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Blocked: Short Story Manuscript

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Mixed Signals

Everyone thinks Jericho is in a mid-life crisis. They think he's bipolar, unhinged. He doesn't like to call it that.

Jericho prefers to see it like any other stage. High school, career, marriage, home-ownership, to him it's nearly the same. Crises fade away and come crashing back like the tides. Eventually he will have his old age crisis and his death crisis, and those will be the same too. He can't wait.

Jericho is lying on his couch. Fragments of a dream leak into his mind. He is walking up a steep hill, watching the halo of light growing at the summit. He squeezes the bridge of his nose. Something cool and wet is on his hands. Mud. He shuts his eyes tightly, trying to remember where it came from. Muddy boots dangle over a white couch arm. A small spade, an empty bucket, and a steaming mug rest on the end table.

He hears a newspaper ruffle in the kitchen. In his dream he is close to the top of the hill. The light is starting to hurt his eyes, but he goes on anyway. Today is, uh, Tuesday? Wednesday?

"Thursday. Today's Thursday. People go to *work* on Thursdays." His wife says from the kitchen. She's on vacation this week, the first one she's taken in years. Jericho hears a sigh. "Do you want coffee?"

"Yeah, coffee. I was just, uh, getting ready. In fact, I was so ready that I thought I'd nap on the couch before work."

"It's ten o'clock."

"So I'm a little late."

"Coffee's on the table."

Jericho opens his eyes and she's standing in the doorway. In his dream he reaches the top of the hill and the sun blinds him. Mara's eyebrows slowly inch upwards. They run out of forehead and her face collapses. A hand attempts to hold it all together. Her hair shines against the heavy sunlight pouring in through the kitchen windows. Everyone says she should be more assertive. But to Jericho, her problems always seemed to work themselves out so easily.

Now Jericho remembers what today is. Today is the second day after his 15th anniversary at his job. Today is the third day since his old friend Rob came to visit, since his wife took her vacation. It is the day on which, 16 years ago, they were married.

"Where were you last night?"

Last night was a blank. "Meetings, you know. Had to stay late."

"Jerry, you didn't go to work yesterday. I think you got fired."

Jericho thought he would remember something like this, but his memory is stumbling over its own feet. At the crest of the hill, he holds his hands out and walks in circles.

"Jerry, are you okay?"

He looks around him. His eyes run slowly over the photos and portraits on the walls. There was something he was supposed to see from the top of that hill. "I don't know. Yes."

"Jerry, are you sure?" Her voice cracks. "Is this some kind of joke?"

"What's funny about it?" He asks.

"Jerry, I don't know what to do."

"Me neither."

Jericho looks down at himself. He's covered in mud, from bare legs to wrinkled shirt collar. He looks at the couch.

"Honey, I can explain—"

"No, you can't." Mara turns back into the kitchen. Her slippered feet scuff across the tiled floor.

It's true. Jericho can't explain it. He wishes he could show her somehow—like acting it out, or drawing pictures. That's her territory though. He never learned how to draw pain and confusion, and he feels silly describing it. He wishes he could show her, any way other than standing like a mud-covered madman in the living room.

He gets up slowly and stares down the portrait on the far wall. Jericho's arm is hooked over Mara's shoulders, and she looks out calmly. Over the mantle there is a framed photo of a beach, next to it a pencil rendition—two blurry figures standing together in the distance. Memories of cold wind and halogen lights edge around his consciousness.

Jericho tries to see the beach. Out loud, he repeats the names, conjuring friends who were there, and those that should have been. He remembers Fran, Chris, and Erik around their driftwood fire, telling stories. He remembers Rob building sand-castles and pointing to the tailor's house, the shoemaker's, the

bankers', the knights'. His bare feet are damp and cold, but his hand is warm holding Mara's as they run up and down the surf, challenging the waves and only at the last retreating from the advancing tide. The wave breaks and reaches its fat white fingers towards them. He looks up smiling, but the water is receding and she is gone.

He hurls the bucket at the wall. After a few seconds the spade follows it. The portrait thuds to the floor. He hears glass shattering in the kitchen.

Mara purses her lips tightly. Her hands shake only a little as she mops up spilled wine and sweeps glass from the floor. She wishes he would say something, anything. Sometimes she can feel the past gathering around her, clattering like a freight train by their window at night, tapping her on the shoulder early in the morning, ambushing her on her lunch break. In times like these, she goes up in the attic. She sits by the small window with the delicate frame, amidst piles of their old records, the good china, and the dust. She looks outside and she paints. But she knows now, this feeling can't be covered with layers of acrylic anymore. Remembering the wet sand between her toes, she can't help feeling guilty. Mara always assumed having each other would be enough.

She hears the door slam and goes into the living room to clean up.

In the driveway there is a tiny sports car, and Jericho crams himself into it. He can barely drive the manual transmission, and now he can't afford it either.

He sets his hands on his knees, which peak conveniently at the middle of the steering wheel. The sun shines on their suburban paradise and heat waves blur

his view. His face sags, and the skin under his eyes looks like rubber. A bead of sweat jumps from his nose.

"I'm sorry." He says to the leather interior. He wonders how you can just say… anything. Rob is an architect. He designs buildings in New York City. He looks good in a bandana. Jericho throws his fist against the steering wheel, and it honks halfheartedly. For an instant things are quiet. Rob has three Shetland terriers; he lives next to a recording studio. Jericho decides he'll get a better sound if he uses his forehead.

He waits for his wife to emerge. Jericho is ready for her to scream, to call him a failure, a charlatan, a zombie. She would use much shorter words. He wouldn't move if she took a swing. Half an hour later he turns on the car and puts it in reverse and pulls out of the driveway. He thinks he sees a curtain move upstairs, but he can't be sure.

Jericho drives aimlessly and he feels young. Back then he would drive with his friends out to the beach, they would throw sand and their voices into the wind, and everything would blow away. They would build sand-castles and sometimes sand-people. They would talk about how good life is. Jericho's sand-people always looked eerily like him. He would put his cap on its head. Give it a stick for a pen, a rolled-up diploma. As long as it looked happy. As long as it looked like he was helping people or doing something useful. It was all a joke then.

He met Mara for the first time in May. She was sitting alone in the wet

sand. She never seemed to notice the waves as they eddied and gurgled around her. After that he would slip away and walk along the beach alone, searching for her.

He speeds past parks with children playing, dogs walking, a cluster of office buildings. His building. The window washers are out, writing secret messages in broad strokes.

He parks the car and goes into his building.

Groups of business suits are scattered through the lobby. He recognizes Sally, the receptionist. He says hello, she tries to smile. They had meetings down here sometimes—he would sit unmoving at the table, staring in her direction. He remembers the restaurant, the candle burning between them as he looked deep into her eyes.

"I never thought it would get like this. I used to know if I was doing the right thing." He had said.

"Nothing was certain. Compromises leveraged, guilt exploited, fingers pointed."

"The beach was always too perfect to be true. We invested our plans in sand castles."

"He promised me everything. It felt like a betrayal not to believe. How do you not go for it?"

After that he had taken her home, kissed her on the cheek. He said he would call her, but they both knew he wouldn't.

Signs of the party still remain. A big banner—Happy 15 Years! Jericho remembers now. He is sitting, unmoving, while Rich is saying nice things about the employees. Rich gives them each a silver watch, one by one. They are all much older than Jericho. He picks at his fingers, waiting for his turn. When Rich finishes giving out watches he asks for a round of applause. After it is over, Jericho raises his hand. Rich is surprised he is there. Rich asks him why he never mentioned it. Then he asks for another round, for Jericho. There is some scattered clapping. Rich is sorry, he is out of watches.

Jericho goes to the elevator. He swipes his badge and the light turns red. He swipes it again, and again. Finally the elevator opens. The steel doors split his face in two and his eyes meet the red tie of his boss.

"Oh Rich, thank God. I—I need—I need to talk to—"

"What are you doing here Jerry?" The tie asks. "You think you can scream at me like that and still... Not come in for days... Jesus, you almost broke Tim's wrist..."

"I—I don't know. I just—"

"I'm going to need your badge. And your watch." The tie waggles and holds out a hand.

"You never gave me a watch." The badge in Jericho's hand slips through his fingers to the floor. The watch was stupid. He never wanted it anyway.

"I'm afraid I have to ask you to leave." The tie says.

Jericho turns and heads for the desk. "Thank you." He says to the receptionist. She looks at him and her smile is real this time. He follows his muddy footsteps back to the door, shouldering through groups of ties, sport coats, and pantsuits.

On his way he thinks of the beach—the single-stoplight town, tin shingled roofs looking out over the water. He barely knew himself. They were lying in the warm August sand when he asked her to marry him. That word, the wind could never blow away. Jericho thinks of afterward, of how they would walk through the thick pine trees and feed stray cats.

In the shadow of the glass tower Jericho lays on the grass. He stares into the sky and his hand picks landscaped office flowers.

The man behind the counter doesn't think it's strange for a guy to be buying rum this early. He knows about the itch. Though he is curious about the muddy gym clothes and the wild hair. Jericho's debit card doesn't go through. He tries it several times, then the credit, which fails too. The whole time Jericho grips the neck of the bottle, half expecting it to grow legs and run. Now the counter guy takes the lower part firmly. Jericho doesn't let go. He considers trying to explain his situation, trying to hammer the words together.

"Do you really need this?" The man behind the counter asks.

"No, I guess not."

"Well, then let go."

Jericho wrenches the bottle from the man's hand and runs out the door.

Half-way to the car his legs give out and the bottle breaks open on the ground. The man at the counter notices the people walking by, talking behind their hands and pointing. He watches as Jericho gets up and struggles to start the car. He wants to laugh and maybe cry a little, but he has a job to do so he hits the alarm. The sleek vehicle stalls out in the parking lot.

A few blocks down the street Jericho hears sirens behind him. They must be looking for someone else. He feels like being home sooner and struggles to shift into fifth. The car floats back and forth over the yellow lines.

The ball of pain is back, and in the crowded cell Jericho holds it between his knees. The man next to him is looking forward and talking to no one.

"…'s like it was there all from the start. Dangling 'em all right'n front o me."

Jericho wishes he'd shut up.

"What a guy 'sposed to do? Signals never clear. Never so simple as that."

Jericho remembers Rob sitting at their table, eating chicken. His wife making conversation. Rob talking too much about New York. Jericho could barely say a word; Jericho had nothing to talk about.

The voice joins the general buzzing. The drone of explanations in the back of his head. The justifications like a pile of throw-away milk cartons, names of lost children printed on the side. He has to call his wife, but his head is too loud right now. He puts it back between his knees.

On the phone his wife's voice is strange.

"What is it?"

"I ran into some trouble."

"So you did get fired. I can't—"

"No, it's not that. Well. But it's not that. I need to, I need to tell you something."

His pause was too long and she began to cry.

"I knew it, I knew that—

"No, but—"

"Is it me? Oh god, it's my fault. I..."

Jericho let her go on for a moment, wondering how anyone talks to anyone else.

"I hit a tree."

"Oh. Oh my god, are you—"

"I'm at the police station."

"Oh."

"This isn't what I meant."

"It's what you said."

"I just meant, I—with your life, you should do… something."

She knows exactly how bad this sounds. There is a silence. Mara was never good at resolving their conflicts. It was usually enough just to listen. Her words got all tangled, so instead she shut herself away and painted.

"Thanks for the advice." There is no sarcasm in his voice. She would

come out after 3 days locked away, and show him the result. Somehow he always knew what it meant.

Mara pulls the car into the driveway and turns the key.

"Re—"

"I—" They both speak at the same time.

She meets Jericho's dazed eyes for a second. He looks down at his hands, lying open in his lap.

"What happened?" He asks.

Sometimes they had yelled at each other. Screamed. He had almost hit her once. But their arguments always receded with the tides and the darkness. The wind blew their words away, but this silence was too heavy.

"Things got in the way. The kids at the rec center, they needed someone to talk to, they needed me. I—but we still had to eat—you never got to…"

Jericho lets her go on. His head is pounding and he wonders how anyone talks to anyone else with all this noise.

"—just back from the corps—" Her voice comes in snatches.

"—your friends—" He can barely recognize the life she sketches.

"—so far away—"

But he recognizes the beach. The drive was too long. During the week they would talk for hours on the phone, but in the car he would still plan out what he had to say. Wasn't Carson funny today? I like your eyes. Will you marry me?

He thinks of his crumpled car and the handful of flowers spread across the front seat. About the dream, whatever he was supposed to see from the top of that

hill. He wishes he could go back to coasting along. She's still talking, but he gets out of the car and goes into the house.

The house is like it was. No muddy couch, no fallen pictures. Only there's a new portrait in place of the one Jericho knocked down. Two blurry forms stand apart. He runs a finger over the surface. It comes away wet and blue-black. He can feel her eyes on his back. As he takes the stairs up to his study, no footsteps follow him.

Jericho feels the urge to write. Talking softly, he scribbles on a piece of paper. After a few minutes, he realizes he's covered every inch of it. He erases it carefully, then writes again. When he looks at it, the paper is so clogged with fragments of words and cramped handwriting that he can't decipher it. There is a marker on the desk and he takes it and draws an S on the wall. He reaches up again, all the way this time, and brings his hand snaking down.

He gathers some paint cans from the basement. Sounds of movement come from the kitchen. His wife won't be happy about this.

At the side of the house, facing the street, he uses a brush to apply paint to the wall. A few feet away is a field of mud, standing in the middle is a crude brown figure draped in Jericho's sport coat. A red tie circles the neck and his slacks are pinned into the muddy waist with nails. He stands beside the figure, looking from eye holes to the wall and back again. The muddy mouth is frozen. He carefully smoothes an imperfection on the cheek.

Jericho takes the can and, pumping his arms, lands a crooked line of paint

on the wall. Another attempt and a slashing line intersects the first. His paint can is empty. But he has a lot of paint and a lot to say.

When he is finished, he looks at his work. Some of the letters in the middle are mixed together and runny, others sagging in places and too sharp. But he deciphers it. It says "SATISFIED?" He looks at the figure in the field of mud and shakes his head.

He is about to leave when Mara comes out. He had almost forgotten. She looks at the house, then at the mud man dressed in Jericho's clothes.

"Repainting the house? And what is this?" She is pointing. She is trying to sound calm. She is not sure what keeps her from screaming.

Jericho looks down at his feet.

She looks at him for a second. Then she takes a paint can.

"What the fuck is this?" She screams, and then she swings it into the mud man. It sticks in the torso, an arm slides out from under Jericho's coat. She cocks her arm again.

"No!" Jericho screams. He runs over and, shoving her out of the way, frantically mends the arm. "Don't hurt him."

She is crying now. "So, what? This, this *statue* is taking my place?" Across the street, a family is walking with their dog. Parents whisper to each other and hurry their children along.

Jericho says the worst thing he can think of. "Well I don't fuck it, do I?"

"You don't do that to me either. I'm not even on your fucked up radar."

Jericho realizes he can only make things worse now. His head is floating

away like a balloon.

"Jericho. What am I supposed to think?" He doesn't deserve her. He never did. Everything is far away.

"Jericho. You have to get him out of here. This has to end. Jerry I can't—we can't..." She tries to calm her voice, to slow down the thoughts in her head, to ignore the consequences. "Jericho, it's him or me. Please Jerry."

In silence Jericho dumps the last can of paint over the mud man and gets in his wife's car. She stands in the field of mud as the engine starts, as the car struggles over the lawn toward her. She doesn't move.

Mara watches the car bearing down on her, flinging mud from the wheels. Going 25, Jericho plows into the coated figure. He bounces the sedan over the curb and on to the street and drives away.

Mara lets her breath out. Mud and paint drip from her hair and from her fingertips.

Jericho looks into his old office, and the wind whistles through his hair. The window washer cart shakes in ways he doesn't like.

Jericho works the cart clumsily, moving it into position. He knows now, this is one of those things that seems easy, but is actually terrifying. The wind shakes the cart and he thinks of waves crashing against the beach. That time was never coming back. The sun peeks through a hole in the clouds. He sees his boss at his desk, back to the window. Jericho can't resist tapping a few times on the glass, smiling and waving at the red tie and open mouth. The sun reflects off the

window and hits his eyes like a fist. His own jerking almost unbalances the cart. His dream rushes back to him: he is blind at the top of the hill, so blind that he can no longer feel himself. He still feels like a self, just someone else, someone he had never met.

There is something he needs to see from up here, he is sure. Something that will make the climb worth it. It's not that far down, he thinks, though he is too afraid to look. From below, he hears the sounds of sirens and indistinct voices. He hears one voice clearly. It is crackling, gigantic.

"Come down from there, son."

God?

"You have so much to live for."

No, that wasn't God.

"Don't do it."

They must be talking to someone else. Jericho looks around. Seeing no one else, he shouts "Why not?" The wind carries his words away.

On the crowded street, the aging sheriff puts aside the megaphone. He looks at Mara and shakes his head. "Can't make out a damn thing, he have a phone?"

Jericho scratches his head and rethinks his question, shouting "Maybe you're looking for someone else?" No answer. He shrugs and dips the roller—the largest he could get. His pocket vibrates. His wife. "Not now, honey," he says into the speaker and closes the phone. It rings again. At least she is persistent.

He shrugs again and flips the phone into the air.

Down below, cell phone innards lay scattered across the ground. The sheriff looks at Mara and shakes his head again. Her face is held tight, but she's been through worse. She wishes for the beach and for a glass of wine and a taste of salty wind. She knows there are a thousand ways things could have gone, and she wishes for a moment that she had never asked him to stay. But she isn't wishing very hard. She takes the megaphone and runs forward.

Jericho starts writing. He lets his mouth run a bit—he always liked talking to himself. He talks about the peace corps, the teaching job, the books he never wrote, the kids, Lilly and Matthew, that he never had, the sand at the beach sparkling and the waves whispering softly. He talks about the acceptance letter he still keeps in a box somewhere, about his trouble pissing, about the calls from his friends never returned, about Rob, who was too satisfied with his life. Thoughts about his wife careen around his head like shrieking, pecking seagulls he can never catch.

The curving river line follows his voice, sometimes it breaks and drips, but he's not too concerned. He thinks they'll get the idea.

"Jerry, please don't do it."

The woman won't stop. He leans over the side of the cart and tries to tell her. He needs her now. But how could he say it? There was too much. A gust of wind blows the cart and he almost topples over it.

"Jerry, please don't jump."

Jump? Jumping? Don't worry, he wants to say.

He looks down. Jump? What an interesting word. He looks back to the

glass. A less-than-graceful S winds above him, like a path he could follow through the woods. He looks back down. Oh the ruthless possibilities of that S. He could jump and the wind would take him. It would take him to where they kept all those words they used to say. It wouldn't matter what he was supposed to see from up here. He was at the top, and he had to go down. He would write his message on the asphalt, like the mud man splattered across the lawn.

"Jerry, I love you" comes the huge voice. Shut up God, he thinks.

Safety. Sadness. Satisfy. Suicide. Words were never enough.

"Jerry, I'm sorry. I don't care. I don't care about the job, the car, the mud. You can do whatever you want."

"No I can't." He screams, leaning over the rail. He can finally make out her tiny body below.

"You can be whoever you want. You can be a goddamn mud artist if it makes you happy. You can write all over the house. I just want to look into your eyes and know what's there."

He looks at her, way down below. He works his mouth. If there was ever a time, this was it. He thinks of the blue-black paint on his fingertips. Blurry figures standing apart.

"Jerry—remember when we used to walk? Just walk for hours, along the beach. How surprised we were when the sun rose?"

Mara remembers when the weather had caught them out on the beach. It was a warm spring night, but the wind and the rain had driven them into a shack some kids had built with driftwood and sheets of corrugated metal. Jericho

remembers trying to make a fire, but the wood was wet and crumbling. They shivered and held on to each other and when they woke they could almost see the sun through the morning fog.

His mouth is moving but no sound comes out. The roller leans up against a rail and he grabs for it. He misses, and it tips over the edge. Jericho thinks about going after it. Instead, he sits down and puts his head in his hands. Mud drips from his face, the soft feeling of wet sand escaping between his fingers.

"Jerry, remember that I love you."

They had talked of sacrifices. It wasn't going to be easy. But was it worth his sanity? He holds the sides of the cart and shakes it. His whole body is shaking, crashing back and forth.

"Do you love me?" That voice, like it was coming from inside his head, crackling and gigantic.

He looks down and he can see her there, covered in brown and white and holding up a painting of two blurry figures standing together by the beach. It makes sense to him.

"Yes." He whispers. He shouts it.

He looks down and shouts it again. Yes. He can't see her eyes, but it doesn't matter. She hears his words softly on the wind. He dips his hand in the paint bucket. White paint splatters on the asphalt below. Before the S he writes the two letters, just to be clear.

Less by one

There was so much to say. They got out of the car and Molly rushed to get the door for her husband. Close by, a flock of sparrows sang an elegy to the fading light. Honey, honey, I can open the door. I may be dead to the world, but I can still do that.

Their children greeted them inside the sky blue door. The dog's back end twitched with manic joy.

Joester, man of the house for a whole week and you haven't raked the leaves? Tracy, your Mom's picking up more shifts so Daddy'll need you around here while he's homebound. No more big hospitals Moll, those quacks put cleaning fluids in the IV. I can taste disinfectant.

"Everyone's gotta be extra nice to your father for awhile. He's had a... rough few days." Molly tried to smile. You always know the right thing to say, Molly. If we had a bull horn we could announce it to the neighbors.

Madeleine peered around a corner. Her right arm crushed a plastic doll to her chest. A paper cone on her head shouted "Happy Birthday" in colorful letters.

There's my favorite little girl. He thought.

"There's my little girl. Get over here and hug your father." Molly said.

The child moved slowly towards them, eyes on her mother, her siblings, the amber-colored floor. Joseph and Tracy exchanged quiet looks. Their father's smile was lopsided. He took a small brown bear from a bag by the door. Look in the green leather bag, next to the busted rocker, he had told Molly before the

surgery. He had listened in disbelief to his own voice, his words like gold coins tossed carelessly into a fountain. He had barely let go of the bear on the ride back from the hospital.

Heard you turned six today. Got something for you, a little friend of mine. When I was your age, he helped me when I got lonely. Hey baby, look at me, just because your Daddy can't say happy birthday doesn't mean he's not your Daddy.

"Madeleine, what's wrong honey?" Molly said.

Look at me. Maddy. Daughter.

Madeleine jerked her head from side to side, her eyes on the floor. She squeezed the doll, and a tinny voice said "you're the best." She squeezed it again, and the voice said "I love you."

The doll came unglued from her chest, and it floated towards him, a small hand holding the legs. He imagined the doll speaking to her, telling her comforting things at night when her room was dark. The bear fell from his limp hands.

I don't need the goddamn doll. I need you to look me in the eyes.

He knocked the doll out of her hand and held his arms out. Madeleine's wide eyes fell on his face for a brief second; then she turned away and scampered up the stairs, leaving doll and bear lying face down on the floor. Molly caught his eyes, her emotions like razorblade cuts on his face. He wondered if the tiny cuts added up, or if they were always just distractions from the biggest one. He carefully wiped at a drop of drool threatening to leap from his bottom lip.

"I have to make dinner," she said. She looked at the intravenous feeding tube running into his mouth. It was not a question.

Remember, a dash o' fennel in the sauce Molly. Not too much onion. Nobody else should have to suck on my goop sack.

Molly mishandled a pot and it fell to the floor. The sound was immense and she let out a little yelp, but he didn't stir from his perch on the stool. She wiped her forehead and made the universal sign for shoo. Molly felt embarrassed speaking when it was only the two of them, his lively eyes on her, storing up every movement. She didn't know if she should make conversation or let him alone. She wished to be drunk and silly, spewing token words without care like a broken slot machine. She thought about turning on the radio, but there was something sacred about their newfound silence.

Of course I'll go away. You don't need a blind man telling you what blue is.

Where are you, my special girl? Oly oly oxen free. What is it, the bandages? The tube? The bear with his mouth all stitched? Is it the heavy steps? The house shivering and shaking all round you would make anyone want to hide. But baby, come back, please. Just because I brought a hurricane in with me doesn't mean I can't protect you against the wind. Or do we live 10 feet apart from now on? You forever sidling by like a crab round a toothless shark. Trace and Joe will figure out the head nod, head shake type questions. But you?

Gotta bone up on the sign language. What's the sign for 'out of my head'?

Downstairs, Joseph read in the purple plush chair, the tip of his tongue poked out between his lips. Tracy played by herself in the small room adjacent to the den, hiding behind windowed French doors.

"Dinner's ready kids." Molly went to retrieve their other daughter. She found her hiding under their bed.

They settled quietly around the table. Joseph offered his hand to his father, who took it, nodding. Joe nodded back—he would remember his father's strong hand, the clasp they held for a few extra seconds, the strength of desperation in his fingers, the seal to their agreement. He would remember the air buzzing with invisible insects, every small sound magnified.

There was a moment of silent confusion—Dad always led the prayer before dinner.

Molly's voice balanced on a mountaintop. "God bless this food and this house, and, and help us through these trying times. Help us taste," she paused. "Taste the glory of your promise. Amen."

Nice one. Tastes like goop and ammonia. Amen.

"How was your day, Joe?" She asked. He shrugged—the question seemed insignificant. They rearranged the food on their plates, stole unsecret glances toward the head of the table. Madeleine dipped the doll's face in the stew then turned her away. The doll had no appetite.

Sorry kids, not this time—Daddy's got no stories to tell tonight. Just this bag of goop for his dinner.

Joe pointed to his father, and then to himself. He mimed something, his fists moving together. His Dad signed nonsense back to him, throwing a baseball, eating a hamburger, a tiny smile escaping from his lips.

Joe colored and held his hands in his lap. "Can you help me with the leaves tomorrow, Dad?" He said in a miniscule voice.

"Joseph—"

No Molly, it's okay. Head nod, thumbs up. Sure I can Joe, thanks for asking.

"Daddy Daddy."

What is it girl? No Maddy, I don't have any more jokes today. Eat your dinner.

"Happy birfday Daddy. Sing Daddy." She grabbed at his worn hand, pressing and clapping it between her tiny fingers. "Daddy Daddy sing happy birfday Daddy. Hey hey hello Daddy."

No, Daddy can't sing happy birthday. Cool it, darling, you know more than you let on.

"Daddy Daddy hey hey Daddy Daddy." Molly struggled for words of authority and discipline, but none came. Madeleine picked up her plate and banged it against the table, again and again.

Stop it. Put the fucking plate down. Sit your narrow ass back in that chair.

He opened his mouth and a hoarse grunt filled his ears. Like a frightened animal.

Silence invaded the room, wisping over the table, clinging to the walls. He wanted to catch some of it and lock it away. Madeleine dropped the plate and it shattered on the floor, splattering red sauce, chunks of meat and carrots. She ran from the room. She left the doll on her seat, grinning blankly at them, the face covered in red sauce.

Maddy—I can't. Come back.

Yeah, what's the use, you bastard? She's gone away now. You're locked out and there's no open sesame even if you could say it. Moll, I'll grab the broom, you talk to her. No, no, staring at my hands and sucking on my goop pacifier won't help. We both know how much is gonna be on you now. Is this the romance you imagined, marrying an older man?

After returning the broom to its place, he lumbered out to the backyard. He sat on the lawn chair under the beech tree and one flimsy leg folded, toppling him on his back.

Where are you Maddy? I'm sorry baby. If I could I would take you off, set you down and say it. You got so many birthdays left, so many people going to sing to you. Don't want you confused by your Daddy dropping parts like the old wagon in the driveway. There's so much I need to warn you about, so many good

things I need to promise you. And how to say that Daddy got this way cause he could never kick a habit?

He caught sight of her between the leaves, hugging the smooth tree bark overhead, talking quietly to the bear. Come down here baby, I know what's bugging you. You know this empty hole in my mouth? No pot lid covers that. It boils and boils until it all bubbles over, frothing and hissing. I never meant to show you like that—but you have no idea what it's like to feel all alone. I'm sorry, baby—big brave Daddy got claustrophobic back there. And I think I may have scared you too, with my dead grunt and my dead-dumb hole, scared you and hurt you maybe more than any words.

There's so much to say, Maddy. Come a little closer. Happy birthday, honey. Big girls like you can't be scared.

She offered him the bear, and he took it, rubbing the soft down of its head. One eye was coming loose from its stitching. I promise I'll sew that up for you, darling.

Madeleine, sit with me next to this tree. Old timer's been here longer than even your Daddy. Be here after he's gone too. Crumple the leaves and dig your nose in there. Savor those orange leaves. I hope you always remember that spicy

earth smell. There were so many things I was afraid of telling you, before. Now I only hope you never smell death in those leaves.

You know what I always do, girl? When I feel that dark pit down there in my tummy? She laid her head on his chest, and he felt it welling up inside of him. He started to hum, and it came out broken, his chest spasming lightly. She tightened her grip around him, buried her face in his shirt. He kept going and eventually he recognized the first notes. Happy birthday to you...

I'm sorry, because... I'll never be able to sing to my little girl ever again. But don't worry baby, you'll never have to hear your Daddy yelling again either. I just hope you understand that when I grunt at you it means hello darling, and when I laugh with you it means I love you.

Front Stage

He knew he would bungle the line. He was supposed to feel undying love toward this woman when all he felt were the cyclops eyes taking him apart piece by piece.

The stage lights were making him sweat already, and he loosened the collar on his brown tunic. His toes felt mashed together, and his feet were lead balls attached to rubbery legs, covered with pointed shoes. He had raged against those shoes until Frank had threatened to cut him down to stable boy. It was Frank's big stage debut, and his artistic vision couldn't be reasoned with. Robert had even taken to calling him His Majesty in private. As long as she was his lead, nobody would tell him that his play was knock-off trash, that double suicide was a poor excuse for an ending.

He dragged his feet off to the side while Lady Elsbeth began her monologue, unfazed by his mistake.

"Doth a love spring from my hidden hate? Too early an alliance, true love known too late?"

He knew she was seething though—she had insisted on late night one-on-one meetings to practice their lines over and over. She had picked out the costumes for both of them. She would have to go home with Frank after the show, to listen to his griping about who muffed which line and who wasn't blocking right.

"Pssst," he heard from the darkness where the audience sat. He tried to ignore it, but he couldn't ignore the omen, the tingling in his hands, the feeling of his knuckles meeting the soft, bourgeois face of that heckler not so long ago.

"Or perhaps born into it, I was. To love too many men, my fate."

She was the only reason he wasn't lazing in his girlfriend's bed right now, eating microwave meals from plastic plates and pretending he looked forward to seeing her. He hated Elsbeth for that. For interceding with Frank. For taking his job out of his hands, when maybe a small part of him wanted to go back to living with Eileen, even if she did hold onto him too tightly after the shows, or hide his shoes so he couldn't leave the apartment. Even if she was constantly reminding him that she was the one with the real job.

Frank liked to play poker with all his actors. Weeks ago, facing each other over the table and the haze of alcohol and cigar smoke, Robert had called him a poor playwright to his face, just to see how far he could go. When Frank's famous temper came down to a red face and a curt "that's your opinion," he knew it was her. He had thought about telling Frank that he was nailing his wife in the prop closet after the shows, but he wasn't ready for that.

"To feel free only in secrecy. To love those who deign themselves enemy."

Now she began musing about the devilishly handsome peasant man she had met on her tour through the kingdom, about how her husband was too obsessed with running every detail of his kingdom to entertain her on long nights, or even to talk to her like a human being, unless it was about the decorations for a formal dinner, or if he needed to vent about a particularly annoying courtier.

Robert knew, her monologue was supposed to end here. But Elsbeth kept going, and he noticed a hint of color creeping into her face. He pictured Frank pacing backstage, furiously chewing on his bottom lip.

She was little more than a pretty bracelet to drape over his wrist when he needed to impress other heads of state. She tired of his theories on the sexual orientation of the particularly well-dressed princes and worried about his fondness for suckling pig and expensive liquors. Her companions no longer even pretended to respect him, and more and more she found herself laughing at their jokes, nodding her head in agreement and smirking derisively without realizing.

Sure, there were others to entertain her: maidservants, ladies in waiting, jugglers, fire breathers, magicians, acrobats, poets, and all that, but no one who wasn't paid. She had seen all they had to offer, now they mostly leaned against the wall and drank the king's wine. Sometimes the entertainers tried to catch her attention by flipping through hoops, or conjuring fire in her soup bowl, but the more she ignored them, the less discrete their conversations became. No, this man was new, he was mysterious, dirty and disheveled and appealing.

Doesn't she know I'm right here? Robert thought. Please, I'm not interested in you. There's a thousand peasant babes who, under all the filth, are probably pretty hot, and would do whatever you want if you found them a discrete barn with some nice discrete hay. So why should I love you?

"Psssssssst" he could tell it was a woman's voice, and she was getting more insistent. He kept his face neutral, as if he couldn't hear that bitch Elsbeth, but he

couldn't hold the weight pulling down on the corners of his mouth, the look he knew everyone would see.

"And do I pair silver pieces with my cards? Surely not, the love of which was sung by bards. And would they sing the shame of Elsbeth, a queen to a peasant, transformed in one breath?"

He thought: And what do you think they would do to me, if we were caught? I can tell you what they wouldn't say: oh, nice job bagging that queen of ours, Robert, she's quite a looker. You must be a pretty decent fellow to have pulled that one in. Why don't you come be our king for awhile? No, they would bring him to the nearest square and guillotine him, or stake him up, or kill him in whatever other horrifyingly ingenious way they kept in their back pocket for preventing people like him from messing around with their queens.

"PSSSSST." He couldn't take it anymore. He got down on one knee, shadowing his face with his hand.

"What?"

"Just be yourself."

"Huh?"

"I said, just be yourself."

He looked over his shoulder. Elsbeth shot him a cold look, stumbling on a line where she was supposed to praise the breadth of his shoulders. She stomped her foot to get herself back into focus. Everyone else thought it was for emphasis; they all knew her name and her reputation. They knew she never made mistakes. He hoped the audience would be talkative as the scene changed so they wouldn't

hear the screaming going on backstage, her eyes on fire as she berated him for his inattention, Frank waiting in the wings for a second pass. He hoped they would be drunk with lights and tragic romance as Queen, King and Peasant took their final bow together, too drunk to see her knuckles turn white and her nails plow four tiny furrows of blood in the back of his hand.

He no longer cared about the reviews the critics would write. He wasn't excited to listen to the whisperings of the audience caught on their carefully-placed microphones. Or to hear the reports by their plants in the audience.

"What are you talking about?" He whispered out of the corner of his mouth.

"You love her right?" She whispered back.

He nodded his head. He was supposed to.

"Well, then stop being a dweeb and worrying about what everyone thinks."

"Tell that to her," he said. He could feel the cold stare on his back. It was getting closer to his line. Helping her into the carriage, he was supposed to wipe the mud off her shoe with his shirt-sleeve, say what a pretty shoe it was, and so well-proportioned. He wouldn't say that they had found the shoe in a thrift shop, that it cost two dollars and they took it away in a brown paper bag. He wouldn't say that inside the shoe was a smelly foot, or that the owner of the foot was a human being who pissed and sweated and had a life to manage and thoughts that surprised her and a jumbled array of hang-ups and idiosyncrasies and emotional issues. He flexed his vocal chords, his diaphragm, and warmed up his tongue, but

he always came back to the inevitability—the block that was in him and yet outside. Like the prop door he could walk to but never open.

He suddenly felt false, too, pretending that he didn't get the implications of the play. It was exactly as Frank wanted to see her, and she would play the part. When she snuck out at night wearing rags to fool the guards, she would turn and brood on the world she was leaving behind. She would lean the slightest bit in the direction of home, then suddenly start and hurry along to him, interrupted by the hoot of an owl.

Already he felt himself a fool for trusting her. How could he love her, much less find her worthwhile, when he knew she would betray him in the end—leave him to his life of hard labor, cold porridge, and consumption because of her responsibilities and her reputation. Or because they had no time for each other. Or because there was a cute new leading actor. Or whatever other horrifyingly ingenious excuse she would invent to make her exit more graceful. What was worse, when his anger grew cold as it always did, in crept the hot shame of knowing that it would be his fault too, his stubborn silence, his sense of entitlement. That was the only thing that made the ending bearable, that he would end his stage life too, escape that hot wash of guilt and the feeling that everything would have worked out if only he had done something else.

"Alas! What shall I do? Torn between moon and sun. The path forward obscured, the way back a thorny run."

Elsbeth finished her monologue with words of her own, words that didn't have to rhyme: "And, over all, the feeling that this life is only imaginary, that

cause has only the most tentative of connections to effect, that action only leads to action because we have decided it. How to live in a world like this?"

She paced slowly to stage left, swishing her skirts as she walked in what was supposed to be a sensual manner. He had watched her practice that walk—the carefully practiced steps somehow seeming casual. Every movement of her arms and quirk of her brows coordinated to appear spontaneous. He had to think to close his mouth and to call up his next line—soon he would have to face the blackness and ladle bits of his heart into its gaping—he checked the thought. It was as banal and wordy as the script.

He turned his eyes towards the darkness where he knew the woman's seat was, the one who had whispered to him. He imagined a cautious smile on her face. The hand in her lap twitching, as if to say, go get 'em Robert. The diagonal slope of her shoulders, legs crossed, head cocked: wow me with your pain. But he knew she would jeer as loudly as the others if he didn't say what they wanted, if he didn't make every move as prescribed.

"Alas," he had always hated that word, "my pain, deeper than the plowed seed berth, darker than the blackest earth. When shall spring come again and cast its warmth on the seed of love that harbors, listless, in my garden?" Filth of the worst kind it was. And he was its mouthpiece—the most jaded peasant on the farm, or the innocent-hearted representative of forlorn and dangerous love? Love that broke all the rules. That was the tagline of the play, like the trailer of an over-cast romantic comedy with shots of a well-dressed couple kissing in the rain, kissing in the crowded train station, fucking secretly in the closet. Nobody knew

that in real life they only dressed up so they could tear each other's clothes off, or that he liked to pull her hair when he came, or how when she woke she would scream in fear at the stranger in her bed, the harsh contours of his body like a scarecrow in the light that was either dying or just being born, she could never tell which.

He realized he had stopped talking. The contact lenses he wore onstage were blurry and unsettled. He was crying, although this might be where Robert was supposed to cry, he couldn't remember. At rehearsal this was his worst thing, crying on command. He hid his eyes at the shows because he knew they would see, and he felt like a patsy, for letting himself be coaxed into crying for nothing, and for failing even at that. But now the sobs were real, and he knew the silence of the audience was real. These were the only true things. His morning walk to the theater, its stories and its people, the cool blasts of heavy spring air, crowded corner-stores and piled garbage—those things were memories, renewed each day. This was real and it would not last.

The curtain came down and there was a silence that dragged on, stubbornly refusing to become memory. Without his consent, the play continued. He remembered the downy hairs on Elsbeth's forearm when he had to grab her roughly later on. He felt the tickling hay of the barn, the look of guilt and grief in her eyes when he would make his final plea for her to stay. He felt the theater breathing, the walls closing in and bursting out again, as the closet sometimes breathed to the beat of her moans, low and plaintive and a little scared. After those

first desperate minutes they would blanket themselves in the costumes, and still they could talk for hours about why, around other people, they felt small and weak.

He remembered the first time in the closet, her hot breath on his neck as she told him that they would have to be professional about this. The scent of her—mothballs and hardwood. Sweat. Frank would be devastated, he'd never get over her, he'd never write a play again, and she loved him too much for that. Besides, what about his wife? He had laughed at that, though it was real as knives then, but at some point it became a memory, conjured and changed by laughter, like a scratchy phonograph. Memories were so you could keep things at a distance, Robert knew—so you could pretend they were only in the past. They could talk about anything with complete honesty, as long as it wasn't their own future.

He heard a soft voice, male this time. "Why don't you stop crying like a baby and fight for her?"

"Yeah, fight for her," other voices agreed. There was a subdued buzz coming from the audience. A few cynics whispered that he should give up, because love was a game and the rules were fixed. They were quickly and sometimes violently shushed. A whispered chant of "fight" spread through the crowd.

Robert sneaked a glance at Elsbeth, whose face was composed and unreadable. She twitched one eyebrow at him. He could feel the balance tipping, his resolve fading. He squinted out at the crowd, the stage lights blinding him, and tried to make out the individuals.

"Life erects barriers for all of us," he said. "I can only find myself buried in the black dirt and the deep night sky, not packaged in some backdoor lover's cloth, some dandy courtier's robe."

"Excuses!" They whispered, as one. They chanted it, they shouted it. Excuses excuses excuses.

"No one has stood where I stand today," he roared back, tears streaming down his cheeks. "No one can understand how these peasant shoes crowd my feet, how the blisters turn to calluses, to rough-edged memories and words locked in the rotten teeth of my hungry mouth. None of you can understand!"

"Yes we can!" The audience had given up the pretense now. They were one mouth gnawing on an imaginary bone, like the amputee whose missing leg still itched.

Now the furiously chanting crowd was illuminated by the roaming spotlight. Finally he saw the individuals—the woman with the cocked head had two stiff braces on her legs. The man who had first said fight—his face was pock-marked like an old man, but ruddy and dotted with pimples. He noticed one of the theater plants, her eyes as blank as the rest, mouth open, fist pumping. Robert's girlfriend was in the audience. No, not Robert's. Eileen was in the audience, chanting and grinning with the rest. He told everyone that she was his wife, but he told her that he didn't believe in marriage. They had been together for 6 years. She insisted that he wear a ring. He insisted on living separately while he was acting.

And he thought for a moment, yes, yes I can. I can fight. He stood up, his cheeks dry, and the crowd cheered before falling back into restless silence. It was her turn.

"Woe that ever I was born to this fantasy world, to feel the happy weight of life only with trouble in every finger curled. To scorn the good times, and pass through like a ghost. To live only for each moment that I have more proof of my humanity than the breath in my lungs and the heartbeat in my chest and the duties on my calendar. I love this peasant man, this Robert, I cannot deny it, but what kind of stupid, selfish love is this?"

"True love!" The audience shouted, ready with an easy answer to even the most difficult of questions. Robert wanted to hate them, but he knew it was only their line.

When the time came for him to recognize her beauty in the crowded castle hallway, he had no trouble. She was the most lovely human being he had laid eyes on. He pushed his way through the other actors, who shot him winks as he went. He took her hand so softly that she wondered if he was touching her at all. He was afraid she would shatter—that ice, or crystal, or whatever she was made of would cover the floor, glittering in the funeral lights.

When the King came on stage there was a smattering of quiet boos from the audience, and for the first time Robert wondered if this wasn't all part of the plan. Frank knew no one would sympathize with his king, that he was never more than a foil for the perfect, doomed love.

Ignoring the audience, the king wondered aloud about the recent distance his wife had shown him, he brooded about his renewed passion for governing, and whether it wasn't all an attempt to show her that he needed her as little as she needed him. Behind the curtain her face was flushed. But she squeezed his hand only a little too hard, and gave him a tenuous smile. He knew it by her changes to the script, she could feel it coming too. Somewhere in there she was afraid, because she needed the audience. She needed them just as much as they needed her.

His Majesty left the stage, and when the lights picked up they sat apart from one another, on bales of hay in the dim barn. This was the only place fit for lovers, he thought, a secret place. He picked at the hay—it was the real thing—tearing it into strips, tickling the back of his hand.

She was looking at him, talking to him, finally. He had almost missed it, playing with the hay.

"I love you," she was saying, "but..." he didn't need to hear those lines. He knew all of them by heart. Suddenly he felt the script tugging at him again, the lethargy that had been drilled into him. But we're too different. But what will Frank do without me? And his lines too: At worst I'll be blacklisted. At best, all my performances will star the good lady Elsbeth. Will I be the next Frank?

The audience was waiting in rapt attention for their conflict to resolve, as they knew it would, for them to cast off the weights of society and join together in the love that would give their play its happy ending, or its tragic one. He felt it, that distant warm feeling inside that signaled that he was himself and yet not

himself, that she was Elsbeth and yet not, and that he loved her no matter who she was.

"Yet, despite all, I believe in love," she was saying. "That love conquers all." He knew she hated those lines too. The ones whose banality almost obscured their truth. Like their situation wasn't delicate, like they weren't at odds within themselves and without.

"But, your friends, family, the king, the court, your people..." At this, he swept his hand over the audience. He heard grumbles—they thought he was on their side. Suddenly, he realized, too, that he and Elsbeth could never be together. Her family was theater royalty, the kind that still put the "e" after the "r." He still held his fork with a clenched fist, as if someone was lurking behind him to take it away. No director would have her, knowing she betrayed Frank like that, knowing her penchant for sleeping with the supporting actors. But the audience was frothing, starving for romance. He knew that if she asked him to come with her, he would come.

"Can nothing shake us of this love malaise?" She said. "I fear I cannot live without your shining eyes, their constant praise. That my only escape is the cold clasp of death."

Even as he was scowling inside at Frank's words, he wondered if somewhere she wasn't relieved. He knew audience members were holding their hands to their heads, gesticulating wildly, but talking softly now, aware of the delicate balance they might upset.

If he could, he would have said, your voice is like an army of a ten thousand. A balm for any symptoms, even for love. Please, burn down my castle, grind up every stone and build a palace. We could plant lawns of daffodils and snowdrops, splash naked in pools smelling of rose petals. But no, he was supposed to feel these other things. His decisions were final, there was no cause for looking back.

He was supposed to ask a question of himself and the audience, go on another damned monologue. Instead he looked into her eyes, remembering the furrows of warmth her fingernails traced down his back. Instead he asked her, face to face. It was the least he could do.

"And what would it come to in the end? A brief flare of passion and a long slide into unhappiness?" He swallowed, steeling himself. "If death is your escape, then I will follow you, even there."

Finally he understood her. She had to die every night, by her own hand. She had to take another down with her, a person who she cared about, even if just a little. Her eyes were pleading with him, for him. And he loved her now more than any other woman he had ever loved, and, he knew, more than she could ever love him. He tried to think of the words, but nothing came into his head, there was no script for this.

She took a cup they had filled with water, tinted a purplish color with food dye. She held it up, and just as the lights dimmed he noticed her looking behind the curtain. She winked—her eyes, one open and the other closed, frozen in that imaginary place where life had lost its hold but death had not yet come calling.

Their silence was bursting with the thoughts neither could say. Suddenly Robert was blinking, blinded by the unexpected spotlight. He looked behind the curtain and caught the eye of Jonas, the lighting manager. Jonas winked too. Robert realized suddenly that he was only in the line of sight between Elsbeth and Jonas—those winks were not for him. But he still had to act.

"Wait." He said, holding out his hand. The cup hung inches from her lips. He heard the collective sigh from the audience. A quiet "way to go!" He saw the corners of her lips turn up, the equivalent of a corpse for her.

He rose, and walked towards front stage. In the corner of his eye he saw Frank mouthing words and stomping on his plastic crown. He was already fired, he knew it. Robert had already lost, so there was no reason to keep playing.

"What shall I do? To die beside her, or to live on in emptiness, close enough to touch but never to recognize?" He said, looking down. It gave him time to think, to plan his next move.

"Talk to her! Fight for her!" The crowd shouted in response. He tried to ignore them. As their voices were fading away he heard one say "let the bitch go."

He started to laugh. His chest shook and his eyes blurred for a moment, the lights catching the moisture and turning the audience back into a dim blob.

"Oh, love, what are you? Are you the infection that will end us, or the white knight riding to set us free? Oh, how I wish I could meet this knight with a strong axe in my hand. I would lop the legs off his horse, put as many cuts on his fine skin as lie underneath my coarse costume. Who are you love?"

"We are love." The audience roared. It seemed the most obvious thing.

"And who would decide my fate, into whose hands would I lease my life, if not love?"

"Ours!" They chanted. Some were standing up now, forming their hands into megaphones before their mouths. A smirk came to his lips from somewhere deep down—use your diaphragm, he thought.

"And what would you have me do then?" He said, now grinning demonically. "We can never be together."

The audience was silent. His grin became wider, in triumph. Their love was shopping for matching furniture together, finding the right school for their children, Thursday date night and cocktail parties.

The soft male voice went up in the silence: "Tell her how you feel. Make it work." He heard voices of agreement.

Then the first woman, the one with splints for legs-- "Be yourself." And they took up the echo, so that the words could be heard by a young man walking alone outside the theater.

He looked at Elsbeth—her eyes were pinched together, slanted upwards. She wiped her hands on her skirt. He knew he was someone else—a smiling, dancing demon. He was nobody. He had shed those outer layers like an oversized costume.

The audience perhaps saw some of this, because now they hung suspended in a frightened silence. It was the silence that was never complete, because each time it was deeper and darker and more silent than the last. He bent down. He removed his shoes. He straightened his body and looked into the lights, blind.

Then he hurled the shoes into the blackness before him. He heard the echoes, one a soft squelching sound, the other a short, collective gasp.

His course set, his script memorized, he walked quickly to Elsbeth. He could see every ounce of love squeezed between her eyelids, the trembling in her hands as she put them to her bosom, the habit she had picked up off-stage too.

He opened his mouth, but she held up her hand. It was her line.

"And what is more innocent than secret love? The one that is consummated only when lovers catch eyes in the hallway, when suddenly the world becomes one narrow river--"

"Wherein they store up each kick and splash, every small impression on the water, destroyed by the current but saved in their minds, forever enchanting and all their own—"

"And each wondering what could have been, if only they were the sole inhabitants of the earth, if only..."

"If only they could have found a way to love each other in the real world. But knowing that their other world would have to be enough."

"I will always keep your secret." She said.

"On my honor, I promise to love you always, only from afar."

He kissed her on the cheek. She blinked at her tears.

"Goodbye." She said, the only word she said. He knew she loved him too. It was the happiest moment of his life.

As the lights dimmed he bowed his head and covered his face with his hands, to hide the demonic smile that played on it.

When he looked up he could see the audience, stunned in their seats. He could see every face, confused, expecting more. He turned his back to them, and walked slowly off the stage.

This was supposed to be the final scene. But Robert watched from backstage as Frank entered, alone.

Frank took the cup. "I have seen her eyes wandering. Her gaze lighting on him while the poets recite to an empty room, two empty hearts." He put his hand over his heart and with the other raised the cup. The audience ate it up.

"Cheers! To a kingdom without a king. A king without a queen. A man, without his woman by his side. Lovers, in this world and the next, and every form that love takes, be it poison, death, or fate. Perhaps I must find love in the afterlife. Pray, by my death, someone finds it in this one."

Then Frank put the cup to his lips. He fell back into the hay, and the lights went down. It was the end.

The crowd waited in stunned silence for a few moments. Then they broke into wild applause. When they made their final bow, her hand was lax in his. Backstage, he was accosted by an old woman who had made it into the hallway. She was crying and fanning herself with her hand.

"That was the worst performance I have ever seen," she sobbed. "I am heartbroken, and it's all your fault. Look, Mr. Robert, or whatever the hell your name is, I'm coming to the next showing, and if you don't work it out with her, you'll answer to me, you hear?"

She sniffled, and he said, of course, next time it will all work out.

He suddenly felt naked and dirty without his shoes, and he padded faster, towards the costume closet. Eileen appeared from nowhere and embraced him. "Bobby, you were wonderful."

From the corner of his eye he saw Elsbeth embracing Frank. At first Frank held his hands limp, but after a moment he put them around her. They kissed each other.

"Oh, Frank, it was a triumph. Everything worked out so perfectly."

Frank gave Robert the slightest nod before turning his attention to his wife.

Robert winked at him, but his eyes were on Elsbeth. Then, locked in Eileen's embrace, he closed his eyes and passed his hand over his face. Holding hands with Eileen, he felt the cool blast of heavy spring air as they left the theater, never knowing if it was the world that had died and was reborn, or himself.

Believe Me

My son is innocent, believe me the Dad thought while he watched his son sit with the stone mask he put on when everything was all wrong and the Dad wondered if his own secrets weren't dripping off his face, and he wondered if the prosecutor wasn't reading his fears in the veins of his eyes and if the jury wasn't thinking that since the father was sweating so much, the kid couldn't not be guilty

but you couldn't tell from his son, whose face looked the same as when his dad shoveled dirt over the cold dog or when he knocked down the toad hut on the lawn or when in the early evening his son heard the door rattling closed louder than usual and his dad told them they had to move because his tabs were running up and they couldn't pay for the place with the job much less with no job now and Dad was only thinking that at least he wouldn't have to hear the goddamned door rattle ever again and the only way he could tell his son was upset was from the way his jaw protruded and his cheeks moved oh-so-slightly as he bit at the end of his tongue until he bled down his own throat, as he was doing now

but the prosecutor was talking, a tall, sturdy guy in sport coat and sunglasses and behind those shades the dad knew he didn't see in faces but in green computer printouts and diagnostic boxes that identified cheek tics and eye sidles and saw every restless, endless tapping of his foot like the Terminator and now the Terminator was saying how his son was the robot, the killing machine, and the

Dad wanted to laugh out loud, but he realized it would come out rusty and the jury would not appreciate the irony and anyway he knew he shouldn't laugh, that he should get to know all the words this machine said, this walking death who wanted to take his boy, to rape him and kill him just like they said his son did to that poor girl, because he knew that's what they do in prison—they rape and kill innocent young men like his son, especially if the young men don't react like they're supposed to, like the Dad knew his son wouldn't, because if he had taught him anything it was don't let them get the satisfaction out of beating you down, because they can always do it

but at least you can take the beating so far inside that it's not them hurting you anymore but it's you, wearing them like an overcoat and so when it's over you can lay down with your bruises and forgive yourself and you don't even have to think about forgiving them and they know that it makes them powerless so they try harder and harder to hurt you and in prison in that state of unending hurting and forgiving they might just kill you before realizing that you had a dad and a mom and that life is a game that everyone loses in the end

but the Terminator was bringing a witness to the stand, so the Dad figured he should listen, and he heard the lady say that she had heard loud voices from the apartment next door, because the wall between them was so thin and she heard a lot and she practically knew everything about the couple from that wall, like at first a lot of no's, don'ts, and some laughing, then louder don'ts, then he was saying

didn't she deserve it the little whore and eventually the screaming woke up her kids and something hit the wall hard and the floor shook, jumped the dad thought, and the screaming stopped and it got real quiet and the damn kids started crying and that's when the Good Citizen lady called the police because before it was just a domestic dispute and now it was personal. And then there was a cross-examination where his son's lawyer asked all the wrong questions and nobody in the jury gasped or had their hands over their mouths

except when he asked the Good Citizen if she had heard this behavior before and she said yes, she heard everything and she often heard a lot of no's and don'ts and then she would have to cover the children's ears because the girl would scream a little and it sounded like pain but a little pleasure too and the Dad remembered the times when he and his son would drink beer and the young man would tell the old man about how his girl sometimes liked it rough and maybe he did too and his Dad remembered drunkenly that sometimes he had caused his wife pain and in his memories which were like slick roads at night he was trying to make her feel what he felt, like some kind of twisted hurt shuffle and he remembered they would yell and scream but then they would lay down together and apologize and forget about it and those were some of the best moments of his life and then it was like the Dad was up there with the green printouts and diagnostic boxes measuring her face and asking why the Good Citizen didn't call the police earlier if she thought it was rape and if she didn't like it rough sometimes herself and if she had never scratched her man's back into furrows and heard him purr or if she had never put any of her fears

into her children and turned them into scared kittens, but his son's lawyer didn't ask these questions and anyway the jury would think he was a monster because you weren't supposed to say those things

and now a doctor was talking about the bruises around her neck and Doctor Kevorkian said the sperm in her 17-year-old vagina matched his son's DNA, and a condom was nowhere to be found, and only here did the Dad blame his son, because he had taught him to chase tail, even young tail, to be aggressive, forceful even but he had always taught him to use a rubber, no matter how drunk he was, and then his son's lawyer was asking the doctor wasn't there another man's sperm in her vagina as well and he said yes, and the Dad found the first hope he had been offered all day, and then Kevorkian said that the other sperm was older and didn't match the age of the bruises on her vagina or where her rib had caved in and punctured her lung and he was saying all of this in that neutral doctor voice because he was supposed to be unaffected by it and not judging anything

even though the Dad wondered how anyone could know all of this with such certainty and not wonder if knocking each other around wasn't just how people made up to each other and not wonder if the girl had parents who had hurt her and learned that the only two ways are to hurt or be hurt and so she let his son do it, encouraged him maybe, not because she deserved it but because love and ignorance are powerful things and because he never learned any other way of living than by wearing the overcoat on the inside so she could forgive them all but

especially him and they could lay down afterwards in their blood and sweat and bruises and find some peace but this time he threw her against the wall and he was trying to forgive her so hard that he punched her lung in and she couldn't breathe and she died with her blood sliding down her throat while he was fucking her and forgiving her and the Dad was up there in the courtroom of his mind arguing that his son was a sadist and even there the jury knew better and they held their hands over their mouths and shook their heads and locked up his son forever

but then the prosecutor was objecting to something, and the Dad felt like objecting too, objection your honor! You're taking my son away where he can't go, where believe me no one deserves to go, away from his father, the one that loved him and tried to teach him life even though his mom died years ago and he didn't have any college or a good job and couldn't teach his boy to be anything but a man and even if he did sometimes get drunk and get mad and yell at him and beat the kid a little it didn't mean he was a bad father because his dad did the same thing and it was just normal, but his mother would have taken the licks for him if she had been alive and maybe that would have saved him from the courtroom, from the Terminator and Doctor Kevorkian and the Good Citizen and Judge Doom up there with his hammer of death coming down over them all. But he knew objecting would do no good. So the Dad kept his mouth shut, even though he felt like objecting to a lot of things

but he was coming up to the stand soon and he couldn't look like a crazy man when he got up there, but only like a good, kind father who loved his son who was not a robot that raped and killed this little girl but he was sweating more now because there were many people and his son was doing a better job with the stone face thing than he was, and he was afraid that the Terminator would read the little green dots of sweat on his forehead and print out a list of his thoughts and ask exactly the right questions to make him stumble and seem like just the kind of crazy man who could have brought up a robot like this boy who raped and killed his underage girlfriend and whose face looks like it was cut from granite

but he was walking up to the stand now, and he had to remind himself that half of keeping it off his face was not letting himself think about it, not letting himself believe it, even though he did a little bit, and he worried that he never told his son about this part and that Doom and Goody Goody and the Terminator and Kevorkian and all the jury people could tell that he hadn't done his job right, hadn't kept up his end of the bargain, and now they were there to punish them both, even though what they wanted wasn't justice but just to go home but he was on the stand now and he was answering the questions from his son's lawyer in the way they had practiced, calmly, with even breath and a straight face, hoping the jury didn't think that he was losing it, though he was

but then the prosecutor was telling him that he understood that he was in a hard position and the Dad wanted to jump up and tear his head off, but he knew he'd

just look foolish in front of the court and his son, who he looked at for the first time while he was on the stand because the prosecutor was asking him did he think he was a good father and he had asked himself the same question a thousand times and even asked his son once and the answer was always different so how could he answer it again with certainty, but he had to this time and it had to be really good, the best answer yet, so he said believe me my son couldn't do it because where'd he learn? Because I didn't do nothing like that, I didn't teach him that, I taught him to be a man, unless he learned it from the tube or the street and how do we blame him for that, or for me with not enough to buy him a hockey stick or a saxophone or all the books he needed to be a good person? And he saw the prosecutor's eyes were getting a little soft and he hadn't interrupted, which was a good sign, but maybe the Dad was being too sane in comparison so the jury couldn't see how his son could grow up crazy or maybe he was just waiting to Terminate him when the moment was right and that moment would be when he stopped talking so he couldn't stop talking so the trial would never end

the Dad thought, and his thoughts became words. My son is innocent, believe me. At least he's not guilty. How do you look into his eyes, as the Dad was doing now, and ship him out to get raped and murdered by some lifer when all he wanted ever was to be a human being like his dad who maybe wasn't perfect but at least had in life a measure of respect and peace and even if he did do it how do you know it wasn't him doing it but you, all you inside him, and him stuck there looking out his eyes and not able to change a thing? How do you know it wasn't your fist

crunching into her ribcage or your penis going in and out of her so fast it didn't feel like a part of you until you came and realized she had gone limp and fainted or maybe died and you were fucking an unconscious girl or maybe a dead one and she was your girlfriend you loved and then you wanted to tear it off but you couldn't do that to yourself, only to other people?

and believe me he didn't care now about going off the script, or about his restless feet, or the wild readouts in the Terminator's green vision or Judge Doom's hand inching toward the gavel, or the jury with their hands over their mouths, he only cared about talking and talking so the trial could never end and he could look his son in the eyes, as he was doing now, forever, but eventually he ran out of things to say though he would have stood on the stand and shouted nonsense words if they hadn't threatened to take him out of the court and what was the difference because none of the words they used made sense anyway, and the Dad thought that if God let his son be taken away he might damn God for the first time in his life, but he knew God was too good to let his son be taken away in the name of justice, to be raped and killed in prison, even if it was just his mind, his soul that was raped and killed, in the name of punishment and redemption

but the bailiff had dragged him to one corner and thank God and damn God because he had to stay in the courtroom to see the prosecutor call his son a robot and a monster again, to pass judgment on them both, and his hands were cuffed so he couldn't reach the crucifix in his pocket, the little Jesus that still had dust in the

corners because he had just dug it up from a box in the basement where he was surprised to find it because in his panicked thoughts the Jesus had gotten up and walked away with the cross on his shoulders because he knew the Dad was a bad man and hadn't been to church or talked to God in years but he really needed him now, he really needed God's help and if you wouldn't just come down and help his son he would go to church every day and follow you forever and never do any bad things, even though he knew that was a lie, because if he could he would kidnap Jesus and hold him for ransom for his own son

who would bring home the toads he found until believe me it looked like the floor was jumping and when he swept up all the toads his son would say no daddy, where are they gonna sleep, but daddy would do it anyway and his son would bring them back the next day until his daddy whipped him because they barely had room for themselves, much less the goddamn toads, and plus he kept stepping on them and he didn't like the crunch and the sick wetness beneath his feet, so his son built a hut for them out of sticks and leaves on the apartment lawn and brought them crickets and moss, and the Dad would joke to himself that the goddamn toads lived better than they did

and now the Dad stood in the corner watching the floor jump as his son's lawyer finished with appeals to common humanity that seemed weak even to him, and then there was silence except for the sobbing that he only realized was coming from him when he opened his eyes and saw the wet spot spreading on his shirt and

realized that he was shaking a little and that the only sound in the wooden courtroom was his sobbing and occasional sniffling and he looked his son in the eye for the second time that day and believe me his son's eyes seemed to say you did all you could, we never had a chance and he realized he was crying because even he didn't believe his son was innocent anymore so how could the jury believe it and how could they believe any evidence except for the sight of this old man who hadn't cried in twenty-two years and eight months, who had always held his head high and never buckled but was losing control of his knees now and was actually glad of the bailiff or else he'd be on the floor and who with his tears was pleading for his son and damning him at once

and then his pleas were drowned out by Doom's hammer and the shuffle of the jury and the Dad waited for what could have been hours but seemed like just seconds by the time it was over and the jury shuffled in again and the judge banged his hammer of death and the floor was jumping to and fro and the jury said his son was guilty, guilty, guilty, and the hammer banged again and the Dad thought my son is not innocent. He is guilty. And he looked into his son's eyes for the third time that day and saw nothing there as they cuffed him and dragged him away and released the Dad into the wooden silence of the courtroom and he looked at the red lines on his wrists and then for his son who was gone, and then he damned God and decided he would kill himself because he would be dead long before his son got out of prison, especially with all the drinking he planned to do, and he had no

friends and he had already damned God twice so there was nothing left to do in his life.

Outside the courtroom the victim's family approached him, a man and a woman, young, and two little girls dressed in black and already he hated them but they weren't triumphant but a little soft around the eyes so he thought he should probably hide it, hold it back, but then he thought that since he had already damned God, and since law had failed him, etiquette might as well go next and he was planning to kill himself anyway and it was much harder to hate a dead man but he didn't say what he was going to because he saw there was something in the girls' eyes that made him feel pathetic for the angry words of a guilty man bubbling up inside of him and so instead he hung his head and said he was sorry and they said they were sorry for him and they would try to forgive his son and even though he knew and they knew that he didn't mean it and they didn't mean it, they both meant it at least a little, and that was enough and they parted

and he went home and hung himself but the pipe broke and he realized he could see his son in prison and so he did and when he could he brought his son letters but more importantly he brought toads and he filled his own house with them and he was careful not to step on them for years, but he did one day getting out of bed and then he wept for their spoiled lives—for the woman who was dead and for his son who was guilty and for himself, but most of all he wept for the little flattened toad body that could no longer make the floor jump

Outside

"I warned you," Troy said as he held his fist up to the scuffed green door. "This won't be pretty."

He spat on the tall grass that surrounded the house. Across the street a motley scarecrow kept watch.

"Think sublime Troy."

The sun had already begun its tumble behind the mountains. Floating dust motes shimmered in the dying light. The road tore the field of wild grass in two. Miles down it, she saw a tiny house ringed by tiny fields of corn.

Troy knocked. Trees congregated around the house, fatter and taller than any she had seen since crossing into Nevada. He knocked again. As his fist closed in for the third time, the door swung open. The man on the other side took a jerky step backward, tripping over his ill-fitting black trousers. He pushed the door closed, but Troy wedged it open with his foot. A wrinkled red face peeked out.

"So it's all punching when I open the door? Because even brothers act nice from far away but in person it's all..." He paused, eyes locked on the tall woman standing behind Troy. He fingered a link-less cuff at the end of one sleeve.

"Ben, Ben, slow down, Benny..." Troy stopped, following his look. Her eyes were green ponds, long, silvery things darting beneath a placid film of algae. Light brown hair collected into a bun behind her head.

"Ben, this is my wife, Dorothy." Benny's narrowed eyes flicked from her patterned sundress to Troy's jeans, then to his own wrinkled black trousers. Hands on the frame of the doorway, he leaned out, looking both ways.

"Good good, so you showed off your new wife. What's the haps?"

Troy coughed.

"The word, the dig? Why the hell are you here?"

"Can we come in?"

"Oh, now you want to come in? What, did your new wife make you?" He said. Troy opened his mouth, but a smile slowly broke over Benny's face. "Yeah yeah, inside, inside is good."

He waved his hand toward the dim interior. They stepped inside and were enveloped by musty smoke smell and television babble. Benny shouldered them out of the way, locking the door with key, bolt, and chain.

"I guess now is as good as later or before. Unless you came to watch the movie, because I was thinking of changing it." He leaned towards Troy and lowered his voice "Towards the end, the plot gets a little predictable."

Dorothy smelled wood shavings and dish detergent. She could feel his torso heaving as he took a breath and smiled at them, bushy eyebrows raised. The elbows of his dinner jacket were patched— the stitching coming loose. They stood there in the small anteroom, uncomfortably close, as if stunned by the rattling of the chain, or the sound of their own breathing. Benny considered the bitter taste in his mouth, like crushed acorns or over-steeped tea. Dorothy crooked her lips and looked at Troy. His hand covered his eyes, pinching his nose.

There were two houses here, Dorothy thought. One was history—all thick carpeting, antique lamps, floral wallpaper and old furniture battered into comfort by heavy backsides. The second was the prowling ground of a restless teenager. Tall stacks of dishes grew from a soil of cellophane packaging, cookie crumbs, and scattered papers. Half-finished models perched haphazardly on the furniture—an airplane fuselage, a house with no roof, a ship missing its sails. Dorothy saw Troy staring at the ship intently. When he caught her eyes again, he winced. Dorothy only shook her head slightly. It was perfect. The television squatted before a screened fireplace, and she heard crackling through the TV talk.

"Eat?" Benny said. As he pushed by them to the kitchen, Dorothy noticed that he favored his left leg. "Mr. Netter brings groceries on Mondays. Haven't seen him lately—he used to come inside, but now he just leaves them on the doorstep."

Dorothy looked at Troy—his throat was working, concentrating on swallowing. Troy was always absent Monday mornings, and when he showed up he was distracted and irritable. There were a few things she didn't know. He looked at her, then put a hand over his eyes again.

"No housewarming gift Troy? Tsk. What would Mom say?"

"Ben, listen. Can we... can we stay here awhile?

Benny emerged from the kitchen, suddenly quiet. "Excuse me," he said, "can we what?"

"Can we... can..." Troy looked at Dorothy. "We should go."

Troy lurched out through the doorway. Dorothy glanced at Benny, then followed him.

"Nice to meet you Troy's wife." Benny said, from behind her.

"Please call me Dorothy," she said over her shoulder.

She followed Troy out into the field of wild grass. They passed piles of rocks and sudden ditches. Finally they came to a spot where the grass grew taller than the rest. There was a small pond there, fed by a trickle of water from some hidden spring. Troy squatted down and splashed his face with water.

"Elise," Troy said. "He hasn't left the house in years, you know."

"Exactly. He's perfect."

"The neighbors had to break down the door with an axe. They found him unconscious. This story won't have a happy ending."

"He could be dead tomorrow. We'll still have the movie." She wondered what an audience would make of this line.

Troy paused. He splashed his face with water again. "You know, Dad used to spend every second of the day out here. I wanted to help so bad. But Dad, he would always say 'no, no, this is my job, go back in the house, and help Mom.' Finally he told me I could pile up these rocks.'"

"You made these piles?"

"No. Benny did." Troy said. "I dug a hole. Spent weeks down in that hole."

"Where is it?"

Troy pointed to the water. "Pond now. I couldn't be inside. The first year the field did well, but all Mom did was sit in the living room, smoking and watching the same movies, over and over. She never wanted to come here." Troy paused.

"One day Benny tripped on a rock and fell into it. Broke his leg, couldn't get out. It was a cold night. Found him there in the morning. Dad lost it after that, couldn't keep up. Then he left."

She met his eyes when he looked at her. She didn't look like a woman in her forties, but placid self-assurance and competent makeup work drained years from her face. She wasn't beautiful, it was more in the way she held her head, the way she took in everything without seeming to notice.

"Elise." Troy said her name slowly, as if tasting it. "You think you can play him?"

When they came back inside the house, Benny was watching a Western, smoking. Two men were facing off, guns drawn. A woman waited off to the side to see who would win. Troy sat down on an antique chair. Benny looked over at him, nodding, then focused on the movie.

Dorothy discovered albums of photographs. Shots of Benny with crew-cut hair, Troy as a gangly teenager. She poured through them, looking for clues and connections. There were no pictures of mother or father.

For a long time the only sounds were the occasional ruffling of cloth, or the turning of a crumbling page in the album. Occasionally there was the dry rustle of

a match sparking as Benny lit a cigarette. She looked at her watch, surprised that hours had passed. The windows were boarded up—time was a foreigner here. Troy had fallen asleep, and Benny was silent. Dorothy curled up in a chair and watched him, trying not to fall asleep.

Benny put a VHS in the player. A few minutes later he changed the tape again. He let the dialogue wash over him as he listened to their steady breathing. He remembered waking to the sound of voices in the next room. His parents at their morning fight before Dad went out. He remembered the corn growing high that first year, before he had his fall. When Mom finally saw the ground would produce, she started her garden. They both spent all their time outside, avoiding each other, but when they saw each other for the few minutes each day, over dinner, or just before bed, they talked politely, even seemed to enjoy each other's company. Their bed was huge, and each slept on their own side. Sometimes Dad slept out in the field.

Years later, he would wake to his mother's coughing, coming like a train by his window. He heard the voices again, listening hopefully in his sleepy daze, but he realized she only had the volume up high. In the morning, when he brought her breakfast, he would ask her what she watched that night, and her sandpaper cough would be his answer.

Dorothy explored the house, walking softly, as if afraid to disturb the spirits. The TV was like another person in the crowded house, but when she shut it off the babble was replaced by sounds of arguing, so she turned it back on. They

would dissect the arguments later, as they always did, sitting around the tape recorder Troy kept in his pocket. She knew she was asking a lot from him to come here, but he wanted to be an actor anyway, and it was good practice.

"Checkmate!" Benny's laugh rang through the house. It was morning and sunlight flooded the dining room. Since they had unboarded the dining room windows, Benny's enthusiasm had not relented. His voice was the loudest thing in the world so far.

Troy spoke deliberately. "Ben. You promised you'd go--"

"Only if--"

"—to the goddamn hospital." For the first time, Troy sounded like the younger brother.

"Only if you beat me." Benny's words were quick, his grin cherubic.

"But Ben, queens can't jump other pieces."

"My house, my rules." Benny lit a cigarette. He blew a cloud of blue tendrils in Troy's direction.

Troy puckered his lips to spit, but he caught Dorothy's eye and swallowed instead. "You have to checkmate the *king*."

"Honey, what's wrong?" She said to Troy, putting her hand on his shoulder. She winced inwardly—don't overdo it Dorothy. She didn't know what Troy's wife would do here.

"Nothing. Why don't you do the dishes or something?" He said as he turned away and picked up the newspaper. He had no trouble playing Dorothy's husband.

In a small room behind the den she discovered bookshelves cluttered with VHS tapes. Westerns, dramas, Bond movies, Star Wars, and a few romances. They didn't put much stake in comedy. Her eyes widened as she saw her face looking out from a box, her name splashed across the cover. Elise Morland. They had shot the movie in the Canadian pine forest, and her clearest memories were the smell of sappy needles and Troy's face glowing by the light of the stage lamps as he watched her perform. They had stayed in tents, to capture the feeling of the woods, and she remembered the zipper snapping up one night, Troy crawling in on hands and knees, careful not to make a sound.

She slipped the tape in her purse. If he found out it would ruin everything. From her place she could hear them talking in low voices, and, not knowing what else to do, she listened and tried to make herself invisible.

Troy put down the newspaper, looking around for Dorothy. He reached into his pocket and paused the tape recorder. He spoke in a low voice.

"Hey Ben, let me ask you a question."

Benny nodded. He rearranged the chess pieces and played by himself.

"Do you remember when Dad left—"

"No," Benny said.

"—he took you out to the field the day before. And I smashed the boat because I was so mad he took you out there and not me?"

"Was a crappy boat anyway."

"Well, yeah. But he came back and helped me rebuild it. He said it was a beautiful boat. Benny, what did he say to you out there?"

"Took me to where he planted the first seed. Said 'this is where it began, where it ends, and where it will begin again after that.' Planned it, practiced the words. Didn't like not knowing what he was going to say."

"We worked so hard on that boat—he had this... almost frantic intensity. By the end of the night my eyes could barely focus, my hands were sore. We never got to the sails."

Troy paused. "That night he took the gas can out there, you made that circle of stones, so that the fire didn't burn up the whole place."

Benny nodded. He moved a rook, knocking the king off the board.

"He hung his wedding ring on the mast. He told me the ring would make it sail. Benny, what happened to that ring?"

"Are you done with the paper?" Benny asked.

"Well, I guess... I don't see—"

Benny snatched it. He limped to the fireplace and removed the screen. A whoosh of soot swept into the room. Smoldering books lay in the fireplace, a half-burned cover of National Geographic. He lit the newspaper with a match and tried to shove it in the fireplace. But it roared to life too quickly and he dropped it.

"Benny, what are you doing?" Troy screamed.

Benny kicked at the newspaper and yelped, scampering awkwardly away from the fire and looking around the doorway. Troy ran and stomped out the blaze, pushing the newspaper into the fireplace.

"Okay. Just trying to save your life here. No thanks necessary."

Benny shrugged.

"Ben, Jesus, do you stick your fingers in the outlets too? Do you drink the cleaning fluids under the sink?" Troy brought both hands down on the table, and a model rocket teetered off the edge of the table, nosedived to the floor.

"Nobody's keeping you here." Benny said, still smiling. He sniffled a little, and Dorothy caught a wetness in his eyes before he bent down to gather up the pieces.

"Only thing you've said so far that made any sense. Let's go Dorothy."

"No." She said, barely above a whisper. She wondered what he wanted with the ring.

"What?"

"I'm not going."

"Fine." Troy slammed the door to the kitchen and they listened to his heavy footsteps ascending the stairs.

"Miss Dorothy?" Benny approached her hesitantly.

"Yes, Benny?"

"Did you like our family? In the pictures?"

She smiled. "Yes, I did. I don't have any siblings."

"Everyone is likeable in pictures," he said, then he paused. "You seem lonely."

Dorothy didn't know what to say. "Maybe... sometimes."

"I want to show you something." She was nervous, but his child-like look comforted her. This was not like in middle school, when Terry Miller brought her into the boy's bathroom to show her what they had written about her, when he suddenly dropped his pants in the stall.

He led her through the back door, his limp barely noticeable now. Outside there was a jungle, grass four feet high, trees and bushes growing to sizes unknown in this part of Nevada. Benny jumped down the stairs, tripping at the bottom and rolling into the grass. All that grass could drown him, she thought, and her heart beat faster. His face appeared in her mind, eyes vacant, lips blue and still. Suddenly, his head surfaced and his hand beckoned for her to follow. He didn't look like a man close to death. She smiled, and remembered to breathe. They were outside, surrounded by living air, filled with the smell of pollen and grass, and the musty smell of earth. Benny sneezed violently.

Dorothy felt lost out there, but hiding under the tall grass was a twisting dirt path that led to a dark spot where the grass was clipped short. There was a low fence, made from tree limbs. Inside a small black rabbit hopped, pausing to chew on grass tufts.

"Ody, meet Dorothy," he said. He held the rabbit in his arms, stroking its head rhythmically.

She reached out tentatively to touch the dark coat. The rabbit squirmed under her hand. She had never been good with small things—pets, children. "He's beautiful."

They looked into each other's eyes for a moment. Then Benny looked toward the house, noting the slightest vibration, the rumbling of heavy steps down creaky stairs.

"Come on." Benny said in a strangled whisper. He took her hand and they ran inside.

They were both panting when Troy came inside. He looked at them, narrowing his eyes. "What's going on? Where were you?"

"Oh, I was... teaching Benny exercises. Stretching. For his leg."

Troy raised his eyebrows. "Exercises?" He paused. "Don't you think it might be a little late...?"

Tears welled up in Benny's eyes and he lumbered upstairs, heavily favoring his good leg.

Troy watched him go, his face unreadable. "I'm going shopping. Are you coming?"

Troy hurried to open the passenger door for Dorothy. The only sounds were the scratch of Troy's leather gloves on the steering wheel, the roar of the engine.

"The new Scorsese is screening in LA."

"We've gone too far now."

"Do you want to get something to eat? Coffee?" He asked, looking straight ahead. His throat worked, trying to swallow.

"No."

He cleared his throat. “Are you mad?”

“No.” But she knew this was not quite true. His presence felt like a crushing weight. He had no idea how well he fit this role. The few times they had been together, they had always laughed it off and blamed the alcohol. They had agreed to remain friends and colleagues. She wondered if she loved him, then the same about Benny. She wondered if she loved herself, and again, was not sure.

“Where do you want to go?”

“The pet store.”

Troy checked the date on the fourth carton of milk. Past expiration. The handle slipped through his fingers, knocking others aside like dominoes, a milk-carton aftershock.

“Should be more careful with things that ain’t yours.” The voice was scratchy and deliberate.

“What’s it to...” Troy started to say, before he recognized the old face. “Oh, it’s you.”

“Nice to see you round here again. You still coming by every Monday? That poor boy needs to eat like the rest of us.” Wrinkled hands rebuilt the milk carton city.

Troy pawed through containers of yogurt. He didn’t like Netter pretending to know him and his family. “Is everything here expired, or what?”

“Knew your mama pretty well, you know.”

"Want to tell me about her?" Troy muttered. The words had stuck in his throat—he couldn't get his voice to carry the sarcasm. He hoped the old man would just go away.

"She always talked about you. Expected you back at any moment. Every day you didn't show only made her more certain. Tomorrow's the day. Always tomorrow. Crazy old bat."

Troy looked at him. The old face had broken into a grin, crow's feet stretched tight beside watery blue eyes.

"One day she decided you wasn't coming after all. Nothing special, just that was the day. So, I helped board up the windows, gave her some old movies to watch instead of the road outside."

"You're a saint."

"Look, I don't mind what you think of me, but Benny was the only one could stand to be in the house with her for more than an hour. You and that woman'd better--"

"That's only because he's as crazy as she was. Now if you'll excuse me..." As he walked out, Troy looked over his shoulder—the old man was carefully rearranging milk cartons and whistling to himself.

Dorothy stroked the pale grey fur as Troy pulled into the driveway. The rabbit shivered under her hand, ears flat against its skull. Troy got out with a grunt, closed his door, and went right up to the door of the house. Dorothy frowned, opened her door with difficulty and followed him.

Troy had taken a spot at the dining room table, reading the newspaper in the morning sun. He hadn't made his daily pitch about going to the hospital yet. Benny brought him coffee. Troy narrowed his eyes a little, reached out slowly to take the cup. From the corner of his eye, Benny caught sight of Dorothy and the rabbit. He dropped the steaming cup.

Troy's curse ripped through the house, but Benny and Dorothy ignored it. Benny was holding the rabbit high in the air, eye to eye with it. He twitched his nose at it. Dorothy felt herself losing control of her smile, before she caught Troy's dark look. She quickly put the smile away, though she could feel it tugging gently at the corners of her lips.

Troy sighed heavily. He got up and walked upstairs.

Benny's smile faded and he considered Dorothy's face. He held out the rabbit and she took it. Benny grabbed the discarded paper, balling it up in his hands. He threw it at the fireplace, and it bounced off the screen. He looked at her again. "I already have a rabbit. I only need one rabbit."

Dorothy blinked. She felt the smile stubbornly sticking to her face, but the corners drooped. "I bet he's lonely though." She said. She was in uncharted waters now. Without Troy to anchor her, she didn't know how to make Dorothy seem real.

"Maybe," Benny said. "But he's used to it. He has a good thing going. Nobody bothers him." He fingered the model rocket, absentmindedly smoothing rough edges with his calloused thumbs.

Dorothy wondered if this was what honesty sounded like. "Maybe he needs someone to bother him. Maybe he needs a friend."

Benny's voice was suddenly fast and deep. "I'll tell you what he doesn't need. He doesn't need some fucking pet store rabbit who likes people watching her and always poops in the same corner."

She was suddenly, inexplicably angry. As far as he knew, they had come here to help him, and all he could do was play games with them. She said the first thing in her head.

"Yeah, because his life is so great by himself. He's got all he needs inside that shitty little fence. Well he can have it, I don't want her cooped up until she dies."

Benny dropped the model and walked slowly towards the back door. Dorothy sat down heavily. It was a long time since she had been confused like this.

He was sitting in a corner of the makeshift fence, legs akimbo, stroking the black rabbit. He cursed and waved his hand. "Ody! Bad rabbit! The other rabbits won't let you play with them if you bite."

Dorothy felt like crying, but she couldn't. Ever since her first tears flowed with the camera pointed in her face, she had never been able to really cry again. She walked to the edge of the fence and laid the bundle of grey fur down inside of it.

"What should we name her?"

"Helen." He said quickly. She nodded and gave him a tight smile.

The rabbits sniffed each other curiously. They kept to opposite sides of the enclosure.

"They just need to get used to each other." She said carefully.

Behind them, they heard the door open. Crispy leaves crunched like tiny landmines. Troy appeared around a corner.

"What the hell is going on?" He said, his face hot, a vein in his forehead bulging.

"Troy, meet the rabbits. Ody, Helen, meet Troy."

"This has got to be a joke." He spat and rubbed his eyes.

"Maybe." Benny said. He squatted down and stroked Ody's fur.

"Outside." The word sounded like a sigh of pain. "You can go outside."

Benny looked around him. "Sure I can."

Troy looked stunned for a moment. "So go to the fucking doctor's already." He roared.

"Not out there."

"Why not? What is the goddamned difference?"

Benny shrugged. The jungle let in a few rays of light. "Don't need to. Nothing out there for me." He shrugged again.

Troy spluttered. Words formed in his mouth, but he only spit them on the ground. He spun around and stomped to the house, kicking up dirt behind him. Benny looked at Dorothy, his eyes quickly fell to the ground.

"Maybe Troy is upset?" Benny wondered aloud. Dorothy wasn't concerned—the car was still in the driveway.

The house vibrated slightly, Benny's head snapped in the direction of the disturbance. His eyes were wide, his mouth hung open slightly. There was a crash, this time unmistakable, from upstairs.

Benny vaulted up the stairs. Dorothy followed him slowly. Upstairs, he was leaning on a doorframe, careful not to cross the threshold. He pointed inside. "Troy, you're not allowed in there, Troy. Get out get out."

Dorothy heard another crash, isolated thuds, one very loud. Benny swore to himself. The room she could see was covered wall-to-wall with shelves. Books, VHS cases, magazines. Some were strewn over the faded carpet, and as she leaned around Benny she could see several bookcases turned over, Troy's arm lying across the floor. She put her hand on Benny's shoulder.

"Let me talk to him." Dorothy said. She ducked under his arm and began to enter the room, but he grabbed her around the waist and hurled her back out. Her back bumped hard against the wall and she crumbled into a sitting position.

"No. Not allowed." He said. She rubbed her elbow. The wall was not plaster anymore, but the hard wooden door of her parents' room, through which she could hear the angry shouts blending together, real and imaginary.

"If you're staying inside, then I'm staying here too." Troy's voice broke like the ranks of grass under a gust of wind. At least there would be entertainment, he thought. He could watch movies until someone finally died. The morgue guys could watch *License to Kill* while they carted off the bodies.

"I know, but that's not allowed." Benny's voice cracked on the last word.

"Everything is allowed." Troy spat back, word soldiers charging blindly into battle.

"Nothing is true." Intoned Benny.

"Always the smart one, Benny. Can you imagine? Me, jealous. Of you...for that?" His voice limped, pushing out the stumbling words.

"How you always argued with Dad's friends when they were drinking, like you were baiting them... anyone could see you were smarter, that they had to treat you like a child to feel better."

"Troy, that's Mom's room, you're not allowed."

"You know, my teachers always asked if I was your brother. They'd make some little comment, like oh, good stock, or some bullshit. Mom never said she was disappointed in me. The teachers did that fine, as soon as they realized I was just staring into space and flirting with the girls."

"Troy..." Benny whimpered. He tried to step inside, but he tripped on his feet and had to catch himself on the door frame.

"But, I mean, how could they be disappointed? Once they figured out I wasn't you, they stopped paying attention."

"Troy, I'm sorry about your teachers. But you have to come out."

"Not until you do."

"Fine, stay. Maybe you'll like it."

Benny towered over Dorothy, and she covered her head with her hands. She was afraid of him. Her, afraid... Of him. She peeked through her arms and he

was holding his hand out. She took it, pulling her limp body up, and he led her into the bathroom. Benny locked the door.

"Dorothy, I need to tell you something," he whispered. Troy had said the same thing, years ago. I love you, his mouth said. But his hands and his heaving chest said, I want to take you, make you mine. All she could manage was no no no.

She nodded to him. She saw lips forming words... just don't have it for film.... not pretty enough for TV, or porn.... Her lips held tight, she imagined closing her nose, her ears, closing off every entrance so the bad news couldn't seep in and become a part of her. It took all the effort she had to keep her eyes open.

"So, um, I'm maybe not actually sick."

Every plugged space came free at once. The breath fled her body and for a moment she despaired of ever coaxing it back. She let out the nervous giggle that had been building in her chest. She eventually managed a nod.

"Can you please act like you don't know please?" He said, suddenly bashful. "I have cash, how much do you want?"

He brought out some faded bills and began counting. She felt dirty without knowing why. "No, no, what?"

"This is what you do, isn't it? Pretend things, for money?"

She shook her head, trying to reset her mind. "What?"

"Is there a contract you have to sign? Or does it only work that way when there are cameras?"

She finally understood him. She shook her head, put her hand on his and pushed it away.

"Gratis, as long as you keep calling me Dorothy."

Benny's smile was untamed. She smiled back, but her other hand was clenched tight.

She left the tiled room to check on Troy.

"El—Dorothy, is he gone?" Came the whisper from the room. She heard a clattering in the bathroom, saw Benny's head poking out, hoping to catch sight of Troy.

"Not coming out." Troy said.

"You will. You never had the patience." Benny said, and went back downstairs, this time padding so softly that when Dorothy lost sight of him, it was as if there was no one else but Troy in the house. She imagined Benny chasing down baseballs thrown wildly by eight-year-olds, stringing up a wide hammock between two birch trees.

Dorothy was left alone. This was what she wanted, wasn't it? Time to paw through family heirlooms, hoping the emotions would eek through her fingertips. Time to wander the rooms, reconstructing a life with no history, only disparate stories pushing onwards, thrusting towards and aching for the end. How could anyone sort out their story here? How could they remember what was theirs and not a fragmented scene from a film seeping up from their unconscious, idioms and

speech patterns pieced together from the last paragraph read on a cold night, the one read four or five times before sleep finally wins.

Dorothy heard the television blare to life, the soundtrack to one of her movies. Now she knew the secrets, and the air felt lackluster. She didn't want to move.

She uncurled her body, almost falling down the stairs as blood rushed to her legs. She saw Benny standing by the fireplace, holding a book to the flame. It caught, and he dropped it, yelping quietly. She paused halfway down. Bending over, he poked at the fire, then he blew on it. His head almost in the chimney, he breathed into it, and the fire fell back and shot up again, breathing in response. He turned suddenly, and, seeing her, his body jerked. One side of his face was streaked with soot.

He wouldn't accept food. Benny stood over a large pot of pasta, stirring and cooing lightly, as if coaxing it into edibility. She brought the food to Troy several times, but he didn't answer her, and she could never push herself beyond the threshold, the seal formed by tinny acoustic soundtracks.

She didn't know who to watch now. Benny spent his time in the jungle, watering and talking to the rabbits, and Dorothy chose to leave him alone. She noticed the leaves had begun to turn, the creepers drooped. If he wasn't in the back, she would catch him staring out the unboarded window in the living room, across the street to the vast plot which struggled to grow prairie grass, the mountains in the west.

They both knew there was civilization between their plain and those mountains, but it was easy to deny the houses and roads and strip malls and power lines without the evidence. Benny talked quietly, as if to himself. Their father had dragged them out here with promises of government grants, hard work and fresh air. He had made piles of stones in the field, and from the top Benny and Troy would drop more stones, watching them tumble down the slope. Still, nothing would grow except the saplings in the yard. Dad went west to find work—a few months later, divorce papers came in the mail.

She was glad she didn't have the tape recorder. This history was not fit for recording, only for understanding, for telling and hearing. His body was warm to her touch, his arms strong around her shoulders.

The sun was hidden behind the mountains, and she found Benny upstairs, sitting by the open doorway, reading National Geographic. She stopped at the bottom of the stairs, unnoticed by Benny. His reading face was all quirking eyebrows and head bobbling. Once in awhile he would read something to Troy.

"Hey Troy, National Geographic says there's this native tribe in the Amazon, uncontacted by civilized man. Isn't that wild?" He scoffed at his own pun. Dorothy smelled cigarette smoke, and she heard Troy grunt in response, then fall into a fit of coughing. He had found their mother's stash.

The smoke from decade-old cigarettes tingled in her nose and she let out a small sneeze. Benny looked up, then back to his magazine.

"You like the smokes Troy?"

"Mmmhmm."

"You know, when Mom finally kicked the bucket, they asked if they could do an autopsy—I said only if I was there."

"Oh, isn't that sweet."

"It wasn't like in movies, you know. Her skin wasn't firm and blue. It was sloughing off her face, the doctor said she had started decomposing before she died."

There was no sound. Benny looked at Dorothy, one eyelid twitched, she was not sure if it was a wink or just a tic. One side of his mouth quirked up slightly.

"They had to saw at the skin for awhile. It wasn't a cutting job, too leathery. They never show the insides in movies because it's gross. Her lungs really were black, just an ooch of pink left. Like someone had melted down tires, ripped out her lungs, and shoved the rubber in there."

"Lovely."

"I wanted to bury her here, but they said the soil wouldn't hold the coffin. It'd get washed up in the runoff, and her corpse would float down a river and into the ocean, they said. They wouldn't believe me about how well things grow out back."

"Elise, I know you're there. Why did we come here? This place is a desert, it's a tumor."

She knew she shouldn't say anything, that even the most truthful statement would ring false here, would only make things worse. "We came to do our job. We came for the role."

Dorothy felt Benny's eyes boring into her.

"So do you think you can do it? You think you can play him?" Benny's eyes did not stray from her face.

"I don't want to." But again she knew this wasn't true. She was afraid to, but she wanted it more than anything. In the back of her mind, she hoped for some dramatic event to unfold, for Troy to burn the house down, or Benny to lie down in the unlit road, waiting for the rumble of an eighteen-wheeler. Instead, Benny simply folded his magazine and walked quietly down the stairs. Dorothy closed her eyes and was only aware of him as a disturbance in the air.

Dorothy took his place, sitting against the wall and picking up the magazine. She looked at a glossy photograph of two men, bodies painted red, wooden bows aimed at the sky, a dark-skinned woman behind them guiding the shots with an outstretched finger.

The walls leaned in, whispering to one another. Mortar fell like bombs, clouds of dust ripped from the ceiling. The fire hissed and spat, licking up the brick fireplace. The heavy door flapped open and slammed shut, over and over.

She came back to consciousness as the light stole through the shades, throwing bars on the carpeted floor. She put her hand on the wall. The house had

not burned down yet. The only noise was a mouse scrabbling in the walls. The crashing door had seemed so real.

She looked through the doorway, where several bookcases had been knocked over. Her ears strained for the sound of labored breathing or the rustle of bedcovers. Troy was an early riser, but he often turned in bed for hours. She had thrown that in his face, years before, but it was never a real reason. When they were together, she could find nothing serious to hate in him. So she hated the little things—the gentle mocking in his voice, the constant spitting, and the way he hid his eyes when he was embarrassed.

She heard footsteps, through the kitchen, pounding up the stairs. Troy's face, red and wild, it reminded her of Benny.

"I can't find him." Dorothy narrowed her eyes and shook her head.

"I'm serious, he's not here."

"You checked the jungle?"

"Just two happy rabbits chewing on a huge pile of grass."

Dorothy sat up and the magazine fell from her hands. A yellow note slipped from between the pages.

"It's got your name on it." Dorothy said, handing it to Troy.

> Troy, I don't know if Dorothy told you, but the cancer was a funny joke by me. That was the not nice thing. The nice thing is... to go away. I'm not in the movie biz but I know this storyline. It always ends with someone leaving, or dying.

I still remember that morning. After watching that oval patch of sky all night, seeing your head peeking into the hole. The happiest moment of my life, Troy, believe me. Only thing was, I couldn't swim for shit after I broke the leg. Hope you always keep your head above water.

The nicest thing would be no surprises, no lies ever. All I have is an ending. The tragic, yet somehow welcomed death. The nice girl gets the part. The nice guy gets the girl. The end.

Dorothy ran after Troy. After all their time spent just sitting around, watching Benny and ignoring each other, running seemed silly. The chain on the door hung limp from its socket. Troy ran across the street without looking. There was a honk and the screech of tires. The only car Dorothy had seen in several days corrected its path on the road, and she could see the driver look over her shoulder.

Troy ran out across the plain, the sun at his back. He could run for a mile and she would still see him. Her fingers snatched at the top of the prairie grass as she followed her shadow towards the mountains. Her thoughts were scarecrows watching over the wild land. She shied away from them, and the scarecrows grinned at a job well done.

Dorothy suddenly realized she had lost sight of Troy. She picked up her pace, trying not to lose him, but somewhere hoping she would. She began to jog,

passing by huge piles of stones. The horizon went up and down like a jump rope—somewhere along that frantic line she would find Troy.

A huge pile of rocks drew her eyes and she almost passed by him as he lay spread-eagle next to the pond. She sat next to him on the cool ground.

"How long did you know?"

She shrugged.

"Who are you, really?"

She looked at the still water. Only Troy knew how deep it was. "Do you want to get him out?"

"I can't. Not right now."

He turned over and put his head on a stone that seemed to grow up from the ground. She came and laid beside him, hunger and exhaustion turning to lethargy.

When she woke up the sun was straddling the mountains. Troy's eyes were closed and she checked his watch. Five o'clock and the sun was low in the mountain horizon. She realized that night came here hours earlier than other places.

"Was it worth it?" Troy said. She kept her eyes on the peaks. Afterimages spotted her glance.

"Is that the only question we can ask?" She said quietly, as if afraid to let the thought escape her lips.

"Should we call the police?" That question seemed just as empty.

"Do we have a movie?"

"We have to. It's the only thing..."

She began walking, her shadow again leading the way. Troy followed. Dorothy felt the ending welling up in her. The moment before the curtain closes. The grass bowed towards them, blades clapping silently. She prepared for the epilogue, words moving unstoppably against a black screen. Days later a body is found, bluish and puckered, perhaps weighed down with stones and rope. A movie is made by an unlikely team. The merits of cross-gender roles are picked over by critics for what seems like years, but is only a few months. It wins an Oscar, or falls to another film, and either way people forget anything ever happened, if they even believed the events in the first place.

She unclenched her hand, and a few blades of grass fell into the wind and were blown away. For the first time she noticed the lines on Troy's face, the flecks of gray that had snuck into his hair. They had both avoided marriage, and she wondered what could have been. She stubbed her foot on a rock, and from then on she watched where she was going.

The house was a tanned face, upstairs windows narrowed in spite, the door yawning open with indifference. In his head, Troy shot a movie where two boys throw clods of dirt in each other's faces. In the final scene the boys run at each other and fall down in a heap of gut-wrenching laughter. Elise imagined playing a woman with well-adjusted children and an interesting career where everything worked out in her life.

Troy stopped beside the car. She felt his eyes as she crossed the road. She stood before the doorway, breathing in air which smelled too fresh now. The trees

towered over them. The silence hung by the end of her breath for a moment, but its grip was broken by a slight sobbing noise. She looked back quickly, Troy was waiting by the car, stone-faced.

She stepped through the doorway and the sobbing was bouncing over the walls. Though the sound was everywhere, she somehow knew where to go. When she moved the screen she found him curled in the fireplace, legs thrust beneath him, head against the blackened brick. His body was shaking, his hand was covered with black soot as it stroked the scratchy brick wall.

"Benny." She said softly, and her hand reached out to touch his hair. He twitched like a frightened rabbit and pulled his legs closer to his chest.

"Benny." She said. She only said his name, her voice was not burdened by accusations, disgust, or demands.

"Dorothy." He croaked, his voice breaking.

"My name is Elise, Benny."

"Dorothy." He said again, and he lifted his hand towards her. She squatted down and took his hand, waiting. His other hand dug through the ashes, closed around some object at the bottom. Finally, he lifted himself up. His head bumped against the fireplace and his lips pulled away from his teeth, a noise half-way between a sigh and a laugh escaped.

She led him outside. Troy stood by the side of the road, watching as his brother stopped on the other side.

There was a gust of wind and Benny caught a leaf floating from the trees overhead. He crushed it in his hand and brought it to his nose. Then he walked slowly to Troy and put something in his hand.

Troy came up to her. He went to spit, but swallowed the dust instead.

"I want you to hold onto this for me," he said. He put a plain golden ring into her hand. "We can talk about it later," he said, closing her fingers over it.

Troy sat down in the middle of the road, Benny across from him. Troy took the recorder from his pocket and threw it out into the grass. They started talking in unison, a torrent of words. Dorothy sat on the porch and listened to the wind licking the trees. She counted rock piles and wondered if this would be the end.

Reflective Essay

I began my project working within the theoretical realm of the English and Textual Studies discipline. The question I wanted to explore was one concerned with authority—how authors create characters that seem "real" or "authentic." I chose to explore this issue by looking at how conceptions of "self-hood" are represented in literature. I wanted to investigate how an authentic fictional personality is formed by negotiations with other characters, systems and restraint structures in the story, especially with respect to social and cultural norms, conventions, and interactions.

There are many ways to approach the rather broad issue of how authors produce character in cryptic form and through signification, and how readers encounter those characters in the text. Before my project assumed its current form, I researched a model of social encounter theorized by the sociologist Erving Goffman, using as my primary text The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life. Goffman provided both framework and terms for approaching my study, and it led me to think of character interactions as negotiations of social conventions, or performances of social discourses centered around class, race, gender, sexuality, etc.

Goffman theorized that when a person enters into an interaction with another, they both adopt a line—in other words they choose a set of information about themselves, which they control in order to satisfy the goals of the interaction, such as an interaction with a shopkeeper, where the goal is to buy something,

presumably at the lowest price possible. Much of this control is exerted by deploying sign equipment such as clothing, manner of speech, etc. Sign equipment identifies each actor as a member of a particular identity, which usually fall into dialectic categories such as upper class, lower class, white, black, male, female, etc. Moreover, people in an interaction perform this identity to other people—for example, in the way males act differently in the presence of females than they would if the audience (the other performers in an interaction) was homogenously male, or in the way a poor person might act differently around acquaintances that are more wealthy. Goffman referred to this as adopting a "face." He used the word "face" as opposed to "mask" because people tend not to be aware that this "mask" is not actually their true self, because it is much more difficult to make the performance work if the subject is aware of their own performance. Moreover, the goal of performance is to avoid the loss of face, or the embarrassment that comes with the misuse of sign equipment or behavior that is misaligned with the norms of society. In my work, exploring how people see themselves in comparison to other people was impossible without taking into account these performances, and the way they shape ideology. As a writer, I know that my own characters are a product of the way I see the world, but that the literary world they inhabit must be a product of their own ideology. Thus, I tried to take performance into account in every aspect of the story, including in the way that the whole text performs within the narrative of writing itself.

In my writing, I generally chose to work with the 3rd grammatical person. For the most part this was a personal decision—I felt more comfortable with the

distance provided by the 3rd person narrative. Moreover, I felt that writing in the first person aggravated a tendency to be too explicit with character thoughts—to tell what the main character was thinking as opposed to showing it through stage directions and dialogue. I also avoided the first person in an effort to keep from centering too closely around a single character, as well as to avoid setting up an explicit duality of self versus other; rather, I wanted that duality to be exposed powerfully in the drama of the interactions.

For the most part, my stories adopted a realist style. That is, I tried to depict contemporary life and society as it is at the moment, and I wrote about regular people in everyday life. Moreover, I tried to avoid romantic embellishment or outright unambiguous statements about the condition of the characters, other than those that were necessary for introducing them. I also refrained from lengthy exposition and back story, which tends to weigh down a story and make it more of a chore to read. I also tried to avoid expansive descriptions of the physical features or personality of the characters, except for where it seemed absolutely necessary. Instead, I focused on showing character traits through dialogue, drama, and stage directions. This is part of an overall strategy I pursued throughout my work of aiming towards minimalism. In today's world of instant communication, reading is increasingly done on the internet—a performative space which leads readers to expect more payoff out of smaller real estate. People expect stories to move faster, to be sharper—nobody wants to read a story that they feel is wasting their time. Therefore the goal is to make the story as trim and efficient as possible, and by doing that to bring readers into the production of the story itself.

Literary theorists today discuss the *way* we read almost as much as what we read. The traditional perspective on interpreting literature emphasizes reading a story by objective standards and investigating for clues as to authorial intention. However, especially in the discourses of post-structuralism, post-modernism, and Marxism, theorists have become concerned with the idea of literature as a product of a socio-cultural, economic system. The argument goes that both the writer of "literature" and those that determine the cannon are subject to ideological limitations, thus, works we deem "literature" should be considered in a subjective manner, as the product of an ideological lens. The theorist Roland Barthes discussed this at great length in his work, highlighting the point where the text becomes, as he calls it, *writerly*. He theorizes that this happens when the reader becomes no longer a passive consumer of the text, but a co-producer of it, along lines of cultural discourse. In practice, this means creating a story that is not simply a trail of hints for the reader to follow to a given conclusion, like a mystery novel. Rather, the goal is to create a story that plays with social constructions and conventions, leaving it open to as many different interpretations as possible.

The way to effect this is by avoiding a reliance on the rigid structure of plot and instead cultivating the fertile ground of character. In other words, not by constructing a plot that has as many twists and turns as Daedalus' maze or your favorite soap opera, but by making the characters that inhabit the story as complex and lifelike as possible, as well as drawing on mythic understandings and recognizable cultural narratives. I chose to pursue this strategy by showing characters at their breaking point in a conflict. I wanted to show how the figures in

my stories understood the world and themselves indirectly—not by an exact reproduction of their reality, but by illuminating the moments when their conceptions of their world and themselves were challenged, and how they responded to their new situations. In my stories, the characters deal with the breakdown of the boundaries between an imagined, constructed life, and the so called "real" life. Whether it is the sudden recognition of old age, the slow slide into middle age, the childhood home, the courtroom, or the stage, all of the characters face situations and people that seem alien to them, and most jarringly, they must face another "self" that seems the most alien of all. This is consistent with my interests in the boundaries of individual vs. society, the idea of performance and authority, and the exploration of the things we "know" to be "true" (the things we know about ourselves) versus what we assume must be true (the world around us), even though we may maintain the healthy suspicion that the latter is a lie in clever disguise. This is also consistent with the goal of writing fiction in general—using lies in the service of exposing truth, or at least what is truthful.

A key challenge for writing fiction is balancing evocative character drama with symbolic motif and comment on the human condition, and every writer has a different style of performing this challenge. When I had just started writing, my tendency was to construct highly symbolic pieces that functioned more like literary essays than real stories. They were like this because the characters acted more as puppets on strings than as real people. I learned that in order to write a successful story, one has to elicit an emotional response from the reader, and for that, the

literary writer's emphasis must be on exploring character first, rather than explicitly advancing a political or philosophical point. Often this meant thinking and talking about characters as if they were real people—another aspect of writing: making pretend things become real.

This all goes back to the concept of writing in an active way—showing the reader, rather than telling them. My advisor told me to identify the key concept of the story—the point you are trying to make, the thing you are trying to say about the human condition. Then he told me to make sure never to say it in the text. Rather, the goal is to bury it, to feel it as subtext throughout the piece. The goal is to gesture towards the meanings readers can take away from the piece, to lead the reader to a conclusion or epiphany, rather than to hit them in the face with it. The way to effect this is by hinging the story on character and the unexpected things people do—by crafting a story that does not have easy answers, and one that people from all walks of life can take something away from. The problem for young writers is twofold. Firstly, many smart young people, especially in college, feel like they have something really important to say or prove, and as a result they become emotionally invested in a story and unwilling to make necessary compromises. Secondly, inexperience with the world makes it difficult for young writers to challenge themselves to look outside their own perspective—a task that is vital to any artistic work. It makes it too easy to fill one's literary world with people that are reflections of the author and too emotionally difficult for the author to prune their story into health—which is why you see so many young writers writing painful stories about young writers writing. My own writing sometimes

began as a story involving myself or subjects that frame my life—and in one sense it is essential to pick a subject in which you are personally invested. However, the stories that made it through further drafting and workshopping were the stories in which I found a broader narrative within the draft that resembled but differed in many ways from the original. The narrative that writers look for in their personal stories is one which participates in the broader cultural and literary narrative of the time, and one which allows the writer a necessary distance from their own story. This is often the result of many complete rewrites, and as such it is rare to find a line in a mature story that has carried through all the way from the beginning. Through this process, writers strive to develop a unique narrative voice, sometimes going as far as constructing a separate literary personality in order to provide the necessary distance. The question of whether writers should write as themselves or as someone else (perhaps as a fictional person) is subject to nuance, debate, and personal style, but it is all part of a strategy to avoid being too authoritative with the meaning of a story—to leaving it open to as many different interpretations as possible. When a reader finishes a story, they often ask themselves a question like: "what was that story about?" My goal, as the writer, was to allow for as many valid answers to that question as possible within the space and subject of the text.

To understand writing, it's important to understand the process of writing. In the process of coming to a completed story (if a story can ever be said to be complete), authors leave hundreds of pages of written thought by the wayside. Not only are these pages notes and outlines, but oftentimes they are previous versions

of the story itself. Some of my stories are the result of a few days of inspired writing, but most are the result of painstaking workshopping and wholesale rewriting. For many of the stories I wrote, I came to them after writing 3 or 4 very different stories that never got off the ground. Those previous stories, for whatever reason, I wasn't sufficiently inspired by or dedicated to. In the production of any presentation, such as a work of art, an analytical paper or model, what the audience doesn't see is the incredible amount of failure that goes into one success.

Thus, one of the most interesting things about writing is looking back from a finished, mature story at the original attempt. Personally, I am very careful about saving old drafts. My documents folder is full of files ending with numbers, signifying each iteration of a draft. Sometimes there are as little as four or five, other times I have to scroll down the page to come to the end of different versions of the story, along with my notes and outlines.

When I was just starting to write real stories, my writing professor gave me this all-important piece of advice: Don't sweat it if the first draft is trash. Every first draft is trash, he said. Or to put it in the words of another professor: Think of a story as a building under construction. At first, it's very ugly, and all you see is naked two-by-fours and pipes and support structures. But as you go, you tear down the support structures, piece by piece. You replace them with floors and lights and people, and on the outside (if it's like the architecture of today) is a smooth pane of glass, which from far away reflects serenely back at you. But when you get close up, perhaps shielding your eyes and pressing your nose up against the glass, you can begin to see inside to the inner workings.

I would like for a moment to reflect on the works, authors, and people that have influenced my development as a writer. In talking about these influences, I could mention every single novel and short story that has affected me. However, I suspect those reading this paper would become bored very quickly. So, instead, I'll mention a few particular books and authors that influenced the way I write. In terms of theory, I have already mentioned Erving Goffman as a prime source for my reflection. As for fiction, I grew up reading fantasy and science fiction, and some particular authors have appealed to me in that vein: George Orwell, MT Anderson, Phillip K. Dick, and Robert Heinlein. These authors helped me in constructing the social and political worlds that revolve around the characters in my stories. They helped me think about the social and political implications of our modern world, and the restrictions and authority structures that play on the psyche of fictional characters.

Another prime influence on my work was Kurt Vonnegut, the modern mad scientist of literature. Vonnegut looked at stories like he looked at people—as funny, ironic machines with brains and souls. He exposed the inner workings of his stories, openly tinkering with all the moving parts and being honest about where the story was going. Vonnegut wrote simply and with great humor, avoiding frills, fireworks, or false drama. He often told the reader exactly what would happen in the story in the first paragraph. He also wrote profusely about writing, including a list of rules for writing a story, which I would recommend as essential reading for any young writer. You can find it online by searching

"Vonnegut 8 basics of creative writing," or by going to this address: <http://melanconent.com/lib/rev/bagombosnuffbox/creativewriting.html>.

The Russian novelists, Leo Tolstoy and Fyodor Dostoyevsky, have also had a great effect on my work. Tolstoy regularly dug to the bottom of the Russian social world, exposing complicated aspects of performance with respect to class, gender, and sexuality. Dostoyevsky did the same, except focusing on an individual's psychological makeup. Where Tolstoy was a master of social worlds, Dostoyevsky was at home in the world constructed inside his characters' minds, playing with the tricks that came along with those minds. Dostoyevsky was an expert on people we consider "crazy," and his work, along with that of Murakami and Ken Kesey, helped me think and write in an authentic way about characters whose actions seem at times absurd and unrealistic. For opening me up to these amazing Russian writers and stimulating my thinking about them, I would like to thank Professor Patricia Burak, a professor here at SU and the Director of the Slutzker Center for International Services.

Another source that has had a particular effect on my writing is the Syracuse student writing community. To a certain extent, my writing was influenced by all of my peers in every writing workshop I participated in, by every story I read by others in my classes, and by every critique that was made on my own work by those peers. However, one particular group of student writers has influenced my own work more than any other. I took my first writing workshop at Syracuse in the spring of my junior year, and in that class I met a set of enthusiastic young writers who freely and constructively shared their ideas in a

setting that was both professional and fun. Discussions about our writing evolved into conversations about books, authors, and styles, about literature and politics and society. At the end of that semester, a small group of 8 decided that we did not want the workshop to end, and that we would continue it on our own time. From then on, we met at least twice a month to share our stories and our conversation. That group inspired me to continue writing at the important formative stage, as I had a safe space to share my work and ideas with other people who understood and shared my interest. Eventually, the informal workshop sessions became so important to us that we decided to turn them into something bigger—to try to reach out to the other student writers at Syracuse University. Thus, the B36 magazine was born. It was conceived as a literary magazine catering to short fiction writers, a demographic our group felt was under-represented by the established literary magazine on campus, Verbal Seduction, which focused on student poetry. Although at this time the group has not been successfully registered as an SU organization, we have put out two issues, entirely funded and organized by the members, with help from our gracious and beloved friends from the creative writing faculty.

In reflecting on what my work means to me, I have found that one of the strangest things about the writing process, particularly in the workshop setting, is negotiating the disconnect between how one's work is viewed by others versus how the writer views it. At first, this was difficult to get around—it is sometimes frustrating for young writers to take a story into a workshop and find that people

interpreted it in a wholly different way than they intended. This is one reason why I chose to focus on issues of performance and authority in my work—because eventually I found that this disconnect is inevitable, and can be managed in the same way that one manages a performance.

I sometimes think of my writing as a sort of journal, except in coded form. When someone reads it, they might be tempted to draw conclusions about my life, but most of those conclusions would be based on assumptions from their own life experiences. Partly, this is because of the ritualized nature of writing habits, and the way rituals lead to encoding and shorthand. Especially during my final year, I made it a routine to get up in the morning and write for several hours before I did anything else in the day. Sometimes I would have something to write, sometimes I would end up just sitting and thinking for hours. In this way, the space I created for writing also acted as a meditative space, a calm place I could go when my life was busy and full of stress. It was a place I could open up to myself, where I could pursue the thoughts I wouldn't have time for amidst the demands of classes and social life, or those that seemed irrelevant to my nominal intellectual pursuits. Ritualizing this process helped me understand the events that happened to me, how they affected my mood, and in turn, how that affected my writing. It gave me a mental space in which to represent my life and my experiences, and by representing it, to exert an influence over my own story. As such, my stories do function something like a journal, except one in which the representations are inevitably distorted and coded through many layers, inevitably rendering the product worlds different from its materials.

As such, it's a strange and difficult thing to talk about why I wrote about particular subjects at particular times. In a certain sense, writing for me was a balancing act between serendipity and discipline—my best ideas came during times where I felt most conflicted, and often at those times I was not by a computer, or even a convenient pad of paper. Moreover, my interest in a particular story would wax and wane based on how I saw the conflict in that story relative to my own conflicts. As such, I had to learn to bring myself to that point of inspiration in order to balance the more mechanical requirements of a story, but also simply to write in a satisfying and efficient manner. Sometimes I could sit for an hour, thinking about one story and nothing would come out, but when I switched to a different one, I would suddenly be flooded with ideas. In my time writing, more than anything else I learned about how my mind worked, what I could do and when I felt most comfortable doing it.

Writing was a big part of my life in the last two years of college, so I think it's appropriate that many of the stories I wrote are at least partly about the act of writing itself. In particular, I tried to focus on the challenge of imagining another person in order to represent life—their lives and also your own, through them. In my stories, people are often constrained by their situation, unable to express themselves in a satisfying way, so they turn to reproductions, models, and characters to help speak for them. In *Mixed Signals*, Jericho makes a statue out of mud. The statue looks like him, and in fact he pins his clothes to it, but he knows it is not him. Rather it's a way to dramatically show how he feels, when simply telling people has failed to produce a satisfying answer to his condition. In *Front*

Stage and *Outside*, the characters find themselves playing roles that are eerily similar to their situation and representative of their hidden conflicts. *Believe Me* is a work about our moral view of characters, about how we encounter abstract norms of good and evil embodied in real people, and how we try to account for behavior that goes beyond the pale. These stories are all about characters who are at once morally ambiguous and sympathetic, who stand tall but also fall hard, and who represent the complexities, contradictions, and ironies of real life.

When thinking about characters in a story, an old theme of classic American movies comes to mind: bad guys are always bad shots. This is a statement most of all about the Western narrative tradition, especially among popular epic stories, and about the way storytellers formulate concepts of protagonist and antagonist, as representing good and evil. The bad guys are usually impotent, and the explanation for this is simple: it's because the bad guys don't really exist. From my point of view, we create the bad guys—we give them their guns and their threatening manner, and they are mostly there for the good guys to triumph over. I am certainly no ethicist or philosopher, and I do not want to engage in debate over the absolute or relative value of social norms—but that is the narrative I perceive within many popular Western stories. Sometimes I find that I have written a character who is *bad* into my work as well, but those characters always feel as if they lack substance, as if they are but well-dressed, animated scarecrows. The way I see it, in a successful, literary story, any character must operate on a continuum of good and evil. Moreover, that an enormous amount of the power of a story is generated in the negotiation between those

norms—in readers finding the "good" within a character or situation represented as "bad," or vice versa. In that sense, my stories are a representation of my hopes for the world—that people are surprising and beautiful in their ability to transcend their ritualized performance and the barriers they set up between themselves and others. Moreover, that people have the ability to break out of restrictive representations, roles, and performances, whether they originate from systems, structures, other individuals, or from themselves. And finally, that those transcendent moments can create powerful, complex, authentic meaning, even from the material that seems weakest and least genuine.

As the closing to this reflective essay, I would like to thank all of the professors I have had over the years. I have taken advantage of some remarkable assistance to get where I am today, and I am very aware of my debt in that regard. My goal is not to spend their efforts fruitlessly, not to throw away the amazing gifts I have received, but to make something that they, and I, might be proud of. In particular I would like to thank Professor Amy Shrager Lang, my wise and caring advisor through the initial stage of my project. I would also like to thank Phil LaMarche, the reader for my project. Most of all, I need to thank my advisor, the incredible Arthur Flowers. He has been a source of inspiration, a shining example, a patient moderator, teacher, and friend. Without him I would have never discovered this new world which has already brought so much struggle, meaning, and joy to my life.

Written Summary of Capstone Project

Less by One began its life as an entirely 1st person piece meant to be spoken. It seemed the most appropriate way to begin a story where the primary conflicts come from the narrator's inability to physically speak.

The decision about which narrative person to work with is an important one that changes not only the way information is presented, but also which narrative strategies are used and how readers approach the work. One important question is one of authority, or, in loose terms, how much control the author has over the text, mirroring the control that characters and narrators have over how they tell their story. Both have their strengths and weaknesses: 1st person is good for exposing complex inner thoughts, 3rd for applying multiple perspectives to a conflict.

As *Less by One* evolved, I found the perspectives of the main character's wife Molly, his son Joseph, and his daughter Madeleine to be essential to the father's conflict. But when I wrote the story entirely in third person, it suffered from the lack of the direct personal impact of the father's thoughts, contrasted with his inability to express them, a lack of authority over his own body. That problem led to this experiment, a hybrid of the two.

The loss of authority is a theme that I explore throughout my work. I am interested in authority as another aspect of performance—another role that people play, a mask (or face) that they take on. It also relates directly to the task of writing. An important goal an author must keep in mind is fashioning a story that allows the reader to be a producer of meaning in the text, rather than simply a

decoder of clues handed down from on high. The most successful literary stories seem to be those in which the author abdicates their role, leaving the thorny questions of interpretation up to the reader, rather than those in which the author lays down a track to follow. In other words, the difference between a mystery novel and ... As the writer, the authority, a story feels most vibrant when it seems almost out of my hands, when my role becomes to shape it, to realize character potential and expose new layers, rather than to twist all the pieces into their proper place.

In my manuscript I try to present the stories of people struggling with a life that is suddenly, inexplicably different than it once was. People who wake up and realize that their life today is not how they had imagined it would be. In my experience, people find many unusual ways to deal with this dissonance, becoming "crazy", bitter, or perhaps reaching a moment of epiphany, etc. In this story, I tried to present the feeling of alienation that goes along with the loss of an innately human attribute—communication—as well as the loss of the tools he once used to inhabit the authoritative structures that came with his patriarchal role in the family. I tried to present a man once comfortable with his authority, now at his most helpless, the things he defined himself by fading away. This man cannot rely just on himself, rather he must turn to the people around him, even to the littlest, least experienced of people, like his daughter.

With *Mixed Signals*, a main challenge for the piece was to create a prose representation of Jericho's mental condition, to charge readers with a sense of

Jericho's experience. Like most things, "craziness" operates on a continuum—the statement "she's crazy" can signify a number of different personal traits, from fun, to unusual, to neurotic, to clinically insane. The statement can encompass a wild-haired math professor pacing and talking to herself, conspicuously unaware of the world around, or a frat guy who routinely gets drunk and makes a fool of himself for laughs. Therefore, I saw it more appropriate to look at craziness as behavior in misalignment with the norms of one's identified social groups. Moreover, that everybody feels this misalignment, but the difference between us and those we label "crazy" is that the latter acts on those feelings.

In this case, Jericho's experience seemed to come most naturally in a series of clipped sensations, as if to survive mentally, he had to create a psychological wall of rubber, so that the things happening to him would only make a brief indent in that wall and then be pushed away. This is also partly a strategy to highlight the importance of the things that really do affect him, the things that manage to break through that wall.

With this story, as with others, I try to balance a narrative that comes mostly through one idiosyncratic character with the necessity of bringing other, fully-fleshed personalities into Jericho's world to provide perspective on his condition. Because, similarly to the father in *Less by One*, Jericho cannot handle this alone—other people act as both a cause of the condition and a cooling balm to it. His problem is partly one of perspective—the difference of his constructed self, mortared by aspirations, ideals, and interpretations of his personal history versus the realized self, the one judged by social relationships and achievements. The

purpose is to expose his sense of infidelity to the former construction, the feeling that he has not lived up to his potential, the feeling of dissatisfaction with life as is, and finally, to show how he can perhaps make peace with his life and his past.

A performance can connotate a number of different activities, from reading a poem, to putting on a play, to acting out social normative roles, such as those of gender, sexuality, class, etc. In *Front Stage*, I chose a familiar, ritualized setting of performance, the theater, and contrasted the performance of character roles with the performance of a relationship.

In this story, Robert feels trapped within a set of lines prescribed for ritual interaction. The intent was to look at ways we understand love, and what those understandings owe to our cultural discourse, or the audience in our story. When we talk about love, especially in books and movies, we like to talk most about romantic love, the kind of spontaneous, extravagant emotion that leads people to take plane flights cross-country to see each other. On the other hand, I don't think it would be controversial to argue that gender, sexual, and class roles are shaped to prepare for the institution of marriage. Moreover, that the history of marriage in Western culture suggests marriage is as much a consummation of love as it is a temporal alliance, based on finances, progeny, and inheritance.

My primary goal here was not to critique the idea of marriage, but rather to expose the audience's authority over how love and marriage are represented in a story and in the lives of individuals. For a play (or any performative art) to be successful, the audience has to buy tickets, which means certain demands of theirs

must be met—in short, they have to like the play. I argue that those demands and expectations are rather contradictory: The audience at once wants a plot familiar in structure (like a tragedy) but also one that surprises and challenges them. They want to understand what's going on, but also be left wondering at the end. They want to be able to feel like they can predict the ending, and then have that certainty pulled from their grasp at the last second.

Normally the audience takes a passive role, and artists internalize their demands because of the force of their wallets. In this story, I tried to show the real power of love—the mysterious force of emotion that inspires people to suddenly disregard the rules that they had formerly played by, to defy the audience and perhaps change the rules, whether or not their actions seem morally justified. Moreover, I tried to show that power acting in a setting where lies are the fabric of their existence, where real, or at least truthful, things emerge from the performance, in the same way that fiction works with lies in order to expose "truth."

Believe Me is a work that explores the performative space within a courtroom, a familiar institutional setting where people argue over representations of justice and truth, comparing actions to social standards (as represented by law) in order to reach an "official verdict" or a social agreement. Not only do the actors here perform their own roles (those of prosecutor, judge, jury, accused, etc) but they collectively perform the act of justice.

Whenever we talk about abstract concepts like justice, truth, or love, in the story, we are talking about social constructions of morality, or social agreements about what those concepts signify and what actions are acceptable under those definitions. While our definitions change from generation to generation, at any one moment they are assumed to be relatively unbending, as they must be in order to reach a verdict. The institution reflects a desire to maintain not only the social order, but moral stability in our own lives. We feel more secure when we have concrete, perhaps absolute, moral grounds laid out for us.

There's a multi-faceted contradiction at work here: people tend to view themselves as an undivided, unchanging consciousness, as opposed to others, who seem at times whimsical, hypocritical, and confusing. We also tend to view our own behavior as subject to our situation, as contextual; whereas, observing others, we tend to over-value dispositional, or personality-based explanations. In other words, for ourselves we say, oh I had to because of so and so, whereas for others we say, oh, that's just how she is. In psychology they call this the fundamental attribution error. In effect, it allows us to assume what we consider a neutral position, to weigh all the evidence in our heads and come to an absolute judgment (the same way a reader might come to a judgment about the value of a literary work).

In this story, I tried to put the Dad in the most uncomfortable position possible—one of conflict between his moral views and the perspective he has of his son's personality. There is no convenient position or neutral standard for the Dad to fall back on. I tried to represent his cognitive dissonance as a dazing

experience for him, as when one walks from a darkened room into full sunlight, or when one goes from complete silence to being surrounded by noise. The physical adjustment necessary for this is similar to the ideological, moral adjustment that the father must consider in order to make sense of his own behavior, especially as the man who single-handedly raised his son. The torrential nature of the prose represents the feeling that the world is out of control, that the father finds his experiences impossible to translate into a coherent moral schemata, into discrete units to which value can be individually assigned and separated by periods and commas.

Outside was partly an experiment in creating a family mythology and a narrative that draws on a more full chronology of the characters' lives. In the world of ambitions, family examples and grievances are often overlooked or ignored as motivation, especially by the subjects themselves. They are often the site of the most entrenched, long-lasting conflicts.

Family conflicts are attractive because of the transformation into adulthood that completely changes one's perspective. There's an understanding gap—when you're a child you have a fuzzy understanding of family drama and dynamics. But as an adult, you look back and understand things that you didn't before. It's the same feeling we have with intimate relationships gone sour. The way best friends one year can be the worst of enemies the next. The way a disgustingly happy couple can turn to two bickering people that can't be around each other. The more emotionally high we get, the further we fall. But, for many people, family is the

last resort of human contact, the people that are always supposed to be there for you.

In this story, the characters struggle to reconcile some broken aspect of their past. But they cannot get away from constructing a cover story to hide their actions, even perhaps from themselves. They use this cover story to hide the hurt and helplessness they feel but have been trained to avoid expressing. But the cover story invokes their condition— Benny's cancer is a reaction to the feeling of slow decomposition in the house by himself, and Troy and Dorothy's marriage roles are a cover for feelings of personal alienation. While they may not find a solution to their problems, they can perhaps come to the understanding that the temporary accumulation of wealth or status is a distraction to the real goal of reconciling their actions with those of others, in making peace with the past in order to draw on it.