones family that had been there had sat down for Thanksgiving dinner, imagined the sound of a can opener on the cranberry sauce and the corn in the pot on the stove bubbling in a kitchen full of silent people.

He'd thought about the last summer, when he'd been stopped at a light and averted his eyes when he'd seen the woman losing a struggle for breath on the sidewalk, surrounded by EMTs who were no longer giving her medical attention; there was nothing else that could be done. One of them had been holding her hand. He hadn't pulled over. He'd been running late for a meeting. The ambulance was already there. What comfort could one person give in the face of immovable suffering? What comfort could one-hundred-and-thirty-seven give when no one could even hold his hand?

Guillaume's older sister, in a shouting match that had ended abruptly when the vase that he'd swept off of the mantel revealed itself to be full of their great aunt's ashes, gritty on his tongue, had once accused him of abstracting other people's suffering to wallow in his own guilt because he'd never suffered a day in his entire life. He hadn't been the child singled out. Even after they'd made up, he'd kept the words. Thinking about the man head-down in the cave, which had felt like a revelation about the human experience, was abruptly obscene. He'd felt sick. His shoulder had throbbed. The doctor, reading from a clipboard, had walked into the room.

Her cold little hands had found the growing knot cupped neatly in his collarbone; she'd rolled it between her fingers, and his vision had doubled under the pressure. He'd been grinding his teeth in his sleep, she'd told him, straining his muscles, stress most likely, and he'd left the office with an appointment scheduled with an oral surgeon the next Friday at 4pm.

The surgeon, who'd sported an unfortunate combination of low v-neck scrubs and enthusiastic chest hair, had diagnosed him with TMJ dysfunction, did the initial fitting for a flat plane bite splint to wear while sleeping, and told him to call the office if he started having serious migraines.

He never got any migraines, but he didn't go back to the doctor when the lump started growing. Buckled in the backseat of his own decision, the compulsion to see what would happen if he left it alone, just to see, just for a while, turned private, mythic. There was a kindling connection with the new organism born of his own flesh, even if it might be killing him. If it were, at least he wouldn't go out alone.

Maybe, the initial lump had been cancerous, the first sign of lymphoma. Maybe it had been transformed, had gorged on his belief. Or maybe, maybe it was always going to be what it became, what it was by the time it started teething in that empty TGV compartment.

The moment of fissure as the mouth opened hadn't hurt, not like the voice had. He'd felt the muscles of his neck and shoulder clench, relax, clench, relax. And then, in his ear:

« Où es-tu? croaking, creaking, Je ne peux pas te voir. »

He went cold. The cadence, he knew it, though it was rusted over beyond recognition. The hissed plea into the dark, seeking him out, of this newborn, familiar part of him, woke within him both great horror and great desire to comfort that snaking little voice. The feelings didn't chafe against one another, but coexisted easily.

« S'il te plait, s'il te plait. Je dois te voir. »

I'm here, I'm here, he consoled it. Don't worry, I'm here. He trailed a fingertip over one of the blunt little teeth through his collar. It didn't bite, and he wondered if what he was feeling was love – pure and unconditional. Maybe this was him accepting himself, his worst parts, manifested out of his head and into the world.

A tall woman running on an hour of sleep saw him as he got off of the train and onto the platform, and his serene expression, one that she'd never seen outside of renaissance oil portraits of soft-eyed noblewomen holding ugly little dogs, bolstered her through the rest of her day, knowing that there were still happy people like that out there.

It withered in sunlight, so he took care to layer his shirts and jackets carefully. It shrunk away from water, so he bandaged it with tender hands when he showered. When if

fissured shallow little slit nostrils, he started working remotely as often as possible, and they could breathe more easily in the soft darkness. This new development took the whistling note from its voice, but the mouth was still gestating, and he had yet to recognize it. He was certain that, eventually, he would hear his own voice.

One night, as he watched the timer count down on an oven-bake lasagna, it told him a story.

It began:

« Quand j'étais mort, j'étais un petit oiseau dans la maison où tu as grandi et ta mère est morte. Ma maison était une cage, et j'ai chanté les matins. Tu ne pouvais pas me voir. C'était l'enfer ou c'était le paradis – mais, maintenant, je suis vivant. Est-ce que tu es heureux ? Tu m'as manqué. »

It began:

When I was dead, I was a little bird in the house where you grew up and your mother died. My house was a cage, and I sang in the mornings. You couldn't see me. It was hell or it was heaven... but, now, I'm alive. Are you happy? I missed you.

When I was alive before, before I was dead, you were the little bird. You sang in the mornings in the cage we kept in the bathroom. I saw you; I did. You didn't see me when it was me, but I saw you when it was you. You sang better than I ever did. I kept you safe, and you sang *so* sweetly. I miss your singing.

In the house, there was also a dog. It slunk from room to room and bit all of our ankles; it didn't know how to be loved, though I loved it as best as I could and as best as it deserved. Your mother tried to teach it not to bite, to not choke itself against its leash on walks. I think that it wanted to run. She never did teach it to walk properly, though it eventually stopped biting. When I died, I became the bird. I thought I might become the dog, and I thank God that I didn't. I became the bird, and through the bird I found my way back to you. I kept you safe while you sang, and I never asked for anything back.

My little bird, are you happy? I missed you so much. I've never asked for anything in return, but I think I might. Soon, I might.

My little bird, it called him. It loved him back just as he loved it. He was learning to love himself again, alive, dead, but then alive again. He felt alive again. The story was a well and puzzle, and at the bottom of it, once he got the pieces all together, he was going to finally, finally find himself.

Still mostly flat to his neck, it grew a face that a child would make out of clay. In the mirror he watched its features form, nose pinching up and out, lips ringing its mouth, stubbly eyelashes growing around its deepening sockets. It could finally smile. The face, so smooth and new, was no one's face yet, and would not become anyone's until it opened its eyes.

Its eyes, however, remained closed as it formed a head behind its face. It whispered comforts to him through the nightly cramping and seizing as his neck migrated rightwards to make room for it. He didn't have work anymore, and he paid to have his groceries

delivered. He developed a sympathetic ache, watching it grow, his own skin tight against his skull. The migraines that the oral surgeon had warned him about became a constant and throbbing vise. He was becoming, he was becoming, he was becoming, he told himself. And what would he become? What would they become? He was so, so excited.

It didn't tell him any more stories. He thought that it probably wouldn't until he solved the first one.

A fine cap of baby-soft hair settled on it, the same color as his own, around the same time that it became able to raise its head. Both heads, almost the same size, settled equidistant on his shoulders, balancing out the sloping, slumping laps that he'd been pacing around his apartment. When his phone wouldn't stop ringing, he let the battery die, and put it out for the next garbage pickup.

The day after he realized that his head had grown smaller than its head, it opened its eyes, and he closed his for the last time.

Like dozing, like the best nap he'd ever had, it guided his body around the warm dark of his apartment, and he let his head loll, often falling into deep and dreamless unconsciousness. Vacillating between light and heavy sleep, he let everything relax, go limp. His better self was in the driver's seat now. He'd been so tired for so long, and it was letting him finally, finally rest.

And now it whispered to him, clear, so clear now, six months to the day since it'd first spoken. It whispered to him on the day when his mouth closed up. It kissed where his forehead had once been and told him that it loved him, that it was so proud, and that he was going to sing so beautifully again.

It told him that he would be its little bird, and that it loved him more than he would ever know, more than he could ever know. It told him in his father's voice.

And he was so happy to sing again.

And, soon after her brother's missing case went cold, and he was presumed dead, Doctor Guillaume Dubroc's sister developed an ache in her neck, an ache that would one day tell her a story about a dog: beaten, pathetic, but resilient. A creature that dragged itself around the house, voiceless.

It would tell her it was so proud of her, in her mother's voice.

An old man, interviewed by police as one of the final people to see Guillaume Dubroc in person, had his account immediately marked as irrelevant to the case. He responded to the initial questioning about his activities that day with a diatribe about famous cases of people falling into crevasses, and things only went downhill from there, until, long after he

probably should've been stopped, he wrapped up with a story about the friend of a friend who had invented a new and very important word.

All of this was dismissed as unconnected to the missing person in question, but the original transcript still exists filed away in some archive, never to see daylight again, unknowingly the world's only written account of the life of a man they once called Boggs.

THE WORD MADE HOLE

The transcript is absolutely incoherent.

It's almost useless to read it; there's really nothing at all to be gotten out of it. It's been transformed from interview to monologue, though no one will ever notice; Boggs' life can only ever be his own to tell (and that's a threat). So, if you really, *really* want to know a story that's not worth knowing, I can take you to the word of Boggs, the word of Boggs' word. All of it's incoherent, scrambled, and absurd. You're not going to get anything from it. And, if you do, or – god forbid – if you *believe it*...well, you're not welcome in *my* house, or you won't be when I have one. All that said, it's a good idea to let Boggs talk when he wants to, otherwise he might talk you, and not in the good way, either. And unfortunately, when I was a ten-year-old-do-nothing, he told me that thirty years ago when he died, I was going to let him talk, or he'd hit the first syllable hard and sharp and give me a horse-face. I grow up pretty ugly, but not as ugly as horses, those awful creatures. So, here he goes, I guess.

It's a pain waking up when I'm not even due to be born for decades. Let's get this over with as quickly as possible, so that I can go back to not existing yet. Boggs told me that he tells the story best in the moments after his death and before his after-death, when all of his life is spread out before him: all two-hundred-odd years in The Hole:

It's really my own fault that I bad-talked Mister Dimitri. Had he come any other time of day, I would've welcomed him as a brother-dear. Jackasses-til-always! Detestable-jugglers! Daughters-three-of-them and even priests! All are my brothers-dear. Except! Here he comes, here he comes confident-as-anything down the road. Barely after sunrise to boot! It's rude to call upon someone before breakfast, no? I don't think it's too much to ask for just... three minutes to myself a day, just three-little-minutes.

It doesn't really justify it, I suppose. I was heinous-a-bit-admittedly, where he was rude. But, in the cosmic sense, it's almost impossible to tell the two apart anyways. I'm absolutely-and-one-hundred-percent making excuses. I'm aware, and I do it all the time.

I don't intend to stop.

I have to, imperatively, be constant-forever-same. If not, everything else around me would fall apart, slipping about in the throes of dissolution – nothing to hold on to. That's not to say that I'm the lovely-black-hole-at-the-center-of-the-galaxy and others the arms-of-the-spiral-maypole-ribbons marching around me, but, I'm the lovely-black-hole-at-the-center-of-the-galaxy and others the arms-of-the-spiral-maypole-ribbons marching around me. So it goes.

I'm a liar too! I can't change this either, but I wouldn't even if I could. I love it. I'll lie to anyone, anytime. I'd prefer not to lie to you, if you'd kindly believe me, considering that

this is my own story, and I do love to tell about myself, but it's a hard-habit-breaking, my lying is. So please do forgive me, even though I won't be at all sorry.

Every man's entitled to his hobbies! I might take up woodworking-embroidery-dance if I'd anything with me down in The Hole, but I don't. And, if anyone throws anything down, I say my word-in-the-way-of-killing. You have to hold it down on the front and whistle out the end, and if you don't whistle right, the killing doesn't stick, and they come back the next week all out-of-sorts and real sore with you. You'd think they'd be happy to only get killed a little, but I'm surrounded by ingrate-bastards.

I don't think it's unreasonable, though. If *you* had a-word-that's-sometimes-for-killing, you'd probably use it too if someone broke all the furniture in your house. And, frankly, your house is nothing compared to The Hole.

My schedule's pretty full-up with people coming and asking for me to use my word all the time, which I use as they need or deserve or according to however I'm feeling that day. Because, when the world rumbled my word to me with my newborn ear pressed to the cold bottom of The Hole (when it was new-shallow) the earth told me that being responsible was made up by that-crew-of-bastards-they-call-God to keep us all from having fun, and that I could use my word any way I liked. The only rule's that I stay in The Hole all-my-life-forever-and-ever-always-cross-my-heart-and-let-it-burst-if-I-leave-it.

Maybe you've already noticed that I prefer saying things in one word when I can, even if I have to make a bunch of words be one word. Though I bet the coward-rat-dog giving you this story's going to put in dashes and make my words ugly and multiple again. I'd tell my whole story in one word if I thought he'd write it down like that. Nothing's ever

perfect, though. But I will say, If you don't use contractions, I hate you, and if you don't like my together-words, I hope you're a miserable-all-your-life. If I find out that you don't like them, I'll *make* you a miserable-all-your-life. If I don't find out, and they just give you a headache and make my story a bad-to-read-eye-strainer: good. Get bent.

But anyhow, when Mister Dimitri came and yelled down The Hole to me, before it was too deep to yell down, I'd just woken up, and, like every morning, I was eating three-minutes-of-dirt, which digs The Hole deeper and means I don't have to eat-drink anything and keeps me oh so beautiful-strong.

He yells down the hole to me, and I make myself hear it all-together, because otherwise people's voices are so ugly to me that I'm afraid the ugly will fall down The Hole and make me a horrid-and-awful-terrible.

He said to me, he said, my-great-aunt-I-love-has-boils-all-on-her-feet-and-they-hurt-her-and-stink-terrible-bad-when-they-burst-and-fluid-runs-all-out-and-can-you-talk-them-away-please-please?

And usually, I'd say my word in the singing-it-soft-then-screeching-harsh that takes away feet-boils, but I swallowed my mouthful-of-dirt-*one*-minute-of-dirt, and said my word nasty-trilling-whisper-ended so that he became a pottery-man, and every time he moved, he cracked a little bit more. His family had to keep him in the front yard the rest of his life and pour water in his mouth when he needed it. A wife-of-his-brother grew string-beans and mint in his cracks because she was a gardener and thought it could maybe make him happy, and it did make him as happy as a pottery-man-in-the-front-yard could be. Which –

stop being presumptuous – was actually pretty happy, because his family loved him, and his sister-older-with-black-eyes wrote down the poems that he made up and told her.

He published four little-poem-books, and things were good for him, until one day the dinner-bell-ring woke him up, and Mister Dimitri stood up and turned from a content-pottery-man-poet to ceramic-shards-with-mint-and-string-beans-in-them, which is to say: dead.

So, who's to say if I even cursed him at all? He had good and bad in his life like everyone does, and he did die, but so does everyone else too. And, a lot of foolish-lump-faces would say that living in The Hole all your life and digging it deeper and using your word is a cursed-life, while it's, in fact, the-best-life-of-all. So really the point is that you can live a lot of ways, and all those assumptions you've been making about me being a liar-killer-curser-bad-man are pretty unfounded, and I hope you feel a fool now.

But, since I'm a complicated-person-of-many-dimensions, and one of those dimensions happens to be kindness, I'll do something for you now, to make you feel better about your foolery. But, because I'm also a complicated-person, I'll admit that it won't do you any good at all.

I'll tell you my word, which has forty-five-thousand-uses-all-different, and I know them all. Are you ready?

It's scrubbgle.

Yes! You know my word! And you may think that you're as powerful as me now, maybe even more so, because you don't live in The Hole. Unfortunately, you're once again the fool (at least you got a little break). Because knowing my word won't do you any good.

Scrubbgle! Scrubbgle! Scrubbgle! Say it all you want!

I'll tell my word to anyone who asks. It doesn't matter. Each of the forty-five-thousand-ways-to-scrubbgle-talk is just saying it a different way. Which, as any scientist-worth-salt-bits will tell you, is the exact number of ways you can say any two-syllable word minus-one.

Only one person has ever been able to talk-happen anything with my word, and he turned himself into his dog, while his dog was also still himself, and it was all very confusing for the both of them. I know the forty-five-thousand-ways, and everyone else can only say the minus-one. What a *shame*.

But who knows? Maybe you'll be able to talk it and make something happen, which will be bad-or-good and you'll feel regret-happy. You have the word now, too. You can do what you want with it, but do know that you'll never be as good as me.

But here, I'll do something-else-kind for you, because I've made you the fool twice. I told already you how the earth told me the word and how to talk it when I was a baby, which was either-sometime-future-or-past (the distinction doesn't matter, but people do get all up-and-bothered about it. I'll tell you about how I was born and how the Hole was born and how I died just-now and some-things-in-between and maybe after also.

All the days of my life I live in The Hole. I take away three-minutes-of-dirt from the bottom every morning by eating it, like I've said, and every day The Hole gets three-minutes-of-dirt deeper. The rest of the time, people come to me and ask me to use my word for them, to make their lives better or to make the lives of people-they-hate worse. Sometimes I talk their lives better and talk their enemy's lives worse, and sometimes I talk their lives much-worse and their enemy's much-better. People know this, and they still come to me every day and ask me to talk things.

The early days when The Hole is shallow people come to me, and they speak-regular-or-even-whisper. When it's deeper, they **yell-down-it-yell-their-hearts-out**, and when it's very-very-deep, they lower down a bucket on a rope with their wishes written on little-paper-slips. That's what I do when I'm alive.

My birth goes like this: my mother came with a shovel and dug a hole three-feet-deep and squatted-down-squeeze-birthered, and then I was in it, and then it became The Hole after I was in it. She gave me a name, my-name, which is Boggs. Have I told you that? It's the second-most-important word I have. My mother gave it to me and left, which was all-well-and-good. And the next day the earth told me my word, which you already know, and it told me something else too. I've already gone through the beginning-and-middle too, and now that I'm dead, I'll tell you the end and what the earth told me then and tells me now.

The earth said to me, it said, says, is saying, in its sweet-voice, that if I stayed in The Hole all-my-life-forever-and-ever-always-cross-my-heart-and-let-it-burst-if-I-leave-it and dug it deep enough, right down to the bottom-of-the-earth, that the earth would tell me a-

secret-the-only-secret-there-is, which is just one of the only-secrets-there-are, but this one is-will-be *mine*. Listen closely, I didn't dig down to the core of the earth. Maybe there's a different secret-the-only-secret-there-is there, but I'll never know. The core is the center-of-the-earth, but I dug to the bottom-of-the-earth, and when I got there, I fell down into it and died. And now that I'm-dead-was-dead-will-be-dead, the earth is-telling-me-told-me-will-tell-me the only-secret-there-is.

And that's all-there-is. I'm dead now. Dead-and-gone. That's all I have to say. Thank-you-and-goodbye-have-a-safe-journey-home.

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.....you-can-go-

now.....

.....

..... that's-all-goodbye

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.....get-on-your-way

.....

I don't need him to tell you things, because I'm dead-and-there-aren't-rules-anymore-when-you're-dead-which-is-a-bonus-they-don't-tell-you-about-until-you-get-here. Now it's you and me, you-and-me. We're here together, which means you're dead too, but that's okay! We're both here, fallen out of the bottom-of-the-earth. The no-horse-face-boy is gone. I sent him away on purpose.

Because, let me tell you another secret: (*I like you better than him*). And now that it's just us, the earth is-telling-me-told-me-will-tell-me a-secret-the-only-secret-there-is. And you know what? It's telling-you-told-you-will-tell-you too.

It's the same secret every time, but the story is always different. That's how it always goes with stories, or fancy lying, if you'd like to use another name. We're going to sit down together. Imagine, maybe, around a fire at night, circled around with those you trust, woodsmoke smell blending with voices as they both rise into the sky and disperse. I'm talking to *you*. And I mean you. And I do have something for you, as that man in the hole promised. I have for you a story about yourself.

YOU ARE NOT IMMUNE TO THE DOGS

You are immune to the dogs.

I wouldn't want to waste any of your time telling you what you already know, but neither of us have any obligations. You wouldn't be here otherwise. Thanks for coming!

I really, really want you to have a good time. But. We should talk about the dogs first.

Here, I'm myself (not) as much as you're yourself (not), but even if we were pressed cheek-to-cheek it wouldn't be any better. We could knock our heads together. We could do it as hard as possible 'til we both passed out, skull and layers of the brain peeled open with nothing in between, you'd know a *myself*, and I'd know a *yourself* no better than we do now. Then we'd wake up with concussions no better off than before. Actually, we wouldn't wake up at all because our heads would be all opened up for the sake of a gross metaphor, and we'd both be extremely dead. So, there's no point to that. So it goes. You'll make a me in your head. I can be whoever you want! I can look like anyone! It's your party. It's important

to you that you have a good time. And I'll make a you. And it's important to me that you have a good time, too. I know that you've been pretty stressed out recently.

I know you. I know what you do.

I can tell you. I can tell you that you are immune to the dogs.

But you already know that. You told me that, already. Do you remember? You definitely did. And I asked how you knew that, and you told me that you found out on accident, but it's a long story. And you knew that I didn't want to hear it. But the thing is, I *do* want to know. I really want to hear about the dogs. And, for the sake of open communication (important to both of us), I'd be really hurt if you lied to me. Please don't.

Let's start with one truth. You are immune to the dogs. Tell me about it.



You wish that the bus driver would stop letting the dogs get on. But they have places to go too, he tells you. They pull the line like it's their stop and then don't even get off. The dogs are very funny. It makes your commute about twice as long. You were late a few times too many, and you lost your job. The dogs are very funny, but they have no sense of kindness, not in a way you'd recognize.

People ran out of things to do and decided to un-domesticate dogs, which was sure a decision. You didn't get a chance to tell anyone that, because everyone moved on to trying to make functional versions of things out of wax and then to making it so that growth plates

never fuse at the end of puberty so that no one ever stops getting taller, and all of the old people are really tall now and leave things on rooftops all the time. It's an ongoing issue.

The dogs really aren't the worst thing that's happened, though people didn't like when they got into chewing through cables, and all of those bridges fell into the sea. Classic dog behavior.

You don't blame them for you getting fired, though. It'd be unfair to expect the dogs to care about your job. They haven't invented lateness among themselves yet. So it goes.

You don't blame them, but you did want to tell them about it. So, you told them in dog-language by biting one right on the leg. It bit you back, of course. You got banned from the bus, because *you* should know better. Just because you can speak dog, doesn't mean you're allowed to. There's a no-biting rule on the bus for people.

So, you got off of the bus, walked a few blocks to the Walgreen's and went up to the pharmacy counter because you wanted to know what to do in the case of a dog bite. You also got banned from the Walgreen's for wasting the pharmacists' time. You get your prescriptions somewhere else now. You got bitten by the dog, but you didn't get a dog bite.

You are immune to the dogs.

On the other hand, you're banned from two more places now.

They know now, though, that you're immune to them.

Life, vis-à-vis dealing with the dogs, is easier. You like that. They avoid you.

Dogs spend most of their time in canyons now. No one digs quarries anymore, because there's nothing left to dig up, and also: the dogs. They've always made an exception for you though, have always loved to follow you around.

What else is there that you're immune to that you don't know about? How much easier could you make your life? And you have a lot of free time to test it out now, so you do.

Nothing comes of it, besides the natural consequences from trial-and-erroring whether or not you can be hurt.

After a few weeks, you run into someone from the bus. Sometimes you'd sit next, or across from one another, never really talking, but they did give you a few tangerines once. You would say that they're one of your best friends. You tell them about the dogs, maybe a little too proud of yourself, with your dog immunity and all.

They tell you that they were there when you got banned, and, unfortunately, it was the talk of the bus for days. They were embarrassed on your behalf. You're embarrassed on your behalf.

The kicker though, is that they saw you bite the dog, and then the dog bit back, but it missed and tore up the strap of your backpack.

You are not immune to the dogs.

You'd done all of that testing, lost that finger during the hatchet-immunity experiment, for nothing, nothing at all.

Of *course*, you are not immune to the dogs. No one is. This is the real world, after all.



So, you lied. The dogs have as much power over you as they do over everyone else. And that story wasn't even that long. Okay. Okay then. That's fine.

The *yourself* in my head told me about the dogs, and so, like everything else that happens between people, you-in-me lied to yourself about it.

I really enjoyed our time together. I don't know about you. Tell me yourself, if you can. There are blank spaces tucked between paragraphs, floating around the margins. Those are yours, if you have anything to say. This place belongs to you as much as it does to me, maybe moreso, maybe entirely. You're here now. I haven't been here for a long time. We're still here together, though.

It's all just the antimony of the liar: "this statement is false."

Don't waste your time on all of the philosophers, mathematicians, problem-solvers, and so on, who've stuffed all of their thought and effort into the matter, seeking the thrill of coming up empty handed.

This is the secret. Do you remember that? I said I'd tell you a good one. Untangling a paradox is stooping to its level. Just take a sword to the knot, and I'll tell you the same thing twice:

This statement is false. We are here together.

But not for long. It's time to go. It shouldn't be a surprise. I'm sure that you've looked down.

It was good though. Really good.

I'll miss you.

If we ever cross ways again, maybe we could come back here? Would you like that, too? We could do it all over again next time. I think it's your turn now, if you want it.

You could tell me a story about me. It doesn't have to be true.